Slurping Noodles and Munching Octopus Balls in Kyoto

by Nancy Bestor

Bob and I are just back from a week in beautiful Kyoto, Japan—a city that offers an appealing blend of the old and new with both modern and traditional Japanese culture on display. Architecturally exciting high-rise buildings stand next to thousand-year-old temples. High fashion teenagers share the city streets with geishas. And contemporary hotels offer both traditional, communal Japanese bathing for hotel guests, and high-tech toilets (see accompanying story) in their guest rooms.

Our stay gave us the opportunity to visit many of Kyoto’s amazing shrines and temples, stroll traditional neighborhoods, drink green tea in cozy wooden teahouses, and, of course, eat lots of great Japanese food.

We flew into Osaka, Japan via San Francisco, and hopped on the clean and comfortable JR Express Train to Kyoto ($30 each, 90 minutes). Our hotel, the APA, was conveniently located just five minutes on foot from Kyoto Station, the city’s transportation hub. Our room at the APA (about $125 a night) was clean, well equipped and incredibly small. While two normal sized adults (I’d like to think Bob and I are normal sized!) could comfortably sleep or lounge on the double bed, there was barely room for anything else. Laying flat across the bed, Bob could stretch out and touch his hands on one wall and his feet on the opposite wall! Thankfully we were not in Kyoto to stay in our hotel room—we were there to explore the city, and explore we did.

There are countless outstanding sites in Kyoto. Hands down, my favorite spot is the Fushimi-Inari-Taisha shrine. More than 5,000 orange torii (shrine gates) cover the paths of this complex, that is dedicated to the gods of rice, sake

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An Ode to the Japanese Toilet

by Nancy Bestor

I love Japan. This trip to Kyoto was our second to this fantastic country; a few years ago we also spent a week in Tokyo. When friends and customers ask what makes it so special, I have to pause and collect my thoughts, as it is difficult to articulate. The best way to explain, I guess, is to say that it all starts with the Japanese toilet.

A Japanese toilet comes in many varieties, and in the public restrooms of museums, restaurants, department stores, and even train stations, you may come across a few different styles. First is the basic low-tech and low comfort squat toilet. Second is the traditional Western toilet. And third, my

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Great Gift and Gear Ideas for the Traveler (Maybe That’s You?)

by Ember Hood

The holiday shopping season is upon us again, and our staff has come up with a list of some of our favorite products to help keep you from wandering aimlessly store to store, or website to website, looking for the perfect gift for the traveler in your life. Not seeing the right item here? Give us a call, stop into our store, or check out our website for more great gift ideas.

25% off our best-selling travel underwear From Ex Officio

Now through December 31 we’re offering all styles of Ex Officio’s amazing quick-dry travel underwear at 25% off! Available for both men and women, Ex Officio makes the best travel undies out there. Made from amazing moisture-wicking, quick-drying and anti-microbial (that means they don’t stink!) materials,

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and prosperity. Bob and I started up the 4km pathway late one afternoon and were lucky enough to be treated to a picturesque sunset at the summit. The various small shrines within the complex, and the thousands of torii that we walked under, were truly breathtaking. Be sure to make a tight fist when walking in Fushimi-Inari-Taisha, because the messenger of Inari is the fox, and the Japanese believe that the fox can possess humans—by entering under their fingernails.

Once Kyoto’s red-light district, Pontocho Alley is now known for its restaurants and nightlife. This narrow pedestrian walkway is about as wide as our small hotel room and is filled with colorfully lighted signs and old buildings, and is packed on both sides with eateries. Quiet in the day, Pontocho can be almost frantically busy at night, with locals and tourists alike scurrying in and out of restaurants, waiting outside for tables and using it as a hot spot to meet friends.

