PACKING 101: LUGGAGE & ESSENTIALS

“Lay out everything you plan to bring with you, alongside your cash. Cut the amount of clothing in half, and take twice the amount of money.”
— Patrick Field, alumnus of Bilbao, Spain

The basic rule of thumb when packing is less equals more. The following advice is inspired by true stories from past study abroad participants. Before packing, make sure you tap into alumni from your host country for specifics on essential versus unnecessary items. Remember, you will most likely accumulate some memorabilia and souvenirs. Therefore, leave room to bring back some memories from your experience abroad.

Luggage (the basics)

- Large backpacks should definitely have waist straps
- Consider buying a “backpackers” pack
- Be sure your “carry on” fits airline size requirements
- Buy locks acceptable to airlines at travel store
- Bags with straps need to be able to be tucked inside
- Know the easy access parts of bags (pickpocket’s dream)
- Put your host country’s address on your luggage tags
- Consider shipping textbooks ahead of time (if advised by alumni of your program)

Check Airline Restrictions

- Carry on dimensions
- Weight restrictions
- Extra costs associated with baggage

What NOT to Bring

- Giant Dictionary (unless advised by alumni)
- Computer printer
- Pots and pans
- Ten pairs of shoes
- Multiple bulky jackets, coats & sweaters
- Costco industrial sized shampoos
- Hair straighteners/blow dryers/electric razors (buy them there or bring a good converter)
- Dry-Clean Only clothing
- Framed photos
- Banned items (check country specific regulations)

What to Bring

- Mix-and-match clothing
- Special toiletries you are attached to (i.e. makeup items)
- Enough deodorant to last the entire semester (if advised by alumni, country specific)
- Travel sized stain remover
- Flip flops for showers (hostel hygiene)
- Prescription medicines & eyeglasses (with recipe/prescription)
- Travel Febreze (gets out the bad smells and wrinkles)
- Ziploc Bags
- Travel Towel (dries quickly, found at travel stores)
- A few family/friend photos (not an album)
- Power converter (current) and/or adaptor (prongs) (can get at most travel stores, REI, Wal-Mart, etc.)
- If bringing a laptop: Pack backup software & install discs
- External hard drive with movies & music loaded on it
- Extra flashcard for camera & rechargeable batteries
- Headlamp (especially if you will share a room)
Why You Should Pack Your Bags Half-Full:  
How to pack your bags (and yourself) before you study abroad

Steve Hanna  
(University of Idaho Study Abroad Alumni)

I have two more hours until my flight leaves for Spain and I can barely contain the desire to run and hide. After listening to all of the different languages I had to get up and leave the waiting area. I walked down the hall and tried to calm myself down, but I’m still as nervous as a wire stretched tight. Now I’m back in the flight area, but I have my headphones on and cranked up to the max. I don’t want to hear Spanish. I don’t want to hear Italian. I just want to be back on the farm. Now I’m wondering why so many months ago I thought this would be a fun idea.

Ready, Go!

As I wrote those words in my blog, I was sitting in the Philadelphia airport with one small carry-on laptop case. My only other bag, a half-full hiking backpack, was already loaded in the plane, and as always before a big trip, I wondered did I bring the right stuff? If you think you will find yourself in the same position in the months ahead, here is my advice for packing not only your bags, but also yourself for the changes that are about to come.

Choosing Your Backpack

There are many articles out there that will tell you what to pack, but not how to pack it. I recommend bringing one piece of luggage to be checked at the airport that is a large mountain/hiking backpack and one smaller carry-on (i.e. the backpack you use for school). I don’t recommend bringing a large suitcase, and if it’s big enough to have wheels to roll around on, then you probably don’t want it! Why? Because it will (1) slow you down, (2) make you more susceptible to theft because you’ll be slower to respond and distracted by your baggage, and (3) you don’t need a lot of stuff. The best advice I heard before I left was to pack light, but the term I prefer is half-full, and here’s why this is so important.

When I got off the plane in Madrid from Philadelphia, I met another guy who was in the same study abroad program. The two of us hit it off and went down to wait for our luggage and then find our hotel together. It’s a good thing we went together because he had two 75-pound rolling suitcases, a large backpack, and a smaller suitcase (and I later learned when I met up with the other kids in my program that this was the norm). I put on my backpack that was half-full and slung my laptop case over my shoulder and then helped him pull one of his suitcases because he couldn’t manage both of them. We then went to navigate the Madrid metro system of cramped spaces with lots of people, stairs, and no elevators. If I hadn’t have been there, he would not have been able to get all of his stuff up the stairs by himself, let alone even move. I’m glad I was able to help, and it definitely taught a valuable lesson about packing.

