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I Finally Said Goodbye to Packing Anxiety

Stressing about what to bring was constantly ruining the joy of travel for one writer. Here is the strategy she implemented to overcome the pressure and focus on what truly matters.

BY DALIAH SINGER PUBLISHED: MAR 16, 2023

It's nearing midnight on a Sunday, and I'm sitting in the hallway outside my bedroom surrounded by two carry-on roller bags, a duffel, and an oversize suitcase. I'm packing — or more accurately, attempting to pack — for two weeks in Switzerland. Our flight leaves the following afternoon. Because the trip is a combination of work and fun, my clothes are a mishmash of comfy and chic.

I've packed and repacked in three different suitcases, discarding a sweater here, an extra pair of jeans there, trying to make it all fit without needing to check a bag. (No extra fees for me!) As a bead of sweat drips down my neck, my husband, who is as relaxed as can be, knowing he'll simply toss a bunch of stuff in a bag in the morning, calls out from the bedroom asking if I'm coming to bed any time soon. I let out something between an angry sigh and a yell. Why did I wait until so late to get this done?!

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The truth is I'm a terrible packer. It's an awkward confession to make as a travel writer who flies at least a dozen times a year and regularly packs for weekend trips to the mountains near my home in Denver. It's not that I'm unprepared to travel. Between my husband and me, there are perhaps two dozen duffel bags, backpacks, and carry-ons shoved under the guest bed plus plenty of packing cubes, shoe holders, and toiletry bags.

It's the physical act of picking out what I'm going to put in all those containers that causes panic. The minute the suitcase comes out, my heart races, and my brain goes into overdrive trying to remember everything I need. It's so overwhelming that I wind up procrastinating, then I'm more stressed because I'm trying to gather everything at the last minute. Forget #vacationmode. Once it's time I leave for the airport, I feel like I've run a marathon.

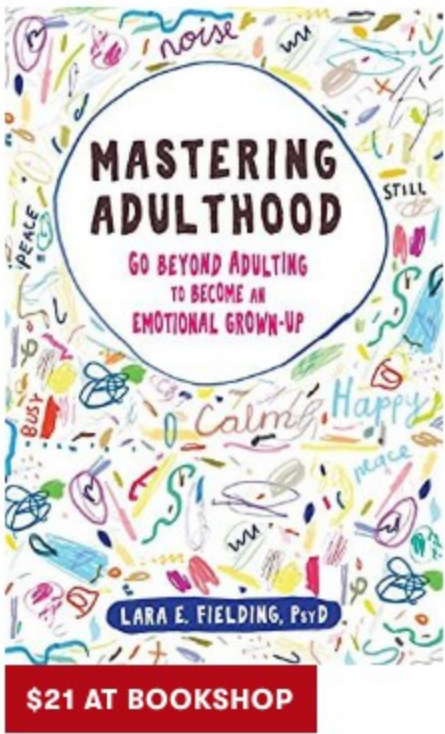


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When packing, remind yourself it’s okay to forget an item.

I know I’m not alone. In a [2021 study](#) by OnePoll, respondents rated packing as the second-most stressful part of travel after airport security. I’m one of the 65 percent who said they had trouble with packing, and the one-third who admitted they put off the task until 24 hours before takeoff. As airline fees force travelers to squeeze more into less space, and social media does its best to convince us that we need to look fashionable in every photo, packing has become a pressure-filled endeavor rather than an anticipation-building task.

Mastering Adulthood



“Packing is the antithesis of all the things we love about travel,” explains Lara Fielding, a clinical psychologist and the author of *Mastering Adulthood: Go Beyond Adulting to Become an Emotional Grown-Up*. “Travel is about freedom and new experiences. Packing is a constraint. It’s not a spontaneous thing.”

That’s the paradox I found myself fighting against. Most of the time, travel is a break from my type A personality. I forgo to-do lists and a jam-packed calendar for impulsivity. I avoid overly planned itineraries, preferring the recommendations of a friend or a good bartender to best-of lists or travel guides. I had long been operating on the assumption that I could shift that easy, breezy energy to my packing process. I was wrong.

As I neared tears on my hallway floor that night before my two-week-long Switzerland trip, it finally dawned on me that I could benefit from a true packing plan. Over the past year — and many trips — I’ve tested some new strategies. And they’ve worked. Here are the methods I employed to be a better packer.

Acknowledge the anxiety

You can’t get rid of anxiety by telling yourself to stop being anxious, Fielding says. Instead, the psychologist advises people to name that feeling, identify the underlying thoughts that are contributing to it — like believing you must wear *the perfect outfit* every day — and then validate them.

Also, you should balance your concerns. For instance, if you’re worried that you’re going to forget something, remind yourself that on most trips, you can buy something you accidentally left at home, such as a phone charger, or anything you didn’t realize you needed, like a swimsuit.

Make a list

Thinking about an upcoming trip makes me giddy. When I put off packing, that excitement sours. So, whenever a spark of anticipation hits, I take advantage of it, starting a note on my phone with what I think I want to pack.



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A list curated over several days with help lessen packing anxiety.

Over the following days, as I read travel articles or chat with friends who’ve visited a destination where I’m headed, I refine my list and make it more specific, adjusting from “three tank tops” to the exact ones in my wardrobe I want to bring. An added benefit? I’m creating a window to shop if I need, say, a new bottle of sunscreen or a specific color shirt because I’m going on safari.

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“As a general rule, less is always more when you travel,” says Radha Vyas, co-founder and CEO at adventure travel company [Flash Pack](#). “Anything that you’re grappling over, you probably don’t need.”

