

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



ADOBE

Budget bills a \$450 cleaning fee for dog hair to non-dog-owner

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. Budget charged me a \$450 cleaning fee for a vehicle that had dog hair in the back seat. I only had the rental car for one day. I traveled from the airport to my meeting, then to the hotel and back to the airport the following day. I never had an animal in the vehicle at any time. Can you help?

RUSS DeVRIES, *Midlothian, Va.*

A. If you didn't bring a dog with you, then you should not have to pay a cleaning fee. Car rental companies have been clamping down on customers who trash their vehicles. I reviewed the correspondence between you and Budget, and here's how it justified the fee.

"Charges for cleaning vehicles that are returned in such poor condition that the vehicle must be sent out for detailing will be charged in proportion to the level of cleaning that is needed," it said in an e-mail. "This includes, but is not limited to, vehicles returned with food stains on the seats, dog or animal hair that cannot be removed through normal vacuuming of the car, excessive odor, smoke odor and cigarette burns. We find that the location has provided documentation of the condition of the vehicle at return."

Budget said it would gladly remove the charge if you could show the condition of the car before you rented it. That's a valid request. You should always take a picture of your car — inside and outside — before you leave the lot. If someone forgot to clean the vehicle, or if it has dings or dents on the outside, ask for a different car.

Budget then told you about the dog hair, which you vehemently denied. You were on a business trip and did not bring a dog with you.

In the end, it's difficult to prove you didn't have a dog. I see cases like this all the time. Among the car rental companies' favorite fees is charging nonsmokers a cleaning fee for "smoking" in a rental vehicle. But pet cleaning fees seem to be a close second. And it's not limited to car rental companies. A few years ago, a vacation rental management company in Sedona, Ariz., tried to charge me for dog hair in my vacation rental. Yet, I don't have a dog. When I pointed that out, the company dropped the fee.

I would have pressed Budget for more proof. In your e-mail correspondence, the company insisted it had the evidence. But it couldn't show you any evidence that proves you (or your non-existent dog) messed up the back seat of your rental. I wonder why? If a car rental company wants to charge you an extra \$450, it should at least have something to show for it.

Here's another problem with your case: Budget didn't notify you of the cleaning fee. Instead, it simply charged your credit card. You had to ask the car rental company about a mysterious \$450 charge on your card. Come on. At least the company could have let you know it was billing you — and maybe ask for your side of the story.

A brief, polite e-mail to the executives at Budget might have produced more evidence. Or it might have convinced the powers that be of your innocence. There was no dog and, therefore, no dog hair.

I contacted Budget on your behalf. It refunded the \$450 it charged your card.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Elliott's latest book is "How to Be the World's Smartest Traveler" (National Geographic). Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.

THE VIP LOUNGE

Ben Cramer

on wanting to unplug (someday), negronis, and walking off the vacation calories

One of the things indie singer-songwriter Ben Cramer, better known as Old Sea Brigade, enjoys about being a touring musician is the traveling and how it "takes me out of my comfort zone." Cramer, 31, and his fiancée, Fanny Algenax, a jewelry designer, split their time between Nashville and Gothenburg, Sweden, where Algenax is from. "We're both so passionate about travel, so when we're in Gothenburg, it's easy to hop on a cheap flight to explore other parts of Europe," said Cramer, who will be performing at Café 939 at Berklee College of Music on Nov. 15. The Atlanta native, who just released an album, "5AM Paradise," said he always enjoys playing in Boston (most recently, he performed at the House of Blues in April). "The crowds are really friendly and they kind of keep me on my toes," Cramer said, adding that this is his first tour with a five-piece band. "One of the things about playing live is reinterpreting the songs to fit the lineup of musicians. I still want to stay true to the original songs, but mold them into a special, unique live experience based off the lineup of musicians I have with me for this tour." We caught up with Cramer, who with his fiancée is the proud owner of Rasmus, a rescue dog from Romania, to talk about all things travel.

