



## An Apple AirTag, Stolen Luggage, and Lessons Learned

### Description

### A Cautionary Tale

“It is not so much about what life hands you, but what you do with what you get”  
***Idowu Koyenikan***



Picture from my flight

From a theft perspective, we have been fortunate during our travels. By nature, we are cautious and have many protections in place. At times though, due to necessity, when moving from hotel to hotel, we leave all our luggage in a rental car while visiting sites. We pay close attention to where we park but know that is no guarantee. So far, we have had no issues; knock on wood.

On a recent trip, I (Joelle) learned a hard lesson at my home airport. My suitcase was stolen from the baggage carousel before I arrived there. Sadly, I discovered this is an increasing occurrence in the US. At my airport alone that evening, there were three reports of stolen luggage.

## Home from a business trip

The flight from Detroit landed late. The airport was busy with many flights coming in. I was scheduled to work my evening volunteer shift at the airport USO. I quickly stopped to drop off my carry-on and coat before heading to baggage claim. Several people from my flight were still there, and several bags were on the carousel. My luggage was not. I waited until it was apparent no more luggage was coming.

Becoming more concerned by the minute, I checked my Apple AirTag. Opening the Find Me app on my iPhone, it registered that my suitcase was nearby, but it seemed to be in an odd place. I immediately approached the airline and showed them the app location, and they said it looked like it was on a baggage cart somewhere. I am unsure how they were so confident, but I figured they knew the airport better. The agent said luggage is always found; it may take some time. We started the paperwork so it can be delivered to me once found. I kept watching the app; the suitcase was still at the airport but moving farther away. The agent reassured me not to worry; they would find it.

I was not so sure.

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Baggage Claim direction sign at Seattle (Sea-Tac) airport from Adobe Stock Photo

## Time for the Police

A short time later, with the bag moving farther away, I called the Port Police, who met me at their baggage claim substation. The second the Officer saw the app location, he said your suitcase is at the transit station; it has been stolen.

He asked for pictures of my luggage to examine the security video. Luckily, the suitcase looked unique, and we could spot it immediately on surveillance video. To my surprise, it was the first one out on the carousel.

Why does that never happen when I am standing there?

The suitcase had gone around several times. Our thief was casually leaning up against the wall the whole time, then moved in to grab my suitcase and walked away. The Police got a clear shot of his face.

Of course, since I lost so much time with the airline, our thief was off the light rail by the time we identified the theft. I could track the luggage on the Apple AirTag as it went down the rail line. If I had interacted with the Police sooner, they could have asked the transit police to stop him as he got off the train.

A City Police unit did go out where the bag was showing on the Apple Air Tag, but they did not find it when searching the area, even in dumpsters. I spent 3 hours at the airport dealing with this; it made for a long exhausting day. When I returned to the airline to make the report, the same agent was apologetic for giving me the wrong info. She was shocked when I told her this evening alone; there were three luggage thefts at the airport.

## How airport luggage is stolen



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The thief's mode of operation is to wait by the carousel and note which pieces are not picked up yet. Once they have seen the same bag go around several times, they grab it and casually walk away. If you show up and say, "Excuse me, that is my bag." they can say, "Oh no, did I grab the wrong bag? I am so sorry."

\*Remember, if your luggage gets left behind and is scheduled on a later flight, it will often go to the carousel first and be picked up by staff after most people have collected their luggage. But if the thief gets it first, you are out of luck.\*

## **The [Apple AirTag](#) continues to report to the home base**

Over the next two days, the Apple AirTag frequently reported the suitcase's location. It moved the night of the theft but stayed in the same place for the next 48 hours.

It was calling out to me, and I could not ignore it.

The night after the theft, I reached out again to the City Police. They sent another unit to the area where Apple AirTag was reporting but did not spot the suitcase.

