

# **How To Be An AIR COURIER**



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by

Avril Harper, MCIPD, Dip PM

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All ventures involve risk and the individual must take care to guard against potentially heavy losses by arranging appropriate contact with professional legal and financial advisors before committing high sums of money to untested ventures.

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## About The Author



Avril Harper has written extensively on living and working abroad, having produced a string of titles for Grant Dawson Travel and other publishers of travel and expatriate guides. She was specially commissioned by the Ministry of Defence to produce a guide to working overseas for service men and women exiting the profession.

Here she shares with us the many openings for you to travel the world free of charge or at very little cost and even make money as you go.

# Introduction To Air Courier Travel

Air courier travel is one of the easiest ways to travel free - or at very low cost - and there's a growing need for couriers, meaning *more* chances for *more* people to travel to many *more* places than they ever thought possible.

Courier firms - those recruiting air couriers - deal in time-sensitive material, items that must be transported from one location to another, in the shortest possible time.

Some courier companies operate on purely domestic routes, say between major towns and cities in the UK, and often use road couriers or domestic airlines involving little hassle and few delays.

It's a case of handing the package over to a delivery driver, or having a member of staff accompany a package on a short flight. There are few security hassles, few likely delays possible, and most items reach their destination in a couple of hours.

But items being transported between countries are an altogether different matter, mainly due to rules and regulations enforced at Customs at airports on route.

**The reason firms use couriers to accompany items abroad centres around whether packages are classed as cargo or baggage.**

Cargo travels alone, overwhelmingly on 'cargo only' flights since the Twin Towers tragedy and it can take several days to pass through Customs to allow thorough checks of paperwork and package. Cargo must arrive several hours ahead of flight time meaning even more delays for sender and recipient, and there's no priority for cargo, unlike people, to gain access to a particular flight.

Even worse, the sender's package may be bundled with many more items into huge storage containers which must be full before travelling. More delays, sometimes long ones.

The problem continues at destination, where cargo can again take hours to be inspected and cleared for collection.

**All totally unacceptable - and very unnecessary - for firms dealing in urgent contracts, life-saving medicines, perishable goods.**

For delivery companies it's not just a question of making sure time-sensitive items actually reach their intended destination, they also have to do so as quickly as possible, and ahead of rival companies.

Courier travel is the solution. Items classed as baggage, specifically 'personal baggage' arrive with the passenger, typically an hour or so before the flight, and generally pass

quickly through Customs at airports on route. Additionally, a passenger seat can be reserved on a specific flight at a definite time. Now what might take days for cargo to reach it's destination can take hours with a courier.

Very few firms have sufficient workload to warrant employing full-time staff couriers to accompany articles abroad, with all the hassles of employment law and contracts, not to mention full-time wages, holiday pay, sick pay to consider. Hence the preference for most companies to use freelance and standby couriers. And also the point at which you now come into the picture.

## Life Is Getting Faster Day By Day!



The 'I Want It Now!' philosophy prevalent in today's society, has seen a growth in people required to accompany time-sensitive items between countries.

Items accompanied by courier are classed as 'Baggage' and flow quickly through Customs.

Unaccompanied items, classed as 'Cargo', take longer to process, and is inappropriate for urgent items such as medicines, contracts, perishable goods.

So couriers are hired to transport time-sensitive materials as part of their own personal 'baggage', meaning fast delivery, and a nice reward for couriers in the shape of greatly reduced air fares or even free passage.

## What You Will Be Doing

Items you might be asked to accompany abroad include: letters, photographs, legal papers, business proposals, contracts, computer disks, reports, product prototypes.

But it isn't just big companies that require your help.

You might also get to accompany urgent deliveries overseas, such as perishable gifts, animals, children, medicines left behind by travellers, culinary delicacies for smart international restaurants, and other time-sensitive items that must reach their destinations safely, and on time!

The courier is not usually required to physically collect or accompany the package or even liaise directly between sender and intended recipient. Usually, all the courier does is remain responsible for the package between airports.

That 'responsibility' rarely involves carrying the package. In fact you might never get to see what you are accompanying, but that item will be listed as your personal baggage, and that's why it travels speedily through Customs throughout the journey.

Typically you turn up at the airport of departure at a pre-appointed time, where you are met by representatives of the courier company who hand over your ticket and process you and the package through Customs. On board plane you may carry the package or it may travel separately in some secure place.

At the destination airport company representatives will again process you and their package through Customs and give you your return ticket once your role is complete.



