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12 Airport Security Habits That Really Annoy TSA Agents — and the Travel Accessories That Solve Them

Get through the security line faster thanks to these TSA hacks.

By Katie Jackson | Updated on February 19, 2025 03:12PM EST

15 COMMENTS

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Last year, TSA officers screened a record-breaking 3 million passengers, *and* their luggage, in a single day. If that sounds like fun, I have good news: They're hiring. If you want to help TSA, but not *work* for TSA, I also have good news. I recently asked a TSA agent, Uniformed Advisor TeaNeisha Barker, what passengers can do to make her job easier (as a travel writer who spends more time in airports than at home, I know that happy agents equal happy travelers).

Barker didn't hold back. "The top three things that travelers can do to assist with a seamless screening experience is, be prepared, be attentive, and follow the direction of the officer providing assistance," she told me. While Barker says she doesn't get "easily annoyed," she admitted that passengers' lack of preparation — when it comes to what they're wearing and packing — plays a major role in slowing down the screening process.

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Surprisingly, the worst offenders are often the most traveled. "Working PreCheck can be quite annoying because you're dealing with a few passengers who believe they are entitled to bypass security," said Caleb Harmon-Marshall, a former TSA agent who now shares his top travel tips via the newsletter Gate Access. He also answered a burning question I've had for ages. Why are TSA procedures different at different airports? "TSA follows the same guidelines and rules as a whole, however, they may be running different screening procedures at the time of your visit," Harmon-Marshall told me. "The key is to listen to what the officer is saying instead of going off muscle memory to ensure you're complying with the current screening procedure being implemented."

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One thing that is a constant, however, is this: Good packing habits can definitely expedite the screening process. Below are 12 TSA carry-on mistakes Barker and Harmon-Marshall recommend dropping, and more importantly, 12 habits they recommend adopting.

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Don't bring: Laced shoes

Pack instead: Slip-on sneakers

Skechers Women's Hands-Free Go Walk Slip-Ins

hands free slip on shoe

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$75~~ $55 at Amazon

Barker and her colleagues don't like to see passengers struggle with taking their shoes off or putting them back on. There's a time and place for laces: the airport might not be one of them.

Alternatively, consider these best-selling Skechers Women's Hands-Free Slip-ins. Despite only becoming available in September, they've already racked up more than 5,600 five-star ratings. "I have been able to quit wearing my prescription orthotics and these shoes support my feet," wrote one happy shopper. "The hands-free slip-on made the TSA checkpoint at the airport a breeze! I will be ordering other colors."

Don't bring: Bulky belt with buckle

Pack instead: Pants with drawstring waist

Libin Women's Cargo Joggers

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$44~~ $30 at Amazon

They may be a fashion statement, but belts with wide buckles aren't an accessory most TSA agents want to see. "They often create a need for extra screening," explains Barker. Instead, invest in a pair of travel pants with an elastic waistband and/or drawstring.

As a travel writer, I personally love to fly in these Libin Women's Cargo Joggers which have both, along with nearly 12,000 five-star ratings at Amazon. "I purchased a second pair even though my travel wardrobe was complete," wrote one shopper. "Who knows? These pants could become everyday pants."

Don't bring: Things in your pockets

Pack instead: Fanny pack

Pander Belt Bag

belt bag

PHOTO: AMAZON

$17 at Amazon

According to Barker, one of the best ways to hold up the line is to try to walk through the metal detector with something in your pocket. Harmon-Marshall agrees: "A little piece of balled-up tissue can actually cause the body scanner to alarm near your pocket, and this happens pretty often. Due to it being in that area, it can possibly lead to a groin pat-down which everyone hates."

Instead, carry anything you need easy access to in a belt bag you can easily remove. I personally use the Lululemon Everywhere Belt Bag, which is beloved by travel writers, but this Pander Belt Bag is pretty similar. It's so popular on Amazon, where it has a 4.7-star average rating from 7,800-plus ratings, that more than 6,600 were bought in the last month alone.

Don't bring: Pocket knife

Pack instead: TSA-approved multi-tool

Geekey Multi-tool

PHOTO: AMAZON

$23 at Amazon

Even the smallest knives are a no-go for flying. "Travelers have a tendency to forget that pocket knives are considered a prohibited item," says Barker before adding, "Tools are also items that travelers forget to remove from their carry-on."

If the idea of traveling without your favorite piece of survival gear is daunting, check out this TSA-approved Geekey Multi-tool, which has racked up more than 5,300 five-star ratings. It's about the size and shape of a key, but it features 16 different tools including a screwdriver, wrench, bottle opener, and ruler. "When I cut my hand on broken glass, I used it to cut gauze and tape for a bandage. When our espresso machine was leaking, I used it to tighten the drain pipe. I never thought I'd enjoy a little gadget this much," said one Amazon buyer.

Don't bring: Jewelry hidden in your bag

Pack instead: Transparent jewelry bag

Linglingo Transparent Travel Jewelry Organizer

$20 at Amazon

When passengers pack jewelry, the chances of the bag getting pulled to search are greater because the X-ray can not see through genuine jewelry. This means the officer has to physically look through the bag. Transparent bags make this process faster," says Harmon-Marshall.

With more than 1,200 five-star ratings, this Transparent Jewelry Storage Book is a nice travel-friendly solution. "It's such a clever approach to jewelry management," wrote one traveler at Amazon. "I can't believe that it's not the most popular way to carry jewelry."

Don't bring: Carry-on without laptop sleeve

Pack instead: Backpack with easy-access compartments for electronics

Lovevook Laptop Backpack

backpack for laptop

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$39~~ $29 at Amazon

"Multiple electronics in a bag can make it hard for officers to clear a bag," recalls Harmon-Marshall. That's why he recommends traveling with a carry-on that makes it easy to remove these items without having to tear apart your whole bag.