## **How does an Apple AirTag work?**

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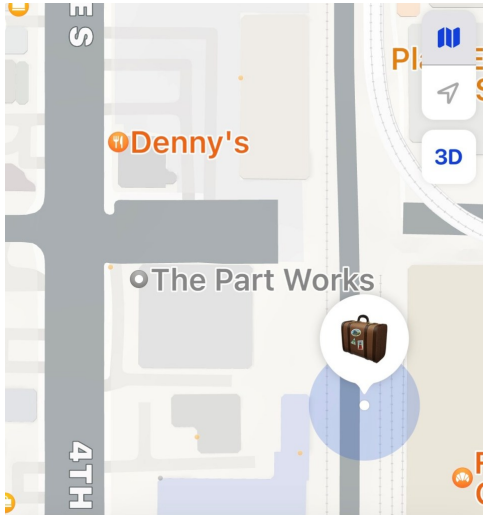


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The Apple Airtag reports a location based on other iPhones in the area. It does not ping at the exact location but is close to it. As so many people use iPhones, you can easily track the Apple AirTag, as was the case here.

They could not be simpler to set up. Pull the tap and place your phone near the Apple AirTag. It picks it up immediately, and your iPhone guides you the rest of the way. Takes less than a minute.

## **Our intervention to retrieve stolen luggage**



Two days later, my husband and I decided to go to the city to track the suitcase. We had no plans to confront anyone or do anything risky. We figured the bag was probably abandoned, and maybe I could salvage some items. Though I had nothing of enormous value in the suitcase, between clothes, shoes, toiletries, a nice winter coat, knee brace, etc., I lost over \$1000 of contents.

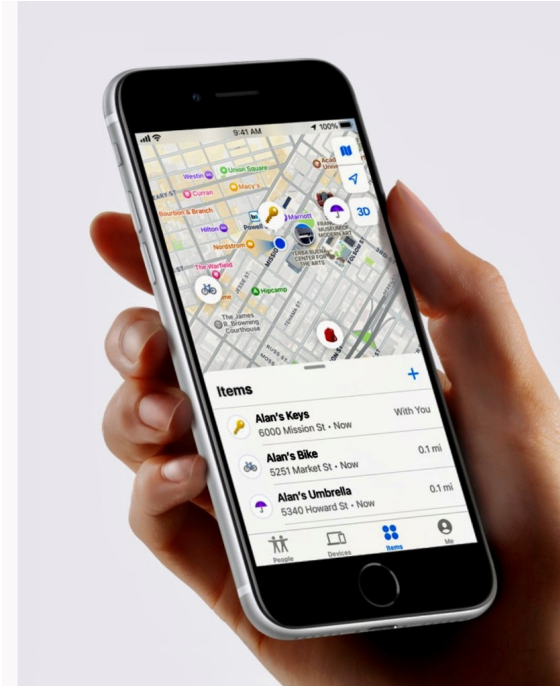
We followed the Apple AirTag GPS, which led us near railroad tracks in a warehouse district. It pointed straight to some tents next to the tracks. We did not get out of the car. As we sat deciding what to do, to my shock, the suspect walked by us. That Apple AirTag did its job.

## What we learned next

It was getting late, and we decided to return home and contact the Port Police. I was told to contact the City Police during daylight and see if they would help. They warned me they did not have to, but it was worth trying.

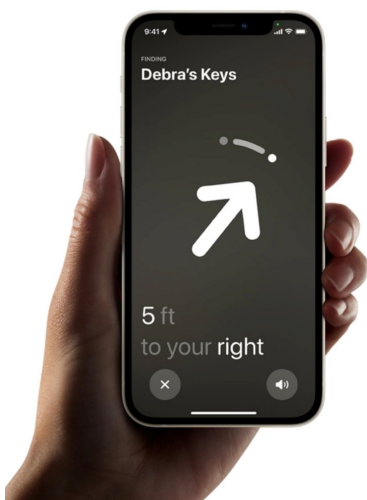
They also told me they had identified the suspect, who is well-known for this kind of theft. He had been arrested many times and charged, and nothing had been able to stick. Later in the story, you will learn why.

## Returning to the Apple AirTag location



When I called the City Police the next day, they said they would be happy to help. They asked us to come to the city, park a couple of blocks away from the location, and they would meet us. We provided the Officers with a printed photo of the stolen luggage and images of the AirTag location. They said to stay put, and they would call us if we were needed.

The Officers went to the first tent, and the resident allowed them to search the tent, and they found nothing. But just past this tent, they said they saw something suspicious. They asked us to come to the scene. I handed the Officer my cell phone, and he followed the Apple AirTag GPS. As he approached, it said 10 feet, 9 feet, and so forth until it said, "You have arrived." Right in front of him was my suitcase. The Officer was pretty impressed.



