

The Little Book of Travel Wisdom

Before You Go

1. Immunization Tips

Hepatitis A and B, malaria, typhoid fever, anyone? These are among the most serious diseases travelers can prevent with vaccination or pre-trip medication. Yet more than half of U.S. travelers headed to high-risk disease areas fail to seek travel health information prior to departure—a costly move, considering the bad bugs out there. Although most medical insurance plans don't cover vaccines or prophylaxes for the following illnesses, an ounce of prevention is worth the price. Hepatitis A and B vaccines (three shots over six months, \$80-200) provide protection for at least 15 years. Mosquito-borne malaria is prevented by daily pills such as Doxycycline and Malarone (\$60-150). Contaminated food and drink could cause typhoid fever; a shot (\$70-120) or live, oral vaccine (\$50) helps stave off this infection. To avoid being vaccinated at the border (or possible quarantine) check entry requirements before departure and carry proof of vaccination. If you shouldn't get a vaccine for health reasons, be sure to carry a doctor's signed waiver. Consult the [Centers for Disease Control](#) and the [World Health Organization](#).

2. Passports/Visas

Obtaining travel documents for your trip has become more complicated due to tightened security post 9/11. Passports cost \$55-85 and have a turnaround processing time averaging six weeks (expedited service costs an extra \$60). Plan ahead as some countries require passports to be valid at least six months prior to your arrival. Parents, keep in mind a new State Department rule: Young travelers (age 14 and under) must apply in person for a passport or renewal. Acquiring a visa can also be a challenge. Don't assume you don't need one: Call your destination's embassy in advance to learn visa requirements, fees, and application processing times as they can vary widely. Australia, for example, has a simple online visa application costing \$14 (20 AUD). Brazil, on the other hand, now requires Americans to obtain a visa prior to departure and charges a \$100 fee. For a country-by-country list of document requirements and American passport guidance, visit the [U.S. State Department online](#).

3. Essentials to Go

Among handy items to pack, you'll find that Ziploc bags are the most useful— good for wet swimsuits, medication, shampoo bottles, soap, and dirty laundry. Duct tape (wrap a few feet around a pen for later use) comes in handy if the strap on your favorite sandals breaks or the handle on your suitcase snaps. Avoid camera calamities and pack extra batteries in addition to extra film; also an extra watch battery. A Swiss army knife (keep it in your checked luggage) has multiple uses on the road, and a pocket calculator helps with figuring out tips and taxes on local purchases. Jennifer Smith, a frequent traveler who roams the country on business, includes "antibacterial pads to wipe the phone, TV remote, and light switch in hotel rooms, even in five-star hotels." A lint roller will freshen up your dark clothes, and spot remover will save you from a trip to the dry cleaner. A small, portable white noise machine with earphones is great for long plane rides and noisy city hotels. Bring a copy of your medicine and eyeglass prescriptions in case you need to refill them during your trip. Other things to have on hand: Deet-based bug repellent, antacid tablets, 24-hour non-drowsy cold and flu medicine, and Band-Aids. Finally, bring an extra shoulder bag to carry purchases home.

4. Don't be a Pack Rat

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Sharpen your packing skills and save yourself loads of travel stress. Pack your bags a day before your trip, then remove five to ten items. Choose light, wrinkle-free fabric clothing. Make sure that some of your clothing does double-duty: a sarong can be used as a skirt and beach cover-up. Have your clothes laundered at a hotel or wash them yourself (use hotel shampoo). Not enough room in your suitcase? Try [PackMate](#) VacuSacs (\$18 for two). Place clothes in a plastic bag and squeeze out excess air. Always pack a swimsuit, and wear layers on the airplane (which saves room in your suitcase). And remember: You can usually buy needed clothing on the road.

5. One Room, Three Prices

"You really have to shop around to find a great rate on a hotel room," says Traveler contributing editor Christopher Elliott. Start with discount websites, such as [Quikbook.com](#), but also go to the hotel's website to compare, then call the hotel, and inquire about available promotional rates or discounts for AAA, AARP memberships, or credit card programs. Also ask if they have a best-rate policy, where they guarantee other outlets won't beat them. "Hotels don't like to see lower prices than theirs on someone else's website," says Elliott. If you do book through a third-party website, always call to confirm your reservation directly with the hotel before arriving.

