

Gadgets on the go

Lean luggage, geek chic and keeping it all *extremely* clean are the coming trends in the travel gear biz

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Las Vegas—We travelers just love our gear, gadgets and gizmos. Like golfers or stereophiles, we just can't resist the lure of a suitcase that morphs into a desk or a 64-language translator, including Uzbek, or a Velcro-trimmed vest that keeps our arms from dangling as we snooze on the plane.

Happily, there's plenty of ingenuity around to keep us satisfied. That was evident at the recent Travel Goods Association show, an annual event for everyone — suppliers, manufacturers, retailers — involved in the business of accessorizing the novelty-crazed traveling public.

And business is booming: \$19.2 billion worth in the United States alone last year, says TGA president Michele Marini Pittenger.

"Sales are up and it's good news," she said. "It means people are traveling and that's good news for a lot of industries and it's good for people because they're doing something they love."

Yes, people are traveling again. But we're traveling *differently* since the days before 9/11 and the airport security crackdown, SARS, and skyrocketing airline fuel costs, and what we're taking with us has changed too.

"There are things out there that we never dreamed we'd need 10 years ago," says Marini Pittenger. "But now we're realizing that a lot of these products make perfect sense. As stressful as travel can be, these products are designed to make it less stressful." So here's a glance at this year's stress-reducers:

- Everybody's fretting about their weight these days ... luggage weight. Airlines' weight restrictions — in most cases now 22 kilograms (50 pounds) per bag — and stiff penalties have forced us to ditch our bulky old bags for new ones made from formidable-sounding materials like thermoplastic urethane and ballistic nylon wrapped around polycarbonate frames.

Look for that to become even more important in the future, predicts Jim Lahren, vice-president of marketing for Briggs and Riley Travelware, which has redesigned its collection to make it about 10 per cent lighter.

"Carriers like Ryanair (a low-fare airline) in the U.K. are starting to charge customers to check *all* bags and I expect to see that in North America," he said. "Airlines aren't making any money and as fares go down, they're struggling to find new sources of revenue."

Clever designers are also coming up with ways for us to make sure our luggage makes the weight so we don't get any costly surprises at check-in time.

This year's winner of the TGA's industry innovation award was Ricardo Beverly Hills for its Solutions line of luggage which has a built-in digital scale.

And since we're toting fewer, lighter bags, they have to be as versatile as possible, leading to a curious menagerie of hybrids, such as:

- The Swany Walkin' Bag, designed by polio survivor Etsuo Miyoshi, which is a wheeled carry-on sturdy enough to lean or sit on (it'll support up to 100 kilograms).

- Cartdesk (second-place in the innovation competition), which is a carry-on with a pull-up arm that converts into a laptop desk and has a detachable briefcase.
- The Boom Bag, which has a built-in speaker system and amplifier, so you can connect audio devices, like Mp3s, CDs and DVD players ... or a microphone if you're making a business presentation (or maybe street busking?)
- Electronic toys are looming ever larger in the travel picture, partly owing to a dramatic rise in business travel. But everybody from executives to backpackers has their alphabetized gizmos like Mp3s, DVDs, PDAs, PS/2s, etc., plus laptops, language translators, currency converters and video games. "Lifestyle portability" is the buzzword. "Business travel has changed," says the TGA's Garrett Lai. "You take what you need to get your job done ... We're carrying more stuff."

Geek chic demands that what we carry those things in have to be stylish and functional, which means padded for protection and equipped with more pockets than a pool hall to stash all those cords, discs, chargers and plugs necessary to keep it all working right. And there is an array of combination locks — some of which can be opened by a special key in the possession of vigilant members of the U.S. Transportation Security Administration — as well as a huge selection of pouches to stash our documents in and then conceal them in every conceivable place on our body. There are personal safety alarms, tracking devices and services (like `homers') to recover lost luggage and even electronic tags that will sound off if the distance between ourselves and our luggage becomes too wide.

- More and more, the person carrying those electronic devices is a woman. Almost 50 per cent of business travelers in the U.S. now are women, and they demand that their specific needs be served by an industry that has long neglected them. "Most companies who do women's bags just took a man's bag, tried to pretty it up a little bit, add a little pink, make the strap a little longer and call it a woman's bag," said Steve Oh, vice-president of Abbi New York, which has come out this year with two lines of laptop bags specifically for women. "We took the opposite approach. We made a beautiful woman's bag first, then added functionality."

- SARS has had a lingering effect on us in the form of a near-mania for hygiene. "For example, there used to be a couple of kinds of travel pillows and they were considered a bit of a luxury," says Marini Pittenger. "People would say, `My goodness, you get a pillow when you go on the plane, why would you want one of your own?' I'll tell you why, cause the ones on the plane are *scary!* You don't know who had them last, you don't know where they've been. And anyway, lots of airlines aren't even giving out pillows anymore."

So now there are products with names like DreamSack, PlaneWrap and PlaneSheets, all designed to encase our airline seats or our own selves in a sleeping-bag-like anti-cootie cocoon. There are portable water filtration systems and ultraviolet contrivances to sterilize our toothbrushes or scan our rooms for rogue microbes just waiting to rip us cell from cell.

There's even a Traveler's Supply Infection Control Kit, which contains a surgical mask, antiseptic hand cleaner, disinfecting wipes and Nitrile gloves — good for the hotel room, or the operating room.

Another interesting contraption is the Plane Clean Air filter which attaches to the air nozzle in the plane and removes, it claims, "99.5 per cent of all airborne bacteria, viruses and allergens."

"It's going to be interesting to see how that product flies," said Marini Pittenger. "If I didn't know this industry and I saw somebody putting that on the air spout in a plane, I might be concerned, because that's not something that you normally see ... people attaching things to the plane."

- Another thing we might not be used to seeing on planes is an animal — at least the four-legged kind. But pets are becoming frequent traveling companions, both on the road and in the air: Many airlines allow small critters in the cabin, provided they are in proper carriers.

"I told the airlines that (my dog) is my most precious jewel, and nobody checks their jeweler," says Gayle Martz, a former flight attendant, who has forcefully lobbied airlines to allow animals on flights.

Martz blazed the pet-carrier trail, but now there are many fellow-travelers, such as Celltei, which produces carriers that accommodate all creatures great and small ... even ferrets.

Convenience. Stylish organization. Wellness. That's what we travelers are looking for this year.

And, of course, one more thing.

"Some stuff is just cool and fun," says Marini Pittenger. "We look at it and say, 'Do I *really* need that? No. Do I want it? Yeah, I do!'"

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