The Officers were out of our view for some time, and when they returned, they had my suitcase in hand. To no surprise to me, the suitcase was empty. The Officers felt bad returning an empty piece of luggage, but I was happy to have retrieved it with their help.

They also found several other suitcases and said it was apparent our suspect had been very busy at the airport. We had tracked his stash, and that is no small thing. It was obvious the Officers were pleased as well.

## It got a bit more interesting

While the Police were out of our view, guess who showed up in the distance? Our suspect. He was dressed exactly as he had been at the airport. He stopped when he saw the Police cars, watched for a minute, then took off quickly. I pointed him out to the Police, and one Officer left to track him. I do not know the result of that.

## Keeping everyone in the loop



The stolen suitcase

I contacted the first Port Police Officer to update him. He was genuinely pleased with the news and thanked me for pursuing it. He said these people keep getting away with repetitive crimes as they have received no repercussions. Prosecutors today have little interest or resources to prosecute property crimes.

When I opened my suitcase, I noticed every piece of identifying info and luggage tags had been removed. He swept it clean. There would have been no proof it was mine as it was likely the case for the other suitcases he had stolen.

This time he messed up. Though it was in plain view, he did not know what an Apple Airtag was. He probably thought it was a zipper pull. He was caught red-handed with the stolen item. Whether this goes to trial, I don't know; he has been charged with theft. At least, I hope this will deter him from returning to the airport and finding new victims.

Upon further research stealing luggage from an airport is a federal crime. I can only hope they will pursue that. A few trips back, I found a lovely one-of-a-kind piece of art I could not fit in my carry-on. I would have been heartbroken if he had stolen that.

### **What about the contents? What do I do now?**

The airline is the first step, and I did file a claim. Theft is covered under the category of lost luggage, as my items are gone. I can then forward what they don't cover to my travel insurance. I am curious how the process will go and will update it here.

The paperwork alone took hours, but it was well worth it, with over \$1000 of items needing replacement. I was surprised they only required receipts for items over \$100. I still gave them receipts for everything, Thank goodness for online shopping; it was tedious to gather receipts but also very easy.

### **What I did next**

I wrote to the Port Authority that operated the airport and shared with them what occurred. First, I commended the fantastic Port Police Officer I engaged with.

But I also told them they must do more since luggage theft is rising. They should increase security in baggage claim watching for known thieves, then if they grab a bag, ask for proof it is theirs. Another idea would be to have airlines or the airport make announcements advising people luggage thefts are occurring and to head immediately to baggage claim. They could hire staff to do random crosschecks of luggage tags and claim checks.



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## **There is likely lots of stolen luggage never reported**

Based on this experience, I would guess more luggage theft is occurring than is reported. The airline wanted me to do paperwork and said they would find it.

They never would have.

Eventually, it would just be noted as lost, and it would be done. I would have gotten mad at the airline when they weren't the culprits. In the meantime, another theft is missing from the logs.



Click the image to go to the Apple AirTags on Amazon

One thing I do know is I love my [Apple Airtags](#)



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When I first bought these, my only thought was to find my luggage in a sea of bags during that crazy time in Europe. I use them for my keys too. We use them on all our trips, and it was a relief always to know where our luggage was. I never considered the benefit from a theft situation perspective.

In the days after this event, I bought four more Apple AirTags. We will put one in each car, my carry-on, etc. People use them for pets, and on our [Amazon Storefront](#), we have holders that attach to the animal collars. There are so many other great uses.



Adobe Stock

There have been reports of the downside, such as Apple AirTags being used to stalk people or being attached to expensive cars that are later stolen. There is always a downside, but Apple is working on the issue.

In this case, this worked in ways I never imagined. A criminal was caught with my luggage and several others he had stolen. I don't expect restitution; the satisfaction of finding the thief is enough for now.

## Carry-on only, no thanks

I know some will say if you use only a carry-on, this won't happen.

That is not always the case, especially when there is no room in the overhead bins. I see that on most flights I have taken in recent months.

But many of us can't live out of a carry-on, period. Kudos to those who do, but that will never be me. I suggest placing an Apple Airtag in your carry-on suitcase too. You may be forced to check it. If you are on a trip, you have to part with your luggage at some point. If it is stolen or accidentally left behind in the cab, you can track it if you act quickly.

