A Tale of Two Countries—Visiting St. Martin/St. Maarten

by Nancy Bestor

There are many reasons to vacation on a Caribbean island. Beautiful white sandy beaches, clear, warm water with exotic tropical fish swimming just below the surface, and a laid back atmosphere, to name a few. But when that island is a 37-square mile patch of land governed by two nations, France on one side and the Netherlands on the other, it gets even more interesting. And the fact that jumbo jets practically land on top of your head is just icing on the cake.

Over spring break our family traveled to St. Martin/St. Maarten for a weeklong holiday that met all the requirements of a tropical vacation: eating, swimming and relaxing in the sun. It was a perfect place to enjoy all three activities, with the bonus of speaking French and eating delicious fresh baked baguettes on the quiet side, and heading over to the livelier and more developed Dutch side for a bit more action. St. Martin/St. Maarten really IS the best of both worlds, and its two nations really ARE different, even though they share the same small island.

The airport is located on the Dutch side. When we arrived, our jet plane practically clipping the hair of people on the beach just in front of the runway (more on that later), I was a little disappointed. St. Maarten has an uber Euro-party feel to it, with brightly lit casinos, discotheques and naked lady dancing parlors. But after picking up our rental car and driving just 15 minutes over the “border” into St. Martin, it felt like we were in the French

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A Carry-on is a Carry-on is a Carry-on

by Nancy Bestor

A lot of customers have recently expressed concern over the “new” restrictions for carry-on luggage. Well, here’s the scoop: There are no new carry-on restrictions. THEY HAVE NOT CHANGED. We’ve been in business for 20 years, and in that time, the maximum carry-on size has always been 22 x 14 x 9 inches. But that doesn’t mean that nothing has changed. Here are the details.

First off, what has led to this confusion? United Airlines simply announced recently that they would begin strictly enforcing their carry-on regulations. Customers with oversized bags would now be required to check them and pay checked baggage fees where applicable. So United has not changed the size of carry-on bags. Instead they have vowed to pay closer attention to make sure travelers bags are in fact, no larger than 22 x 14 x 9. Gate agents have been trained to “eyeball” bags to make certain they are carry-on size. If there is a

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countryside, albeit one with sandy beaches and blue Caribbean waters. This, I thought to myself, was more my speed. St. Martin is definitely the more laid-back side of the island, and I was glad we had chosen it. It turned out though that our family really enjoyed both sides of the island, exploring quiet beaches in St. Martin, and dancing the night away and gambling all our earnings on the Dutch side. Okay, really we just ate on the Dutch side, but we enjoyed our meals so much that we returned to a couple of the eateries multiple times. We also couldn’t pass up the opportunity to get close and personal with the planes landing at Juliana Airport.

Maho Beach lies right at the end of the Princess Juliana Airport runway. At 7,152 feet, Juliana’s runway is plenty long for small and mid sized planes, but it’s the 747s and Airbus A340s that fly in from the States and Europe that create exciting, low altitude flyover landings, directly over Maho Beach. I had heard about the heart racing fun of watching planes come in right over your head, and I had seen pictures as well. None of this prepared me for the real thing.

We arrived in the late morning, ready for the big jets that begin coming in around 11am. The first planes to land were small to mid-sized, and people aren’t kidding when they say that it looks like they are headed right at you, propellers blazing. We took a few pictures, and chuckled with each other, as if to say, “Yes, that was fun, but not scary or anything. Bring on the big boys!”

And then they came. As the first big one appeared in the distance, pointed right at me, I was standing on the curb at the edge of the beach. As it got closer and lower, I stepped off the curb onto the sand. As it got closer and lower still, I sat down. And even then, it was far closer and way lower than I expected. Now I know jets land safely all day, every day here, but just this once, I wondered, was the pilot making a mistake? Its engines howled as it passed, and my hat blew right off, along with many of the hats of those around me. Almost instantly after it cleared our heads, its tires smoked and squealed as they hit the runway just a few yards away, and a loud cheer erupted from the crowd. My heart stopped beating furiously, and I found myself thinking, “Again! Do it again!”