We visited Pontocho Alley several times and ate three memorable meals. Once at a bustling yakitori spot, where we sat at the bar, drank beer, and ate grilled chicken, duck, eggplant, scallops, oysters and more, and twice at a more traditional Kyoto restaurant, Kokoraya, where shoes are not allowed and you sit on floor cushions and order small plates to share. Fatty pork, lightly fried eggplant, and vegetable tempura were just a few of the delicious dishes we sampled. Our dinner at Kokoraya was so good we chose to return for the last meal of our trip and the second visit was every bit as good as the first.

Kyoto’s famous Nishiki Market always seemed to be on the way to wherever we were headed and since it is packed with interesting shops and more good food stands we often took the opportunity to stop in for a look and a quick snack. This covered food market is packed with stall after stall of delicious and sometimes mysterious Japanese food. There are the many fish stalls, with quite exotic fish—both dead and alive—on display, as well as candy, tea, and meat stalls, but the most interesting and peculiar to us were the vegetable stalls. These stalls were filled with pickled and preserved vegetables—many that we had never seen before. Most booths offered free samples, and although we weren’t sure what we were eating, we had fun tasting all the exotic veggies.

We ate lunch in the market one day at Yaoya-no-Nikai, which translates to “the restaurant above the vegetable store”. This delicious vegetarian restaurant, reviewed several years ago in the New York Times, offers a set price (about $21) lunch full of outstanding tastes. Our meal included a Japanese yam ball, mustard spinach, and cooked pumpkin, all delicately prepared with excellent spices.

We also ate delicious fresh tofu donuts in the Nishiki Market, which taste surprising like regular cake donuts (but just think about how much healthier they are right?). Bob’s favorite stall food was Takoyaki, or as he liked to call them, octopus balls. Not really the balls of an octopus, Takoyaki is a Japanese dumpling made of batter, chopped octopus, pickled ginger and green onions, topped with mayonnaise and katsuobushi (fish flakes) and served piping hot. Not for my taste, but Bob loved them. (Maybe I’m just not man enough?)

One of the more unusual sites we visited was at the Kiyomizu Dera Temple, in the Southern Higashiyama district of Kyoto. This fantastic temple includes many sub-temples, such as the Jishu-jinja, or “Love Shrine”, where visitors attempt to walk between two “love stones” with their eyes closed. If successful, they will be ensured success in love. Jishu-jinja also offers places to pray for good marriage, good childbirth, improved school test results, and more. Thanks to the Lonely Planet Guide for Kyoto we also visited the most interesting attraction at the Kiyomizu Dera Temple, the Tainai-meguri. This short and completely pitch-black walk begins down a steep staircase and follows along a corridor, with only a handrail to guide you. Tainai-meguri is the figurative womb of Daizuigu Bosatsu, a female Bodhisattva with the power to grant any wish. After a few disorienting twists and turns (still completely dark) you arrive at a large, dimly lit stone. Turn the stone one time and make your wish. Bob’s wish was to get back to daylight. I’ll let you know if my wish comes true.

Southern Higashiyama has beautiful pedestrian only streets, leading to or away from the Kiyomizu Dera Temple. After our visit to the temple we stopped for green tea in a very authentic wooden tea shop, Kasagi-ya (another Lonely Planet recommendation).

A visit to Kyoto would not be complete without a walk on the Philosopher’s Path in Northern Higashiyama. The quiet canal-lined pathway is just over a mile long, and is anchored on each end by temples. We walked the Path and visited the Ginkaku-ji Temple, on the northern end of the...
An Ode to the Japanese Toilet...

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personal favorite, the Western toilet gone “Japanese high-tech.”

The high-tech Japanese toilet is a commodity like no other. Initially one might not notice the difference, as at first glance it looks just like a Western toilet. But soon after taking your seat you’ll discover an advanced control panel offering a multitude of mysteriously labeled buttons. What fun I had trying them all out! In my admittedly limited experiences, options have included adjustable seat warmers, different water sprays for various body parts, and my personal favorite, the fake flusher, which makes a flushing noise in an effort to mask any actual noise you might be making.

An article in the Washington Post (But Do They Flush—Japan’s High Tech Toilets Do Nearly Everything, by Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan), says there are models of Japanese toilets that clean themselves, spray pulsating water for a backside massage, and even offer a bottom blow dryer, to do away with toilet paper.

