

Episode 99 • 10 Essential Travel Tips for Every International Trip

with Tracy and Doug Collins

The tried and tested routine Tracy and Doug follow before and during every international trip: the ten things that keep them organised, connected and confident, wherever in the world they are heading.

TRACY After years of travelling the world together, Doug and I have developed a tried and tested routine that we follow before and during every single international trip. Today, we're pulling back the curtain and sharing exactly what we do, the 10 things that keep us organised, connected, and confident no matter where in the world we are headed.

Welcome to the Global Travel Planning Podcast. Your host is founder of the Global Travel Planning website, Tracy Collins. Each week, Tracy is joined by expert guests as she takes you on a journey to destinations around the world, sharing travel inspiration, itinerary ideas, and practical tips to help you plan your next adventure. Join us as we explore everywhere from bustling cities to remote landscapes, uncover cultural treasures, and discover the best ways to make your travel dreams a reality.

TRACY Hi, everybody, and welcome to this week's edition of the Global Travel Planning Podcast, where this week I'm actually joined by Doug.

DOUG Hello.

TRACY And we thought what we'd do this week is we'd chat about all the different things that we do, our routine that we follow before and during our international trips. Because we've been travelling a lot over the last few years. How many countries do you reckon we've travelled together?

DOUG Together? Close to 50 countries, I'd imagine.

TRACY I would say so. I think the only continents that we haven't been to together are South America, and then Antarctica, because I went there last year without you.

DOUG And I get seasick, so I'm not going there. Drake's Passage did not appeal to me one little bit.

TRACY Yeah, well, I'm just busy writing an article about Drake's Passage, actually, with some tips as well. But anyway, this really isn't a generic tips list. These are actual things that we do personally, and because we get asked all the time. We bumped into a lovely lady on the train the other day who's a big follower of the UK Travel Planning Podcast and website, and she was really chuffed when she recognised us.

DOUG It was nice to be recognised, not just from our legs.

TRACY Yeah, that's a bit of an explanation needed. That was just what happened on the Edinburgh tram last year. Someone recognised Doug's bandy legs. But anyway, these are all tips that we've learned through the years. Some of them the hard way, because we have made some mistakes along the way.

DOUG Oh, yes.

TRACY And we just want to share these as ways that work for us, that you may want to consider. And I will say as well, some of this stuff I've started doing a little bit more as I've got a bit older. It's definitely different from travelling in my 20s and 30s.

DOUG Well, there's technology around now.

TRACY Before we get into it, though, if you're in the middle of planning a trip and not sure where to start, I've put together a free global trip planner. It's a five-step workbook that takes you from the first "where do I even begin" moment right through to being packed and ready, with all the checklists and itinerary templates we use for our own trips. You can grab it at globaltravelplanning.com/tripplanner, and I'll pop the link in the show notes. Anyway, should we just go through these top 10 tips?

DOUG Yeah, I think so.

TRACY Let's start off with tip one, and this is a really important one. This is something that I've really started doing recently, in maybe the last 10 years or so, and that is to research the airport and book a transfer in advance. I do this without exception. It can be a game changer. It's the time when you arrive at the airport in a country and you've got to decide how you're going to get to your accommodation. A lot of people who err more on the side of budget travel or backpacking may not do what I'm about to suggest, but this is something that I find calms me down. I feel less stressed arriving at a destination, and that is booking my transfer.

DOUG It works for you. When I'm on my own, I don't do that so much, but definitely when we're together, we certainly do.

TRACY After a long flight, arriving in a country you've not been to before, an airport you've never been to before, and potentially a language you don't understand, the last thing I want to start negotiating is how to get into a city. I know a lot of people will say it's cheaper to get a bus or the train into the city. I remember doing that when I went to Bergen a few years ago to visit you when you were in Norway. I got the bus from the airport into the city, and then a train to visit you. But when I've got luggage, I just want somebody to meet me with my name on a board, put me in the transport, and take me to my accommodation.

DOUG There's lots of logic to it, to be honest. Especially when I'm in Australia and you're travelling to Europe somewhere, the time differences as well. If I'm going to bed and you're still travelling and arriving in the middle of the night, I like to be at peace in my mind that you've got it covered.

