



If you're like me, you've fallen in love with the States through watching numerous movies and TV shows growing up, that give you a hint of the magic and all the excitement and wonder it has to offer.

Like everywhere you go, there are always tidbits you learn along the way that you wished you had known to start with...am I right?

So, if you're a first-timer travelling over to the States, or thinking about booking a vacay there (that's American talk for holiday btw), then check out my top tips I think are a 'must-know' when heading to the land of opportunity.

Consider the size of the US when planning your trip

The USA is a large country, so when you're thinking about the cities you want to go to, consider the distance and time it takes to travel to each one. For example, people often don't realise when they're booking that after getting off an international flight to LA, the last thing they'll want to do is travel for another 5 hours across to New York.

Stopping at places along the way will keep you refreshed. I found this to be the case especially when coming home and taking a break in Hawaii. It certainly was a relaxing way to break up that long flight from LA to Sydney, that's for sure. And, it helped me to get over jet lag a lot quicker.



Plan stopovers when coming home to break up the distance. Here I am, stopping to relax at Turtle Bay Resort in Hawaii.

Choosing the best time to go

The best time to go to the States depends on the events you want to see and the seasons you want to experience. Autumn and Spring are common times to travel because it's generally less expensive and the natural environment is gorgeous. Plus, you can avoid the heat waves in summer, especially in the southern states, and avoid the snowstorms in winter, in the northern states. In saying that, I've got friends who love travelling in winter because you get to experience the magic of a white American Christmas.

I personally love travelling to North America in summer because I know I can pack my luggage a lot lighter and it's a great escape from the winter back home. It's a personal preference but I can guarantee you'll have a great time no matter when you go.

Booking in advance vs winging it

If you like winging it, reconsider especially if you are looking to see some historical spots. For example, if you want to visit the [USS Arizona Memorial in Hawaii](#), you can be lucky getting walk-in tickets if it's not sold out but generally, they are only available at least 2 months in advance. So, if you really want to go somewhere, make sure to book ahead.



I missed out on tickets to visit the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor, so I only got to see it from afar.



Keep in mind the distance & costs from airports

In some cities in the US, there is more than one airport to fly into. Keep this in mind as although the airfare may be cheaper, the transportation fee to get to where you need to may cost you. For example, if you fly into Newark airport OR JFK International Airport in New York, it will take you 50 minutes to get to Manhattan versus 30 minutes when travelling in from LaGuardia Airport. That can add up if you're taking a Taxi that isn't offering a flat rate.

Use an itinerary app

Technology is so helpful these days, so instead of having heaps of printouts of your flights and hotels, use a travel app to store all your pieces of information. I tend to book through Expedia because I love how easily I can look my bookings up. Plus, it gives me cues, like when to check into my flight or a notification about the hotel I will be checking into when I arrive.

Picking a room

When picking your hotel, hostel or Airbnb, think about what is happening around you – Is there a supermarket close by? Local 7-Eleven? Starbucks? That way, you can get water when heading out or stop on your way home for a snack without carrying it around for ages. No-one likes their ice-cream melting or hot food going cold before you can sit down to enjoy it.



I chose my Airbnb in LA based on it's proximity to restaurants and shops on Sunset Boulevard.

Check the expiry date on your passport

Your passport must have 6 months left on it when travelling to the States. You are risking your entry if yours says it will expire in less time than that. This is because US customs officers have to weigh up whether you will attempt to stay in the country longer than your visa allows. Last year, the dates on my student visa didn't look right to the US customs, so I had to be detained for over an hour, without the use of my phone, while they investigated. Everything turned out okay in the end but even though I did everything right, they were very suspicious about it. Luckily, I planned my next flight to Nashville hours after my arrival in case something like that happened, otherwise I would have missed it for sure.

If you do happen to have less than 6 months left on your Australian passport and are travelling to the States for less than 90 days, your ESTA visa may cover you for the duration of your visit. At the time of writing this article, Q&A's that explain this further can be found under the U.S. Customs and Border Protection tab 'How to Apply for an ESTA'. Additionally, you can check out the Skyscanner article about travelling to the US with under 6-month validity on your passport.



