



# Travel Light Packing Tips

By Mary Charleson, Founder of CarryOnQueen.com

For the last 20 years, I have travelled with just one bag: A carry-on. It's not only practical; it has become a thing of pride. I hate having lost bags, and I love being able to glide off the plane and be on my way immediately. Plus there's the added benefit of security, economy and mobility. When you carry-on, the bag never leaves your side, making it less prone to theft or damage. You skip bag fees, have better mobility options and can likely take public transit much more easily – both actions saving you money, perhaps better spent on destination experiences. Plus, when you carry-on you'll have less hassle with missed connections. Below are some packing tips and a reminder checklist. If there's something essential not mentioned, that you have found useful, drop me a line! [mary@carryonqueen.com](mailto:mary@carryonqueen.com) I will happily add it to the list and give you credit!

## Travel documents

- Pack the passport. This goes without saying, but check the validity requirements for your destination. Many countries will not let you in unless your passport is valid for as much as six months beyond your intended stay.
- Nexus card. This is TSA pre-approval for Canadians, which makes travelling through US borders more expedited. However it also allows you to pass through pre-checked security at Canadian airports as well, often with much shorter lines, which can be particularly important if you're cutting time tight making a flight.
- Passport wallet, preferably RFID protected. Since a stolen passport from countries like Canada and the US has a lot of value, you need to protect it. Not only from theft, but also having data compromised.
- Photocopy of your passport and Nexus card. The photocopy won't get you out of the country, but it will certainly help expedite replacement documents at a consulate when abroad to allow you to get home. I always keep this separate from my purse, and usually keep an additional back up copy tucked away permanently in my carry-on.
- Credit card(s). I say plural here, since my preference is to use one primary card to accumulate points towards future travel. But occasionally you may find yourself somewhere where one card is preferred (eg: Visa) so it's good to have an alternate. And again in the interest of divide and conquer, I split up my cards in a passport wallet and my primary purse, so if I were to lose the bag or have it stolen, there is a plan B.
- Government issue photo ID. A driver's license is a good idea to have with you anyway, but it doubles as a photo ID. Although International Drivers Licenses are seldom asked for these

days, it's best to check with your destination or car rental-company. It could be your savior in a traffic stop shakedown.

- ATM card (s). Best to choose a card without transaction fees when abroad, and having a back up is not a bad plan. Think divide and conquer along with that extra credit card.
- Travel insurance wallet card. Some insurance coverage is only valid if pre-authorized. And even if it's just for standard care, insurance is only as good as being able to have the details at hand when needed. It's not a bad idea to also make sure a travel companion knows how to access your coverage should you be unable to speak for yourself. If that helicopter evacuation or private medical flight home from a third world country is required for proper medical care, it will no doubt need to be authorized. Have the info readily available.
- Print outs of itineraries, important phone numbers, flight and accommodations. Although you will no doubt have this in your phone, and may well prefer to keep everything electronic, phones can break, be stolen, or dropped in the water. I've personally watched in horror as my phone flew through the air by accident, destined for the bottom of a pool, after a well meaning volunteer took a group photo and lost hold of it. Her subsequent dive fully clothed into the pool to retrieve it was both heroic and entertaining, but the phone still died after a couple days on rice, along with all the photos and data. Lesson learned.
- Back up flash drive for photos. WIFI and the cloud is great, but not always available. I personally have an iDiskk removable 64GB flash drive with a mini lightening connector for my iPhone that allows immediate back up and transfer of files when outside of WIFI or when you don't want to use data. It's also handy for when you've been taking a lot of photos or video on a phone approaching capacity.
- Most credit card companies these days no longer need you to notify them of planned travel destinations. It's still a good idea if you're going to an infrequently visited destination though. Credit union based cards can be a little stricter with this. A heads up is a good precautionary move.
- Get some foreign currency before you leave, but don't carry a huge amount, and divide up what you do take to limit loosing it all in one ill-fated incident. Ordering online in advance, or getting currency at exchanges not in the airport can keep fees lower. If you plan to use an ATM, and most of us will in a foreign country, select a reputable one at a banking institution, not a random convenience store. You're more apt to pay higher fees in these locations, plus a compromised card is always a possibility.
- Leave flight numbers and a rough itinerary at home. My husband and kids laugh, but I also make sure they know my banking and online passwords. Mom controls a lot of the family finances, and if something were to happen to me, there's too much in my head to not cause serious access issues for my family. Flight numbers and a rough itinerary allow others track you, should locating you abroad from home become important.

## **Some essentials**

- Headlamp. You may laugh, but even if not planning a camping adventure, I always have one stuffed in my bag, along with extra batteries. It has been a lifesaver on two occasions. Once during a 4am tsunami warning with no electricity in a lightening storm – truly a terrifying experience, and a second time evacuating a hotel from the 28<sup>th</sup> floor during a fire alarm in the middle of the night. There should have been emergency lights, but they were not very bright in the stairwell.
- Basic sewing kit, pins, string and duct tape. Pretty much everything can be fixed at least temporarily with these as a minimum.

