Europe Through The Eyes of a Really Cute Teenager

by Nancy Bestor

My first “real” experience abroad was in 1983 when I traveled through Europe with my older sister Teresa. Initially, we flew to Yugoslavia, to visit family for 10 days. But then we set out on our own across the Adriatic by ferry to Bari, Italy, where we began our European Backpacking Adventure. For the next six weeks it was just the two of us. Teresa was 21 and I was 16. Yes, 16 years old.

We traveled via train through six countries with our second class Eurail passes. I remember getting off at our first stop in Rome and my distress at being confronted by aggressive touts offering cheap hotel rooms (among other things), and thinking we had made a huge mistake; that we had no idea what we were doing.

I feared we would get cheated, robbed, raped, lost, or all of the above. We spoke only English, and had no experience booking hotels in the U.S., let alone booking accommodations in Europe. We were novice travelers, but everybody’s got to start somewhere, and we learned quickly from our mistakes. First lesson learned – don’t rent a room from a train station tout. Instead consult a guidebook, fellow travelers or the local tourist office for recommendations.

I was quite surprised to discover the scores of teenagers and college students riding the rails and backpacking along with us. Almost every single one toted their very own copy of Let’s Go Europe (a.k.a. the backpacker’s bible), which amazingly, we knew nothing about before heading across the pond. It was great to consult with these veteran yet like-minded travelers on where to visit, sleep, shop, by Ember Hood

We’ve just returned from the annual travel and luggage trade show and are delighted to offer several new and innovative travel products that we discovered in our research. Luggage and travel accessory companies continue to find new ways to make travel safer and easier for us all. Here are a few of our new favorites.

Aircraft Toiletry Kit
The Kiva Aircraft Toiletry Kit offers the smartest design we’ve seen yet for carry-on toiletries. Going through security is a breeze when you un-zip the Aircraft Toiletry Kit ($29.95) into two halves, leaving you with a clear, durable, one-quart TSA-compliant bag for your liquids. The other side of the Kit is easy to pack with a large u-shaped opening and interior pockets that are perfect for easy organization. And, once you’re in your hotel, the Aircraft Toiletry Kit hangs neatly from a towel rack using its handy...

Carry-on Bags: The Truth

What’s the size of the largest bag you can carry-on?” It’s a question customers ask us every day. Although lots of rules have changed in the airline industry in the 18 years we’ve been in business, the one thing that has stayed constant is the maximum allowable size of a carry-on bag. When traveling in the United States, and from the United States to other countries on a U.S. based carrier, a carry-on suitcase can measure 22 x 14 x 9, or 45 linear inches (the three measurements added together). Sounds simple, right? Well….yes and no.

Bear with me here, as this is where it starts to get a bit confusing. Almost all U.S. based airline’s measurements include a little bit of “grace” for wheels and handles. So, when wheels and handles are included, a legal carry-on for them is more...
and eat, all on the cheap. We, like all our backpacking peers, were very frugal, many meals consisted of bread and cheese or other store bought items. Fancy restaurants? Never. Hotels? Nope.

We stayed in youth hostels, with our Hostelling International membership cards (www.hihostels.com), and rarely paid more than $10 a night for a bed in a dormitory room. Most of the hostels we stayed in had kitchen and laundry facilities, as well as strict rules about what time you had to be back at the hostel, and what time you had to leave in the morning. Many even provided social activities. I fondly remember watching An American Werewolf in London in Interlaken, Switzerland, with a crowd of low budget adventurers who looked so much cooler and better traveled than I.

To save money and cover more ground, we sometimes slept on trains. I remember it not being too important exactly where they were going, as long as it was in the general direction we were headed and we could get a minimum of six hours of sleep. As far as we were concerned, it was more about a free night of lodging than getting from point A to point B.

