

NEW PROCEDURE: Making our own airline reservations

We used to contract with our travel agent buying each trip participants' airline seat in a group contract. Once folks started enrolling in the trip, often many individuals would express a preference for an aisle or window seat, premium coach or business class, etc. To get the best/lowest pricing we would have booked standard coach seats, from the middle to the back of the plane body. Asking for "upgrades" is certainly acceptable to serve our participants, but the air contracts only allowed 10-15% deviation from the original seat specifications without incurring substantial cost increases or even losing the contract plus penalties. Now, years later, many people have credit cards that award points for buying air travel with certain airlines, or points awarded to be used on any airline by buying groceries, services, etc.. The multiple types of credit cards offering points that may lower our flying cost or plane choices have encouraged us now to fly using different companies to get to the same places – we'll have 40 people on our Scotland trip and it could be possible that our group will use more than 5 or 6 airlines and many various schedules to get us all there. So, many agents, including ours, have now abandoned the practice of packaging air flights into the land package of a tour and they let every passenger choose and make his own flight to a destination using whatever payment method is desired plus any choice of airline and airline services. This cash payment practice also actually saves in the range of 6-8% off the cost of air travel per person since the use of credit cards to pay for the trip actually added cost to the tour agent that they had to pass on to us – thus the reason for our paying for each participant via check, to save \$300 or more per travel package.

The rub comes in managing all the variables in this 'do it yourself' air travel practice. We will be asking our Scotland travelers to **choose a plane schedule that gets you into Scotland/Edinburgh airport no later than 11:00 AM/12:00 noon on October 9** (leaving the US afternoon or early evening on October 8). We will have a bus at the Edinburgh airport to pick us up as a group at 1:00 PM. We will do several short stops for sightseeing from the airport on our way to our in-town hotel for check-in around 4:00 PM. Having this schedule will allow our agents/trip leader the appropriate cushion time IF something should happen to any one of our incoming flight schedules for one or many of our travelers that could delay their arrival. Once we see the various airline schedules you are taking, we'll make a back-up plan probably with taxis/shuttles to get any late arrivals to the hotel.

One of the primary things that can impact/delay your arrival in Edinburgh is dealing with European/Scotland Customs to enter the continent/country. Edinburgh is a wonderfully smaller airport considering we are going into a major capital city. The whole Customs experience, we expect, will be smaller, less chaotic, shorter time in lines, etc. if your first landing in Europe is in Edinburgh. Many flight schedules will be wanting you to land first in London/Heathrow – one of the most huge and chaotic airports in the world! So we want to do all that we can to avoid landing in London first – do everything you can to land in Edinburgh first! Dublin, Ireland is an acceptable alternate first landing airport with a short hop then to Edinburgh if you cannot get a schedule to land first in Edinburgh. Lufthansa is a wonderful airline that can get you to Edinburgh eventually but you have to land in Frankfurt or Munich first – seems way out of the way to fly to get back to our destination in Edinburgh and both of those primary German cities have huge airports with congested Customs services for your first touch-down in Europe too. So be real focused on your first European landing to be in Edinburgh!

The best way to accomplish an Edinburgh-first landing in Europe is to change planes, if necessary, in the US that then gives you a direct flight into Edinburgh. Many different airlines will have departures from Columbia SC, Charlotte NC, and Atlanta GA that will stop in New York (Newark and Laganardia), Chicago, or other of our biggest international cities. I want to recommend that you look for smaller US cities/airports to fly through to make your change then on direct to Edinburgh – such as Philadelphia, Boston or JFK in New York City. Smaller US cities do also have flights that go first to London (Heathrow) too and then on to Edinburgh, which I'm

recommending you NOT consider doing unless you have a cost or timing concern with other direct flight schedules – Heathrow is massive and crowded at all hours of the day and night as they are processing many thousands of travelers through Customs at the same time you would be going through there!

