



Flying with Costumes Stacy Meyn*

In the upcoming costuming season, some of us will be flying to conventions with costumes, props, and accessories. An aviation security professional who is also a costumer offers worry-free packing and traveling tips.



Think of it as getting your goodies through airport security without having (or causing) a meltdown.

Conventions and gatherings outside of driving range means putting up with the airfare and mysterious extra charges, the lines (both ticket and security), wailing kids who are always right next to you, and the screening process itself.

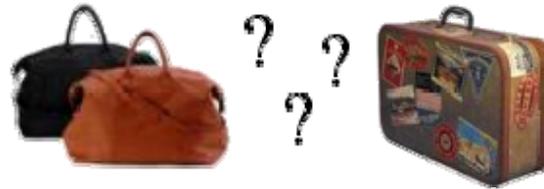
Whether or not you believe your jaunt through checkpoint/checked baggage is security theater, it is a hoop that must be jumped through and this article will provide you with some suggestions for meltdown avoidance.

If you want your costumes and/or props to (likely) reach your destination with you, there are two ways to do it: carry-on and checked baggage. Mailing and

freighting are other options that I will discuss later.

Carry-on is best when you are concerned about being parted from your goodie, but there are limitations to what can go in the overhead bin, both from the TSA and the airline. Depending on the type of item, its size, value, and fragility, the costume and/or prop might be happier with you on the flight, as long as it meets TSA carry-on security directives.

Here are some general guidelines to help determine whether the item should and can be with you or in the belly of the plane.



Better as Carry-On

Film – It is less likely to get nuked by a machine and end up showing only authentic San Francisco fog. You can request hand-inspection. Digital cameras are unaffected by the machines.

Small/fragile items – The airlines indicate baggage number and size restrictions, so use those as guidelines.

“Softwear” – It could get crushed/damaged/spilled on in checked baggage. And you might want to do some sewing inflight. Very small scissors and needles are allowed now.

Anything that might require some explanation to a person – Some airports use inline systems that whisk away your checked baggage and you won’t get to talk to anyone about your stuff nor will you see it until you reach your destination.

When at a checkpoint, look at it from their point of view—security has extensive rules to follow and while things are supposed to be consistent, they can vary from airport to airport. Be friendly and patient, even if security and/or the other passengers are not. You don’t want to be the person that security thinks is testing them.

Be sure to get there in plenty of time in case you do need to haggle with the authorities or end up having to transfer something from carry-on to checked baggage.

Better as Checked Baggage

Tools, including pointy-stabby things, are ok in checked baggage. Just pack them carefully. The same with electronics: keep batteries and power supplies separate from items—they could catch fire or cause a stir.

Liquids, powders, moldables in quantity, as long as they are not HAZMAT. More on that...

Weapons – If it is a sword, knife, martial arts device, not to worry in checked baggage. They are not restricted as long as there is no attempt made to hide them. Additionally, certain types and ammunition sizes for firearms are allowed, when properly-packed and declared to the air carrier. Prop and replica weapons would be safer and attract less attention in checked baggage.

You may have put in a lot of time on that replica, but don't expect security to be impressed. Things that look like the real deal often elicit reactions you do not want. Include a note stating it is a non-working replica or prop weapon.

“Hardwear” that is too large/fragile for carry-on – Pack well in a proper container to protect it. A popular shipping company uses the “six foot drop” test, as in can it survive being dropped from six feet? The belt systems and baggage handlers can be brutal and you don't want that mighty armor or weapon to get crunched.

Overall No-No's and HAZMAT

Things that blow up, shoot, burn or otherwise generate heat, melt, are toxic, etc. or things that look like they do any of those are no-no's. The following is a hells-to-the-no—security is not allowed to share in this brand of humor.



The Department of Transportation has huge lists of what qualifies as hazardous material. To decide if something is HAZMAT, ask yourself: would you put it on or in yourself, someone else, your pets? If so, it's nasty enough to be considered HAZMAT and can't go on your flight. There are some options for shipping such things and those businesses will let you know what they can handle in terms of adhesives, resins, cleaners, fuels, etc.

Be careful with liquids as far as labeling and amounts. The more info you provide, the better. The same is true with powders, especially in light of recent events. Fabreze[®] and air fresheners are usually ok to fly, thank the costuming gods.

If you are traveling internationally, do some homework in relation to yourself and your goodies. You may need immunizations and paperwork, and your stuff might be

subject to declarations/restrictions. Check with your air carrier and if need be, the embassy/consulate of your country of destination.

While sending items through checked baggage does solve many problems, be aware of what chemicals are in your tool/repair kits. Sewing kits are not an issue, but fabric glue can be. For example, Canada and Super Glue[®] (cyanoacrylate) do not get along. It is a controlled substance there.