We met lots of interesting characters. There were the two girls who stole an older couple’s Roquefort cheese on a train in Switzerland, and who also attempted to sneak into a youth hostel for the night. They were caught, and I must admit, I was glad. (I know where my daughters get their “rule following” tendencies.) Then there was the friend we made in Venice, Mai, who when introducing herself said “my name is Mai, as in My God.” We shared a pension for several days in Italy together, and were sad to say goodbye. I met a guy at the first and oldest youth hostel in Switzerland, Balmer’s (www.balmers.com), who explained to me the whole “pay it forward” system by folding someone else’s laundry while waiting for his own to dry.

We also came up with “The Five Questions”. These are the questions that every single euro backpack traveler is guaranteed to ask every other euro backpack traveler that they spend longer than five minutes with:

- Where are you from?
- How long have you been traveling?
- Where have you been so far?
- Where are you going next? And, how much time do you have left to travel?

The great thing about those questions was that as repetitive and inevitable as they were, and still are, I suppose, everyone we ran into had a fascinating and informative answer to each of them.

One of my strongest memories of that first trip is how different everything was. I was shocked to discover Italian pizza was very thin, not like the thick Round Table Pizza I was used to. I even had to ask for ice for my drink. If I was lucky they’d have it, otherwise it was served room temperature. For the first time I stayed in a pension where the shower was in the main part of the bathroom, with no curtain, so one could conceivably sit on the toilet and shower simultaneously. At the time, with my 16-year-old brain, these cultural oddities were annoying, but in hindsight, they were just different. It’s safe to say this trip greatly impacted my life, as well as my future outlook on travel.

Fast-forward 29 years (yes, I’m 45 years old). These days, Rick Steves is more likely to be my travel bible, not Let’s Go. I don’t stay in youth hostels anymore.

I still like to do things on the cheap (which, it turns out, is usually the best way to “live like a local” when traveling) but not so cheap that I miss out on the little adventures that make a trip worthwhile.

This summer I’ll be putting my 17-year-old daughter on a plane by herself from Milan to Paris, where she will be met (we hope!) by a French family who will host her for two weeks. Emily is far more traveled than I was at her age, but I’m certain there will be some cultural differences that she finds annoying as well. I’m hopeful however, that she won’t need to sit on the toilet and shower at the same time.

“Remember what Bilbo used to say: it’s a dangerous business, going out your front door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” — J.R.R. Tolkien
A crucial element in the process of planning a European trip is deciding how you will get from place to place. This somewhat complex choice not only affects the pocketbook but is also a key determinant in that very important trip success measure—the fun factor. For some, two or three weeks of driving is the best possible way to travel. Others would rather eat their morning muesli with ground glass than get behind the wheel of a car in Europe. Still others go to Europe just to ride the trains. I am comfortable with both rail and car, and given the choice, prefer a four-hour drive or a six-hour train ride to a 60-minute commercial airline flight.

That pretty much sums up your choices: car, rail, and air. If money is not a consideration, a combination of rail and car—and once in a great while, air—will be the best solution for trips that plan to cover a lot of ground.

Given their sometimes very low fares, discount European airlines such as Germanwings, Brussels Airlines, easyJet, and Wind Jet are a definite option for a long trip. Europe’s rail companies, however, have responded to the cheap flights with reduced, advance-purchase fares of their own. Early this month I found a Berlin-Frankfurt June rail fare at the Deutsche Bahn web site (bahn.de) for $65 ... total, for two persons ... and you get there in a little over four hours. And why fly from London to the Continent when you can be in downtown Paris (two hours, 15 minutes) or Brussels (two hours) via Eurostar for about $85 to $125, depending on date and time of day? Still, there are times when intra-Europe air travel will be the least expensive and quickest way to get there. A Frankfurt to Rome train trip is as cheap as $124—provided you don’t mind sitting up on an overnight train. Travel during the day, however, and gemut.raileurope.com quotes $4$38 for a May second-class, one-way train ticket. At its shortest, the rail journey is 11 hours with two changes. On the other hand, EasyJet can get you there from Düsseldorf in two hours flight time for as little as $87.

