

Many of you have emailed, asking about Manuel's travel arrangements with the guitar.

Airplane travel with a guitar is often a hassle. Through all the years of traveling, Manuel has experienced his share of misadventures, ranging from seeing his guitar fall from the top of a 747's baggage conveyor belt to playing a concert in jeans when his suitcase did not arrive.

Although Manuel has never (knock on wood) had to play a concert with a guitar other than his own, he always carries a couple of sets of his favorite strings with him on the plane, just in case! There have been some very close calls -- a few years ago in Athens his guitar arrived just one hour before the concert!

The following will give you an idea of how we make travel arrangements to make things run as smoothly as possible and to minimize the risk of losing the guitar. The following stories refer to when Manuel flies coach; when he flies first class, there usually are no problems bringing the guitar on board without a ticket for it:

First of all, if Manuel travels on a day of a concert, we ALWAYS buy a seat for the guitar. However, if not flying on the concert day, there are a few things to consider before deciding whether to check the guitar or buy a seat for it. For example, will he absolutely need the guitar right away? Is he going to a place where we can easily find a good replacement guitar if necessary?

If we decide to check it, we of course will bring the safest and strongest case possible, cross our fingers, and follow these rules:

1. **Avoid connecting flights.** If we absolutely have to connect somewhere, we avoid airports with lots of traffic such as New York, Chicago, and London, as in our experience, these airports greatly increase the chances of misplacement.
2. **Avoid tight connections.** A delay of the first flight can easily cause the baggage not to make a connection, even if you do.
3. **Avoid taking the last flight of the day to your destination.** Usually, bags will arrive on the very next flight if they don't make the connection, but if there are no more flights that day...
4. **Know your airport codes and make sure that the bags are being checked to the right destination.** We have caught agents checking the guitar to the wrong destination a couple of times...

Manuel rarely will try to take the guitar on board without a seat for it. The fact is that regardless of the regulations, it is completely unpredictable whether the airline will allow one to take the guitar on board. Although it is true that by explaining (and sometimes fighting), they might give in, sometimes they don't. Besides, with all Manuel's traveling, his life could easily become one long fight with the airline people.

For those few times that he tries taking a guitar on board, the rule we follow is to ask for seats in the back of the plane, to be able to board before the bins get filled up. Unfortunately, even buying a seat for the guitar does not guarantee you a seat for it on the plane! Not all airplanes allow cabin baggage and most reservation agents have no idea about the regulations. Even the check-in agents and the boarding agents usually don't know. Yes, yes, yes, I know, it should be as simple as: Airline sells you ticket = you have seat. But no, it is not so simple.

Here is a little story to illustrate my point:

Manuel went to South Bend, IN, last season from Baltimore. We bought a seat for him and the guitar from Northwest, making sure to tell them that this was for cabin baggage, a guitar, and asked the agent to make sure it was ok. No problem, I'm told.

To make a very long story short, on the outbound flight there were no problems. Coming back, however, Manuel is on the plane in South Bend with the guitar strapped in the seat when the baggage handler tells him that the guitar cannot stay there, that it has to be put in the cargo. Manuel tells him that he bought a seat for the guitar, that it has a boarding pass, and that he had come in on this particular plane a couple of days earlier -- but no luck. In few words: The captain said: "Either your guitar goes in the cargo, or you and the guitar get off the plane!" Manuel had no choice but to take that flight because of other engagements and was forced to give them the guitar.

When connecting in Detroit, he was given the guitar at the gate and went on to his connecting flight. Well, that flight was overbooked, and although Manuel had a boarding pass for the guitar and himself and was on the plane with it, the flight attendant told him the guitar could not stay in the seat (although this time not because of regulations, just "because"...) and took the guitar and put in its place another passenger who had been on a waiting list!

This is not the only time this has happened. On a tour here in the U.S. a couple of years ago, we bought a seat for the guitar for the whole tour (7 flights on United) and on none of them -- NONE -- did we keep the guitar in its seat, but in the overhead bin!!!

The overhead bin??? Would that be the same overhead bin they tell us the guitar doesn't fit in when we try to board the plane **without** a boarding pass for the guitar? What irony is that?