

I'm writing travel journals again after a long hiatus. This is how you can make one, too.

Memories are fleeting, but a journal can be forever if you do it right

Perspective by Natalie B. Compton, Staff writer
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We all know the joy of traveling doesn't start the minute you leave the house and end when you get home.

There is the anticipation in the days or weeks or months leading up to the trip. Then, obviously there's the trip. Once it's over, you have the rest of your life to look back on the memories you made driving across California with your best friend, weaving through the tangled markets of Mexico City or eating gelato on the Spanish Steps in Rome.

But the human brain is fallible — or mine is at least. If I can't remember where I put my keys on a regular basis, how am I supposed to remember every intricate detail of my travel adventures? Most of those memories are doomed.

To preserve as much of the magic as possible, behold the travel journal.

My first official one was a light-blue hardcover diary that I brought on our first family trip to Europe in 1998. I don't think my original intent was to immortalize my vacations. I just loved writing down

stories and having something to do while we sat on planes, rested at cafes and waited in train stations.

That first diary is long gone, but I still have a collection of travel journals from the many trips that followed.

I would keep plane tickets, brochures, stubs from visits to cultural sites, business cards of restaurants we visited, folding maps, then tape them into the pages of a notebook I bought for the occasion. I would write down what I ate and drank and saw, foreign language essentials and highlight quotes from the trip. If I hadn't, I would have lost countless nonessential yet priceless details. One such instance: In 2015, a British woman at a hotel near Italy's Lake Como told my mom, "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to stare?"

In addition to standard travelogue content, I also wrote highly embarrassing little essays. For example, one from the 2007 flight home from Corsica started with: "This plane is a miniature model of society! We, the coach class, the masses, are separated by a translucent barrier from the first 'elites.'" To read them now is, let's say, humbling.

Once I started travel writing as a job, I stopped making my collage-heavy travel journals. I didn't have time to write down daily recaps, or space in my purse for 10,000 tiny scraps of paper. The last one was the journal I started when I moved to Thailand in 2014, then I hung up my Scotch tape for seven years.

Then the pandemic happened. Then we stopped traveling. Then we got vaccinated. Then my boyfriend (Dan) and I booked tickets to France. The prospect of going on a special trip after a horrible year made me want to revive my old travel journal tradition. I needed to memorialize the milestones: first international trip since covid hit; first trip abroad with Dan, or any significant other for that matter; first week-long vacation from my job.

The resulting red Moleskine feels like a prized possession, just like the other Moleskines and Mead Composition notebooks from trips past. They are personalized time capsules documenting some of the best parts of life, and this last one even more so.

Should you want to make a travel journal to prolong your appreciation of a trip, and would like some tips on doing so, here's my advice.

Choose a sturdy notebook

When you pick a notebook for a travel journal, it needs to meet function as well as aesthetic. If it's going to be sitting on your bookshelf or coffee table, you want it to look good.

But it also has to be sturdy. Something too delicate will get destroyed in a carry-on bag, or crumble when you spill an *Orangina* all over it at a cafe. Choose a notebook that won't be too much of a hassle to carry.

I went with Mead Composition Books for years; they worked for me because I was always carrying a backpack or big purse to hold it. I have transitioned to Moleskine exclusively now. They're not as big as the Compositions of my youth, so they fit in smaller bags, plus they have a reliable hard cover and binding that won't quit. They also come in fun colors. (I mostly go with red or black.)

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Write in pen

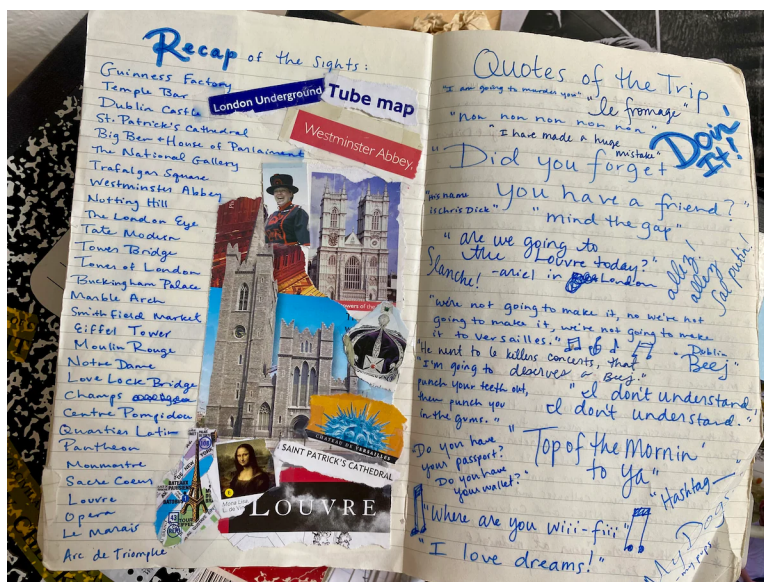
Any old pen will not do for your travel journal. You need pens with ink that will not bleed through the page and ruin what you have on the other side. You also need ink that will look clear for years to come. I have come to love Paper Mate Flair Pens, which also just feel lovely to write with.

