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How to Pack for a Two-Week Trip With One Small Suitcase

Expert advice from professional travelers on what to bring and where to put it.

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Illustration by Ilya Milstein. Animation by Jonathan Eden

Ask any frequent traveler their rules for a trip, and you'll likely hear the same advice: Never check a bag. Carry-on only. But fitting everything you need, especially for a longer stay, into one small suitcase and one handbag or backpack requires some ingenuity: The maximum dimensions for luggage going into most overhead bins are 22 by 14 by 9 inches, and though the majority of domestic flights don't have — or at least don't enforce — weight limits, some international and trans-Pacific flights do (certain Delta flights to Asia, for example, have a limit of 22 pounds, while Hawaiian Airlines's maximum is 25 pounds). The payoff, if you do get it right: quicker airport experiences that don't involve the risk of lost luggage and, upon arrival, fewer decisions about what to wear. Here, tried-and-true tips from a few experts.



Ilya Milstein

Choose the Right Luggage

Though some regular travelers swear by soft bags — the New York-based stylist Ian Bradley, 38, favors the capacious extra-large [L.L. Bean Adventure](#) duffel — most are committed to hard, rolling suitcases. “They’re lighter,” says Hitha Palepu, 39, a New York-based author and entrepreneur who wrote what might be the definitive book on the topic, 2017’s “[How to Pack: Travel Smart for Any Trip](#).” The polycarbonate material used for hard-shell suitcases, she explains, “is about half the weight of the rugged nylon used in soft suitcases.” These are the rolling bags our experts recommended:

- A roller from the German brand Rimowa is often considered the gold standard, and many people we spoke with vouched for the products' durability. "They're more expensive but a worthy investment," says the New York-based artist Laila Gohar, 35. (Like the Antwerp-based architect Vincent Van Duysen, 62, she flies with the aluminum [Cabin model](#).) For those concerned about weight limits: The brand's lightest full-size carry-on is the [Essential Lite Cabin](#), at 4.9 pounds.
- Palepu is a fan of the hard-shell suitcases by the American brand [Béis](#), which are considerably less expensive than Rimowa's. "They have the best in-suitcase compression, a really solid construction and a padded handle for dragging through the airport," she says.
- The New York-based chef and author [Andy Baraghani](#), 34, who completed a multicity book tour last year, likes the [Away Bigger Carry-On: Aluminum Edition](#) because it feels indestructible, he says. "And its glossy finish stands out from the rest of the luggage at the airport." (Just be careful to [check](#) that its above-average dimensions are compatible with your airline's carry-on size limit.)

Edit Your Packing List Ruthlessly

"You can't have a 'just in case' mentality," says Gohar. "If something isn't absolutely essential, it doesn't make the cut." Below, some strategies for identifying the bare necessities.

Clothes

- "Look for clothes with viscose or Lyocell blends, or silk and wool — those fabrics are more wrinkle-resistant than most," Palepu advises. She prioritizes "pants that can be worn multiple times before they become unattractively baggy, patterned shirtdresses (prints help disguise wrinkles) and matching sets that can be mixed and matched with other pieces." But her real workhorses are [men's non-iron](#)

[button-down shirts](#) from Uniqlo — they rarely get creased and work with a wide range of outfits.

- Suits are also a great option because of their versatility. “They can be dressed up with heels for a night out, or down during the day with a tank top and sneakers,” says the London-based creative director Alex Eagle, 40. The gallerist Mariane Ibrahim, who lives between Mexico City, Paris and Chicago, has a similar philosophy: “My bag always includes an evening and a day suit, plus a few staple items in black and white (jeans, T-shirts).”
- For Gohar, the key is building an adaptable uniform. “If you have a solid base look, you can get away with bringing one coat, one or two pairs of pants and simply changing your shirt daily,” she says. “And I’m not afraid to wash my clothes, or my kid’s, in the hotel sink. I just ask housekeeping for an unscented soap and then hang them to dry.”

