

Perfect Packing Tips for Better Business Trips

by Steve Multer | Industry Best Practices

Even the most ambitious and organized jet setters rarely enjoy packing for a trip. For the business traveler, that lack of enthusiasm becomes a monthly if not weekly grind, and presents unique challenges. Warm weather to cold, workout clothes in the morning, suit for the conference, team building streetwear that night. Shoes for the gym, shoes for the awards dinner, shoes for the weekend hike.

I speak from experience; for 25 years I've trekked from across country and between continents, often back-to-back, and occasionally wedged in with a family holiday or specialty trek. Travel is wonderful, but not always glamorous, or easy to fit in a 22-inch roll-aboard.

Knowing how to pack – and more important, how not to pack – can make the difference between an extra glass of champagne at the neighborhood bistro or a lost afternoon at the baggage carousel. As Rick Steves, the popular PBS travel guide and writer, suggests, “On your trip you’ll meet two kinds of travelers: those who pack light and those who wish they had.”

Pack the Same For a Week as You Do For a Month

I pack the same carry-on luggage for four days or four weeks. Honestly. That requires strategizing wardrobe for a short sales training in San Francisco or long event in Copenhagen exactly the same way. It's smart travel, reduces stress, minimizes risk, and maximizes efficiency. You can do it too, I promise. But let's start with why you should.



Never Check Luggage (Unless You Have No Choice)

Checked luggage is costly, time-consuming, and frequently misdirected, lost, or stolen. Cancelled flights, distracted agents, overworked baggage handlers, customer service lines stretching down the concourse, all increase the odds your bag may not meet you at your destination. An AirTag will tell you where your bag went astray, but won't help you avoid that error. As demand for flights continues to increase, and staffing suffers, we read amore and more checked baggage nightmares.

Unless you're an elite traveler, airlines charge \$35-100 each to check a bag, an unnecessary and offensive expense. And once you turn your bag over to the carrier, it's often left in the rain or heat, crushed or ripped by handlers, frozen in a plane's undercarriage, broken into, or left for hours on exposed baggage carts.

If your bag makes the flight, you'll waste time at the baggage carousel while travelers with carry-ons head for their ride shares or public transportation. If your bag is lost, that wait gets longer and your stress mounts as you wonder what happened. Then you'll waste more time filing a report and figuring out your next move.

Losing your checked luggage is hard enough under the best of circumstances. Imagine your stress if it occurs on the way to an important meeting or expensive vacation. When will you have time to shop? Are you even near a mall or store to replace the items needed for a successful trip? How much will you have to spend to get by?

Most carriers, credit cards, and FAA passenger rights rules offer protection for delayed or lost luggage, but filing a claim takes time and patience, both scarce when the cruise is set to depart or the conference is about to kick off. Who wants to waste time shopping for toiletries and clothes as your vacation days tick past or your client is waiting? In the end, you may get a little money back, but you'll never recover that time and stress.

And once the airline finds your bag – if they find it – you'll have to return to the airport to pick it up. Or stay available in one spot waiting for their timed delivery that rarely honors the promised time.

Are all these risks, costs, concerns, and hassles worth it for a few extra shoes?

The Joys of Carry-On

While your fellow tourists wait hours to rebook a cancelled or delayed plane, hoping their bags will make the transfer, you'll be on your mobile with an airline representative, zipping between gates and terminals to catch the next available ride with your roll-aboard safely at your side.

Facing a short connection, lengthy delay, cancellation, or other travel disruption? No worries when you carry on rather than check. Last-minute gate changes, itinerary shifts, or unplanned hotel stays are so much easier when your belongings are right there with you. Late arrival at the airport is less concerning when you don't have to check luggage or worry about the 60-minute pre-board cutoff. And if you need an extra jacket, toothbrush, or medications in the terminal, mid-flight, or the moment you land, your bag is always in reach.

If you don't have airline status and are among the last to board, you may still be required to gate check your roll-aboard. But it's taken directly from the jet bridge to the belly of the plane. And when you land, those gate checked bags are often brought directly back to the jet bridge without wasting time at the baggage belts.

Everything Goes With Everything

Now that you've embraced carry-on only travel, how do you make space for corporate plus personal clothes, shoes, even equipment and a tripod, all in a 22" wheelie and personal bag beneath the seat in front of you. The tricks are matching, stacking, rolling, practicality, and austerity.