This is a microcosm of what I love about Japan. Are you scratching your head wondering how I get from loving the toilet to loving the country? Let me try and explain a little better. Japan is incredibly neat, clean and orderly, and the Japanese are an extremely courteous people. God forbid embarrassing noises emanate from your bathroom stall or, once you’ve finished, you have to take care of cleanup manually. No, both perfect decorum and sanitation are available at the touch of a button.

A few years ago our family hosted a Japanese exchange student for a month. At the end of her stay, I asked her what was the thing she found most surprising about the United States. It turns out she was astonished that stall doors in public restrooms don’t go all the way to the ground. She did not like the idea of anybody being able to see her feet while she was on the toilet.

Courtesy in Japan extends beyond the bathroom though. In Kyoto I saw two businessmen say goodbye and bow to each other seven (I counted!) times. When conductors enter the car of a train to take and check tickets, they bow to the passengers, and when they exit the car they turn back around and bow to everyone again. My favorite experience with courtesy, however, is entering a department store right at opening in the morning. As customers walk in, every employee stands diligently by their station and bows. Bob and I walked down an aisle between two cosmetic counters, and I felt like the Queen of England.

The Japanese culture also seems quiet and rule-following and I am nothing if not a quiet rule-follower. Cars rarely honk their horns. It’s uncommon to see Japanese use their cell phones in public and when they do they often cover their mouths and turn away from others. Construction takes place behind closed doors or panels. And no matter how narrow the street nor how light the traffic, it is extremely rare to see a pedestrian cross against the red light.

I know Japan is not perfect. I did have to use squat toilets now and then. And I did see a little graffiti every once in a while, and a piece of trash on the ground here or there. But there just seems to be a level of respect and consideration in Japan from one human to another that I find incredibly compelling, and have not experienced in any other country. It makes me wonder what Japanese tourists think about our culture when they visit the United States for the first time.

—Nancy Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. She drank as much water in Kyoto as possible.

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Path. This world heritage site features spectacular gardens with Zen patterns in sand and symmetrical sand mounds designed to reflect the moonlight.

Although public transportation is cheap and easy to use, we chose to walk throughout Kyoto. I’ve always believed that walking a city gives you a better feel for the neighborhoods, the people, and the culture. And, of course, all the walking helped us work up an appetite, and it seemed as though there was always a noodle shop handy whenever we were in need. Ramen, soba and udon noodles are a quick, inexpensive and healthy meal in Japan, but quick and inexpensive does not mean the equivalent of American fast food. The noodle shops we visited were all delicious. Some offered soy-based broths, others noodles with a whole herring, sliced pork, or a hard boiled egg. In every case, a large bowl of hot fresh noodle soup tasted great, and cost less than $6. And best of all, slurping noodles isn’t rude in Japan. It is actually considered polite! (Bob felt right at home.)

One last must see on a Kyoto visit. Stop into any large department store and head down to the basement. Entire basement floors of department stores (and sometimes the two bottom floors) are dedicated to food. Prepared food, grocery items, packaged food, pastries that rival French baked goods, and more, are all waiting to be sampled, eaten right away, or taken home to eat later. The smells alone are mouth watering.

—Nancy Bestor could (and did!) spend hours wandering the basement food aisles of Japanese department stores. She never slurps.

“The trip is what you take when you can’t take any more of what you’ve been taking.” —Adeline Ainsworth
Great Gift and Gear Ideas for the Traveler...

Ex-O travel undies ($18-25) are lightweight and nice and stretchy for comfort. You only need one pair (okay, maybe two or three pair) no matter how long your trip—just wash them at night, hang dry and they’re ready to go the next morning.

They are available in a variety of styles, including both full-cut briefs and bikini briefs for women, and boxers, briefs and boxer briefs (pictured above) for men. So take advantage and stock up for all your future adventures. They also make great gifts for the travelers in your life!