Favorite vacation destination? I love traveling too much to choose just one. I live in Sweden part-time so my fiancée and I like to take advantage of the cheap flights around Europe. A couple years ago we flew to Barcelona for a weekend in November. That was a particularly special trip. It was perfect walking weather so we walked around the whole city discovering little neighborhoods. I guess because of the time of year it wasn't overcrowded either. We probably had a glass of wine for every mile we walked. And we walked a lot of miles.

Favorite food or drink while vacationing? I'm a big negroni fan. That's usually my go-to but I can only have one, otherwise I get a headache. Not very rock 'n' roll I suppose. Food-wise, I always go for whatever the local cuisine is.

Where would you like to travel to but haven't? Croatia has always been high on my list of places I've been wanting to visit. It just looks incredible from all aspects. I just finished [watching] the Croatia episode of [the Netflix series] "Somebody Feed Phil" and that made me want to go even more. I guess I haven't been because I haven't had enough free time to go there over the last few years. I want to make sure I



Ben Cramer and his fiancée, Fanny Algenax, in Sweden with their rescue pup.

have a few weeks to really take it in and hop around to different islands.

One item you can't leave home without when traveling? I wish I could leave it behind, but I always need my laptop. I'd love to do a trip where I unplug from all my devices, though that'll take some practice. Maybe I can try not looking at my phone for an hour first.

Aisle or window? If it's a long flight, I take the aisle because I like to get up to stretch my legs often. But anything under three hours or so, I always choose the window. I find flying really therapeutic when it's a nice day. I love getting lost while looking out the window at all the different landscapes. There's a reflective magic to it.

Favorite childhood travel memory? When I was 16, my dad and I flew down to Florida to go deep sea fishing with his old college roommate. I knew nothing

— and still don't — about fishing, so it took me completely out of my comfort zone. We woke up at 3 a.m. to drive 80 miles off the coast in this tiny boat. I caught a tuna that almost pulled me overboard. It was an exhausting day and at times not the most enjoyable, but I look back on that trip with so many special memories that I cherish to this day.

Guilty pleasure when traveling? I probably don't eat very healthy when I'm traveling. There's too much great food to worry about that when you're on vacation. I do love to walk a lot, so maybe that counterbalances it.

Best travel tip? Be open to new experiences and allow those experiences to challenge your perspectives. I think you have to be patient too. The AC may be broken or there's a loud party next to your hotel. That's all part of it. I love traveling because it takes me out of my comfort zone. That creates memories. JULIET PENNINGTON

HERE

LET THERE BE LIGHT!

The seasonal festival of lights known as Gardens Aglow returns as a walking tour at the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, Maine (Nov. 19-Dec. 31, Thursdays-Sundays, plus select dates). The largest lights display in Maine opens with a new reimagined design. Visitors can stroll along approximately one mile of lighted paths through a colorful and sparkling wonderland where more than 750,000 LED lights are strung among the 14-acre gardens. Tickets must be purchased in advance, online, or by phone; not available onsite. Extend your visit by exploring Boothbay Lights, a month-plus-long celebration of family-friendly holiday events at restaurants, shops, dining, and other community businesses in Boothbay and Boothbay Harbor. Visitors can also participate in a Community Lighting Contest by voting by text for their favorite festively lit homes and businesses. Gardens Aglow tickets: adults \$18; seniors \$16; ages 3-17 \$10; family (2 adult/2 children) \$45; under 3 free (207-633-8000, www.maine-gardens.org/events-exhibits/gardens-aglow).