6. The Price of a Free Ticket

Some people call them "frequent frustration miles" because, as exciting as a free flight might sound, it can be maddening to redeem frequent-flier points for tickets. Limited capacity, inconvenient scheduling, expired miles, frustrating point requirements, and processing fees contribute to making point savings more hassle than helpful. A few tips: The best practice is to focus your spending on a single airline-affiliated credit card; you'll accrue miles more quickly and turn them into tickets more easily. US Airways, for example, offers a Visa card that awards customers who spend \$25,000 in one calendar year with 10,000 miles that go toward their preferred status. Unaffiliated travel-reward credit cards (not endorsed by any airline) tend to lack the mileage-earning power of airline-affiliated cards, and the earned miles typically can't be combined within a frequent-flier program. Websites such as [FrequentFlier.com](#) and [InsideFlyer.com](#) offer comparisons of many of the major travel rewards cards. When redeeming frequent-flier miles, take into account blackout dates, peak travel periods, length-of-stay restrictions, alternative airports or partner airlines, and all the other annoying fine print. Don't overlook alternative redemption options, such as exchanging miles for products and college-savings plans.

7. Background Check

If you're not satisfied with the State Department's briefing on your next travel destination, contact a travel security company, such as [iJET Travel Risk Management](#), which briefs you on health care and transportation risks at your destination from \$25; [Intelliguide](#) offers up-to-the-minute security analyses from \$83; [International SOS](#) gives you the scoop on local medical care and access to doctors and medical evacuation from \$55 (single-trip membership); or [GlobalOptions](#), which asks on-the-ground personnel to evaluate the security risks of your itinerary and provides escorts from \$125 an hour.

8. When to Take a Pass on Rail Passes

Multiple-stop train passes don't always save you money. Depending on your itinerary, you could end up paying more for passes when standard point-to-point tickets would be preferable. Railpass options (single or multiple country, passenger class, number of allowable stops, discounts for traveling groups, Rail 'n Drive packages) sometimes add to the confusion. Begin comparison shopping on Rick Steves's Guide to [European Railpasses](#), which details bargains by country and provides rough fare maps; also included are itineraries, tips on making the most of your pass, and purchasing options.

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The [European Railway Server's](#) Web site provides links to the timetables of most of Europe's national railways, so you can begin planning your trip (to the minute!) from home. For more information and railpass purchases, visit [Rail Europe](#) online.

9. Do You Need Travel Insurance?

Most trips have steep penalty charges for canceling at the last minute. If you think there are reasonable odds that you might not be able to make the trip (medical condition, unstable situation in your destination) or if you're traveling with a group of friends, travel insurance is a smart option. Base your decision on the amount of money you're spending, your tolerance for financial risk, and the cost of the policy. "With terrorism and political uncertainty in a significant percentage of the world, trip cancellation insurance is worth considering," says marketing consultant Mark Kantor. But read the fine print carefully, because each policy is slightly different. Most policies include medical coverage, trip protection, baggage loss, and medical evacuation. But policies differ in coverage of weather disasters, terrorism, and preexisting medical conditions. No policy will refund your money if you change your mind about taking a trip. Policies cost between 5 and 7.5 percent of the trip's cost (most base rates start at under \$100). Top trip insurance providers include: [Travel Guard](#), [Travelex](#), and [Global Alert](#).

10. Fare Strategies

Airlines once offered their best fares on Wednesdays. But big sales, which induced fare wars by midweek, are less common now, says *Traveler* contributing editor Christopher Elliott. Comparison shopping is a must if you're looking for the best deal. Try online consolidators, such as [One Travel](#), [Priceline](#), [Hotwire](#), where airlines can disguise their low rates. Don't forget to look at the airline's own website, call its toll-free number, or ask a travel agent who may have access to consolidators' fares.

11. Combo Deals

Buying your trip as a package (hotel and flight, plus car) can reduce the cost of buying the components individually by up to 30 percent. Airlines and hotels are willing to offer websites, such as [Expedia](#), [Travelocity](#), and [Priceline](#), discounts on package rates in part because the sites do not divulge the prices of the individual parts of the package, says Expedia spokesperson Melissa Derry.

