From Packing to Snacking

Little survival tactics and hacks for Incoming Indian students coming to the University of Virginia

Prolog

I was sitting in my apartment, waiting to start my internship the following week. I needed to travel from Charlottesville to Boston. And yes, feeling excited and adventurous, just as how I was feeling a week before my flight from Indira Gandhi International, New Delhi to Dulles International, in Dulles (I guess). I can't believe it had been almost a year since I had this very feeling, as I reminisced all the moments that passed in between. Amidst this, also flashed in my eyes, so many different fears I had conquered. The fear of feeling shy when talking to someone with a strong (and fast) American accent. The fear of having to look left and right so many times before I cross the road. The fear of not refusing free food, especially everyone’s favorite (or at least mine) mac-n-cheese and cookies - and then, afraid people might judge you. The fear of spending $2 on a loaf of bread (Rs 140, which I could get for Rs 15 in India) or $6 on an Uber Ride (Rs 400, seriously?? I might as well have just booked a flight) . That's it! I had found the one fear that almost all of us had conquered in unity (and probably the easiest one to conquer, yet the hardest to admit). All of us who were tuned to thinking money in Rupaiya (desi for Rupees, the Indian currency) who would convert every cent, every dollar to rupees before buying (sometimes, even before looking at) any item in the market. Yes, those of you who are reading this might nod your head in agreement that you did ace such a feeling when you stepped here, while those who are not, you were and still are, either funded or financially secure, or planning to marry some citizen here (it's actually not a bad idea).

It is this very thought that puts us back on many levels; it distorts our whole perception of not knowing what to shop or what to pack. There is this unprecedented mist of uncertainty. While I sat back, and completed the reel of memories, I thought to myself, why not pen down some of the things that need to be told and are not very obvious to incoming students. One would not want to squabble over what items to pack with their dear ones at home at a time when there are other things to worry about. So I decided to come up with an aid or handbook that deals with the truth about stuff that happens (or at least, should happen) couple weeks before your departure, and some useful hacks about living a casually frugal (conversely, frugally casual) life while at Charlottesville.

I am happy to share with you some of the hacks my friends and I have discovered and/or invented over this course of an year which will definitely be useful for any incoming Indian Graduate student coming to the one and only University of Virginia! Hope this finds you while you're in a disarray and an uncomfortable state however, after reading this, you find the situation much more comforting. Good Luck! Feel free to reach me at ks6cq@virginia.edu

Just another service provided by your friendly neighborhood, “Siva”ra-man or Shiva, or Siva or whatever. :)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I know I have many people to thank for helping me create this piece. Most importantly, Gautam and Sharon. I will definitely list down all the other people who helped me with inputs, ideas and content to write about. My gratitude to Gayatri, Arvind, Tanushree and the others who reviewed my drafts insofar and gave valuable feedback. Thank you all.

And of course, I want to thank my parents who always taught me to believe in myself and be a thoughtful and helpful person; it is their upbringing and encouragement that motivated me to write this piece so I can help the uncertain and unprepared. Oh, and also, my parents and I had a lot of doubts, differences and debates while I was preparing for my travel; nevertheless, thank you mom and dad!
Chapter 0
What's inside?

"I am a Computer Science student, and so, numbering in my mind starts from 0. Kindly deal with it." - Me

This chapter basically outlines all the following chapters. Yeah, I am not a fan of table of contents.

**Chapter 1: {What, When, How} to pack.** Yes, all about packing and getting your “butt” here

**Chapter 2: The Day you come in the US:** Literally, it’s the closest you can get to awe-struck/orgasmic. Welcome to the world’s most developed and exciting country.

**Chapter 3: Conversations:** How it is a different ballgame here, when talking with people!

**Chapter 4: Shopping:** Breaking the conversion paradigm. Yes, forget 1 USD = Rs 65\(^1\). It’s over!

**Chapter 5: Cooking:** The Master Chef in you. Finding joy in your peanut-butter jelly!

**Chapter 6: Part-time or not:** How to keep your income churning if you’re not funded.

**Chapter 7: Orientation and the Social Network:** How your department paints a rosy picture in your mind, and presents grad life as a cakewalk - except, it is indeed, if you bake one! And also, ain’t no party like a college party! But don’t keep your hopes high.

