

Staying on top of the smugglers' tricks

By Felicity Galvin

As a supervisor at passport control and baggage areas at Sydney Airport, my first task each day is to make sure adequate staff are allocated to arrival and departure points. Morning shifts are always busy, particularly on weekends when up to six aircraft can land within three minutes of each other and we can expect up to 2000 passengers arriving at the control points in both terminals. This, combined with the departure of several flights, can stretch our resources to the limit.

The few complaints we get mostly come from arriving passengers upset or offended at being selected for an examination.

I explain Customs role in protecting the community and advise them not to take their selection personally as any combination of a wide range of factors may have led to it.

This satisfies most people. Some complaints can leave me speechless, such as: "I have no complaints about the search. However, the officer did not pack the bag as well as my maid did."

Compliments from arriving passengers far outweigh complaints. Most compliments are about the friendliness of our officers and the speed with which passengers are processed.

Because of our high profile at Sydney Airport, we receive complaints for events beyond our control. This includes missing or damaged baggage, delays in the arrival of baggage and a lack of baggage trolleys.

We can judge from the origin of a flight how busy we will be in the baggage examination area. For example, a flight from Bali usually means seizing at least two or three blowpipes complete with darts, which are prohibited imports. We often find tortoise shells from Bali which are

protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and are seized on behalf of Environment Australia.

Other protected items commonly seized include American ginseng, caviar, tarantulas and scorpions which, unfortunately for them but fortunately for us, are already dead. Commonly seized goods listed in the Customs Prohibited Imports Regulations are flick knives, daggers, ball-bearing guns, replica pistols, sling-shots fitted with wrist braces and items which administer an electric shock.

While most travellers are law abiding, some will go to great lengths to import narcotics, prohibited goods, undeclared currency and prohibited quarantine items. Other breaches often detected can involve people attempting to evade duty and sales tax or intending to breach visa conditions such as working when their visas do not allow them to, and overstaying visa periods. Here are some examples of travellers' tricks which we often detect:

A passenger declared a video camera, saying he had owned and used it for four months overseas, to gain a higher depreciation. He provided a receipt, dated the previous day. Confronted with the date, he readily admitted lying, saying his brother had advised him to do so. He was charged the appropriate sales tax on the camera and told a penalty would not be imposed as he was obviously normally honest because he was so unskilled at being dishonest.

About \$A10,000 and \$US7000 was found in an arriving flight attendant's belongings. Anyone possessing \$10,000 or more in Australian or foreign currency must declare it and complete an Australian Cash Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre form. She said she had forgotten to do so. The Australian Federal Police were notified. A frisk search uncovered a further \$10,000 in cash. The flight attendant and the cash were handed over to the AFP. Later, \$2000 was returned and the remainder was seized.

One officer found an empty ring box in a passenger's bag. The passenger

Felicity Galvin

