You’ve Got Tough Travel?
We’ve Got Tough Luggage

Luggage has come a long, long way in the 13 years we’ve been in business. Not only has the luggage itself improved immensely, but so have the warranties. We now carry three luggage lines that are so tough their manufacturers offer unconditional warranties. And unconditional means just that—whether your friendly neighborhood baggage handler purposely destroys it, your taxi driver runs over it, or your dog chews it to pieces in an act of revenge for all the long trips you take while leaving him at home—your bag will be repaired at no cost to you.

Way back in 1994, rolling luggage was available from just a few companies and the latest in technology and design wasn’t too far removed from the kitchen creations of Bob Plath, founder of TravelPro and the inventor of the modern wheeled carry-on bag. In one respect this was good for us as new retailers, we learned very quickly what worked, what didn’t, and what we needed to do for our customers when things didn’t work out as planned.

Industry leaders Eagle Creek, Swiss Army and Briggs & Riley are all raising the bar in their prospective arenas of luggage expertise and excellence. All offer the finest value in their class—Eagle Creek, who goes in a new direction with their elegant Velocity line; Briggs, with a major makeover of their stalwart Baseline; and Swiss Army, who has gone for broke to become the undisputed king of the finest luggage in the land.

While always offering tremendous value, amazingly, Eagle Creek has been able to simultaneously make the lightest, top quality bags on the market. All while maintaining its legendary durability record attained from several decades as

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Do You Love Me Surfer Girl?

by Nancy Bestor

There I was, a 38 year old mother of two, listening to my 24 year old extremely buffed Costa Rican surfing instructor tell me to lay on my surfboard, and when he said go, I was to “glide” to my knees, “pop up” onto my feet and catch a small wave. I know I should have been focusing on form and balance, but the only thing running through my mind, as my 24 year old extremely tanned and buffed Costa Rican surfing instructor stood six-pack deep in the water right behind me holding my surfboard, was “Does my butt look big in this swimsuit?”

Last spring our family traveled the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica, stopping in every sleepy beach town that caught our fancy, soaking up the sun and its rays.

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Vive la Difference

by Bob Bestor, Jr.

International travel is as much about toilet paper as it is about museums and old churches. Toilet paper? Perhaps I should explain. Wasn’t the poor quality of that essential item one of the first things you noticed about Europe? Didn’t you wonder about it? And aren’t you puzzled now—even though European TP is much better today than it was 30 years ago—that there are still places where it’s like sandpaper?

Then didn’t you keep discovering more of the subtle ways our cultures are different? Nude sunbathing, for instance…though that’s not so subtle. The knife-fork thing is a better example. If you’re like me you’re curious as to how we Americans got started putting down the knife and transferring the fork from the left to the right hand. How about your first hotel bed in the German-speaking part of Europe? No sheets, no blankets, no spread, just the duvet, one for each person.

Observing and experiencing the differences in the way life’s mundane little realities are handled is an endless fascination, and a few years ago I realized it is these everyday cultural contrasts—with “toilet paper” as their poster child—that keep me traveling. I am often in Germany, Austria and/or Switzerland, and though I

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Do You Love Me Surfer Girl?

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Playa Samara was the spot for our surfing lessons, and Jesse’s Surf School (www.samarasurfschool.com) was just the ticket. Jesse and his daughter Sunrise, who are originally from Southern California, along with their patient instructors, work very well with beginners and children (as well as advanced surfers), so they were an excellent fit for our family. A one-hour private surfing lesson was $40 each, and Emily and Sarah (ages 11 and 9) each had a private half hour lesson for $40 total. The price included one hour of board rental after the lesson.

Surfing might sound easy, but it is harder than it looks, especially if you’re trying to keep your swimsuit in place because you have a 24 year old extremely tanned and buffed surfing instructor close by. I would get as far as gliding to my knees, but the “popping up” onto my feet and balancing on the board while riding a wave was just a shade more than my body could handle. As quickly as I would “pop up” I would pop right back down, into the tumultuous white water, which would toss me around, tangle my hair, sting my eyes, and send rivers of snot cascading down my face. It doesn’t take many wipeouts to come to the conclusion that the ocean is a powerful force. Then you realize you’re only knee-deep in water.