Start with inter-matching items where each piece goes with every other in flexible outfits. Use a black, navy, or cream foundation then add bits of color or personality. Go with solid or simple patterns in pants, shirts, sweaters, and jackets that mix and match and scale to any occasion.

Lay out options before putting anything in your suitcase. Assemble an outfit, then choose other items that easily swap in for variety and occasion. Anything that doesn't work with everything else stays at home. Specialty items that will only be worn once or with one look have no room in your 22" bag. Snap a photo of each ensemble, then if you forget which shirt goes with which pair of pants, just check your phone. The more you travel, the simpler this process becomes. And the more your wardrobe will evolve to make carrying on even easier.

Think stack-ability, warm weather to cold and back again. It might be 90 degrees in Rome but freezing on your flight. Or air conditioned in the conference hall but muggy at the team dinner. Layers that work together can be added or subtracted in response to the moment. When colors and patterns are complimentary but also look good alone, you can shed or stack at will.

Choose breathable, wrinkle-free, or “intelligent” fabrics requiring low maintenance and repeat wear before washing. A garment you can use three times takes up a third of the suitcase space as a garment that requires dry cleaning after one use.

Roll and Stuff

Rolling is a more effective use of space than folding and lighter fabrics rarely wrinkle. Underwear, socks, t-shirts, jeans, workout wear, sweaters, etc. can be rolled and wedged around items that require folding like blazers, dress shirts, and creased pants.

Stuff your shoes with socks and underwear rolled in clean plastic bags, and place those at the bottom of your bag along with office items like a tripod, technical equipment, or supplies. Folded pants or skirts go next followed by folded shirts or blouses. Rolled items fill the gaps around folded items and accessories slip into crevices. Blazers are folded inside out and placed on top with a toiletry case containing TSA-approved liquids, dry supplies, makeup, etc. Once you get the hang of it, these space restrictions quickly go from frustrating to liberating.

Your Packing List

As a male speaking at a trade show then climbing bell towers in Europe, here’s a sample list of what goes into my well-planned wardrobe and 22” roll-aboard. On the plane I wear:

- 1 pair of jeans
- 1 pair of underwear and socks
- 1 button-down shirt
- 1 merino wool sweater (good for business or layering for flights and cool evenings)
- 1 navy dress belt (works for all outfits)
- 1 pair of casual sneakers (doubles for gym workouts)
- 1 season-appropriate coat (worn on the plane: heavy for winter, rain/wind-proof for other months)

And in my luggage you’ll find:

- 1 pair of navy pants
- 1 pair of khaki pants
- 1 pair of khaki shorts (doubles as a swim suit)
- 1 navy patterned blazer (goes equally well with pants or jeans)
- 1 cream colored blazer (goes equally well with pants or jeans)
- 1 pair of comfortable rubber-soled dress shoes
- 2 button-down dress shirts, white and white with blue pattern
- 2 pocket squares (creates variety for blazers)
- 1 pair of yoga pants (thin, easy to roll, great for workout or sleeping)
- 2 thin t-shirts (good for base layer, hotel room, or pool)
- 4 more pairs of socks and underwear (higher quality equals less weight and washing)
- 1 high quality travel umbrella (I trust Davek in all weather conditions)

Then I add three wonderful, small, easily packable travel products to maximize use of fewer clothing items. The [Scrubba Mini portable wash bag](#) combines with packets of [SinkSuds laundry detergent](#) and a [portable clothes line](#) so I always have fresh underwear, socks, and shirts at the ready.

Bottom Line

Of course there are times you'll have to pack and check a larger suitcase. That Baltic cruise may offer a formal Captain's night or costume party. But ask yourself if you'll really need that cowboy hat. It's not a question of if you'll use it but how often, and is it worth carrying that throughout your journey – or checking a bag – just to have it along for the ride? All resorts sell sunscreen. And if you need a hair dryer, you can always buy one for less than the cost of a checked suitcase.

Rick Steves also says, "I've never met anyone in my travels who said, 'Wow, I sure wish I'd packed more!'" And if you simply have to have that fantastic leather jacket you found in Florence, you can always check a bag one the flight home when the stakes aren't quite as high.

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