

# The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



GABBY JONES/BLOOMBERG

## Booking.com suspended my account. How can I get it back?

By Christopher Elliott  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**Q.** I write to express my disappointment and distress with recent experiences at Booking.com. I travel frequently, as do my wife and family. I always recommend Booking.com, and we all use it almost exclusively.

Recently, while traveling, I discovered two fraudulent attempts to make bookings on my account. I canceled them immediately and contacted customer service. A representative told me to change my password. I did this, yet the next time I tried to log in using my email address, I received a message that my account had been disabled.

I contacted Booking.com's customer service. A representative assured me that the company was investigating the problem and that I should set up a new account and import my existing bookings.

I did this, but when I contacted Booking.com, a representative told me that I couldn't import my existing bookings. Now I have another problem: I can't reactivate my old account because I have too many cancellations. The only cancellations in recent history were the two fraudulent ones.

I feel like I am being punished for reporting fraudulent behavior. Can you help me get my Booking.com account reinstated?

DAVID HENDRICK,  
Charlottesville, Va.

**A.** Booking.com should have fixed your account without making you set up a new one, and it should have transferred your existing reservations. And if a Booking.com agent told you to do that, they also should have helped you with restoring your account.

But that's difficult. You can ask for the agent's name and extension, but often the agent will only offer a first name, which makes it hard to find the person again. (You had part of the conversation in writing from a representative named "Ahmed M." How do you contact Ahmed M.? Who knows! There's no direct phone number or email for him.)

It looks like something went wrong — very wrong — with your account. First, someone gained access to your personal information and made fraudulent bookings. But then, Booking.com flagged your account for fraud after you reported the bogus bookings. Finally, adding insult to injury, it wouldn't help you fix the problem and instead effectively banned you.

You needed to appeal this above the chatbot level at Booking.com. A human being needed to review your case and figure out a way to fix it. I publish the names, numbers, and email addresses of those humans at Booking.com on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. You could have reached out to them. I recommend doing so in writing and using my proven methods for fixing a consumer problem.

You asked my advocacy team for help, and after we reviewed your case, I reached out to Booking.com. According to the company, it was a combination of your booking history and the fraudulent bookings that triggered the review of your account.

Booking.com disabled your account "to ensure your security" and told you to create a new one. However, it ran into trouble when you tried to transfer your loyalty status and points to the new account.

After I asked Booking.com for help, the company worked with you to find a way to secure your account.

*Christopher Elliott is the founder of Elliott Advocacy (elliottadvocacy.org), a nonprofit organization that helps consumers solve their problems. Email him at chris@elliott.org or get help by contacting him at elliottadvocacy.org/help.*

## THE VIP LOUNGE

# Lesléa Newman

on Paris, Cher, dark chocolate, and the legacy of Matthew Shepard

**A**ward-winning author Lesléa Newman, whose 1989 book "Heather Has Two Mommies" was banned in numerous schools and libraries across the country when it was released, was looking forward to talking about her controversial book at the University of Wyoming on Oct. 12, 1998. It was part of what was then called Gay Awareness Week and the school's LGBTQ organization — which included a 21-year-old student named Matthew Shepard — invited her to speak. But on Oct. 6, just six days before her speech, Shepard was brutally attacked because he was gay and tied to a fence in a field outside of Laramie, Wyo. He died six days later, the morning of her speech. "I didn't learn that he had died until I landed in Wyoming," Newman, 68, said, in a recent phone interview. "When I gave my talk, all of the kids from the [LGBTQ] committee sat in the front row and they left an empty seat [for Shepard]." The Brooklyn, N.Y., native said she made a vow then "to tell his story, to keep his name alive . . . because his voice was silenced." In 2012, Newman released "October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard," a poetic exploration of the impact of his murder. And in September, nearly 25 years after Shepard's murder, Newman's book "Always Matt: A Tribute to Matthew Shepard" — which focuses on his life and his legacy in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, as well as the formation of the Matthew Shepard Foundation — was released. "He was not just a headline or a cause; he was a person — a person who was loved, a person who had his own dreams and desires," Newman said. "He was a kid, really . . . a 21-year-old living his life. So I wanted to focus on his childhood and his teen years." The prolific author — "Always Matt" is her 84th book — said her goal in writing it was to "hopefully inspire readers to take action in whatever way they are compelled to . . . to make the world a better place. Matt wanted to work in international social justice and he can't do that. But, ironically, he is doing it because he has inspired so many people." We caught up with Newman, who lives in Western Massachusetts with Mary Vazquez, her spouse of 35 years, and their 11-year-old calico cat, Mitzi, to talk about all things travel.