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Toiletries

It’s easiest to buy travel sizes of your favorite products and refill them from larger bottles at home, which eliminates excessive waste, says Palepu (alternatively, small empty containers can be found at stores like Muji). She also suggests streamlining by finding multipurpose products: “My [EltaMD tinted sunscreen](#) is hydrating enough to be my daytime moisturizer; I use my [Le Prunier](#) oil as a hydrating serum and a finishing oil and to slick back flyaway hair.”

Flight Essentials

Palepu likes to pack a simple cross-body bag with the items she'll need between takeoff and landing (lip balm, sanitizing wipes, an e-reader), carrying it on board inside a bigger tote, then keeping it on her lap once she's seated. The hotelier Philomena Schurer-Merckoll, 40, who splits her time between Marrakech and London, recommends the British brand Métier's [Perriand Weekend bag](#) in lieu of a handbag; its hidden exterior pockets make things easy to reach on the plane, she says, and "the clip-in clutch means I have an evening bag for my trip." And the fashion designer Phillip Lim, 51, recommends bringing a Bluetooth transmitter from Airfly, which allows wireless headphones to connect to the in-flight entertainment system.

Pack as if Every Inch Counts (Because It Does)

Work From Heavy to Light

As a general rule, Palepu packs the largest items first, to maximize space. She recommends rolling most — but not all — garments, to avoid wrinkles, and always packs [this very compact steamer](#) to remove the few creases that do inevitably occur (she also uses the device to steam her face after flights before applying a hydrating mask). Here's how she recommends filling a bag, from bottom to top:

- Begin by laying any bulky sweaters flat at the bottom of one half of your suitcase, with the sleeves and any extra fabric flowing over the sides.
- If you'll need a coat once you arrive, choose a versatile one and wear it on the plane. If you really need another piece of outerwear, make it a thin one and pack it with your bulky sweaters.
- Fold suit pants lengthwise to preserve the crease, then roll them. For packing suit jackets, Palepu endorses [this method](#), which involves folding the garment into a square along the seams. Lay these pieces on top of your sweaters.
- Roll any other pants as well as skirts, dresses, pajamas and workout clothes and pack these next.

- Fold shirts and tops along the seams, to cut down on wrinkles, and lay these on top of the rolled pieces.
- Fit underwear and socks in any remaining gaps.
- Once all your clothes are in your case, fold your sweater sleeves over the top of your other items.
- In the other half of your bag, arrange your shoes, stored in shoe bags, around the perimeter. (To save space, wear the bulkiest pair you plan to bring on the flight.)
- Pack any other accessories and your toiletries in the center of your shoes.

Consider Packing Cubes

Packing cubes, which are zippered pouches designed to compress clothing and save space, are especially useful for multistop trips, providing a more seamless way to pack and unpack quickly. Bradley likes those made by [Bagsmart](#) and also repurposes the dust bags that came with some of his accessories. “I put underwear, shoes and shirting in one and pants in another,” he says. Packing cubes are particularly helpful for young families, too, says Palepu: Her children each have a set in their favorite color, which means their clothes are easily distinguishable if they share a suitcase. Joeonna Bellardo-Samuels, 44, a senior director at New York’s Jack Shainman Gallery, says one of her secret pleasures is “snagging good hotel laundry bags” to use in place of cubes. “Each one is embellished with a gorgeous monogram that reminds me of my adventures.”

Ship Souvenirs Home

If you’re going on a shopping-focused trip, Palepu suggests packing a foldable duffel in your carry-on that you can fill and then either check in for the return flight or ship home en route to the airport. “Dirty laundry is the best padding for packing fragile items,” she says. Likewise, Eagle packs

an [L.L. Bean Boat & Tote](#) for return-trip overflow including gifts and her children's laundry (packing it separately means it's easier to throw in the wash once you're home). "The zip on the top makes it secure," she says. "So you can check it — if you really need to."