My patient instructor James (a Costa Rican surfing champion) would tell me where I had gone wrong—sometimes my feet were too far forward, other times I wasn’t crouching down enough on the board, and other times I was just too darn old and uncoordinated (my sentiments, not James’). Finally, however, James got me to focus on the task at hand, and become one with my surfboard. He was genuinely pleased when after about 40 minutes of instruction I started shredding on some righteous and gnarly waves. I was stoked. Jesse’s Surf School claims that almost all of their students are able to get up onto a surfboard and surf in whitewater after just one lesson, and Bob, Emily, Sarah, and I did just that. Dudes, we rocked.

Travel Notes

- We stayed in a delightful hotel in Playa Samara, the Hotel Belvedere (www.belvederesamara.net), which our Lonely Planet and Rough Guides both recommended highly. Our apartment had a bedroom, a living room with a pull out bed, and a full kitchen for $75 a night. This also included a full breakfast served on a balcony overlooking the ocean. Owned by a German family, the rooms at the Hotel Belvedere were spotlessly clean, and the two lovely swimming pools kept our girls happy.

- We stopped for a few days at Manuel Antonio National Park in Quepos. Our hotel of choice here was the Mono Azul for $75 per night (www.hotelmonoaful.com). This hotel is the home of “Kids Saving the Rainforest,” started by local kids worried about the endangered squirrel monkey. Ten percent of hotel receipts are donated to the organization. Although not crowded, Manuel Antonio National Park had more people on the beach than we had yet experienced in Costa Rica, and anytime there were “wild” animals around, such as sloths and monkeys, there was a large group of tourists with cameras at the ready. The park was beautiful, but we didn’t want to share, so we decided to head for more remote locales along the coast.

- A pristine and deserted coastal stop on our trip was Matapalo, on the southern end of the Pacific Coast, just north of Dominical. The gravel road to Matapalo was rough, with mile after mile of bone-jarring potholes. It took us past endless oil-palm plantations and villages consisting of small workers’ homes surrounding well kept soccer fields. We even had to ford a shallow river at one point. The secluded stretch of beach in Matapalo, and the oasis-like hotel, Bahari Beach Bungalows (www.baharibeach.com), made the drive well worth it. The Bungalows are actually “safari-style” tents right on the beach with full electricity and plumbing, beautifully tiled private bathrooms, and views of the ocean from the front porch and strategically placed hammocks ($100 a night for our family of four). The pool was fantastic, and we had the beach and facilities virtually to ourselves.

—Nancy Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. She likes to imagine herself a female Duke Kahanamoku, albeit younger and better looking.
Pura Vida—The Good Life of Costa Rica

by Nancy Bestor

Costa Rica’s coastlines have a great deal to offer, with outstanding beaches, jungles and rain forests, but a trip here would not be complete without a visit to the volcanoes and cloud forests of the country’s mountainous interior. Last spring we spent seven days sampling the natural wonders in and around the northern highland towns of Monteverde and La Fortuna.

We chose the public bus ($4 each) for the first leg of our journey, to Monteverde from San Jose. The trip took about five hours, with the last two on a very slow and bumpy dirt road. To preserve both the land around Monteverde and their way of life, locals have resisted paving the roads. The payoff for your slow, bumpy, and often very muddy ride is a relatively low-key, ecologically oriented destination that offers wonderful, nature-based attractions and a friendly local population.

In 1951, Quakers from the state of Alabama settled in Monteverde. Fleeing the draft, they purchased more than 3,500 acres and began a dairy farming operation that is still in business today.

Our first adventure in Monteverde was a guided twilight nature hike. We met our guide, Chris, a local born and raised in Monteverde, at the entrance to the Bosque Eterno de Los Ninos (Children’s Eternal Forest) at about 5 pm. Right off the bat, we were lucky enough to spot a two-toed mother sloth carrying her baby right along the main trail. It paid us no mind as it crossed on tree branches directly overhead, close enough for our guide to pet. Apparently sloths are seldom seen, and never this close up. We were treated to the sights and sounds of many other delightful creatures of the night on this hike, including several tarantulas, fireflies, a toucanet (the only green toucan), various roosting birds, woodpeckers and more.

The next day proved even more exciting, as we took a canopy tour of the cloud forest in Selvatura Park. The tour consists of 15 zip-line cables that visitors with harnesses ride from platform to platform under the guidance of a fun group of enthusiastic and knowledgeable guides. A spendy venture to be sure ($170 for our family of four), but not to be missed. It is hard to describe the feeling of riding over and through the trees on a cable suspended, at times, several hundred feet in the air; needless to say we had an outstanding time. The park also offers a cloud forest hike—1.9 miles of trail crossing eight bridges that range in height from 30 to 180 feet.