Packing Your Bags Half-Full

The concept of half-full is very important when studying abroad. You want your bags to be half-full so that when you return, you will have room to put all of the stuff that you bought while you were there. It’s almost inevitable: you will buy gifts, souvenirs, postcards, mementos, books, and other things for your family and friends back home. You need space to fit this stuff in, and also you need to bring expendable items that you can pitch in a hurry and not have to bring back (think old workout t-shirts). It’s true that you could pack a full package and then ship it back home with all of your extra stuff, but it’s also true that doing so will cost at least $50 from Europe or another country (it’s usually closer to $100 for weighty packages) and shipping stuff overseas is no guarantee that it will return and is also subject to customs taxes if you ship a lot of stuff. Which returns us to the concept of half-full.
Half-full means that not only is your pack half-full, but that you are also coming to another country to “fill up” yourself. Half-full means that by going to another country, you will inevitably learn so much more about yourself and your new friends, their culture, and your home back in the US. A half-full student is a wise student because they are a student who comes to learn, not to expect what they already have at home. A half-full student is someone who comes to another country to experience that culture for what it is, not what it lacks. You’re not going to Europe or Asia or Africa to experience the same life you have here, with running water, washing and drying machines, fast food, cell phones, and picket fences, right? You’re going abroad to learn as much about them as you can, and then to bring that back with you – to fill up your pack, if you will, and to return with much more than you had before.

So what do you fill your pack with? And consequently, what do you fill yourself up with when you get there? We’ll tackle the physical packing part first.

**The List**

You’ve only got about one square foot of physical space if you want your bag to be half-full. It’s just like a good relationship: you get what you tolerate, so what do you need the most, and what can you do without? Here are my recommendations:

- **7 t-shirts.** To pack them light, lay them flat and fold them in half, then roll them up with a rubber band. Not only will they be wrinkle-free, but they’ll also take up one eighth of the space that they normally would. Also, bring solid-color shirts or t-shirts that you don’t mind losing. I didn’t bring any shirts with designs or fancy stuff because you should come prepared to lose everything. Ten people in my program of 70 students either lost their luggage or it was delayed for at least several days. You probably won’t look as good abroad as you normally do, but it’s a tolerable evil for several months.
- **10 underwear and socks.** Pack in the nooks and crannies around fragile objects.
- **2 pairs shorts.** Roll them up like the shirts.
- **2 pairs jeans.** Roll them up, and since most countries don’t have washing machines, plan on wearing one pair for one week while the other one hangs to dry, and then wear the fresh pair while the other one dries.
- **2 nice shirts/blouses.** You can look nice when going out.
- **1 pair slacks.** This is one of the best things you can bring and I highly recommend them. I wore mine to church, to plays (you will need nice clothes to enter), the jazz club (they turned down clientele not dressed nice enough), and special family/cultural events. A set of slacks opens many doors in other countries, many of which (especially Europe) tend to dress a lot nicer than we do in the US. Just roll them up and they won’t take up too much space.
- **Swimsuit.** Bring an old one that you can leave behind or give away before you return. I made the mistake of bringing my nice one, and that’s another thing that eats space that could be better used on gifts for people back home.
- **Reading material for plane.** Don’t bring a book you really like. I made the mistake of bringing a book I’d borrowed from my brother and now I have to haul it all the way back home to give it back to him. That’s eight inches of space I could have saved had I brought something that I could give away when I got here.
- **Computer (in carry-on).** Let’s face it, you’re probably going to want this, and if nothing else, bring it. Skype your family back home and save on buying phone cards (transfer all of your important documents, pictures, etc to a separate hard drive back home in case your computer breaks down).
- **Digital camera and charger.** Carry these with you because you can’t afford to lose them.
- **Money belt and copies of ID/passport/bank account #’s and driver’s licenses: carry these with you and whenever you travel out of your town, always wear the money belt and carry your passport (or a copy) with you.
- **Sports equipment, or American cultural items that you can share with people abroad.** The best thing I brought with me was an American football, and it proved to be a great thing because since they don’t really play football in other countries, I could use it to teach my Spanish friends how to play American football in exchange for them to teach me fútbol (soccer). Items like this are great because you are on an
exchange program, and in order to exchange our culture, it helps to bring things that you can share. Other great items are anything that you can do with a group of people, and games make great gifts because you can give them away.

- A picture of your home and family to give your host family or as a personal reminder. My host family has three photo albums full of pictures of past host students, and they host kids because they love what they are doing and making a difference in the lives of students. Bring a nice picture of your home and family for them and they will treasure it. My host family put my family picture on their kitchen counter so that they could look at it every day and be reminded of who my family were and whose son they were taking care of.

That’s only 13 different items to bring. You’ll notice that there aren’t any iPods and cell phones and other technology devices on this list, and that’s because something like an iPod takes you out of the world that you’re in and puts you in your own world. If you’re here for a foreign world, then it’s a good idea to put yourself there as much as possible, even though it might be hard to go without some things you are used to. On the positive side, if you have your own computer, you will have your music with you and you can listen to it there.

Using this list, your pack should be half-full and you will be a lot more mobile when you arrive. The hiking backpack will also come in handy when you go on longer trips, and for me it opened the door to a week-long backpacking trip through the Swiss Alps and another hiking trip through the Cirque Terre in Italy. Mobility is worth more than most material things that you could bring with you.