- Basic pharmaceuticals. Your needs will vary obviously, but at minimum I take Tylenol or Aspirin, Petro Bismal for upset tummy or diarrhea, Tylenol cold decongestant and cough lozenges. In my experience if you're coming down with something, the last thing in the world you want to do is have to go looking for meds, plus finding an equivalent is often hard, or impossible – depending on where you are. It's best to have a few things, and hope to never need them.
- Basic first aid – antibiotic cream and band-aids, moleskin (especially if you're hiking), small sunscreen (mind the liquid size allowance for carry-on), painkillers optional. I usually pack some T3s for this purpose. Better numb than in pain if medical help is some distance away!
- Basic personal care (obviously this will vary) but usually includes: toothbrush, paste, floss, deodorant, soap/shampoo, face cream, hair care products, brush, cosmetics/make up, razor, nail clippers, tweezers (anyone over 50 will likely also toss in a little magnifying mirror too!), moist toillettes package (quick freshen up/hand wash in a pinch)
- Eyeglasses and/or contacts (extra pair also a good idea)
- Sunglasses with case. I take mine everywhere even in the winter, but I'm a light sensitive and squint a lot. Don't mess with long-term eye health.
- Power adapter for countries to be visited. Most electronics like cell phones, ipads and laptops will have a power voltage adapter within the plug, and you will only need a wall plug adapter. Hair dryers should have dual voltage settings or leave them at home. Or just leave them at home period – they take up space. Many hotels and even hostels provide hair dryers these days too.
- Charging cables, USB charger. Having a charger or plug that allows two phones to charge at once will allow you to charge even if all plugs are being used. Plus you'll also likely make a few friends along the way. A USB power pack charger is a great back up, especially for wilderness trips where you are using you phone for photos without the ability to recharge in the evening. A universal power adapter is a must for some camera/video devices.
- Earphones – always better to have your own for music or listening to a podcast.
- Waterproof cell phone carrier with neck lanyard. This is indispensable for activities near the water, and most now allow you to use the camera function while protected. MEC sells numerous options.
- Earplugs. Absolutely essential for overnight flights if you want to check out and try to rest. And pretty much necessary for any hostel experience. It seems there's always someone in a bunkroom catching a super early morning train or plane, and they usually have stuff in crinkly bags or locked away in zippered compartments. Late night arrivals will also be less distressing with earplugs, and if your travel companion snores – need we say more! I personally don't use an eye mask, but some people love them.
- Leave the pocketknife at home if you are carrying on luggage. I always have to remember to remove the small one from my key chain before departing.
- Compass. This might be redundant if you have a compass APP on your phone, but in some cities where it's hard to get oriented, or when you don't want to use data for Google maps and you've been unable to hook into wifi, a good old map and compass can be useful. Plus it can be kind of fun. Purely optional.
- Depending on your destination you may want insect repellent or water purification tablets.
- Notepad and pen. You might be hit with some profound thoughts, or you might just need to fill out a customs form. Having an extra pen will also guarantee you a new friend in the line.
- Unlocked phone. This will allow you to use a local SIM card and a pay as you go 30 day local destination plan, for less expensive data and roaming options. Combined with using WhatsApp for messaging or placing international calls for free online, and using you phone

in airplane mode while in WIFI, you can keep your phone charges low. Canadians pay some of the highest phone rates in the world. “Roam like home” day are now the norm – fine for short-term trips from \$7-12/day, but highly impractical for extended time abroad.

## **Other tips**

- I usually aim for a hard case roller bag carry-on along with a “generous” shoulder bag (as a purse) or a small shoulder nap sack (with a cross shoulder purse inside it) when checking in. These fit under the seat and my carry-on goes overhead.
- I always pack a lightweight expandable duffel bag inside my carry on suitcase. MEC has a very compact but durable one that folds into 4 x 6 x 1” – allowing it to pack inside a running shoe for example. This bag allows me to pack home extra items acquired while abroad. Or it could be used to sequester dirty hiking boots and stinky laundry bound trekking gear as a checked bag on the way home. Either way it gives the comfort of expanding your load without committing to necessarily checking a bag.
- I always have a couple dry bags and Ziploc bags along too. They’re endlessly useful and can save electronics from water ruin, or protect them in tropical/humid damp climates.
- Portable clothesline, or extra string. This is handy for hand washing clothes on extended trips. If you buy with quick dry in mind, most items will be ready to go by the morning.
- A few carabineer clips. These are handy for clipping hats, or water bottles on the go, and many other things. Micro small ones with twisted threads to close can also be a good deterrent to fasten two zipper pulls together on a backpack. This could make you less of a target for pickpockets looking to unzip your bag.
- Airport cleared luggage locks. Even if you’re going carry on, occasionally your bag may be gate checked due to cargo space. Anytime it is out of sight, a lock is a good deterrent.
- Small padlock. This is a necessity for any hostel travel to be able to lock items in a room locker, but it can also be good for locking multiple bags together in a train or bus stations – often where thieves work in pairs to distract and snatch lone bags.
- If I haven’t taken a knap sack as my “purse” walking on, I pack a small one in the carry on. I have a great little one made of parachute material that is super durable and packs into the size of a tennis ball. This is very useful for day trips or use as a beach bag. Remember the George Carlin skit about “your bag of stuff?” It’s always a good idea to be able to edit you belongings into a smaller bag for shorter trips. This small knap sack along with the light weight expandable duffel also allows options for short term/multiple location outings where you can check a bag of stuff you don’t need in the immediate future and still have options for transporting your things.

