


# Flashpacking: The new travel mantra

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Digital nomads leave well-paid jobs and take time off to visit exotic destinations with hi-tech gadgets in tow

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt and white shorts, is sitting on a grassy hill. She has a large black backpack with pink and yellow accents on her back. She is smiling and talking on a silver mobile phone held to her ear. The background is a soft-focus landscape of green grass and purple flowers under a bright sky.

In a recent survey conducted by HostelWorld.com, it is found that nine out of 10 travellers do not leave their mobile phones behind even when they are vacationing. The survey has also brought to notice that at least a quarter of the travellers take their laptops along and 72 per cent are plugged in to their MP3 players or iPods. It seems that in today's wired world, the plain old backpacking or holidaying incommunicado is an outdated concept. Instead, flashpacking has become the new mode of adventure travel.

What is flashpacking then, you must be wondering? Simply put, it is backpacking or travelling with a lot of hi-tech gear. Yogesh Shah, co-founder of The Backpacker Co., defines it as "backpacking with gadgets like camera, laptop, smartphone (read iPhone or BlackBerry) and other gizmos that will help you travel, work and play – all at the same time." In other words, flashpackers want to enjoy the fun and thrill of backpacking but, at the same time, do not want to give up on the little luxuries of modern life.



## Digital nomads are here

Flashpackers need not necessarily carry a bevy of hi-tech gadgets, though. They may also belong to a community of travellers who shun organised tours and do not fear to enter the traditional domain of adventure seekers. Or they may turn out to be those travel bug-bitten digital nomads who leave well-paid jobs and take time off to visit exotic destinations with a couple of hi-tech gadgets in tow. Aparna Roy is one such flashpacker who, about one-and-a-half years ago, quit her job, pooled her earnings and set out to explore South America with a backpack full of gizmos. "I'm a travel buff and make it a point to travel to a new destination whenever I can. But my only style of travelling is backpacking. I don't think I am capable of putting up with luxuries, but rather enjoy the lack of so-called amenities."

According to industry experts, flashpackers essentially fall into two age groups – youngsters still in high school/college, possessing a few trendy gadgets but without a lot of hard cash in their pocket and the older lot – young professionals who have quite a bit of income stashed away and own most of the essential gizmos – right from notebooks and smartphones to digicams and iPods. Today's travellers are choosy too. They are no longer willing to carry all their worldly possessions in rough-and-ready backpacks when they have the option to take a wheeled soft-top suitcase.

## Get smart gear, travel light

Ask Aparna and she will endorse the view. She had carefully chosen the gear and finally decided upon a handy backpack and a sleeping bag, given to her by one of the leading companies when she approached the firm with her travel plans. "The backpack survived 15,000 km of bus journey, the desert of Atacama (in Chile), the waterfalls of Brazil and many more tough situations. It was one sturdy gear that saw me through and I am still using it these days."

However, Aparna believes in travelling light, "I packed 12 kg worth of stuff and travelled for seven months. During the first few weeks, I felt that I had packed just right. But later, I realised that I had too many clothes. The beautiful part about backpacking is that you don't necessarily develop an attachment to anything. I just gave away the stuff I did not want and made my bag lighter."

The ideal gear for flashpacking is a sturdy bag with lots of compartments into which each item can be dropped. This helps in quick retrieval when the need arises. The other must-haves include a thermos bottle, a torch and a Swiss knife, especially if you are travelling to remote destinations.

"Most of the electronic stuff comes in lightweight options. The items that take up maximum space and weigh more are chargers, batteries and cables. These things take up nearly one-

third of the space in my bag," complains avid flashpacker Anita Suresh. Bharatanatyam exponent Indira Kadambi, who is also an avid trekker, says that her mobile phone, camera and iPod are absolutely essential during her rock climbing trips. She prefers the time-tested Duffel backpack and vouches for travelling light.