However, the best answer for most two or even three contiguous-country itineraries is a combination of rail and automobile. You might, for example, spend a few days using a Swiss Pass to ride that country’s trains, postal buses, and lake boats, nipping across the border at the end of the Swiss journey to Singen, Germany to pick up an inexpensive rental car that you drop a week later in Berlin. For reference, a four-consecutive-days Swiss Pass for two persons is $496 and a compact car for a week in Germany is $188. That’s $684 for ground transport for an 11-day, two-country independent tour—in my opinion the ideal way to see the territory. The cheapest way, however, would be to rent the car in Germany for 11 days for $266 and tour the two countries by car. (Note: rental cars in Switzerland are nearly twice as expensive as they are in Germany and France).

For many travelers, however, it comes down to train vs. rental car—one or the other. Unfortunately there is no across-the-board answer or rule of thumb to apply when it comes to determining which is better. It depends on personal preference and a host of other factors, including: area to be traveled, countries to be visited, number in the traveling party, ratio of city to country travel, and of course, cost. Rail travel has steadily increased in price since the turn of the century, while car rental rates during that time have been more stable. In 2000, a compact car could be rented for one week in Germany for $157. Today, the price with tax is $188, a 20% increase. The four-day Germany Twin Pass that cost $131 per person in 2000, has jumped 60% to $209.

For the couple planning a two-week tour of three countries—say, Germany, Austria and Switzerland—the car is a more clear-cut cost winner. A three-country Eurail Select Pass for seven non-consecutive days travel for two persons is $888. A compact rental car in Germany for 14 days is $338. While that price difference makes the car seem like a “slam-dunk” choice, it’s closer than it looks. Fuel cost is more than ever an issue. In Germany a gallon of unleaded gas is about $8.50. A gas-powered, manual transmission, compact car in Europe averages about 33mpg. Thus a 1,000 mile vacation (Frankfurt-Zürich-Vienna-Munich) will consume around 30 gallons of gas for about $255.

For these examples, we’ve been talking about rail passes. For multiple train trips, they are usually, but not always, more economical than buying individual city-to-city tickets. The problem is determining which is less expensive; tickets or passes. Finding prices for European rail tickets is not easy. While fares within a specific country are usually readily available at the web site of that country’s rail system, it’s a different story with international fares. You will have to check a variety of web sites, some of which, like the French Rail site, are not so user-friendly.

In summary; for big distances it’s probably rail, for really big distances consider Europe’s discount airlines; and for the rest it’s car rental or rail...or some combination thereof.

Notes:

- A car is unnecessary in a large city.
- Fuel in Europe is $7-9 per gallon.
- Everything you take to Europe, everything you acquire while in Europe, you will carry on and off every train.
- Except in small towns, hotels that offer free parking are nearly extinct.
- Switzerland is the only country that can be seen as well by public transport as by a rental car.
- Checking luggage on discount European airlines is costly.
- At $3632, the three-month Global Eurail Pass (24 countries) for two persons is a super bargain...just over $20 per day/person.

Rail web sites:

- http://gemut.raileurope.com/index.html (Rail passes)
- bahn.de (German rail)
- rail.ch (Swiss rail)
- www.seat61.com (A guide to train travel)
- http://www.oebb.at (Austrian rail)
- www.italiarail.com (Italian rail)
- www.renfe.com (Spanish rail)
- www.sncf.com (French rail)
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hook. The Aircraft Toiletry Kit’s smart design might just leave you wondering how you ever traveled without it.

takes pressure off of your hand, wrist and shoulder while you’re on the move. The Ease 4-Wheeled bags (ranging from $340-$450) still offer Eagle Creek’s amazing “No Matter What” Warranty, which means that if your bag is ever damaged, no matter whose fault, Eagle Creek will repair or replace it. The Eagle Creek Ease line also includes two-wheeled uprights, wheeled duffels, totes, and a flight bag.

