

**Note: I wrote this guide in summer 2022, when the world was dropping a lot of its Covid restrictions and air travel was a shit show. The recommendations in this guide may be a bit on the cautious side. I also added imperial measurements. This guide was also written assuming you're traveling internationally. If you are traveling domestically (within your country), you don't need a passport; a government issued ID like a driver's license or state ID will suffice.**

## **Phase 1: Before you fly**

*Booking your flight:* I recommend always booking directly on the airline's website. If your flight gets delayed, canceled, etc you want to be able to deal directly with the airline's employees at the airport or over the phone, not with a third party service like Orbitz or Kiwi that might not care if you make it to your destination. Also, if a flight is overbooked (it's shitty and very rare, but it can happen), people who booked on third party sites are the first to get bumped - meaning you can't board the plane and are forced to reschedule. If you get bumped and you booked with the airline directly (unless it's a very low-cost airline), you often get a chunk of cash as an apology and a free hotel if you can't fly until the next day.

- If dinner will be served on the plane, you should have the option to indicate if you have dietary restrictions. Airlines usually offer vegetarian, low salt, gluten free etc meals if you request it in advance.
- I personally like aisle seats for long flights because I have a small bladder. But if you think you'll sleep the whole time, or you won't need to get out of your seat much, window is the better choice. I never voluntarily book a middle seat, but if it's your only option, it will be fine. You may have to pay extra to pick your seat, depending on the airline.

*Packing:* When you book your ticket, you will need to decide whether you want to check a bag (meaning it goes in the airplane's cargo hold), or stick to carry-on baggage. The advantage of checking a bag is that you can pack more stuff, and there are significantly fewer restrictions on what you can pack. The advantage to bringing carry-on baggage only is that you don't need to wait in line to drop off your bag at your departure airport, and you don't have to wait at the baggage claim when you arrive at your final destination. You also don't risk that the airline loses your bag (this is very rare but can happen unfortunately - use an AirTag for peace of mind).

- The maximum allowed size for **carry-on baggage** (they also call it "hand baggage" but it's the same thing) is typically 55 x 35 x 25 cm/22" x 14" x 9" and the maximum weight, if the airline has one, is usually around 12 kg/26lb. I have never had an airline weigh my carry-on baggage, but in theory they could require it. Look up your airline's baggage policies to be sure. They will be posted on the airline's website.
  - If you are planning to pack liquids in carry-on baggage within the U.S. or on international flights, special rules apply. All liquids, pastes, gels and creams need to be contained in a transparent and closed bag that's no bigger than 20 x 20 cm/1 quart (I usually will use a Ziploc bag). The airline won't measure it but if it's obviously too big it could be an issue. Each container of product needs to be no bigger than 100 ml/3.4 oz.
  - If you want to bring a water bottle, it must be empty.

- Aerosols (like deodorant or hairspray) are not allowed in carry-on baggage unless you can find a 100 ml/3.4 oz one.
- Here's a link to the U.S. [TSA's guidelines](#) on what counts as a liquid.
- The size requirement for **checked bags** is usually that the total of the dimensions can't be more than a certain number of total cm/inches, but I have never had a checked bag measured at the airport. The maximum weight is 23kg/50lbs and they will weigh it when you are checking in. If your bag weighs more than 23 kg/50lbs, you'll get charged an extra fee. You can pack liquids/gels/creams/aerosols of any size in checked luggage.
- Regardless of whether you do carry-on or checked luggage, you also get **one personal item** for on board the plane. Maximum size is 40 x 30 x 15 cm/17in x 13in x 9in, but again I have never seen an airline measure this as long as it fits under the seat in front of you.
  - I highly recommend having a small backpack or purse to hold a phone, wallet, keys, passport, snacks, a book, tissues, your carry-on liquids, laptop if applicable etc. Laptops or other tech have to be in a carry-on; they cannot be checked - this is because of the type of battery.
  - Medication should be in your personal item so there's no risk of you being separated from it. Some countries may have restrictions on what medications you can bring (mostly in the Middle East and Asia - ADHD meds I think are a common one people have issues with), so that's something you may want to research.
- **For international flights, bring a printed copy of your flight itinerary plus any hotel/Airbnb booking confirmations. Make sure to look up if any other documents are required to enter the country and prepare them.**

*Checking in:* You can typically check in for your flight 24 hours in advance. Some airlines allow for earlier on international flights. Check your airline's website to be sure, or look for your booking confirmation email to see if it says.

