PACKING FOR THE ROAD - TO CHECK OR NOT TO CHECK

Preparing for air travel with instruments is risky, delicate, and often frustrating. As you prepare to travel, decisions you make along the way will lead you to a solution that’s right for your needs and resources.

Airplane cargo holds are notoriously dangerous places for instruments, but overhead storage bins cannot always be guaranteed to be large enough or empty enough to accommodate your instrument. Overheads are easier to secure with soft cases and gig bags, but those cases offer no protection in cargo holds. However, carrying your instrument onboard allows you greater control over access to and care of the instrument.

If you are unsure of whether to check or carry, FIRST check on the overhead dimensions of your particular airline and airplane. On a regional jet, short hopper, puddle jumper, etc (Canadair, Embraer) you will likely not be able to fit an instrument larger than a violin or mandolin, unless it is flat like an electric guitar case. Acoustic guitars and accordions would not fit in those overheads. If you are traveling on one of those planes, you will probably not be carrying-on.

If you are on a Boeing, Douglas, Airbus or other large carrier on major routes, you “should” be fine. If you are unsure, or concerned, scour the internet for details on your particular aircraft.

Websites like seatguru.com and tripadvisor.com can be useful resources in deciding the best course of action for you.

Once you have determined your latitude, it’s time to consider the options, between checking or carrying-on (or both, if you have many instruments).

PROS AND CONS

CHECK – Pros
Relieves burden of carrying through airports
Protects your instrument in hard case your entire outing.
Probably necessary if you carry multiple instruments

CHECK – Cons
Costs $25-$35 per bag, or more (except on Southwest or in First Class)
Removes the instrument from your possession and oversight
Opens you to lost or delayed luggage issues
Instrument can be damaged in the cargo hold by shifting cargo
Instrument can be damaged by ground personnel and conveyor belts

CARRY - Pros
Instrument in your constant possession and oversight
Opens up checked bag space/budget for clothing and other gear, or no additional bag.

CARRY – Cons
Instrument vulnerable if not allowed on plane
Can be bulky
HYBRID – Carry hard case to plane, if not allowed, gate check it.

Pros – flexibility and protection, possible money savings, avoids conveyor belts and baggage handlers.

Cons – Significant, if you want a lighter case. Little to none, if you have decided to check a case anyway, or are checking multiple cases.

If you check, you need a case that affords suitable protection and is light enough to be practical. This means, for instance, if you have a crew and gear truck, you can afford to go big and bulky. Not so good if you tour alone. These are the factors that go into your decision. Bulk, protection, convenience, time, space, money.

If you have chosen to use a hard case, but still carry your instrument on, you can try to bring a hard case on board. “Normal” ones, like OEM cases, will fit nicely in most overheads. But they are larger, bulkier, heavier than gig bags, and can draw attention to themselves by their size. You could be “asked” to gate check the instrument.

Gate checking means the instrument is hand placed in the cargo hold, as opposed to suffering conveyor belts and baggage tractors. At the destination it is returned to the gate for retrieval, not sent to the carousels (via more belts and transfers).

Some airlines even have special carts in the hold for gate checked luggage, so those items can’t crash into other cargo. Gate checking makes that special rack available to you. So gate checking is a viable option to gig-bagging your carry-on. But you won’t have a lighter gig bag for the tour.

An interesting twist…usually, when you are asked to gate-check an instrument you have tried to carry on, you will not be charged a checked bag charge at the gate. So you could actually save money on a checked bag.

CASE OPTIONS

Anvil - Made of plywood, plastic, aluminum and steel construction. Heavy, bulky, ultimate protection partly due to construction materials and partly due to the space around the instrument. Interiors easily modified by professionals. As such, cases can be ultimately more versatile than other options. And because flight cases are not OEM products, they can often be purchased used.

Can also easily be stacked, if you are touring with multiple cases. That also makes shipment easier if you are shipping. It is not the most efficient option for solo touring, due to bulk and weight.
Calton Cases
We’ll use “Calton” as a generic term for high quality, high density fiberglass and resin cases, shaped like a guitar, smaller and lighter than anvil cases. Widely used for solo touring and air travel, but expensive at $800-$900 and up, and heavy.

SKB and other ATA cases
Though many offer advanced features, like flush hinges and screw-latch closures (like anvil cases), they are essentially plastic hard shell cases. Most offer significant neck and headstock support, string pad on the lid, a plush interior and sufficient space between the instrument and the outside of the case as to assure protection. But they are not necessarily designed for constant tour use. Those I have had did not meet up to the rigors of constant touring, but they did perform in individual outings suitably. Still, I felt like I was taking a chance.

SKB Sonic Sense $299 weighs 23 pounds
Factory hard shell cases – wood or plastic

Similar to above, but without screw closures or reinforced hinges. Plastic cases prone to warping in heat, wood cases prone to breakage when overly stressed. Modern cases afford much more protection and support. But there is still a risk in using one of these. Padding, latches, hinges and body integrity are sufficient for carting the guitar around or tossing it in the back of the SUV, but not for the kind of unpredictable and x punishment it could suffer in cargo holds and on conveyor belts.

