

REROUTED

UNCLAIMED BAGGAGE GETS A NEW TRIP

By Caroline Eubanks

Most of us have fallen victim to lost luggage in our travels, whether temporarily, to be returned to us in a few days after a period of minor inconvenience, or even permanently. Baggage delays and losses are at an all-time high, especially as travel has returned after the pandemic, but airports are understaffed. If you've ever wondered what happened to your items between check in and baggage claim, you might be surprised at where it could end up.

Set between Atlanta and Huntsville, Unclaimed Baggage in Scottsboro, Alabama has been selling travelers' lost items since 1970. Entrepreneur Doyle Owens borrowed a pickup truck and \$300 from his father and father-in-law, bound for Washington D.C. It was here that he purchased his first lot of "unclaimed baggage" from the Trailways bus system, after a friend alerted him to the pile of luggage left there. Owens and his wife sold their finds from card tables in a rented house. His venture was soon a success, allowing him to quit his job as an insurance salesman to pursue the business full-time. In 1995, the Owens' son, with his wife, took over the business.

In 1978, the company shifted to airline baggage with a partnership with Eastern Airlines. The company now works closely with all major airlines, purchasing luggage from airlines three months after unsuccessful claims have been filed to reunite with its owner. In addition to luggage, items for the store are also sourced from abandoned shipping containers from planes and ground carriers filled with new-in-box retail items.

The store now stocks a wide variety of items over the nearly 50,000-square-foot space, including souvenirs, artwork, electronics, clothing, camping and sports equipment and, of course, luggage of all sizes. It's a great spot to pick up travel essentials like a gently used camera, a surfboard and base layers for your next camping trip from brands like Smartwool and Merrell.





Souvenir mystery bags let you get items from around the world, even if you haven't traveled there. People have even found their own items for sale inside the store! There's also an onsite café if you need a break while shopping.

Since 1981, Unclaimed Baggage has also held a popular annual Ski Sale for all of the essential gear needed to hit the slopes. It's held every November and excited shoppers can camp on site in preparation. As you might imagine, the shop has found some truly wild items over the years, including a live rattlesnake, a shrunken head, a cowboy hat signed by Muhammad Ali and forged artwork.

In early 2023, the Unclaimed Baggage Museum opened within the store, highlighting some of the most unusual, quirky and unbelievable pieces that aren't for sale. The exhibits include two full suits of armor, the Hoggle puppet from the movie *Labyrinth*, and Egyptian antiquities. Unclaimed Baggage merchandise has also made a name for itself. In 2023, Alabama native Daniel Scheinert walked the red carpet for the Academy Awards in a suit he purchased at the Scottsboro store originally intended as a prop.

For Nicole Letts, author of *Unique Eats and Eateries of Alabama: The People and Stories Behind the Food*, the store is an essential stop for travelers through the state, especially bargain hunters. "On my last visit, I scored a pair of Fendi sunglasses and a Louis Vuitton coin purse for \$200," she says of the steal, well below the luxury items' retail price.

Visitors to the store can go behind the scenes daily at The Baggage Experience, which allows them to open unclaimed luggage themselves to see what treasures might be inside. The items are sorted to see which ones can be sold and which will be donated.

Typically, only one-third of the pieces can be sold. Everything is then cleaned, including clothing at the largest commercial laundry facility in Alabama, and electronic items are tested for working condition.

Unclaimed Baggage also contributes to the world at large through its Unclaimed for Good program, which collaborates with non-profits around the world. Love Luggage supplies suitcases and bags for foster children to hold their personal belongings, while Wheels for the World takes unclaimed wheelchairs and donates them to those in need. The Lions Club International's SightFirst program takes second hand eyeglasses and medical supplies to help the efforts of Samaritan's Purse.

The next time you're passing through Alabama, give yourself a few hours to roam the aisles of Unclaimed Baggage. There's no telling what treasure you'll discover and you can be sure that your purchase is going to a good cause. You can also shop online, though it might not be as much fun. Visit unclaimedbaggage.com for more information.

