

Detailed comments on ‘The mother of all overseas travel checklists’

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How often have we read horror stories about travellers coming to grief far from home – often because they forgot to check some of the finer details in their travel plans?

One way to avoid some of this possible grief is careful preparation and planning – particularly if you’re thinking of a do-it-yourself holiday with several stops along the way.

The checklist provided below is based on one I have been using for many years, but I have also expanded it through additional research and the inclusion of many helpful suggestions from Ken Gill and Chris Bonnor during the proofreading stage.

Whilst targeted at international travel, it also definitely applies to domestic travel as well.

In its current state this checklist is obviously very detailed. You need to decide what works for you and ignore or delete the rest. To make this easy for you, I have also provided an abbreviated version of it as a Microsoft Word document that you can download and edit to your heart’s content. Please see my website article called ***The mother of all overseas travel checklists – Microsoft Word version***, but also please note that you will first have to download it to your computer as a Word document before you can access it.

Action	Comments
Research your destinations	
Create a new trip folder on your computer into which you can progressively save all your research information and essential documents.	Eventually this folder will contain digital copies of every important document and file. <i>Just before you leave home you should save a copy of it to Dropbox, iCloud or OneDrive so that it is accessible online no matter where you are in the world.</i> <i>In addition, having all your documents and information in one place will make it easy to print out paper copies or retrieve information at the touch of a button.</i>
Commence detailed research on your destinations, bookmark useful websites, save relevant information to your new trip folder.	This will allow you to formulate a general plan, i.e. where to go, when to go, for how long in each place, how to get there, possible tours and attractions, accommodation needs etc. Rome2rio is a useful website for working out how to get from one place to another and how long that might take.
Check Smartraveller for warnings and general travel advice about your destinations.	Be fully informed before you pay any money. Advice from Smartraveller can include current risks, precautions and practical information on safety, security, local laws and health issues. Of particular importance is the information on <i>entry and exit requirements</i> .
Also subscribe to Smartraveller to receive the latest travel advice on each destination.	You will need to sign into your Smartraveller account (or sign up if you don’t already have one) so that you can subscribe to this free email service. You then nominate which countries to want to receive information about.
Confirm key dates, start making bookings and take out travel insurance	
Develop a draft itinerary and confirm key dates for your trip – essential flights, cruises, tours, accommodation etc.	At some stage you will need to settle on key departure and arrival dates for each part of your trip, plus specific tour and cruise dates etc.

	Also consider arriving in places at least one or two days before a cruise or tour departs.
Start booking these essential items so that your critical dates, flights, tours etc are locked in.	This could be through your favourite travel agent, directly online or a mixture of both. There are pros and cons to each method.
Can you pay for some of these using a credit card that offers complimentary overseas travel insurance, thereby providing you with overseas travel insurance at the same time as you pay for your trip?	Some credit cards offer free overseas travel insurance if you use them to pay more than a specified amount on flights, car hire, tours, accommodation etc <i>purchased before you leave home</i> , e.g. Westpac specifies a minimum of \$500 spent on behalf of each person. Please read their insurance terms and conditions, as well as the cover offered and excesses payable, to see if this type of overseas travel insurance will meet your needs. If you do decide to use your credit card insurance, Smartraveller advises you to get written confirmation that you are covered for all of your personal circumstances, destinations, planned activities etc.
Can you get a discount for early payment of the full cost of your cruise or tour package?	Full payment of a cruise or tour package at the time of booking or by a specified 'early-bird' date can sometimes result in a very pleasant price reduction.
Do you need to provide your frequent flyer number or membership number?	Why not gain points on your airline loyalty program or club membership if you can?
If you book your airline seats online, use SeatGuru to show you the best seats on your aircraft.	SeatGuru allows you to check out the best seats for every airline, every flight and every type of aircraft.
Arrange travel insurance (if not already done via use of credit cards – see section above).	<i>This is the one thing that everyone says is essential the moment you make your first booking. As Smartraveller says "If you can't afford travel insurance then you can't afford to travel".</i> While overseas travel insurance is quite obvious, cruises in Australian waters should also have travel insurance. You should also have travel insurance for any domestic travel involving flights, fares, tours or pre-booked accommodation. Shop around before you purchase your travel insurance, i.e. analyse differences in policy cover, see whether they offer cover for pre-existing conditions, medical evacuation, particular sports activities etc. You could also use the Smartraveller/Choice travel insurance buying guide .
Arrange cover for pre-existing medical conditions if necessary.	People who do not declare pre-existing medical conditions can find themselves without medical and hospital cover for these when overseas. This cover is also very handy if you have to cancel your trip due to health issues prior to your departure. Some travel insurance policies do not offer cover for pre-existing conditions while others do – you'll need to shop around to get the best policy. Some credit cards also offer very cheap cover for pre-existing medical conditions if you already qualify for their complimentary overseas travel insurance, but Smartraveller advises you to always get written confirmation of this cover.
Start saving all important travel documents to your new trip folder.	These will include e-tickets, travel insurance policies, tour vouchers, receipts etc.

