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Bags versus Boxes Debate

Kathy's Question.

Is there a way to get my boxed bicycle boxed and myself from Paris's DeGaulle airport to Orly airport? I plan to bike in France and have a connecting flight.

Ethan Gelber's Answer.

Well, there's the easy answer to this question — which has to do with local transport in Paris — but the more interesting general question is about transporting your bike. This is commonly called the "bags versus boxes" debate.



But first, an answer to Kathy's question . . .

Getting from DeGaulle to Orly is not at all difficult. There are, of course, taxis that can zip you from one to the other, but this can be quite expensive since both airports are in the distant suburbs of Paris but on opposite sides of the city. More reasonable mass transportation alternatives include the bus and the train. There are direct transfer Air France buses that make all terminal stops at DeGaulle (also known as Roissy) and then head to Orly. Otherwise, try the RER, the suburban train line that runs from the extended suburbs into and through Paris. From DeGaulle you can purchase a ticket all the way to Orly. This ticket will include a ride on RER line B through the city center and as far as the station called Antony, and then a switch to the fully automated Orlyval connecting service. If you go by bus, you won't have to drag your bike as far and can stow the box in the luggage area. If you go by train, you will have to lug the box through the change of trains. (Stay at the back of the train and this connection is very easy. Also, there are free carts at both airports, so getting to and from the stations is not as hard as it sounds.)

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Which brings us to the more general question:

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How do you get where you need to go with your bike?



If you are traveling with a bike you care about, you need to protect it. For some people this just means folding in what could detach itself or stick out too far (handlebars, wheels, quick release axles, derailleurs), tying down the loose parts, and packing the whole thing in bubble wrap. For others this means all of the above (or not) with the added protection of a bike bag. For the rest, this means enclosing the whole kit in a bike box or special transport containers designed for bikes. Whatever the case may be, many bus companies, airlines, railroads, and other transport services have their own policies and you should always ALWAYS check in advance.

However, in my opinion, after years of stuffing my bike into every possible conveyance, here is what I would recommend.

- When traveling on any mode of transport that will require you to schlepp your bike over any distance and then stash it somewhere not too far beyond your reach, use a bike bag and don't worry about the bubble wrap. Carrying a packed bike is MUCH easier in a bag than in a box. Plus, when stowing a bike in a bus or on a train, you can take the necessary care to make sure that it isn't improperly handled.
- If you are ever required to hand your bike over to a service that handles all luggage and is not equipped to recognize a bike as worthy of special handling, e.g. airlines, Amtrak, UPS, pad it and box it or use a special bike luggage. A well-padded bike can also be transported in a bag but won't weather abuse as well. And even if you are going to box your bike, pad it. Baggage handlers do not seem to differentiate bike boxes from other big stuff and are more likely to throw it around (since it will need extra heft to move it) than to caress it.
- If you are lucky enough to be working with a baggage service that acknowledges the unique handling needs of bikes (as is the case with some airlines, most European railroads, and some bus lines), remove everything that could fall off the bike (water bottles, pumps, etc.) and send it on as is.

Whatever you do, check in advance what policy dictates. And don't fear being overcautious. It's worth it to take the extra time to bubble wrap a bike when the alternative could be dealing with damaged, difficult-to-replace material precisely when you would rather be on the road.

Happy trails!

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