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## Lessons Learned

**1. DO NOT stop at Go or DO NOT doddle along the way; NO bathroom or coffee stops. GET TO BAGGAGE CLAIM!**

**2. Place [Apple AirTags](#) in all luggage you have with you, even carry-on. Place it in a discreet place. In this case, the suspect removed all identifying tags from the bag but obviously did not know what an AirTag was that was sitting in full view on the zipper. He likely thought it was a zipper pull.**

**I have now moved the AirTag into the zippered section that provides access to the rails. I taped it to a rail while putting lots of duct tape in other parts of the rails to make it look like a repair.**

**Then there is the obvious; I love Apple Air Tags.**

**3. Always have travel insurance, and don't rely on the ones your credit card offers. We exclusively use [Squaremouth](#) for all our travel insurance needs. Here is an article on the importance of travel insurance and how to be an intelligent consumer.**

*Check out our blog post on the importance of travel insurance by [clicking here](#)*

4. Always take a picture of your suitcase with your phone. I can't begin to tell you how valuable that was during the process.

5. Take a picture of your packed suitcase before heading to the airport. It will assist in your insurance claim. If you always have certain items in your suitcase (in my case, a knee brace), keep that receipt, take a pic, and keep a list of those items.

6. Buy luggage that looks unique so it can be easily spotted if theft occurs. Placing tags on the handles isn't enough, as those can be easily removed. I currently have a Travel Pro Bold, my favorite ever! You can find it by [clicking here](#).



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*Check out our blog post on the [Top 25 Tips for Successful Travel Abroad](#)*

7. I have often sat with people who had to check their carry-on on a crowded plane. They left their meds, electronics, laptop, etc., in the suitcase as it was last minute. They would say, "Well, I won't need it on the flight; it's not a big deal."

8. But that luggage goes to baggage claim, where it is now a potential target for theft. Most luggage insurance coverage does not include electronics.

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9. Every officer, 911 or dispatch person, was fantastic. Caring, engaging, attentive, and

professional. From that perspective, it was a positive experience. I was always calm, patient, respectful, and appreciative of every effort they made. I have always respected our Police, but that has only grown exponentially.

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## How to process this

Travel comes with many wonders, and it also comes with many bumps along the road. We could write a very long article with all the stories that have occurred to us over the years. It is part of life; bumps happen while at home too. The key is don't let it impact the joys of travel. It is a minor hiccup in a lifetime of incredible memories. Please take it in stride, learn from it, and move on.

A travel blogger, Nomadic Matt, has had many things go wrong over all his years of world travel, including being badly knifed in Columbia. I admire how he does not let it deter him from seeing the world or speaking well of the country where it occurred. He focuses on how the strangers on the street came to his rescue and how the Police loaded him in a truck, not wanting to wait for an ambulance as he had multiple wounds. Focus on the good.

## Final thoughts



Though an unpleasant and stressful experience, my luggage theft taught me a lot. I was lucky in many ways, too, I had no items of great sentimental packed, and we did retrieve the suitcase and [Apple AirTag](#). I also had very positive experiences with all the law enforcement I encountered, which is a valuable lesson in its own right.

If airport travelers make their voices heard, airports may be motivated to do more about this growing issue.

It also inspired me to share this story to educate others about the risk. Through shared experiences, we may prevent others from being a victim.

See the world, travel with an open heart and gentle eyes, respect the culture, and seek authentic experiences. But also take precautions, and be an intelligent traveler, to reduce the risk of bad stuff occurring. Despite all our precautions, things still happen, so buy travel insurance to assist in those times. It will give you peace of mind, which is worth its weight in gold when traveling.

Safe travels!!

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Do you have an airport theft or [Apple AirTag](#) story to share?

Comment below so we can all learn from your experience.

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**\*We have NO affiliation with Apple, and when we purchased our Apple AirTags, we paid full price on Amazon\***

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[VRBO](#) is now under the Expedia group's ownership, which many were worried about, but it hasn't panned out to be a concern. It is a massive network with access to all lodging forms should issues arise. Joelle has used VRBO for many years with her family and has had no problems with it.

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