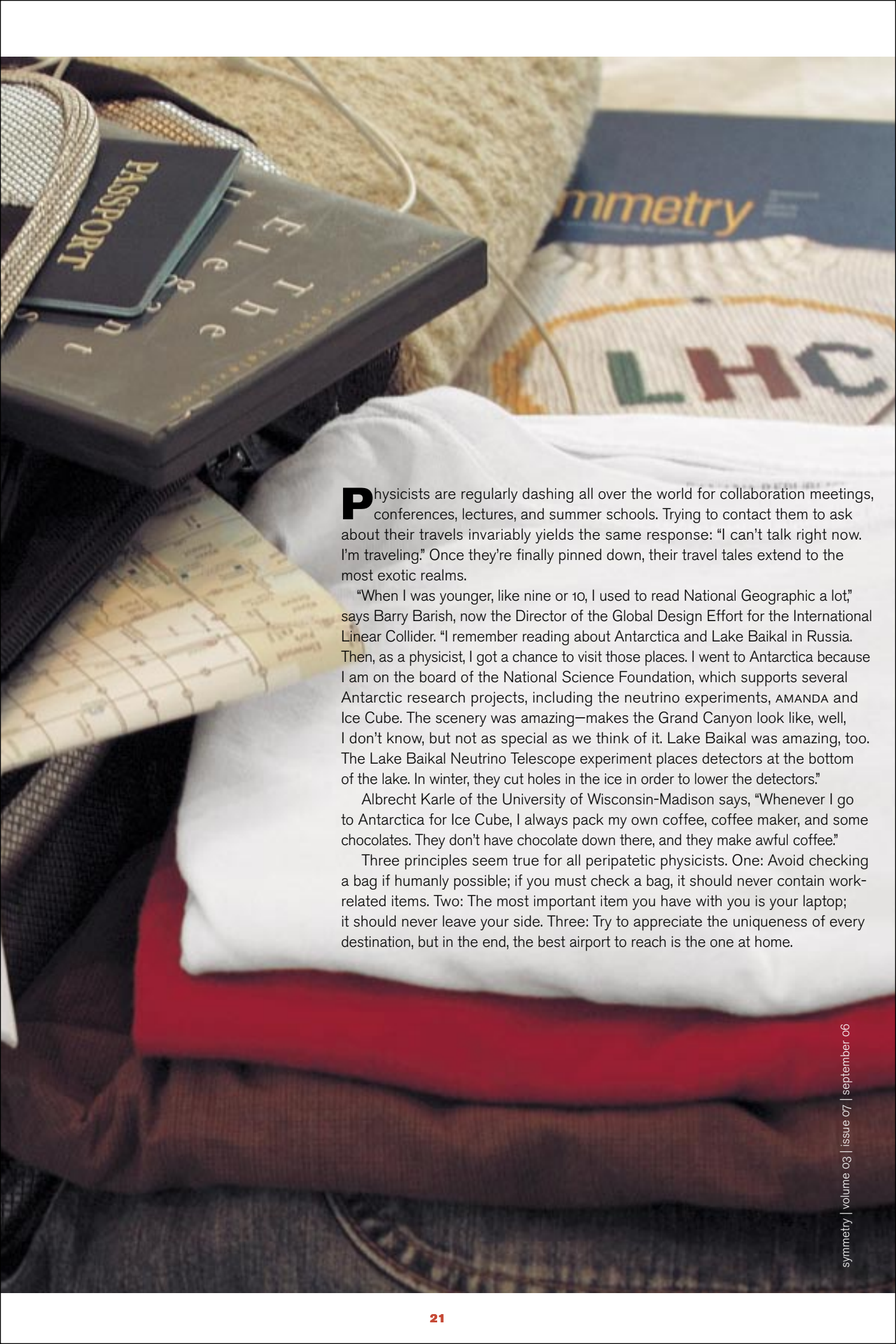


by Ben Berger

# Packing it in

Globe-traveling physicists put some of their best thinking into strategies for their bags—all carry-ons, of course.



**P**hysicists are regularly dashing all over the world for collaboration meetings, conferences, lectures, and summer schools. Trying to contact them to ask about their travels invariably yields the same response: “I can’t talk right now. I’m traveling.” Once they’re finally pinned down, their travel tales extend to the most exotic realms.

“When I was younger, like nine or 10, I used to read National Geographic a lot,” says Barry Barish, now the Director of the Global Design Effort for the International Linear Collider. “I remember reading about Antarctica and Lake Baikal in Russia. Then, as a physicist, I got a chance to visit those places. I went to Antarctica because I am on the board of the National Science Foundation, which supports several Antarctic research projects, including the neutrino experiments, AMANDA and Ice Cube. The scenery was amazing—makes the Grand Canyon look like, well, I don’t know, but not as special as we think of it. Lake Baikal was amazing, too. The Lake Baikal Neutrino Telescope experiment places detectors at the bottom of the lake. In winter, they cut holes in the ice in order to lower the detectors.”

Albrecht Karle of the University of Wisconsin-Madison says, “Whenever I go to Antarctica for Ice Cube, I always pack my own coffee, coffee maker, and some chocolates. They don’t have chocolate down there, and they make awful coffee.”