**ScotteVest Travel Vest**

Ever wondered just how much more you could carry on to a plane if you only had a few more pockets? With ScotteVest the answer is: a lot more! With 17 pockets on the women’s vest and 24 pockets on the men’s, wearing a ScotteVest Travel Vest ($125) is like having an extra piece of carry-on luggage. Pack your phone, camera, glasses, travel documents, keys, water bottle, maps, change, batteries, mp3 player, and more! The men’s vests (sizes medium and up) can even hold an iPad or comparable tablet. Clear touch pockets for your smart phone mean you don’t have to remove your phone from the pocket to see who’s calling. To go through airport security, simply take off your vest and pass it through the scanners. With a ScotteVest, you’ll save room in your carry-on and have everything you need at your fingertips.

**Eagle Creek Pack It Specter**

We love using Eagle Creek’s Pack-It Folders, Cubes, and Sacs. For years they’ve kept our packing organized and efficient, no matter the adventure. But with Pack-It Specter, they have never before been so thin and lightweight. Pack-It Specter consists of a Specter 18” Folder ($32), a Specter Cube ($16), a Specter Half Cube ($14), a Specter Quarter Cube ($12) and a Specter Sac ($14). These wonderful little packing aids work just like the original Pack-It products, only they weigh far less — 50 to 80 percent less! And their ultra-thin nylon rip-stop is so sheer you’ll be able to see what’s inside. Pack-It Specter is a definite improvement in helping you to pack a lighter and more organized carry-on.

**RFIDtec Wallets**

RFIDtec wallets from PacSafe are designed to block the RFID signals in your passport and credit cards. RFID (or radio frequency identification) chips are found in many credit cards and all U.S. passports issued since 2006. These chips emit a radio frequency that contains your banking and personal information. With this new technology comes a new form of theft. Hackers can scan for these radio

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"I was trampled to death by a man who believed his luggage would be the first piece off. If he were an experienced traveler, he would know that the first piece of luggage belongs to no one. It’s just a dummy suitcase to give everyone hope."— *ERMA BOMBECK*
They’re professionals at this in Russia, so no matter how many Jell-O shots or Jager shooters you might have downed at college mixers, no matter how good a drinker you might think you are, don’t forget that the Russians—any Russian—can drink you under the table.

— Anthony Bourdain

A Spotlight on New and Innovative...

PacSafe Slashproof Bags

We always turn to PacSafe when we need a bag that will protect our valuables. Their newly redesigned G2 line uses the same great slash-proof, lockable protection as before and has evolved to include RFID-blocking pockets in all of their new waist packs, shoulder bags and purses. The MetroSafe 200 G2 ($79.99) is one of our favorite shoulder bags. Made from sturdy ballistic nylon, the MetroSafe boasts internal stainless steel wires in the front panel and shoulder strap to thwart attempts at cutting into your bag. If you’re looking for something more feminine, the CitySafe 200 G2 ($79.99) offers the same safety features as the MetroSafe with a more purse-like look and feel. Both of these bags are also available in smaller versions for those who’d like to carry less.

Evolution Neck Pillow

Falling asleep on an airplane can be a pain in the neck! But the new Evolution Pillow ($29.95) from Cabeau solves that problem by cradling your head for perfect slumber—even in cramped airline seats. A toggle-tie on the front ensures that the pillow won’t shift out of position or fall when you’re asleep. It also allows you to twist the pillow around to the side or front to hold your head in the right position for you. A slip pocket on the side is handy for holding your iPod, so you can lull yourself to sleep with music. Or, if you prefer silence, the Evolution pillow comes with a pair of deluxe memory foam earplugs. It also comes with a handy storage pouch that includes a snap loop for attaching the pillow to the exterior of your purse or carry-on bag.

Briggs & Riley BRX Luggage

We are excited to carry BRX from Briggs & Riley — their lightest luggage line yet. BRX bags are soft-sided but still structured enough to maintain their shape and protect your belongings. They have a simple, casual style that is both appealing and functional for many types of travel. A clever pocketing system provides built-in organization and Briggs & Riley’s patented “outsider” handle system leaves you with a completely flat packing space inside. The entire line is covered by Briggs & Riley’s amazing “Simple as That” lifetime warranty, so you’ll never have to worry about your BRX bag being damaged. The line includes wheeled uprights ranging from 19 to 25 inches (from $280-$320), a 28 inch Rolling Duffel, a rugged and organized computer backpack, and a compact toiletry kit.