Start typing up your day-by-day itinerary to include all major flights, tours, cruises and accommodation.	<p>Once you have started typing this up, it's easy to then add new items as they are booked or confirmed. I use a table format with four columns: Day No. 1, 2, 3 etc; Day and Date; Location; Comments (timings, events and other necessary information).</p> <p>You could also put in booking reference numbers for tours and hotels, voucher numbers, plus full details of each hotel address etc – very useful when the kids want to contact you and you're not answering your phone, or when you need to show an address to the taxi driver when he doesn't understand where you want to go.</p>
Now start booking your minor travel arrangements – other accommodation, transport, transfers etc.	<p>Having booked and confirmed the essential elements of your trip, it's now time to fill in the gaps in terms of where to stay, how to get from one place to the next, what to see etc.</p> <p>It makes sense to book flights, hotels etc in advance if the places you are going to are very popular ones. One tip is to book a hotel near the airport if you have a very early flight the next morning.</p>
Consider early online booking of cruise port excursions and optional excursions on bus tours etc.	This will remove the hassle of trying to do this on a faulty Wi-Fi connection late at night in some far-away place. It will also make sure you get a seat on that excursion!
Consider online booking of tickets for local attractions, tours, live shows etc before you leave home.	People constantly recommend going online before you leave home to pre-book tickets to popular museums, galleries, shows etc. This can save you hours waiting in queues and also removes the chance of great disappointment when you arrive at the ticket office to find it all sold out.
<i>Passports, visas and ID</i>	
Check that all passports: (a) are valid <i>for at least six months after your planned return date to Australia</i> (b) have at least three blank pages in them (c) are not damaged in any way.	<p>Some countries may refuse entry if you have less than six months validity on your passport <i>beyond</i> the period of intended stay.</p> <p>Some countries also may refuse entry if they can't stamp a blank page in your passport.</p> <p>Damaged passports will be rejected, especially those with a damaged electronic chip. If in doubt, check with the Australian Passport Information Service on 131232.</p>
Check what visas are required → do the necessary paperwork.	<p>See Smartraveller country information for specific details re: entry and exit requirements for each of your destinations.</p> <p>Follow this up with all necessary applications etc. Only get your visas via an official government consulate, registered travel agent or certified visa processing office.</p>
Confirm all visas have been approved and all relevant documents have been saved to your trip folder.	Having applied for your visas, it's very easy to forget to confirm that they have all been approved and that you have in your possession all the necessary paperwork to ensure a smooth passage through immigration.
Scan the ID page in each passport and save these to your trip folder.	You could also make a photocopy or take a photo on your phone – very useful if your passport goes missing.
Take a spare copy of each passport photo in your hand luggage or scan them into your trip folder.	My wife and I both carry a set of our passport photos 'just in case'. You could also scan these into your trip folder so they could be easily reprinted if necessary.
Scan your driver's licence and save it to your trip	You could also make a photocopy or take a photo on your