The same procedure will be true on your return to the US after our adventures in Scotland. Plan to fly from Edinburgh back to a smaller (if possible) US entry city/airport, again such as Philadelphia, JFK in New York or Boston where there are usually many less international travelers entering the US at the same time you are going home. So getting through Customs on the US side will be easier with a smaller crowd and there are direct flights from those entry cities back to Charlotte or Columbia. The exception to this assumption is if you happen to have US Global Entry certification as part of your TSA identification for quicker security checks on the US side of the Atlantic only. Global Entry goes through a different customs desk for faster Customs service and then directly on to Baggage Claim, avoiding most lines of tired travelers being processed.

At one of our future group participant meetings, we will discuss the possibilities of having a bus to take us to the departing airport as well as from the returning airport back into Columbia IF enough of us have chosen similar departure airport and flight times on October 8 and October 22. To avoid needing a bus or shuttle connection coming home, perhaps more of us will want to fly out of and back into Columbia with a short connecting flight from our entry city on the US side – fly to Philadelphia, to Charlotte and on to Columbia which means you don't need a bus at all – get a taxi or Uber home. Or we may like to get into groups of six or eight people and share a ride round trip to Charlotte with the Charlotte Airport Shuttle van service. We'll talk more about this later at a meeting in person.

Another reason for the agents discontinuing to offer group air arrangements is that so many travelers choose to add on to the front or back of a group tour a few days in the main city, Edinburgh in our case, or another nearby destination, such as Dublin or London which are easy plane or train hops from Scotland, or even an European mainland neighbor such as Amsterdam or Paris. I encourage you to consider that addition of a second destination as the airline cost is a major part of the cost of any trip, so you can certainly justify the extended trip as an economical effort. If you do add that extra destination into the major effort to get your air put together properly, just be sure to make your arrangements to meet our group/bus at the Edinburg airport on October 9 by 11:00 AM/12:00 noon.

Whether you come home directly from Edinburgh or from another city if you extend your vacation on the end, do plan to fly from Edinburgh (or your other departing city if you extended) to any smaller US city like Philadelphia or Boston to go through Customs and then on to Charlotte, or Columbia, your final destination.

For our less experienced travelers, asking a local travel agent to help you may be a good thing OR I'll be glad to help you as well.

To Do Right Now: Start studying air travel sites (you might save a nickel to use the airlines direct sites since the flights are the only service you need). Our agent, Betty Ann Buckley, recommends that we wait until May 1 to buy our air tickets to assure we have 40 people signed up to make sure the trip is a "go". I'll recommend that we have a little committee amongst the participants to meet to choose a schedule on each of American, United and Delta that we share back with you. I think we may be able to get ourselves organized enough to make hiring a bus work. We'll talk about this more in our first meeting and I'm glad to try to do what the majority of the group desires to make this less confusing. Once we do give the 'go ahead' to purchase your tickets, please consider the option of buying "refundable" tickets so that if you have an illness or business reason, etc. for cancelling your trip it will be easy to get a refund. See comments for Trip Insurance to add to this info.

Here are some AIR schedules to consider for the Scotland Trip. These all have only one stop, avoiding London/Heathrow. Two stop schedules may offer you some fee discount over one stop flights, but your total flight time is extended. Although I've not listed two-stop suggestions here, the same concepts apply – try to do all the plane changes in the US, avoiding London/Heathrow.

Oct 8 – Leaving Charlotte to Philadelphia - Boeing 737
American Flight 1838 LV 4:41 pm AR 6:46 pm
Philadelphia to Edinburgh – Boeing 787
American Flight 278 LV 7:55 pm AR 7:30 am (Oct 9)
Total travel time 9 hours 49 min (plus 1 hour 9 min to change flights)

Oct 8 – Leaving Charlotte to JFK New York City - Airbus A319
American Flight 657 LV 5:35 pm AR 7:34 pm
JFK New York to Edinburgh - Airbus A321neo
American Flight 82 LV 9:00 pm AR 8:30 am (Oct 9)
Total Flight Time 9 hours 55min (plus 1 hour 26 min to change flights)

