

Air Travel Made Easy

By Nimit Desai

Abstract

The goal of this guide is to make air traveling easy for someone who has had none or little air traveling experience. It is specifically geared for Indian students, their parents, and their spouses traveling to the US for the first time. Although I have tried to be general and comprehensive, you may experience something that I have missed. Please report such experiences and your suggestions back to me. Bon voyage!!☺

A Sample Travel Route/Itinerary (flights are fictitious)

Jet Airways Flight 9W0326: Ahmedabad → Mumbai

Delta Flight DL0032: Mumbai → Frankfurt → New York

Delta Flight DL1743: New York → Raleigh

There are two different “types” of itineraries often followed by travelers to the US from India. In the first case, the entire itinerary is booked as a single reservation, e.g., Ahmedabad → Raleigh in the sample above. In the second case, the reservation of the Indian domestic flight is made separately (to save some money), e.g., the reservation of Ahmedabad → Mumbai is separate and the connection to the Mumbai → Raleigh flight is the passenger’s responsibility. Below these are referred to as case-I and case-II.

Glossary of Terms (*Italicized words are explained in this glossary*)

- **Aircraft Cabin:** The space inside the aircraft where passengers are seated.
- **Aircraft Lavatory:** Small bathroom (a.k.a. restroom) inside the aircraft cabin. There are multiple lavatories on most aircrafts depending on the size of the aircraft.
- **Airport Gate:** Area of an airport that connects the aircraft entrance to the *airport terminal* building. This is where the *flight attendants* check for the *boarding passes* and let the passengers enter the aircraft. Gates are usually numbered with a letter (usually representing the *terminal*) followed by a number, e.g., B26.
- **Airport Terminal:** A building of an airport that houses several *gate* areas, *check-in counters*, *baggage claim areas*, and other facilities like restaurants and shops. A terminal may have check-in counters for several airlines, listed on the big dashboards placed on the roadside. Terminals are usually numbered by a letter, e.g., Terminal B.
- **Baggage:** All the luggage that you want transported as you travel.
- **Baggage, Carry-on:** Part of your luggage you want to carry with you in the *cabin* as you travel. You are allowed one bag that is smaller or equal to 22" X 14" X 9" and weighs less than or equal to 8 kg. You are also allowed one small purse/laptop bag. The enforcement of these rules varies across airlines and other unknown factors.
- **Baggage, Checked-in:** Part of your luggage you want to be flown via cargo and do not want to carry. If your reserved itinerary crosses the Atlantic Ocean, you are

allowed two pieces of checked-in baggage each weighing 32 kg. This rule is strictly enforced most of the times. You will be delivered this baggage at the *baggage claim area* of the destination (see *customs check*).

- **Baggage Claim:** At the destination airport *baggage claim area*, if you do not receive all of your *checked-in bags*, you should go to the baggage claim office and file a claim for the bags you are missing. You will need your *baggage claim tags* as a proof of the checked-in baggage.
- **Baggage Claim Area:** The area where big conveyors circulate the baggage to be picked up by the passengers of an arriving flight. An active conveyor displays the flight number that it is circulating the baggage for.
- **Baggage Claim Tag:** When you check-in a bag at the *source*, you are given a paper tag that has a number and a series of airport codes written over it. This is the receipt given by the airline for your checked-in baggage. You will be issued one tag per checked-in bag. Check your baggage claim tags to see where you are supposed to pick up your baggage; as a rule of thumb, if you have a boarding pass for your next flight, you would not have to pick up your baggage here.
- **Boarding:** The process of getting on the aircraft from the gate. Boarding time is usually 30-45 minutes before the departure time. The flight attendants would call the passengers to board ordered by their seat row numbers. Usually, passengers seating at the rear end are called before those seating in the front.
- **Boarding pass:** The document given on basis of a *ticket* at the *check-in counter* of the respective airline. One boarding-pass is issued per *flight* in your reserved ticket. It mentions the corresponding flight number, your seat number for the flight, and the *boarding* time. If some *flights* of the itinerary are operated by a different airline, at the source, you may be issued boarding passes for flights only up to the airport where the airline operator changes. At that airport, you would then *check-in* again with the different airline for your next boarding passes.
- **Check-in:** First thing to do when you reach the airport. As a result of check-in you receive your *boarding passes*, check-in some of your baggage to the airline to be flown via cargo, and receive *baggage claim tags* for the baggage you have checked-in.
- **Check-in Counter:** The counters where check-in process is conducted. Each airline administers several check-in counters in a *terminal*.
- **Check-in Time:** Airline recommended time for your arrival at the airport of your departure. For international travel, you should reach the airport 3 hours before the departure time. For domestic travel, you should reach the airport 2 hours before the departure time.
- **Concourse:** Same as *Airport Terminal*.
- **Connecting Flight:** See *Flight Connection*.
- **Customs Check:** The procedure performed at the *port of entry* to make sure the travelers conform to the customs regulations of the *destination* country. The travelers need to declare their items by filling up the *customs declaration form*.
- **Customs declaration form:** During the flight to the port of entry, you will be given a “US Customs and Border Protection” form. Lines 1-10 are straightforward. Your answers to the lines 11-14 should be “No”. In line 15, visitor’s box, you should put \$0.0 (Any value under \$100 is allowed). Notice that