TRACY So I always do that, and I'd be interested to know if that's something you do as well when you arrive in a place. There are lots of YouTube videos you can watch about how to get from the airport into places, but for me, having that transfer is just peace of mind.

DOUG It's a good idea.

TRACY The second thing we always do is sort our eSIM and VPNs before we leave home. I've never changed a physical SIM card, because I am the sort of person who would lose it.

DOUG I remember when we sat on a flight somewhere, and there was a guy with all his little kit, his little clips and needles, sorting out a SIM for the country we were going to. With us that would have ended up on the floor somewhere.

TRACY You don't have to do that these days, because there are fantastic things called eSIMs. But you have to check that your phone is compatible with an eSIM. We've tried lots of eSIMs over the years, but now we use Saily eSIM, and we've found it really good. I actually have a discount code for 10% off your first purchase if you decide to go with Saily, and I have a comparison guide on the website for eSIMs, and for VPNs as well. A lot of these you can get for whole regions, so you can get an Asia or a Europe eSIM.

DOUG If you're doing multiple countries you don't want to be changing it from country to country, which would be a bit of a hassle.

TRACY You used the Saily eSIM when you came over to the UK. How did you find that?

DOUG Incredibly straightforward, the most straightforward one I've used, because I could set it up while I was still in Australia to be ready to start when I got off the flight at London Heathrow. After a flight that length, you're tired, you don't want to start faffing around. I literally just switched my phone on, and there you go.

TRACY I know the whole eSIM thing can feel a bit overwhelming, but honestly, it's a lot easier than you think, as long as your phone's compatible.

DOUG If I can manage to get it working, pretty much anybody can, trust me.

TRACY Now, for those of you who might be using free Wi-Fi in your hotel or the airport, we highly recommend a VPN. A VPN is a virtual private network that you set up on your phone or laptop. We've been using this for years, and we have it on most of the time. It means people cannot see what you do. If you're doing any banking on your phone and someone is on a free network, like in your hotel or the airport, they could hack into that and hijack anything you're doing.

DOUG Public Wi-Fi is fraught with danger.

TRACY I've heard stories of people who used free Wi-Fi in a hotel and then suddenly had money taken out of their bank account, or their email hacked. It gives you that protection and peace of mind. We use NordVPN, and I have a link to have a look at different VPNs so you can see what works for you. It's also really good if you want to watch TV shows in different parts of the world, because you can set the VPN for different countries. So if you want to watch something like *Traitors*, which we've been doing recently, you can set it up and watch it as if you're in New Zealand.

TRACY Tip number three, we download our key apps before we even get on the plane. There are some apps that we've found absolutely invaluable.

DOUG And if you've already got the apps on your phone, double-check they don't need updating or refreshing before you leave.

TRACY There are some apps I would have liked access to. This year, being in the UK, I went to the Chelsea Flower Show, and they have an app guide to the show. Myself and my friend Melissa from America tried to download it, and it wasn't available on our App Store.

DOUG For different countries.

TRACY So double-check you know what apps you need. Ones we always download are the transport apps for various countries. One of the most useful apps we've found, especially travelling in places like Southeast Asia, is Google Translate.

DOUG That's been incredibly helpful.

TRACY When I was in South America last year, I was in a shop and I'd bought a fridge magnet, and the lady at the till wanted to tell me it was two for the price of one. She didn't speak English, so she typed it in and it spoke it out to me. We used it a lot in Japan as well, going around supermarkets and scanning labels to find out what's in something.

DOUG It's useful when you're paying bills as well, when you want to know what the charges and fees are.

TRACY Google Maps offline is something I liked when we were driving across Australia. We downloaded the maps and had them offline. We've got the taxi apps, like Grab, when we're in Asia. One of the things we did talk about is making sure you've got enough storage on your phone for all these apps.

DOUG Not to mention all the photos and videos you're going to be taking.

TRACY If you're travelling to the UK, I do have a best apps to download before you go. I haven't got a global one, but we have recommended apps per destination, so if you look at our destination guides you can see what we recommend.