Booking the best seat on the flight

Come close, I'll let you in on a secret... if you're travelling on a Qantas Airbus A380, there is a golden seat in economy that you can book for a standard seat selection price that has stacks of leg room (Seat 71D). You'll just have to fight the people you're going with for it.

Get insurance & organise your visa

If you've ever travelled somewhere and thought to skip travel insurance, don't do it to the US! No, really, don't. Medical bills are very expensive. Heads up, if you're planning to do extreme sports such as snowboarding or skiing, you will need extra insurance cover. Make sure you pay for a US visa in Australia before you leave. A Holiday Visa is valid for 3 months and in order to be granted another one, you just need to leave the US. A stopover in Canada is always a great option.

Watch out for dodgy US Visa websites that aren't legit. This is the official one here.



Compression vacuum bags will help you pack more into your luggage.

In-flight and packing essentials

The flight to the States is a long one so to avoid deep vein thrombosis (DVT), stretch often on board and wear compression socks. I like wearing these because they slide up to your calves and keep your feet warm, especially as the cabin floor can get very cold.

Another hot item to pack is using travel compression space bags. These bags take out the air without using a vacuum. I probably gained an extra 35% of clothing space by storing them in these bags. I picked up a packet at Big W. Pretty useful for those extra few pieces you might want to take. I never travel without them.

Luggage tips

With most airlines travelling to the States, you have the option in economy to check-in 2 x 32kg bags and take two carry-on bags. This gives you the option to buy more when you're over there. I'd suggest taking a duffle bag that can roll down small into your luggage, so if you need to come back with a second bag, you have the option without buying a new one. This is a much cheaper option than posting items back home.

Keep in mind though that it's \$25USD for your first bag and \$35USD for your second to book in luggage domestically with most US airlines. Usually, there are long lines to organise this but some airlines also can arrange it outside of the airport too (literally outside). Keep on the lookout because these lines may be a lot shorter.

It's important to use TSA security locks on your bags. TSA stands for Transport Security Administration, which is an agency that has been monitoring security overall travelling persons in the US. If they want to inspect your check-in luggage, they can use a key to unlock your TSA lock. Be warned though that if you're not using TSA locks, they will cut them off if they wish to explore your belongings.



Etiquette in customs

Arriving at US customs can feel a bit scary. Firstly, you're greeted by a long line leading up to a bunch of private desks. While you wait in line, make sure you have your incoming passenger card filled out – especially your first night's accommodation details (hotel name and address).

When you step up to the desk, make sure you take your hat off and press hard on the fingerprint pad when instructed. They'll dish out questions, such as 'what is the purpose of your visit?' and 'what do you do for work?'

Heads up, the custom's officers tend to come across like that teacher you had at school who always thought you were up to no good. For example, one time I got a bit nervous talking to a good-looking customs officer...which he recognised, then started questioning me about my nervousness. Oh gees!

Keep your passport ready

Keep your passport in your hand when travelling domestic and have your ticket in between where your image and details are. Every stop point will check it, even sometimes when boarding the plane. So don't even bother putting it back in your bag until you sit down on the plane.



Have your ticket in your passport so that checks go more smoothly.

Boarding tips

Download the app of the airline you're travelling with, for free WIFI onboard e.g. [Gogo Entertainment](#), [American Airlines](#) and [United Airlines](#). Just make sure to do this *before* boarding.

When at your gate, you are called up to board according to your group, which is classified by where you're seated. Your group positioning will determine your chances of having your second piece of carry-on luggage put up into the storage compartment. This is a good tip for when you are choosing your seat at time of booking.

If you are in group 6 or 7 and you think everyone boarding will fill up the compartments with their luggage, you can always check it beforehand (for free) at your gate counter.

The other option is to risk it and go down the aisles of the plane to find a spot to put it up. Keep in mind though that since it won't be directly above you, you have to be mindful of someone opening it or taking it if they exit the plane before you.

You can always check-in your carry-on luggage on board if you aren't confident. Just make sure you're comfortable with putting your carry-on luggage under the plane, particularly if you have open pockets, etc.