HOLIDAY FUN IN THE BERKSHIRES

Join merry holiday happenings in the Berkshires during Stockbridge Main Street at Christmas, a weekend when the village's streets, shops, and restaurants will be decorated with wreaths and festive lights, and offer activities the entire family will enjoy, including live performances, historic property tours, holiday markets, Santa, and more (Dec. 2-4, stockbridgechamber.org/visit/stockbridge-main-street-at-christmas). A 10-minute drive away, Lenox Winterland kicks off with a tree lighting in Lilac Park (Dec. 2), followed by a weekend of events including a Jolly Poker Run and student art show at the library (lenox.org/lenox-winterland). A beautifully decorated Christmas tree welcomes you to Wheatleigh, a Forbes 5-star hotel set on 22 manicured acres of lush parkland landscaped by Frederick Law Olmsted. Stay in Italianate, Gilded-Age



style in one of the hotel's 19 rooms and suites featuring high ceilings and museum-quality art and antiques. The signature restaurant, The Portico by Jeffrey Thompson, features multi-course menus of modern French gastronomy. Deluxe rooms from \$1,355 per night (833-774-6752, wheatleigh.com).

THERE

ANCIENT ROCK ART AND WATER SAFARIS

Those looking for a different kind of safari experience may want to consider Nxamaseri Island Lodge, Desert & Delta Safaris' newest addition to its portfolio of nine luxury lodges in Botswana. The main feature of this eight-ton lodge is an excursion to Tsodilo Hills, a UNESCO world heritage site that is home to impressive collections of ancient African rock art, with more than 4,500 paintings in 400 different sites. Located on a private island in Botswana's Okavango Delta, the property also offers a "water safari" experience for avid anglers attracted to catch and release the region's fighting Tiger Fish. The all-inclusive price includes all meals, local alcoholic drinks (excludes premium brands), park entrance fees, laundry, filtered drinking water, plus scheduled safari activities including boating and walking safaris, fishing and mokoro (canoe) excursions,

and Tsodilo Hills trips by vehicle. From January to March 2023, rates from \$330 per night, per person (double occupancy); rates for a 6-night Fly-in Safari package with safari flights start at \$3,958 per person (desertdelta.com/camps/nxamaseri-island-lodge).

TROPICAL TRIATHLON

Test your multisport endurance skills this winter at Tri Las Catalinas, a triathlon event hosted by the car-free, seaside town of Las Catalinas in Guanacaste, Costa Rica. (Feb. 18) Returning after a two-year pandemic hiatus, the competition features a 1,200-meter open-water swim, a 25-kilometer mountain bike challenge and an 8.5-kilometer trail run that covers more than 42 kilometers of trails, beaches, and waterfront. Special triathlon weekend hotel and lodging deals, in hotels and vacation homes, can be found on the website of Las Catalinas, a coastal beach development with houses, shops, restaurants, small hotels and inns, plazas, parks, and recreational facilities. Not interested in competing? Visitors can always enjoy swimming, stand-up paddleboarding, kayaking, boogie-boarding, and snorkeling at two stunning beaches, and hiking and biking in the nearby 1,000-plus acre tropical forest. Accommodations from \$250/night (www.lascatalinasr.com).

EVERYWHERE

COOL SNOWSUITS KEEP KIDS WARM

For the coolest (and warmest) kids clothing on the ski slopes and other winter adventures, check out the Quest snow overall "Nemphis" by Namuk, designer of outdoor clothing made specifically for kids. Available in four colorful patterns, the warm and waterproof winter overall features an easy-to-use drop seat zipper — for easy bathroom visits — integrated suspenders, built-in garbage pockets, hidden pacifier, and key holder, and YKK zippers. High breathability lets moisture escape easily, and high waterproof rating ensures a constant warm and dry feeling. Each piece is truly one of a kind, as prints are hand-drawn and cut-out sections vary. Sizes 2T to 8-9 years, \$329 (<https://us.namuk.com/collections/ski-clothing/products/quest-snow-overall-nemphis-blue-marin>).

FEEDING FIDO ON-THE-GO

Whether you're hiking for the day or camping for a week, the new Great Basin Dog Bowl by Ruffwear makes traveling with your pup a breeze. The packable, lightweight food and water bowl is available in three sizes — small, medium, and large — that hold from three to 10 cups. The durable, water-resistant shell fabric provides a stable structure, and reflective trim aids spotting the bowl in low-visibility conditions. Folds flat to store in pocket or backpack (slate blue, \$29.95, <https://ruffwear.com/products/great-basin-bowl>).

NECEE REGIS

