YOUR PHONE KNOWS WHERE YOUR BAG IS. DOES YOUR AIRLINE? - INTERVIEW WITH SUMESH PATEL, PRESIDENT OF ASIA PACIFIC, SITA

News / Airlines, Airports / Routes

In an era where travellers expect their smartphones to track everything from their luggage to their ride to the airport, one question looms large over the aviation industry: if your phone knows where your bag is, why doesn't your airline? As global passenger volumes surge and operational complexity intensifies, the pressure to deliver seamless, transparent, real?time baggage management has never been greater.

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To explore how technology, data intelligence, and industry collaboration are reshaping this critical part of the passenger journey, we speak with Sumesh Patel, President Asia Pacific at SITA, a leader at the forefront of aviation's digital transformation. With decades of experience driving innovation across airports and airlines, Patel offers a sharp, insider perspective on why baggage tracking still lags behind consumer expectations—and what it will take to finally close the gap. I was looking forward to straightforward, insightful perspectives on what's holding the industry back—and what it will take to finally align airline capabilities with the simplicity travellers already experience on their smartphones.

T.O.: When I travel, I see more and more passengers using their phones to check where their luggage is. What do you think the current percentage is, and why?

S.P.: That's a fair question, and the honest answer is that nobody has a reliable figure. The industry doesn't measure it today, so we won't invent a number. What is measurable is the trajectory: in our 2026 Baggage IT Insights Report, half of all airlines plan to give passengers real-time baggage updates within the next two years. That's airline investment rather than passenger behavior, but it tells you where travel is heading.

Two things explain that trajectory. We've built Apple Find My and Google Find Hub into WorldTracer, so passengers can see where a bag actually is, not just whether it has been scanned. The technology has caught up. And passengers have been conditioned by food delivery and ride-hailing apps to expect that same real-time visibility everywhere, including their luggage. Aviation didn't set that expectation. What has changed is that we can now meet it.

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T.O.: Do you think it's important to have a “relationship of trust” between the airline/ airport and its passengers?

S.P.: Trust isn't a soft metric. It decides whether passengers share the data that makes smoother travel possible. Without it, every biometric checkpoint, every predictive baggage alert, every whole-journey identity solution stalls at the point of consent.

Our Passenger IT Insights 2025 survey shows both the opportunity and the gap: 86% of passengers say they trust airlines, airports, and border agencies with their data, though only one in five say they trust them “a lot.” Closing the gap between broad trust and deep trust is the opportunity in front of us.

Visibility is one of the most direct ways to close it. When passengers can see exactly where their bag is, confidence in the airline follows almost immediately. Trust in this industry is not built through reassurance. It is built through evidence.

T.O.: Airline’s passengers have no idea how much it costs when luggage is mishandled. Could you provide us with last year’s statistics?

S.P.: Mishandling cost the industry US$6.3 billion last year — around 15% of total airline industry profit, at an average of US$260 a bag. Passengers rarely see that side of it. To them a mishandled bag is an inconvenience; for us it is compensation, rebooking, storage and delivery logistics, compounding fast across millions of bags a year. Those figures come from our 2026 Baggage IT Insights Report. Set against net profit averaging just US$8 per passenger, a single mishandled bag wipes out the profit from more than 30 seats sold.

The encouraging part is the trend line. Global mishandling rates fell 23% in 2025, to 4.9 bags per 1,000 passengers. Asia Pacific is already well ahead of that benchmark, recording the lowest mishandling rate globally at 2.1 per 1,000 passengers and the lowest cost per bag at US$210,

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against the US$260 global average. That gap is the dividend of newer airports and earlier technology adoption.

T.O.: Since SITA is committed to providing exceptional service, is it still possible to know exactly where my suitcase is?

S.P.: Yes. Land, open your phone, see where your bag is — that is becoming the standard, not the exception. We have built both Apple Find My and Google Find Hub into WorldTracer, so you can share your bag's exact location with the airline instead of waiting on a generic status update.

Permanently lost bags dropped 90% among passengers using the integration, with recovery time falling 26%. SITA Bag Radar goes further, flagging potential disruption before a bag is ever at risk, rather than only reacting once it has already gone missing. Between the two, the industry is shifting from recovery to prevention.

T.O.: What solutions do you currently offer that minimize "headaches" for all parties involved in this chain—passengers, airports, and airlines?

S.P.: Minimizing that headache comes down to giving every party in the chain better visibility, earlier. On the passenger side, the location sharing I mentioned earlier is already working — permanently lost bags down 90%. For airlines and ground handling teams, SITA Bag Radar flags potential disruption before it escalates into a mishandled bag. And for the operation itself, automation compresses what used to be manual, time-consuming processes: Thai Airways cut bag reflighting from three minutes to one second per bag using our Auto Reflight tool, across nine airports.

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The point is not only fewer headaches. The same tools that remove friction also delight passengers and lift efficiency across airlines, airports and border agencies — the visibility that reassures a passenger is the same data that helps an airline recover a bag faster and an airport run a smoother operation.

Asia Pacific shows what happens when these tools are adopted early. The regional figures I mentioned earlier are no coincidence — airlines and airports that invest in the right technology see measurable, lasting results.

T.O.:The logical question is: What are the benefits of investing in a baggage handling system compared to the losses incurred due to mishandled luggage?

S.P.: The numbers settle this. Total mishandled volumes dropped 19% in 2025, to 24 million bags—below pre-pandemic levels, even as passenger numbers hit a record 5 billion. Set against the cost figures I mentioned earlier, that improvement represents real money returned to the industry, not just a better statistic.

Asia Pacific makes the strongest case for investing early: the region's technology adoption has already delivered the lowest mishandling rate and lowest cost per bag globally. Passengers and airlines are increasingly aligned on where this goes next—78% of passengers say they would pay to track their bag across the whole journey, and three in four airlines plan to invest in AI for baggage within two years. The remaining question isn't whether this technology pays for itself. It's how much of the advantage goes to the airlines moving first.

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