**Under International Law all baggage on commercial flights must be checked in and accompanied by a passenger. This ruling has all the more poignancy since the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>!**

## Who Can Become An Air Courier?

Air courier travel is a bargain hunter's dream and appeals to budget travellers from all walks of life: students, business men and women, retired individuals and couples,

families, freelancers, writers, international traders, not forgetting holiday makers and people who just love to travel!

No special qualifications or knowledge is needed, but it helps to be flexible, especially if you hope to gain the highest award of all. **REGULAR FREE TRAVEL** – and that normally means being ready packed and able to travel at a moment's notice if an unexpected need arises or another courier falls otherwise absent or ill.

Anyone over 18, a passport holder, in good health, can become a courier. Nationality is usually unimportant, and one does not need to be of the same nationality as the airline used. Retired people are preferred by many companies as being more reliable and professional, and having more time to travel, than their younger counterparts.

## How Do I Get Started?

The application procedure is simple and there are many ways to find 'work' as a courier. The easiest is to contact courier companies or associations provided later or others listed in *Yellow Pages* and other listings on and off the Internet.

A variety of membership groups exist for couriers, both on and off the Internet, with most offering updated information about opportunities, prices, application procedures, and so on.

You could find this information yourself, by surfing the Internet, or making constant telephone calls to courier companies, but you'll find that very time-consuming, costly, frustrating and not quite so easy or effective as becoming a member of a specialist group.

It doesn't cost much to join these groups, typically from fifteen to fifty pounds a year in the UK, or up to fifty dollars or so for an international group.

You'll also access opportunities via Internet discussion groups and forums, where like-minded individuals, keen to fly without high cost, pass information and advice for others to benefit.

Additionally, newsletters are available by snail mail and online to highlight current opportunities for paying subscribers. A number of Internet sites and other contacts are provided later.

If you prefer the DIY route, first contact international delivery companies close to your own local airports. Write or phone, fax or email, explain your intentions and ask for your details to be placed on file pending future assignments.



## The Application Process

You may have to apply by letter, telephone, fax or email, sometimes in person. Increasingly, companies request applications online.

Spend time completing as many such forms as possible, for companies you'd like to work with, visiting places you want to go.

Be select, don't apply to hundreds of different companies, or you'll just get confused, and possibly become very unreliable, too, once you begin receiving offers from all and sundry.

Abide by rules laid down by courier companies and they'll thank you for it and might offer regular assignments.

When you apply make known your preferences for destination and timing but try to be flexible.

## What Happens Next?

Some companies fly to just one destination; others to several; many cover most major international towns and cities. Restrict yourself to one courier firm and you limit the number of places you visit; work for several companies and you could travel far and wide.

Most firms will keep your information on file and will inform you of openings, sometimes without notice, and what fare (if any) you have to pay.

You may be sent a list of destinations, prices, schedules and the company's likely future needs. You will normally be asked to sign and return a contract provided by the company which basically outlines your responsibilities and duties during your assignment.

When a flight becomes available you'll be notified (by post, telephone, fax, email), and asked to confirm your availability for a particular flight at a specific time. It isn't unusual to be offered 'work' just a few days after initial contact with a courier firm, especially for destinations that don't require visas.

## Is It Legal?

Absolutely, but as always you must be careful, take precautions, deal only with reputable, reliable, preferably long-established courier companies. Forget thoughts of

spies carrying guns and weapons abroad, but pay heed to tragic tales of individuals being conned into carrying illegal drugs and stolen goods, realise these things do happen. But rarely to the careful courier!

The best companies provide couriers with a list of contents of packages being accompanied and some also provide plastic identity cards as proof of your status.

Problems for couriers are few and relatively minor, the most common being limited room for your luggage after the company's baggage is boarded.

What other potential problems might confront the courier? Imprisonment - or worse - for carrying illegal drugs, might be the first problem that springs to mind for more sceptical readers, but it's a very unlikely scenario for high profile companies with reputations to keep and rigid pre-flight baggage screening routines.

All airlines carry out extensive checks of packages for drugs, weapons, bombs, and other of life's more unfortunate paraphernalia. If this isn't sufficient to allay your fears, then remember that you have a contract stating that you are just a courier. Keep that with you at all times.

The chance of losing a package is quite remote and also outside your control and contract. In many cases, you won't see the package you are accompanying and you will rarely carry it physically, so loss of whatever kind will not be your responsibility.