If you pack half-full, you will be one of very few students. Most students study abroad expecting to get America abroad with a smattering of another culture, but you can’t really have both. Most students expect the same nice things they have in America, but the half-full student knows that the only way to return full is to leave space inside to put new things and to bring things that you don’t mind throwing away. You will throw off old habits and mindsets, discover new talents and interests, and meet unforgettable people, but you will need room to put it all, both inside yourself and inside your bag.

Packing Yourself Half-Full

Part of preparing yourself for studying abroad is to expect that you won’t be living like an American. The famous European travel guide Rick Steves is famous for saying that you don’t go to another culture to experience your own all over again. Go to learn about the people in your country, and if you’re interested in them and their language and culture, they will be interested in you. So how do you show interest in other people? The same way that you do here: by making them feel important and valuable, by talking to them, interacting with them, saying hi, goodbye, and learning their names and what they like and dislike and then doing things for them that make them happy. Here’s a little bit of what I think that looks like.

Every day on my way to school I would get on the bus with the intention of talking to someone new in their language. One time, I talked with a woman on the bus from South Africa. We started talking in Spanish, but after a few minutes she asked if I wanted to speak in English and I told her that since I was in Spain, I wanted to speak Spanish. But then she said something that caught my attention. She had grown up speaking English, so whenever she heard other students on the bus talking in English, it made her feel like she was home again. So we talked in English and had a great conversation as two extranjeros adrift in a world and culture that we were a part of but that wasn’t entirely ours.

This same week I talked with two more women, one from my town of Alicante and another from a nearby small town. Just a week earlier I had had a conversation with a woman from Ecuador, a fellow transplant to Spain, and even though we were from two different parts of the world, we could communicate through our shared language of Spanish. Later that week was a talk with a girl my age from the university, and a day later, a talk with an elderly man on the way to his dentist appointment. Each of the conversations was just as interesting as the last, and each person equally engaging. I would get onto the bus and not know what to expect or who to encounter, only that (1) they were bound to be interesting, and (2) I was bound to learn something and grow in the process. What if this concept was applied to life? How much more would we be apt to chance, risk, even dare?
And that is what I hope you are able to take back home with you when you return from your study abroad – that by carrying a bag half-full you will have the joy of returning with a lifetime’s worth of memories made in just a few short months. I hope that you will treasure the stories of the new people you meet abroad just like you do the people back home and that by reaching out to them and being interested in them, that the act of doing so becomes a habit, so that when you return home *everything* becomes more interesting. It is important to remember that people from other countries want to visit the US just as much as we want to go visit them, so what is so interesting about America that they want to see when they come here?

One of the wonders of being a traveler is being interested in where you are going, and the goal of studying abroad and seeing more of the world should cultivate an interest in the world – wherever you are at the given time. So when you return home, do so with a full bag and a full heart, knowing that you reached out to the locals, made friends in another country, learned their geography, saw their plays and their cinema, learned what types of food they eat, how they cook it, and what types of trees grow there, so that when you get back you can be just as interested in learning the names of all the trees in your backyard and the names and stories of your neighbors and the people you ride the bus with. Studying abroad should expand your world, and that in the process of becoming interested in another country, you become interested in your own, and that it makes you more engaged, more caring, and more receptive to the concerns and needs of people all over the world.

Maybe that’s a bit idealistic, but like a stone thrown in a pond, it has an expansive rippling effect. I’m still unpacking my bags. The old backpack sitting in the garage always greets me with a smile, and even though it’s now empty and I’m back at home, it is still half-full and ready for the next adventure.

For more information on packing, check out the following websites:

1. [www.ultimatepackinglist.com/ultimate-travel-packing-list/](http://www.ultimatepackinglist.com/ultimate-travel-packing-list/) Check here for the most detailed and thorough packing list available. This site also has videos on how to pack your luggage. Highly recommended.
2. [http://www.studyabroaddomain.com/study-abroad/travel/packing](http://www.studyabroaddomain.com/study-abroad/travel/packing) Check here for a quantified list of clothes items to bring and to learn about other travel items.
Once as free as bags of peanuts, checked luggage is now a multibillion-dollar business for airlines. Barbara S. Peterson reports from behind the carousel to find out why—despite all that money and fewer checked bags—some 26 million suitcases go missing each year.
IT IS 12:27 P.M. at Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, and Delta flight 1826 to Fort Lauderdale is three minutes from push-back. Ramp workers in regulation orange vests close the cargo door and yank back the conveyor belt that moments earlier was flinging suitcases, bulging duffels, and strollers into the 757’s narrow hold. A walkie-talkie crackles with good news: 11 passengers connecting from a delayed flight out of New York have just boarded. Their holiday in the sun has been salvaged.