Navigating airport security

When boarding domestic in the USA, it can be quite daunting. Be prepared to take your laptop out and take your shoes off each time. You will either walk through a normal security



scanner, like the ones in Australia, or through a 360-degree one that feels a little more intense. Just follow the instructions of the TSA security officers and you will find it will be over in no time.

If you're an airline frequent flyer you can get TSA PreCheck status automatically. This is a government program that gives you a low-risk security status. Basically, it means that at certain US airports, you can get through security screening a lot quicker. All you need to do is enter your number in when checking into your flight.



If it's 11 am in San Francisco, it's 1 pm in Chicago. That's 2 hours that can be lost or gained depending on which way you're travelling.

Consider the 9 time zones in the US

There are 9 different time zones in the USA, so keep that in mind as depending on the direction you are travelling, you will gain or lose hours. For example, if it's 4:00 pm in California, it's 7:00 pm in New York. That's 3 hours lost or gained – a fair chunk of time either way!

Turn off your mobile data before an international flight

Turn off your mobile data before you leave on your international flight. And, if you decide to turn it on and use it, even for a few messages or emails, you may be slumped with fees when you get home. I barely turned my phone on when in the states and got a \$50 charge...not happy, Jan!

WIFI in airports

Most airports offer free WIFI, which is awesome for checking in with people, saying goodbye or looking up Google maps and booking Uber rides. Don't rely on it too much though as some WIFI spots in airports are weaker than others, and some airports don't even offer it.

For example, there is no free WIFI at the Honolulu airport in Hawaii. You wouldn't think it, but they are just a little bit behind the times there.

Just a heads up, that WIFI in airports is free for only a certain amount of time, sometimes for only 10 minutes. Most often it will ask you for your email to get access to the WIFI. Don't be thrown off by this because I generally put in a fake email address and still get access. Be aware that if you exceed the time, it can ask you to pay for more.

SIM card options

If you don't want to rely on your WIFI and would rather have access to your phone data and WIFI all the time, you can check out the best SIM card options [here](#).

Take a portable charger

I knew I was going to be on the go a lot, particularly before leaving on my last trip to the States, so I got a Goal Zero 20 Flip Recharger. I made sure I kept it charged in my bag at all times, so I could go out and explore all day and still be able to charge my phone and camera when they ran out of juice.

My friends had low battery one night out when we were heading to a baseball game, so they all had an opportunity to charge theirs just enough with it. This kept us all in contact and we could take as many selfies and videos as we wanted throughout the night.



A portable charger was so handy on my way to a Boston Red Sox baseball game when I didn't have time to charge my phone beforehand.

Safety

RFID protection

To protect your credit cards and passport, I always use an RFID sleeve. I use one for my credit card every day, even in Australia, because it sits easily in my wallet and it gives me peace of mind knowing people cannot scan my card.

Let your bank and the government know you're travelling

Whenever you're travelling internationally, let the Australian government know, which you can do here. Also, tell your bank where you're going and how long you're away for. That way they won't suspend your bank account if they notice transactions are being made in a different country.

Research any warnings or laws beforehand

Check out the Smart Traveller website, which gives you all you need to know about laws, health, safety and security when heading to the USA. There is no hiding that travelling to the States can feel a little intimidating, particularly with regards to safety in recent years. So, this website can help you to educate yourself more on how to handle a threat if something does happen.

In saying that, I personally feel comfortable travelling to the States on my own and I'm a single woman mind you. I keep my wits about me, but overall I honestly feel as safe there as I would anywhere here in Australia.



Know what the laws are before your trip so that you don't get charged with an offence.



Social media

Never post on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., that you will be travelling for a period of time overseas or anywhere in fact. Even if you think your friends and family have your back, it's better to keep it on the down low about this. You wouldn't want to come home after your trip to find you've had a break-in.

Well, I hope that gave you a little bit more of an insight about the States before you head there. Keep a look out for part two of my series where I cover everything you need to know about the US while you're *on* your trip.

Have you been to the USA? What did you learn that you can pass on to first-time visitors?