

Packing Light & Right

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 she travels. You can't travel heavy, happy, and cheap. Pick two.

One Bag, That's It

Limit yourself to 20 pounds in a carry-on-size bag. A 9" x 22" x 14" bag fits under most airplane seats. That's my self-imposed limit. 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" x 22" x 14"? That's my cosmetics kit! But they manage, and they're glad they did. And 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 leaving home, 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. (Some travelers claim that airline employees have stolen items from checked luggage.) 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'll also save money by carrying your own bag: Some airlines charge a small fee to check even one suitcase, and may charge as much as \$50 apiece when you check more than one bag.

Pack light...and pack smart. You can't bring anything potentially dangerous—such as knives, box cutters, lighters, or large quantities of liquids or gels—in your carry-on bag. (This list can change without notice.) Now I leave my Swiss Army knife at home, bring smaller bottles of toiletries, and carry on my bag as usual. You can take an entire set of knives or giant bottle of shampoo to Europe if you like—but you'll have to check your bag.

Be aware that many airlines have additional (and frequently changing) restrictions on the number, size, and weight of carry-on bags. (Restrictions can vary from airport to airport, even on the same airline.) Check your airline's website (or read the fine print on your e-ticket) for details. For example, British Airways currently allows two pieces of carry-on luggage—a small "personal item," plus a bag no larger than 10" x 22" x 17.5" and no heavier than 51 pounds. (You must be able to lift it into overhead storage without help.) Meanwhile, SAS restricts you to one 9" x 21" x 15.5" carry-on bag, which must weigh 17 pounds or less. In these cases, it's only worth fighting to carry on your bag if you have a tight connection.

If you check your bag, mark it inside and out with your name, address, and emergency phone number. If you have a lock on your bag, you may be asked to remove it due to increased security checks—or it may be cut off so the bag can be inspected (to avoid this, consider a TSA-approved lock, described in the packing list later in this chapter). I've never locked my bag and never had a problem.

As carry-on restrictions tighten, people who used to carry on are now more likely to check their bags. Does this mean it's less important to pack light? No way! Packing light isn't just about the trip over and back—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.

Backpackademia—What to Bring?

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 this snorkel and these fins enough to justify carrying them around all summer?" Not "Will I use them?" but "Will I use them enough to feel good about carrying them over the Swiss Alps?" Regardless of my budget, I would buy them in Greece and give them away before I would carry that extra weight over the Alps.

Don't pack for the worst scenario. Pack for the best scenario and simply buy yourself out of any jams. Risk shivering for a day rather than taking 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's getting really small; you can buy Dial soap, Colgate toothpaste, Nivea cream, and Gillette razors in Sicily or 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 more than 500 million Europeans can live without it.

Whether you're traveling for three weeks or three months, pack exactly the same. Rather than take 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....

Backpack or Rolling Bag?

A fundamental packing question is your choice of luggage. Of all the options, I consider only three: 1) a carry-on-size "convertible" bag with zip-away shoulder straps; 2) a carry-on-size "roll-aboard" bag; or 3) an internal-frame backpack.

Travelers who want the easy mobility of a backpack but with a more low-key appearance travel with bag #1: a convertible backpack/suitcase with zip-away shoulder straps. These bags give you the best of both worlds—a suitcase when in town, and a backpack when you want to be more mobile. I travel with this bag and keep it exclusively in the backpack mode. While these "soft" bags basically hang on your back and are not as comfortable for long hauls as an internal-frame backpack (#3, described below), they work fine for getting from the station to your hotel. And, at 9" x 22" x 14", they fit in the airplane's overhead lockers. I live out of this bag for three months each year—and I absolutely love it.

Carry-on-sized "roll-aboard" bags (option #2) are well-designed and popular. My wife, daughter, and most of my staff prefer this bag; its tight and compact design makes it roomy while keeping it just small enough to fit in the plane's overhead locker. The advantage of bag #2 over bag #1: You can effortlessly wheel your gear around without getting sweaty. The downside: Bags with wheels cost \$40–50 extra, weigh several pounds more, and delude people into thinking they don't need to pack so light. They are cumbersome on rough or uneven surfaces (crowded subways, hiking through a series of train cars, walking to your hotel in villages with stepped lanes and dirt paths, and so on)—but they're wonderful in airports (where check-in lines and distances to gates are longer than ever). Hybrid bags with both wheels and backpack straps try to give you the best of both worlds, but generally fail the practicality test.

Most younger travelers "backpack" through Europe with an internal-frame backpack (option #3) purchased from an outdoor store. While these are

the most comfortable bags to wear on your back, they can be expensive, and are often built “taller” than carry-on size.

Base your decision on the strength of your back. The day will come when I’ll be rolling my bag through Europe with the rest of the gang. But as long as I’m hardy enough to carry my gear on my back, I will.

Unless you plan to camp or sleep out a lot, a sleeping bag is a bulky security blanket. Even on a low budget, bedding will be provided. (Hostels provide all bedding free or rent sheets for a small fee, and often don’t allow sleeping bags.) Don’t pack to camp unless you’re going to camp.

Pack your bag only two-thirds full to leave room for picnic food and souvenirs. Sturdy stitching, front and side pouches, padded shoulder straps (for backpacks), and a low-profile color are virtues. I’m not wild about the bags with a zip-off day bag—I take my convertible backpack and supplement it with a separate day bag.

Entire books have been written on how to pack. It’s really quite simple: Use packing cubes or mesh bags (one each for toiletries; underwear and socks; and miscellaneous stuff such as a first-aid kit, earplugs, clothesline, sewing kit, and gadgets). Roll clothes and store them in packing cubes to keep them compact—or, to reduce wrinkling, zip them up in airless baggies or a clothes compressor like the one by Pack-Mate.