Or maybe not. As the ramp retracts, Delta’s luggage operations chief, Hussein Berry, scowls at the update broadcast over his radio: The fliers made it, but their bags did not. The pilot, who’s been apprised of these developments, must now make the crucial call of whether to wait for the errant valises and risk a late departure, or to have the bags put on the next flight out. The latter option is sure to inconvenience passengers, especially those boarding a cruise ship this afternoon, as well as lose the airline goodwill and money: It costs a carrier an average of $100 to reunite each delayed bag with its owner, and the airlines must also refund the fees they pocket for checked bags.

It’s those fees, more than anything, that are pushing the topic of airline baggage to the fore. This year, consumers will fork over more than $3 billion to check their luggage in the United States alone, a 700 percent increase from five years ago. The mounting baggage fees and passenger battles over bin space have not escaped the attention of some members of Congress, who are threatening a crackdown on the industry. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-La.), among others, has sponsored legislation that would force carriers to permit customers to check at least one bag free of charge. “Air travel can be a stressful experience for many reasons, but unfair fees for basic amenities should not be one of them,” Landrieu said as she introduced the bill late last year.

The fees have led to a precipitous drop in the number of checked bags, yet domestic airlines still lose or damage nearly two million pieces of luggage annually. While that is admittedly a fraction of the roughly 400 million bags entrusted to U.S. carriers each year, mishandled baggage is the number two source of complaints to the Department of Transportation, after flight delays and cancellations. Overall, the airlines do a respectable job—the industry claims that more than 99 percent of checked bags arrive with their owners, and most late bags turn up within two days. But that’s of little consolation to the millions of fliers affected by lost and delayed luggage each year; few experienced travelers have escaped the dread induced by watching a carousel disgorge its last bag—with theirs nowhere in sight.

Worldwide, the problem is far worse: Some 26 million pieces of checked luggage went astray on international flights in 2010, an increase of six percent from the year before: It’s as though an airport the size of Philadelphia International had misplaced one bag for every passenger during an entire year. An astonishing one million suitcases were never recovered at all, vanishing into a sort of baggage black hole because they were either stolen or lost their identifying tags somewhere along the way. “The lost bags don’t really get much attention,” says Lucian Ilie, a former baggage supervisor at JFK. “They just get kicked around.”

There will be no such misfortune for the luggage belonging to the passengers on flight 1826. Within minutes, a cart pulls up with the missing baggage; it’s quickly hoisted into the hold and the plane is on its way.

JUST HOW do the airlines handle hundreds of millions of bags a year in the United States alone? There’s no better place to find the answer than Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson, which is not only the busiest airport in the world but also the one that doubles as Delta’s test kitchen for new methods of tracking and scanning bags with greater accuracy than ever before.

At the center of the airport’s baggage opera-
In Atlanta, about 6,500 bags per hour travel along a hidden labyrinth. Duffels and valises share the luggage hold with an unnerving array of cargo, dead and alive. A vast sorting system consisting of 20 miles of high-speed conveyor belts, laser scanners, and pinball machine-style arms that shuffle bags and shoot them to their gate area. About 6,500 bags per hour travel along this hidden labyrinth, usually for about ten minutes at a time. And you won’t find just the usual assortment of duffels and crammed valises: Our travel togs share the luggage hold with an alarming array of cargo, dead and alive. I spot an unadorned white rectangular box on a cart that I’m quickly informed contains a human body. “That’s big business for us,” Berry interjects. Side by side with the corpses are surfboards and crates with live birds, snakes, and pets of all sizes. Baggage handlers tell wild tales of what fliers have attempted to check as baggage, ranging from a 150-pound pig to a full-size Christmas tree.

Simple Steps to Suitcase Security

The vast majority of checked luggage arrives on time and intact. These tips will help assure that you and your bags get to where you’re going.

BEFORE YOU GO
- Photograph the contents of luggage you intend to check, and keep an itemized list of valuable items in a safe place, with sales receipts if possible.
- Place an itinerary with your contact information and e-mail address in a visible place inside the bag.
- Make sure you’ve got a “clean” bag—remove tags from previous trips, especially those small white bag-check stickers airlines affix to the sides. Avoid travel stickers or decals.

They may make your bag stand out, but they could be misread by a scanner.
- Take off any straps and lock wheels that can cause a bag to shift or get stuck on a conveyor belt.
- Avoid checking very expensive-looking bags; cloth bags are less appealing to thieves than leather luggage.
- Never pack anything valuable or that you can’t afford to do without, especially a laptop or other electronics, medication, jewelry, or important documents. Replacing these items is inconvenient, to say the least, and airlines deny any liability. If in doubt, check airlines’ policies on their Web sites.
- Put the address of your destination—not your home address—on the outside of the bag. Your home address could announce that there is a house available to be burgled. The address on your bag should be where you will next be spending a night.

They may make your bag stand out, but they could be misread by a scanner.
- To protect checked bags from dings and theft, consider using one of the luggage-wrapping services found at many airports. For about $10 per bag, machines will enshroud your suitcase in a layer of plastic resembling a tough Saran Wrap. If the TSA opens your bag, it’s rewrapped for free.