it is not allowed bringing fruits and vegetables to the US. It is not recommended to bring more than \$10,000 with you in any monetary form. You will need this form at the port of entry for the customs check.

- **Destination:** The final airport of the itinerary, e.g., Raleigh in the sample above.
- **Flight:** A travel route having a schedule and one or more *legs* similar to trains. All the legs of a flight are traveled via the same aircraft. A *flight connection* is required at an airport that is the last point of the flight. In our example, the flight DL0032 has two *legs*: Mumbai → Frankfurt and Frankfurt → New York. *Flight connection* is not required at the Frankfurt airport, but it is required at the New York airport to board the connecting flight DL1743.
- **Flight Attendant/Steward/Stewardess:** The flight personnel that administers boarding, serving of snacks and beverages, and general traveler queries during the flight.
- **Flight Connection:** The process of boarding off a flight at the end of its last *leg*, reaching the departure gate of the next flight, and boarding on the aircraft of the next flight in the itinerary. If both the ending flight and the next flight are reserved together, the next flight is called the *connecting flight*, e.g., the New York → Raleigh flight is the connecting flight of the Mumbai → Frankfurt → New York flight if they both were reserved together. Making sure that you reach on time to board on the connecting flight is the responsibility of the airline and in case of delays, you will be allowed to board on the next available flight.
- **Gate Security:** Same as *Security Check*.
- **Immigration Check:** The procedure performed at the *port of entry* to check if the arriving passenger should be allowed to enter the country. This is where an immigration officer checks your visa, I-20 (if student or student dependent), and other immigration documents. Your picture and finger prints are also taken in the new SEVIS system.
- **I-94 form:** During the flight to the *port of entry*, you will be given an “I-94 Arrival/Departure Record” form. All nonimmigrant visitors entering the US with a visa need to fill it. This form has two specific perforated sections to it. The bottom section is a departure coupon and must be returned to U.S. officials upon exiting the US (on your way back to India). An immigration officer at the port of entry affixes an admission stamp to the arrival and departure portions of the completed I-94, the traveler’s passport, and the traveler’s customs declaration form. The officer retains the arrival portion of the form and inserts the departure portion of the I-94 into the traveler’s passport. Line 7 is the flight number of your flight to the port of entry and line 9 is the city where you boarded that flight. The number at the top of the form is your nonimmigrant alien number which will be useful during your stay at the US.
- **Leg:** A hop in the travel route, e.g., Mumbai → Frankfurt in the sample above. Aircraft is landed after completion of each leg either for it is the end of the corresponding *flight* or for refueling and cleaning.
- **Port of Departure:** The last airport in the country of your *source*, e.g., in the sample above, Mumbai is the port of departure.
- **Port of Entry:** The first airport in the country of your *destination*, e.g., in the sample above, New York is the port of entry.

- **Security Check:** The procedure performed by airport authorities to ensure safety of the flights. Passengers are checked for weapons, metal items, and any other hazardous material. Security checks are placed between the check-in counters of the airlines and the departure gates of the terminal. Once cleared, passengers are free to move around in the *gate* areas of the terminal. However, if the passenger crosses the security check and goes back to the *check-in counter* area, he has to pass the security check again. Usually, there is only one security check point in a terminal.
- **Source:** The origin airport of the itinerary, e.g., Ahmedabad in the sample above.
- **Ticket:** The document given by the travel agent or the airline at the time of payment. It contains the flight details and the passenger details. It does not contain the seat numbers and the departure gate numbers of the flights.
- **Transit Area:** The area of a terminal beyond the *immigration check* from which all the *gates* and transit areas of other *terminals* are accessible (same as *gates* area).
- **Transit Passenger:** When you are making a *flight connection* at an airport, you are a transit passenger for that airport and you must remain in the *transit area*. To allow a flight connection, some countries require the transit passengers to possess a *transit visa* for that country.
- **Transit visa:** During your travel, if you are changing flights in a country other than the country of your residence and the country of your destination, you may require a visa to pass through the airport of that country. Rules for the need of transit visa depend on the respective country and the duration of your stay on the respective airport. Please check with your travel agent and your airline to check if you will need a transit visa.