folder as well – ‘just in case’.	phone. This could provide an additional form of ID if your passport goes missing.
Money and banking	
Decide how much money you will need and how you will access it while you are away.	How much do you expect to spend? What are the cheapest ways to pay for goods and services or get cash? Experts recommend taking at least one debit card and one credit card. Are you going to use your normal debit and credit cards? What overseas transaction fees do they charge? Will you use a ‘Cash Passport’ MasterCard (or similar product) which can be preloaded with foreign currencies? Is its exchange rate as good as your normal debit/credit card? How much are overseas ATM fees? How much actual foreign cash will you need to take? What other options do you have to access your money?
Check that your normal debit/credit cards won’t expire for at least a month after you return home.	Get new cards if necessary.
Notify your financial institution that you’re going away – including where and when.	This is essential if going overseas but has also proven very useful in Australia. Some banks allow you to do this online while others require emails etc. Always make sure you get a confirmation back saying that your arrangements have been noted.
Check that your ‘Cash Passport’ overseas currency card (or similar product) won’t expire for at least a month after you return home.	Get a new card if necessary.
Upload your ‘Cash Passport’ card (or similar product) with the necessary currencies.	This will allow you to easily buy goods and services and also obtain money from ATMs overseas.
Calculate how much foreign cash you will need to take with you → purchase it before you go.	Because it can be cheaper, many people use their local bank, foreign exchange bureau or Australia Post to buy at least some of their overseas cash before they leave, rather than arriving overseas and trying to do it there possibly under pressure and in unfamiliar surroundings. If you have the time it’s always a good idea to compare what rates are on offer before you buy.
Decide how and where you intend to carry cash on your person while travelling.	This is critical to the success of your trip. Loss of your cash, debit and credit cards and documents either by accident or as a result of pickpockets etc can be quite devastating, not to mention the considerable inconvenience that comes with this. Many websites give tips of how to protect yourself against pickpockets. Perhaps you can read my ‘pickpockets’ article elsewhere on this website?
Make sure you will have sufficient funds in your bank account and on your credit cards while you are away. Make sure you have a system to allow top-ups of credit cards etc should you exceed your credit limit.	I always find it very comforting to know that there will be sufficient funds available in my bank account for the whole time I am away – just in case of emergency etc. Access to internet banking will also allow you to transfer between accounts if necessary, in the event of such situations as overspending on your credit card.
For cruises, factor in sufficient funds on credit cards to cater for the pre-authorisation charge at check-in.	Some cruise operators offer ‘cashless cruising’ whereby you can link your credit or debit card to a ‘Cruise Card’ against which you can then charge all your expenses whilst on board. As part of this process, the cruise operator obtains a pre-authorisation from your bank to cover the total amount