However, there may be occasions where you are required to carry a package and be charged with its safety at all times, in which case you may be responsible for loss or damage to that item. Read your contract and check your duties thoroughly before agreeing to any assignment. Weigh up the pros and cons before signing on the dotted line!

## How Much Will It Cost?

Until very recently all couriers travelled free. Today, although there are still some opportunities for free and very low cost flights, courier travel has become more competitive and discounts not quite so extravagant.

However, even cheap flights from discount agencies and so-called bucket shops rarely compare with the high discounts offered by most major courier companies or the fact that travel is normally first class travel with a firm booking.

Exactly when you travel can have a significant effect on the price you pay for your seat or if you get to travel free. Fare is invariably higher for bookings made well in advance of the flight than for last minute or emergency flights.

So, if you can travel at short, or no notice, do so; you'll probably travel free. A flight

that might cost £150 if booked well in advance, might cost £15 - sometimes nothing - to a standby courier.

### **Being a Courier Doesn't Mean Being Fobbed Off With Cheap Seats No-one Else Wants!**

Most courier companies use first class airlines, so you won't be crammed into uncomfortable seats or left without food and water on long journeys, and you shouldn't experience the kind of long delays and inconveniences at airports typically encountered by budget travellers.

Couriers who remain flexible over destination and time should achieve regular assignments as well as a wider range of destinations and cheaper fares. They also maximise the chance to travel free or at uniquely low cost by being available during the off-season and willing to travel to less popular destinations.

To recap, your best savings are likely to come from being flexible, willing to travel to any destination, at any time, at little or no notice. This way a courier firm will almost certainly consider you each time they are faced with an urgent delivery and nowhere else to turn.

**As a general rule of thumb expect to pay about 40 to 50 per cent the price of the cheapest ticket between cities involved.**

## **Where Can I Go?**

Naturally, you'll only be able to visit areas serviced by specific courier companies so, again, it's wise to make yourself available to a number of companies, operating on different routes, and covering multiple destinations.

Most firms requiring freelance couriers operate internationally, some to just one or two major destinations, others to all major overseas airports. If you limit your choice of destinations and availability, or work with one courier company, you'll limit the number of places you might visit.

The best solution to lots of free and low cost travel is to make yourself known to as many courier firms as possible and try to be available at all times, without notice.

Not easy for someone in full-time employment or with family or other responsibilities, but a great way to finance a life of total independence, freedom to travel full-time, or even start a business associated with travel and get to earn high profits from every trip.

## How Long Can I Stay At My Destination?

Just how long you will be allowed to remain abroad is a matter for you and the company to decide in advance and always forms part of your contract. Departure and arrival dates and times are agreed prior to the flight and might only be changed in exceptional circumstances.

So if the contract says you arrive in Paris at 1pm and depart thirty minutes later, that's exactly what you must do.

You're unlikely to get more than a free lunch from that experience but thankfully few courier companies operate such tight schedules. Your job is to be flexible yourself and find a company willing to match the gesture.

## What If I Can't Fulfil My Obligations?

None of us is perfect, and there will be times when family or personal problems mean you have to cancel your flight, just as ill health and unexpected emergencies might prevent you from travelling. In such cases, your contract will normally provide for a charge to be levied against you for cancelling your flight, the actual amount depending on notice given to the company. If you cancel at the last moment you will probably forfeit the entire cost of your flight.

For obvious reasons, the would-be 'professional' or full-time courier should try never to cancel a flight and only for the most urgent of reasons.

## Do I Need Travel Insurance?

All travellers should have insurance against loss or damage to possessions and illness or injury to themselves.

Sometimes insurance will be offered or provided by the hiring company, sometimes not.

If the company provides insurance, on rare occasions it will be free of charge, but usually a reduced rate will apply to couriers.

Make sure you are covered even if this reduces an already limited budget. The alternative can be very risky and potentially life-threatening not to mention very expensive if you are taken seriously ill overseas or your expensive belongings are stolen or lost.

## Are There Any Drawbacks?

Potentially the biggest drawback is that sometimes you will be restricted to hand baggage only on your journey, since the courier company's packages are effectively using what would otherwise be your space as passenger.

Sometimes you will be allowed to use some part of hold storage space where your baggage will be included alongside the courier company's items. If not a hold-all or sports bag should carry enough clothing and personal items to provide for most short stays abroad.

Couriers, normally, are expected to travel alone, so holidays with family and friends might seem out of the question where you travel as courier.