Kiva 21” Lightweight Carry-On

Kiva’s new 21” Upright Light Carry-On ($199.95) is a sporty and durable suitcase, and weighs an impressively lightweight 6.5 lbs! It comes in three fun colors and is made from 100% recycled fabric. Simple and easy-to-pack, the Kiva 21” Upright has plenty of organization, too—including two front pockets, a side water-bottle pocket, and a mesh pocket on the inside of the lid. If you’re having trouble fitting everything you need, you’ll find an expansion zipper that provides about 15% more packing space. It can handily add space to your bag, or you can use it to neatly compress your belongings after closing your stuffed bag.

“arles professionals at this in Russia, no matter how many Jell-O shots or Jager shooters you might have downed at college mixers, no matter how good a drinker you might think you are, don’t forget that the Russians—any Russian—can drink you under the table.” — Anthony Bourdain

END
by Nancy Bestor

I’ve never had any desire to be in the armed forces. And although my youngest daughter was intrigued when she heard that the military would pay for college after enlisting, I’m pretty sure neither of my kids will join up either. But I’ve always had some fascination with the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. Maybe it’s because my father served in the Air Force, or because Bob’s father was an officer in the Navy, but maybe the truth is much more shallow than that – maybe it’s because a man in uniform is awfully cute. Whatever the reason, I was delighted to visit the S.S. Midway in San Diego last month, on a college visits road trip our family took to Southern California.

The Midway (www.midway.org) was one of America’s longest serving aircraft carriers. Decommissioned in 1992, it is 972 feet long, and when fully operational could house more than 4,000 men and women at one time. And it was its awesome size that impressed me most. A person could get lost on the ship tour, and the flight deck could easily host several football games or dozens of basketball games at once. (An NCAA basketball game has been scheduled for the flight deck in November of 2012, between San Diego State and Syracuse.)

Here are a few facts. The typical sailor who served on the Midway was 19 years old. The kitchens onboard served as many as 13,000 meals a day, and the size of cookware on display in the galley is enormous. There were more than 1,500 telephones on the Midway. One link in its anchor weighs 130 pounds. More than three million gallons of ship and aviation fuel could be stored in its tanks. Another awe-inspiring stop on the tour was the bunk rooms for low level enlisted men. There were at least six men to a room with barely any room to move, let alone have any privacy.

The Midway really was a city at sea. Visitors can see the jail, the post office, the laundry room, three barber shops and as many as 60 displays of shipboard life throughout the vessel. One of my favorite sections is the aforementioned flight deck, where 27 restored aircraft that saw action in wars from World War II to Operation Desert Storm are on display. The price of a visit is $18 for adults, and $10 for children, and the self-guided audio tour takes about three hours. We only had an hour and a half and wished we could have stayed longer, but the rest of beautiful San Diego beckoned.

Our food adventure began with a visit to Little Italy, a San Diego neighborhood just outside of downtown, to see a friend and former Travel Essentials’ employee, Ditsy Claterbos (now a lawyer with the San Diego D.A.’s office!). Our Little Italy dining started with delicious breakfast crepes and excellent coffee at Fabrison’s French Creperie Café (www.fabrisons.com). At midday we snacked on yogurt at Yogurtland (www.yogurt-land.com). Some call it “the mecca of frozen yogurt” and I must say, my tangerine and vanilla yogurt with fresh bananas, kiwi and strawberries was outstanding. For dinner we chose the traditional Italian restaurant, Filippi’s Pizza Grotto (www.realcheesepizza.com), solely because the line to get in was out the door. We all shared a good pizza with "the works"; and Bob had the sausage and meatball ravioli. Mind you, the raviolis were filled with meat, and a large Italian sausage was laid over the raviolis and sauce. The food was good and the atmosphere old school family-style Italian.