12. ATM Awareness

ATM cards are better than credit cards, cash advances, or hassling with travelers' checks. Plus, get the best exchange rate and avoid standing in long bank lines. Before you pack your bags, check with your bank about incurring ATM fees on both ends, says veteran travel journalist Laura Powell. Typically, there's a \$2-3 fee per transaction, but as long as you're not pulling out, say, \$20 each time, you'll save money. Many European ATMs have only numbers, not letters, on their keypads, so work out the numeric equivalent of your password beforehand. Stick to ATMs affiliated with major international banks to avoid poor exchange rates and inflated fees. Access cash (in U.S. dollars, euros, or pounds) at select ATMs with American Express's [TravelFunds Card](#). The prepaid, rechargeable card isn't linked to a bank account and can be replaced within 24 hours if lost or stolen (\$14.95 for a three-year card). Finally, alert your issuer to your whereabouts to avoid having your account frozen for "abnormal" use. Carry a few cards with you (preferably separately) in case one is stolen or lost.

13. Hidden Hotel Costs

Inquire about the local tax rates on lodging and food when considering the budget for your next trip. Hotel occupancy tax can be as high as 17 percent (Houston), and taxes on restaurant meals can be as high as 11 percent (cities in Virginia).

14. Off-Season Bargains

Save money and serenity by traveling when others don't. In the U.S., for example, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon are swamped in the summer—exactly when many Mexican and Caribbean destinations offer discounts. Shoulder seasons (the periods before and after peak travel season) also promise reduced traffic and deals. A few seasonal tips: Caribbean cruises are better priced in the fall than in winter or spring; National Park lodges are cheapest in the winter; dude ranches offer better deals in the spring and fall (and don't always require a week-long stay). Europe's best deals come between Thanksgiving and Easter (airfare specials usually appear in early fall).

15. Money Where It Matters

"No one travels to London to spend the night near Heathrow or Gatwick," says filmmaker Gregg Helvey. "The money you save by sleeping at a cheaper hotel on the fringes of a city is quickly gobbled up by tube and taxi fares, and the time you waste in transit

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detracts from the quality time you can spend exploring London." Travel is about balancing costs and opportunities. Although most hotels in the city center charge more than outlying inns, the price difference is easily compensated by the comfort and convenience of being able to say, "My hotel's just up the street." The money you save by not renting a car can easily cover the premium on pricier accommodations.

16. Navigating the City

Tour your destination like a local by following the advice of Don George, global travel editor for Lonely Planet. Research your destination before you go and arrive with a good map and a list of the areas you want to visit. He also champions taking walking tours led by a resident, to get the "inside flavor" of a city. Chicago, New York City, Tokyo, Melbourne, and other international cities offer greater programs, usually run through the local tourism office. Visit the [Tourism Offices Worldwide Directory](#) online.

17. Hostel Makeovers

Forget those bare-bones, barracks-style hostels of your youth. While they may be called youth hostels, they welcome travelers of all ages. Members of [Hostelling International USA](#) (\$28 annual dues) receive discounted rates, but you don't have to join to get a room. The organization's website links you to hundreds of hostels around the world. Two favorite hostels in the U.S.: The Clay Hotel's hostel in Miami Beach offers 120 bright rooms two blocks from the beach in the art deco district; deluxe private rooms feature television, refrigerator, and daily maid service. Hostelling International Point Montara Lighthouse on the coast south of San Francisco has five private rooms (shared baths). They fill up quickly, so book two months in advance, especially for weekend stays.

In Transit

18. Music to Travel By

A great way to chew up idle hours in the air is to soak up the sounds of your next destination. Used to be you had to lug around a CD player and a bulky cache of CDs. But now an MP3 player allows you to fit an entire world of music in a shirt pocket. Get the 40-gigabyte version of Apple's nifty iPod (\$399) and you can bring along up to 10,000 songs, bought easily online from [iTunes](#). It's also a snap to copy a CD you own onto an MP3 player. And the best place to find music from all corners of the globe? Check out [RoughGuides.com](#). The site sells thousands of selections that will please the most eclectic listener—from salsa and Sri Lankan tunes to music from Macedonia and Malawi.

19. Food on the Fly

Since many airlines stopped serving meals on domestic flights and decided a turkey sandwich was worth \$8, packing food for plane or car trips has become essential. Carbs, particularly refined, such as sugar and white flour, give you quick energy and then a crash, so you crave more—a "vicious circle," says David Goldbeck, co-author of *Healthy Highways*. Start with a good breakfast and carry snacks, such as nuts, dried fruit, and cheese cubes. The fruit gives you a quick energy boost and the nuts provide protein to sustain you.