	you might spend, based on a per-day rate. Although this does not mean that any money is actually withdrawn during the cruise, the money is set aside or quarantined in your account to ensure that sufficient money is available at the end of the cruise to pay your bill. In turn this means that this money is not available on your credit card for you to spend elsewhere.
Decide how you will access your banking passwords and debit/credit card PIN codes etc.	Many options exist, e.g. secure online access, documents in code, alpha-numeric PIN tables etc.
Check you have a currency converter app on your phone or take a table of overseas currency rates in your pocket.	Currency converter apps like iCurrency and XE Currency allow you to save current exchange rates on your phone and therefore you can access these when you don't have Wi-Fi access etc.
Confirm that you can readily access your debit/credit card emergency phone numbers.	This could be on paper, in your phone contacts list or in your trip folder etc. Lost or stolen cards need immediate action.
What bills are you expecting while you will be away? How will they get paid?	Do you pay all your bills via direct debit? Even so, who will check your mail for the one bill you forget about?
<i>Medical matters</i>	
Check what vaccinations are required → get these done sooner rather than later.	Some countries require compulsory vaccinations. Other vaccinations may be strongly suggested. Do some research online and then visit your GP at least 6-8 weeks before you go to determine your general health level and what vaccinations you will need for your chosen destinations. Make sure you get these vaccinations done well before you leave, just in case you have a bad reaction or need a series of injections several weeks apart.
Check if you need to take specific medical precautions, e.g. exposure to high altitudes, malaria, yellow fever, rabies.	Read up on these and pack your bags accordingly. Don't forget to also brief your travelling companions as to what to expect and take, e.g. long sleeves.
Organise sufficient tablets/medications to cover the period you will be away → pack them in your hand luggage.	I always carry my essential medications with me in my hand luggage, just in case my other luggage goes missing. Your tablets etc should be in their original packets. Will you buy non-essential vitamins etc when you get there, take them in your luggage, or not take them at all? In addition, Smartraveller advises that you should check with each foreign consulate to confirm all your prescriptions are legal in that country.
Get a signed printout of your current prescriptions/medications from your GP → copy	Your medications may have changed since your last trip away. Take a copy of the doctor's letter with you.
Check if you also need letters re: medical conditions, syringes, medical equipment etc → copy	People with specific medical needs may need to take a copy of a letter from their doctor/specialist explaining the purpose of the equipment etc they are carrying.
Fill any required scripts from the doctor, e.g. courses of antibiotics to take with you.	People with hip replacements, for example, must take a full course of antibiotics with them just in case they get an infection and cannot get it treated immediately.
Calculate your tablet schedule if flying overseas → add this info to your itinerary.	Flying overseas often involves lengthy hours of travel and significant changes in time zones. You will need to calculate when you should be taking your tablets etc so that your general medication routine is not interrupted.
Prepare sets of tablets etc for the first few days of	If you have pre-packed several sets of tablets in your

your trip.	hand luggage, this will make it easy when you're in flight or on the move to have all your correct medications.
<i>Further planning considerations</i>	
Print out your tried and trusted packing list so you won't forget anything at the last moment.	How much you take partly depends on how mobile you want/need to be, e.g. independent train travellers need to travel more lightly than those taking fully-organised tours. If you don't already have a list to work from then many websites offer packing lists and hints. Just Google 'overseas packing list template' and choose from the hundreds on offer.
Decide how you will access your internet passwords etc.	Many options exist, e.g. secure online access, documents in code etc.
If on a cruise or coach tour, how will you manage gratuities to key people?	Will you pay a specified amount at the time of booking, get it added to your final bill, put the money in a single envelope at the end, or pay people individually at the end? This is often a very tricky question.
Research tipping expectations for each of the countries you will be visiting and decide how you will manage this as well.	Every country has different expectations of when and how much different people should be tipped for their work. Places like the USA, for example, are a tipping minefield.
If taking several flights etc, what is your <i>lowest</i> maximum baggage allowance? → pack less than this when you leaving home.	If you are planning to take several flights, land tours and cruises, each of these could have a different maximum baggage limit. To avoid getting caught with excess baggage charges – or worse still, your bags being declined or left behind for the next flight – plan to leave home with your bags comfortably below the lowest of these maximum baggage allowances. The alternative to this is to store stuff prior to one particular leg of your trip and then collect it later, or post the excess baggage home – which can be very expensive. Also plan to take a minimum number of luggage items so you are less vulnerable to bag snatchers, pickpockets etc.
Confirm minimum check-in times for all flights, train and cruise departures etc → add to your itinerary. Calculate backwards to determine sensible arrival times at terminals, train stations etc → add to your itinerary.	Minimum flight check-in times as advised by my travel agent are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum 1 hour for departures from a domestic terminal within Australia • Minimum 2 hours for domestic travel within Australia from an Australian international terminal • Minimum 3 hours for any international travel departing from Australia (esp. North America) • Minimum 3 hours for any international travel whilst overseas, depending on the season and location/popularity of the airport • Minimum 2-3 hours for any domestic travel whilst overseas, depending on the season and location/popularity of the airport
How you will get from your home to your departure point, plus get back home at the end of your trip?	The starting point for your adventure is leaving home and getting to the airport or cruise terminal without any hassle. How do you intend to get there and back – drive yourself, taxi, shuttle bus, Uber, public transport, getting a lift with the kids?