But unlike traditional travellers, why do tech gadgets make an essential part of their luggage, especially when they cover uncharted territories and follow flexi tour schedules? Robin, who has come all the way from the UK to flashpack in India says, "People want to retain a part of their normal routine even when they are travelling. I love to visit new places but don't want to be totally cut off from family and friends. They also go

to know my whereabouts through my blogs, e-mail messages and occasional phone calls."

Most of the flashpackers use VoIP-enabled mobile phones to call home and touch base, without having to spend too much. GPS and Google apps are some of the other value additions for flashpackers on the go. What's more, many of them make it a point to load photos and make updates on Facebook, adds Yogesh.

Aparna's list of essential items is brief and basic "Digital camera, netbook, iPod and a multiplug which will work

anywhere," she elaborates. "You have to decide whether you want a large DSLR that adds to your load or a sleek digicam that fits easily in your back pocket. You can take your pick, depending on your mode of travelling and the weight you are ready to carry. I carried my Canon D350 Rebel and my little Sony Cybershot."

Incidentally, she had saved a lot of money on the Internet connection as many places offered free WiFi. She mostly used the Net for mailing, blogging and posting photographs. "Also, an iPod helps on long bus journeys and serves as a phenomenal external hard disk to back up photos," she clarifies. Robin agrees with Aparna's list. "Even a couple of years ago, travellers only carried cell phones and SLR cameras were a rarity then. But nowadays, most flashpackers carry laptops and iPods." The bottom line is simple. If you really want to cut down on the bulk and yet take the necessary gizmos, go for multi-utility gadgets.

## Save & guard money, the savvy way

Although traditional backpackers mostly look for affordable options, flashpackers can always spend more – feel some of the service providers of the travel industry. But this is a wrong concept altogether, says Parteek Tanwar, a software engineer by profession and a flashpacker by passion. "Of course, we plan things out in advance and take care of the cash flow. But none looks for a seven star holiday, complete with luxury suites and sumptuous feasts," he laughs.

“ Stay with local people when travelling abroad. This will help you know the country and its culture even better ”

In fact, contrary to popular belief, most flashpackers are increasingly looking for budget accommodations and cheap meals – within India and abroad. “I have been to Europe twice and found that most of these adventure seekers are quite satisfied with the hostel amenities there. We just require standard facilities and the Internet to stay connected.”

However, connectivity is never a problem, feels Aparna. Most cities have hot spots (free Wi-Fi zones) like airports, cafes, restaurants and hostels. So, during my travel, connectivity had never been an issue. From JFK Airport to Bolivia’s little towns – I always had access to the Internet.”

Flashpackers rarely book hotel rooms in advance or stay in hotels for that matter. “I had never booked any place in advance,” affirms Aparana. “I am a member of a travel community called Couchsurfing and I managed to stay with the local people when I was travelling abroad. You must do that if you want to know the country and its culture even better. So, I rarely stayed in hostels and they cost me only 15 per cent of the entire budget.”

However, it is the technology behind the plastic money that comes in handy for most flashpackers. Travelling with too much cash is rather risky and losing all your money

during a vacation is not at all a pleasant experience.

Alternatively, carrying multiple credit and debit cards, and packing them separately may be a good option. It negates the chance of being stranded in a foreign country if a card gets stolen or misplaced.

## Flashpacking: A trend or a fad?

The concept is extremely popular in developed countries and it is easier to plan a flashpacking trip in Europe, than one in India, says Yogesh. “However, Indians are taking to it in a big way and there is a phenomenal increase in the number of people booking such expeditions.”

Again, flashpacking involves all attendant risks of travelling alone, but this can be taken care of with careful planning. “I recommend extensive research, if you want to have a fantastic time,” says Aparna. Have thorough knowledge of the place you are visiting. Use common sense. And don’t do foolish things like carrying expensive stuff or visiting places that are not safe. But all said and done, the only way to find out whether your trip is foolproof or not is to walk through it and check. So, plan one today and redefine travelling. You surely have the courage and innovative power required to become a digital age flashpacker.