India → USA

Here, the chronological sequence of steps for traveling from India to USA is described. Case-II procedure is outlined followed by a common procedure for case-I and case-II. You are a case-II passenger if you have made separate reservations for your flight from your hometown to the port of departure and the flights from there to your destination. In the sample above, if your ticket from Ahmedabad → Mumbai was reserved separately, you are a case-II passenger. You are a case-I passenger otherwise.

For case-II passengers

Only the differences with the other case are mentioned here. Follow these guidelines to reach the international airport of the port of departure.

1. You need to go to the domestic airport of your town and proceed to the check-in counter of your domestic airline.
2. You will be issued boarding passes only till the port of departure.
3. Your baggage claim tags would indicate that you need to pick up your checked-in bags at the port of departure. Sometimes, if you produce the international ticket to the issuing agent, he may be able to check-in your baggage all the way to the destination.

4. Remember, this reserved itinerary is domestic and does not cross the Atlantic Ocean. So, you are allowed only 20 kg of baggage in total. If you have paid only the apex fare (50% discount) for this ticket, you are out of luck and need to pay for the excess baggage. If you paid the full fare, the issuing agent will allow you to carry the international baggage if you show your international ticket.
5. Proceed to the security check at the announcement (usually 1.5 hours before the departure time).
6. Board the aircraft, fly to the port of departure airport and board off at the domestic airport of the port of departure.
7. Proceed to the baggage claim area and collect your checked-in baggage.
8. Inquire to the airport staff about the location where you can board the bus to the international airport. Wait for the bus to arrive.
9. The bus operators would put your baggage in the cargo compartment of the bus, transport you to the international airport, drop you off outside and give your baggage back to you.
10. Get a cart to transport your baggage and find your terminal (either lookup a dashboard or ask someone).
11. Walk to your terminal with your cart and follow the steps below.

For case-I and case-II passengers

1. **Buying the ticket:** Most travel agents don't issue a ticket unless you have a visa for the country of your destination. However, they may allow you to block a ticket for certain duration. If you plan to earn "frequent flyer" miles for your travel, you should provide your frequent flyer account number e.g., Delta SkyMiles number to your travel agent. Check with your travel agent and the airline if you will need a transit visa before you book your ticket. Also, if you are a vegetarian, ask your travel agent to book Asian vegetarian meals for you, or if available, Indian vegetarian meals. Once you have booked the ticket with an agent, check with the airline and make sure it is really booked.
2. **Packing up:** Make sure your bags do not weigh more than what they are suppose to weigh. Although the rules are not always enforced strictly, your alternatives are limited if you run short of luck. Do not lock your check-in bags and make sure you keep your valuables in your carry-on luggage as much as possible. Arrange your baggage such that if you do not immediately receive your check-in bags at the destination, you can still survive for a couple of days. Keep several quarters (\$0.25 coins) in your purse in case you need to call someone from the airport after reaching the US.
3. **Entering the Airport:** You need to go to the international airport. For international travel, it is recommended by the airlines to reach the airport 3 hours before your departure time. As you approach the airport, keep an eye on the dashboards with list of airlines per terminal to see what terminal houses the check-in counter of your airline. There would be carts available outside the terminal entrance to easily transport your luggage around till you check it in. At the door, you will need to show your ticket to enter the terminal. If your relatives are seeing you off and wish to enter, they need to buy the visitor tickets available outside the terminal.