Three principles seem true for all peripatetic physicists. One: Avoid checking a bag if humanly possible; if you must check a bag, it should never contain work-related items. Two: The most important item you have with you is your laptop; it should never leave your side. Three: Try to appreciate the uniqueness of every destination, but in the end, the best airport to reach is the one at home.



### Bag it

"On my first trip to Japan I was to attend a conference at KEK. I landed in Tokyo and knew I had to take a bus to Tsukuba. Unfortunately, no one spoke English and I don't speak any Japanese. I tried to find the bus, but couldn't figure out what bus I needed and no one could help me. I was completely lost and felt very panicked. It was only by chance that I happened to see a physicist in the airport who could help me. I could tell because he had a bag from a physics conference."

—Olga Mena, Fermilab

### Gender specific

"I don't think I pack too lightly, but my wife does hate me. Wife: 'Four days and just a shoulder bag?!' Ted: 'Why do I need more shoes than the ones I'm wearing? And if I don't spill anything on these pants then I'm fine.'"

—Ted Baltz, Stanford Linear Accelerator Center

### Keeping orderly

"Computer. Charger. Cell phone. Cell phone charger. I can buy anything else I need. Being able to charge through USB was brilliant. Whoever figured that out deserves a medal. It's a religion thing—never check a bag. When you go through security, you learn to put the things through in the order that enables you to most efficiently put them on again on the other side, so your shoes go on first and so on."

—Gordon Watts, University of Washington

### 1-2-3 by Kaiser

1. Ritualize your traveling as much as you can. Buy the same bottled water (San Pellegrino), the same chocolate (Rolo, perhaps Toblerone), the same magazine (*Wired*, or perhaps a film magazine, otherwise *Vanity Fair*. Avoid *The Economist*.)

2. If you are traveling with a colleague, you should still take an aisle seat, not a middle seat. Convince your colleague to take the seat across the aisle. Taking the middle seat because you are traveling with a colleague (or your group leader, or your student) leads only to resentment.

3. You also need the gold or platinum frequent flyer card to pre-board together with the business passengers, so that you can get all of your carry-on luggage stored in the overhead bin right at your seat.

—Ralf Kaiser, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

### Battery life

"I avoid airplane chargers, extra laptop batteries and all that stuff. It's just gotten to be ridiculous. I used to try and bring everything, but it's become too much. I can't take it anymore. I'll do my 3 hours of work, or however long the battery lasts and that's it."

—Albrecht Karle, University of Wisconsin

### The 'Cosmo' Physicist

"I have to work on flights. During the school year, I'm constantly traveling between New York and Chicago, and I need my flights to prepare my class lectures. I have a really good trick for getting rid of really chatty guys, but it only works for women. I always carry a *Cosmopolitan* magazine with me. I just pull it out and they leave me alone. It really works. I just carry one with me for that purpose; there's nothing in there really worth reading."

—Janet Conrad, Columbia University

A person is shown from the waist down, wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans, holding a black garment. They are standing in a room with a bed. On the bed, various items are laid out, including a laptop, a white mouse, a camera, a backpack, a toothbrush, a passport, and some papers. A small digital clock on the bed shows 12:56. The background is a plain wall.

**No surplus socks...**  
“I pack the absolute minimum possible. I avoid checking anything into the hold if at all possible. Every sock is counted. By the end of a trip there is no surplus item. I can live out of two carry-on bags—a roll-on suitcase and a small backpack—for two weeks. But I’m stuffed now. With the new regulations I will have to check a bag, but I will maintain how I pack.”  
—Phil Burrows, John Adams Institute at Oxford University, United Kingdom

**...and no skyscrapers**  
“Recently I was leaving SLAC, and a friend had given me, as a joke, a small metal model of the Hancock Building in Chicago. I was going through security and my bag got intense interest. They put it through the X-ray machine three times. They came over to me and asked what item in my bag had aroused suspicion. I responded, honestly, that I didn’t know. They asked me to open my bag, and they took out the model. It was run through the X-ray machine by itself and they were satisfied. I guess the Hancock building looks like an offensive weapon if it’s small enough.”  
—Phil Burrows

Read other physicists’ tales of packing and travel online at [www.symmetrymagazine.org](http://www.symmetrymagazine.org)

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A photograph showing a person from the waist down, wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans, standing and holding a black garment. On the floor in front of them is a large collection of items, including a laptop, a white mouse, a camera, a backpack, a passport, a digital watch, a toothbrush, a tube of Colgate toothpaste, a small digital scale, a stack of papers, and various cables. The items are laid out on a light-colored carpet. In the background, there is a bed with a white pillow and a glass nightstand with a digital clock displaying '12:56'. The overall scene suggests a person preparing for a trip or travel.

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A photograph showing a person from the waist down, wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans, standing and holding a dark-colored garment. On the floor in front of them is a large collection of items, including a laptop, a white mouse, a camera, a backpack, a passport, a digital watch, a toothbrush, a tube of Colgate toothpaste, a small digital scale, a stack of papers, and various cables. The items are laid out on a light-colored carpet. In the background, there is a bed with a white pillow and a glass nightstand with a digital clock displaying '12:56'. The overall scene suggests a person preparing for a trip or travel.

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