

# Emotional baggage

There's much more to packing a suitcase than grabbing and stuffing, writes **Caroline Baum**.

**I**HAVE AN AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE TO suitcases. It has something to do with my father being a refugee. In 1938, at the age of 10, he left Vienna at short notice as part of *kindertransport*, a rescue operation to remove Jewish children from Nazi territory.

He was allowed to take one piece of hand luggage, which may explain why he became so adept at packing at a very young age. Ever since, my father has been emotional around suitcases. Freud would have had a field day with his decision to become a travel agent.

To say he carried heavy baggage through life is true in both a physical and psychological sense. In that small case he packed, his precious stamp collection (for which he had to get an export permit from the Nazis) took up more space than sensible items such as warm clothes.

As an adult, he compensated with a suite of leather bags that required counting at airports, like children, to make sure none had gone missing. "Where is the shoe bag?" he would yell in a state of high agitation from one bend on a conveyor belt to another, having stationed my mother and myself like sentinels to yank the rigid cases off the humming rubber snake, fearful someone would steal them if we were not prompt enough.

Even hand luggage in those days was bulky – solid and structured like a corset, instead of soft and malleable, like today. My mother travelled with a cumbersome vanity case the size of a small hatbox, which clicked shut in a pleasing way. Inside, all her travel-size opaque ridged plastic bottles of cosmetics and unguents lined its rounded contours, held in place by flesh-



coloured, nylon elasticised pockets. In departure lounges, waiting to board, I amused myself rearranging these like the objects in a doll's house, swapping the bottles from pocket to pocket as if from room to room, making them fit more snugly like pieces in a puzzle. Watching my parents wrangling luggage that refused to be lifted or dragged (in the days before wheels), I made a mental note to always travel light.

THE RITUAL BEGINS A WEEK BEFORE DEPARTURE, when I lay clothes out on the bed in the spare room, triggering a quiet thrum of anticipation.

I love the second guessing involved: what will the weather be like? What sort of occasions will I need to be prepared for? As I fold and roll each item, I imagine the situations in which I might wear them, like rehearsing lines for witty conversation. But that's not as extreme as a friend who has a packing diagram. Truly. One axis is

for types of weather, the other is for parts of the body. She uses it unflinchingly. Other friends have time-saving packing lists for work trips. My husband is a terrible packer. He combines the techniques of folding and rolling into one called stuffing. Shirts and jackets are bunched indiscriminately, creating additional volume, displacing shoulder pads and creating permanent creases where there should be none.

I find this so painful to watch that I have taken over sole responsibility for all packing in our household. Mind you, I do trip up. When he had to attend a black-tie function recently for a gala preview of his latest film, I forgot to pack his best suit and had to send it by Fedex, creating nail-biting tension as it winged its unaccompanied way across the world in time for a French premiere, punctuated by occasional bulletins from the courier, as if Interpol were tracking a fugitive: "It has reached Paris" ... "It is now in Bordeaux" ... "It is waiting for the delivery bike".

When he goes on business trips to countries where I don't think he will be able to pronounce "Do you have an iron?", I steam press his shirts, fold them with origami precision and, yes, okay, I wrap them individually in tissue paper to minimise creasing. I find the process quite restful.

Now friends ask me to help them pack. I am pretty ruthless about only allowing for one pair of boots, despite appeals about varying heel heights or arguments about the appeal of leather versus suede. I always insist on rainwear.

In one case, when a friend was interstate, we conducted the entire exercise via Skype, with her holding up garments for show and tell and me approving and vetoing on screen, despite poor reception.

I have no idea whether half of what I said yes to was the right colour or weight, but it seemed to work – largely because I insisted she take a coat on a trans-seasonal trip to China.

The problem for me is not the packing, but the unpacking. Coming home broke and jet lagged, it's hard to find joy in liberating compartments bulging with dirty socks.

I leave the case sprawled open on the bedroom floor, things spilling from hidden pockets like guts from roadkill, trying to extend the lingering sensations of being away till the very last moment, when I can no longer do without something that is buried on the very bottom layer.

The emptied shell returns to its place under the bed, a husk hollowed of all promise until the next adventure. **GW**

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