La Fortuna and its smoke belching and rock spewing Volcano Arenal were another adventurous stop on our Costa Rica travels. Volcano Arenal was dormant from about AD 1500 until 1968, when huge explosions and large lava flows destroyed villages, people, and cattle. Even then, Arenal has put on a civilized but continuous show of red lava flows and plumes of smoke and ash. Arenal did not disappoint during our visit. From our hotel, we could hear cracking, thunder-like explosions and see smoke and ash rising up from the volcano. After dark, at various viewpoints near the volcano, a fireworks display of red-hot lava rocks could be seen shooting out of the volcano and cascading down the hillside. Arenal National Park (open in the daytime only, $14 for our family of four) offers excellent views of the volcano, as well as a great hike over trails and lava rocks.

A trip to La Fortuna would not be complete without a visit to one of the many hot springs. All, of course, are heated by Volcano Arenal’s boiling magma. The top of the line hot spring, Tabacon, at $45 per person, was too rich for our blood, so we chose Baldi Hot Springs, for a moderate cost of $15 each for a full day with in and out privileges.

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Even this lower end choice has a Las Vegas, James Bond feel to it, with ten different pools of varying sizes and temperatures, six hot and four cold—the hottest claiming to be 63 degrees Celsius (145 Fahrenheit). The swim up bars, lush foliage, and waterfalls all lend to the hip, relaxing and gaudy atmosphere.

Travel Notes

• Our hotel in the Monteverde area was the Arco Iris Lodge, a very nice collection of cabins on well-manicured grounds in the nearby town of Santa Elena. Our two-bedroom cabin was $80 a night and other than finding a scorpion on the wall near Bob’s pillow, it was spotless. A favorite restaurant spot was the Restaurante Maravilla on the main drag in Santa Elena. This cheap restaurant, with white plastic tables and chairs, offered good “soda” food (local Costa Rican fare), and was always crowded.

• We arranged for jeep/boat/jeep transport from Monteverde to La Fortuna, crossing Lake Arenal. This is a misnomer as it is really van/boat/van. But it’s still a fun and very scenic ride. The van from Monteverde to the lake took about two hours, the boat crossing about one hour, then another half hour to our hotel in La Fortuna. The cost was $21 per person. Traveling around the lake from Monteverde to La Fortuna by car takes approximately eight hours.

• In La Fortuna, we stayed at the Hotel Fuego Arenal, a clean, simple hotel with great views of the volcano. Hotel Fuego Arenal is about six miles out of the downtown area, so a stay here requires a car. The family owned and operated hotel cost $60 a night. It was hard to say goodbye to this kind Costa Rican family, who treated our girls like their own, and let us cook in their kitchen and play endlessly with their one year old granddaughter Ruby. A favorite dinner spot in La Fortuna was Soda Kioska, an octagonal outdoor restaurant with stools around a bar. We ate great Costa Rica dinners here for $8-10 for all four of us.

—Nancy Bestor, co-owner of Travel Essentials, would be perfectly happy not to see any more tarantulas in her lifetime.

“While armchair travelers dream of going places, traveling armchairs dream of staying put.” —Anne Tyler
Tough Travel, Tough Luggage

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an outdoor industry leader. With their new Velocity line they’re making the leap from backpack influenced wheeled bags to a more “traditional”, business-minded design. An integrated organization system minimizes wrinkles while maximizing space, and a soft, yet structured frame allows for easy packing while maintaining Eagle Creek’s reputation for lightweight design. With ten different bags, Velocity offers everything from a classy and compact two-suit garment bag to a standard 22” rolling carry-on, as well as handy rolling totes, briefcases and shoulder bags.

All around it’s an excellent choice for someone who wants to save a little weight and a little money, while still getting a classy, traditional look and feel with their luggage. The Velocity 22” rolling carry-on sells for $300. For more information keyword search “Velocity” at our website, www.travelessentials.com.