**Eagle Creek HC2 Hovercraft**

Eagle Creek’s recent redesign of their Hovercraft luggage line (pictured at right), makes them lighter, even more durable and backs them up with an unbeatable guarantee.

First off, and most important for frequent travelers, is Eagle Creek’s “No Matter What” warranty. It’s a promise from Eagle Creek that no matter how your luggage is damaged, they will repair it free of charge. And, having the best warranty in the industry is just one part of why we love their new HC2 Hovercraft bags.

Constructed from the most durable yet lightweight materials, including a heavy-duty ballistic nylon exterior, rugged wheels, handles and zippers, the line features two styles of rolling luggage in bright new colors that are certain to make your bag stand out.

The HC2 Hovercraft Wheeled Uprights offer a classic, streamlined look, with two handy front pockets, interior compression straps, interior accessory pockets, and an expansion zipper that adds an extra 15% to packing capacity when you need more space. The 20” and 22” Uprights ($225-$250) are both carry-on friendly with US-based airlines and larger checkable sizes are also available.

The HC2 Hovercraft Rolling Duffels offer a more casual travel option. They are a bit lighter and offer both internal and external compression straps. Large handles on the front and sides make them easy to carry when you have to, but mostly you’ll want to roll them using their sturdy telescoping handle and wheels. The rolling duffels also offer interior pockets, including a lid pocket that is accessible from both the inside and the outside. The 22” size is a legal carry-on and 25” and 30” sizes are also available ($225-$260).

Two Rolling Totes (one with a padded computer compartment) and a smaller, carry-on In-Flight Shoulder Bag ($95-$240) complete this versatile and reliable line from Eagle Creek.

**Smartwool**

Smartwool has been making amazing socks for hikers, campers, and runners for years. They take the finest, softest wool from New Zealand’s Merino sheep, and weave it into a luxuriously warm wool that doesn’t shrink and doesn’t itch. And, since wool is naturally antimicrobial, you won’t have to worry about odors, either. Cool in the summer and warm in the winter, Smartwool socks are comfortable and long lasting and come in a variety of sharp, contemporary colors and patterns.

Dedicated to sustainable, environmentally friendly practices, Smartwool makes it easy for you to feel good about filling your sock-drawer with these ultra comfy and fashionably fun socks. Definitely a top stocking stuffer, pick up a pair or four this holiday season.

**GoToobs**

We are completely enamored with GoToobs—the squeezable, pliable, leak-proof travel bottles that everyone should be using on their next trip. Made from a food-grade silicone, you can put almost anything in them—soap, sun block, lotion, or even your favorite jam, if you’re

“Once the travel bug bites there is no known antidote, and I know that I shall be happily infected until the end of my life.” — Michael Palin
Great Gift and Gear Ideas for the Traveler...

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so inclined. The large opening makes the bottles easy to fill and clean, while the cap is leak-proof yet easy to open. The collar of the GoToob has a built-in labeling system that allows you to choose from conditioner, shampoo, sun block, lotion or soap, so you won’t forget what’s in which tube. The best option is the new 3-pack of three ounce bottles ($24.95). GoToobs come in three sizes—1.25 ounces ($6.50), 2 ounces ($7.95) and the new 3 ounce size ($8.95)—all three are carry-on friendly.

Global Commuter

The Eagle Creek Global Commuter ($135) is a wonderfully versatile briefcase/shoulder-bag/backpack combo designed for easy organization and easy airline travel. A padded and suspended interior compartment provides excellent protection for your laptop and the bag’s “checkpoint-friendly” butterfly opening ensures that you won’t need to remove your computer when passing through airport security.

One of Eagle Creek’s strengths is interior organization and the Global Commuter lives up to their high standards with an internal file organizer, a neoprene iPod pocket with a headphone portal, a fleece-lined pocket for electronics or eyewear, a passport pocket, pen slots, a detachable key fob, and more.