It's worth getting the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) for each item so you know exactly what you are dealing with and what resistance you may face. Including a MSDS printout with a substance that looks like HAZMAT (but isn't) might get it through. Contact the manufacturers to get MSDSs for their products. A Wikipedia [article](#) provides a good overview of MSDSs.

If what you are carrying in checked baggage is small, it might be allowed, but no promises. Also, if you buy duty-free items that are liquid and expect to fly domestically with them as carry-on, think again. It's a liquids issue.

The Situation with Sloshe Things at Checkpoint

It's 3.4 oz. maximum for each liquid/gel/aerosol item in the “freedom baggie” (100 ml for European packaging). One per passenger, please! Place them in a 1-quart-size, zip-lock-type clear plastic bag, no more than 7.5 inches in l/w. Think tiny

toiletries. The ones from the hotel are perfect. Pack them so they are comfy and visible in the baggie and pull out of your carry-on and place flat in a bin. Bring extras for those who forgot/didn't know and you'll make friends and security might love you, if only for a moment.

The [TSA website](#) also listed at the end of this article) spells out more about what is up with liquids, et al., for checkpoint and in checked baggage. If you don't do this, say goodbye to your LGAs prior to flight.

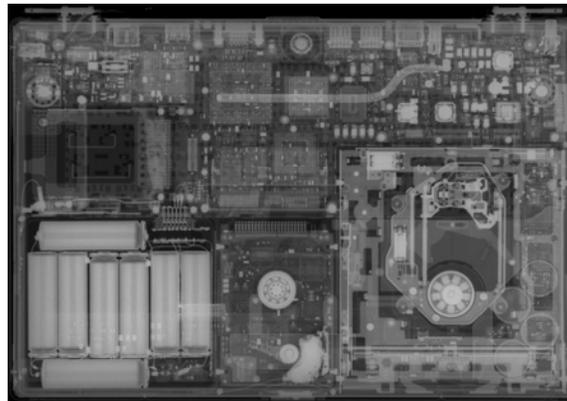
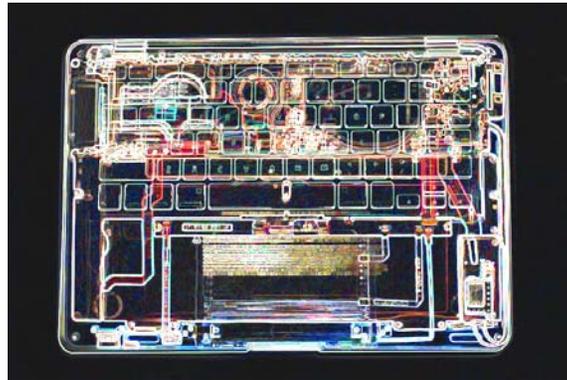


Electronics

Electronics can be a concern because they qualify as IED components, yet we all

have them in our travel stuff. Gadgets and gizmos as part of a costume/prop can appear scary to screeners, especially as it is a configuration with which they are often unfamiliar.

In these images of laptops, you can see all the wacky parts and pieces stuffed in there. Is it a healthy laptop or something that can take down a plane? Hence there is the need to make your electronics look as harmless as possible.



The example I like to use is the light saber hilt, complete with 9-volt battery. First of all, hardly anything in the US requires

this battery (smoke detectors, garage door openers, and light saber hilts aside), and the cylindrical-shaped, metal object with nifty electronics and the oddly-shaped battery inside will likely attract unwanted attention. Disassemble the saber parts as much as possible and keep the batteries packed in another part of the bag/box. Put a note next to the hilt indicating it is a toy and yes, stating it what it is and from what film can help.

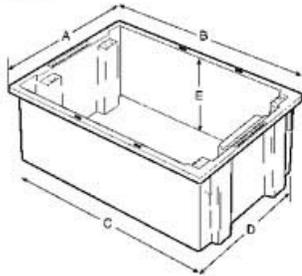
How to Pack to Survive the Trip

Once you've followed all the rules and are pretty sure that security won't freak out over your stuff, pack it so it'll live to see the convention. Assume the checked baggage will get a rough ride at some point. If you have many fiddly bits, use a tackle box or screw storage container (the ones with little drawers) and tape it shut to reduce the chances of your delights ending up all over the place.

I'm a big fan of Tote boxes, and Anvil and Pelican™ cases. Totes are great for the smaller budget, but spring for the others if you've really put a lot of time, energy, and money into your costume/prop. They are perfect for "armor" and fragile items, and will save agony on the receiving end.

