

Pack Mentality

Worried about what size suitcase to lug? Don't have a cow

by Colleen Friesen

Smug isn't quite the right word. Righteous, perhaps? That's closer, I muse, as I wheel my luggage past the airport's baggage carousel and straight to the Tucson exit – where I wait, and wait, for my husband, Kevin, to be reunited with his bloated bags. • I am the Queen of Packing Light. While the over-burdened needers-of-porters and renters-of-luggage-carts swarm all around me, I regard the world's lightest carry-on at my feet. Empty, I can pick it up with my pinkie. Truly it is a bag made for those who know how to pack.

Like me.

Case in point. Earlier this year, and a lifetime after leaving Vancouver, I landed before the Shangri-La Hotel in Kuala Lumpur with 17 other travel writers. I hadn't yet discovered my perfect carry-on, so I was toting one discreet zip-bag that now sat diminutively among the piles of luggage on the sidewalk.

"Is that it?" hissed a patrician-looking writer from Winnipeg.

"Uh-huh." I tried to appear casual about my packing prowess.

"Whaddya do? Wear the same outfit 12 days in a row?"

I smiled, an indulgent and beneficent smile, a smile for the unenlightened.

By the third day she was shadowing me. "Teach me how to pack."

I entertain myself with such memories as I wait. Finally, Kevin staggers into view with his Olympian weight. How many outfits could he need for a six-day train journey into Mexico's Copper Canyon?

To be fair, my packing system can get irritating. If everything isn't piled just so . . . well. By our third day in Tucson, it's downright annoying how Kevin has room for the laundry bag he blithely stuffs into an empty corner of his mammoth case. I vow to take even less next time. But there are other forces at work. I'm sweating more than in my usual Canadian habitat, which creates more semi-smelly clothes than I had counted on. Perhaps on that Malaysian trip, my bag had been just a bit bigger?



The Sonoran desert flips by our little window on the *Sierra Madre Express* like a Road Runner cartoon, as we rock and sway south from the Mexican border town of Nogales toward Mexico's Pacific coast. Kevin heaves his bags onto the left bunk in our tiny compartment; I slide my perfect silver case into the narrow gap between the bed and the floor. Funny, how so much virtue can be displayed with one deft move.

The next morning, it's more blue skies and rocking rails. Today we'll climb 2,400 metres and reach the first of the 87 tunnels and 37 bridges that took a century to cobble together, resulting in the "world's most exciting train ride," according to the Society of American Travel Writers. I extract my

white blouse. Not everyone who packs light would choose white, but the right items can create myriad mix-and-match options.

The viewing car is an open-sided platform with rails around the perimeter, a seat in the middle, a bar at the back and two little seats tucked into the forward corners – directly behind the locomotive. Cherie, a retired flight attendant, is in one of those

little front seats when we lurch inside from between the cars. Kevin leans against the back bar while I brace myself at the side rail. The heat and roar of the engine mixes with the hot desert air and whips through the car. The whistle starts, loud and insistent.

"Something must be on the tracks!" Cherie turns to yell over the roar. She grins at me and then faces forward again. Which is the exact moment that we hit the cow. Or the cow hits us. Or, as they say, it hits the fan. Because that is what Cherie is now wearing . . . a fine but generous spray, with the odd bigger blob, of smeary bile-green feces.

Cherie leaps upright, her mouth open in a big "O." I take in the lime slime on her wraparound sunglasses and the truth slowly registers: it's as if we're looking at our reflections in a mirror – the simultaneous realization of which sends us both into hysteria. We gulp air with each howl.

Later, after sealing my smart outfit in a garbage bag and burying it in my suitcase, thereby reducing my clothing options by about 50 per cent, I contemplate some appropriately regal new titles for myself. Like, *The Queen Who Loved Her Husband for His Extra T-shirts* and, my favourite, *Smug Queen Humbled by Flying Cow*. ■ Sechelt-based writer Colleen Friesen is currently working on her encounters with alligators and men called Bubba while paddling northern Florida's Suwannee River.