With a near complete redesign of their Baseline collection, Briggs & Riley implemented changes per lessons learned from 10 years of producing premium luggage. How good is Briggs? Well, six years ago their “Simple as That” warranty made them the first company to offer an unconditional guarantee on their products. Our initial reaction was surprise mixed with a bit of fear. The warranty forced Briggs to live up to it, or go broke trying. In a positive case of the tail wagging the dog, the warranty and the commitment it forced upon the company is chiefly responsible for the high quality that Briggs produces today.

Like Eagle Creek, Briggs offers tremendous value. Durability is ensured by a 2520-denier ballistic nylon fabric, ABS corner guards, YKK Racquet Coil zippers and retractable leather handles. Usability is in the details and is enhanced by finger-fitting zipper pulls, a removable, waterproof pocket, magnetic handle wraps, an exterior handle so you pack flat on the inside, and a unique, locking expansion that opens up 30% more packing space. The new redesigned Baseline is perfect for travelers who want the extra benefits and details that Briggs & Riley offers. The Expandable 22” rolling carry-on (U22NX) is $395. Keyword search “Briggs” at www.travelessentials.com.

And finally, for those who desire the ultimate in performance, we have Swiss Army’s Tourbach collection. Beginning with their proprietary Performax fabric, Swiss Army sets the standard for luxury and performance in travel gear. Performax combines two Swiss technologies—Dynatec, a ballistic nylon fabric rated number one in tensile strength and NanoSphere, a process that actually changes the fabric at the molecular level to create a waterproof, self-cleaning exterior that repels everything! Add to that handle tubes made from the same 6061-T6 aircraft-grade aluminum alloy used on the wing struts of commercial airliners. Micro-silk lined jewelry pouches and tie pockets and a fine jacquard lining throughout proves that Swiss Army’s commitment to quality carries right through to the finishing touches. The Tourbach 22” Rolling Carry-on is $550. Keyword search “Tourbach” at www.travelessentials.com.
Top Holiday Gift Ideas From Travel Essentials

Here are a few of our favorite products that most anyone would be delighted to find in their holiday stocking.

**DreamSack—Silk Sleep Sack**
If you’ve ever slept on silk sheets, you know how hard it is to go back to cotton. But with a DreamSack tucked into your bag, you’ll suffer no more from scratchy hotel linens. Instead, you’ll have your very own soft and sumptuous silk sheets, wherever you travel.

Designed to keep you clean and comfortable, DreamSacks (starting at $65) are as convenient as they are luxurious. Extremely lightweight and compact, they’re exceptionally easy to clean. On the road they hand wash easily and hang dry quickly. But DreamSacks do just fine in conventional washers and dryers too.

Silk, one of Mother Nature’s finest products, makes the DreamSack perfect for any climate. A built-in pillowcase ensures your face is just as pampered as the rest of you. Whether you’re backpacking and hosteling Europe, stuck in a Motel 6, or on the couch at your brother-in-law’s, a DreamSack will make sure you don’t have to worry about where your sheets have been.

**Bag in a Box**
Imagine the ideal gift. It’s the perfect size, the perfect style and the perfect color (or colors). It’s exactly what you need! Well, Timbuktu’s Bag in a Box might just as well be called perfection in a box as it lets you design your own Messenger Bag. You, or the lucky recipient, choose your favorite color combination (interior and exterior!), size and options.

The process is simple. Inside a Bag in a Box, you won’t find a bag at all, but a gift card for $100. The gift card leads to Timbuk2’s website where a secret code helps you start “Building Your Own” bag.

And you really do get to customize just about everything - the fabric, the three panel colors, the logo color, the lining color, whether you want a right or left handed bag, whether you want to add a grab strap, a laptop insert, a center divider, and accessories.

If you want to spend your money on a standard Timbuktu bag, you’re also more than welcome to choose any backpack, duffle, yoga bag, messenger bag, or accessories—anything you want from Timbuk2. And if there’s a balance left on your card, Timbuk2 will save the remaining amount so you can buy accessories or use it later toward another purchase. So if you strive for perfection, whether as a gift-giver or recipient, Timbuk2’s Bag in a Box is a perfect choice this holiday season.

**Swiss Card**

Ever wished you could have all the convenient features of a Swiss Army Knife without actually having to tote one around? Perhaps you’d like something a little slimmer, something that you could tuck into your wallet or back pocket and forget about until you need it. Well, the Victorinox Swiss Card Classic ($20) will make sure you’re never caught off-guard.

