



HOW TO TRAVEL LIGHT WITH PHOTO GEAR

Quick Guide
Written by Karthika Gupta





Photograph by Karthika Gupta

If you would have given me an option of another lens or this hammock, guess what I would have chosen! No image is worth the amount of peace and happiness I experienced out in the wildness sitting in that hammock and just enjoying my trip. Not every moment needs to be documented, and not every piece of gear needs to be used at the same time!

For the longest time, one of my dreams has been to live away from home and travel with my family for an extended period of time.

I used to dream about all the places that I could travel to, and how much fun I would have living a nomadic life. Of course, then I would wake up and the realities of my responsibilities would take over.

A couple of years ago, after a major life setback with the loss of my mom to cancer, I decided that my life was too short to not make my dreams come true.

That year, after several months of discussion and planning, my husband and I decided that our little family would spend our summer in India, traveling and visiting family.

Somewhere along the way, a trip to Ladakh, London, Zurich, and Rome was added to the roster, and pretty soon I was in charge of planning and packing for a life on the road for two and a half months living out of just four suitcases – one for each of us.

Being a photographer, I knew that somewhere in there I had to pack my camera equipment along with my essentials.


Since that year, my family has made a conscious decision to take time away from everything over the summer and spend at least three to four weeks traveling. Last year, we spent two weeks in Utah and backcountry camped for a week in the wilderness around Denver.

Being the official photographer both for personal reasons as well as professional reasons, I have had to take on the task of packing my gear and traveling as light as possible to make the most of these trips.

I'll share with you a few things that really helped me make the most of my time away from home. It is very likely that I have missed some key photographic opportunities, but overall I am very happy with my

gear setup, the opportunities that my family has experienced, and the images that I have created.

And as an added bonus, all the camera equipment that I take has made it back without any major mishaps along the way.

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Photograph by Karthika Gupta

The one thing I always wished I had taken with me is a rain cover for my camera. My backpack has its own rain cover, which I have used numerous times when I have gotten caught in a sudden downpour. But without a separate rain cover over my camera, I am not able to use my camera in the rain, which I really want to do sometimes. Somehow, I always forget to buy one before my trip.

GEAR CHOICES

Let's face the reality of life as a photographer: we all love and want all the gear that we think we need wherever we go.

As I pack, I realize that as a photographer, I always have so many things I want to bring along, but often the need for gear is quickly overruled by the need for practical things like clothes, shoes, books, etc.

After a few days on the road, taking a shower is not simply an overrated thing; it becomes necessary!

I narrow down my photography gear list based on where my travels are taking me and what gear I can realistically carry and transport safely without any damage.

This is my typical kit for most travel adventures:

- A wide zoom lens – my go-to lens is the Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8
- A simple point and shoot camera (yes, this is my backup as weight is a concern on most trips)