**Chapter 9: There is no Spoon:** If you read this without noticing that there is no Chapter 8 above, glad you are engrossed! It’s highly likely you’re gonna enjoy the rest of it!

**Charlottesville and Virginia is for lovers:**
An amazing university town with many accolades to its belt\(^2\). We shall reveal some things that you can and cannot do in C’ville. And hopefully you'll unravel a lot more yourself while you’re here!

And this also marks the end of Chapter 0.

---

\(^1\) Subject to change
Chapter 1

{WHAT, WHEN, AND HOW} TO PACK

“I get ideas about what’s essential when packing my suitcase.” - Diane von Furstenberg

Come the month of July, comes the dreaded sweat. Like I said, it can get very nerve-wracking at the same time, exciting when packing your baggage. Remember, you’re flying so there is only so much you can carry. Please follow the steps in order. Am not numbering them, but that should roughly be the flow of your to-do.

So...

TSA:

I highly recommend reading the Transportation Security Administration (TSA): https://www.tsa.gov/travel/security-screening

Please, read it more carefully than any other document you have ever read so far. You need to know what is permitted and what is not.

Stuff/Documents/ID:

Please bring your Driver’s License. You do not need an International Driver’s permit if your license is already in English. I can vouch for that because I asked this information with an employee at Dept of Motor and Vehicles.

Also, carry a Forex card with you; from any good bank like HDFC or ICICI.

If you are bringing your “Indian” phone, or buying a new one please ensure it works on a quad-band frequency. 800/900/1800/1900 MHz. It is advisable to get a Matrix Card or any other International SIM card, although, not a must, but good to have.

Spices/Powders/Masalas:

Now, you have at the back of your mind what you can carry. Next, let’s see what we need. Be very careful with the masalas, only get the packaged ones, such as the ones sold by MDH, Badshaah, Aachi, Shakti, MTR, etc. Please, do not get the powders and masalas grounded and prepared by your relatives which you will need to loosely pack. That’s just an invitation to problems.

Masalas, spices and powders are essential to cooking Indian curries and other dishes.
NOTE: One other powder I can think of, is a Vibuthi (white ash): If you use it and wish to keep that practice up, I suggest you not to get it from India. Personally, I still keep a box of Vibuthi with me, but I did not carry it with me when I stepped into the US. I would not recommend that. You can always get it here in the Indian store, they’ll surely have it.

Regarding cooking, please bring one pressure cooker and a couple cooking utensils and a few storage vessels. I highly recommend getting copper-bottom vessels, they are very effective on the electric cooktop.

**Clothes:**

Clothes are really inexpensive here in the US. I would suggest keep your suitcase light. Ok, you know what, let me break it season-wise. That seems better.

**Summer-Fall (General):** This is when you land if you are joining in the Fall. Most parts of the US, in the East coast heat up. It can reach 37°C / 98°F. Keep thin, light colored clothes. Bring some athletic shorts and tees if you enjoy exercising. But do not get too many of them. My conservative estimate:

- 5 - good tee shirts,
- 5 - homewear tees,
- 3 - shorts,
- 3 - pyjamas,
- 2 - formal shirts,
- 2 - formal pants,
- Undergarments - up to your discretion.

NOTE: If you are a Master’s student and wish to get a job, please keep in mind, the Fall Engineering Career Fair. You can bring a fine suit for yourself. Honestly, here, they do not care what you are wearing when you are talking to them or being interviewed. I shall discuss this later. But get a suit, and a pair of formal shoes if you already have them. If you do not, please do not bother buying them.

**Winter:** Do NOT get any big jackets. Just keep one think casual jacket or maybe two, just in case, it rains or it gets cold in the airport or wherever. But please, I repeat, do NOT buy them in India. Do not bother getting your relatives’. Please, just save yourself a lot of space and weight, and most of all, money! Just do not bother packing winter clothes at all. I know your mind is playing with you: What the hell is he talking about? I have heard it is so cold and snows in the US, why is this mad man asking me not to bring anything?