FOR ADDED PROTECTION
- Open your luggage shortly after you land to see if everything is there. If something has been rifled, submit a claim with the airline and your insurer as soon as possible.

Understandably, there are many rules on where checked items can and cannot go: On wide-body planes the cargo is usually loaded in containers, but on smaller single-aisle planes it has to be carefully stacked. “We have to keep the dry ice away from the pets—otherwise, we could have a problem.” Indeed, dead pet stories are the bane of an airline’s PR department. “Nothing gets a TV crew out here faster,” says Berry.

If baggage fees have had one salutary effect, it’s been to ramp up the pressure on the airlines to provide better service and more transparency on this largely hidden part of their operation. “It’s a key part of customer satisfaction,” says Bob Kupbens, Delta’s vice president of e-commerce. Indeed, Delta had one of the worst records among major airlines for baggage handling in 2007; by 2011, the company had cut its lost-bag tally by 47 percent, rising to the second-best spot among the majors after JetBlue, which flies far fewer passengers and routes. Delta also launched a new smartphone app this year that lets passengers track their bags at every stage of the journey.

In truth, a modern baggage operation is a mash-up of high-tech innovation and old-fashioned
Mounting baggage fees and passenger battles over bin space have not escaped the attention of Congress.

The less urgent bags are trucked by another driver to the cavernous luggage depot, where they’re either sent up chutes to the carousel at baggage claim or, for those on long layovers, land in a holding area until they’re ready to reenter the system. And while it might seem logical to assume your bag is most at risk in a tight transfer, more leisurely layovers have a downside too, since luggage can be left in the open in intense heat or in the rain. Don’t check your bags too far in advance, cautions Don Harris, senior director of ground operations for Southwest Airlines, which carries more luggage per person than its rivals due to its generous two-bags-free policy. “If bags are coming in for a flight that departs in three hours, we might have to set them aside. It could become a case of out of sight, out of mind.”

Judging from complaints received by Conde Nast Traveler’s Ombudsman, bags can be subjected to all manner of abuse. One flier reported that when he retrieved his “indestructible” suitcase from the carousel, it was soaked in oil and had been punctured, with two large holes clear through the bag. “It looked like it had been impaled on a forklift,” he said.

Baggage Blues Unresponsive airlines, inadequate compensation, and an unanticipated gate check are behind the recent baggage nightmares that readers have shared with us.

**DESIGNER DRESS DISASTER**
*Passengers:* Elizabeth and Lee Clegg.
*Airlines:* US Airways, Air Portugal.
**Incident:** The Cleggs went to Europe for a 22-day trip that ended with a wedding in Ireland. Mrs. Clegg planned to wear a Bob Mackie outfit, but it was stolen from her checked bag, perhaps during a transfer in Lisbon. The dress was never found. **Value of lost items:** An outfit with immeasurable sentimental value that retailed for $680.
**Resolution:** The Cleggs received $200 from each airline; their insurance paid the remaining $280. **Lesson:** A dress is a dress to airlines, so try not to check items of great sentimental value.

**MISSING MEDS**
*Passenger:* Keith Zook.
*Airlines:* Kenya Airways.
**Incident:** A bag with expensive hiking gear and medicine for Zook’s daughter was lost en route from Kilimanjaro to Entebbe. The bag never turned up. **Value of lost items:** $4,000.
**Resolution:** Zook sent several e-mails to the airline but received no reply; for months before his claim completely disappeared from the system, the online status read, “Tracing continues. Check back later.”
**Lesson:** Never check medicine or other items that cannot easily be replaced.

**MACBOOK SNITCH**
*Passenger:* Nathaniel F. Queen, Jr.
*Airlines:* British Airways.
**Incident:** Queen’s new MacBook was stolen from his bag when he was forced to gate-check his regulation-size carry-on. Queen had used the bag on BA before, but all bins were full on this busy holiday season flight. The laptop was never found. **Value of lost item:** $1,200.
**Resolution:** For three weeks, BA told Queen that they were actively pursuing his lost computer but then sent a letter claiming no responsibility for his loss. **Lesson:** Granted, the forced gate-check was unexpected, but never check items of value.

**TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE**
*Passenger:* Margaret Gruen and family.
*Airlines:* LAN.
**Incident:** The Gruens lost two bags flying from LAX to Santiago. Their luggage was never returned. **Value of lost items:** Clothing and luggage worth $8,898.
**Resolution:** Although the Gruens filed complaints with the DOT and LAN, and had proof of the value of their bags, they received only $3,532 in compensation. They also had to spend their first day in Santiago shopping for clothing. **Lesson:** There is a limit to what airlines are required to reimburse—about $1,750 on international flights. Check bags worth more than that at your own risk.

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CLAIRE C. BROWN
BAGS PACKED, READY TO GO
The latest in baggage-handling technology—from handheld scanners to luggage tags embedded with radio chips—promises a future of shorter lines and, of course, fewer lost bags. Here's what is coming soon to your typical big-hub airport.