Do yourself a favor and don't lock them if you don't have to. "Non-force entry methods" can involve force and security might not take the time to chase you down for a key or combination, and even if they do, it could gum up your flight plan. Use

[Travel Sentry®](#) locks if you must lock things—more on those....



For “softwear”, Space Bags really do help with flattening and protecting, especially as we often pack in checked baggage the liquid toiletries that we can’t take through checkpoint. Spread jewelry and any other metal items out in the bag because wads of metal get attention. Same thing with any friendly plastics and modeling compounds—I’ve seen it all and it gets noticed—not always in a good way.

When to Chuck it All and Freight It

Sometimes the costume and prop bits are just too much to wrangle oneself, or maybe you don’t want to take the chance of a hassle with security or something precious getting damaged. Furthermore, some freight services will ship things that can’t fly commercially, such as the adhesives, resins,

some casting compounds, etc. It is ironic that what is prohibited at checkpoint and in checked baggage may very well end up on the same plane as mail, cargo, or freight. That is another way the airlines make their money. At any rate, most hotels offer services so you can send things ahead and pick them up once you’ve arrived.

Very Clever, But NO.



A Big Simple Plus

“A picture can save a thousand words.”

Top off your goodies with laminated pix of you in your costume and/or with your item to establish context. You can bring these with you through checkpoint or pack in checked baggage. Write a note of explanation (and include repacking instructions if needed). It will help. Many

screeners are also fans and you just might make their day. Happy travels!

A Handy Lexicon

Airsoft: an example of very realistic-looking guns and rifles powered by gas or electricity. They are supposed to have orange or other brightly colored tips to differentiate them from actual weapons, but can be modified to look and feel everything like the real deal.

Component: an item that appears to be a component of an IED. Many of the “innocent” items we have with us every day could be deemed components, let alone what might be part of a costume or prop.

De-mil’d = Demilitarized: All the parts that make it dangerous have been removed, but it can still look lethal.

Declaration: When traveling with a firearm and/or certain parts of firearms (whether real or real-looking), make sure it is properly packed and declare it to the air carrier.

BAO = Bomb Appraisal Officer: someone from whom you and your stuff don’t want attention.

HAZMAT = hazardous materials: chemicals and substances that are prohibited on board the aircraft.

IED = Improvised Explosive Device: what you don’t want any of your items looking like.

LEO = Law Enforcement Officer: another person whose attention you don't want.

MSDS = Material Safety Data Sheet: a form that spells out chemical information and effects of substances on humans, required as part of workplace safety and worth a skim regarding goops and powders you may be trying to travel with.

PAX = Passenger: you.

Queue Master: This is the person at the checkpoint who directs the PAX to take off jackets and shoes, laptops out of the bag, yadda yadda, and who you can ask about having things hand-inspected or if you need to speak to a supervisor.

Realistic Replica: It isn't the real thing, but looks real enough to raise eyebrows and possibly heart rates and blood pressure. Put it in your checked baggage—declared if necessary.

STSO = Supervisory Transportation Security Officer: The person in charge of the checkpoint you are trying to get through with as little fuss as possible. Be nice and cooperative and hopefully s/he will be as well. It is ultimately the STSO's call on whether you and your stuff stay or go.

Travel Sentry Locks: Each checked baggage location has a set of keys that can open these locks so if insurance and/or your conscience requires bags to be locked, you can use these. They are noted for their diamond-shaped logos. They come as padlocks, combination locks, lockable

straps, and as an entire hard-sided lockable bag.



TSA = Transportation Security Administration: Love 'em or hate 'em, these are the folks who have to look at your stuff and decide if it's safe to fly.

Connections

The Air Transport Association has a clearinghouse page that includes helpful links to sites (such as TSA) offering various travel tips:

<http://www.airlines.org/customerservice/passengers/Passenger+Travel+Tips.htm>

The ATA also includes a brief history of aviation security that can help connect the dots:

<http://www.airlines.org/products/AirlineHandbookCh7.htm>

And the TSA offers loads of information and is getting with the program in terms of Internet presence:

<http://www.tsa.gov>

Standbys TAP Plastics and MG Chemicals offer MSDSs; there are other product-specific versions available here:

Super Glue[®]/Zap Glue:
http://www.cfesa.com/MSDS/super_glue.pdf

Loctite[®] thread locker:
<http://www.henkelcamds.com/pdf/01-30379.pdf>

Travel Sentry[®] Locks:
<http://www.travelsentry.org/en/index.php>

Stacy Meyn's "day job" involves instruction about aviation security and explosives detection, and she is halfway through her Master's in Education. Costuming and prop building are welcome alternatives. Herd electrons to stacymeyn@yahoo.com.