Oct 8 – Leaving Charlotte to Washington DC/Dulles - Embraer 175
United Flight 3998 LV 7:47 pm AR 9:12 pm
Washington to Edinburgh - Boeing 757-200
United Flight 978 LV 10:25 pm AR 10:35 am (Oct 9)
Total Flight Time 9 hours 48 min (plus 1 hour 13 min to change flights)

Oct 8 – Leaving Charlotte to Toronto, Canada (staying inside the secure part of the airport in Toronto, you won't have to go through Customs in Canada) - Air Canada/United partners Embraer 175
United/AC Flight 3998 LV 3:35 pm AR 5:26 pm
Toronto to Edinburgh - Boeing 757-200
United/AC Flight 8748 LV 7:45 pm AR 7:20 am (Oct 9)
Total Flight Time 10 hours 45 min (plus 2 hours 21 min to change flights)

Oct 8 – Charlotte to Boston - Embraer 175
Delta Airlines Flight 5639 LV 2:10 pm AR 4:36 pm
Boston to Edinburgh - Boeing 767 – 300 ER
Delta Airlines 122 LV 7:40 pm AR 7:05 am (Oct 9)
Total Flight Time 11 hours 55 min (plus 3 hours 11 min to change flights)

Following are some return schedules for the major airlines above. We will spend the last night in Edinburgh at an airport hotel that is a 10-minute walk from the terminal or a free shuttle ride away. In choosing the options to show you, I picked a return flights later than 11:00 am (meaning that you need to be at the airport around 8:30 – 9:00 am on each of the three airlines. Since there are no activities planned other than going home on Oct 22, I'm assuming everyone wants to get going early. Breakfast at the airport hotel starts at 5:00 AM so there's plenty of time for folks to eat before they leave the hotel.

Oct 22 – Leaving Edinburgh to Philadelphia - Boeing 737
American Flight 819 LV 11:25 am AR 1:50 pm
Philadelphia to Charlotte - Boeing 737
American Flight 3012 LV 3:48 pm AR 5:50 pm
Flight Time 9 hours 27 min (plus 1 hour 58 min to do Customs and change flights)

Oct 22 – Leaving Edinburgh to Boston - Boeing 767
Delta Flight 123 LV 11:20 am AR 1:25 pm
Boston to Charlotte - Boeing 767
Delta Flight 209 LV 3:59 pm AR 6:40 pm
Flight time 9 hours 46 min (plus 2 hours 34 min to do Customs and change flights)

Oct 22 – Leaving Edinburgh to Dulles - Boeing 757
United Flight 979 LV 12:30 pm AR 3:35 pm
Dulles to Charlotte - Embraer 175
United Flight 6209 LV 5:15 pm AR 6:41 pm
Flight Time 9 hours 31 min (plus 1 hour 40 min to do Customs and change flights)

TRAVEL INSURANCE will be offered by our tour agent, Alpha Christian Tours. Once you have paid 100% of your ground tour package, you will receive an electronic confirmation that will list the cost of your ground trip and provide a travel insurance cost matrix. At that time, you can add the total tour cost from the invoice, the amount of your airfare that you have already paid and the last 4 digits of the credit card used to pay the airfare, and check for any other variables, usually age if there are any variables. That information will lead you to a total cost of insurance. Assuming you choose to buy the insurance, you will print off your invoice, write the total of your air cost and the last 4 digits of your credit card on the invoice and send with a check for your insurance cost back to Alpha. Alpha will then send you a receipt for the total cost of your trip and a disclosure that lists all the coverage details. You will put this document with your passport and carry it with you throughout the trip to have on hand IF you were to need medical help or an evacuation from the country back home before your regularly scheduled flight.

