

WHEN YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

How to pack and travel light
for a long photo trip

Text & Photography By Josh Miller



This location in Zion National Park has been on my life list for as long as I can remember. While popular enough to need a permit, it is also a very difficult off-trail hike that requires wading through a frigid river and scrambling over boulders for about 9 miles. Knowing fall conditions were perfect and worried that a coming winter storm was going to blow all the leaves off the trees and flood the river that night, I knew I only had a short window to create the fall images I had always dreamed of. As a result, I opted to leave well before sunrise and make my pack as light as possible by only carrying a single mid-range zoom lens, polarizer, ND filter and tripod.



We all love to travel, and often our cameras are a window into the world and its cultures. Now imagine packing everything you need to travel the world nonstop for a year and a half. After years of saving, and very little actual planning, that is exactly what my wife and I did this fall.

We rented our house and started home-schooling our 8- and 11-year-old

boys in order to spend more than a year traveling around the world. Aside from making a rough outline of a route that takes us first through South America and then Asia, we are keeping our options open and booking nothing in advance.

We are carrying all our gear for the entire trip in backpacks, which is often called “backpacking,” and are mostly riding local buses, motorbikes, boats and/

or any other local cheap transportation (maybe even a camel or elephant). As photographers, we all want to have the “right” gear for every occasion. But talk about a packing nightmare!

How do you narrow down all your gear to go light enough to carry everything on your back, including all your personal items like clothes, shoes and toiletries for multiple climates on multiple continents?

All in a 60-liter travel pack and small daypack? Don’t forget, we need to carry schoolwork for our boys as well so they can keep up with their studies. Here’s how we did it.

The Best-Laid Plans

As part of the idea of traveling light and mobile, I had to pare my camera gear down as much as possible. I seriously

debated just carrying my trusty Sony RX100 VI point-and-shoot camera, which, while tiny, produces publishable-quality images and reasonable-sized prints. But then as we planned the South America portion of our trip, we decided to spend nearly two months in the Patagonia region of Chile and Argentina hiking, shooting and scouting for future workshops.

In getting ready to travel around the world and carry a smaller tripod, I spent a bunch of time this past fall in Colorado testing my abilities to hand-hold panoramas with a range of lenses and situations. In this case, I was easily able to shoot a series of handheld vertical mid-range telephoto shots that were stitched together to create a wider panorama image using Lightroom. No tripod needed.



How could I go to such a dream landscape destination with just a point-and-shoot? Plus, hopefully I'll have a chance to spend a few days photographing pumas as well. In an effort to reduce the size of my gear, I even tested and wrote an article for the April 2023 issue of *Outdoor Photographer* about using the relatively compact, 20-megapixel OM System OM-1, a Micro Four Thirds sensor mirrorless camera.

While I absolutely loved the travel-friendly OM-1, the image files didn't offer enough resolution compared to my full-frame 45MP Nikon Z 9. Knowing I would want to make 30x40-inch and larger-size prints from some of my Patagonia work, I decided Micro Four Thirds was just too much of a compromise in terms of resolution and image detail.

Determine Your Goals

One of the things that must be assessed when traveling is what are your goals for the trip? Is it a trip where photography is the main activity? Are you mainly just wanting to document your travels to share

with family and friends, or do you plan to do more with the images you create along the way?

If the goal is mainly to share and post photos online, perhaps a high-quality point-and-shoot or even a smartphone might be enough. But in my case, as a working professional who is trying to help fund our round-the-world trip by shooting jobs along the way, I ended up opting to go "light" with my full-frame camera gear.

So, what does going light actually look like? After many years of backpacking in the Sierra Nevada, Cascades and Alaska, I have learned that sometimes less is more when it comes to camera gear. When you are already carrying a heavy pack with as much as 10 days' worth of food, you just can't carry all your lenses and still have fun. In these backcountry situations, I usually just carry a single mid-range zoom lens, knowing that it will meet most but not all my needs. Sure, there are times when I wish I had something a bit wider or longer, but often I can stitch vertical images to replace my wide angle and crop to cover some of my missing telephoto

Above: This past year, my wife and I started getting into packrafting as a way to access more backcountry locations. Packrafts weigh 6 to 8 pounds and pack down into the size of a daypack. I saw a packraft as a natural extension of my camera gear, as it is lightweight and nimble and allows me to get my camera into locations/angles I can't reach via a larger and harder-to-maneuver full-sized raft. Part of my packrafting kit is my mid-range Nikon 24-120mm, which gives me the ability to create landscapes as well as tighter telephoto images of other boaters on the river.

Opposite: In my effort to lighten my pack weight during backcountry adventures, I sometimes opt to leave my full-frame Nikon system at home and just carry my wonderful Sony RX100 VI. I only carry a tiny Really Right Stuff Ultra Pocket Pod tabletop tripod for these super light adventures. I can attach it to three trekking poles using rubber ski straps, creating a makeshift tripod that produces tack-sharp long exposures.





