

## Sisters-in-Law Say Birthday Trip Turned Into Smuggling Setup; Co-Passenger Claimed His Marijuana

Two women charged with trafficking marijuana say they were misled by a man they met in Las Vegas who asked them to carry bags to St. Thomas without sharing who'd be receiving them; a third suspect told officials the weed in his bag was his.

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Three inbound passengers at the Cyril E. King Airport were charged with drug trafficking offenses after marijuana was allegedly found in their suitcases.

According to court documents, sisters-in-law Ailina Armaz and Mayra Ochoa arrived on a July 31 United Airlines flight from Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C. South Carolina man Jaylen Keeles

was also on the flight, which reportedly originated in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Customs and Border Protection officials doing x-ray screening on the flight's checked luggage say they found anomalies in three suitcases. Two of these were tagged with the names of Ms. Armaz and Ms. Ochoa respectively, while the third apparently belonged to Mr. Keeles.

The luggage was placed on the baggage claim carousel, and CBP officers watched as the two women retrieved the suitcases that were labelled with their names. Once approached, the women reportedly told officers that they were merely transporting the luggage from Las Vegas, Nevada to St. Thomas to be handed off. They were doing so on behalf of someone they had met at the airport in Las Vegas, the women reportedly told officers. The man had approached the sisters-in-law when they arrived at the airport to set off on a birthday trip, and asked them to deliver the suitcases to family members on St. Thomas, the women reportedly told customs officials. He handed them money to cover the baggage fees and reportedly told them that he could not make the trip himself because he had no suitable form of identification. The women said that he declined to give them contact information for him or his family; once they reached St. Thomas they would be recognized by their bags, the man had reportedly said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Keeles told CBP officers that the suitcase tagged with his name was indeed his, and said that he packed it himself, and was not transporting it on anyone else's behalf.

A physical inspection of the women's suitcases revealed several vacuum-sealed packages wrapped in bedsheets. A total of 51 in all, the packages in both suitcases contained a green leafy substance which returned a positive result when tested for marijuana. Officers say that they recovered over 27 kilograms of the substance between the two suitcases. Ms. Armaz and Ms. Ochoa were then charged with possession of marijuana with intent to distribute.

The suitcase belonging to Mr. Keeles was also opened and found to contain 20 vacuum-sealed packages "hidden under some towels," according to documents submitted to court. The green substance inside the packages, which returned a positive result for marijuana when tested, amounted to approximately 9.74 pounds, officers say. He was also charged with possession of marijuana with intent to distribute.

The three appeared before U.S. Magistrate Alan Teague on Friday, who ordered that they each be released on a \$25,000 unsecured appearance bond. A further hearing for Ms. Armaz and Ms. Ochoa is scheduled for Monday afternoon, while Mr. Keeles is set to appear before Judge Teague again on Tuesday.