The World Travel Projection Clock doesn’t just tell the time—it projects it onto any flat surface using the convenient projection display located on the top of the clock. A sliding window will block the projection when you don’t want it. You won’t have to worry about setting the time because the World Travel Projection Clock synchronizes itself with one of four atomic clocks spread across the globe. The clock also has two separate daily alarms, both with an eight-minute snooze function. In addition to the time, the World Travel Projection Clock gives the date and the day of the week in five languages. Less than an inch thick and just over two inches tall the Travel Projection Clock will easily fit into your luggage when you travel.

“Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the Titanic who waved off the dessert cart.” — ERMA BOMBECK

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Fifty Hours on an Indonesian Bus

by Michael Burrows

I should have suspected something was amiss as I approached the elongated chicken coop, cleverly disguised as a bus station ticket booth. When I enquired as to the length of the upcoming trip from my present location, Bukittinggi, Sumatra, to the modern day capital, Jakarta, I received a very enthusiastic “yes”. While it is always nice to receive positive responses, I politely pointed out that the appropriate answer to my question did not include ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as an option. At the third attempt, I finally extracted “30 hours” from my friendly counterpart.

The upcoming ordeal began well as we departed, on time, in a cloud of dust. Being a genius at math, I was able to work out that a 9 o’clock departure on Monday morning meant that we should arrive in Jakarta somewhere in the vicinity of 3 p.m. on the following day. Diana, my girlfriend, and I remarked to each other on the beauty of the Batak houses as we drove through the inner suburbs of Bukittinggi. An hour later, we were quite surprised as to the size of Bukittinggi, not realizing that such a small city centre could have such sprawling, outlying areas. Still, the Batak homes were, indeed, lovely, even though they were remarkably similar to each other. It was only as the second hour passed, with one of our several bus conductors still hollering out “Jakarta, Jakarta”, that it dawned on us that those similar Batak homes were, in fact, the exact same Batak homes that we had seen at the start of the journey. Bukittinggi did not rival Sao Paulo in size after all. The bus driver was determined to recreate the largest sardine known to man, such was the attempt to squeeze every last pulse in the city onto one bus! After two more hours of “this one’s my favorite, you only get to appreciate its beauty on the seventh viewing”, we finally headed for the lush hills of the countryside.

The air was becoming decidedly fresher as we chugged ever upwards. Suddenly, a clunk followed by a couple of loud belches from our new home’s under belly, and we were chugging no more. I thought it must be quite serious as our driver and the seven (yes, count them, seven) conductors stood near the engine scratching heads and various other parts of the anatomy. At one point, one obviously gifted mechanic began pounding on the engine block with a wrench. Must be a local ritual, designed to drive out evil demons, me thinks. After requesting the assistance of the 351 passengers (or thereabouts) to push the bus up to a more level terrain, we were truly amazed to witness, 45 minutes later, the sight of conductor number four pouring petrol into the tank! Yes, indeed, it wasn’t some complex malfunction of the engine after all. We had simply run out of gas.

So, eight hours and a whopping 45 kilometres later, we were well and truly on our way. The first stop for food occurred shortly thereafter. I was hungry, but evidently not as hungry as the myriad flies that were attacking the padang with gusto. Padang is a local dish, served cold, so I wasn’t afforded the luxury of having this concoction heated up to get rid of the one or two germs that may be surfacing. Instead, I opted for the first of many picnic rolls and a can of tuna. After finishing this delicacy, I sauntered over to the driver to ascertain, in my best Bahasa (local language), our progress on the schedule thus far. To my delight, he informed me that we were, indeed, on time! Obviously the merry go round that had been our circumnavigation of Bukittinggi was part of the plan all along.

“So, when do we arrive in Jakarta?” I enquired, as I pushed for confirmation. “Wednesday morning, 11 o’clock” came the retort. Backing my head off my shoulders, I went in again, thinking I had got my days and numbers wrong.

“What time did we leave Bukittinggi?” I persevered, thinking perhaps he had bought his watch from the same thief that had attempted to offload a plastic Rolex on me. “Nine o’clock Monday morning” came the reply. So far, so good.

“And how long is the trip?” I continued. “Thirty hours” he responded. Two for two, I thought. “So, what time do we arrive in Jakarta?” I pressed, hands firmly folded in prayer position. “Wednesday morning, 11 o’clock” came the jovial reply. I trudged off to tell Diana the good news.

