

Why You Should Pack Your Bags Half-Full:

How to pack your bags (and yourself) before you study abroad

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I have two more hours until my flight leaves for Spain and I can barely contain the desire to run and hide. After listening to all of the different languages I had to get up and leave the waiting area. I walked down the hall and tried to calm myself down, but I'm still as nervous as a wire stretched tight. Now I'm back in the flight area, but I have my headphones on and cranked up to the max. I don't want to hear Spanish. I don't want to hear Italian. I just want to be back on the farm. Now I'm wondering why so many months ago I thought this would be a fun idea.

Ready, Go!

As I wrote those words in my blog, I was sitting in the Philadelphia airport with one small carry-on laptop case. My only other bag, a half-full hiking backpack, was already loaded in the plane, and as always before a big trip, I wondered *did I bring the right stuff?* If you think you will find yourself in the same position in the months ahead, here is my advice for packing not only your bags, but also yourself for the changes that are about to come.

Choosing Your Backpack

There are many articles out there that will tell you what to pack, but not how to pack it. I recommend bringing one piece of luggage to be checked at the airport that is a large mountain/hiking backpack and one smaller carry-on (i.e. the backpack you use for school). I don't recommend bringing a large suitcase, and if it's big enough to have wheels to roll around on, then you probably don't want it! Why? Because it will (1) slow you down, (2) make you more susceptible to theft because you'll be slower to respond and distracted by your baggage, and (3) you don't need a lot of stuff. The best advice I heard before I left was to pack light, but the term I prefer is half-full, and here's why this is so important.

When I got off the plane in Madrid from Philadelphia, I met another guy who was in the same study abroad program. The two of us hit it off and went down to wait for our luggage and then find our hotel together. It's a good thing we went together because he had two 75-pound rolling suitcases, a large backpack, and a smaller suitcase (and I later learned when I met up with the other kids in my program that this was the norm). I put on my backpack that was half-full and slung my laptop case over my shoulder and then helped him pull one of his suitcases because he couldn't manage both of them. We then went to navigate the Madrid metro system of cramped spaces with lots of people, stairs, and no elevators. If I hadn't have been there, he would not have been able to get all of his stuff up the stairs by himself, let alone even move. I'm glad I was able to help, and it definitely taught a valuable lesson about packing.

Packing Your Bags Half-Full

The concept of half-full is very important when studying abroad. You want your bags to be half-full so that when you return, you will have room to put all of the stuff that you bought while you were there. It's almost inevitable: you will buy gifts, souvenirs, postcards, mementos, books, and other things for your family and friends back home. You need space to fit this stuff in, and also you need to bring expendable items that you can pitch in a hurry and not have to bring back (think old workout t-shirts). It's true that you could pack a full package and then ship it back home with all of your extra stuff, but it's also true that doing so will cost at least \$50 from Europe or another country (it's usually closer to \$100 for weighty packages) and shipping stuff overseas is no guarantee that it will return and is also subject to customs taxes if you ship a lot of stuff. Which returns us to the concept of half-full.

Half-full means that not only is your pack half-full, but that you are also coming to another country to “fill up” yourself. Half-full means that by going to another country, you will inevitably learn so much more about yourself and your new friends, their culture, and your home back in the US. A half-full student is a wise student because they are a student who comes to learn, not to expect what they already have at home. A half-full student is someone who comes to another country to experience that culture for what it is, not what it lacks. You’re not going to Europe or Asia or Africa to experience the same life you have here, with running water, washing and drying machines, fast food, cell phones, and picket fences, right? You’re going abroad to learn as much about them as you can, and then to bring that back with you – to fill up your pack, if you will, and to return with much more than you had before.

So what do you fill your pack with? And consequently, what do you fill yourself up with when you get there? We’ll tackle the physical packing part first.

The List

You’ve only got about one square foot of physical space if you want your bag to be half-full. It’s just like a good relationship: you get what you tolerate, so what do you need the most, and what can you do without? Here are my recommendations:

- 7 t-shirts. To pack them light, lay them flat and fold them in half, then roll them up with a rubber band. Not only will they be wrinkle-free, but they’ll also take up one eighth of the space that they normally would. Also, bring solid-color shirts or t-shirts that you don’t mind losing. I didn’t bring any shirts with designs or fancy stuff because you should come prepared to lose everything. Ten people in my program of 70 students either lost their luggage or it was delayed for at least several days. You probably won’t look as good abroad as you normally do, but it’s a tolerable evil for several months.
- 10 underwear and socks. Pack in the nooks and crannies around fragile objects
- 2 pairs shorts. Roll them up like the shirts
- 2 pairs jeans. Roll them up, and since most countries don’t have washing machines, plan on wearing one pair for one week while the other one hangs to dry, and then wear the fresh pair while the other one dries.
- 2 nice shirts/blouses. You can look nice when going out.
- 1 pair slacks. This is one of the best things you can bring and I highly recommend them. I wore mine to church, to plays (you will need nice clothes to enter), the jazz club (they turned down clientele not dressed nice enough), and special family/cultural events. A set of slacks opens many doors in other countries, many of which (especially Europe) tend to dress a lot nicer than we do in the US. Just roll them up and they won’t take up too much space.
- Swimsuit. Bring an old one that you can leave behind or give away before you return. I made the mistake of bringing my nice one, and that’s another thing that eats space that could be better used on gifts for people back home.
- Reading material for plane. Don’t bring a book you really like. I made the mistake of bringing a book I’d borrowed from my brother and now I have to haul it all the way back home to give it back to him. That’s eight inches of space I could have saved had I brought something that I could give away when I got here.
- Computer (in carry-on). Let’s face it, you’re probably going to want this, and if nothing else, bring it. Skype your family back home and save on buying phone cards (transfer all of your important documents, pictures, etc to a separate hard drive back home in case your computer breaks down).
- Digital camera and charger. Carry these with you because you can’t afford to lose them.
- Money belt and copies of ID/passport/bank account #'s and driver’s licenses: carry these with you and whenever you travel out of your town, always wear the money belt and carry your passport (or a copy) with you.
- Sports equipment, or American cultural items that you can share with people abroad. The best thing I brought with me was an American football, and it proved to be a great thing because since they don’t really play football in other countries, I could use it to teach my Spanish friends how to play American football in exchange for them to teach me fútbol (soccer). Items like this are great because you are on an

exchange program, and in order to exchange our culture, it helps to bring things that you can share. Other great items are anything that you can do with a group of people, and games make great gifts because you can give them away.