DOUG It depends on the mode of transport you'll be taking. Maybe a weather app as well.

TRACY A weather app's a useful one. There's some general travel apps we'd always have, and then ones we look at specifically for the destination.

TRACY Number four is absolutely essential. I've had people say, "Oh, I don't really need this, I'm not going to bother." Well, as far as we're concerned, if you can't afford travel insurance, you can't afford to travel, and that is the fourth thing we always recommend.

DOUG Harsh, but true.

TRACY You must get travel insurance, and don't just assume it's to protect you in case of a cancelled flight or lost baggage. It can help you if a health emergency happens.

DOUG And we've heard cases of this.

TRACY I've been with people who've hurt themselves on holiday and had to be flown home, at least in business class, and looked after. I've heard of people who have flown back with a nurse with them, all covered by travel insurance. We all hear horror stories of people having accidents on motorbikes in Bali or Thailand and then having to do a GoFundMe because they didn't have travel insurance. Make sure as well that you can access that information.

DOUG The reference numbers, the account number, the telephone number, all the out-of-hours ones in the countries you go into.

TRACY Remember when I ended up in hospital in Vietnam.

DOUG I'm not likely to forget it in a hurry.

TRACY I ended up with pneumonia, in hospital in Vietnam. I think you actually had to go and pay a certain amount before they'd do anything, which is fair enough.

DOUG A few hundred dollars, it was.

TRACY In the end, for everything, it was something like 600 Australian dollars, and with our excess I think we only paid 200. I got excellent treatment, but we also didn't have to worry, because we knew our insurance covered it. There are lots of trips where you have to have travel insurance. When I went to Antarctica last year it was compulsory. I went to Morocco in March with Intrepid, and again they wanted to see that you've got travel insurance. We can talk about medications as well.

DOUG I'm on medications every day, and whichever country we're visiting, I always do my homework to double-check that they're accepted in those countries. Don't make the assumption that all medications, even over-the-counter ones, are available in another country. Look at embassy and health sites for the country you're visiting. From Australia we have Smartraveller, which is incredibly helpful. It lists every country, with websites and checklists. It takes a bit of work, but it's worth it. You don't want to be arriving into a country and having your medications taken off you.

TRACY Tip number five is to check visas and entry requirements. This is really important, because there have been lots of changes recently. For example, the UK now needs an ETA, and if you're classed as a British citizen you have to have a British passport, you can't enter on an ETA. There's ETIAS in Europe. Depending on which countries you're going to, you need to look at what the visa situation is and stay up to date. We've had to apply for entry requirements before, for example for Sri Lanka and Malaysia, before you arrive in the country. You pay a small amount and it gives you access. Thailand is changing its entry period at the moment as well.

DOUG You've got to do your homework, and don't assume that because you visited a country two years ago and didn't need it then, it's the same today.

TRACY Always go through the official government sites when you pay for these things, because we've heard horror stories of people paying 200 pounds for an ETA when it's nowhere near that price through the official site. I remember when we went to Japan.

DOUG I knew you were going to mention that. For the Japanese entry requirements, I did all the visas for both of us on my laptop, and then when we landed I hadn't got the correct information, because it was on a QR code which I didn't have on my phone.

TRACY By the time we got it sorted, everybody had gone and our luggage was the last on the carousel. So there are different types: a visa you need to apply for well in advance, like the one I needed for India, and then eVisas you apply for on arrival or 24 hours before. It really is about doing your homework about what your passport enables you to do, because it's different depending on where you come from. That's why Smartraveller is really good.

DOUG It's an excellent website. The lesson I learned is to always do that sort of work on my phone when I'm registering.

TRACY Did we get it wrong for the Philippines? It was on our phone, but they sorted us out when we arrived.

DOUG In the Philippines we'd done the first stage, a pre-registration, and there was another step to go through for the actual application. We'd registered our details and passports, but for the dates of arrival and leaving we hadn't gone to that next step.

TRACY So we get it wrong too. But how lovely was that lady when she sorted us out. We make mistakes, and that's part of the joy of travel. It's learning from it and going, "Okay, next time what can we do so we don't end up with this error?"