Two other Dutch side favorites revolve around my favorite pastime: eating. The first is Hilma’s Windsor Castle, a food shack run by Hilma herself, and once featured in a New York Times article by Anthony Bourdain. Hilma opens at 9am and serves food until about 3pm, or whenever she runs out. She features just a few items, such as soup and fried chicken, but her johnny cakes are my favorite. Johnny cakes are a stuffed fried sandwich of sorts, filled with such delectable goodness as salt fish, barbecued chicken, or pulled pork. We tried a little bit of everything on our two trips, and it was all very good. Her “castle” has just four stools out front, where you can visit with Hilma while eating her delicious and inexpensive food. Both times we visited, some of the same folks were just sitting on the stools drinking beer and chatting. Hilma is delightful, and her food is not to be missed.

Another great, though somewhat odd, spot is The Carousel, an exquisitely restored indoor Italian carousel that also sells fabulous gelato. Frankly, their offerings were as good as any we had on our recent trip to Italy. The building and carousel are quite fancy, and oddly, both were mostly deserted on our two visits, but that just meant we could get our gelato that much quicker.

Sometimes things just work out, and on this trip we were lucky enough to be on St. Martin during the Harmony Nights of Grand Case. Every Tuesday evening from late January to the end of March, the town of Grand Case on the French side closes off its main street to car traffic and hosts a Mardi Gras celebration, complete with live music, roadside barbecue stands (called lolos) and even a Mardi Gras parade. My favorite part, you’ll be shocked to learn, was the food. Everything from delicious ribs and crab, macaroni salad and baked beans were all available and all prepared on outdoor grills.

“Everything you’re sure is right can be wrong in another place.”
—Barbara Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible

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question, they might ask a traveler to put their bag into the bag-sizing boxes, located at ticket and gate counters.

Can a traveler over-pack a legal 22 x 14 x 9 inch carry-on size suitcase and thus keep it from fitting in to the bag-sizing box? Of course they can! Outside pockets are the biggest culprit for overstuffing. Those pockets should NOT be stuffed to the gills if you are worried about fitting your suitcase into the bag-sizing box.

Here’s our experience with carry-on bags on United Airlines from our trip to the Caribbean, after United made their enforcement changes. Each of the four of us took a fully-packed, maximum carry-on sized rolling suitcase on three separate United flights out of Medford, Oregon, and three separate flights back home from St. Martin. Three of our bags were 22 x 14 x 9, and one was a wide-body carry-on, measuring 20 x 15.5 x 7.5. On every one of our flights all of our bags fit into the on board overhead compartments. We traveled through Medford, San Francisco and Newark airports, and not once were we questioned about the size of our bags, nor were we asked to test them in a bag-sizing box. Even though every flight we were on was full, and we were never the first to board, we had no problems.

United has also introduced requirements for the “personal” item that all passengers are allowed to bring on board in addition to their carry-on suitcase. This personal item can measure no larger than 17 x 10 x 9. As with our carry-on suitcases, however, no one questioned the sizes of our personal items. Each of our daughters carried a school-sized backpack on board, I carried a large tote bag, and Bob carried a large Eagle Creek daypack.

To make sure, we recently headed to the Medford Airport to test several of our carry-on suitcases in the United, Delta and Alaska bag-sizing boxes. In every case, from the Eagle Creek Tarmac and Adventure Series 2-Wheeled and 4-Wheeled 22-inch bags, to the Briggs and Riley Transcend 22-inch and 20-inch Wide Body bags, all the suitcases fit into all of the sizing boxes. Please note that two of these bags, while fitting completely into the box, did stick out over the top of the box. In each case it was less than an inch and if an airline employee called a traveler out on one of these bags, they would really be splitting hairs.

Keep in mind that any traveler can be denied carrying on a complying bag if the airplane’s overhead compartments are full. So the best way to guarantee your bag getting on the plane is to board as early as possible. And one more reminder: don’t put anything in your bag that you cannot live without, just in case you do end up having to check it. So don’t put your medications in it, and don’t put valuables in it either.

