

Lightening the load

9 tips that can take the lug out of luggage

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Travel with just a carry-on. Never lose a bag. Skip the noisy carousel and go straight to your destination.

For the air traveler, these fantasies rank right up there with getting a free in-flight meal or fawning service from a friendly flight attendant. But are they just that — fantasies?

Not necessarily. Here are nine tips that can take the lug out of luggage and help you travel in style.

Carry good bags. If your luggage can't handle the rigors of the road, you are just wasting your money. On a long flight a few months ago, my seatmate Chuck and I started talking about luggage (a sure sign of boredom). He told me that six months earlier he had gotten what he thought was a great deal: a brand-name, wheeled carry-on bag for \$200. His good fortune was short-lived, however, because the bag was already falling apart. My Tumi bag, on the other hand, is 10 years old and can probably go another 2 million miles with me. Yes, I did pay \$200 more for my bag, but 10 years sure beats six months. In luggage, good value really does start with quality.

Carry on if you can. Carry-ons make flying so much easier. Everything you need is always within reach, you never risk losing your bags, and you save all that time at the baggage carousel. Just remember: most airlines limit the number of carry-ons to one bag and one personal item, such as a purse, briefcase or laptop. (Generally, passengers may also carry a coat, umbrella or other routine item.) Remember, too, that overloading yourself can be a nuisance — and sometimes a danger — to others in the cabin. How many times have you been hit in the face with a shoulder bag when some overburdened bozo lumbered past you in the aisle? That's just bad travel etiquette.

Size *does* matter. Carry-on bags must fit in the aircraft's overhead compartment or underneath the seat in front of you. Usually, this means your bag should measure no more than 45 linear inches (e.g., 9 inches by 14 inches by 22 inches); moreover, it must weigh no more than 40 pounds. Some airlines are stricter about the rules than others, especially on full flights and around the busy holiday seasons. For that reason, many veteran travelers invest in luggage specifically designed to meet the Federal Aviation Administration's carry-on size limit.

Pack right. Several books detail good packing techniques. Use them. But first understand the basics. Always put your contact information and your itinerary inside your bag. (Putting this information on the outside of your bags advertises your personal information to the world). Never pack hazardous goods, guns or knives in your carry-on. Sounds like common sense, but you would be surprised what Transportation Security Administration officials have confiscated. (If you have any doubts about what items are allowed, check out its [Web site](#).) Finally, keep your glasses, medications, and emergency phone numbers handy, along with a bottle of water and healthy snacks for the ride.

Lose the lock. Unless you are carrying gold bullion in your bags, locking them provides little value. But it sure can impede your travels. While returning from a golf trip in Costa Rica, I had to change planes and recheck my luggage in Mexico City. When the federal officer asked me to open the case around my golf bag, I couldn't find my keys. After fumbling haplessly for several minutes, I was escorted to an office and asked a series of questions while officers broke the locks on my case, ruining it for future use. I could have avoided the 45-minute ordeal — and the cost of a new case — if I had simply kept the case unlocked. Bear in mind that less than one-half of one percent of airline passengers ever experience a theft from their luggage. Of course, if you must travel with valuables, keep them in a carry-on bag in your line of sight.

Toss the tags. I often see travelers with all sorts of tags littering their bags. The only tags you need are the baggage receipts you are given at check-in (keep these on your person), the destination tag (make sure it's correct and that it has been firmly attached to your bags), and a nametag. If your airline insists

on showing you how special you are by putting a priority tag on your bag, tear it off. Every time I've needed to check my "priority" bags, they have been the last off the plane.

Store your bags. There will be times when you arrive at your hotel early or have a late flight. Instead of hauling your bags around with you, have the hotel staff — usually the front-desk personnel or bellman — store them until you can collect them. (There may be a nominal charge for this service.)

Handle with care. One of the joys of travel is finding unusual items to bring home from interesting countries. But these may require special handling. I once found a great wooden mirror in the Ipanema section of Rio. Having carefully packed it, I thought it would ship without harm. But I was wrong, and I ended up having to replace it. On a later trip, I bought a few delicate vases and other art in Buenos Aires. This time I sought out the supervisor at the airport check-in counter and explained that my package was fragile. She put my box aside and hand delivered it to the plane. Happily, all those items arrived home undamaged.

Watch your bags. More bags are lost on the ground than in the air, so keep a close eye on your luggage, especially at the airport, in the hotel lobby, and at the curb. If you ever have a dispute with your taxi driver, make sure you get your bags out of the car before voicing your displeasure. I once took a gypsy limo into New York from JFK and refused to pay for poor service. Fortunately, I had collected my bags before complaining, because the driver stomped off muttering that he should have held my bags ransom.

Your bags are an essential part of your trip: they are your emergency kit, your change of clothes, and your connection to your everyday self. That said, remember that there is very little you can't buy abroad — whether your destination is across town or halfway around the world. So travel light, travel smart, and save some space in those bags for something really wonderful to bring home.

Joel Widzer is an expert on loyalty and frequent flier programs. He is the author of "The Penny Pincher's Passport to Luxury Travel," a guidebook on traveling in high style at budget-friendly prices. [E-mail him](#) or [visit his Web site](#). Want to sound off about one of his columns? Try visiting [Widzer's forum](#).