

# Flight, a Filmmaker's Plight

By [ProAmUSA](#)

Booked a gig at a distant location? Great news! Well, in part. The unfortunate part of that event is the air travel with photographic gear. Solutions aren't ideal, but herein are a few aggregated tips from travel veterans to help you weather the turbulence of domestic air maneuver. Information pertains to domestic air travel, and might vary for international travel.

## **Know the Current Policies**

The most obvious tip is to plan well! Familiarize yourself well with the baggage policies (for checked, carry-on, and media checked) of the airlines that you will be flying and double check that information just prior to flight. You definitely do not want to arrive at the airport, or worse the gate, and be surprised by a recent change. Print out the baggage policy and carry it with you, in case you meet with any resistance. Often, an airline representative can use a bit of discretion, but demonstrate your intention of knowing and adhering to the rules. And, be polite, of course.

Be aware of the limitations of all connecting flights, as well. If you are connecting with a puddle jumper, chances are that your 25 equipment cases won't be coming with you. Small planes might not even have overhead bins. Have a contingency plan for these situations.

## **Right Tools for the Right Job**

While overpacking -- and trying to be flexible for unforeseens -- is so tempting, it can cause a world of hurt when travelling. Pain for your wallet, your back, and your stress level. When your shoot has precise requirements, take only what you need for that shoot. Establish contacts with location rental companies or fellow professionals for any gear that you might need to supplement or could need unexpectedly. If what you need is not available locally, especially large equipment, consider shipping it ahead of time by Federal Express or other courier service.

## **Remain Calm and Carry On**

Above all else, carry on your most sensitive and expensive equipment: camera bodies, lenses, recorded media and backups, and items forbidden as checked baggage -- i.e., loose lithium ion batteries. Some people will recommend that you carry these items in non-equipment bags, padded by clothing and such. However, keep in mind that if the bins are full, and it won't fit under the seat in front of you (or by chance you have no seat in front of your), the bag will get checked by airline personnel. Better to pack it securely in an appropriate gear travel case, to be safe.

Gear vests can come in handy for sneaking in more, non-delicate items. When going through TSA checkpoints, you can simply remove the whole vest and present intact for scanning.

A note about lithium-ion batteries, from TSA:

*You are allowed one larger lithium ion battery installed in a device, plus up to 2 spare larger lithium ion batteries. These are in addition to any smaller lithium ion batteries. For smaller lithium ion batteries, just follow the Basic rules.*

*Lithium ion batteries rated over 300 watt-hours (25 g ELC) are forbidden.*

Battery terminals need to be covered. Store batteries individually in ziplock bags and within hard-shell containers, as a damaged battery could result in a dangerous release of chemicals. Batteries are allowed in carry-on items only.

If you travel frequently, keep a logistics log of your experiences by airlines and planes. Once you have stowed your bag in an overhead bin or under seat, take a photo of it there while holding the airplane safety card next to it. This documents that your particular bag will fit in the bin of that particular airplane (identified on the safety card). You can carry this in your check-in documents if challenged at the counter or gate about your carry-on item, in the future.

“I once had an airline rep insist that I must check my carry-on bag because it wouldn’t fit in the overhead bin,” said Mike Simms. “I whipped out my photo showing it in the bin of the very airplane that I was to fly.”

### **Weighing the Costs**

As for checked baggage costs, frequent flyer programs and business class are your friends. Assuming that your checked baggage isn’t over standard weight or size, you can make good use of the extra checked bag allowance for premium travellers and possibly offset the additional price of the upgrade. It is possible that you could fly along a companion to assist with the baggage, utilizing their free baggage allowances, for less or similar cost of extra baggage fees. Just remember, using this tactic, you will want to stay within the allowable weight and size limits or get nailed with add-on fees. Being an elite traveller will also get you early boarding, which will ensure that there is space to stow your carry-ons.

Luckily, most major airlines have a media baggage policy for film & video production personnel, wherein media equipment will not be assessed oversized or overweight charges, and you are allowed to check substantially more items than would a casual traveller. However, they do require you show some credentials. So, DIY yourself an official looking badge, if you don’t have one from an employer. Wear it visibly on a lanyard when dealing with airline personnel. Not only will it immediately legitimize you, but might just impress an agent who could generously overlook a thing or two in your favor. (Don’t forget to hide it when on the plane to avoid endless questions about what famous people you know!)

### **Proper Packing**

Some recommend that you pack gear in non-descript everyday baggage to reduce the likelihood of theft. That might work well when working on the street; but for the rigors of baggage handling and air travel, opt for indestructible containers instead. No harm being clever and putting your

hard-shell case within another everyday piece of cheap luggage, for a bit of disguise. Try a canvas army duffle bag, for example. People might think twice about stealing from military service persons. Add something distinctive to your bags (even simply those neon colored plastic arm bands around the handle) so that you can spot them easily on the conveyor belt.

If you must check particularly expensive items, one suggestion is to pack a starter pistol or flare gun in the case. (Must be in a locked, hard-shell case.) This will require that you declare it, since it is considered a weapon, and it will be tagged and treated with more scrutiny by airport personnel and TSA agents. Unscrupulous baggage handlers would be pretty foolish to mess with something with such a paper trail.

Specialized equipment cases and bags are pricey, but much cheaper than the rental or purchase cost of having to replace gear on location. Not to mention the time delay and aggravation of dealing with a damaged item. Several specialized carry-on soft and hard cases are available for camera bodies and lenses. Most have adjustable padded dividers for different configurations. Throw in a light-color pillowcase so that you have a clean surface to reassemble equipment. (Store it in a ziplock bag to keep it dust- and debris-free.)

Always pack lenses disconnected from the camera body, with lens caps on both ends of lenses and a dust cap on camera body.

Photographer Christinne Blacker recalls, "I've had one TSA agent try to remove the lens; I told her I would do it. She didn't let me, even yelled at me to stay back. When she finally managed to remove it, she dropped the lens -- a very expensive one."

### **Daisy Chain Gang**

Purchase a long cable with spring clip ends so that you can use it to daisy chain your baggage together while you collect it. (Keep a lock handy for added security, when needed.) Even if using a cart, this will make it harder for someone to snatch an item. You can even tether it to your person as you are collecting all of your items from the carousel.

### **Production or Travel Insurance**

Lastly, it should go without saying, but insure all of your gear for damage and theft at replacement value! Never rely on a homeowner's insurance policy, which won't cover your gear away from your home, and not likely for business purposes at all. If you don't have production insurance that covers transportation of gear, carefully review travel insurance documentation to be certain that your gear will not be excluded.

### **Personal Travel OPs Manual**

Whether for yourself as a freelancer or for your company, create a operations travel manual for easy reference. Ideally, create it in a shared document format (such as cloud software) where members of the team can easily update this information as it changes and annotate it based on personal experiences. Make the document available online, where the document will be

accessible from any internet connection.

The website [SeatGuru.com](http://SeatGuru.com) provides a fantastic, detailed analysis of each airline with plane schematic and even traveller comments. This is a good resource for the planning phase of your travel. Of course, all information should be confirmed with your subject airline(s) prior to your departure.

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