20. Car Rental Rates and Fees

If you need to rent a car for more than four days, it's usually cheaper to rent for the entire week. Reserve your car early—there's no penalty to cancel, but there is usually a discount for renting in advance. And don't go straight for an economy car thinking it's the cheapest; sometimes midsize car costs are just as low. Ask if the rental agency will upgrade your car for the same price.

21. Airline Dos and Don'ts

To avoid catching a cold or flu on an airline flight, request a seat as far up front as possible—where the air is cleanest. To lessen the effects of turbulence, try sitting in the center of the plane where motion is usually not as strong as in other areas. Seats in front are quieter because engines are in the rear or over the wing. They also allow for a quick departure if you need to make a flight connection. Avoid the seats in the last row, which do not recline and have no window.

22. Luggage Logic

"The best packing question a traveler can ask is: Do people where I'm headed live without this item?"

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says Doug Dymont, whose website, [One Bag](#), offers packing tips. In brief, you'll be better off with less. Additional tips: Never check luggage containing valuables (cash, credit cards, cameras, jewelry); fragile items (eyeglasses, bottles); or critical items (medicine, keys, travel vouchers). This advice is even more important lately, with checked luggage now subject to routine hand searches and increased opportunity for theft. Stick a copy of your travel itinerary in an outside pocket of your luggage so that if it's lost the airline has a better chance of tracking you down while you're traveling. To insure your luggage, ask for "excess valuation." With this you can bump up the liability to as high as \$5,000. The cost: about \$1 per \$100 of coverage. Additionally, this gives the airline more incentive not to lose your luggage.

23. Leave Jet Lag Behind

Jet lag happens when the body's inner clock falls out of sync with daily cycles of light, meals, and rest. Some medical experts estimate that travelers require a day of recovery for every time zone crossed—but who can wait that long? Minimize the effects by getting several good nights of sleep before your trip. Set your watch to your destination time when you board the plane, and adjust sleep and meals accordingly. During the flight, do isometric exercises, eat light meals, and keep hydrated, but avoid sugary, alcoholic, or caffeinated drinks. On arrival, shower and throw yourself into your new schedule—avoid naps. [No-Jet-Lag](#) (\$10 for 32 tablets) is a homeopathic supplement that eases transitions to new time zones.

24. Expedite the X-ray

Navigate airport security checkpoints and speed through the boarding process with these quick tips: While waiting in the airport security line, pack a small zippered bag with your watch, jewelry, keys, change, cell phone, and belt. This will keep your valuables together and enable you to reassemble in peace—not in public. Have your boarding pass and driver's license ready for security personnel. Wear metal-free shoes. Pack your laptop so that it can easily be removed from your bags—and label it with your name, phone number, and e-mail address. Pack prohibited items (pocketknives, scissors, etc.) and most metallic or sharp objects in your checked baggage. Don't overstuff carry-on baggage, and consider stowing personal belongings in clear plastic bags to reduce the chance that screeners will have to handle them. To avoid having to unwrap a gift at a security checkpoint, wrap it after you arrive at your destination.

25. In-Flight Wisdom

Spend your in-flight hours smartly and you'll arrive at your destination refreshed. You might even avoid jet lag altogether. Wear layers on the airplane to weather cabin temperature changes and for pocket space to store handy items like snacks, glasses, and medication. Stretch in your seat, breathe deeply, and amble up and down the aisle. Avoid the seduction of in-flight movies: Eight hours of cinema might sound tempting, but sleep will undoubtedly prove more rewarding. Preparation for smart flying begins a day before your long haul: "Re-duce preflight stress," says Manhattan-based Dr. Ronald Primas, a [travel medicine specialist](#). "Pack ahead of time and don't race off to the airport at the last minute." To aid personal comfort while cabin-bound, bring skin cream to ward off dry air, Blistex to moisten lips, earplugs to aid sleeping, and saline solution to keep eyes lubricated.

26. Unexpected Layovers

Flight delays and the need to arrive at airports early often leaves travelers with time to kill. So airports have improved the passenger experience by providing more amenities. Check with the airport's information booth to inquire about art exhibits, outdoor terraces, and other on-site offerings. For example, Miami International Airport's hotel has a gym and swimming pool; London Heathrow Hilton has a spa and showers; San Francisco International Airport has a mini aquarium.