Book your shuttle bus, airport parking or confirm other arrangements to get you to/from there.	Do you need to book something in advance so that everything will/should go smoothly?
Identify where else during your trip you will need hotel, airport or other transport transfers etc. Investigate what transport options are available for these transfers → book these if necessary.	Online research can be of great help here. Even if you don't book these additional transfers, at least jot down in your itinerary any useful information you think you might need, including the amount you could expect to pay for your selected transfer option.
If using airport metros, trains or other public transport → research costs, ticket system, timetables, where to catch, how to get there, platform changes required en route, accessibility of platforms (lifts, stairs, travelators) etc	Airport metros and local trains are usually easy to use, but make sure you do your research re: how it all works to avoid any unwelcome surprises, e.g. ticket costs, where/how to buy, how/when to tap on/off, timetables/frequency, stops, where to catch within the airport terminal, departure/arrival platforms, platform transfers en route, platform access via lifts, stairs, travelators, interconnecting tunnels etc.
If renting a vehicle on arrival → carefully plan your first day, including which roads or even lanes to use	If you decide to rent a vehicle upon arrival, consider airport rather than downtown pickups and returns and google the road rules and signs – they may look familiar but there will always be local variations. If driving on the right-hand side consider getting an automatic car and keeping your first driving day short and easy – and don't forget your international driving licence (in addition to your Australian driving licence).
Double-check check-in/out times at hotels etc. Can they store your bags if arriving early/leaving late?	If arriving early can you store your bags at the hotel while you explore the city and wait for check-in? Can you get a late check-out and then store your bags if leaving late at night? Storing bags becomes a little bit trickier when it comes to B&Bs etc.
Investigate whether your airline(s) will demand baggage payments at the time of check-in.	Some airlines like United Airlines and Delta Airlines in the US will ask for baggage payments at the time of check-in.
Decide on your phone requirements while away, e.g. Telstra International Day Pass?	There are many options here, e.g. taking your own mobile phone combined with a global roaming plan, buying a local SIM card or multi-country SIM card over there, using overseas phone cards, or using Skype or WhatsApp for making calls with free Wi-Fi etc.
Decide on your map requirements while away, e.g. phone app, paper maps and/or GPS unit?	Do you hire a rental car supplied with GPS, use your phone app, take your own GPS unit or buy a GPS unit over there to get you around the cities and countryside? What about city maps etc? Will you pick these up when you get there, use an app on your phone like Google Maps or download, save and print out maps prior to departure?
Check if you need an international driver's licence → get this if necessary → make copy.	International driver's licences are required in many overseas countries, <i>in addition to your Australian licence</i> , even if you're not asked for it at the car rental desk. Check on the internet for the requirements of each country you intend to drive in. They can be obtained through the NRMA, RACV etc. Don't forget to take a copy of it as well.
Do you need a translation dictionary – either a phone app, paper or online version?	If you intend using Google Translate on your phone, don't forget to save each dictionary offline so it will always be available even if you don't have Wi-Fi or internet access.
Do you need a printed list of simple phrases and	Locals always appreciate some effort to use basic words