Styrofoam cases
Becoming more popular due to their reasonable price and light weight. They accomplish their task with space – relatively vast expanses of dense styro protecting the instrument from bumps and drops. A little scary, since the lightness of the material make sme think it could be torques badly enough to snal. Still, more are using them, and they are lightweight.
Case Extreme

Double-wall corrugated plastic construction, designed to hold your guitar in its hard case of gig bag (I like the latter option. The case itself is extremely light – 12 pounds -- but a bit bulky, since your normal case fits inside using C-pads to keep anything from ever even making contact with the face of your inside case, regardless of how much the corrugated plastic is stressed. Clever, cheap, and it works. But they are bulky. Under $300. [www.casextreme.com](http://www.casextreme.com)

[http://www.premierguitar.com/articles/roundup_5_high_end_gig_bagsReviewed](http://www.premierguitar.com/articles/roundup_5_high_end_gig_bagsReviewed)
BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

Regardless of your case choice, you should loosen your strings before you travel, but only slightly. Too much and you will weird the neck out.

Make sure the back of the headstock is supported, and that the neck is supported the entire length. Remove any loose straps or other items – picks, capos, string, straps – from the instrument compartment, unless you are sure they will not damage the instrument.

Make sure the latches are all secure, no loose or missing screws, no bent flanges. Tape the latches if you can, to prevent breakage of accidental opening. Make sure the instrument remains unlocked.

CARRY-ON OPTIONS

If you do not check, you need a light case, preferably one that affords some protection. Many gig bags offer side-of-instrument support and protection (usually in the form of gussets instead of seams). Some offer neck support, some have rigid sides, others open like a sleeve. Some have better back=straps than others.

“Most Gig Bags”
Most gig bags are a waste of money. Though they cover the instrument, and are light and nominally padded, they lack neck support or suitable side support, in many cases.

That said, there are numerous options in higher-end gig bags that afford a lot of protection and still retain the gig bag’s vital lightness and portability.

A good, pro level gig bag has a resilient exterior, thick padding, snug fit, side protection, neck protection, headstock protection, string-end protection, double zipper-pulls, dual adjustable backpack straps, suitcase-styled handle, vertical grab-handle, opens like a lid rather than a sleeve, possibly some rigid members in the front, back and sides, possibly other rubber or plastic applications that absorb shock or provide stability and rigidity. Leather bags are beautiful but heavier.

Some suggested cases…

Levys - [http://www.levysleathers.com/home](http://www.levysleathers.com/home)

Reunion Blues gig bags - [http://reunionblues.com](http://reunionblues.com)


[http://www.roadrunnercases.com/about.cfm](http://www.roadrunnercases.com/about.cfm)

The Taylor Hard Bag blends the protective properties of a hard case with the lightweight portability of a gig bag. It features a tan, 600-denier exterior and a 70-denier interior that's reinforced at the peghead and tail end. Supportive structure includes rigid PVC sidewalls, full-
length Correx/EPE foam hard top and back, and an EPE foam neck rest with a hidden internal pocket. Also includes vinyl-wrapped carry and pull-up handles and sewn-in adjustable backpack straps.

At the airport…

Use skycaps, tip big. It won’t take more than a time or two to get them remembering you and going out of their way to help. They can be real problem solvers, on lare check-ins, overweight bags, etc.

If you’ve chosen to carry your instrument, try to wear it. Wearing it as opposed to carrying it frees up a hand, and makes less of an impression on gate staff. You won’t look as big and space-hogging.

If a gate person says, ”You might not get the guitar onboard.” Politely and pleasantly ask if you can please try to fit it on. Point out that the narrowness of the neck means it will not take up two spaces in the overhead. And offer up that, if it doesn’t fit, you will “gladly” hand it over. “May I please try, nice gate attendant?” Keep it polite, and understanding of their point of view – so many people, so little space.

RESOURCES

www.seatguru.com - Seating charts, seating amnities, airplane information, overhead information.

TripAdvisor is go-to for all sorts of travel information
http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowTopic-g1-i10702-k4734317-Overhead_Bin_Dimensions-Air_Travel.html

Bloomberg article on overhead etiquette

List of overhead bin dimensions
http://www.flyertalk.com/forum/delta-skymiles-pre-worldperks-merger-closed-posting/873405-list-overhead-bin-dimensions.html

And more…
TIPSHEET FOR TRAVELING WITH INSTRUMENTS ON AIRPLANES

IF YOU CHECK

- Choose a case that will provide sufficient strength but be light enough for you to manage.
- Pack your instrument securely. Loosen strings, secure or remove loose or bulky objects in case.
- Make sure latches are secure. Tape over them if possible.
- If you use a Skycap, tip big, $5 and up per bag.

IF YOU CARRY ON

- Choose a case with sufficient protection, stability and lightness.
- Make every effort to secure priority boarding in advance.
- Wear the case like a backpack, on both shoulders, to minimize its profile
- Keep a copy of the FAA regulation available, as a printout or on your smartphone or tablet.
- If asked to check the bag, politely request that you be allowed to try to get it onboard.
- Explain that the instrument is not as big as it appears because of narrowness of the neck area
- Once on the plane, take the most convenient open overhead, unless they are in short supply.
- If an overhead is already partially occupied, ask before rearranging things so both items fit.
- If your instrument is on the plane and fits, it cannot be forced to be removed or checked.
- If your instrument will not fit onboard, ask for a description of the hold area it will occupy.
- Ask to speak to the attendant who will place your instrument in the hold.
- Request the instrument be returned to you at the arrival gate, not at baggage claim.
- Above all, be polite. Being convincing is helpful. Being aggressive is not.
- Get names of flight attendants and gate clerks if needed.
- Get numbers and name for Customer Service in case of issues.

UPON LANDING

Check your instrument for damage BEFORE leaving the gate area or baggage claim area.