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27. Foreign Currency

Whether you need yen or euro, exchange enough money at your departure airport to cover cab fare and incidental expenses at your destination, but no more as fees will be high—they are lower at a bank in your destination city. Another option: Order foreign currency online and have it delivered to your door before your trip. [Wells Fargo](#) offers online purchase of 14 foreign currencies and charges a service and delivery fee starting at \$8 for up to \$1,000. [Travelex Currency Services](#) offers 75 currencies through "My TravelWallet" with no service fee, and free second-day shipping on orders over \$500.

»On Holiday

28. Ride Guide

Taking a cab from the airport to your final destination is convenient, but it's usually expensive. From New York City's JFK, a cab costs \$45 plus tolls to Manhattan; from Charles de Gaulle into Paris, 40 euro (\$49); and from Narita into Tokyo, 15,000-20,000 yen (\$138-185) plus tolls. Save money with the two-prong approach: Take the subway, train, or a shuttle bus into the general city vicinity and from there hail a taxi. Research transportation before arriving at the airport; airport websites often post links to bus routes or subway maps, if not detailed descriptions of ground transportation options.

29. Risk Factor

If you're headed to a destination in the off-season and you're willing to risk it, show up with no hotel reservations. Walk into a hotel between 4 and 6 p.m. and start bargaining. They'd rather have you pay a low rate than let a room go empty for the night.

30. Foreign Travel Etiquette

When traveling in countries where English is not the first language, learn how to say these five expressions in the local tongue: hello, goodbye, thank you, please, and pardon me. It's amazing how far these words will get you when spoken in a person's language, even if he or she knows the English equivalent.

31. Safety on the Road

Travel is an improvisational art: Hope for the best, but be prepared for complications. Always carry your passport, and bring along photocopies—in some countries, hotels hold your passport during your stay. Keep all trip information (reservation numbers, itinerary, and telephone numbers, including that of the local U.S. Embassy) as well as relevant health information (a list of medications, allergies, blood type, and an emergency contact number) with you at all times. Blend in by dressing like the locals; leave labeled T-shirts and baseball caps at home. Watch your pockets and purse, and keep cameras, computers, and other gear concealed and close at hand. Carry enough local currency for cab rides, and regardless of what country you're visiting, always keep \$100 hidden in your wallet or security belt for emergency purchases.

32. Asking for Directions

"Ask more than one person for directions," says Lonely Planet editor Don George, in a twist on the old tailor's rubric: measure twice, cut once. "In certain cultures, particularly in Asia, it is impolite for a local to say 'I don't know.' It can be a cause of embarrassment to a local if he can't provide an answer for you, so his natural response is to say something, anything, even if it isn't correct."

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33. Protect Your Plastic

Use a credit card for big-ticket items like jewelry, rugs, and artwork—or whenever there might be a problem. Credit card companies won't cover buyers' remorse, but will protect against unauthorized charges, billing errors, and misrepresentation with proper documentation (e.g. certificate of authenticity, signed description from retailer). Expect one percent currency conversion fees from Visa and Mastercard and two percent from American Express on purchases. Read the fine print: Some banks add a surcharge of up to three percent of the converted amount.

34. Cheap Thrills for Drama Queens

Try not to pay full price for tickets to art events such as plays, musicals, and operas. In New York City, for instance, half-price day-of-show tickets are available at the Times Square TKTS kiosk. San Francisco and London have similar agencies. For spontaneous theatrical adventures while traveling, pick up a local English-language newspaper and make your plans on the spot. In Prague, for example, buy a copy of the Prague Post and check out the opera and concert listings. Then stop by the box office (prices here are often half of what consolidators charge) or stand at the theater around showtime. Even if a concert claims to be sold out, just wait: Ticket touts will find you.

35. Light Eating

At resorts, where meals can cost you up to \$70-100 per day, consider spending extra money and booking a club-level hotel room. Amenities usually include a breakfast buffet (with juice, danish, fruit, cereal), midday refreshments and snacks (cookies, fruit), and hors d'oeuvres and cocktails in the evening, which might just save your bottom line in the long run. You'll also have an opportunity to mingle with other guests on your floor. If you want to try a fancy restaurant, the breakfast and lunch menu will be cheaper than at dinnertime; or in large cities, ask the tourism office for dates of "restaurant weeks," when some eateries offer deals on prix fixe lunch and dinner menus.

