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FRUGAL TRAVELER

For the Intrepid, From the Thrifty

By SETH KUGEL

SHOPPING for travel gifts after being on the road for five months brings on an acute state of something that is best described as the opposite of buyer's remorse. It turns out that products abound that could have made many moments of my trip more pleasant and, in some cases, more frugal, too. Those icky sheets in a Guatemalan hotel room? Turns out that I didn't have to touch them. That bottle of Argentine red that I delicately wrapped in a sweater? There was something better I could have put it in. And the cellphone that took a split-second dip in Brazilian waters? Well, a device could have sucked the moisture right out of it.

This holiday season, those of us who are toss-the-clothes-in-the-suitcase-and-go travelers are counting on our thrifty gift-giving friends to equip us for future trips. The following gift ideas are, with a couple of exceptions, \$20 or under.

1 For the Less Organized

Eagle Creek Cubes, \$12.50

The Eagle Creek luggage brand won my affections this summer as I banged one of their rolling suitcases down rocky dirt roads and tossed it ruthlessly atop buses, without doing a lick of damage (to it or the buses). Their "packing cubes," which help subdivide your suitcase into sections, win raves from travelers for making it easier to pack bags efficiently and find things quickly upon arrival, two areas I could improve on. Information: eaglecreek.com.

2 For Gadgeteers

Universal Power Adapter, \$16.99

As soon as I checked in to a Buenos Aires youth hostel a few weeks ago, I went straight to the wall outlet to charge up my waning laptop and cellphone. To no avail. How was I to know Argentina used those quirkily angled three-pronged plugs? (Aside from looking it up online, I mean.) Luckily, a worker at the hostel let me borrow an adapter another guest had left behind. What I really needed was a product like this — an inexpensive one-piece adapter that the company promises will work in an impressive list of countries, from the Maldives to Myanmar to Monserrat. Information: thinkgeek.com.

3 For Coffee Drinkers

Contigo travel mug, \$19.99

I record every penny I spend on the road on an Excel spreadsheet, so I know that a surprising amount of my budget goes toward spur-of-the-moment coffee and bottled water purchases. Let's see, how much money could I have saved by filling a Contigo travel mug with the free coffee, filtered water or orange juice that are doled out during breakfast at so many of the B&Bs, hotels and youth hostels where I've stayed? Enough for me to put it on my wish list. These 16-ounce mugs, vacuum-insulated and made from stainless steel, have a top that opens only when you push a button so that they can be tugged carelessly in your backpack with no fear of spilling. Another obvious bonus: sparing landfill in every country you visit. Information: gocontigo.com.



4 For the Well Groomed

ShaveMate razor, \$9.99 for three

I despise travel-size toiletries, and I despise putting my itchy-bitsy bottles in Ziploc bags even more. As a result, I often travel with a razor and no shaving cream, assuming that hot water alone will do the trick. Except when there's no hot water, which is a pretty common occurrence in the places I stay. ShaveMate razors solve that problem by putting shaving cream inside the han-

dle. Goofy, yes. But also ingenious. One problem solved. Information: shavemate.com.

5 For Oenophiles

WineSkin, \$9.85

There's no gift quite so great — or quite so terrible — to bring back from a trip as a bottle of malbec from Argentina or a sangiovese from Tuscany or Champagne from, er, Champagne. Great because it's impossible not to like and shows that you went out of your way to

lug it back. Terrible because you spend your trip fearing that it'll break in your bag and ruin whatever sweater you wrapped it in, along with the rest of your clothes. These bottle-shaped sleeves are both padded with bubble wrap to prevent breaking, and, in the event of a particularly brusque baggage handler, sealed so that if the bottle does break, the damage is limited to the gift. And though it's not specified, I'm betting it would work just as well for a similarly shaped bottle of Barbadian rum or Russian vodka or Scotch whisky, should your taste for liquor run in a different direction. Information: magellans.com.

