

Packing Smart and Traveling Light

By Rick Steves

The importance of packing light cannot be overemphasized, but, for your own good, I'll try. You'll never meet a traveler who, after five trips, brags: "Every year I pack heavier." The measure of a good traveler is how light he or she travels. You can't travel heavy, happy, and cheap. Pick two.

One Bag, That's It

My self-imposed limit is 20 pounds in a 9" × 21" × 14" carry-on-size bag (it'll fit in your airplane's overhead bin, at least on your transatlantic flight — though many European airlines restrict hand luggage to even smaller weights and dimensions).

At my company, we've taken tens of thousands of people of all ages and styles on tours through Europe. We allow only one carry-on bag. For many, this is a radical concept: 9" × 21" × 14"? That's my cosmetics kit! But they manage, and they're glad they did. After you enjoy that sweet mobility and freedom, you'll never go any other way.

You'll walk with your luggage more than you think you will. Before flying to Europe, give yourself a test. Pack up completely, go into your hometown, and practice being a tourist for an hour. Fully loaded, you should enjoy window-shopping. If you can't, stagger home and thin things out.

When you carry your own luggage, it's less likely to get lost, broken, or stolen. Quick, last-minute changes in flight plans become simpler. A small bag sits on your lap or under your seat on the bus, taxi, and airplane. You don't have to worry about it, and, when you arrive, you can hit the ground running. It's a good feeling. When I land in London, I'm on my way downtown while everyone else stares anxiously at the luggage carousel. When I fly home, I'm the first guy the dog sniffs. These days, you can also save money by carrying your own bag. While it's still free to check one bag on most overseas trips, you'd likely pay a fee to check two. If you're taking a separate flight within Europe, expect to be charged to check even just one bag.

Remember, packing light isn't just about saving time or money — it's about your traveling lifestyle. Too much luggage marks you as a typical tourist. It slams the Back Door shut. Serendipity suffers. Changing locations becomes a major operation. Con artists figure you're helpless. Porters are a problem only to those who need them. With only one bag, you're mobile and in control. Take this advice seriously.

Packing 101

How do you fit a whole trip's worth of luggage into a small backpack or suitcase? The answer is simple: Bring very little. Spread out everything you think you might need on the living-room floor. Pick up each item one at a time and scrutinize it. Ask yourself, "Will I really use my snorkel and fins enough to justify carrying them around all summer?" Not "Will I use them?" but "Will I use them enough to feel good about hauling them over the Swiss Alps?" Frugal as I may be, I'd buy them in Greece and give them away before I'd carry that extra weight over the Alps.

Don't pack for the worst-case scenario. Pack for the best-case scenario and simply buy yourself out of any jams. Bring layers rather than take a heavy coat. Think in terms of what you can do without — not what will be handy on your trip. When in doubt, leave it out. I've seen people pack a whole summer's supply of deodorant or razors, thinking they can't get them there. The world is getting really small: You can buy Dial soap, Colgate toothpaste, Nivea cream, and Gillette razors in Sicily and Slovakia. Tourist shops in major international hotels are a sure bet whenever you have difficulty finding a personal item. If you can't find one of your essentials, ask yourself how half a billion Europeans can live without it. Rather than carry a whole trip's supply of toiletries, take enough to get started and look forward to running out of toothpaste in Bulgaria. Then you have the perfect excuse to go into a Bulgarian department store, shop around, and pick up something you think might be toothpaste.

Whether you're traveling for three weeks or three months, pack exactly the same. To keep your clothes tightly packed and well organized, zip them up in packing cubes, airless baggies, or a clothes compressor. I like specially designed folding boards (such as Eagle Creek's Pack-It Folder) to fold and carry clothes with minimal wrinkling. For smaller items, use packing cubes or mesh bags (one for underwear and socks, another for miscellaneous stuff such as a first-aid kit, earplugs, clothesline, sewing kit, and gadgets).

Go casual, simple, and very light. Remember, in your travels you'll meet two kinds of tourists — those who pack light and those who wish they had. Say it out loud: "PACK LIGHT PACK LIGHT PACK LIGHT."