Another good San Diego meal was fish tacos at the Blue Water Seafood Deck (torreypine.org) in La Jolla, down to Torrey Pines State Beach. We walked through the majestic Hotel del Coronado, and sat on the back deck of the “Del”, eating ice cream, chatting, and gazing at the ocean. Another stop on Coronado Island was a movie at the newly restored Art-Deco movie house, The Village Theater. This 1947 theater reopened last year, after being closed more than ten years. The theater boasts wonderfully modern seats, sound and screen and a very fun retro vibe.

"Funny, isn't it? The airlines go to all that trouble to keep you from taking a gun on board, then they just hand you a dinner roll you could kill a musk ox with." — DAVE BARRY

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like 23.5 x 15 x 10 even though it says 22 x 14 x 9 on their web sites. No nonsense carriers Southwest Airlines and Virgin America are the exception here. They each list a maximum measurement of 24 x 16 x 10. Their measurements logically include handles and wheels. Got it?

Now if you’re traveling on a foreign based airline, it gets a little tricky. While for the most part these airlines have similar sized carry-on restrictions as above, there are some curve balls to be aware of. Qantas for example lists a maximum carry-on size of 45 linear inches, but limits that same carry-on to 15 pounds. There is no way a fully packed 22-inch wheeled carry-on is going to weigh anywhere near 15 pounds. So always check your airline’s web site for the complete run down of sizes, weights, and most importantly, fees.

Bob and I traveled to Barcelona last fall via United Airlines with two maximum carry-on bags. We had no trouble carrying the bags on during the flight over, but on our return flight from Barcelona to Frankfurt, we were flying Lufthansa (even though we were ticketed by United), and our carry-ons were too big. Next to all the Europeans who carried on their tiny bags, I felt like a supersized American; in comparison our bags were huge. It wasn’t a problem though, as Lufthansa/United just checked them all the way through to Medford. On the down side, we did have to wait for them in Medford, which is always a little irritating at the end of a long trip.

A recent development in carry-on bags is the 20-inch wide body. Since so many travelers are carrying on luggage these days, flight attendants ask passengers when possible to stow their suitcase in the overhead “wheels out” or “head first”. This allows more bags to fit. Depending on the plane, and the shape of a 22-inch suitcase, sometimes a legal carry-on bag won’t fit “wheels out” (at least if the overhead bin door has to shut!).

Thus luggage companies introduced the 20-inch wide body. Because it’s shorter, the 20-inch wide body fits more easily “wheels out”, but the two extra inches of width make the packing capacity about the same as a standard 22-inch bag.

Let me stress though that the sizes listed above are the “legal” carry-on limits. There are certainly times when bags of any size are denied carry-on. One reason is that although your suitcase may measure 22 x 14 x 9, if you’ve over-stuffed the outside pockets, its actual measurements may end up larger than the legal limit, and if you’re asked to put your suitcase into the carry-on box to see if it is legal carry-on size, it may not fit, even if you push it as hard as possible (I’m speaking from experience here). You can also be denied if you board later in the process and other passengers have already filled the overhead bins. This is an excellent reason to board your flight as soon as your section is called. While I hate sitting in a cramped airline seat longer than I have to, I’m willing to do it if it means my carry-on bag gets on the plane.

Generally speaking, the current rules of carry-ons are as follows: each passenger is allowed one maximum sized carry-on bag for overhead storage and one “personal item” to be stored under the seat in front of you. Keep in mind that there are no guidelines for the personal item, so a gate attendant can deny your personal item as being too big at any time. Most airlines loosely define a personal item as a small backpack, a purse, or briefcase.

Also be aware that at any time, an airline can change their carry-on rules. So once again, always check your airline’s web site for the most up-to-date information. Allegiant Air for example just announced they will begin charging $25 for a carry-on bag that has to go into the overhead compartment. If you can squeeze it under your seat, a carry-on bag on Allegiant is still free.