36. Think Smaller, But Still Go Big

Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, and Yellowstone: America's most striking natural wonders are also among its most crowded (combined they drew more than 10.5 million visitors last year). The National Park Service is working to increase awareness of the 57 national parks and reduce the negative impact of overuse on the biggies. Visit <http://nps.seeamerica.org> for maps, itineraries, and links to deals on parks. Another underutilized resource: the 192 million acres of national forest, mostly in the West, where natural resources are protected and managed. Visit the website of the U.S. National Forest Campground Guide for recommendations.

37. The Tipping Point

While you'll never make an enemy by leaving a big tip, it's not always necessary or expected. Generally, tips reward good service. While in the U.S. a tip is an expected part of a server's income; in many other nations tips are small grace notes underscoring your appreciation. In America, of course, it is customary to tip 15-20 percent (of your un-taxed total bill) at restaurants, bars, and in taxi cabs. In Germany and France, service charges are included in restaurant checks (verify this with your server), and tipping becomes more of an ad hoc gesture—consider giving five percent of your bill, or simply rounding up the total of your check to the nearest full euro. Bartenders receive small change or none at all. Tipping is generally not expected in Japan and other Asian countries. Some general tipping guidelines: Assess the state of the local economy, determine the local currency equivalent of \$1, and tip freely. Tip bellhops and porters \$1 per bag; hotel maids should get about \$1 per day of your stay. A concierge receives a tip of \$5-10 for each request, with an additional gratuity for special

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services or favors. If your tour guide and driver have been especially helpful, offer \$2-5.

38. Shopping Savvy

Buy items that the area or city is noted for. For example, in Oaxaca, Mexico, purchase handmade pottery; in Hong Kong, buy custom-tailored clothing; in Florence, bargain for leather goods. Compare prices in several locations before you buy, and avoid shops near train stations and in heavily touristed areas.

39. Waterborne Bugs on Tap

There's no end to the trouble that a little dirty water can cause you. Among the common bacterial illnesses that can be transmitted by drinking water are cholera and E. Coli infection; viruses can include hepatitis; and parasites such as giardia and amoeba can lurk in a sparkling glass of water, too. Fortunately, the water in most cities is chlorinated—but why take the chance when traveling in a country with poor water quality? Always buy bottled water (ideally not from your hotel: Some hotels charge as much as \$5 a bottle—which might not be made clear until you check out). Remember to brush your teeth using bottled water—not tap water. When at a restaurant, ask whether their table water has been purified. And reconsider that cocktail—ice from bad water can carry bacteria, too. Beer or bottled sodas might be your best libations. Steamed vegetables are safer than raw vegetables and salads.

40. Phoning Home

Here's how to avoid sky-high phone fees charged by hotels. International calling plans from U.S. providers such as [AT&T One Rate Global Plus](#) cost a monthly fee plus per-call surcharges, but guarantee competitive rates from international destinations and streamline fees on your monthly phone bill. [Prepaid calling cards](#) have set limits of talk time and are widely available at newsstands in Europe and Asia. They're easy to use and cheap, though you might have to call from a pay phone. Some U.S. cell phones operate internationally; if yours doesn't, you can rent a local cell phone at many international airports.

»Heading Home

41. Check It Out

Examine your hotel bill carefully before checking out to make sure you were billed the quoted rate, particularly when your stay spans both a weekend and weekday, which are often billed at different rates. Mistakes are common (which is a good reason to avoid the express checkout service).

42. Customs Shortcuts

Know the restrictions of bringing home goods such as produce, food products, and cigars from other countries. Some rules of thumb: Fresh produce is usually not allowed, but dried and preserved fruits are no problem. Salami and sausages are prohibited, although vacuum-packed meats are sometimes okay. Soft cheeses like Camembert are generally a no-no; harder varieties such as cheddar and Stilton are welcome. Tip: "Don't buy expensive food, because there's always a chance it will be taken away," warns U.S. Customs manager Janice Mosher. Cuban cigars are prohibited no matter what country you bring them from and will likely be confiscated. For a complete list of customs restrictions, visit the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#) online.

