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Skip to main content

Open Navigation Menu

Menu

Coconuts: the reason you may miss your next flight

The Latest

Destinations

Hotels & Homestays

Food & Drink

People & Culture

Mindful Travel

Readers' Travel Awards

Video

Immersive

MAGAZINE

Escape to Rajasthan

More

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Newsletter

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Search

The Latest

Destinations

Hotels & Homestays

Food & Drink

People & Culture

Mindful Travel

Readers' Travel Awards

Video

Immersive

MAGAZINE

Escape to Rajasthan

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HOTELS

CNT TOP RESTAURANT AWARDS

DESTINATION WEDDING GUIDED

DON'T TRAVEL WITHOUT IT

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AUSTRALIA

ESSENTIALLY

RAJASTHAN

INSIDERS

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Coconuts: the reason you may miss your next flight

Checking in this seemingly harmless condiment gets thousands of passengers and bags regularly detained at airports across India

By Condé Nast Traveller

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Helder Faria

We all have that one friend that cuts their arrival at the airport far too close. While the deciding factor behind whether they make their flight often seems to be the security line, that's just what meets the eye. Check-in bags can just as easily cause you to miss your flight, if there are prohibited items in them. While air travellers have largely become accustomed to keeping the likes of power banks and e-cigarettes out of bags they are checking in, other less suspecting prohibited items can snag them. Enter: the dried coconut or copra.

Coconuts may make you miss your next flight

Valued for its long shelf life and religious significance—not to mention its nature as one of the most ubiquitous condiments countrywide—the prominence of dried coconut presents a unique challenge for airlines in India. Unlike matches or lighters, copra doesn't make for an obvious omission from travellers' packing lists, but in flying security terms, it's considered a fire hazard. A banned item, it “contains a high amount of oil that is highly flammable and can cause a fire if it encounters heat inside the aircraft,” explains a spokesperson from Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA). According to data provided by the CSMIA spokesperson, dried coconut accounts for approximately 9% of all prohibited items found in check-in bags at the airport. From December 2022 to May 2023, CSMIA faced 3,683 instances of checked-in copra. Moreover, this July, Zulfiqar Hasan, Director of General Aviation at the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security, had released a statement highlighting that the prohibited items in check-in luggage cost roughly 1,250 hours of security personnel time every day at airports across the country. “In airport operations, time plays a very crucial role. Every minute lost in the process can cause a passenger to miss their flight,” the CSMIA spokesperson adds.

Safety and timeliness guide the vast network of security protocols for bags moving across major Indian airports, with security personnel trained to determine whether a bag is ‘clear’ within 20 to 30 seconds. At CSMIA, for example, 99% of check-in bags are cleared in this time frame, but the less than 1% of them that require more in-depth scrutiny translates into thousands upon thousands of bags. Once one is flagged for potentially carrying a prohibited item, those valuable seconds can turn into minutes or hours—plenty of time to cause a traveller to miss their flight or board it without knowing that their luggage is being withheld. According to protocol at CSMIA, “if the passenger is present at the airport, they must be physically present when the bag is opened... If the passenger is present at the airport but there's little time left for the flight to take off, then the airline representative will take the passenger to a dedicated facility from where the passenger can see the prohibited item being removed via CCTV and video screens.” And if the passenger has boarded their flight while their bag is being detained, they must provide authorisation to an airline staff and security members to open their bag, remove the prohibited item, and then wait for them to send their bag to their destination—a cumbersome, albeit necessary, process to say the least. So if you don't want to miss your flight or end up at your destination without all your travel necessities, we suggest you keep dried coconut out of your bags.

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