Clothing

The bulk of your luggage is clothing. Minimize by bringing less and washing more often. Every few nights you’ll spend 10 minutes doing a little wash. This doesn’t mean more washing; it just means doing it little by little as you go.

Be careful to choose dark clothes that dry quickly and either don’t wrinkle or look good wrinkled. To see how wrinkled shirts will get, give everything a wet rehearsal by hand-washing and drying once at home. You should have no trouble drying clothing overnight in your hotel room. I know this sounds barbaric, but my body dries out a damp pair of socks or a shirt in a jiffy. It’s fun to buy clothes as you travel—another reason to start with less.

For winter travel, you can pack just about as light. Wear heavier, warmer, high-top, waterproof shoes. Add a warm coat, long johns (quick-drying Capilene or super-light silk), scarf, gloves or mittens, hat, and an extra pair of socks and underwear since things dry more slowly. Pack with the help of a climate chart. Layer your clothing for warmth, and assume you’ll be outside in the cold for hours at a time.

During the tourist season (April–Sept), the concert halls go casual. I have never felt out of place at symphonies, operas, or plays wearing a decent pair of slacks and a good-looking sweater. Pack with color coordination in mind. Some cultural events require more formal attire, particularly outside of the tourist season, but the casual tourist rarely encounters these.

Many travelers are concerned about appropriate dress. American women, caught up in visions of the super-traditional Old World, wonder whether it’s OK to wear pants. But in today’s Europe, women are equally comfortable in pants, skirts, and dresses. While you may see elderly women wearing skirts or dresses in some areas (especially southern Europe), you’ll attract no unwanted attention if you wear nice dark pants or jeans. Women who prefer to wear pants and don’t pack a dress have no regrets.

If you’re trying to blend in, realize that shorts are uncommon in Europe. They’re considered exclusively beachwear, for use in coastal or lakeside resort towns. While most Europeans won’t be offended if you wear shorts, you might be on the receiving end of some stares. Shorts are especially uncommon on older women and in big cities, and the cutoff temperature for “hot enough for shorts” is much higher than in the US. Especially in southern Europe, no matter how hot it is, grown adults look goofy in shorts.

Shorts (and other skimpy summer attire) can also put a crimp in your sightseeing plans. Some churches, mostly in southern Europe, have modest dress requirements for men, women, and children: no shorts or bare shoulders. Except at the strict St. Peter’s in Rome and St. Mark’s in Venice, the dress code is often loosely enforced. If necessary, it’s usually easy to improvise some modesty (buy a cheap souvenir T-shirt to cover your shoulders and borrow a nearby tablecloth for a skirt or kilt to cover your legs). At some heavily-touristed churches in southern Europe, people hand out sheets of tissue paper you can wrap around yourself like a shawl or skirt.

But ultimately—so long as you don’t wear something that’s outrageous or offensive—it’s important to dress in a way that makes you comfortable. No matter how carefully you dress, your clothes will probably mark you as an American. Frankly, so what? Europeans will know anyway. I fit in and am culturally sensitive by watching my manners, not the cut of my clothes.

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 once out loud: “PACK LIGHT!”

Electronics

I used to recommend traveling without electronic gear. But today, there are just too many cool and handy gadgets to go without. I still pack light...but I also bring a few select electronic items.

Europe’s electrical system is different from the United States’ in two different ways: the voltage of the current, and the shape of the plug.

First you’ll need to consider the **voltage**. American appliances run on 110 volts, while European appliances are 220 volts. (These numbers can vary slightly—for example, 120 instead of 110 volts in the US.) Most newer travel accessories are “dual-voltage,” which means they work on both American and European current. If you see a range of voltages printed on the item or its plug (such as “110–220”), you’re OK in Europe. Some older appliances have a voltage switch marked 110 (US) and 220 (Europe)—switch it to 220 as you pack. A few old, cheap American appliances aren’t equipped to deal with the voltage difference at all, and could be damaged or destroyed if plugged directly into a European wall outlet. In these cases, you’ll need to buy a separate, bulky converter (about \$30)—which can be more expensive than simply buying a new dual-voltage appliance. With so many dual-voltage gadgets available, I haven’t traveled with a separate converter in years. Still not sure? Ask the salesperson about voltage when you buy the appliance. Travel stores also offer useful advice on plugs and adapters (such as the “Electrical Connection Wizard” at www.magellans.com).

Once you’ve dealt with the voltage, you’ll have to consider the **plug**. A small adapter allows American-style plugs (two flat prongs) to fit into British or Irish outlets (which take three rectangular prongs) or continental European outlets (which take two small, round prongs). I bring both continental and British adapters (handy for long layovers in Heathrow Airport). Secure your adapter to your appliance’s plug with electrical or duct tape; otherwise it might stay in the outlet (and get left behind) when you pull out the plug. Many sockets in Europe are recessed into the wall; your adapter should be small enough so that the prongs seat properly in the socket. Also, Switzerland recently introduced a newer, slightly modified “Type J” plug—similar to the rest of continental Europe, but with a hexagonal (rather than oval) shape. You might find that an older European adapter doesn’t fit into a recessed Swiss outlet. If this happens to you, look for a special adapter or extension cord that allows you to use your European adapter.

Many budget hotel rooms have only one electrical outlet, occupied by the lamp. Hardware stores in Europe sell cheap three-way plug adapters that let you keep the lamp on and your camera battery and MP3 player charged.

Well-wired travelers bring reams of personal and travel information—but not a lot of paper. Instead, store these documents on your laptop or handheld wireless device; save them on a USB flash drive; or simply park your details and addresses in a file on your email account for easy access anywhere (though it’s not wise to store sensitive information like credit-card numbers or your Social Security number online).