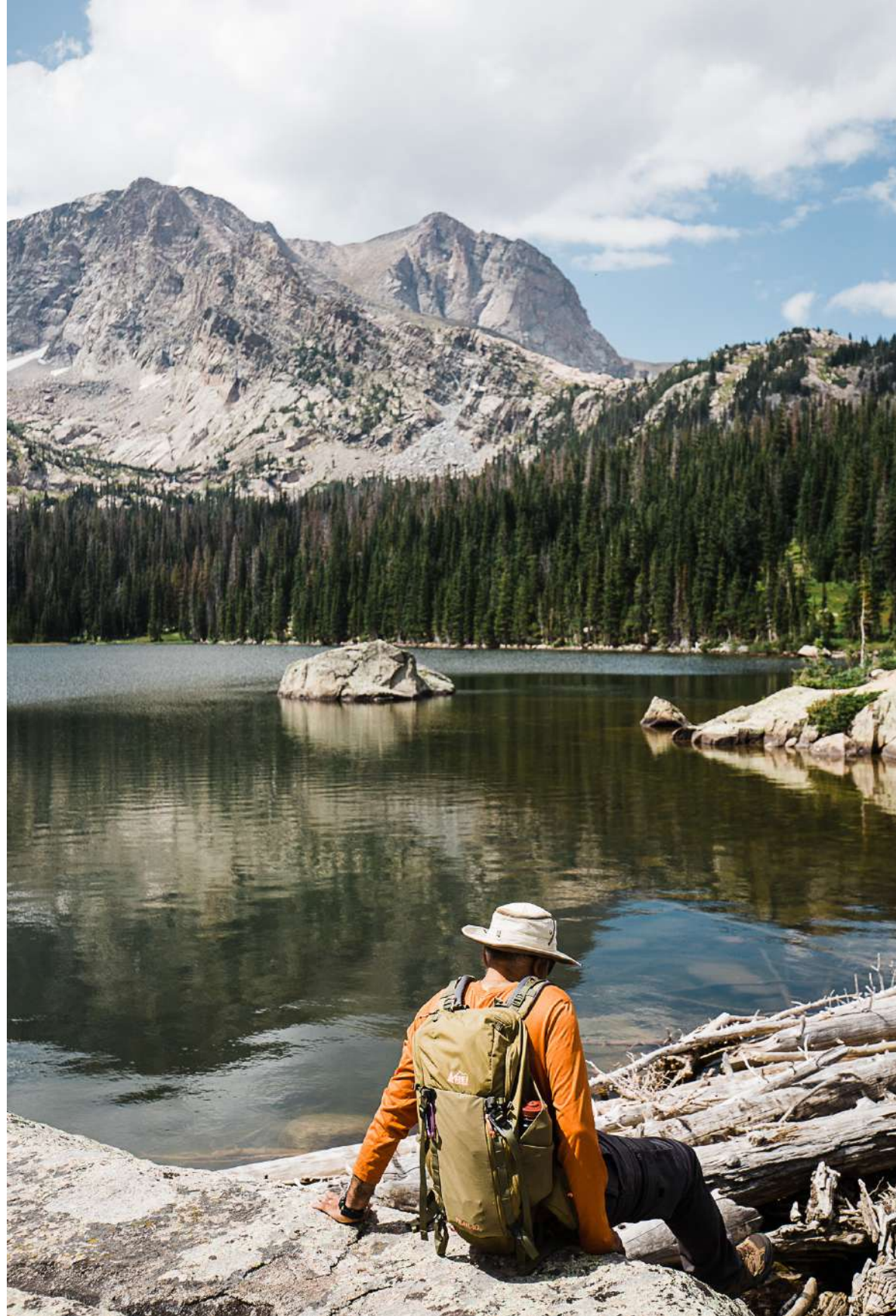
- One telephoto lens – I have the Canon 70-200mm f/2.8
- One camera body – Canon 5D Mk III
- 3 camera batteries
- 1 battery charger
- A small travel tripod – this is my latest addition, and it fits into my airline carry-on bag
- A remote trigger
- Five camera CF cards ranging from 8GB to 32GB

- Two compact 2TB external hard drives (primary photo storage and a backup photo storage)
- Two generic lens and camera cleaner kits

All of these things comfortably fit into my REI brand hiking backpack. I use this bag for everything and store my gear in individual soft-cover bags inside the pack. This is what I have done since day one, and it has worked well for me.



Key Lesson: Have some form of rain protection not only for your bag, but also for the camera and lens itself. Without one, you will miss opportunities!



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

Sometimes, if I ask nicely, my husband will carry my gear bag, but only because it is not too feminine!! And, it doesn't scream camera bag.

ORGANIZE AND PLAN THE TRIP


For me, being prepared and organized includes having a rough idea of where I am going and the kind of environment I am going to expose myself, and my photo gear, to.

Before I leave for a trip, I jot down all of the serial numbers, models, and brands of my camera equipment, and I store them in a document in my cloud-based Dropbox account.

This is obviously updated and checked multiple times throughout the year, as I sell and buy new gear.

Add this as one of your to-dos before you depart on your trip. While I'm gone, all of my external hard drives, as well as the remainder of my gear, are stored off-site at a friend's place for safekeeping.