**If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go?** I would click my heels and instantly find myself in Paris. I have tried going several times and each trip was waylaid: first by a traveling companion's broken leg, and then by the COVID shutdown. I have heard that Paris is more spectacular than one can possibly imagine. My dream is to stand in the street while I admire the city's beauty and weep.

**Where was the first place you traveled to after COVID restrictions were lifted?** I went right to the beach. Hot sand under my feet, salt air wafting up my nose, ocean waves roaring in my ear . . . this is my happy place.

**Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own?** Definitely a travel agent. They know what they're doing.

**Thoughts on an "unplugged" vacation?** An unplugged vacation is my idea of heaven. I do pay for it on the other side, but it's totally worth it. Live like it's 1969.

**Do you use all of your vacation time or leave some on the table?** Since I have been a full-time,



Lesléa Newman (right) and her spouse, Mary Vazquez, at Perkins Cove in Ogunquit, Maine.

self-employed writer since 1984, I have never really had "vacation time." My time is basically my own. Though I will say my boss — a.k.a. "moi" — can be very strict. I often write while on vacation. Since I still use a notebook and pen, my work is very portable. And my work doesn't feel like "work" — I love what I do.

**What has been your worst vacation experience?** I was flying home from Anchorage, Alaska, where I had been the keynote speaker for what was then called "Gay Awareness Week," which I combined with a few days of sightseeing. I had to be at the airport at 3 a.m., which means I left my hotel at 2 a.m. When I got to the airport, I found out the flight was delayed. And delayed. And delayed. Finally, the customer service clerk told me my best bet was to come back the next day and start over. I found a hotel close to the airport that let me check in — it was now about 7 a.m. — and hopped into bed. A little while later, a note was slipped under my door, which said that the fire alarms were going to be tested every hour on the hour until mid-afternoon. Each time I managed to drift off to sleep, the fire alarm rang, scaring me half to death.

**Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all?** All of the above. The beach is for relaxation, museums and theater and historical sites are for learning, and every day, whether on vacation or not, is always an adventure.

**What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation?** Whichever one I'm working on.

**If you could travel with one famous person/ce-**

**lebrity, who would it be?** Cher, whom I once met at a book signing — hers, not mine. She was every bit as charming as one might expect. I'd love to spend some time with her. I bet she'd be a lot of fun.

**What is the best gift to give a traveler?** A room of her own.

**What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip?** When I travel for work, my beloved will sometimes sneak a little dark chocolate into my suitcase. Always my go-to snack.

**What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation?** I was in Denver on a working vacation, attending the Matthew Shepard Bear to Make a Difference Gala, where I received a very special "souvenir" — The Matthew Shepard Foundation Making a Difference Award. The award itself is very beautiful. Called "The Bell of Peace," it is an actual bronze bell, designed by artist Chris Navarro at the request of the Matthew Shepard Foundation. It has a graceful porcelain white dove adorning the top of it. I am very honored to have received this very special "souvenir" and luckily managed to get it home all in one piece.

**What is your favorite app/website for travel?** I'm an old-fashioned girl and rely on friends and/or a travel agent to do my research for me.

**What has travel taught you?** To keep my mind and heart open, be in the moment, and say yes — as long as it feels safe — to whatever opportunity arises.

**What is your best travel tip?** Get enough sleep. See answer to "worst vacation experience" question.

JULIET PENNINGTON



## HERE

### SNOWMOBILE ADVENTURES IN NEW ENGLAND

Calling all winter outdoor enthusiasts! Get ready to hit the snowmobile trails in New Hampshire and Maine with Polaris Adventures, a company that links to local outfitters who provide memorable tours for all skill levels. Whether you want to book a guided trip or get out on your own, you'll find it easy to discover locations and book reservations online. Every outfitter offers new Polaris snowmobiles, outfitted with color touchscreen 7S display and custom GPS technology, and also provide helmets and goggles. Riders are advised to wear appropriate clothing and to bring a backpack for water and snacks.