The Global Commuter’s various easy carry options include a padded grab handle, a removable shoulder strap, concealable padded daypack straps and a back slip panel for stacking on wheeled luggage. But, no matter how you carry it, the Global Commuter is the perfect bag to protect your laptop, organize all your business gear and speed you through security when you’re on the go.

Thermasilk

Thermasilk Long Underwear ($36.95) is a perfectly toasty companion for winter travels. These simple, lightweight silk long sleeve shirts and pants make an incredible base layer, providing comfortable, natural insulation against the cold of winter climes. Available in both men’s and women’s sizes, Thermasilk is also odor-resistant and moisture wicking for easy washing and quick drying when you’re on the road.

Along with the fact that they are 100% silk, there are two things we really love about Thermasilk long underwear. The first is that it is incredibly thin, yet still provides surprising warmth. The second is that natural silk is quite breathable. While it keeps you warm out in the cold, you won’t overheat when you step inside. It’s the perfect base layer for winter outings and doubles as an excellent travel pajama. We think everyone should have at least one set!

UBU Reversible Jackets

The UBU Milan Reversible Jacket ($144) is a fun and versatile addition to our toasty warm travel wardrobe options this year. It’s lightweight and eminently packable, making it ideal for travel, and its fashionable patterns and colors will keep you looking elegant and chic no matter where you go. We also love how easy the Milan is to care for—there’s no need to dry-clean, and the textured exterior hides wrinkles, no matter how long the jacket is packed (or stuffed) in your bag. And best of all it’s reversible—so you’ll travel with two jackets in one!

Sun Protection for Winter Travels

Heading south for a sunny and warm beach vacation this winter? Don’t forget sun protection! Along with sun block and common sense, dermatologists also recommend quality, UV-blocking clothing and hats. Sunday Afternoons, a local company specializing in sun protection, offers a variety of hats and shirts that will protect your delicate skin by keeping the sun at bay when you hit the beaches this winter.

One of our favorite Sunday Afternoons hats is the Adventure Hat (pictured below, $38). We love it

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Getting Away to the Oregon Coast

by Robert H. Bestor

It’s old news that Ashland is one of America’s great small towns. Theater, art, good restaurants, and an idyllic foothills location—we seem to have it all. Well, not quite; there’s no ocean and once in a while this kid from Coos Bay needs a dose of fog, mist and the sound and smell of the sea—especially when Rogue Valley temperatures reach three digits.

On a recent September afternoon, while watching our car’s outside temperature indicator sink from 109 in Medford to 59 at Reedsport, I was reminded of that 50s marketing catchphrase, the “air-conditioned Oregon Coast.” Let’s also add “spectacular” and “uncrowded.” On that same trip, heading south on 101 late in the day over a stretch of road that brackets Humbug Mountain and yields some of the Pacific Coast’s most dazzling vistas, we had the highway almost to ourselves. Perhaps other tourists had already stopped for the night, but traffic is rarely a problem on 101 or the roads that connect it to Oregon’s interior.

You no doubt have your own favorite Coast destination, but let me tell you about ours. Though Brookings and Gold Beach are the nearest, and Bandon has those wondrous golf courses, for Liz and me it’s worth the extra time in the car to access Florence’s neat package of old-town, beaches, lakes, dunes, state parks, and restaurants.

Besides, the three-and-a-half hour drive to “Flo-town” is particularly scenic. Leave L-5 at milepost 136, just north of Roseburg, and join lightly-traveled but well-maintained route 138 as it slaloms serenely through farmland, gentle hills, and forests. This segment of the trip is so relaxing it often seems a bit too soon to arrive in Elkton, a pretty little town where you join route 38, the Umpqua Highway.

Though the best of this drive is yet to come, before going on you may want to taste one or two of the Pinot Noirs at welcoming River’s Edge Winery. At $22/bottle, the ’07 Barrel Select seems a decent value.