Personally, he travels with this Lovelook Laptop Backpack. It's a flight attendant-approved product and has an impressive 4.8-star average rating from more than 8,000 ratings. Among the 17 pockets and four compartments are two easily accessible padded compartments: one for a laptop, and one for an iPad.

Don't bring: Wrapped gifts

Pack instead: Foldable gift bags

Loveinside Medium Size Gift Bags, Set of 4

medium size gift bags

PHOTO: AMAZON

$9 at Amazon

Harmon-Marshall never liked it when he had to unwrap a passenger's carefully wrapped package, but sometimes he had to verify its contents with the naked eye. "If you plan on traveling with a gift, I highly recommend wrapping it once you get to your destination," he says.

Don't want to mess with tape and scissors (which have carry-on restrictions)? Travel with these Love Inside Gift Bags With Tissue Paper. They're popular among Amazon shoppers, and more than 4,000 were sold in the last month. "Pretty and Tough" is the title of one five-star review that reads: "They're great bags, super cute, and held up very well to travel. My friends are excited to reuse them after receiving their gifts."

Don't bring: A messy, disorganized bag

Pack instead: Packing cubes

Bagail Compression Packing Cubes, Set of 6

compression cubes

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$28~~ $19 at Amazon

If you've ever watched a TSA officer awkwardly check your messy bag by hand and then attempt to repack it, you probably won't be surprised to hear they love packing cubes. In fact, Harmon-Marshall says the "best packed bags" all use them and they "make it easy to pinpoint the area that needs to be searched quickly."

He personally travels with these Aerotrunk packing cubes ($60). But, if you're on a tighter budget, consider these best-selling Bagail Compression Packing Cubes. They're just shy of $20 and are so popular they have more than 16,700 five-star ratings. "I cannot stand the thought of TSA opening my bag and having anything falling out," wrote one happy shopper, who says these also keep everything organized and make unpacking easier.

Don't bring: Heavy toiletry case

Pack instead: Clear, lightweight toiletry bag

Wandf TSA-approved Clear Travel Toiletry Bag

toiletry bag

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$8~~ $7 at Amazon

Since 2006, when terrorists attempted to use liquid explosives on commercial planes bound for the U.S. and Canada, TSA has tightly regulated the amount of liquids passengers can bring in their carry-on. All liquids, together, have to fit in the same quart-sized bag. "There are no transparent color requirements, " says Barker. "Travelers utilize both clear and printed material toiletry bags."

That said, clear bags help officers see what's inside without needing to open the bag. In lieu of a Ziploc bag that has a very limited lifespan, consider these reusable TSA-approved Clear Travel Toiletry Bags with reinforced seams and heavy-duty zippers. Nearly 80 percent of their 6,800-plus ratings on Amazon are perfect five-star ratings.

Don't bring: Shoes or sandals without socks

Pack instead: Travel socks

Wernies No-show Socks

no show socks

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$12~~ $10 at Amazon

If you don't have TSA PreCheck, you'll probably have to remove your shoes — even flip-flops — at security. If you're wearing sandals, that means you'll be left barefoot. "Unfortunately, we do not provide socks," says Barker.

If you want to wear sandals at the airport, slip a pair of these premium cotton Wernies No-show Socks in your bag. They're ultralight and feature silicone grip technology so you won't slip. They'll also keep your feet warm on cold flights. With nearly 61,800 five-star ratings, they're ranked as the number-one pick on Amazon's Best-sellers in Women's No-show Socks.

Don't bring: Oversized liquids, gels, and aerosols

Pack instead: 3.4-ounces or smaller

Tocelffe 18-pack Travel Bottles

travel bottles

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$13~~ $10 at Amazon

Just because a liquid fits in a quart-sized bag, doesn't mean it gets the green light. "Travelers often make the mistake of trying to bring oversized liquid, gel, and/or aerosol products through the screening checkpoint," says Barker. Oversized in this case means more than 3.4 ounces.

One of the best ways to adhere to this rule is to rely on these TSA-approved Silicone Travel Containers. They're so popular that more than 30,000 were purchased on Amazon in the last month alone. One five-star review titled "Security Loved These" reads: "These are a great price [with] fast shipping, they are well-made, and TSA agents at multiple airports have thanked us for using them."

Don't bring: Breast milk in bags

Pack instead: Bottled breast milk

Dr. Brown's Breast Milk Collection Bottles, Set of 4

PHOTO: AMAZON

~~$10~~
$8 at Amazon

There are a few exemptions for the 3.4-ounce liquid rule. Breast milk is one of them. Still, Harmon-Marshall wants passengers to know that when it comes to screening, storing breast milk in bottles is better than storing it in bags: "Bags usually alarm the bottle liquid scanner, creating additional screening procedures to clear the breast milk."

With an impressive 4.8-star average rating, the Dr. Brown's Breast Milk Collection Bottles have won over shoppers with their thoughtful, travel-friendly design. "They travel well, and I haven't had any trouble with them leaking whatsoever," wrote one Amazon shopper, who liked them so much they bought three sets.

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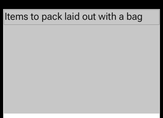

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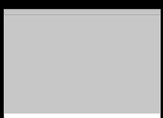

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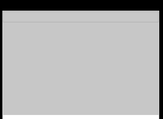

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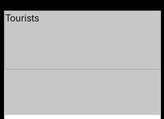

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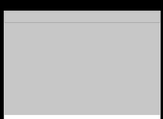

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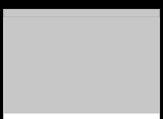

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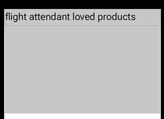

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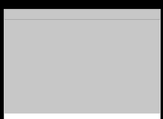

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