The next day proved uneventful, save for the obligatory 45-minute fly fest, seemingly every two hours, also known as a meal stop.

It wasn’t until we entered our third day that things got decidedly more interesting. We were sailing past Krakatoa on the bus ferry in the early hours of Wednesday and I was deep in conversation with a newfound friend, eager to practice his English, about the virtues of drinking alcohol. “Oh no,” he exclaimed “I no like, beer very bad”. “Oh, I like one, once in a while,” I replied. “No I’m slim, I don’t drink beer!” He said. “Well I’m slim and I drink beer,” I quickly volleyed back.

“You slim?” came the amazed response. “Yes I’m slim,” I declared, feeling quite affronted. “You pray to one God?” he asked incredulously. “I what?” I enquired. At this point, Diana, who had been listening intently, interjected. “No, Mike, he is saying I muslim.” When I explained the misunderstanding to my friend, the three of us guffawed uproariously, like people who were delirious with sleep deprivation. Forty-seven hours of it to be precise.

As we re-entered the bus upon

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“Don’t worry about the world coming to an end today. It is already tomorrow in Australia.” — Charles Schultz
Fifty Hours.. 

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landing on Java, conductor number three decided to crank up the disco music once again. At this point, I almost lost it, informing him in the politest way possible, given the circumstances, that his music may be appreciated at a slightly lower level. The venom in my eyes must have conveyed the message, as he immediately turned it off. My volley of abuse may not have been appreciated by the recipient, but judging by the nods of approval and pats on the back I received from a large majority of my new fan appreciation group '351', they appeared to enjoy the Bee Gees about as much as I.

The final sting came as we arrived in Jakarta, on time, in a manner of speaking, at 11 a.m. on Wednesday. First of all, the free shuttle ‘to the hostel of your choice’ had not, as yet, materialized. As I grew more and more agitated into hour number fifty-one, I, shall we say, pressed the issue a little. Suddenly, abracadabra, the mini bus that didn’t exist, appeared as if by magic. Now, as we sat on the shuttle, all we needed was a driver, and we could rest our weary heads.

Twenty minutes later, there was still no driver in sight, but a jovial little fellow poked his head through my window and said “hello friend!” Being thoroughly outraged at this point, with events of the last three days starting to catch up on me, I politely informed him that no, I did not want to buy a watch, nuts or anything else he was selling, and would he please go forth and multiply, shutting the window on him, narrowly missing his nose.

Imagine my embarrassment when the driver stepped on board. Yes, you guessed it. It was, indeed, the would-be watch/nut seller. He was very understanding when I pleaded my case, and welcomed me to Jakarta with the unconditional warmth that one can only find in the developing world.

—Michael Burrows is a world traveler and longtime friend of Travel Essentials’ owners Bob and Nancy Bestor. Although he is not Muslim, he is in fact slim, and he does drink beer.

Vive la Difference.. 

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enjoy their art, music, architecture, and cuisine—plus, of course, their extraordinary physical beauty—I now know it’s the differences in the way we live that are at the root of my travel urge.

They are also why, when I’m there, the sight of a McDonald’s, or a kid wearing a Yankees hat, is a bit of a turnoff. The more we are alike, the less reason there is to cross the Atlantic. I’m looking for things that aren’t the way they are at home. In Europe, I want to hear the local language, not English. It’s the small family-run hotels for me, not the Sheratons, Hiltons and Marriotts. I often hear European hotels praised for their great “American-style” breakfast, but to me that’s not a plus. In the countries where I most often travel I don’t want bacon and eggs; give me fresh cheese and sliced meats and muesli with yogurt. If the shower’s a tiny closer—or maybe it’s just one of those hand-held sprayers over the tub with no curtain—that’s okay. I can live with it. It’s part of the charm.

I hate the change in Europe from real hotel room keys to cards with magnetic strips. Soon all those big heavy brass- and wooden-handled keys will be gone, replaced by plastic cards, just like at the Holiday Inn.

Mainly it’s the small things that give me the warm fuzzies, such as the Guten Morgen greetings from everyone in a German hotel’s breakfast room, and the little paper doily that goes around the stem at the base of your beer glass. In fact, I find the whole beer culture intriguing: watching pilsner glasses fill from the tap and the way it takes seven or eight minutes to get just the right ratio of beer to foamy head; the marker on the glass that proves you got what you paid for; and the pencil slashes on the little cardboard coaster that denote the number of beers you’ve been served. And, though it’s a disappearing practice, I get a kick out of restaurant servers that never write anything down until it’s time to pay the bill, and then rely on me to enumerate what I ordered.