TSA and GLOBAL ENTRY If you don't have TSA PreCheck you might want to consider getting it before this trip. It costs about \$75 per person and will get you through a much shorter and most would say less strenuous check-in through US security than the long public line. PreCheck is good for 5 years and once you are in their system, they will contact you at the anniversary with details for a speedy renewal. Global Entry includes the PreCheck service but carries an expedited Customs desk service that admits members back into the US with a less strenuous interview process, taking far less time. Global Entry costs about \$125 per person for 5 years. Either of these programs are going to require a digital scanned photo (the website gives instructions for size, etc.) and information about birth date, name (married ladies who have changed your names read the instructions carefully), etc. Once you have the member number of the program you choose, you enter that number when you order your flight tickets. If you forget to do that entry, you can ask the airport ticket agent to enter the number for you and print new updated boarding receipts. Department of Homeland Security right now has frozen the services of both programs so there is only fully public, long line service available while the folks in Congress and the President dance more about the national budget. Hopefully, by October, there will again be TSA and Global Entry available – just watch the news or ask me from time to time and I'll try to stay on top of it. You can apply using one of these websites: TSA.gov/precheck or TTP.DHS.gov/. Be careful to use only these sites as there are bogus/scammy addresses on the internet that do not have "gov" as part of their address; they want your data and credit card info so they can go shopping!

FLIGHT SCAMS -- unfortunately there are many scams these days but the one raging right now involves lost luggage, or the perception of lost luggage. Many of us might be eager to pull off baggage tags as soon as we arrive at the airport and collect our luggage, in the bus or in our hotel rooms, but the airlines are asking travelers to not do that at this time. Rather, take the tags off your bags, and fold them with the glue inside and stash them in a suitcase pocket until you get back home to SC, where you can shred the tags along with any other papers that reveal personal info like credit card receipts. Apparently, there are folks going through airport and hotel trash these days looking for these baggage tags which do have a lot of info about you and your trip. They use the data on the tag to fill out a lost baggage report and claim your insurance amount making from \$500-\$2000 per bag depending upon your flight program using points or the minimum the airline provides, which is usually about \$500 per bag. I often wonder why folks wouldn't just get a job, this seems like a lot of work, but indeed there is evil in the world. We just need to do our best to foil these dishonest attempts.

EU VISA Application

Each traveler to European countries must now apply for a VISA to visit for vacation or work. Since the Visa application asks for personal identification information, it is a service that must be applied for by each individual.

Since the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales) is no longer a member of the European Union, we will be applying for a UK Visa and its processing through the United Kingdom. Cost of the Visa is about \$20 per person and is good for two years. Within the two-year period, you may enter any of the four UK countries as many times as you wish but you can stay no longer than 186 days on any one visit. The total number of days across numerous entries during a two year period doesn't matter.

Attached are a couple of pages I printed from the UK and Scotland websites. Follow the instructions and it's really easy. Since the Visa is good for two years and Scotland or any other of the UK countries are so easy to get to from the US, you may want until closer the time of our trip – maybe early September – to get your Visa so that you will have some time remaining in case you wish to travel to the UK again soon. I've heard from numerous travelers that the Visa process is easy and the turn-around is quick so you should have your confirmation shortly.

You cannot enter Scotland without the Visa!

I will plan to send reminders to the group in mid-August to early September to assure we all have this item covered.

The only official, legitimate website for a Scotland (UK) visa application is [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk). All visa, study, work, and Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) applications must be processed through this site to ensure legality and avoid extra fees. You can also use the official "UK ETA" app.  Facebook +3

Key Information:

- **Official Website:** www.gov.uk/apply-to-come-to-the-uk.
- **Application Method:** Online at GOV.UK or via the "UK ETA" app.
- **Visa Types:** Standard Visitor, Skilled Worker, Student, etc..
- **Warning:** Do not use unofficial, third-party sites claiming to handle UK visas, as they often charge unnecessary fees.  Facebook +3

For official guidance, you can visit

<https://www.scotland.org/about-scotland/visa-and-immigration>.  Scotland.org



[Home](#) > [What you need to do](#)

Website:

Gov.UK

How to apply for a visa to come to the UK

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Choose a visa

You may need a visa to come to the UK to study, work, visit or join family.

There are different visas depending on:

- where you come from
- why you want to come to the UK
- how long you want to stay for
- your personal circumstances and skills