From Elkton, the recently re-surfaced road follows the bends of the river all the way to Reedsport. I’m a little nostalgic about this highway as it was the route of my first “road trip,” a Saturday drive in a 14-year-old ’41 Chevrolet to see a University of Oregon football game with high school friends. It’s a gorgeous stretch of river-hugging country road, and the intervening 54 years have changed it little. The road crosses to the Umpqua’s south bank at Scottsburg, a mining and lumber center until the middle of the 19th century. I think the bridge, which is of no special visual merit, is the same one I drove across that October day in 1955.

Throughout the 16-mile stretch from Scottsburg to Reedsport, the Umpqua is wide, placid, and winding. In places, the gorge is solid rock and steep-sided. Further on, it opens to a wide meadow, home to a large elk herd.

Reedsport is a town that bears the scars of decades of hard times on the Oregon Coast. Here you turn north on 101 for the last 22 miles to Florence. Along the way, frequent signs mark the region’s network of lakes and parks. My favorite, Jessie M. Honeyman State Park, with its small lake protected by high dunes, is just south of Florence. Then it’s across the fine, depression-era bridge that spans the Siuslaw River and into Florence’s charming old-town and port.

Accommodations

River House Inn is just steps from the old town with rooms directly on the river. Book well in advance for a south facing, river-view room. Overlooking the Siuslaw and the old town from the south bank is the Best Western Pier Point Inn. Both River House and Pier Point offer familiar motel-style accommodations geared for the traveler stopping for one or two nights.

Though we haven’t stayed there, half a block from the River House is Edwin K, a dazzling white, century-old B & B with six guest rooms. The exterior looks great and Tripadvisor.com reviews are mostly raves.

Restaurants

The Oregon Coast has achieved no fame as a gourmand’s destination. Florence bucks that trend a bit, however. Though there’s little diversity—no Asian restaurants of note—and overall quality doesn’t match Ashland, there are good places to eat and menu prices, compared to Ashland, are a bargain.

Waterfront Depot: Call a couple of days ahead for one of the most sought-after tables in Florence; or take a chance on finding a spot at the first-come, first-served bar. The attraction is well-prepared dishes made from fresh ingredients and sold at amazingly low prices. When available, fried razor clams with aromatic rice and a salad dressed with a spritz of wasabi go for $15, as does a 10-ounce New York steak with fries. The restaurant’s most popular dish is crab-encrusted halibut at $10. A braised lamb shank with mashed potatoes fetches $12. Service can be slow—even though wait staff often seems frantic to turn the 11 tables—and the ho-hum presentation features bare wooden tables, cheap tableware, no wine list, and a blackboard menu. There’s a good selection of wines by the glass and its Austrian heritage is evident in the Trummer Pils lager on draught.

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“If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home.” —James A. Michener
Getting Away to the Oregon Coast...

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**Feast**: The town’s lone “up-market” restaurant succeeds Crave’s, which, though it closed last month for lack of patronage (Ashland-level prices and a bit of a hidden location a block or so off the main old-town tourist streets), served us the best meals we’ve ever had on the Oregon Coast. Feast, its replacement in the same space, just opened and we haven’t yet tried it, but most of the kitchen staff, including the chef, carry over from Crave’s.

**Pomodori**: Decent versions of tried and true Italian war-horses including sautéed veal—piccata, marsala, scallopine—chicken parmesan, and various pasta dishes, are the staples of this house-turned-restaurant located in a residential area a few blocks from the old town. Large portions, low prices, and only a few tables, so reservations are advised.

**Bridgewater**: It’s unfortunate the food here isn’t better because the gymnasium-sized, high-ceilinged room with tall windows is an inviting space. Service is friendly, there’s live piano music most nights, and the great old building occupies a prime corner location in the old-town.

Florence’s most publicized eatery, Mo’s, has a nice waterside location but I suspect most of the food comes frozen or canned from a restaurant supply company. The famed clam chowder is amazingly bad, despite the addition, just before serving, of a hefty dollop of butter.

If you can’t get a table at **Waterfront Depot**, the owner is likely to send you across the street with a discount chit to her other Florence restaurant, **Restobar 1285**. Unfortunately, the food isn’t as good.