43. Shop 'Til You Drop

Duty-free shopping has its perks: reduced taxes, convenience, and a good way to use leftover

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currency. While actual bargains are few, smart shopping can get you the best deals. Major luxe retailers often price an item based on a country's income level. "I priced a Hermès watch in various airports over a year and bought it duty-free in Prague where it was less expensive than in Paris," says Suzy Gershman, author of Frommer's Born to Shop series. In most cases, you'll save on an item in its native country—buy Swedish glass in Stockholm and hard-to-find electronics in Singapore. Check out airline duty-free too; low overhead often makes it less expensive.

44. Get Your VAT Back

Travelers to Europe can recoup a percentage of purchase price on goods—ranging by country from 7.6 percent (Switzerland) to 24.5 percent (Iceland)—in the form of a value-added tax (VAT) refund. A minimum purchase (which also varies by country) is required, but the real reason travelers abandon millions in refunds each year is that securing a refund can be troublesome. But it's worth the effort. Travelers must have their refund request, including original receipt, stamped by a customs official upon departure. Typically this request is then mailed back to the store, which is required to send a refund check (in foreign currency). A better solution is to look for a [Global Refund](#) outlet at the airport; this processing agency gives out cash refunds immediately (sometimes a commission is taken based on a percentage of the total price of the item).

45. Just One More Day

Plan your itinerary to include a day at home of restful regrouping before racing into a frenzy of work and activity. "I try not to tell people the exact time of my return so that I can ease back into life at home," says international development worker Kye Kim. "I like having a day to unpack, do laundry, go grocery shopping, edit trip photos, and reflect on my vacation. The purpose of a vacation is to mellow out, so why undo your holiday cool as soon as you get home?"

Be a Sharper Shooter

Although the digital camera revolution is pushing film out of the picture, the fundamentals of great photography remain constant. No number of megapixels can compensate for bad composition or poor lighting. As Traveler's globetrotting sharpshooters explain below, the secrets to taking unforgettable pictures have less to do with equipment and more to do with elbow grease and imagination.

Steve McCurry: A comfortable pair of shoes is almost as important as film. As you're walking through your day, you need to be light and unencumbered to take your best pictures.

Keep your images simple—make them graphically strong and uncluttered. Identify your subject or center of interest—that is, your focus, around which everything else will be peripheral—and then compose the background.

Work with just a few colors, perhaps only two. The same principle applies to color as it does to overall composition: Keep your images clean and focused. Where colors are concerned, less is definitely more.

When you're photographing people, strike up a conversation with them. Learn something about them that can help reveal their personality, and then photograph them unposed, and in a natural setting. When people are not self-conscious with the camera their personality will come through.

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Carry a Leatherman Tool. I was just in Eastern Tibet and my Jeep broke down, days from the nearest service station. Fortunately, my driver was able to fix the truck using the Leatherman I was carrying. Photographers always need to be prepared.

David Alan Harvey: My background is in art history, and so my photography is often more artistic than journalistic. As a photographer I strive to share information about a culture and place.

Photograph something you can relate to, a setting or mood or subject that's familiar to you. Great photography doesn't automatically come from being in Nepal; often, you can get the best picture in your own backyard.

Take a good look at photography books and magazines, watch films, and educate yourself on the techniques photographers use to evoke feelings, moods, and a sense of place.

Push the envelope of light, particularly if you're working in color. Shoot earlier in the morning than you might normally and continue shooting late in the afternoon, into sunset's warm light and even 20 minutes beyond, to capture subtle, flickering candle- light and firelight.

Composition is really a matter of personal taste. There are no firm rules on how to compose an image, but I've found that including people in your photographs (even if they're not the primary subjects) adds a crucial extra element that creates a "moment." People add scale, vitality, and sensibility.

Macduff Everton: Remember to look at the whole picture when looking through the viewfinder. Too often people only see the middle of the frame and forget the edges. But the edges are essential, and are often the first thing you notice when you look at the prints.

Don't go on a vacation (or a photo trip) with a camera you've never used before.

Experiment with fast-negative film, speeds such as 800 ASA. This film now has less grain, and its fast speed permits you to handhold your camera in low-light situations when you would normally have to use a tripod.