One way airline passengers are getting around the whole carry-on restriction is by wearing a multi-pocketed travel vest. Our favorite, by ScotteVest (see page 4), boasts 17-24 pockets (the women’s vest has fewer pockets than the men’s) and can fit everything from a passport or phone to a water bottle or iPad. Wear your carry-on bag? Why not?

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Market and Grill (www.bluewater.sandiegan.com). Another line out the door promised good things, as did Guy Fieri on Diner’s, Drive-In’s and Dives. Although we waited a long time for our food, the tacos did not disappoint. The fish was fresh, and my mahi-mahi and ahi tuna tacos were excellent.

We stopped for a brief time at Old Town San Diego State Historic Park (www.oldtownsandiego.org), but it didn’t hold our interest for long. Other than an interesting display of a stagecoach and luggage from the 1800’s in the Wells Fargo Museum (we do own a travel store, so of course we’d find this interesting!), the State Historic Park was mostly, in our opinion, a collection of Mexican restaurants for gringos and tchotchke stores in restored historical buildings.

The main reason for our visit to San Diego was to take our daughters on a tour of the University of San Diego (www.sandiego.edu), and it’s worth a stop, even if you are not thinking about college. Beautifully situated on a hill overlooking San Diego, the 180-acre campus is stunning. And forget about my daughters, I’m thinking about going back to college there myself. Maybe I’ll major in military studies.
12th Annual Photo Contest and Other Travel Tidbits

Budding travel photographers take note! Details will soon be forthcoming on Travel Essentials’ 12th Annual Travel Photo Contest. This year we’ll be offering our best prizes ever, including a four piece set of Briggs & Riley luggage, worth more than $800, travel clothing from ExOfficio, Tilley hats, travel underwear, a Yala Silk Dreamsack and much more. But wait, enter the photo contest and you’ll also have the chance to win a set of Ginsu knives (just kidding!). The photo contest dates, rules, and details will be announced via email and on our Facebook page, so if you don’t get emails from us, now is the time to sign up!

If you send us your email address, you’ll get our monthly e-news brief, full of first person travel stories and updated travel news. You’ll also be the first to know about great sales we offer online and in the store. To sign up, send an email with your name, city, and state to: service@travelessentials.com.

Rest assured, we’ll never sell or give away your information.

We’re always looking for new travel related web sites, to inspire us to hit the road, help us find the best deal, and to read reviews and information on places to visit and stay. The longer I sit at the computer and surf the internet, the more useful web sites I find. Hard to believe just 20 years ago I relied solely on a travel agent to help me with my travel plans.

Here are a few web sites that you might not have heard of that I currently frequent:

www.airfarewatchdog.com — This is a good site for (you guessed it) watching airfares. Today they list the cheapest fares for me out of Medford, Oregon to Oakland, CA. How did they know I’m looking for flights for my kids on this route this summer? Just one of the internet’s many mysteries.

www.nerdwallet.com — A website whose tagline is “we do the homework for you.” Where were they in 1987 when I had to write a 10 page paper on the future of journalism? (FYI, I wrote that newspapers would be around forever. Ha!) In addition to comparing gas prices and checking account and credit card fees, nerdwallet also compares airline fees and travel credit card charges.

blog.tsa.gov — Yes, this is in fact the blog of current happenings at the Travel Security Administration, and it might sound nerdy that I like reading this website, but I do! Among other TSA and travel news, TSA employee Blogger Bob writes a week in review with updates on such things as how many concealed firearms were found in carry-on luggage. Last week’s review included a story about a man who when told he could not carry a can of soup on a flight, tried to hide it in his pants. Blogger Bob wrote “no soup for you.” True story. I couldn’t make it up if I tried.

www.lovehomeswap.com — One of these days, I’m going to try a home swap. I stay in someone’s home for a week (preferably in Majorca) and they stay in mine. No dollars will be exchanged. There are many home swap programs out there (including www.homeexchange.com), but this one’s getting a lot of press lately. And the website looks a lot like a match-making site (not that I’ve looked at any, Bob).