- 4. Checking in:** Once inside the terminal, proceed to the check-in counter of your airline. Make sure you wait in the right queue (e.g., economy passengers). Airline agents would come by as you wait and ask you some security related questions. Your answer to these questions should be a “No”. Once at the counter, provide the issuing agent with your ticket and passport and weigh your bags. You may be asked to weigh your check-in bags as well as your carry-on bags. If the agent objects for over-weight, persuasion often works☺. An agent may also open up your check-in bags to make sure there are no hazardous materials inside; keep cool☺. Once your baggage is cleared in terms of weight and security, it will be taken up by the issuing agent. You will be issued a set of boarding passes, baggage claim tags (one per checked-in bag), and an empty embarkation/disembarkation form. Make sure you get your ticket and passport back. The boarding passes may not mention the gate numbers of the flights. If so, ask the agent the gate number for your first flight. On some airports, display screens present up-to-the minute information about all the departure and arrival flights; you can lookup the gate number for your departing flight. Take your documents, carry-on baggage and proceed to the immigration check.
- 5. Baggage scanning:** This is a step usually performed by the airline personnel after you check-in your baggage and you do not have to care for scanning. However, it varies across airlines and sometimes the passenger himself is required to do it before the check-in. If so, you will notice big scanning machines with conveyors by the check-in counters of your airline and some passengers getting their check-in bags scanned with the help of airlines personnel who would also put a plastic seal after the scan on each of the bags. You should get each of your check-in bags scanned and sealed before you go to the check-in counter.
- 6. Immigration check:** The main purpose here is to get your embarkation form stamped by the official. If the issuing agent did not give you an embarkation form, you can ask for it at the check-in counters. Make sure you have filled out the embarkation side of the form correctly and signed it. Locate the immigration check area (usually one per terminal and at the end of check-in counters) and wait in the queue with your embarkation form, boarding passes, and passport ready. Get the required stamping done, make sure you get all your documents back, and proceed to your departure gate (follow the signs).
- 7. Gate security:** As you approach your departure gate you would notice some shops, a rest area, and a security check point blocking the gate entry. You may rest before you go through the gate security or you can rest after you clear the gate security. Each of your carry-on items should have tags (available at the check-in counters and security check points). You will be checked for metals, weapons, and any other hazardous items. You will have to get your carry-on baggage scanned. If you are carrying a laptop, you need to take it out and scan it separately. Once cleared, make sure an official stamps your boarding pass and the tags your carry-on items.
- 8. Boarding:** Wait for the boarding time. When your group of row numbers are called, proceed to the gate exit with your passport and boarding pass ready. It is better to enter the aircraft as soon as possible for sometimes the overhead space inside the aircraft for storing your carry-on luggage is not enough. If you feel that

the row numbers are not being followed and the passengers are queuing at the gate exit out of order, do not hesitate to join the queue. The flight attendant would keep left portion of your boarding pass and check the security clearance stamp on your carry-on items. Once inside the aircraft, locate your seat (seat numbers are written on the overhead bins). Store your carry-on luggage in the overhead space, preferably close to your seat. Take your seat and wait for takeoff.

- 9. Flying:** Once the aircraft starts moving fasten your seat belt. Enjoy your first takeoff experience☺. Once in the air, you may enjoy the ongoing entertainment options, just relax, eat meals when served, glance out of the windows, or catch some sleep. If you feel like walking, it is allowed to walk in the cabin if the flight is not experiencing any turbulence. You can lean your seat back by pushing and holding the button on the chair arm on your right. At the times of takeoff and landing, you should set your chairs back to the upright positions and keep your carry-on items (if not in the overhead space) under the seat in front of you. Once landed, wait for the aircraft to come to a complete halt and the seat belt signs to turn off. Retrieve your carry-on items and exit the aircraft.
- 10. Connecting flights:** As you enter the arrival gate, you will notice some airline officials providing flight connection information. You may ask them which way to go for the transit passengers. You can also ask the departure gate number of your connecting flight. You can also lookup the display screens at some terminals that provide the departure gate information for all the flights departing from that terminal. Depending on what airport you are on, you might either go to your departure gate directly, or go through a flight connection center to get your transit visa checked and your boarding pass stamped to mark you as a cleared transit passenger. Sometimes, the visa check is performed at the gate area just before you enter the security check for the gate. Your departure gate might be far from where you arrived and so, it is better to find your gate and get the gate security check done as soon as possible. Then, you may rest and freshen up. Repeat steps 8, 9, and 10 until you reach the port of entry.
- 11. US Immigration check:** As you board off and proceed towards the terminal, you will end up in the US immigration area. Wait in one of the queues labeled for US visitors and be ready with your passport, customs declaration form, and I-94 form. The immigration officer will take finger prints of your left and right index fingers and take a picture of you. You will also get your I-94 stapled in your passport and your customs declaration form stamped. When you proceed through this area, you will end up in a baggage claim area.
- 12. Customs check:** Look for your check-in bags and pick them up with a cart. Look for the queue of passengers waiting for the customs check and join the queue. As you wait, an official may ask for your customs declaration form. In the customs check area you will have to get your baggage checked by officials and they may open it to make sure it is consistent with your declarations. Once cleared, if your connecting flight is operated by the same airline, your checked-in baggage will be taken in by the custom officials and you can proceed to your departure gate and repeat steps 7, 8, 9, and 10 until you reach the destination. If the connecting flight is operated by a different airline, you might have to carry your baggage to the check-in counter of your airlines which is usually the next

area after customs check. At the check-in counter, you will be issued the boarding pass for the connecting flight and your check-in baggage will be taken in.

- 13. Finally there:☺** On boarding off at the destination, proceed to the baggage claim area by following the signs. You may use the public phones for making calls with quarters. Collect all your baggage at the baggage claim area and wait for your party to arrive for pickup. If you did not receive all your check-in baggage, proceed to the baggage claim office and file a claim for the missing baggage. You will need the baggage claim tags to lookup the tag number of the missing bag.