

Packing

Year's Gear in One Bag

Picture yourself on the eve of your first big solitary adventure, alone in your bedroom facing one small, brown suitcase fitted with wheels and a leash, small enough to fit under an aircraft seat.

That was me in September 1985, graduate of the school of matrimony from which, besides the arts of motherhood, I had learned to avoid changing flat tires and toting bags if a man were around to do it. About packing light I had learned nothing at all.

On my first solo trip to Italy a year earlier, traveling light meant cramming half my wardrobe into one large-size suitcase, a tote bag and a hand bag. Back then I smugly presumed the lot could easily be handled by one of those fold-up metal trolleys on wheels, which were state-of-the-art in those days. The baggage was strapped on with a bungee cord, and off you went pulling the cart and bags behind you. No problem.

I hadn't reckoned on having to haul a cart-full of teetering luggage up the fourscore and ten steps I encountered at Milan train station. But climbing ninety steps was nothing compared to hefting the whole kit and caboodle onto and off of water-buses in Venice. That was a travel treat I reserved for my 45th year of life, at the end of a 20-hour journey by plane, train and interconnecting bus. Which brings me to Venetian canals.

As you may know, picturesquely arching over each and every Venetian canal is a quaint footbridge with decorative railings and seven or eight steps up one side and down the other. But "picturesque" and "quaint" quickly acquire new





and much less pleasant meanings once you drag a luggage trolley across eight of those bridges between the water-bus stop and your hotel.

Having tried several unpacking and rearranging techniques on the previous three bridges, I faced bridge number four with grim determination and began a gingerly bumping ascent, counting as I went . . . one, bump . . . two, bump . . . three. It was at step six on the up side when the whole damn contraption fell to pieces, slithering raucously to the bottom step. Bags, bits of metal tubing and wheels skittered in all directions. The bungee cord, as if propelled from a sling shot, went zinging through the air to land at the feet of a quite astonished Italian. Thank heavens he wasn't killed.

Make It Light Please

Italy taught me rule number one. If you travel alone, take no more than you can comfortably carry with your own two arms, or on your back. I knew that my less than perfect body would need some coaxing to carry me through 18 countries and a year on the road. There simply wouldn't be the room or the strength for most of the paraphernalia usually considered essential to North American style femininity. I had only to persuade myself that I did not require cosmetics, hair-dryer, iron, high-heeled dancing shoes, umbrella, jewelry or, of all things to leave behind – a camera. It took plenty of self-imposed brainwashing (*Diane darling. Forget that curling iron; you are gorgeous even with straight hair*), but I finally managed to get 65 necessities packed into that one brown bag, a feat I still rank high among my lifelong list of accomplishments.

Shoes are my worst weakness. I could easily have filled my suitcase with shoes for every occasion, except for hiking boots. I had no trouble ruling them out because mountaineering and camping were not on my agenda. I agonized over which two pairs (one pair on my feet and one pair in the bag) would go with me before settling on light-weight, low-heeled shoes, okay for walking yet also appropriate for wearing to a restaurant or evening concert.

All went well with this plan until, some months into my journey, I reached Ayers Rock, that awe-inspiring monolith located in the center of the Australian outback. If you visit Ayers Rock and do not climb it, you cannot write your name in the book placed at the top and cannot rightly claim you have done Ayers Rock. Also, while the more intrepid members of your day-tour group scale the heights, you must wait for them, in disgrace, at the

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park

Formerly known as "Ayer's Rock," Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is one of Australia's most famous landmarks. Some years ago, Australia's aboriginal people won back ownership of the site, which they hold sacred.

Tourists are now asked to refrain from walking on the rock, although this has not yet brought a halt to the practice.

Authorities are reported to be working on a code of conduct for visitors to this and other aboriginal sites around the country.

base of the rock, attended by swarms of Australian flies, which are noted in travel circles as the peskiest flies on earth. They love to fasten to your tear ducts. Wincing only invites them to scurry across your eyelids. Flicking, blowing, or slapping stirs them into short circular flight only to alight an instant later. Soon they have you dancing and flapping like a madman. I know this first-hand because, in my leather-soled flats, I managed only a few slip-sliding meters up the sheer rock face before retreating to the bottom. Actually, it's quite a comical sight, but only if someone else is the target. I was nearly foaming at the mouth by the time the other dauntless day-trippers climbed back down the rock flushed with achievement.

As they say, the best laid plans go astray, but most of the time my packing plan worked without a hitch. Hitching is never in my plans, as in hitchhiking, that is. Unthinkable. Yet six months down the road, in Zimbabwe, I met Peter (so will you, later on) at Victoria Falls and suddenly there seemed nothing I'd rather do than go with him hitchhiking and camping-out in Botswana's Okavango Delta wildlife reserve.

Carrying a backpack would have suited the occasion better than pulling a little brown suitcase on wheels down the highway. But Peter was patient, and the local folk were amused. Quite a few had fun making jokes about the woman walking a very funny looking dog. I didn't mind; Pooch (as I fondly nicknamed the bag) doubled as conversational icebreaker. Lingering in my mind's eye still, those laughing faces bring a smile to my face even now as I write and the memories come flooding back.

I covered a lot of territory with Pooch as my constant companion. More than just a survival kit, Pooch became a significant symbol of the fulfillment of my travel dream, and I actually suffered guilty pangs when I recently replaced the bag with a new improved version. The new one has a retractable handle instead of a leash, and its shape is more rectangular, a design that no longer summons up doggy images. It should be easier to manage and more functional. But I know it won't be more fun.

After all, you know what they say about walking the dog – it's a great way to meet people.

[*See Going Solo Tips*](#)

Packing Tips