But it might be possible to book a cheap flight for others on the same aircraft or have them take another flight with plans to meet you at the other end. Check this with the courier company (in case it compromises your contract) and make early plans for others to travel before accepting your assignment.

## Tips For Prospective Couriers

- Make yourself indispensable to courier companies by giving first class service, honouring your obligations, looking smart, and being available for virtually all destinations and willing to fly at any time at little or no notice. Many of the more successful and prolific couriers say they owe their achievements to writing letters of thanks to the courier firm when the trip ends. Okay, so you did them a favour by accompanying their package, but don't forget that both parties provided a service for one another, and both gained something. 'Thanks' is a word that might be entirely appropriate, and might bring you quickly to mind when someone is next needed on an urgent assignment to some distant, exotic location.
- Apply to numerous companies, particularly near your own local airports, where you'll receive priority over couriers from further afield. Contact companies regularly enquiring about vacancies, without making a nuisance of yourself. Constant telephone calls will win you no favours with busy courier companies but a regular polite enquiry letter might keep your application at the top of the pile!
- Try not to show the low cost - or free - air ticket is your only interest. Even if it is! Make sure the company sees you as a responsible, caring individual, not a freeloader caring little about anyone or anything but themselves!
- Try not to cancel a flight unless you have no other option. Reliability is what brings you speedily to mind when the company next needs a courier.

- Dress casually but smart and remember you are representing the courier company. Be diligent and responsible and you'll enjoy regular assignments.

## Useful Information

### Helpful Organisations

**The International Association of Air Travel Couriers (IAATC)** is the oldest organisation of its kind and was founded by a former United States Diplomatic Courier. The organization operates for member couriers and provides information daily of new and urgent opportunities. Members can access exclusive updates which are posted twice daily on the organisation's web site. Learn more about the organisation from its web site at:

[www.courier.org](http://www.courier.org)

**The UK branch of the IAATC** is based at:

The Old Cottage, Boughspring Lane, Tidenham, Chepstow, NP16 7JL.

Web site: [www.aircourier.co.uk](http://www.aircourier.co.uk)

**The Air Courier Association** founded in 1993, and based in Colorado, is an international forum offering updates, advice and information for members. Couriers can access information about new openings much faster than seeking opportunities themselves. For more information go to the firm's site at: [www.aircourier.org](http://www.aircourier.org)

**Air Courier International** is a major specialist courier company with offices in most major international cities, including London. Visit their UK site at:

[www.aircourieruk.com](http://www.aircourieruk.com)

### Useful Listings

For a long list of courier companies operating from the UK (some also with bases overseas) visit:

[www.aices.org](http://www.aices.org)

### Leading Courier Companies

Leading courier companies working in the UK can be located via their web sites:

**Airborne Express Ltd.**

[www.airborne.com](http://www.airborne.com)

**AmWorld Couriers (UK) Ltd.**

[www.amworld.co.uk](http://www.amworld.co.uk)

**ATC Air Express Ltd.**

[www.atcair.co.uk](http://www.atcair.co.uk)

<b>Balkan Transport</b>	<a href="http://www.balkantransport.co.uk">www.balkantransport.co.uk</a>
<b>British Midland</b>	<a href="http://www.britishmidland.com">www.britishmidland.com</a>
<b>Crossflight Ltd.</b>	<a href="http://www.crossflight.co.uk">www.crossflight.co.uk</a>
<b>Deltec International Couriers Ltd.</b>	<a href="http://www.deltec-international.com">www.deltec-international.com</a>
<b>DHL Global</b>	<a href="http://www.dhl.com">www.dhl.com</a>
<b>Interlink Express</b>	<a href="http://www.interlinkexpress.com">www.interlinkexpress.com</a>
<b>International Bonded Couriers Ltd.</b>	<a href="http://www.ibcinc.com">www.ibcinc.com</a>
<b>Sprint International Express</b>	<a href="http://www.sprintexpress.co.uk">www.sprintexpress.co.uk</a>
<b>TNT Global Express</b>	<a href="http://www.tnt.com">www.tnt.com</a>
<b>Transfer 2000</b>	<a href="http://www.transfer2000.co.uk">www.transfer2000.co.uk</a>
<b>World Courier</b>	<a href="http://www.worldcourier.com">www.worldcourier.com</a>

## **Recommended Reading**

**The Courier Air Travel Handbook** by Mark I. Field available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)