

# The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



## HOW TO TRAVEL SMARTER

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How do I know our collective travel literacy is lacking? I run a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that helps travelers every day. This summer, our caseload spiked to levels I’ve never seen. I’m talking hundreds of complaints a week and, often, more.

Most were the result of simple travel misunderstandings — people who wanted refunds on nonrefundable airline tickets or to be let off the hook for damage to their rental cars. No, Americans aren’t the world’s savviest travelers. Less than half of us even have passports.

Travel literacy falls into two broad categories: understanding how the travel industry works, with its often arcane rules and restrictions; and being aware of other cultures and customs. One is easy to overcome; the other isn’t.

I’ll start with the first one. At least 95 percent of it is reading the rules — all of them. A vast majority of misunderstandings with airlines, hotels, and cruise lines end with travelers admitting they failed to review the terms of their purchase. That’s how they ended up with, say, a nonrefundable hotel room or a restrictive timeshare. Most of the remaining 5 percent is fixable with real-world experience.

The more you travel, the more you understand how the system works. It’s something you can’t learn in a classroom. (Less than 1 percent of the problems involved issues that needed a professional advocate — and that’s what I do.)

People who claim they can teach you the ins and outs of the travel industry, and make you more travel-literate with a simple course, are probably exaggerating. It’s true that you can pick up valuable skills on travel safety through a course like Depart Smart or learn more about optimizing

your loyalty programs by attending Frequent Traveler University. But there’s nothing like being there.

So let’s talk about the second part of travel literacy, which is looking more like a citizen of the world than someone who’s never crossed a county line.

**Read a book.** The right travel book can educate, inspire, and enlighten. “Good writing helps me to look at my surroundings with new eyes,” says Martha Merritt, dean of international education at the University of Richmond. Among her favorites: Bill Bryson (her favorite is “Notes From a Small Island”) and “The Art of Travel” by Alain de Botton. A book about travel, most travel-literate people tell me, is not necessarily a travel guidebook. It can simply be a book — fiction or nonfiction — about a place.

**Find your affinity group on social media.** That’s what Tiffany Burnette, who runs a design firm in Philadelphia, does between trips. She spends time on Facebook’s travel groups connecting with new friends and learning new travel skills. Among her favorites: GoWonder’s Female Solo Travel/Women Group Travel page and Weekend Wanderlust. “Many of them are specifically for women travelers, with tons of incredible advice in those groups,” she says.

**Watch a movie or documentary.** “While some movies can have gross misrepresentations of cultures and people, there are still an incredible amount of quality films and documentaries that give an authentic sense of place, context, and history to wherever your travels may lead next,” says Ashley Blake, founder of Traverse Journeys. She cites the 10-part documentary “The Vietnam War” by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick as a good example. The series, she says, “took a deep dive into the complexities of a place to help you appreciate the culture and perspective you’ll encounter

while there.”

**Learn a language.** An app like Duolingo is a great way to brush up on your language skills before you travel. “I spend 15 to 20 minutes each day working on my basic language skills so that I can at least do the minimum to show respect,” says Jeff Wilson, the host of “Real Rail Adventures” on PBS. “Phrases like ‘please,’ ‘thank you,’ counting, and asking basic travel questions.” Wilson also likes virtual language immersion sites such as News in Slow Spanish, which helps you learn a language through current events.

**Take a virtual trip.** Vanessa Valiente, a San Diego fashion consultant, downloads maps of her destination on her phone. “I like to study them to get to know the area before arriving,” she says. “I also download the top-rated transit apps of my destination. While planning my trip, I plug in the main addresses I will be using, like the airport to my hotel, or my hotel, and save them to the maps app. For example, London has several free tube apps, including the London Tube map. Paris does, too.

While these tools could make you a smarter traveler, only one thing is guaranteed to improve your travel literacy. You have to get out of your seat. If you’re a novice, start with a guided tour. You can start your journey by visiting your travel agent or selecting a tour operator from the US Tour Operators Association website. A tour operator can handle everything from hotel reservations to meals, so you can experience a destination relatively worry-free.

But there’s no substitute for on-the-ground travel experience, and there’s only one way to get it. You have to be there. Are you ready?

