

22 Beginner Travel Tips



David Holmes, 2012-07-07

I'm traveling 40% of the time -- 100,000 miles so far this year. I am not a travel hacker, a sport which elevates (or devalues) travel to the level of a game, but I have come up with some tips that may be worth sharing for a beginner business traveler.



Who doesn't love Luggage?

My father traveled a lot, too. A mantra of his is "I lived out of 2 suitcases for three years in Europe and North Africa." That was before the days when suitcases even had wheels. Luggage has obviously come a long way since then, and you can spend whatever you like on it, but if you're in the market for something new, here are some tips to get you started without breaking the bank.

1. Discount chains like Ross and TJ Maxx have last year's luggage at about 40% of the cost of a typical retailer. I don't buy luggage anywhere else.
2. Get wheels that rotate in every direction – it significantly changes the mechanics of the movement, enabling you to push instead of pull.
3. If you can pull it off, get one of the high-tech business backpacks instead of a briefcase. With the back-pack you can tool around Paris or London on your own time and still have all your accessories with you and both hands free. May not work for all professions but is accepted in high tech.

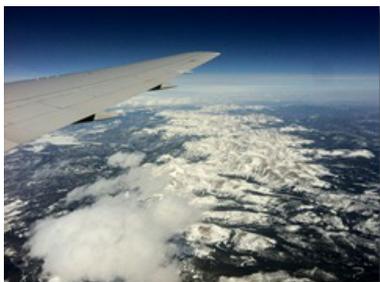
I like to check my luggage when I can. I spend a lot of time in airports and the last thing I want to do is drag a suitcase around with me. It seems like all carriers except Southwest are charging for bags now, which has the side-effect of encouraging more and more travelers to take large carry-ons. If you board last, you can easily find that all of the overhead storage compartments are full. Here are some tactics to avoid this situation.

4. For business travel, pay to check your bag, keep the receipt and expense it.
5. The United Mileage Plus program lets you check at least one bag.
6. Southwest Airlines lets you check two bags free.
7. If you are carrying on, get a seat in the back if the airline boards those seats first.
8. Gate-check your bag if they offer (usually for free).

I've done a five day business trip out of a carry-on size suitcase, it can be done. But it violates another tip of mine.

9. Always pack one extra day of clothes. You never know when you'll have to stay an extra day.

A simple approach to the Mileage Game



The Mileage Game can suck up as many hours as you want to put into it. Nearly every airline and hotel chain has a loyalty program, but they all have different conversion rates, reward schedules and special deals. If you're not a travel hacker and just want a straightforward approach, pick one or two airlines and stick with them. The airlines should meet these requirements:

10. The airline should be a big national carrier with lots of partnerships.
11. The carrier should use your local airport as hub, if possible.

Since I fly out of Denver, United Airlines is my carrier. Delta might have better partnerships (where miles can transfer) but United always seems more efficient, more on-time and has shorter lines. Most of my friends in Seattle use Alaska Airlines (a great company) which uses SeaTac Airport as their hub.

Reward Credit Cards.

12. Use a two-card strategy to separate business from personal expenses.

I use the awesome United Mileage Plus card for all business expenses. The card gets you some instant status such as priority boarding and a free bag check. Status is something that United seems to enjoy to parceling out, but that's only annoying when you're at the bottom of the status tier.

For personal expenses, I use the Southwest Rapid Rewards card. You get 50,000 points just for signing up, and Southwest makes it ridiculously easy to use points for travel. I can get a round-trip to Vegas or Phoenix for 6,000 points.

By using two cards I can manage my personal budget more easily by downloading the transactions from Southwest and not having to filter out the business expenses since those are on the United card.



Dress up and get home on time

People used to get all dressed up to travel. I still do, and here's why.

13. Dress Up. It seems every third flight I'll need something special – maybe a free bag check or upgrade or I'll have trouble in security or paperwork. Things are more likely to go your way if you are dressed professionally. At least a few times, the difference in service was seemed key to getting home or being stuck for a day.

14. Wear a business shirt with a pocket. The shirt pocket is a great place for your ticket, passport, and headphones as you travel through the airport and on to the plane or train.

15. Slip-on shoes are a necessity for the United States, until they relax this ridiculous shoes-off policy (which exists no-where else in the world that I've seen). I wish they made a ceramic belt that I wouldn't have to take off either, but the TSA people say I'd still have to take it off even if it had no metal in it.

16. Pack your sport coat instead of wearing it so you can stay cool if the plane isn't. Here's a [cool way](#) to pack a sport-coat into a small suitcase.



Mobile Apps for the Mobile

17. I absolutely love [Triplt](#) and the Triplt mobile app. It consolidates every detail of your entire trip and gives presents a "what's next" at the top, which it determined based on time. For example, after you get off the plane it will say "Next: Hertz Car Rental conf code XXXXXX".

18. I've been using Triplt Pro for three months. This morning I woke up in my hotel and Triplt Pro sent me a text saying my flight was on time. I never have to check what gate I'm supposed to be going to because Triplt Pro will text me the gate number. It will even text me the carousel number for my bags. It keeps me moving and informed. The Pro version also tracks all of your reward points (though it appears to store your passwords for these so keep that in mind). The Pro version is \$50 / year and it's supposed to pay for itself by noticing when you are eligible for a refund.

19. If you're using Concur for your expenses, the Concur mobile app is pretty neat. It has some Triplt-like functionality, but the best part is it allows you to fill out your entire expense report from your phone (using the camera to capture receipts). This is pretty handy since I like to do my expense report for the bus or train home.



Multi-Segment Flights

20. Travel hackers will tell you to book each segment separately to maximize the number of miles you get. I don't do this, though; it only works if you aren't checking bags.

21. Always plan for at least 90 minutes between flights – even United is late every now and then and I've missed just enough connections to make me paranoid.

22. For a connection to an international destination, leave at least three hours for the connection. Many times international flights only fly out at specific times of day, so if you miss your flight you're trapped for 20+ hours.

There you have it, beginner travel tips from a business-traveling former engineer. I'd love to hear more tips if anyone has them, so feel free to drop me a line or leave a comment.

See you on the road!

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