—Robert H. Bestor is the father of Travel Essentials’ owner Bob Bestor. His easier task is that he is the publisher of Gemütlichkeit, the travel newsletter for Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Robert moved away from the Oregon Coast at age 18, but goes back every chance he gets.

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Great Gift and Gear Ideas for the Traveler.....

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because it packs flat, offers 360-degree protection (including the back of your neck!) and weighs only 3 ounces. Plus, it comes in a multitude of colors, which means you’ll be able to find the perfect hue just for you.

If you want to protect more than just your head (and you should), we’d recommend a UV-blocking shirt as well. For men, the Sunday Afternoons Island Breeze Shirt (pictured at left, $60) offers a UPF rating of 40 and also manages to be soft, moisture-wicking and well-ventilated. And, for the ladies, the Sunday Afternoons Trade Winds Shirt ($56) provides the same comfort and UPF 40 protection. Both shirts come in several flattering colors.

**Anne McAlpin’s Handbag**

The Anne McAlpin Coast and Cruise Handbag ($39.95) is a stylish and functional purse-style bag that converts quickly and easily to a small backpack using hidden loops on the bottom of the bag. A front organizer panel helps you keep track of your glasses, phone, camera, pens, cards, and more—so you’ll always know where to find what you’re looking for! The adjustable strap can be worn over-the-shoulder, across-the-body, or as a backpack. A handy outside pocket makes it easy to stash items for quick access.

Made of ballistic nylon, the Coast & Cruise Handbag measures 9.5 inches long by 7.5 inches wide, and is 3 inches deep. A great purse for travel or every day use!

“**My first rule of travel is never to go to a place that sounds like a medical condition.”** —**Bill Bryson**
News, Tips and Advice for the Traveler

- BritRail is currently offering a 20% “Low Season” discount on both consecutive-day passes and flexi passes. The special price is good for both adults and children and for both first and second-class travel. Travel must be completed by February 28, 2010. A typical 15-day adult second-class pass drops in price from about $530 to $425, a savings of more than $100. More details are available at www.raileurope.com.

- Airport Navigator is a new feature of Travel & Leisure’s website (www.travelandleisure.com/airportnavigator). The site offers reviews of restaurants, shops, attractions and spas at 20 airports worldwide. While still a bit limited in its coverage, it could come in quite handy next time you have a long layover or a delayed flight.

- In an effort to spur tourism and travel, the German government has lowered its Value Added Tax (VAT) on hotel stays from 19% to 7%. This tax rate goes into effect on January 1, 2010.

- Book by the end of November and you’ll get 40% off high season rates this winter at 12 Marriott Resorts in Mexico and the Caribbean. While rooms are limited, we did a random test and the discount price was available on our first two trial bookings.

- If Marriott’s prices (even at 40% off) are too steep for your pocketbook, you might consider renting a bed, couch, futon, or even air mattress in a private home. The website, www.airbnb.com, featured in The New York Times, Newsweek, and The Wall Street Journal, is an online platform that allows users to post listings of available space in their home or apartment for rent. A quick check found an entire studio apartment in the Marais district of Paris for $90 a night, and an entire Chelsea apartment in New York for $100 a night.

- For up to date travel health news and advice on H1N1, dealing with injury and illness, vaccination requirements and more, visit www.cdc.gov/travel. Specific and detailed health information is available for more than 200 countries. You’ll also find information on travel health clinics, current travel health notices and a large list of reference and resource information.

- Virgin Atlantic’s “Flying Without Fear” course is now available as an iPhone app. By addressing personal fears, offering relaxation techniques and clearing up common misconceptions about commercial air travel, Virgin claims that the course has a success rate of 98%.

- Galactic Suite says its space hotel is on schedule for a 2012 opening after a $3 billion cash infusion from an “anonymous billionaire space enthusiast”. The Barcelona based company will offer a three-night stay for $4.5 million during which guests will travel around the world every 90 minutes and see the sun rise 15 times a day. Hopefully complimentary Tang is included in the price.