I have no problem with United and other carriers enforcing their carry-on rules. If it really speeds up the boarding process, I’m all for it. However, I don’t believe for a minute that this is the reason behind their new enforcement policy. Airline profits are at record highs and checked baggage fees are one of the reasons. So, if you’ve got a carry-on sized bag (remember, 22 x14 x 9), by all means take it on board and save yourself some money. United Airlines is making enough money off everyone else, they don’t need your $25 too.

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“An adventure is never an adventure when it happens. An adventure is simply physical and emotional discomfort recollected in tranquility.” —Tim CAHILL.
The Best Gear for Summer (and other!) Travels

by Ember Hood

The summer travel season is heating up and we’ve got several great travel items that will make planning and packing for your next trip much easier and more enjoyable! And remember, we stand behind everything we sell at Travel Essentials. If you’re unhappy with anything you purchase from us for any reason, we’re happy to return your money, and help you find the right item. So what have you got to lose?

Eagle Creek Adventure 4-Wheelers

Four-Wheeled Adventure bags offer the perfect combination of easy mobility, durability, and packing space. This rolling bag is available in three sizes—a carry-on friendly 22” ($295), and two checkable sizes, a 25” ($335) and a large 28” ($375). The four-wheeled design ensures that they are up for any and all of your adventures and of course, they are backed by Eagle Creek’s legendary “No Matter What” Lifetime Warranty!

Aero-Tray

There’s never enough room when you’re flying. With seat space and tray tables smaller than ever, just how are you supposed to get anything done on the plane? The Aero-Tray Portable Workstation ($59.95) wants to help. Its split-level design offers a variety of positions ideal for holding a laptop, tablet computer, book or magazine. It also features a slide-away cup holder that keeps drinks away from precious electronics. When folded flat, the Aero-Tray easily fits into a standard laptop brief and even doubles as a protective case for small devices.

IVAR Backpacks

The weight of a backpack can be unbearable at times, especially when loaded with books, laptops, and other heavy items. But IVAR’s revolutionary new backpack line evenly distributes the weight inside your bag, putting less pressure on your lower back, and helping you carry your load evenly. And, while its interior “shelf system” distributes that weight, it also keeps your belongings organized and accessible. Even the smallest IVAR Backpack, (the Urban 20-$69.95) holds a 15” laptop and makes a great day-bag for just about any adventure, while toting everything you need. And if more space is required we carry a large selection of IVAR’s offerings.

Tilley Travel Socks

Tilley’s Quick-Dry Travel Socks ($16) are guaranteed to remain “un-holey” for three years. Featuring ribbed arches that cradle your feet and moisture-escape panels that wick sweat away from your

“Travel isn’t always pretty or comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart. But that’s okay. The journey changes you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind.” — ANTHONY BOURDAIN
The Best Gear for Summer (and other!) Travels..

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It always rains on tents. Rainstorms will travel thousands of miles, against prevailing winds, for the opportunity to rain on a tent.” — DAVE BARRY

skin, they are comfortable, lightweight and designed to dry overnight. Wash them in your hotel sink in the evening and slip them back on, clean and dry, first thing in the morning. Pack two pair and wear one while the other dries back at the hotel and you’ll have lots more room in your bag for souvenirs!

311 Bag/Nalgene Bottles
The 3-1-1 One-Quart Toiletry Pouch ($6.95) is a durable, re-usable, clear plastic pouch that complies with the TSA’s carry-on liquids 3-1-1 regulation—

that filters water as you drink. Perfect for travel to areas with unreliable water, it filters out dirt and particulates, bacteria and any protozoa and single-cell parasites like Giardia. Lightweight and easy to use, the LifeStraw is great for helping you make sure water is safe to drink. For each LifeStraw sold, one school child in the developing world gets clean water for an entire school year. (Note: the LifeStraw is not designed to stop viruses, which are too small for the filter to catch. Ask us about the SteriPen for virus protection.)