1 AT CHECK-IN Major airlines may soon let you print your tag at home and stuff it into a plastic sleeve they provide. Self-service machines at the airport will scan, weigh, and assess fees in 30 seconds and send a receipt to your PDA, allowing you to skip the lines at the counter even if you are checking bags. You may also be able to drop off your bag before you enter the terminal—at a hotel or rental car location. Airports are laying the groundwork for radio tracking that will use tags embedded with chips to signal where luggage is at every step. Airlines are also finding uses for the latest technology: Qantas's frequent fliers can use "Q tags," permanent electronic tags that automatically synchronize with passengers' boarding passes.

2 BAGGAGE BELTWAY
State-of-the-art systems can zip more than 6,000 bags an hour along 20 to 30 miles of conveyor belts traveling up to 20 miles per hour.

3 EXPLOSIVE DETECTION SCREENING

4 TRAFFIC JAMS
An errant strap or handle can gum up the works; susceptible areas are constantly monitored, and mechanics are on alert to unclog the system before it backs up.

5 SECONDARY SCREENING
Suspicious bags are examined by machine and/or hand.

6 SORTING AREA
Bags are sorted at gate areas and placed on carts or in containers assigned to specific flights. Handheld scanners and wireless tablets trace a bag's progress at each stage of the journey, alerting handlers to missing bags and reducing the odds that they'll be loaded onto the wrong plane.

7 TRANSIT BAGS
Brightly colored tags allow transfer bags to stand out, but new technology should ensure "hot bags" make tight connections. Handlers scan bags as they are taken off planes, while tablets update drivers of delays and gate changes. Alliances like Star and SkyTeam are working on standardized IT systems to ease connections among partner airlines.

8 ARRIVAL
With better technology, more airlines may join Alaska Airlines in offering a 20-minute guarantee. If a bag misses its flight, the details will be sent to the flier's destination and entered into the industry-wide World Tracer database. The system provides continuous updates and real-time tracking so fliers can follow a bag much like a parcel sent via FedEx.
wrote. One reader who flew to Paris recalled that when she collected her luggage at Charles de Gaulle Airport, “every article inside was soaking wet” and colors had run and destroyed nearly $1,000 worth of recent purchases. (The problem had begun when the bags were left beside the plane during loading in a heavy downpour.) She spent several days in a fruitless attempt to get the airline’s Paris office to reimburse her. “My entire trip was spoiled,” she said, with her sole souvenir a bag of smelly and discolored togs.

The industry responds that such anecdotal tales, while colorful, don’t fairly represent the progress it has made in getting bags to their destination on time and intact. “The airlines had their best-ever year for baggage handling” in 2011, says Francesco Volante, CEO of airline data provider SITA, which issues annual worldwide baggage reports. He points out that the rate of mishandled bags has cut in half worldwide in the last five years.

**LOST IN TRANSLATION**

Compared with those in the United States, the baggage-handling records of some of the world’s largest foreign airports and carriers can appear dismal. About five years ago, the airline trade group IATA became concerned that the rate of mishandled bags was rising faster than the increase in passengers, and it initiated a series of audits by teams of baggage experts who would swoop in and suggest fixes. At sprawling Charles de Gaulle, for example, transferring bags is a daunting task—the airport requires fully 62 miles of track to carry the luggage of the more than 165,000 flyers who pass through the airport each day. Among the chronic problems: Bags were arriving at the plane too close to flight time, and some were inexplicably being flagged as “unknown” by the automated handling system, which spit them out for manual reading—causing more delays. In the two years since IATA’s intervention, the airport has reduced its lost-bag rate by 40 percent.

In Athens, a large number of bags were missing connecting flights. One problem was that those on a tight schedule didn’t stand out from the pack; another was that luggage was backing up on the conveyor belts, causing delays. The solution to these snafus was surprisingly low-tech: Airlines simply started using different colored tags for the high-priority bags, and the airport painted dots and stripes on the belts to show where bags should be placed for better spacing.

**Know Your Rights** in both the United States and abroad, there are regulations concerning checked baggage that all airlines must follow. Be sure you understand your rights so you get what you deserve in the event of delayed, damaged, or lost luggage.

**Compensation**

If an airline loses or damages your bag and you file a claim in the United States, the Department of Transportation requires that the airline compensate you for the value of the bag and its contents, up to a maximum of $3,300. If you file a claim overseas, the Montreal Convention regulations apply; these stipulate that airlines provide up to $1,750 in compensation, depending on the exchange rate. Proving the value of a bag and its contents without receipts is difficult. Alexander Anolik, a travel attorney and baggage liability expert, encourages travelers not to be discouraged. “Even without a receipt, if your dispute ends up in court, a judge will look at your claim, and if it seems legitimate, you will likely get your money.”

If you don’t want to go to court, it can be hard to get anything besides travel vouchers. “They will stall until you forget about it,” Anolik says. He encourages passengers to be firm and to include pictures of missing items with claims. Secondary evidence of a purchase is often effective.