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### HERE

#### SQUASH GRAPES WITH YOUR BARE FEET

Stomp on grapes, savor wine, and learn all about winemaking from experts at the third annual White Mountains Crush Festival at Loon Mountain, Oct. 20. Find out how wines are handcrafted in the White Mountains during a Winemakers Tour and Barrel Tasting, when you’ll tour a winery production room, meet a winemaker, and sample red wine (\$25). A highlight of the event: when visitors of all ages can roll up their pant legs, climb into a big steel tub barefoot (don’t worry: stompers sanitize their feet beforehand), and crush grapes Lucille Ball-style (\$25 per person; kids 10 and under free). As you feel the grapes squish between your toes, know that you’re helping Seven Birch’s seasonal wine-making process. RiverWalk Resort, site of the event, hosts special festival packages starting at \$143 per person, based on double occupancy. 603-745-7550. [www.sevenbirches.com/whitemountains-crush-festival](http://www.sevenbirches.com/whitemountains-crush-festival)

#### LOWELL HOSTS A KEROUAC-INSPIRED FESTIVAL

Celebrate the free-loving adventurous spirit of author Jack Kerouac, a Lowell native, and the area’s vibrant arts and music scenes during The Town and The City Festival, a first-ever event named after Kerouac’s first major published work. The event, Oct. 19 and 20, spills across many downtown venues, including the Luna Theater, Coffee and Cotton, Gallery Z, and Zorba Music Hall. It will draw dozens of musicians and artists, such as a poetry session by headliner Andrea Gib-



son and England’s Scarlett Sabet, and performances by guitarist Gary Hoey, singer-songwriter Caitlin Canty, and English rock/new wave singer Wreckless Eric. Weekend passes: \$45 in advance, \$55 on site; tickets to individual shows available. [www.thetownandthecityfestival.com](http://www.thetownandthecityfestival.com)

### THERE

#### GET EQUIPPED FOR OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Maybe you’re not quite the gear nerd your fellow outdoorsy friends are, yet you want to be prepared for an upcoming hike or camping adventure. Check out Cairn, a subscriber-based organization that provides the appropriate gear for your outings and introduces you to worthwhile equipment. Complete an online profile with info on your demographics, interests, sizing, and preferences (dog owner and/or wine drinker, for instance?). Choose a subscription and the experts at Cairn will put together a thoughtfully curated package of high-quality gear and ship it to you. One package may contain a solar light, backpack, and the latest fueling and hydration products,

whereas another may have a high-end rain jacket, camping cook set, trail bars, and water filter — whatever matches your subscription budget, and your personal interests and needs. Pay roughly \$30 monthly for up to \$50 in gear or \$250 for a package valued at up to \$350. Experiencing gear overload? Cairn provides a bag with a prepaid shipping label for subscribers (or nonsubscribers by request) as part of its Gear Up, Give Back program. Ship your old items to The Gear Fix in Bend, Ore., Cairn’s home base, and the shop will repair your gear, resell it, and donate proceeds (with a matched amount from Cairns) to the Conservation Alliance. [www.getcairn.com](http://www.getcairn.com)



#### HOTEL SUPPORTS OAHU’S CULTURAL AND NATURAL LEGACIES

Stay at the Equus Hotel on Waikiki’s quieter west side and enjoy not only easy access to the beach (just a block away) and the city’s top restaurants and shopping, but free tickets to polo matches at the Hawai’i Polo Club on Oahu’s North Shore (caveat: for guests staying on Sundays during polo season, April to September). The owner of the equestrian-themed boutique hotel (Equus means “horse” in Latin) used to play professional polo, and matches were once held in nearby Kapi’olani Park. Following a \$1 million renovation, the hotel’s new lobby bar, the Paniolo (meaning “Hawaiian cowboy”), offers coffee, espresso, and pastries 6:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., and then adult drinks from 2 to 10 p.m. (check out the barstools made with saddles, and try out the Paniolo Punch). The green-minded hotel — it uses eco-friendly cleaners, has energy efficient toilets, and promotes recycling, for instance — has partnered with the nonprofit Hawaiian Legacy Reforestation Initiative to reintroduce the Hawaiian milo tree and return a 500-acre section of land to native forest on the North Shore. In fact, \$1 of each guest’s resort fee supports the planting of Legacy Tree seedlings. Rooms start at \$139. [www.equushotel.com](http://www.equushotel.com)

### EVERYWHERE

#### AN INGENUOUS DO-IT-ALL TRAVEL MUG

Don’t be fooled by the name: Cauldryn’s Coffee travel mug does way more than just keep



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your morning brew warm while on the go. This ingenious multipiece device can blend your coffee beans — or even a smoothie or margarita — boil water for camping meals, sterilize water in case of a home emergency or natural disaster, and of course, keep your soup or hot beverage at the perfect temperature. The 16-ounce insulated bottle comes with an easy-sip lid, a blender attachment, a heating base with temperature settings that range from 78 to 212 degrees Fahrenheit, a 10-hour rechargeable battery base, and the A/C charging cable and base. Buy the optional percolator insert (available later this year for \$14.99) and you can also brew coffee grounds and tea leaves in your Cauldryn. The bottle is too big to fit in your car’s cupholder without an optional \$9.99 adapter, but small enough to pack along on your adventures. Connect the bottle to your phone using Bluetooth and you can control the Cauldryn through a phone app. \$129.99. [www.cauldryn.com](http://www.cauldryn.com)

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