TRACY Tip six, get a Wise card or similar, and sort your currency strategy before you arrive. We both have Wise cards, we've had them for a long time. I've got about 20 currencies on mine.

DOUG I think I've got about a dozen.

TRACY It's like a debit card, so you put money on it, move it around between currencies, and you can put it back into your regular bank account. I've got it on my Apple Pay, so I hardly ever use the physical card. However, there are some destinations that prefer cash, like the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Morocco and India. We tend to get that at an ATM at the airport. Do not change cash at the currency exchange in an airport, because you will lose a lot of money.

DOUG Even though the Wise card's on my phone, I always take the physical card also.

TRACY In some countries, like Morocco, there's a maximum amount you can draw out from the ATM, so you'll probably have to do it a few times. In Europe I tend to just use Apple Pay for everything. In fact, I travel around quite often with nothing but my phone, which is probably not the best strategy.

DOUG Don't you travel around the UK with just your phone?

TRACY I did for about three weeks, and I realised I didn't have any backup. So I learned from that one. It's worth doing that research about whether it's cash, whether you can use Apple Pay or Google Pay, and whether you need a PIN to pay. Also let your bank at home know that you're going abroad, so they don't block your card when they suddenly see payments in a different country. We were picking up a car yesterday and a couple next to us had their card turned down for the car hire, and the guy was asking whether they'd let their bank know they were going to be in the UK.

DOUG They were scrabbling around to sort that out.

TRACY You don't want that happening, arriving at the airport and not being able to pick up your car. I do have a link that, if you want to get a Wise card, gives you either a free transfer or a free card if it's available in your region, and I'll link to that in the show notes. There are other currency cards available, so do your research and check which one works best for you.

TRACY Tip seven is to research cultural etiquette and learn a few words. You are far better at the few words than I am.

DOUG I'm okay at learning a few words, your please, thank yous, good mornings. But once I've left the country, I forget.

TRACY That's normal. I used to speak fluent French, switching between English and French, and that was 30-odd years ago, and I really struggle now. Learning a few words, you're going to forget it, and if you're moving around a few countries you can get mixed up.

DOUG I try, because it's a polite and respectful thing to do when you're visiting somebody's country, and to be honest it's quite good fun. I have no personal aptitude for languages, but I quite enjoy trying to learn a few words.

TRACY Etiquette is important to know too. For example, in Japan, don't eat and walk on the street, it's not accepted. Look into tipping, because some cultures have a tipping culture and it can make you anxious. In Japan, tipping isn't really expected or wanted. Look at dress codes in temples, churches or cathedrals, so you're not walking in with a cap on, shorts, a very short skirt, sleeveless, or without covering your head when it's expected. We have destination guides to a number of countries on the website with that sort of information, so do check those out at globaltravelplanning.com.

TRACY Tip number eight is to be scam aware, and to think about the bag that you use. We got caught out by a scam a few years ago in Rome, which really upset me. This is probably 20 years ago, but even now my heart sinks, because somebody would do this.

DOUG We were aware of it at the time, but you can't prove it.

TRACY It's a scam where the 5 and the 20 euro notes are swapped, because they look quite alike. The taxi driver took us the long way around to a hotel that was quite close to the main train station in Rome. Then, while I was paying, he distracted us, saying "Oh, look over here," and when we looked he swapped a 20 euro note for a 5. Then he said, "You've only paid me two 5 euro notes." So I ended up paying him again.

DOUG You hand me the cash now.

TRACY Yes, and you count it out and hand it over. We don't pay much cash these days anyway. The second thing was an attempted pickpocketing in Paris. We were staying in Montmartre, I got on the train, and a gang surrounded me and separated us. I had a backpack on, and they unzipped it and went through it. I had a Travelon backpack, which is designed to stop pickpockets, and I'd only put my underwear, some dirty clothes and my toothbrush in there, so there was nothing they could get. I knew what was happening but I couldn't move. In front of me I had my crossbody Travelon bag, zipped and clipped, so there was no way they were getting into that. When we got to the next station they all got off, and a man said to me, in French, that they'd been through my bag. I said, "Yes, I know, there's nothing in it." But it could very easily have had everything in it.