Now, obviously, this is a friend I trust. But another option would be to lock it in an off-site storage facility.

 **Key Lesson:** Store your equipment serial numbers and descriptions in the cloud, where you can access them from anywhere in the world. Keep equipment that is left behind at a safe location, especially if you will be traveling for extended periods of time.

As part of your research, another good thing to keep in your back pocket is the name, address, and contact information of authorized service dealers for your gear in the country or countries that you are visiting.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

We chanced upon this flowing river and I really wanted to try my hand at slow shutter speed. The problem was that there was no tripod, so I improvised with rocks, and boom! Done and done!

Sometimes things go wrong, no matter how prepared you are. Being prepared with this information for your gear is a time saver, especially when you are traveling in areas where the Internet connection is not reliable.

During my travels, my gear choice on the road depends upon the activities that are planned and the kind of travel that we are going to do.

When traveling with my family in Rome and Zurich, we traveled everywhere either on foot or used public transportation, so I just carried my camera body and the 24-70mm lens among other daily necessities in my backpack. The rest of my camera equipment was either packed away in the hotel room safe or locked away in my suitcase.

When we hiked and camped in the Himalayas, my camera and both my lenses were always on my person, and the tripod was handed off to the porters that

were carrying our camping gear. For my camping trip, I carried all of my CF cards and ditched the charger and external hard drive at the house where we were staying, because it was highly unlikely I'd find a charging port on that journey.

When we travel on a road trip, my camera and 24-70mm lens sit up front with me while the rest of the gear is stored in the car trunk. When I fly, I carry all my gear in my backpack; I am too paranoid to check any gear into baggage. My next purchase for a long-haul trip is going to be a Pelican case so I don't have to carry anything on my person.

All of these choices are possible because of the research I do ahead of time.

A good mindset when you travel to far-off exotic locations is one of acceptance of the physical and mental limitations, both for yourself and your camera gear.

I experienced some altitude sickness when I traveled to Leh and Ladakh, as we were traveling on roads at almost 17,000 feet above sea level.

I also found out that my gear did not function as efficiently at that altitude. My batteries did not last as long, and the camera also did not shoot as fast. The first few times it happened, I freaked out.

But then I just accepted it as something beyond my control, and I gave myself some extra time to be patient in getting the shot that I wanted.



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Look closely; do you see what I saw? While backcountry hiking, we chanced upon this woodpecker, who gave us first-hand insight into what it is he does all day. I had no ultra-zoom lens on hand so I did the best I could. But I am so glad I got this shot because of all the environmental details that really make the story of this fascinating bird!



Photograph by Karthika Gupta


This photograph took a 26-minute exposure while I was sleeping in the car near Jisp, along the drive to Leh, and was one of the highlights of my trip. This is one of my first star trails photographs, and I now I find myself looking out for stars every night! This would have been impossible without a tripod and a proper remote trigger.

KNOW YOUR GEAR

This one is almost too basic to include here, but it is amazing how many of us don't follow this simple tip.

We are so enamored with the latest and greatest gear available, but yet don't quite know how to use the stuff that we already own.

The best way to get over this is to limit yourself to a few key pieces of camera equipment for an extended period of time!

 **Key Lesson:** By limiting yourself to a few key pieces of equipment, you will learn how to use that equipment completely and with better control.

One of my photography goals was to capture star trails and the Milky Way.

The opportunity presented itself when I traveled to Ladakh. After all, I was going to be in a remote part of the country at an altitude of almost 15,000-17,000 feet above sea level.

Now, astrophotography is not my thing.


I've always limited myself from trying it out, because I don't usually travel with a tripod, nor do I own an intervalometer. So for this trip, I actually downloaded the camera manual onto my phone and studied it before I left.

With that information at hand, I was able to comfortably and confidently use the B (a.k.a. Bulb mode) on my camera and capture star trails in Ladakh.

It was quite a thrilling experience for my maiden attempt!

Another good thing to practice before you head out on a big trip is gear maintenance.

