



REFUSED BOARDING OVER WEIGHT LIMIT

News / Airlines



Air New Zealand refused to let a woman board her flight to Tonga because the aircraft had reached its upper weight limit.

Auckland woman Alex Catchpole-Ozp?nar was supposed to board her 9.30am flight to Tonga on Monday for a five day holiday but was turned away at the Air NZ check-in counter because her aircraft had reached its weight limit.

Catchpole-Ozp?nar said she was told by a manager that if an aircraft weighed too much they kicked off the person who was last to book online.

An Air New Zealand spokesperson said the flight had needed to carry extra fuel because it couldn't land at its preferred alternate airport. Catchpole-Ozp?nar was among the passengers removed from the flight to compensate for the added weight of the fuel.

The flight was not fully booked, Air New Zealand said.

Catchpole-Ozp?nar said she booked her airfare in February. She tried to check in two-and-a-half hours before her departure time.

"This is such a screw-up. I expected way better from Air New Zealand," she said in a post on the airline's Facebook page.

Her mother, Leanne Catchpole, was already in Tonga waiting for Catchpole-Ozp?nar to arrive.

She said the airline had only saved about 70kg by excluding her daughter and her carry-on bag from the flight.

"They didn't try to contact her either to let her know not to bother to make the trip out to the airport," she said.

Air NZ responded to the Facebook post with a link to its conditions of carriage which outline that it may refuse to carry any item for safety or operational reasons.

Catchpole-Ozp?nar's five day holiday in Tonga was shortened due to the disruption and her accommodation was non-refundable.

"I was hoping for a positive experience but I feel discouraged to fly with you to the Pacific again."

She was rebooked on a Tuesday flight but Air NZ said she would need to contact her travel insurance provider regarding accommodation expenses.

Leanne Catchpole said she did have travel insurance but it wouldn't cover the situation for both of them.

She had tried to extend their holiday by two days to make up for her daughter's lost days, but had been told at the Air New Zealand office at Nuku'alofa that it would cost an extra \$851 to do so.

Catchpole-Ozp?nar had received \$350 in compensation, but her mother said that didn't make up for the stress and lost holiday time.

Air New Zealand said the Catchpole-Ozp?nar's flight was unable to land at its destination airport, and the preferred alternative was unavailable.

That meant "we needed to carry additional fuel, and reduce the weight of the aircraft in order to do this," a company spokesperson said.

"Obviously this adjustment is something that only occurs close to the time of departure."

The offloaded customers were accommodated on alternative services

"Air New Zealand apologises for any inconvenience this has caused," the spokesperson said.

Air NZ flies its 168 seater Airbus A320s on the Tonga route on Mondays and the aircraft has a maximum take off load of 77 tonnes.

Catchpole-Ozp?nar has been approached for comment.

Southern Cross Travel Insurance chief executive Craig Morrison said given the circumstances the traveller should receive compensation from Air NZ as the airline was responsible for the traveller not being able to travel as planned.

THE AVERAGE PASSENGER

Aviation commentator and former Air New Zealand employee Irene King said airlines calculated an aircraft's weight by weighing cargo and baggage and applying an average passenger weight.

For most routes there was a standard passenger weight of about 80 kilograms.

For Tonga, Air NZ had a special weight of about 90 or 95kg, because Tongans generally weighed more, she said.

"For Tonga in particular it used to be pretty challenging because the standard passenger was not standard for the Tonga community," King said.

In 2013 Pacific Island carrier Samoa Air started charging passengers per kilo of body weight rather than per seat.

The initiative was deemed a success by the airline's chief executive.

Airlines could leave freight or luggage behind to get an aircraft within the allowable weight while keeping all passengers on board, King said.

"My experience is they usually take the passenger and leave the baggage to come up on another flight."

She said the turned away passenger should be entitled to compensation because she was denied the right to travel.

"She's turned up in good faith, she didn't know that the aircraft was going to be overweight."

King was surprised to hear that the last person to book online was the first one denied boarding.

"Where is it specified in company policy that that is their rule and if it is company policy then it should be on the ticket."

Some airlines hold an auction at the gate to entice passengers to volunteer removing themselves from overbooked or overweight aircraft, she said.

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