I like the feeling of being trusted at hotels with honor bars, where guests help themselves and record what they’ve consumed. And there are still a few hotels that don’t require a credit card at check-in. Sometimes the process consists simply of being handed a key. Though they may have been avoiding local taxes, we’ve stayed in hotels that never took our name; we were given a key on arrival and paid in cash on departure.

Americans have imported many aspects of the European culture. Our country’s interest in good food and wine began with the time European vacations started being affordable by the masses. In the last 40 years, croissant has gone from being a difficult-to-pronounce, virtually-unknown-in-this-country, French breakfast pastry, to a ubiquitous fast food item. There are other practices we haven’t yet adopted that perhaps we should. The way Europeans drive, for instance. Passing on the right is not done in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and drivers are scrupulous about clearing the left lane for faster cars. If we did the same here it might eliminate some of our road rage.

A few customs are a bit confusing, at least to this American. Invited to dinner at a German home a few years ago, we took a rather expensive bottle of wine along as a gift. Our host looked away, mumbled something, and set the bottle aside without another word. Later we read that a gift of wine sends the message that the giver thinks the host’s wine will be inferior. On the other hand, hard liquor, especially Scotch whiskey, is prized. If you bring flowers, make it an odd number (I don’t know why), and stay away from roses because they might mean you secretly have a crush on the hostess.

So, imagine you’re somewhere out of the country ‘taking care of business’ and you’ve just peeled off a few squares. You might consider that this humble moment is one of the main reasons you came.

—Bob Bestor, Jr. is a co-owner of Travel Essentials, and publisher of Gemütlichkeit, the travel newsletter for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (www.gemut.com) and an expert on the thrones of Europe.

“When I was a boy, the Dead Sea was only sick.” — George Burns
by Stuart Henigson

Our friends at Outside the Box have taken what were already the best noise reduction headphones on the market, in terms of pure noise-canceling performance, and dramatically improved the sound quality.

Developed by a company called Able Planet, the Linx Audio technology was originally developed for the hearing impaired, and in this application, it really works. With the Linx technology engaged, music is unmistakably fuller and richer sounding. It’s a little bit like turning on the “loudness” button on some stereos, only better. Able Planet uses the analogy of playing a “C” key on a piano versus playing a “C” chord. The chord will obviously sound fuller than the individual note. When I first read that, it sounded like their technology would actually change the music, but it just comes across subtly richer and a little louder, even though the volume is the same. This means you can turn down the volume and still hear the music well.

One of the consequences of all noise-cancellation technology I’ve tried until now has been a subtle deadening of the music. It’s as if a little bit of the music gets cancelled out with the noise. In other words, in a quiet environment, you’d turn off the noise cancellation for just listening to music.

But with these Linx technology units, the opposite happens. Turn on the noise-cancellation and the sound actually improves! The first time I heard it I thought I had the switch backwards, because I was so accustomed to experiencing the quality reduction. With these new phones, the noise-cancellation switch is just there to save the batteries—you’ll always use them with it turned on.

At first I wondered if this would make any difference to me because I’m not noticeably hearing impaired (except when it comes to my teenagers). But the Linx Audio technology works for everyone. Remember, we all begin losing a little of our hearing by age 21 or so. Even if you hear perfectly, as do several of our younger staff who tested these, the Linx Audio noticeably improves sound quality.

As we’ve said many times, noise-canceling headphones are probably the single most valuable investment in avoiding jet lag. Filtering the incessant drone of jet flight before it reaches your ears will save your brain from having to work overtime to filter it as noise, and that means less fatigue and a more relaxing flight.

The new Solitude Linx Headphones are $50 more expensive than the Solitude IIs, which were our former champion performers (and which we’ll still carry). This definitely positions them as a premium product, but they are $100 less than the Bose noise-canceling headphones and offer competitive performance in every way. We’ve always felt the Solitudes offered a great value; if anything, these new Solitude Linx headphones ($249) are a better value still.

—Stuart Henigson is Travel Essentials’ marketing guru. Although his children and wife might argue differently, he hears surprisingly well.