DOUG That's right.

TRACY The other one we saw was a man running after a pickpocket near the Eiffel Tower. He caught the guy and tipped up the bag he was carrying, and 20 or 30 wallets dropped out.

DOUG There were watches, wallets, jewellery, everything.

TRACY So you have to be really careful. I still use the backpack, but I make sure there's nothing valuable in it, I clip it up, and I keep what's valuable in front of me in my crossbody bag. I hear loads of people on Facebook groups say, "I always just use the bag I've always used." That's your choice, but I feel far more comfortable knowing things are clipped in and can't be slashed.

DOUG They have card readers to read through bags as well.

TRACY I don't want to be a scaremonger. We've only had about three incidents, the money swap in Rome and two pickpocket incidents. We spoke to somebody in a consultation a couple of years ago and warned her to be careful in Paris, and when I met her in London afterwards she said somebody had got into her bag and taken her wallet, but she caught them. It can happen in your home city too, but where there are a lot of tourists there's more potential for people to be on the lookout. Your phone is a thing they're targeting more these days.

DOUG We both have lanyards for our phones, don't we?

TRACY We do. I was reading about somebody who had their phone stolen with all their authenticator apps on it. Make sure you put those onto something else, like your iPad or laptop, so if your phone gets stolen you don't lose access. On trains, keep your luggage in your eye line, because we've heard of people having luggage stolen off trains.

DOUG Look for luggage space behind seats as well. Some trains have deeper or shallower parcel shelves, so you've got to keep your eye on it, even in a crowd.

TRACY When you're in a new or busy place, your guard will be a little down because you're taking photos or figuring out where to go, and that leaves you more vulnerable.

DOUG When we do the consults about trains in the UK, busy railway stations are a notorious hotspot. If more than one person is travelling, dedicate one person to look at train information and one to watch the bags at all times. We do that ourselves, whatever country we're in, even places we're familiar with.

TRACY We took part in an online seminar about travel safety in Europe, and I can put a link to that, because it's experts sharing tips, and we shared some for train travel safety too. It's particularly Europe-based, but if you want to be a bit more aware of how to stay safe, it's worth looking at.

TRACY Tip number nine is to check the weather and pack accordingly. It might sound obvious, but it's pointless looking a month before you arrive. You need to look maybe the week before, especially in the UK. Three weeks ago it was a heat wave, mid-30s, and now it's maybe 15, 16, 17. If you'd packed shorts and T-shirts based on that heat wave, you'd be cold.

DOUG A bit chilly.

TRACY We're in a time of climate change, so what the weather would have been 20 years ago isn't necessarily what it'll be when you arrive now. A weather app on your phone is a good idea. And try not to overpack, which is another way to get stressed out.

DOUG Layers, layers.

TRACY Layers, for the countries you're going to. We're travelling around the UK at the minute, definitely layers, and we're going to South Africa, layers, because we're going over in their winter. Your weather might change rapidly, so be prepared. We also talk about adapters, because we screwed up a little with this for Japan, didn't we?

DOUG I did loads of research on this one, knowing exactly what power adapter I'd need, and then we decided to stay somewhere a bit off the main touristy area, an older property, and the power sockets were entirely different to the adapters we'd brought.

TRACY So we ended up having to go and buy a new multi-adapter. Worth always double-checking against our destination guides so you can find that information for each destination.

TRACY Tip 10, the last tip, is to research what needs booking in advance, and do it. We get asked about this a lot, particularly for London, because we focus a lot on London on our londontravelplanning.com website. People ask, "What should we book in advance?" Some things you can only book two weeks in advance, like the Sky Garden. The main thing is, if there's something you're going to a destination for, for example Edinburgh Castle, or Highclere Castle, something you really want to do and don't want to miss, then book it once you know your itinerary, so it's locked in. There's nothing worse than getting to a place and the thing you want to do is not open or available.

DOUG Is not open that day.