- When you check in, it will ask you to enter your Booking Reference number and potentially your last name, and you'll have to check some boxes confirming what bags you are bringing and that you aren't carrying any hazardous items. It will have you confirm what seats you reserved as well. You don't need to pick a new seat unless you are explicitly told your original seat isn't available anymore (rare but supposedly can happen if people got moved around to accommodate say, a family that wanted to sit together)
- Once you are checked in, the website will ask you how you want your boarding pass. You can have it on your phone if that's an option (on an iPhone it's Apple Wallet, I am not sure if there's an Android equivalent). You can also print it out, either at home or at the airport using a self-serve kiosk.
- If you are told you cannot print your boarding pass or have it on your phone, you'll need to print it at a kiosk at the airport or have an airline employee print it for you when you check your bag. There are check in/information stations at the ticketing counter when you enter the Departures section of the airport.

*Getting to the airport:* Generally it is recommended you arrive at the airport 2-3 hours before an international flight. If you have a domestic layover, you can do just 2. Add an extra hour if you are traveling during a major holiday. It's better to be bored waiting at your gate than to miss your flight because the security line is long. You can google the airport and find out how busy it's been lately.

## **Phase 2: At the airport**

*Checking in/Dropping bags:* You'll want to go to the check-in area for your airline. If you are taking a cab to the airport, the taxi driver will ask you what airline/what terminal, so make sure you read these off your boarding pass. If you don't know what terminal, just say the airline and specify domestic or international, and the taxi driver should know where to drop you off (they take people to the airport all the time).

Once you arrive, the process will look different depending on whether you are checking a bag.

- If you are not checking a bag - make sure you have your boarding pass printed or on your phone, and your passport ready. You can head straight to the security line (there will be signs, or ask an employee). If your boarding pass is not printed or on your phone, you can print it at a kiosk if there is one, or you can wait in line at the check in counter as a worst case scenario, then proceed to security.
- If you are checking a bag - you'll need to wait in the line at the airline counter to drop it off, or if directed to do so by an employee, at a self-serve bag check kiosk (for instance, Delta at LAX in the Tom Bradley terminal has this feature). A lot of airports also now have self-serve bag tag printing - you just follow the instructions on the screen - but you still need to drop the bag at the check in counter. When you get to the front of the line they'll ask you to come up to the desk and show your passport and your boarding pass. They will then weigh your bag and put a tag on it displaying your final destination.
  - Once your bag is checked, you can proceed to the security entrance
  - At the check in counter, they will give you a sticker with a barcode on it; this is your bag tag. Do not lose it - if anything happens to your bag in transit you'll need the tag to deal with it. I usually take a picture of mine on my phone.

*Security:* It could be crowded or not depending on the time of day. When you enter, you'll be asked for your passport and/or boarding pass again, and then you'll wait in line until it's your turn to go through the security checkpoint.

- At the checkpoint, you'll see plastic bins that people put their belongings in before they go through the metal detector. Generally you want to put your jacket, belt, shoes, **anything in your pockets**, and your bag of liquids (if applicable) in a bin. You can usually put any carry-on baggage and your personal item directly on the conveyor belt.
- A security officer will tell you when it is your turn to go through the metal detector or body scanner.
- Your items should be waiting for you at the end of the conveyor belt after you pass through the metal detector/body scanner. It is possible to have a bag pulled aside for additional security; as long as you didn't pack any contraband items or weapons you

won't have any issue if this happens (it's happened to me before; sometimes normal items packed in luggage can look suspicious when scanned by the machine).

- When in doubt, watch what the people in front of you are doing, or ask someone in line or a security officer. The security personnel can sometimes be grumpy, but there are also nice people everywhere.
- Once you have your stuff back, you can put your jacket and shoes back on and move stuff around between your carry-on bag and personal item if you want. If you brought an empty water bottle you can fill it once you are past security, if you can find a water fountain.

*At the gate:* The gate your flight will leave from should be listed on your boarding pass. If you don't see it, there are big screens all over the airport that will list departures and arrivals for that day. Find your flight and identify the gate number. If you need to go to a different terminal, look for signs in the airport for that terminal and follow them, or ask an employee for directions.

At the gate, there will be a desk with a couple of airline employees surrounded by a seating area. If you need to charge your phone, some seats may have an outlet next to them.

- When boarding starts, the airline employees will read out instructions. They will call out boarding groups and you can get in line to board the plane once your group is called. It will say on your boarding pass which group you are in.
- There may be an announcement asking if anyone wants to volunteer to check their carry-on bag so there's more room in the overhead compartments on the plane. You do not need to volunteer for this unless you want to. If you are in one of the last boarding groups, however, you may be required to check your carry-on bag (for free) if there is no room in the overhead bins. I've had this happen to me a few times. It's more common if you are flying domestically on a smaller aircraft where the overhead bins are smaller.
- People will often stand near the line once boarding starts, but that doesn't mean they are "in line," they won't let you board until your group has been called so don't be intimidated when people do this. Airlines have varying levels of organization around boarding. Delta and American may have employees holding signs where you can join your boarding group and wait with them, Virgin Atlantic has no boarding groups at all, United is a mess, etc.
- When your group is called and you reach the front of the line, an airline employee may check your passport (if the flight is international) again. You will then have to scan your boarding pass. Then you can board the plane!
- Depending on where you are flying to, you may be pulled aside for additional security. If this happens, just follow the instructions you are given and wait until your bags are re-inspected, and then you will be told when you can board. (TBH this has only happened to me when flying from Latin America back to the U.S., since their local security standards are more lenient than what the U.S. requires.)