RFID Wallets from Eagle Creek
RFID chips are showing up in more and more credit cards and ID cards. U.S. passports have used them since 2006, which, with the 10-year life of a passport, means that soon all passports will have

that allows you three-ounce bottles in a one-quart bag, one bag per passenger. In combination with leak-proof Nalgene travel bottles, which come in a variety of sizes from a quarter of an ounce to three ounces and above (though, the larger sizes are not carry-on friendly), you’ll glide through security with all the shampoo, lotion, mouthwash and hair gel you’ll need for adventure.

LifeStraw
The LifeStraw Personal Water Filter ($19.95) is a genius filtration system

one. Eagle Creek is keeping up with this surge in RFID technology by adding protective, RFID-blocking lining and/or pockets in many of their wallets and bags. Their RFID-Blocker Zip Stash ($16), is the perfect sized pouch for holding a handful of credit cards or your ID, and some cash. If you need something a little larger, the new RFID Mini Tablet Crossbody ($65) is a small purse with room for a mini tablet. These are just two of a growing number of offerings

from Eagle Creek that block the RFID signals from credit cards and passports and protect valuable personal and financial information in this digital age.

Retiring Abroad Books
Who hasn’t dreamt of retiring to a beautiful, warm, exotic and inexpensive locale? Whether you’re seek urban excitement or rural tranquility, the dream

of retiring abroad doesn’t have to die in the planning stages. Books like The Grown Up’s Guide to Running Away From Home ($14.95) and Retirement Without Borders ($19.95) can put you on track to making it a reality. Both cover the practicalities of living abroad like real estate, healthcare, taxes, residency, weather and red tape. If you’re considering retiring abroad, or perhaps extended stays abroad, these titles deliver the inside information you’ll need from retirees who have been there.

“IT always rains on tents. Rainstorms will travel thousands of miles, against prevailing winds, for the opportunity to rain on a tent.” — DAVE BARRY
We naively started our business with the simple idea of being a travel book and map store, and the intention to dabble in travel accessories like bags and purses and fun clocks with world maps on them. But we quickly realized that if we wanted to survive, we would need more merchandise—lots more merchandise. (Note the strategic placement of plants and chairs in the photo of Travel Essentials retail space during its first year of business.) So we expanded into luggage, electrical adapters and converters, travel clothing, and many, many, many different types of travel accessories. Nowadays, customers from near and far regularly tell us we’ve got the best selection of travel “stuff” anywhere. That’s always nice to hear because we are continually on the look out for new and better products.

We are fortunate in many ways. One being that a travel store is quite a fun business to run. When just about anybody walks in our front door they are likely either in the midst of planning an exciting adventure or they are fondly reminded of past journeys. Everyone has great travel stories to share, and it’s always a pleasure to hear where they have been and where they are going next. We’ve devised many of our own trip itineraries from tips received from our customers, who always provide us extra inspiration to travel to new and exotic locations.

It’s also great to be in a vibrant tourist town that people return to again and again. We see many of the same visitors every year. Whether they are in town to see Shakespeare plays, raft the Rogue or just get a healthy dose of our perfect summer weather, we appreciate that they continue to keep us on their Ashland to do list by stopping in to say hello and fill us in on their most recent travels. Lots of customers have become dear family friends who have enriched our lives in ways too numerous to count. And, of course, we’ve had the pleasure to hire and work with a number of great people, many who have passed through Travel Essentials on their way to their own successful professional careers, and most of whom we keep in contact with today.

Owning a retail business is not without its trials and tribulations....the economic downturn in the fall of 2008 comes to mind. But we have managed to stick out the tough times, (at least so far!), and we take great pride in being one of a small but solid group of Ashland retail shops that have been in business for 20 years. We know travelers can get most (if not all) of what we offer elsewhere and so we’re grateful when they choose us as their travel gear supplier. We hope they do so because of the personal service and real world experience we strive to provide.

strategic placement of plants and chairs in the photo of Travel Essentials retail space during its first year of business.)
I am a fan of the foreign pharmacy. For some strange reason, I like looking at their wares and trying to figure out just how the items available for purchase might help a person's ailments. I have fond memories of being in the pharmacies of many different countries. One stand out is the time we needed antibiotics for my youngest daughter in Vietnam when she was seven. Sarah is allergic to penicillin, so our pediatrician emailed me the names of several other antibiotics that she could take for her illness. After trying to explain to the Vietnamese pharmacist what we were looking for, he invited me behind the counter to find the medicine myself. I did, and it was less than $2. I also remember purchases such as a skin cream in Switzerland, with a high percentage of cortisone, as well as odd dental floss picks in Japan.