TRACY We went to Hobbiton in New Zealand, which I thought was fantastic. I'd have loved to go to the banquet, but by the time we got there it was fully booked. In New Zealand we had a short window of organisation. I booked something and didn't realise it clashed with the Lady Knox Geyser going off at a particular time of day, so we couldn't go. So if there's something you want to do, organise it so things don't clash.

DOUG You prioritise.

TRACY What we tend to do is look up the days we're spending in a destination, then look at what we want to do and see, then look at the availability of those attractions, and book them. That's not to say we book every single hour of every day, because we definitely don't. There are a lot of people who just pitch up to a destination and go for it. If that's your travel style, that's great, but then don't feel bad if you can't get into something you did want to see. Those are the things you should book. Absolutely give yourself some flexibility too.

DOUG You have to, particularly for weather.

TRACY But lock in those must-dos. It's that balance between being well-prepared and not over-scheduling. It depends on your travel style. I have friends who just pitch up, and others who have every hour planned.

DOUG Same with your meals.

TRACY It's the same with meals. That's where I usually mess up, because I love food, but I'm more inclined to go with what I feel like on the day than plan too many things in advance.

DOUG Unless it's an afternoon tea.

TRACY Then I can happily book lots of those in, that's not a problem. Anyway, we're going to finish off this episode, but Doug, if you had to pick the single most important thing from the 10 we've gone through, the one that's made the biggest difference to how you travel, what would it be and why?

DOUG I think it's probably booking your transfers for your destination in advance, particularly when you're travelling alone. It's not such a big thing if I'm travelling on my own, because I'm quietly confident when there are trains involved, I can work through that.

TRACY For me, I am not as physically strong as I once was, and I get tired after a flight. I don't want to leave myself exposed and vulnerable arriving, especially if I'm on my own, and later-night arrivals. Whatever time I arrive, I'd prefer to have somebody meet us. When we travel together, 99.9% of the time I'm the one who organises it and does the transfers. For example, we're flying into Cape Town next month, and they have transfers already organised. It's peace of mind, so you don't have to worry.

DOUG I only worry when I'm not travelling with you.

TRACY I think all of these 10 points are really important, and it comes down to research and preparation. That's what makes your whole trip smoother, safer and more enjoyable. We've got a lot of resources on the website at globaltravelplanning.com, a big back catalogue of podcasts from destination experts, and lots of trip reports from our own travels, so do go and check that out.

DOUG What's the most important thing we've discussed, to you?

TRACY To me, it's the general overarching thing of being prepared, so you're not caught out. I like to feel organised, and I like to feel safe, so having my crossbody bag and knowing where everything is matters. There's nothing more stressful than travelling and not knowing where your phone or your credit cards are. I need to organise what's going in specific bags, and I don't like to overpack, because the more bags you have, the more stressed you get. More bags equals more stress. I think that's a mathematical equation.

DOUG When you're tired and jet-lagged, you're a bit more disorientated, and that's when you doubt yourself.

TRACY As I've got older I travel so differently from my 20s and 30s. Back then it was throw it in a bag and off I'd go, and I had more energy. Now, nearing my 60s, I'm more conscious that I have to feel organised. I'm slightly more careful and aware than I was when I just blithely went into things. Whatever I can do to reduce my anxiety, so I can enjoy my trip.

DOUG It's reducing that risk of anxiety, that's what you're trying to do.

TRACY Exactly, so I feel better and can enjoy my trip, which is exactly what we always love to do. Anyway, I think that's enough for this episode, episode 99. Can you believe it? Episode 100 is coming in two weeks' time, because at the moment we're doing every other week for this podcast. Hopefully by the end of the year we'll be back to weekly. We're really happy with how many of you are following our podcast, and our downloads are growing. We'd love you to use our resources, our website, sign up for our newsletter, that sort of thing. But that just leaves us to say, until next time, Doug.

DOUG Happy global travel planning.

TRACY Happy global travel planning.

Thank you for joining us on this episode of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. For more details and links to everything we discussed today, check out the show notes at globaltravelplanning.com. Remember, if you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on your favourite podcast app, because your feedback helps us reach more travel enthusiasts just like you.