I always routinely clean my lens and camera throughout my trips. Hence, I carry two camera-cleaning kits just because I know my gear gets a lot of use outdoors and in the elements when I travel. Before every major outing, I spend the time necessary to clean out the dirt and dust from the camera and the lens. The dust pen is kept in my camera bag just in case I need it while I am out and about photographing.

 **Key Lesson:** Traveling light means you will likely not have backup photo gear. This makes the maintenance and care of the equipment that you do bring even more important. You don't want it going down in the middle of your once-in-a-lifetime adventure to Nepal!



Photograph by Karthika Gupta

My 24-70mm is really my go-to travel lens. It really lets me get into small places, and I can photograph a variety of things. I am not a photographer who opts for a telephoto lens so that people don't know that I am photographing them. I prefer to interact with people and let them know, or rather see, that I am taking their picture. This is just the way I work.

THINK LIKE A LOCAL

I have to include this one in any travel photography-related article because it does relate indirectly to taking care of yourself and your gear.

Oftentimes, I find photographers that I meet along my journeys that seem to have a fake sense of entitlement.

When you are a guest in someone's house, are you not on your best behavior? Why is it that when you are a guest in another country, common sense and basic manners seem to fly out the window?

Locals are people who deserve the same amount of respect and courtesy as anyone. Put yourself in their shoes. Try to imagine what they experience when someone shoves a camera into their face without so much as a hello or a smile.

While in Ladakh, we visited a lot of beautiful monasteries. Most of them are still in use, and we saw many temples where the monks were in prayer.

Even if there is no sign discouraging photography, please use common sense to not invade a local's private space, especially when they are involved in religious ceremonies.


I cannot tell you how many times I came across tourists that almost jumped over each other or hung out of moving cars just to take pictures of locals chanting and praying.

Seeing this rude behavior almost made me embarrassed to take my camera out.

Additionally, flashing your fancy gear around is almost begging for the wrong kind of attention.

I remember this one evening in Rome when I was out with my kids taking photos around some of the beautiful horse-drawn carriages. We lost track of time and soon found ourselves in a fairly deserted alley. I quickly put my gear away in my backpack, stuffed

it with our jackets, grabbed my kids, and sprinted toward a more crowded piazza.

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MAKE FRIENDS WITH LOCAL PHOTOGRAPHERS

The internet is an amazing tool for almost anything. It is such a great resource to find and connect with other photographers, especially if you are traveling to areas that are new and foreign to you. When I travel, I always try to connect with some local photographers. We sometimes meet for dinner or drinks, chat on the phone, and just become friends.

They even give me advice on some of the local, non-touristy spots to photograph as well as offer to lend me gear if I need it. (Well, some do! Not all want to part with their gear for a total stranger.)

CONCLUSION

I hope these tips are helpful as you plan your next vacation in a far-off destination. Travel in itself is quite the adventure, and adding photography to it is just icing on the cake. But remember, travel light and enjoy the trip for all that it is, not just a photography expedition.

Self-Check Quiz:

1. Is it important to stop and enjoy the moment, as well as taking pictures?
2. What important piece of gear can save the day if it rains?
3. What should you store in the cloud before leaving on a trip?
4. Does altitude affect camera equipment?
5. Is it a good idea to limit the amount of gear that you travel with, and what benefit will you receive by doing that?
6. If you want to photograph star trails, name two essential pieces of gear.
7. Why is it important to think like a local?
8. How can you benefit from trying to befriend some local photographers before you leave on your trip?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karthika Gupta is a wedding, lifestyle, portrait, and editorial photographer based in Chicago. Her style of photography is fun, fresh, and organic. She strives to capture authentic emotions and interactions among her clients and emotive imagery in her commercial work.

She loves connecting with other creatives and photographers and is always ready for an engaging conversation about photography and the art of storytelling.

She can be found online at www.karthikagupta.com and on social media at:

Instagram: www.instagram.com/karthikagupta

Facebook: www.facebook.com/memorablejaunts

Twitter: www.twitter.com/karthikagupta

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