

## The hard work of going away for a long, long time

By **Christopher Elliott**

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When Jeffrey Blaustein and his wife, Marilyn, travel, they really travel. Their next vacation is a five-week road trip from Amherst, Mass., to St. George Island off Florida's Panhandle. That's half an eternity compared with the average number of vacation days — nine per year — that Americans use for travel, according to the latest figures from the [U.S. Travel Association](#).

Blaustein, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, has concerns about leaving home that are heightened by the amount of time away. They include what to do about his mail, home security and beloved tuxedo cat, Abbie.

"We have a friend who comes in twice a day to feed her and show her some love," he says. "It's hard to be away from the cat for five weeks, but we have to live our life while we can. Right?"

Some travelers are pushing the limits even farther than Blaustein, particularly as the pandemic frees them up to work remotely. They're crossing national borders, staying on the road for months at a time. Sometimes it's for pleasure, sometimes for business.

Long trips may look easy, but they can be difficult.

"It's a lot of work," says Marie Helweg-Larsen, a psychology professor at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. She's abroad for two years while she directs Dickinson's science study abroad program. She says the logistics of a long trip can be daunting, in big and small ways.

I asked long-term travelers how they prepared for a marathon trip, from obtaining the right credit card to dealing with all of their worldly possessions. Their insights might help you plan your next vacation, no matter how long it is. They certainly helped me before I left for an open-ended trip to Europe shortly before the onset of the pandemic.

**Banking and credit cards:** Helweg-Larsen says one of her biggest challenges was navigating the banking system overseas. "Because I suspended my U.S. phone number, I couldn't receive text messages to verify purchases from my bank," she says. "And my bank doesn't let me use the app as a verification tool."

She considered several credit card options, including getting a card that doesn't require a U.S. address and using Apple Wallet for her purchases. Her solution was a borderless account with [TransferWise](#), an online money-transfer service. (Note: If you decide to keep your American credit card, ask about foreign exchange fees, which are usually 3 percent of the purchase price. If your card has a fee, consider switching to one with no foreign transaction fees before you leave.)

**Insurance:** You'll need it. U.S. health insurance generally doesn't cover routine care while abroad. And if you have a medical condition, you may have to pay out of pocket for a doctor or hospital visit. Tom Wahlin, who traveled internationally for a year, shopped around before finding a policy through Aetna International that cost less than

conventional health insurance.

“This particular plan required me to be out of the U.S. for about 11 months out of the year,” says Wahlin, who founded a travel gear site called [Pack Hacker](#).

Other travelers buy an annual travel insurance policy, which can cover such events as trip interruption and lost luggage. You can find policies through companies like [Allianz](#) or [Travel Guard](#). Consider [medical evacuation coverage](#), too.

**Mail:** Keep your U.S. address, advises Zachary Stafford, a [professional housesitter](#) who has been traveling the world for the past five years. You can sign up for a service such as [PostScan Mail](#) or [iPostal1](#), which receive your mail and forward it to you or scan your mail and send you an email with the image of the outside of each item. They can also provide check-cashing services.

**Security:** If you keep your house or apartment, home security is a serious concern. Blaustein, whose home was burglarized a few years ago, has installed an alarm with multiple cameras. He monitors the cameras remotely while away. His cat-sitter shows up twice a day to check the home, too.

That takes care of the inside, Blaustein says. “But because roof snow is also a huge problem in this part of the world, I have a camera aimed at the roof, so I can assess how deep the snow is and have it raked before it results in ice dams,” he says.

Blaustein also monitors the driveway with cameras to make sure the plowing service keeps his driveway clear. Note that some homeowner policies don’t cover houses vacant for more than 30 days, so you may need a new insurance policy unless someone is living in the home while you’re away.

**Visas:** Permission to stay in a country can be tricky, particularly if you aspire to the global nomad lifestyle. For example, you can’t stay in Western Europe’s Schengen area — which comprises 26 countries, including France, Germany and Spain — for more than three months before you need a long-stay visa.

The easiest solution is to leave the country for a period of time and then reenter. That’s what Kristin Jaffe does. She is a Virtuoso-affiliated [travel adviser](#) who has lived abroad for a year. “I often enter on a tourist visa,” she says. “If I plan to stay longer than allowed — which is normally 30 to 90 days, depending on the country — I have had to leave the country and reenter on a new tourist visa,” she says.

Some countries have strict rules about reentry, so be sure to check before you try this strategy. You might be better off moving to a new location.

**Voting:** If you will be away during an election, sign up for an absentee ballot before you leave. If you’re already abroad, you can register to vote and request an absentee ballot through the [Federal Post Card Application](#).

**Your stuff:** If you’re traveling for a few months, lend your car to a friend or relative. If you’re going to be away much longer, get rid of it. At least that’s the advice of James Kell, the founder of a [sailing school](#) who is on a multiyear sabbatical. “Don’t put your car in long-term storage. Sell it,” he says. That applies to all of your belongings. “If you’re in doubt about whether you should sell something or not, sell it,” he says. “Reduce everything you own.”

I had to make difficult decisions about all these issues before I embarked on an open-ended trip around the world, which alas, the pandemic cut short. And Helweg-Larsen is right — it’s difficult. I sold almost everything I owned,

including my house and car. The hardest part: saying goodbye to my three Bengal cats. I found a home for them with a caring family and have visited them several times since then. I miss them.

Extreme travelers have a lot to teach infrequent vacationers. Carry the right credit card. Make sure your insurance and paperwork are in order. And, of course, travel light.

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