

Anatomy of a Cruise Carry-On

By Erica Silverstein, Senior Editor

What you pack in your carry-on counts. We're talking about the bag -- be it backpack, shoulder bag or rollaboard -- that you carry onto your cruise ship after you've left the rest of the luggage with pier side porters.

As you may not have access to your cabin for a few hours after boarding and your luggage can show up anytime throughout the afternoon and evening (you try loading and delivering thousands of bags onto a ship by sail away), the items in your carry-on might be the only possessions you have on your first day onboard. And in case of a lost luggage disaster, they may be the only things from home you'll have all week.

If you can't live without something, for a few hours or a few days, pack it in your carry-on and keep it with you. Smart packing will lead to a more pleasant and less stressful cruise experience.

To get your cruise started off on the right foot, we present to you a photographic dissection of the perfect cruise carry-on. Use this anatomy lesson to help you pack for an upcoming trip, and you'll be prepared to sail through many common start-of-cruise snafus.

Passport, ID and cruise documents. You will need to present all your official documents before you're allowed to board the ship. Fail to provide the correct ID and forms, and you will not be allowed onboard. If you're not sure what documentation you need, check with your cruise line, then doublecheck their answers on a government Web site (like travel.state.gov).

2. Credit card and cash. It's unlikely that you'd pack your wallet in your checked luggage, but stranger things have happened. You'll need to present your credit card to set up your onboard spending account, and you'll want a few small bills ready to tip the porters who will be schlepping the rest of your bags.

3. Medications. If you have prescriptions you need to take daily, do not let them out of your sight. Bags can arrive late to your cabin or get lost, and ship medical centers are not full-fledged pharmacies that can easily restock your pill supply. Don't risk a medical emergency.

4. Swimwear and workout gear. Once onboard, you might not have access to your cabin for an hour or two, and your luggage might not arrive until dinnertime. If you think you're going to want to go for a dip or a run on day one, pack a swimsuit, flip flops, workout-wear and sneakers in your carry-on. Why waste a day of your vacation?

5. Camera, cell phone, laptop and other valuables. First off, don't pack anything in your checked luggage that you're worried someone will steal. (Then again, do you really need your expensive jewelry on a cruise?) Second, you may want your camera and cell phone ready for sail away photo ops and final chats and texts while you can still access land-based (read: free) networks.

6. Change of clothes. Remember, your luggage can take hours to arrive in your cabin -- sometimes arriving after you're scheduled to be at dinner. It's better to carry on an extra outfit for the first day -- either so you can change from your winter-in-New-England clothes to cruising-from-Florida attire or so you'll have a fresh look to wear to dinner onboard. (Thankfully, the first evening's dress code is typically casual for just this reason.) Also, should your luggage get lost (either by your airline or the cruise line), having a change of clothes, socks and underwear will help you get through the next few days.

7. Kid stuff. Definitely carry on anything your kids can't live without should bags go missing. Perhaps that's baby's bottle, Junior's favorite teddy bear or a portable video game system. Plus, you'll want to bring extra diapers, pull-ups, wipes and kiddy snacks with you...just in case.

8. Toiletries. Will you cry if you can't have your favorite shampoo, or will your eyes burn without a specific contact lens solution? Then take them with you. You can buy basic toiletries at inflated prices in onboard stores, but if you're picky about brands, don't leave things to chance.

Cruise Packing 101

By Erica Silverstein, Senior Editor; updated by Brittany Chrusciel, Associate Editor

There once was a not-so-savvy seafarer, a self-professed "fashion plate" who didn't feel right unless she took two steamer trunks crammed with enough outfits to clothe a small nation on every cruise. This, she finally learned, was not a good idea.

Besides incurring the wrath of her male traveling companion, who pointed out that he would have to wrestle with excess baggage from car or cab through airport terminals and beyond, she quickly tired of trying to cram her belongings into tiny closets and bureaus. To win the battle of the bulging bags, the now savvy seafarer follows her own "Gospel of Prudent Packing" which states: Thou shalt put into one's suitcase only that which will fit neatly in the allocated storage space without hogging every available nook and cranny for thyself.

Following that advice is getting easier these days because, for the most part, cruising has become a much more casual vacation -- even on luxury or traditional lines. Plus, with airlines charging to check bags (with extra fees for overweight luggage), it's just plain economical to pack light. To do so, you need to have a good sense of what kind of clothing and accessories you're going to need on your vacation, so you don't pack your entire closet ... just in case.

If you're wondering what to bring on your next cruise, here are our guidelines for what you'll need to pack.

The Female Wardrobe

First Things First: Short shorts are best kept to the pool deck or the fitness center. You can stretch it by wearing them to lunch in the lido buffet ... but that's it. Bathing suits are even more limited and should be worn only at the pool (though appropriate cover-ups are fine for lido lunching).

The Daytime Guide: Good bets for indoor activities include walking shorts, slacks, jeans, casual skirts and sundresses. Outdoors, of course, swimsuits and oh-so-casual shorts or jeans and T-shirt ensembles are de rigueur.

On Shore: Rules of taste vary; if you're heading off to a kayaking expedition or a snorkeling sail, the most casual of clothing is appropriate. If you're heading into town, opt for those items specified above.