Above: While nothing can fully take the place of a high-megapixel full-frame camera when it comes to making huge prints, I have been blown away by the abilities of the tiny Sony RX100 VI point-and-shoot. I often just bring the Sony when trying to save weight for travel or a big day in the mountains. This backcountry ski shot from a peak above Lake Tahoe is no exception. It is a big climb and tough ski back down to the lake, and I needed to be light to keep up with my partners.

Opposite: It is amazing what is possible with current cameras and fast frame rates. I didn't have time to get out the tripod for this image of Mesa Verde before the light passed. But I was able to bracket three handheld frames to control the contrast quickly with the OM-1 camera. Because the frame rate of the camera is so fast, the movement between frames is minimal and handheld HDR images are possible at fast enough shutter speeds. I bracketed three images 1/60th, 1/250th and 1/1000th before the light passed and was able to blend them into an HDR using Lightroom.

needs. It is a compromise for sure, but when you are on the move nearly every day dealing with a heavy pack, changing lenses can be difficult.

Lighten Up

All too often, we get caught up in the thinking there is only one lens for each situation, and we can't make a good photograph without it. On workshops, I often hear the question: "What lens should I use for this next location?" As if there is a right and wrong lens!

My kind response is always to encourage clients first to take five minutes walking around observing and looking for compositions without their camera. Only then should you get out your camera and start asking yourself: "Which lens do I need to photograph the composition I found?" I believe, as scary as it may sound, there is always a good photo composition available no matter what lens you have on your camera. And while having all your lenses in your bag gives you more options, it also often makes it harder to settle on and refine a composition. This is one of the reasons most introductory photo classes start students

only with a 50mm prime lens. Students get used to looking for compositions with a set world view, and often their compositions are stronger because they are not distracted by other focal lengths.

Once you add a bag full of zoom lenses, it becomes more difficult to find and refine compositions. This is especially true with wide-angle lenses, which tempt photographers to just go "wider" and include everything rather than getting tight and intimate with their subjects. As the famed war photographer and photo-journalist Robert Capa once said, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough." Yes, I love my wide-angle lens, but it must be used cautiously, or compositions become weaker and less compelling.

The Things I Carried

With all that said, what did I end up bringing on our round-the-world trip? Knowing we would spend time early in the trip in Patagonia with distant landscapes and the possibility of pumas, I just couldn't leave the telephoto behind. In addition to my trusty NIKKOR Z 24-120mm f/4 S lens, I also carried



the NIKKOR Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S and 1.4x teleconverter. (I left my wide-angle lens at home.)

Sadly, I chose to leave my much-loved Nikon Z 9 at home, opting for my smaller but slower Nikon Z 7. My wife is carrying and using our Sony RX100 VI, so that also acts as a backup.

Knowing Patagonia is famous for wind and wanting to have a solid tripod, I opted to leave my tiny waist-high, 2-pound backpacking tripod at home and brought my mid-weight Gitzo GT1542 tripod and Really Right Stuff BH-40 ball head (together weighing close to 4 pounds). Again, not the lightest setup, but I figured the extra 2 pounds would mean a taller and far more stable platform for long exposures, especially with the 100-400mm lens.

In order to be inconspicuous as a photographer, I opted not to bring a traditional camera pack but rather a lens case for the 100-400mm, and my new favorite camera pouch, the super light-weight and nearly waterproof Hyperlite Camera Pod for my Z 7 and 24-120mm lens. My camera gear is hauled in a standard hiking-style daypack, which I can

position on my front when carrying my big travel pack from bus station to hostel. After Patagonia, if I can find someone to take it, I plan to lighten my pack by sending home the 100-400mm and possibly switching to my lighter 2-pound tripod.

Less Is More

In order to make space for all this gear plus my laptop and a few hard drives, I had to go very light on the rest of my personal gear. One of the best ways to reduce the size of your luggage is to invest in quality synthetic travel clothes that can be washed in the shower/sink and will dry overnight, thus minimizing the number of clothes you need to carry. Knowing we would be in several different climates during our trip, I packed two pairs of synthetic pants and two pairs of shorts (one to wear, one to wash), plus four shirts and a few pairs of underwear and socks. A light fleece jacket, synthetic puffy jacket, rain jacket, gloves and a warm hat topped it all off.

While this approach is not as light as traveling with a point-and-shoot, for a working photographer who typically brings a camera pack that is the

When we took our two boys on their first real backpacking trip a couple summers ago, I couldn't carry my full-frame camera along with the 60 pounds of other gear for the 30-mile loop we had planned. We wanted to make the trip about the kids, not photography. So, I ended up just carrying my Sony RX100 VI and tiny tripod.

maximum-allowed carry-on size on every trip, I am extremely stripped down but still able to shoot professionally. Yes, there will be times I wish I had something wider or longer (especially after I send home the 100-400mm lens), but for most travel situations, the 24-120mm will do the job quite well. Sometimes having less gear means you can focus more in the moment with your subject.

If the idea of leaving your heavy camera pack at home and hitting the road for a few weeks, months or even years with a minimal amount of photo gear gets you excited, hopefully this article will motivate you to pare down for your next trip. OR

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