

The Balancing Act

Tips to Balance Your Life and Keep You Emotionally and Physically Fit

Leave the Stress at Home: Tips for Safe Holiday Travel

As the holiday season rolls in, many of us start anxiously counting down the days until a well-deserved vacation. Unfortunately, things don't always go as smoothly as envisioned.

The holiday months are a perfect time to visit friends and relatives or, if you're lucky, jet off to relaxation, adventure and warmer climates.

Luckily, there are many simple things you can do to maximize your chances of a safe, stress-free and enjoyable vacation:

Know before you go. Avoid the stress of trying to find your destination by looking up the address on an Internet mapping site, switching on the GPS, or bringing your trusty map. Always carry the phone number of the person you're visiting so you can pull over and make a quick call to let hosts know if you're going to be late, get stuck in traffic or are lost.

If travelling farther a field, take some time to learn as much as you can about the place you're visiting—including its weather, local customs and places to avoid. If the country's official language isn't English, make an effort to learn a few basic phrases.

Don't leave things to the last minute. Whether you're heading out on a road trip or catching a flight, the day of your departure is almost guaranteed to be chaotic—especially if you're travelling with kids.



Take some of the pressure off by making any needed trips to the gas station, bank or convenience store the night before and packing snacks in advance. If you're renting a car, hopping on a train or flying out, it never hurts to confirm reservations, call to find out about delays or listen to traffic reports on the radio before leaving home.

Back up your documents if you're crossing the border or going overseas. Take copies of your passport and other important documents, and keep them separate from the originals. Know who you need to contact if your information is lost or stolen and keep these phone numbers accessible in several places—e.g., your wallet and in your suitcase. Keep important documents—cash and credit cards—in a money belt you can wear under your clothing to keep pickpockets at bay.

Don't forget the people back home.

Leave a detailed itinerary of your trip with family or friends who aren't joining you. Be sure to include information about the places you'll be staying and visiting, including contact numbers for hotels or relatives. Where possible, check-in by phone or e-mail a few times during the trip. If you keep other people aware of your travel details, they might be able to get you help in an emergency situation.

Pack an emergency kit for the car.

Wise drivers always carry the basics in case of a roadside breakdown, accident or other auto issue including: booster cables, a flashlight, flares, a shovel (in case you get stuck) and a blanket to keep you warm should you get stranded in freezing temperatures. Make sure your car is also equipped with a spare tire and a jack in case you get a flat tire.

Pack smart. Think you need 10 outfits for a three day trip? Think again. Experienced travellers know that less is more when it comes to packing. Smaller lighter luggage will keep car trips more comfortable and will spare your back the extra stress if you're hauling a bag onto a bus, train or plane.

And remember, heightened security means that airports now have strict guidelines around what you can bring on your flight. Research the latest prohibited items list (it changes often) and remove anything questionable from your carry on. Airlines often also charge penalties for overweight luggage, so a little care can save you time, money and a lot of hassle.

Get there early. While no one likes waiting around the train station, bus depot or airport, arriving and lining up as early as possible will reduce your stress and ensure you don't miss your ride. Giving yourself enough time to get to where you need to go will not only leave you feeling calmer, it may also help you get a prime seat.

Be prepared to wait. With unpredictable weather and high number of travellers crossing the border or flying, there's a very good chance of being delayed. Pack extra food, water and 'entertainment' like books, crosswords and toys to keep restless kids occupied.

Stand out! (At least with your luggage). Trying to find your black suitcase in a sea of black luggage can be next to impossible, so attach a brightly coloured tag or ribbon, or choose a suitcase design that stands out. This will also prevent others from mistakenly picking up your items. Also make sure to include your contact information on each piece of checked baggage. This can make it easier for the airline to return it to you if it gets put on the wrong flight.

While it's impossible to guarantee a stress-free trip, a little research and advance preparation can go a long way towards making sure the only 'adventure' you experience is a fun and relaxing vacation.