## **Clothing**

- You’re probably thinking, “Mary, I think the carry-on is already full with this list” but you’d be surprised how compact all these previously mentioned items are if you actually know HOW to pack them. I advocate leaving no space unoccupied. What I mean by that is – stuff things inside your running shoes, stuff packable items like socks and underwear in those little left over corners of your bag once everything else is in there.
- Roll EVERYTHING. Rolled clothes pack down and are much more resilient at their destination. Leave high maintenance wrinkle prone items at home.
- Fluffy items can go in Zip Lock bags. With air removed, they vacuum compact down nicely. I can make quick work of a sweater this way.

- Pack considering a cross-functional system: base layer (underwear, socks, bra), mid layer (insulating/warm) and outer layers (weather protection/footwear)
- Base layers: Pack a week's worth, and get the hand wash cycle going at day five. If you're only going for a couple weeks and wear thongs, provision for it all. They'll likely fit inside your packed shoes! Panty-liners can extend the wear ladies, and if you travel in the company of friends that make you laugh, you'll be happy to have them along.
- Socks: Pack a week's worth, and start the hand wash cycle with the underwear. Performance socks are better than cheap ones. I don't know why technical socks stink less than cheap ones after hiking, but they do. Worth the spend. Especially in tight or shared quarters. Or get out that Zip Lock bag pronto!
- Shirts/tops: I usually consider likely weather and activities. If you pack good deodorant you can wear them multiple times before washing. Having quick dry options here is also a good choice, especially for extended trips where you might hand wash items.
- Pants/shorts: Best dictated by activities and climate. Two pairs can do it if you plan well.
- Comfy stuff: Jeans, tights, sweatpants, loose fitting sweatshirt – personal choices vary.
- Dressy stuff: Having at least one outfit you could dress up somewhat with a few accessories, or a lightweight wrinkle free skirt or dress is a good provision. Even if I don't think to need it, I usually have something tossed in. You just never know what invite or opportunity might come your way. Opera tickets from the sky in Vienna? Be the girl who rocks it with ease!
- Sleepwear: Lightweight unless you're going somewhere cold. Skip the robe and slippers.
- Footwear: This is where it gets tricky and frankly where the bag can get full. You need to consider your activities carefully. Active-wear runners, one pair of evening shoes, and perhaps sandals might get you by. Depending on the climate, you may need to add boots. Provided you're not departing in 30+ Celsius degrees, you could wear them.
- Outerwear: Think layers and multi-purpose here. A light shell for rain is a good idea. Something for warmth. I have a long wool cardigan sweater that doubles as a coat when paired with a light scarf wrap. Worn on the plane, I can often escape taking a heavier coat all together and it's very versatile, dressing up everything with a nice scarf added.
- Headwear: A sun hat is essential for some climates, and a toque will always warm your up if you get cold, or fix a bad hair day easily.
- Umbrella: Coming from Vancouver, I own a few of these. I leave a small one permanently in my carry-on. It has been a welcome find on several occasions.
- Gloves: Really depends on where you're going, but tossing in a light pair of gloves is easy, and can be a godsend if they end up being needed.
- Swimwear. While some guys try to rock their underwear in the pool as a substitute (no tighty-whitey please!), it gets a little more difficult for the gals. Toss in your bathing suit, because you just never know if you might need it, and it can be a time consuming and expensive, not to mention traumatic for some, adventuring out to acquire one. I keep an extra bikini in my carry-on permanently. I make it a bikini to keep my diet and exercise honest enough to continue to be able to wear it!

My bottom line: plan what you'll need and ensure all outfit items can be mixed and matched with others. Roll everything, and leave no space unused. Unlike some of my travel companions, I generally return having worn or used everything taken. I packed for a week trekking in Peru, going out on the town at either end of it with just a carry-on. We had temperatures from well below freezing to the high 20's, rain and blistering sun. Packing light is a lifestyle choice. When you travel light, you leave room to experience more. It's a big world out there. Go enjoy it!

- Mary