**Delays**

“The United States has few explicit consumer protections for baggage delays,” Anolik says. “Airlines make their own regulations and are required to post them online.” However, the DOT does require airlines to provide victims of delayed baggage with a stipend to buy items like clothing, toiletries, and medicines. How carriers choose to pay this stipend is largely up to them. Delta, for example, provides $50 a day for up to 5 days, while airlines such as American reimburse passengers following the presentation of receipts for authorized “reasonable expenses.” At what point a delayed bag is considered “lost” is not regulated by the DOT, but for overseas travel it is 21 days after landing.

**Best and Worst**

According to a February 2012 DOT report, the airline with the fewest mishandled-baggage complaints was Virgin America (with 0.7 complaints for every 1,000 passengers), followed by AirTran, JetBlue, US Airways, and Delta. At the other end of the spectrum, America Eagle had the most complaints (5.69 per 1,000 passengers), followed by ExpressJet, Skywest, Mesa, and United.

**Protect Your Belongings**

If you’re checking possessions valued in excess of an airline’s standard compensation, ask to purchase additional coverage at check-in. Anolik says, “Some but not all airlines offer this insurance, so it’s worth requesting if you’re checking high-priced items. United sells insurance at the one-way rate of $1 per $100 of coverage, up to $5,000. Typical travel insurance plans also include compensation, but beware of the exclusions. Be sure to report any lost, damaged, or pilfered items immediately (United requires passengers to report within four hours of landing), and file a written claim as soon as possible (some airlines require the claim be filed in as few as 21 days). Otherwise, you may not be due any compensation, regardless of your loss.”

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**JULY 2012 THE INFORMER**

**BIN BATTLES**

**ESTIMATED ADDITIONAL PIECES OF LUGGAGE THAT TRAVELERS WILL CARRY ON THIS YEAR TO AVOID CHECKED BAGGAGE FEES:**

60 million.

**AIRLINES PLANNING TO EXPAND THE SIZE OF CABIN BINS ON NEW PLANES:**

American, Delta, United, US Airways.
Paul Behan, head of IATA’s Passenger Experience program and a former manager at Heathrow, says the industry’s rate of lost bags improved noticeably during the first few years of the project. The volcanic ash cloud in 2010, though, was a setback, sending hundreds of thousands of bags to the lost and found in the mass confusion. “It is such a fine-tuned business that any unforeseen issue can dramatically affect it,” he says.

But it’s what goes wrong day to day that is under the most scrutiny, says Behan, because these are the problems that can be solved. “It could be something as basic as a tag getting wet and becoming unreadable,” he says. Or a tag might be damaged or lost, so the bag enters that netherworld of the permanently orphaned. “That’s one of the worst things—we know the bag is out there somewhere, but we can’t connect it back to the passenger,” Behan says. “I can’t say it enough: You should always put your name and contact information on the inside and the outside of the bag.”

Even the most advanced systems aren’t foolproof, though. Despite Delta’s improved showing, it still mishandled nearly 700 bags every day last year.

PEOPLE PROBLEMS
“Airlines don’t have total control of the baggage chain,” says Michael Boyd, of Colorado’s Boyd Group International, an aviation analyst who got his start years ago as a ramp agent in Dallas. Most airlines farm out the baggage handling to subcontractors, except at their busiest hubs. And the conditions at these jobs can be trying. “Some workers are making $8 to $10 an hour, and it’s grueling work, with a high rate of injury.” High turnover is directly related to bag mishaps. At one major airport, IATA found that temp workers were making an inordinate number of mistakes by mixing up airport codes. “You either have to do a better job of training—which isn’t going to happen in today’s economic climate—or you have to make up for it with better technology,” says Boyd (see “Bags Packed, Ready to Go” page 42).

Outsourcing has other risks. In 2009, several bag handlers working for Huntleigh, the contractor providing Delta’s baggage handling in St. Louis, were arrested and charged with stealing 900 items from passengers’ bags during a one-year period—laptops, iPods, and even cologne and cigarettes.

Statistics on baggage theft are hard to come by; the airlines don’t compile them, and if a journey involves multiple legs, it can be difficult to prove where the theft occurred. The TSA, which collects information on lost property, reports that between 7,000 and 14,000 claims are filed with the agency each year. Just how many of those missing items were stolen by screeners, versus baggage handlers, will never be known. Unless, of course, a crime ring is busted—which has happened with increased frequency in recent years. At least 32 instances of luggage-theft operations—including both baggage handlers and TSA screeners—have been exposed at U.S. airports in the last three years. Some security experts have called for more surveillance cameras in baggage areas, but IATA’s Paul Behan says that would be impractical: “A good part of the baggage process is in a part of the airport that is physically quite complex and, in many areas, dark.” He adds: “Your bag may be traveling for several miles” in this maze, and watching it at every step along the way just isn’t feasible.