Give yourself time

A week or so before a trip, I consult my phone list and pile everything up on the floor near my bed. I have to walk by those stacks multiple times a day, and the visual forces me to consider what I really need. Does that heap look unwieldy? I can edit an item out or swap something smarter in.

Taking the time to consider what is essential and what is superfluous can cut your luggage in half, according to Maija de Rijk-Uys, managing director at [Go2Africa](#), a South Africa-based travel agency. Another tip she uses to shrink her lineup for longer journeys is to find out whether the places she’s staying offer laundry services. In a pinch, you can wash your clothes instead of packing more of them.

Two to three days before I leave, I load everything into my suitcase. If it’s not fitting or I’m unsure about an item, I have time to make adjustments. By incrementally tackling my packing, I lower my stress, which leaves space for my excitement to build. Bonus: I’m now packed before my husband, so I can help him out when he inevitably leaves his packing until the 11th hour. This has considerably cut down on bickering.

Pack outfits, not items

No, this isn’t to appease the Instagram algorithm. Thinking about what goes together is a smarter approach because you pack less and end up with more ensembles. “We need to get rid of that undue pressure that we’ve put on ourselves, partly due to social media, to always look like you fit in to the destination,” says Katy Nastro, a travel expert at flight tracker [Going](#). “You don’t have to look like the place before you get there.”



ADENE SANCHEZ // GETTY IMAGES

Consider how the clothes you pack work together.

While I haven’t gone so far as my friend who makes a spreadsheet of every item she packs to ensure each piece can work with at least three outfits, I have started being more thoughtful about my choices and laying things out together to see how I can mix and match.

I recently put my new packing energy to the test. I packed for a monthlong tour of five countries in Africa in one carry-on and a backpack. For a month, I edited my packing list. I laid the chosen items out on the bed, took a photo, and got rid of unnecessary pieces as I thought about the trip over the next week. Two days before my husband and I left, I was fully packed with room to spare for souvenirs. For the first time in my life, I walked out our front door on the way to the airport feeling calm, prepared, and ready for my journey.

Daliah Singer is a Denver-based writer who has contributed to Condé Nast Traveler, Hemispheres, and The Guardian. Follow her on Instagram at @daliah16.

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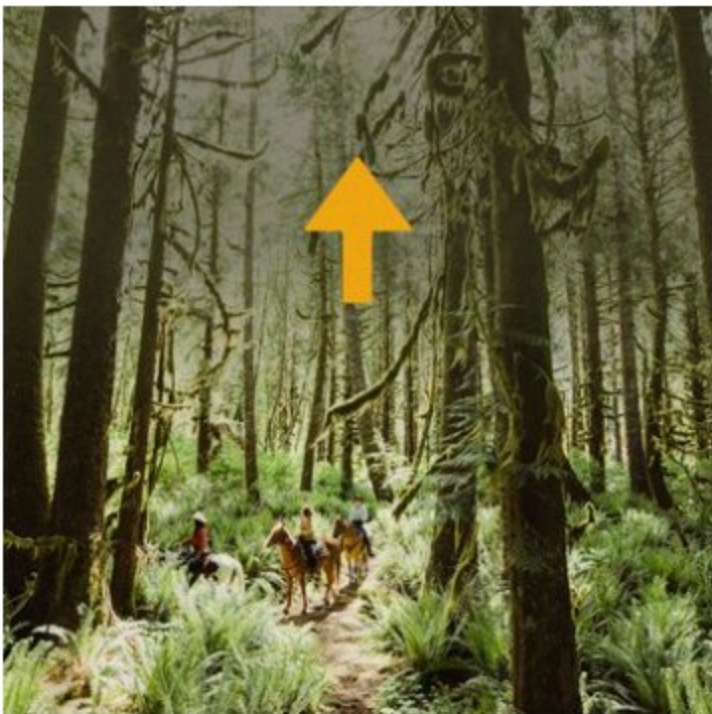
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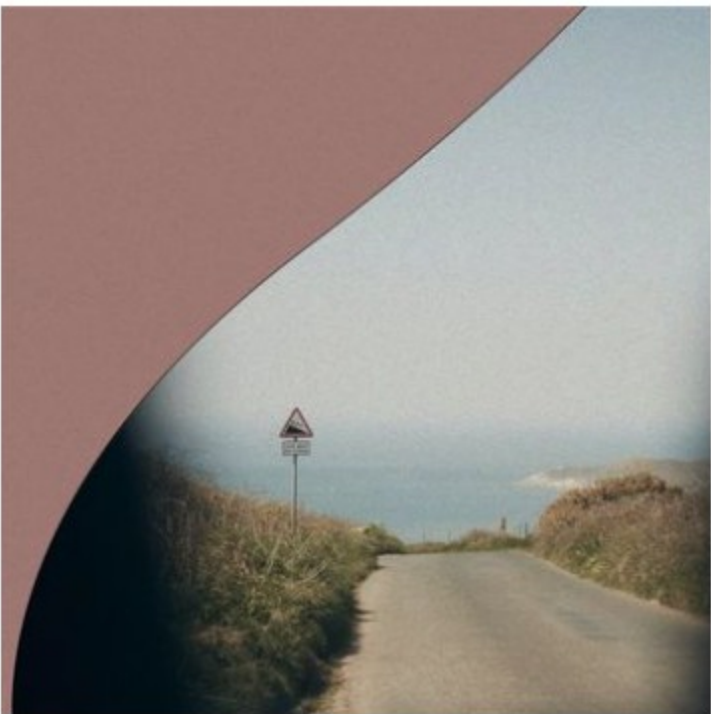
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