A large Ziploc bag will easily hold 30 rolls of film, simplifying security checks at airports. Don't carry film in checked baggage; some scanners will ruin it with only one pass. The handcheck x-ray machines at the gate will not damage film.

Catherine Karnow: Getting close to people is the best way to get close to the culture. The camera is a great tool for meeting people, and even though people may say they don't like being photographed, I find that in every country, there are people who love to be photographed. I always ask permission; I never shoot with a long lens from across the street. Be friendly and polite, listen to people, and take your cues from how they are acting; sit down with people and you'll get great pictures.

Don't shoot when the sun is bright and high, except in the middle of the city where the tall buildings can throw great light around, and in the Caribbean where the water looks most blue midday.

Put people in your photos. I find pictures of nature and landscapes boring without people. There is no sense of scale, and no sense of "you are there." When you include people in your photos, have them do something like walk, hike, or climb—anything but just standing there. Even the smallest gesture is

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important. The gesture is everything. Every photo should be capturing a moment in time.

John Kernick: My best pictures come when I'm relaxed and not spending time desperately looking for a shot. I like to stay open to my surroundings and be ready for the unexpected.

Keep your equipment light and simple; carry little more than a standard lens and camera. You'll only shoot great pictures if you have a camera on you. It's no good to see a great photograph when your big camera bag and five lenses are sitting in the hotel room. Carry a point-and-shoot.

Have a goal. Know what you want to capture and how to go about it before you set off. Sounds obvious but it's easy to waste good shooting time by not being prepared.

Cloudy days can be fine for portraits of people and close-ups, but nothing beats that early-morning or late-evening light. For some reason the evening light always lasts longer and can sometimes be best after the sun has dropped below the horizon, when city scenes come alive and the sky turns amazing shades of magenta.

Bob Krist: I never leave home without gaffer's tape. Strong, waterproof, and—unlike duct tape—removable. I've used gaffer's tape to secure lighting, repair tripods, fix French showers, and lock down rattling windows in cheap hotel rooms.

Go for humor and serendipity. Compositional imperfections, less-than-perfect light, and other flaws are readily overlooked if the picture carries a humorous, offbeat situation at its core.

You can set your landscapes apart if they're shot in unusual light or weather conditions.

Great Travel Websites

Auto Europe

Good for air travel, accommodations, and car rentals in Europe.

airlinemeals.net

Preview first- and business-class dining menus and see pictures of actual airline meals. More than 300 airlines are represented, from Aer Lingus to Yangon Airways.

Cruise Mates

Provides information for experienced and aspiring cruisers.

Expedia

All-inclusive booking site.

GasBuddy.com

Locates the best gas prices at service stations throughout the United States and Canada.

go-today.com

Good for last-minute travel deals.

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Hostelling International USA

Book an inexpensive bed or a private room from Hostelling International—choose from affiliates in 60 countries and more than 5,000 hotels.

LimousineLine.com

Real-time auction system that allows users to bid on the price they would like to pay for a specific service as well as the type of car.

LongTermParking.com

By using this website, which offers coupons for discounts on parking at (or near) 47 U.S. airports and several U.K. locations, travelers can save up to 70 percent.

Points.com

Allows consumers to exchange points and miles from one participating loyalty program to another to achieve the rewards they want faster than ever before. To date, the Points Exchange has attracted close to 40 partners, including American Airlines, InterContinental Hotels, Amtrak, Delta SkyMiles, and Fairmont

Hotel Shark

Publishes unvarnished guest opinions of hotels.

Quikbook

Offers savings of up to 60 percent on various hotels, including Sonesta and Loews properties.

Rentalo

Provides quick access to 120,000 vacation rentals worldwide.

Side Step

This free program downloads to your Web browser and searches for cheap fares on more than 585 airlines.

Site 59

Finds unsold airline seats, hotel rooms, and rental cars and bundles them into reduced-rate vacation packages for last-minute travelers.

TicketsTo.com

Lets travelers to major European cities purchase passes (often at discounted prices) for museums, sightseeing tours, and ground transportation before beginning their vacations. The tickets are received within 48 hours.

Virtual Tourist

Get insider destination advice from fellow travelers—450,000 members from 220 countries—who have just been there.

Where to Stay

Searches hotels, villas, and vacation packages in the Caribbean, Mexico, Bermuda, and Hawaii.

WebFlyer

Details the pros and cons of different frequent-flier programs.

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