And the cameras would probably be useless anyway, according to Scott Mueller, who has spent more than 25 years running baggage operations for U.S. airlines. “Many of those cameras concealed in ceilings at airports do not work or are not monitored on a daily basis,” he says.

Baggage theft “happens far more than the traveling public knows,” Mueller says. If anything, it has gotten worse in the past decade. The arrival of the TSA, which should have heightened security throughout airports, actually created an opportunity for petty thievery, he says. “When you have the TSA and local law enforcement watching for terrorists, this takes the priority off of thieves stealing luggage from the carousel.” And in a cost-saving move, carriers have stopped checking fliers’ bag claim checks at the airport exit, meaning “anyone can walk in off the street and walk out with a bag.”

Mueller confirms that airlines see the TSA as a big part of the problem: “After the TSA took over back in 2001, my pilferage claims quadrupled,” he says. Before the TSA came into the game, passengers’ bags could be opened by another party only if a law-enforcement officer was present. His counterparts at other carriers have reported similar findings, he says, and in a 2002 meeting in Washington, D.C., they demanded that the TSA crack down on rogue employees. It is not clear what the agency has done since that time to solve the problem, but it has agreed to investigate and settle any claims that arise.

But crime rings involving bag handlers are also a serious problem. In one of the more brazen cases, a ring led by a baggage handler for American Airlines at JFK engaged in everything from drug smuggling to stealing luxury items like watches, laptops, and expensive clothing. During the trial, one of the handlers testified that “everybody did it,” according to one of the jurors. Even when a crime operation is suspected—Mueller recalls times when a spike in baggage complaints at a certain location set off an investigation—it’s still a struggle to get the local police involved. “Their priorities may not be the same as mine,” he says. Mueller, who has drawn on some of his experiences for his book, The Empty Carousel, says that his advice to fliers is simple: “Don’t pack anything you cannot afford to lose.”
**Fit for Flight**

Which bags make the smartest and sturdiest travel companions? We convene a panel of experts to find out.

By Monica Kim

**EXPERTS**

Elliot Saks, owner of Manhattan's Lexington Luggage, the repair shop of choice for guests at The Carlyle, The Pierre, and the St. Regis hotels; Kathy Engasser, a 22-year veteran American Airlines flight attendant; and Michael Smith, a Southwest Airlines ramp agent at Dallas's Love Field airport.

1. **SHAPE**

According to Smith, a baggage handler's worst nightmare is cases that are hard-sided in the back and soft in the front, which are more likely to be crushed in storage. The ideal bag to check, according to several airport workers, is a trunk. It's tough and, thanks to its size and shape, perfect for stacking in a cargo hold. A suitcase with a sleek frame and hard-boxed shape is less likely to be damaged during loading.

2. **MATERIAL**

A hard shell offers good protection, but a cracked or dented case is beyond repair. "Plastic cracks too easily," says Saks. Polycarbonate is lightweight and less likely to crack but is more susceptible to dents. Flight attendants, like Engasser, aren't fond of hard-case carry-ons, which are difficult to store in overhead bins. Soft nylon bags are lighter and can often squeeze into tight spaces. They can be torn but are easy to repair (common damage includes broken zippers and impacted corners, says Saks). Ballistic nylon is denser and harder than nylon, which gives it a slight advantage on the belt.

3. **HANDLES**

A broken handle is one of the most frequently seen repair jobs at Lexington Luggage. "Airline workers will throw the bags by the handle and crack them," says Saks. A two-bar construction is sturdier than the one-bar handle. Be sure to examine the bag's interior: A good handle system will use minimal space and give you more packing room.

4. **ZIPPERS**

Ramp workers often find zipper pulls on the floor. "Bags are being made more cheaply, and the zippers don't hold up," says Smith. Metal zippers look sleek but can snag easily. All zippers leave bags vulnerable to water damage when they're left out in the rain on a coverless trolley. A hard case with a latch system is dust-proof, watertight, and more resistant to humidity and fluctuating temperatures.

5. **WHEELS**

Flight attendants love four-wheeled suitcases that glide. "They can go down the aisle sideways," says Engasser, making it easier for passengers to board and deplane. But two wheels are best for larger cases. Says Saks, "They're easier to maneuver, plus there's less to break."

6. **STORAGE**

Fragile items do best in a hard case—there's no fear of crushing—and clothes might see less creasing, according to Saks. Soft cases offer expandability, but baggage handlers urge caution: "We'd rather load two 40-pound bags than one big one," says Smith. "One of our major problems is people overstuffing their bags. The bag will break when the zippers fail."

7. **COST**

"Once you hit a certain price, you're not necessarily going to get something much better no matter what you pay," says Saks, who adds that $150 is the most you should pay for durable well-sized suitcases, which are often on sale. A $25 bag is certainly of lower quality but will do the trick for three to four years for the average traveler, he says. "When it breaks, you buy a new one at little cost."

For a roundup of our favorite new wheeled luggage, visit condenasttraveler.com.