Evenings: Cruise ships assign daily dress codes -- casual, informal, resort casual, formal -- that take effect in public rooms and restaurants from 6 p.m. onward. (Daytime is always casual.) Normally, on seven-night trips, you can count on two formal nights, a couple of casual evenings and between one and four semiformal occasions. To find out the dress code on your next cruise, read [Cruise Line Dress Codes](#).

For all but the most formal of evenings (even on the more upscale ships), resort casual is the common dress code. That means elegant attire, though not in the silk gown milieu. Think flowing cotton dresses or silky mix-and-match pants outfits that would be appropriate at a nice restaurant or a symphony concert on land.

The Male Wardrobe

First Things First: Consider khakis and a navy sport coat -- a can't-miss uniform when accompanied by everything from a polo shirt or (nice) T-shirt to an Oxford. You can wear this type of outfit just about anywhere but dinner on formal night. Also, unless you're hanging by the pool, some kind of shirt is required.

The Daytime Guide: Shorts are pretty versatile (athletic versions for working out and the pool deck, not-quite-knee-length for indoor activities). Jeans and casual khakis work, too. T-shirts and sports shirts go everywhere.

On Shore: Again, going too casual (tank tops, scruffy jeans, any kind of athletic garb) is considered disrespectful in many ports of call. And let's face it: You'll generally be more warmly welcomed in restaurants and shops if you're dressed nicely. The only caveat for men is the same as for women: On active shore excursions or beach days, ultra-casual is just fine.

Evenings: You can pack a tuxedo -- hey, if the mood strikes, you've got a much more elegant photo op -- but tuxes are increasingly being outnumbered by business suits on formal nights. On some ships, you can rent tuxedos. But, for most folks, we'd recommend that you do pack at least a suit and tie because some onboard alternative restaurants are so elegant that you really will feel out of place without them. And don't forget the shoes to match. Otherwise, on non-formal nights, the khaki uniform works well.

For Everyone

Sweaters and Jackets: Embrace the layered look. You will want a rain jacket and sweatshirt on a Caribbean or Hawaii cruise for those less-than-perfect island days. And Alaska cruisers have been known to need everything from bathing suits and short-sleeve tops to warm fleece jackets, hats and gloves; the same goes for cruising round the Horn of South America. Rather than pack clothes for multiple temperatures, bring cardigans or jackets to wear over lighter layers if it gets cold.

Hats: Throw in a hat to protect against the sun or keep your ears warm during scenic glacier cruising, and remember your sunglasses, as well. Consider headbands, bandanas and scarves for practical and style concerns.

Shoes: Ladies especially should try not to pack a suitcase full of shoes. Try to bring styles that can serve multiple purposes (such as sneakers that go from gym to sightseeing or comfy sandals that work as well by the pool as they do at a casual dinner). Color coordinate your formalwear so you only have to pack one pair of dress shoes.

Non-Clothing Accessories

Day Packs: Small backpacks or totes can be quite useful for carrying cameras, books, sunscreen, water bottles and other items around the ship or in port.

Tech: Travelers and their gadgets seem to go hand in hand these days. You'll likely bring your smartphone, but you might also want to bring a tablet, DSLR camera, GoPro, portable game player or book reader. Don't forget to check about foreign country and onboard roaming charges before you turn your phone on mid-cruise; if you bring a laptop or plan on accessing Wi-Fi, inquire about potentially hefty Internet usage rates onboard before logging on. Since many cabins have limited electrical outlets, some folks bring extension cords and power strips, but always check limitations on these with your cruise line prior to packing.

Entertainment: On the lower-tech side of things, you'll want to bring books, magazines and puzzle books for sea or beach days; you can't always count on the ship's library to have a comprehensive selection. Binoculars are a must for Alaska and other wildlife-heavy itineraries. If traveling with kids, consider inflatable water toys for the beach that can be deflated and packed easily. If you plan on going snorkeling in every port, you might consider bringing your own gear.

Beverages: Most cruise lines will let you bring soda and water onboard, saving you the expense of paying inflated onboard rates for nonalcoholic beverages. Do check cruise line requirements, however, as Carnival has banned passengers from bringing bottled beverages onboard. One warning about packing "liquor": cruise lines have increasingly cracked down on the practice (they'd rather you buy drinks at their bars), so consider yourself warned. Your bottle(s) might be confiscated on arrival depending on the cruise line's [individual policy](#). Bring along a Champagne corker if you have a penchant for bubbly in your stateroom but don't want to drink the whole bottle in one fell swoop.

Toiletries and Necessities: The cruise ship should provide soap and shampoo at the very least (and often body lotion, conditioner and body wash), but if you're picky, pack your own. The same goes for hair dryers. If you can't deal with the low wattage of in-cabin dryers, bring your favorite with you. Additional personal items to consider include any medications you will need and lots and lots of sunscreen if sailing in sunny climates.

Storage: Many experienced cruisers swear by over-the-door shoe bags for storing toiletries or keeping small items from getting lost in cramped cabin quarters. Many bring extra hangers on longer cruises to make sure every item that needs to be hung up can be. If you plan on doing a lot of shopping in port, consider taking a foldable duffel that can be packed into your luggage at first and then filled up with souvenirs (or dirty laundry) and checked on the way home.