### Phase 3: On The Plane

*Boarding:* When you get to the plane, a flight attendant may greet you and will ask to see your ticket so they can direct you to the aisle your seat is in. The plane will have 2-3 columns of seats. You can find your seat by looking at your boarding pass and comparing it to the numbers and letters on the overhead compartments where the carry-on bags go.

- **If you have a carry-on bag**, you'll need to place it in the overhead compartment. You can watch other people do it if you're confused but generally you're trying to fit your bag into the compartment so the narrower end of the bag faces you.
  - If there isn't space in any of the compartments near your seat, you can look for other open compartments in your aisle and put your bag there. This is normal, if the compartment above your row is already full it will have been closed by the flight attendant. You can always ask a flight attendant for help if you aren't sure where you can put your bag.
  - If there is no room at all for your bag - I've never had this happen before, but I would talk to a flight attendant who can assist you with having your bag checked. I believe this should be free so long as your bag meets the size requirement. If your bag has to be checked because it doesn't meet the airline's size requirements, then they'd charge you.
- Once your carry-on bag (if applicable) is stowed away, you can sit in your seat and put on your seatbelt. Put your personal item under the seat in front of you once everyone is on the plane and the flight attendant starts giving instructions.
- It's rare, and has only happened to me a few times, but there can be instances where everyone gets on the plane and then they have to have everyone get off the plane because some sort of issue is discovered where the plane isn't ready to fly. If this happens, just follow the crew's instructions and wait for further instructions once you are back at the gate.
- If your flight ends up being canceled or severely delayed, you may get rebooked automatically, or you may need to contact the airline. There is lots of [online advice](#) about this, and fortunately, it's never happened to me.

*Take-off:* It's actually kind of fun! After the flight attendants give their safety speech, the plane will drive over to the runway, and then take off. You can't have your seat inclined during takeoff, and your phone needs to be in airplane mode.

- I don't have much else to say about this. Just put your headphones in, put on a song you like, and enjoy the fact that man has invented a metal sky tube that can get you across the world in less than a day. Our ancestors had to use boats. BOATS!
- Some people find that during takeoff and landing, their ears hurt due to the change in air pressure. Chewing gum or sucking on hard candy can help.

*In-flight:* It's up to you what you want to do with this time. I usually will download movies on my phone or laptop, bring a book, download a game app that doesn't need internet, etc. The flight may have the option to purchase internet, but I rarely do this as I enjoy having several hours

where no one can bother me. You can sleep, if you are able to (you will be given a pillow and blanket at your seat on overnight or longer, international flights). Some general tips for long flights:

- Many airlines offer free in-flight messaging (Whatsapp, Facebook messenger, iMessage etc). There should be an info packet in the seat back in front of you explaining how to access it.
- For most international flights, you will be served dinner at one point during the flight, and breakfast usually about an hour before landing. Usually they give you a choice between two meal options, i.e. chicken or pasta and you get to pick. It's free. There's a tray table on the seat in front of you that you can put down when food arrives. (Shorter flights may not serve dinner - your booking confirmation with the airline will tell you what meals are served.)
- A few times during the flight, flight attendants will come by with a beverage cart and will ask if you want anything to drink. Again, it's free. They usually have a variety of sodas, juice, water, wine, beer, etc. Domestic flights usually require you to pay for alcohol.
- Bathrooms are marked and will either be in front of you or behind you. You typically want to avoid going to the bathroom when the seatbelt sign is on (the flight attendants will explain this before takeoff) but if it's an emergency you can and they won't argue with you.
- If you're thirsty, you can go to the back of the plane and ask a flight attendant for water, if they have extra water bottles they'll be happy to give you one.
- Turbulence! So sometimes the plane will go through a patch of air that isn't smooth, and the plane will feel a bit bouncy. This is totally normal; if this happens you'll notice most people on the plane ignoring it or continuing to sleep. Usually the pilot or an officer will warn you if turbulence is coming up.
- If you want to get up and stretch your legs, walk up and down the aisle etc you totally can, this can be good to do if your joints are hurting or if you are feeling restless.
- You can recline your seat during the flight; there should be a button on your arm rest. If you can't figure it out, ask a flight attendant or the person next to you.
- I highly recommend noise canceling headphones. Planes are loud. It's the huge engine propelling the metal sky tube that makes the noise. I also take a neck pillow on overnight flights (I like [this one](#) or [this one](#)), and an eye mask. I am That Person.