6 For Sleeping on the Go

Grand Trunk Goods Silk Sleep Sack, \$60

"I hope you had your own sheets with you," wrote one of my friends when I posted a photo of the very unsanitary hotel room in which I was forced to hunker down after a bus driver dumped me in a Guatemalan town with only the sketchiest of hotels. "Who takes their sheets with them?" I thought. Um, lots of people, it turns out, thanks to the availability of these lightweight sleeping-bag-shaped products from Grand Trunk Goods and tons of other manufacturers. They provide a cocoon in which you can protect yourself against whatever invisible cooties may be in your hotel bed. This particular one is among the most inexpensive (if you order from the right place), weighs just over a third of a pound and folds up small into the bag that comes with it. Information: grandtrunkgoods.com.

7 For Fumbly Techies

Bheestie, \$20

I've never seen lakes more beautiful than those formed by rainwater in the desert of the Lençóis Maranhenses in northeast Brazil. But that was little consolation when my iPhone took a split-second dip in the very same rainwater. Little did I know that something existed that might have saved my phone. The Bheestie is a bag full of moisture-absorbing pellets into which wet cellphones, iPods and cameras can be placed to dry off (batteries are removed and added separately). It's much less unwieldy than a bag of rice, which is what the online help forums I consulted suggested (and which, by the way, didn't work). Information: bheestie.com.

8 For the Tongue-Tied

NYRIUS 11-Language Translator, \$39

I've never been to China, and I'm dying to go. But I do worry about wandering too far off the beaten path in a country where I don't speak the language and can't even sound out the signs. Having one of these talking translators in my pocket would make me feel much better when impromptu gesturing fails (or results in an unintended insult). The 11-language version contains several that are useful, like Spanish, Mandarin, Japanese and Russian, and two that are really useless: Dutch and Swedish. (Let's face it, the average Dutchman or Swede speaks a hundred times more English than this little machine can manage in their languages. Information: nyrius.com.)

Foraging

BEIRUT
TSC Signature

Food itineraries in far-flung locations tend to feature colorful public markets. But in the newly revived downtown area of Beirut, where slick corridors of high-end, marble-faced shops have replaced the souks that were destroyed in the civil war, there is a dazzling new food hall, TSC Signature, which opened in April.

Sprawling over more than 40,000 square feet, but divided into well-manicured sections, it has a jaw-dropping array of fresh and prepared foods from around the globe: local, seasonal green almonds; Mexican poblanos; French ratte potatoes; more than 100 cheeses; and fresh meat from Australia, Brazil and the United States. Add to that housemade pastries and breads, a well-stocked wine shop and fish from the Mediterranean and far-flung seas. What it does not offer are the sounds and aromas of traditional Middle Eastern markets. Indeed, its inspiration was more likely the food hall on the fifth floor of the famously huge KaDeWe department store in Berlin.

Nonetheless, visitors can browse and shop for local items — perfect for souvenirs and gifts — like Lebanese pastries and candies, bottles of Lebanese wines and spirits, exotic spices like sumac and Aleppo pepper, and jars of olives and olive oils. Shoppers in need of fortification can sip coffee and snack on a plate of prepared food at the clusters of cafe tables and seated counters in many of the departments.

With a bit more exotic flair, sushi and other Japanese dishes are delivered along a conveyor-belt system (below), and pizza is baked to order,



BEIRUT CENTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

as are Middle Eastern flatbreads. Cured meats are also on offer, on a plate or as part of a sandwich, and they include pork products, as Lebanon is one Arab country where pork can be sold. Choices include imported Spanish Ibérico and German Black Forest hams, Italian prosciutto, as well as local basturma (air-dried beef).

Ice cream and pastries, from brioche to baklava, have their own dedicated counters. Out of energy? Try the fresh juice bar. Or, for a respite from food and drink, the mall salon. TSC Signature, Souk Tawile, Beirut Central District; (961-1) 986-444. Open daily. Credit cards and U.S. dollars are accepted. Prices are about what you'd expect to pay in the United States: two pieces of sushi, \$2.50 to \$5; pizza, \$9 to \$15; Lebanese flatbread, \$1 for a package of eight; and ice cream starting at \$3 for a scoop.

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