

= THE MAN WHO PAYS HIS WAY =

# Keep your passport fresh, or else...

i 29 JUNE 2013



**Simon Calder**

Sorry to interrupt your reading routine, but I urge you to go off and check when your passport expires. Millions of British holidaymakers will set off in July, but some will get no further than the airport. The arithmetic is painfully clear. Assuming an even distribution of validity across the population, one in 20 full British passports will expire within six months. Turn up for a flight to Turkey, Egypt or Thailand with a passport that runs out before then – that is, before the end of this year – and you will be turned away.

Even if you are heading for the European Union, you might want to freshen up your travel document. Ten days ago, I reported the case of Jonathan Rickard, a 32-year-old Londoner who was barred by easyJet ground staff from his flight to a wedding in Cyprus because his passport had only two months to run. Then, five days after he was told that it was his fault and he would not get a refund, the airline con-

ceded that a mistake had been made and refunded the £287 cost of his ticket – plus the €400 statutory compensation for denying boarding.

Mr Rickard then asked about the accommodation and airport transfers that he had paid for but had not been able to use because of the airline's action, but was told "easyJet is not liable for any pre-flight arrangements and therefore we will not be able to offer you a refund". A brisk conversation with customer services appears to have persuaded the airline to change its mind.

The airlines deserve some sympathy. They can be heavily fined if they allow on board someone who is ineligible for admission to the destination country. They are also responsible for removing the passenger immediately and flying them home free of charge. So, much to their displeasure, they find themselves as frontline passport checkers. Factor in the multiplicity of nationalities flying and the different rules that countries

impose, and it's not surprising that airline staff occasionally make mistakes. And since easyJet carries far more passengers than any other UK airline, it is likely inadvertently to err more often than its rivals.

After we published Mr Rickard's case, other passengers got in touch with similar stories: same airline (easyJet), same airport (Gatwick), same reason ("Cyprus/Greece/Portugal insists you have a minimum of three months remaining"). The other thread common to the story is what Mr Rickard describes as a "brick wall" – the apparent refusal of ground staff to allow any kind of appeal. Perhaps travellers should keep the number of the embassy of their destination country handy just in case.

I was on a charter flight at Manchester waiting to fly to Cuba. The aircraft door was closed and we were about to push back, when the door opened again to allow another passenger on. She was a Canadian woman going on holiday to Havana, and had been told by airport staff she needed a visa and therefore couldn't fly. She managed to contact the Cuban consulate in London which confirmed to staff that she didn't need one. But airlines have complete discretion, and if they make a mistake there's very little you can do at the time. Let's hope easyJet is addressing the problem rather than barring passengers first and answering questions much later.

**B**est to be prepared. So I was thankful this week when British Airways sent through a "pre-flight services email". Yet when I read

the instructions, I was puzzled. "Check passports and visas. Use VisaCentral's free passport and visa check." But, I wanted to point out, you know that I'm only flying from Heathrow to Belfast. However, I was flying back from Dublin, so I thought I should take a peek at the ID information provided by BA's partner, VisaCentral.

For journeys from Britain to Ireland, while the airlines demand some form of identification (a driving licence is ideal), you certainly need no passport. Or so I thought. The UK citizen heading for the Irish Republic is told: "The traveller must hold a passport valid at least six months on entry with one blank visa page; hold proof of sufficient funds; hold proof of onward/return flights". Evidently UKIP's campaign to separate us from Europe is more advanced than I thought.

**S**mart travellers renew their passports as soon as possible after the nine-month point is reached. Applications made within nine months of expiry are granted remaining validity in addition to the normal 10 years. So, if your passport is due to expire on 1 April 2014, you can renew it on Monday and the replacement will be valid to 1 April 2024 – more than enough to satisfy easyJet, BA and Irish authorities.

Even if your passport has years to run, check its condition. "Entry to Thailand is normally refused if you have a passport which is damaged or has pages missing" warns the Foreign Office, which even publishes a document (at [bit.ly/PresentablePP](http://bit.ly/PresentablePP)) defining what's acceptable. And "the dog ate my visa" is not a valid excuse.