Several New England area tours are featured, including Snowmobiler's Paradise at Bear Rock Adventures, in Pittsburg, N.H. Ride through 3,071 acres, increasing in elevation as you visit the five lakes in this region. Ice fishing is permitted from January through March at First Connecticut Lake, so pack fishing gear if interested. Rates from \$160. Also in the Granite

State, sled across 500-plus miles of connected trails within the Jericho Mountains — with views of Mount Washington, Mount Adams, Mount Jefferson, and more — with Northeast Snowmobile & ATV Rental in Gorham. Rates from \$130. In Maine, take the Ghost Trains Snowmobile Tour at Shin Pond Village, a 100-acre family-owned recreational resort. The 120-mile round-trip tour begins at Libby Camps, a 140-year-old camp and outpost, to stock up on fuel and food. The groomed trails lead past "Ghost Trains," abandoned steam locomotives seen in the woods between Eagle and Chamberlain lakes. Rates from \$285. Polaris Adventures also offer premium off-road, on-road, snow, and water experiences at destinations nationwide. <https://adventures.polaris.com/snowmobile-rentals>

## THERE

### NEW HOTEL SPOTLIGHTS FINNISH CHARM

Forget rustic huts and wood-heated cabins. On your next trip to Finland, indulge in refined Nordic hospitality at The Hotel Maria, a new luxury hotel in

the heart of Helsinki that aims to be a homebase for all your Nordic adventures. The hotel is a collection of four architecturally and historically prominent buildings dating back to 1885. This urban sanctuary's 117 spacious rooms and 38 suites meld contemporary elegance with echoes of its storied past in the city's historic Kruununhaka district. Guest rooms provide double the space of typical Finnish hotels, with an average size exceeding 460 square feet, and features that include large "American-style" beds, state-of-the-art technology, and spa-like marble bathrooms, most with extra-large soaking tubs and electric fireplaces. Nineteen suites are also equipped with their own private traditional Finnish saunas or steam rooms.

The on-site Maria Spa boasts a coed Finnish sauna, steam room, cold and warm water plunge pools, Jacuzzi, and greenery-filled fully enclosed atrium sanctuary. Wellness options will expand in June with the opening of The Wellness Club, a fitness space with best-in-class equipment and unique training programs. Lilja, the hotel's signature restaurant, is helmed by head chef Ville Rainio whose culinary experiences include work at acclaimed Michelin-starred restaurants across Europe. Seasonal menus, inspired by French fine dining, showcase the finest products in Finland and regions nearby, from local wild-caught fish to reindeer sourced in Lapland. More casual dining is found at the brasserie-style Garden Terrace where guests can savor afternoon tea or dishes from an all-day menu inspired by classic international and Nordic cuisine. At Bar Maria, enjoy the live music of a grand piano while sipping champagne — with

some caviar, of course — and decadent drinks prepared by a specialist mixologist. (Nordic Noir cocktail with Kyro Rye Malt and spiced red wine, anyone?) Rates from \$496. [www.hotelmaria.fi](http://www.hotelmaria.fi)

## EVERYWHERE

### VERSATILE ON-THE-GO BAG

If you want a stylish and functional hold-everything bag then make sure to check out the Milmo 1813. Promoted as a "city bag" that accommodates your laptop as well as groceries, we've discovered it's also the perfect carry-on travel bag. Eighteen inches long, 13 inches wide, and 10 inches deep, the spacious interior's removable and waterproof main compartment liner will separate your laptop and other electronics from your water bottle, snacks, lotions, and other essentials you want on hand during a flight. Once you get to your destination, the bag can serve multiple purposes, carrying your beach towels or picnic blanket for outside adventures, as well as your wallet, phone, keys, and purchases on shopping expeditions.

Rope handles — covered in vegan leather — attach along the bottom of the bag for enhanced durability and even weight distribution. A large water-resistant inner pocket protects sensitive items, and a zippered outside pocket provides access to smaller things. Open-ended zippered top keeps your possessions secure. The washable bag is available in four colors: black, gray, green, and yellow. \$140 includes free international shipping from Canada. <https://lemilmo.com>

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