- A picture of your home and family to give your host family or as a personal reminder. My host family has three photo albums full of pictures of past host students, and they host kids because they love what they are doing and making a difference in the lives of students. Bring a nice picture of your home and family for them and they will treasure it. My host family put my family picture on their kitchen counter so that they could look at it every day and be reminded of who my family were and whose son they were taking care of.

That's only 13 different items to bring. You'll notice that there aren't any iPods and cell phones and other technology devices on this list, and that's because something like an iPod takes you out of the world that you're in and puts you in your own world. If you're here for a foreign world, then it's a good idea to put yourself there as much as possible, even though it might be hard to go without some things you are used to. On the positive side, if you have your own computer, you will have your music with you and you can listen to it there.

Using this list, your pack should be half-full and you will be a lot more mobile when you arrive. The hiking backpack will also come in handy when you go on longer trips, and for me it opened the door to a week-long backpacking trip through the Swiss Alps and another hiking trip through the Cirque Terre in Italy. Mobility is worth more than most material things that you could bring with you.

If you pack half-full, you will be one of very few students. Most students study abroad expecting to get America abroad with a smattering of another culture, but you can't really have both. Most students expect the same nice things they have in America, but the half-full student knows that the only way to return full is to leave space inside to put new things and to bring things that you don't mind throwing away. You will throw off old habits and mindsets, discover new talents and interests, and meet unforgettable people, but you will need room to put it all, both inside yourself and inside your bag.

Packing Yourself Half-Full

Part of preparing yourself for studying abroad is to expect that you won't be living like an American. The famous European travel guide Rick Steves is famous for saying that you don't go to another culture to experience your own all over again. Go to learn about the people in your country, and if you're interested in them and their language and culture, they will be interested in you. So how do you show interest in other people? The same way that you do here: by making them feel important and valuable, by talking to them, interacting with them, saying hi, goodbye, and learning their names and what they like and dislike and then doing things for them that make them happy. Here's a little bit of what I think that looks like.

Every day on my way to school I would get on the bus with the intention of talking to someone new in their language. One time, I talked with a woman on the bus from South Africa. We started talking in Spanish, but after a few minutes she asked if I wanted to speak in English and I told her that since I was in Spain, I wanted to speak Spanish. But then she said something that caught my attention. She had grown up speaking English, so whenever she heard other students on the bus talking in English, it made her feel like she was home again. So we talked in English and had a great conversation as two *extranjeros* adrift in a world and culture that we were a part of but that wasn't entirely ours.

This same week I talked with two more women, one from my town of Alicante and another from a nearby small town. Just a week earlier I had had a conversation with a woman from Ecuador, a fellow transplant to Spain, and even though we were from two different parts of the world, we could communicate through our shared language of Spanish. Later that week was a talk with a girl my age from the university, and a day later, a talk with an elderly man on the way to his dentist appointment. Each of the conversations was just as interesting as the last, and each person equally engaging. I would get onto the bus and not know what to expect or who to encounter, only that (1) they were bound to be interesting, and (2) I was bound to learn something and grow in the process. What if this concept was applied to life? How much more would we be apt to chance, risk, even dare?

And that is what I hope you are able to take back home with you when you return from your study abroad – that by carrying a bag half-full you will have the joy of returning with a lifetime’s worth of memories made in just a few short months. I hope that you will treasure the stories of the new people you meet abroad just like you do the people back home and that by reaching out to them and being interested in them, that the act of doing so becomes a habit, so that when you return home *everything* becomes more interesting. It is important to remember that people from other countries want to visit the US just as much as we want to go visit them, so what is so interesting about America that they want to see when they come here?

One of the wonders of being a traveler is being interested in where you are going, and the goal of studying abroad and seeing more of the world should cultivate an interest in the world – wherever you are at the given time. So when you return home, do so with a full bag and a full heart, knowing that you reached out to the locals, made friends in another country, learned their geography, saw their plays and their cinema, learned what types of food they eat, how they cook it, and what types of trees grow there, so that when you get back you can be just as interested in learning the names of all the trees in your backyard and the names and stories of your neighbors and the people you ride the bus with. Studying abroad should expand your world, and that in the process of becoming interested in another country, you become interested in your own, and that it makes you more engaged, more caring, and more receptive to the concerns and needs of people all over the world.

Maybe that’s a bit idealistic, but like a stone thrown in a pond, it has an expansive rippling effect. I’m still unpacking my bags. The old backpack sitting in the garage always greets me with a smile, and even though it’s now empty and I’m back at home, it is still half-full and ready for the next adventure.

For more information on packing, check out the following websites:

1. www.ultimatepackinglist.com/ultimate-travel-packing-list/ Check here for the most detailed and thorough packing list available. This site also has videos on how to pack your luggage. Highly recommended.
2. <http://www.studyabroadomain.com/study-abroad/travel/packing> Check here for a quantified list of clothes items to bring and to learn about other travel items.