words you can carry around?	in their language.
Documentation matters <i>Please note: When I talk about “one copy per person” I mean that everyone in your party could carry a copy – just in case</i>	
Print out a colour copy of each person’s passport ID page (one copy of each to each person).	Apart from carrying a copy of my passport ID page in Dropbox, on my phone, in my hand luggage and in my wife’s hand luggage, I also always print out a colour copy and put it in a small ziplock plastic bag. This is the ‘passport’ I carry around in dodgy places, just in case someone tries to take my real passport.
Print out copies of all other major documents – visa approvals, flight details, e-tickets, train tickets, hotel vouchers etc (one copy per person). Make sure all these have also been saved as files to your trip folder.	If you’ve run out of time then one option is to take a photo of each document on your phone – just so you have a backup that you can refer to.
Print out your travel insurance policy, travel insurance emergency assistance contact phone numbers etc (one copy per person). Check that all travel insurance documentation is also saved in your trip folder.	Paper copies of critical documents such as your travel insurance, emergency assistance details and phone numbers can often be of great help when you’re all flustered after a nasty experience and trying to work out what to do first.
Print out copies of any doctor’s letters re: prescription medicines, medical conditions, medical equipment etc (one copy per person). Check that these have also been saved to your trip folder.	Paper copies of these documents are very useful when going through airport security, e.g. a doctor’s letter covering your sleep apnoea machine or the reason why you are carrying syringes etc.
Decide how you will access addresses and phone numbers you might need while overseas.	Your mobile phone might be a wonderful source of phone numbers and addresses, but what if that goes missing or flat?
Some final things before you go	
Confirm that all necessary bookings of transport, accommodation and tours are now complete. Confirm that any online advance bookings of attractions etc are now complete. Confirm that all essential information has been entered in your day-by-day trip itinerary. Double-check that your final itinerary has all the correct times and locations for your flights, train departures etc. Confirm that all relevant documentation and information has been saved to your trip folder.	This is basically your last chance to check that you have everything covered.
Save a copy of your final trip folder to Dropbox, iCloud, OneDrive etc.	This is essential if you are to have worldwide access to everything about your trip at any time of the day or night.
Email a final set of essential files to yourself if you don’t have access to Dropbox, iCloud, OneDrive etc.	This will provide a second access point to essential files. You could also cc your travelling companions and family into this email so they too could access this information on your behalf. Any passwords etc would need to be in code just in case someone gains access to your email account.
Print out a copy of your final itinerary (one copy per person).	A copy of your detailed day-by-day itinerary will mean that everyone can be on the same page.
Send copies of your itinerary and any essential files to the family etc.	Your family can be great backup and support if you need to contact them during an emergency – especially if they

	have all your paperwork at their fingertips.
Update all the apps on your mobile phone.	Don't forget to save essential information offline. Also take a copy of your app passwords if you're going to purchase an overseas SIM card.
Pack emergency undies, toothbrush etc in your hand luggage. Pack a set of survival clothes in your travelling companion's bag (and vice versa).	Very useful if a lost bag isn't found for several days. Many airlines also have a policy of providing an emergency cash amount in the event of a lost bag. It doesn't hurt to ask.
Make a list of the contents of all bags, plus leave a copy of this at home.	This is very important for insurance purposes.
Prepare 'This bag belongs to' cards for the front pocket or inside of each piece of luggage.	We usually make up a card that contains our names, phone numbers (+61), email addresses, names and addresses of hotels we are staying at and dates of stay, tour operator contact phone numbers etc.
Label all bags clearly with robust luggage tags and bright-coloured bag straps etc. Don't forget to label your hand luggage as well.	We never put our home address on any bag tag or card as this alerts people to the fact that there's probably no one home at our place. Use you mobile number (+61) and email address instead.
Also consider taking a photo on your mobile phone of each bag – just in case.	We found this very useful when one of our bags went missing. At least people know what they're looking for.
Consider an early online check-in from home for plane travel.	Many airlines offer check-in up to 24 hours before the flight departure time, particularly for domestic flights. In some situations, however, online check-in may not be possible, especially if it's international travel.
Lock or otherwise secure your bags before checking in.	This is something very easily overlooked during a last-minute dash from the taxi to the check-in desk.
Divide your cash, cards etc between you and your travelling companion.	Also maybe hide some extra cash on you – just in case.
Do a final check of your packing list to make sure that everything you need has been packed and is ready to go.	We always assemble all our bags and carry-on items in the hallway so that nothing could be left behind in another room.
Make sure you have a key to get back in when you get home!	Being locked out on a cold rainy night could certainly dampen your arrival home.

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