Perhaps another reason I like pharmacies outside the United States so much is because they have lots of stuff that you can’t get in the United States. Take Ibuprofen cream for example. When I fell on a slippery road outside my in-laws last winter, my mother-in-law loaned me Ibuprofen cream that she purchased in Germany. It’s exactly what it sounds like, a topical cream with Ibuprofen. Seems like a brilliant idea to me, when you’ve got a nasty bruise on your gluteus maximus (as sadly, I did), or a sprained wrist. But Ibuprofen cream is not legal in the US. So on our recent trip to the Caribbean, when we stopped in to a French pharmacy to pick up some reading glasses for Bob, I also picked up a tube of Ibuprofen cream. (I thought about filling a suitcase with tubes, and selling them on the black market, but I’m not brave, nor willing to dress up like a priest as Matthew McConaughey did in The Dallas Buyers Club.) When I told the pharmacist that I was buying the cream because we could not get it in the United States, he rolled his eyes.

Bob, on the other hand, was in the pharmacy to pick up a new pair of reading glasses, because his favorites had fallen out of the large hole in his shorts. After telling the French pharmacist the strength he needed, the man kindly brought out every pair of men’s reading glasses in Bob’s required strength. In the meantime, Bob and I found a pair that we liked, but it wasn’t in the large group that the pharmacist had brought out. We asked if he had the style we liked in his required strength, and after a slight hesitation, he said yes, and found the pair for Bob. We made our purchases, and went happily on our way.

Later that evening, when Bob was wearing his new glasses, he came to a realization. The glasses he had chosen were ladies glasses, and thus they had not been in the bunch the pharmacist had brought out for him to peruse. This made Bob much happier with his purchase. For if he was going to make an impression in a foreign country, he wanted to do it in style, or at least with ladies glasses.

—Nancy Bestor came to the realization that she was getting older when she started finding men who wear reading glasses at the end of their noses attractive. Yes, even men with ladies reading glasses.
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There’s quite a bit of duty-free shopping available on St. Maarten, but it would be a huge understatement to say that we are not big shoppers. If you’re looking for designer perfumes and makeup, fancy watches and jewelry, or cameras and cigars, then St. Maarten will be a shopper’s paradise. We couldn’t even bring ourselves to spend any time walking through the booths of the waterfront market. The “handicrafts” and souvenirs were all pretty tacky, and I’m quite certain they weren’t made on the island. I really do love to bring back something for our home from every destination we visit, but I’m just not looking for the ashtray or shot glass that says St. Maarten. Call me crazy.

We stayed at a lovely beachside cottage-like condo on Nettle Bay. We rented the place, which had a full kitchen and slept four, on www.vrbo.com, for about $1400 for the week. The location was perfect, and the lodging great. We were both walking distance from an excellent boulangerie and patisserie, and right on the beach. What more could you ask for?

Notes:
We booked our airfare with frequent flyer miles, so perhaps our 18 hour Medford, San Francisco, Newark, St. Martin routing was not the most direct. But let’s face it, getting anywhere quickly from the Rogue Valley International Airport can often be a bit of a challenge.

We rented a car on the island through Hotwire, for about $250 for a week, a pretty good fare in my opinion. A car really is necessary to get anywhere on St. Martin/St. Maarten.

There is no “border crossing” between St. Martin and St. Maarten, just an old beat up sign. The French side of the island operates on the Euro, and the Dutch side on the Antillean guilder, but on the Dutch side, we paid exclusively in US dollars.

—Nancy Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. In addition to watching planes fly mere centimeters above her head, the most daring thing she has ever done is...... well, she’s pretty sure she’s at least read about daring things. Does that count?