For many years, I brought colored markers to make my journal more vibrant. Writing "Is Thailand trying to kill me?" packs a different punch when you do it with black and red marker.

Make it a handy reference guide

Your travel journal can be also practical tool for your trip. Think of it as your address book, language bible, ledger or to-do list.

I have usually started my travel journals with a list of every address I would like to send a postcard to during the trip. The list has been a way of remembering who was important to me at different points of my life. It is surprising to look back and see who were my best friends of that era and where they lived.



Compton's travel journal from a trip with her friend Arielle Golden to London, Paris and Dublin in 2014. (Natalie Compton/*The Washington Post*)

Using the journals as a trip ledger helped me pay attention to how much money I was spending on the road. Now those pages add more to the memories. In 2005, I made a “Top 10 TERRIBLE ways to spend/burn money” list recalling my Barcelona financial mistakes (paying to use a broken portable toilet, buying flavorless walnuts).

If you’re going somewhere where you don’t speak the local language, jot down some beginner essentials such as “hello” and “thank you” and “I am so sorry but I’ve locked myself in your tiny European bathroom, can you help me?” It helps me retain foreign phrases if I write them down, and doing that may help you, too.

Lastly, your travel journal is a great place to write down your trip wish lists, e.g. what works of art you want to see at a museum or which neighborhoods you would like to explore. In my most recent one, I had a Paris “food and drink goals” page with line items like getting a *jambon-beurre* sandwich at *Caractère de Cochon* (which we made happen) and having a martini at Bar Hemingway at the Ritz Paris (which we failed to do). The list helped us plan our days and also serve as a record of what we accomplished.

Pack good tape

For those going the collage route, you are going to need a significant amount of tape. Don’t assume you will find some when you land. It could easily turn into a wild-goose chase. You could also end up getting subpar tape because you’re desperate and finally found some at an old convenience store that is 24 years old. Bad tape is going to come apart over the years, and your mementos will fly away.

As you’re choosing your tape, consider that you will be on the go while making this thing. Don’t buy tape that will need scissors to cut; you’re adding an unnecessary step.

I bought a four-pack of Scotch Double Sided Adhesive Rollers for my last trip thinking it would be easier than a standard roll. When they worked, they were perfect, but I kept breaking them on accident by pressing down too hard trying to get them to stick. Next time, I’ll go with the original.

Collect any and all scraps

A travel journal with written accounts alone are great, but I like to illustrate mine. To do this, I keep nearly every shred of paper that comes my way on a trip. The tour guide’s business card. Bus ticket stubs. Extra postcards. Restaurant receipts. For me, the more I can find to fill extra pages, the better.

Also note down details that may not end up fresh in your mind when you’re writing your recap at the end of the day. Sometimes I’ll note the names of servers, or the addresses of a restaurant.

Consider getting an instant camera

One of the best decisions I made while preparing for my most recent trip to France was buying an instant camera. After some Googling, I bought a black Fujifilm Instax Mini 11 that had a flash and selfie mode.

In the past, I have promised myself that I will print out photos when I’m back from the trip and paste or tape them in at home, but I get lazy or too distracted by normal life. (I did do it once when I developed a disposable camera weeks later). Not as expensive as a DSLR camera, the Instax Mini allowed me to capture a moment and tape it into my travel journal instantly.

I brought the camera, backup batteries and additional packs of film, which are more expensive than you would think. Knowing I didn't have unlimited film made me more intentional about which moments "deserved" an instant camera shot — kind of like how knowing I didn't have unlimited time on the trip made me more intentional about.

Commentators added:

- At the end of a day of sightseeing, I sit at the desk in my room and write down the thoughts of the day on the hotel's stationary. My last trip, to China, had me in 5 different hotels but they all had a desk and free stationary.
- My husband and I send ourselves postcards from travel destinations.
Share
- I stick an envelope in the inside back cover or outside it... to hold all the little bits I want to save but not stick between the pages. The elastic that goes around the notebook is perfect for holding it in place too.
- I was once asked by a friend what we did when we traveled. I took a few hours and wrote out everything - trip details, meals, laughs, scares, and anything that struck me as a reason why I would have traveled in the first place. It was so well received that I continued to do it for every trip through 2019 when all my travels stopped. I now have a collection of more than two dozen detailed (AKA long-winded) stories that I can read when I want to relive my trips. After fifty countries on six continents, I am always looking for my next interesting adventure - and cannot wait to get back on the road to do it all again.