#### **Phase 4 : Arrival**

*Landing:* The pilot will make an announcement when landing procedures start. They will ask you to put your tray table up, un-recline your seat, and buckle up.

- The descent towards land can be a little bumpy, but this is normal. At some point you will feel the airplane's landing gear come out and it can make a whirring sound but again, that's normal!
- Once the plane lands, you can force open the window with your elbow and carefully squeeze yourself—I mean, you'll need to wait until the plane drives to the gate (this is called "taxiing") and "parks", and then you can unbuckle your seatbelt and get your bag out from the overhead bin if applicable.

- Getting off the plane tends to take several minutes to half an hour. Wait for the people in the rows in front of you to exit with their bags and then you can exit. The flight attendants may announce what baggage claim number your flight has been assigned to, but if they don't (or you don't hear it) it's fine, there will be screens at the baggage claim for you to find yours.

*Arrival (domestic):* When you get off the plane, look for signs for "Baggage claim" (or similar wording) if you have checked luggage. When you arrive at the baggage area, there are signs that will tell you which conveyor belt to go to. The flight number is on your boarding pass in case you forget. Get your bag. If your bag does not show up, there should be a help desk in the baggage claim where you can talk to someone and show them your bag tag so they can help you locate it. Once you have your bag, you are free to exit the airport.

If you don't have checked luggage, you are free to exit the airport right away and can follow "Exit" signs to reach the Arrivals area, where you will see signs for ground transportation/public transit/taxis.

*Arrival (international):* When you get off the plane, generally you want to follow the crowd, as everyone will have to go through customs in the same place. Also look for signs that say "Passport Check," "Immigration," etc. Most signs will be in English, the country's language(s), and maybe a few others.

- If you need to use the bathroom, look for a bathroom before continuing to Immigration. The sign for "bathroom" is pretty universal so they should be easy to spot. The customs line can be long so that's why you want to pee beforehand.
- When you arrive at the customs/immigration area, you will typically be directed to go to one of 2-3 lines, one for citizens, one for passports of countries that use electronic verification (applicable countries will be listed), and one for everyone else. Look for the line that fits your situation.
- When it's your turn to talk to an immigration officer, usually there will be a sign that tells you what counter (they are usually numbered) is available next. Worst case scenario, an officer will shout out that they are ready for you and raise their hand.
- The first thing they will ask for is your passport (have it open to your photo page) and flight info. Hand them your passport + boarding pass, then the copy of your flight itinerary.
  - They'll ask for the purpose of your trip.
  - They will ask to see any other documents that the country requires (again, look this up before you go)
  - If they ask you for more information, just hand over what they ask for and answer questions honestly.
    - It is possible that the officer will ask you to accompany them to a separate room for more questions. If this happens, don't panic, it does NOT mean you are guaranteed to be sent back home. It just means they want to ask you more questions and you're holding up the line if they don't take you aside. If this happens, follow the officer into the room (you may have to

wait alone for a bit before someone can speak to you) and answer their questions honestly/provide any documents they ask for.

- At the end they'll stamp your passport and point you in the direction of Customs.
- Next up is Customs. If you follow in the direction towards the baggage claim (look for signs), you should see an area marked "Customs" or "Exit". You hopefully have nothing to declare at customs (you aren't trying to import anything), so choose the line that reflects this. You can research before you leave if there are any items you are not allowed to bring to your destination country.
- You may have to put your bags in a scanning machine, and it's possible that a Customs officer will pull your bag out and open it if something looks weird on the scan. If this happens, just wait until they are done searching your bag and when they hand it back to you, you are free to go.
- Follow signs to exit to the Arrivals area, and then you are free to leave the airport. Enjoy your trip!

#### **Other random tips:**

- No airport employee should ever ask you for cash.
- Make sure you have a plan to exit the airport at your arrival destination. Some places are known for taxi scams, so figure out in advance how you want to travel from the airport to your hotel/Airbnb.
- Your mileage may vary, but I find that airplanes dry me out. My skin and eyes get very dry especially. I make sure to have a small tube of lotion with me, or I buy some at the airport after security.
- Air travel can also mess with your digestion. I take fiber supplements with me.
- Put an AirTag or equivalent in checked luggage for extra peace of mind.
- If you live in the United States, I highly recommend [Global Entry](#) if you know you will be traveling internationally more than once a year. Global Entry lets you skip the line at immigration when you return to the U.S. For extra convenience, you can do your Global Entry interview when you return from your international trip. I did my interview in the Miami airport at 4am after coming back from a trip. With Global Entry, you also get TSA Precheck, which is awesome and reduces how early you have to arrive at any major U.S. airport as you get to use a special security line.