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Stuffed in socks: 13 iguanas smuggled into UK in a suitcase

Border Agency found 13 'critically endangered' San Salvador rock iguanas stuffed into a suitcase for eight-hour flight, with 12 surviving



The Romanian degree students were caught at Heathrow Airport after stepping off a BA flight from the Bahamas with the San Salvador Iguanas stuffed inside socks Photo: PA

By Keith Perry

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Two "highly-intelligent, well-travelled young women" caught smuggling 13 critically-endangered iguanas, with a potential black market value of £260,000, were each jailed for 12 months.

The Romanian degree students were caught at Heathrow Airport after stepping off a BA flight from the Bahamas with the San Salvador iguanas, one of which had died, stuffed inside socks and wrapped in a blue towel in their suitcase.

Mechanical engineering student Angla-Alina Bitu, 26, who was working as an au pair in Switzerland, and finance student Vitora-Oliva Bucsa, 24, both pleaded guilty to the unlawful importation of the animals on February 3 at Terminal Five.

They were caught after their nine-day trip, which had been financed by a wealthy Swiss gentleman identified only as 'Thomas', before they could catch their onward flight to Dusseldorf, Germany, where the animals were to be collected.

The animals are unique to the Bahamas, where laws have been passed to prevent their export and it is believed the species now only amounts to a few hundred.

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Prosecutor Pamela Reiss told Isleworth Crown Court the women arrived in the early hours from Nassau, claiming they had spent an innocent holiday in the Caribbean, which they had financed themselves.

All their clothes had been stuffed into one suitcase and Border Agency officers checked the second one they had.

"In the other suitcase the 13 iguanas, one of which was dead, were found. Each had been wrapped inside a sock and then wrapped in a blue towel.

"They had been in the hold in the suitcase during the eight-hour flight.

"They come from a hot country and were in the cold hold all that time and must have suffered.



Angla-Alina Bita, 26 (left) and Vitora-Oliva Bucsa, 24 (PA)

"Bita said she did not know what they were and was given them by a man called 'Robert' in a beach bar and was not paid."

It is unknown what the final destination was for the reptiles, but Miss Reiss added: "They are valued at £10,000 each and that's a minimum, they could be sold illegally for up to £20,000 each."

It is difficult to place an accurate figure on the value because the trade is cloaked in secrecy, but the prosecutor added: "Maybe wealthy people keep them as status symbols because they are endangered."

The court heard that Bita lied when quizzed and Bucsa said nothing, but now both women claim 'Thomas' financed the whole trip and arranged for them to carry the Iguanas.

Their lawyer Miss Brinder Soora said: "They recognise the particularly devastating effect their actions have had and it is fortunate only one iguana passed away."

"These two defendants were naive in their actions and they did not know the iguanas were of such value and rarity."

Judge Phillip Matthews told the first-time offenders, who have been locked up in HMP Holloway since their arrest: "You are two highly-intelligent, well travelled young women who chose to act in the way you did free of pressure."

"There is a market for such creatures and for as long as people such as yourselves perpetrate the facility for them to be smuggled out of the Bahamas, that trade will continue."

Grant Miller from the Border Force's endangered species team said: "This particular species of iguana is incredibly rare - only a few hundred are believed to be left in existence - so this was a remarkable and very important seizure."

"Given the circumstances we found them in, it seems incredible that all but one survived such a long flight."

The animals were dehydrated and placed into the care of a specialist vet

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MEMORANDUM
ROOM 28, 90 NASSAU STREET
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

April 20th, 1947

Dr. F. J. Sauer, President
California Naval Company, Ltd.
310 Park Street
San Francisco 4, California

Dear Dr. Sauer:

I send you my sincere thanks and those of my colleagues in the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists for the generous check in support of our work recently received from you through the Chamber Trust.

I am indeed grateful for the encouragement given our mission by the meeting held recently in San Francisco. The resulting Emergency Report should make possible a considerable extension of our work in California.

Sincerely yours,
F. J. Sauer

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where they remain.

Mr Miller said they are working with experts to find the best way to protect and safeguard the endangered creatures longer term.

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