The Heating-Ventilation-Air Conditioning (HVAC) in the US is so well managed. No building will let you freeze to death. And You will hardly ever want to be outside when it is chilly or snowing. Plus, if you are, you will either be driving or in the Bus, again, the heating is very cozy and well managed.
NOTE: I grew up in New Delhi, which gets quite chilly during the Winters. I thought, I could just use the same sweaters and jackets to tackle the weather in the US. I had two sweaters, one really thick jacket, and bought way too many thermals and inner-wears. I packed my arsenal of apparel; but, to no use. Literally, no use. I did not have to use any of what I bought or brought from home. I seriously got one whole suitcase worth of winter clothes. I am happy to distribute it to people, donate it, or sell all of it.

My advice: Take the previous paragraph, very seriously. Winter clothes in India are expensive, unnecessary, heavy and difficult to pack. Please, do not consider getting them or packing them.

*I have no intention of asking you to freeze to death.* When you land here, keep an eye out for the Grand Thanksgiving Sale, where you can get Snow Jackets (they look cool) for dirt cheap prices! Really, I got mine that way, and I really like it.

**Monsoon:** It does rain, quite a lot sometimes. It gets really chilly, so the jacket I mentioned in bold above might be useful. Sometimes, we experience torrential rains. But the drainage in the city is good enough. You will just see the rain come and go. I do not think it warrants getting monsoon-specific clothes.

**Spring:** It’s like heaven on Earth. It gets really pretty. However, there could be a few days where it gets too hot or too cold. Anyway, a few layers of your summer clothes should be just fine.
In all, it is not a big deal to pack your clothes. One important advice, *travel light!*

**Specials:**

You can bring one set of Traditional dress for some Indian occasions, or just wear it when you feel nostalgic! Like a Kurta, or Saree, sort of; whatever you are comfortable with. Also, bands and hair clips (applies to girls or guys with long hair).

**Gadgets:**

Make sure you have a **Universal Travel Adapter** with you. It is a hacky converter which can plug in an 3-way indian plug into an american switch-socket board. They’re different. Also, be careful with the electrical equipments you bring. The operational voltage in the US is typically between 110V and 120V, while in India, it is 220V - 240V. So you wanna play safe on that. *I would suggest, don’t get any at all!*

**Laptop:** Same advice as for winter clothes! Do not buy a new one if you do not have one already. Laptops are really inexpensive here. Really, trust me. It is better to come empty-handed, and walk into a Best Buy and walk out with a Macbook at a student-discount! However, if you already have an old rusty laptop, or you really cannot survive without one, get it. Can do no harm, but again, it is an additional 2-3 kgs.
And yes, Hard-disk full of your Favorite movies, animes, shows/sitcoms and songs.

What else? I guess those are the essentials!

**Dal and friends (cooking ingredients):**

Well, the one thing you need to watch out for, is the kind of items permitted through customs (Customs is not necessarily, TSA). They can lift the ban on pulses or crops, or they can choose to allow (they restrict mostly because they think you will plant them and start your own farming business). It is very volatile, so you need to be very careful. Let’s hope you don’t find yourself in a quandary when you are withheld by customs and immigrations. So travel with only what’s allowed, and what you need.

Read more at: [https://www.quora.com/Can-we-carry-pulses-like-dal-rajma-channa-to-the-USA-or-are-these-items-prohibited-by-US-Customs](https://www.quora.com/Can-we-carry-pulses-like-dal-rajma-channa-to-the-USA-or-are-these-items-prohibited-by-US-Customs)

Also, these are stuff you can get here as well. If you have relatives, great! Tag yourself along when they go shopping, buy yourself all the things you like to cook and eat! If not, your lovable seniors will always be there to help you. Also, every city, including Charlottesville has an Indian store. If you friend has a car, awesome! But a better option (for residents of Charlottesville) is to drive to Richmond once a month and shop for Indian stuff, the C’ville shop is pricey and not worth it.

Flour to make Chapatis/Rotis - Please do not bother bringing any.
Go to Kroger or Harris Teeter and look for “Whole Wheat Flour Tortillas”. They are the closes to Rotis, and trust me, they taste as well. However, if you are not comfortable with that, you can get frozen chapatis from the India store. However, if you are not comfortable with that, Roll your own dough! More about shopping, later!
One thing that I am particularly proud of bringing from back home - Instant Meals. **The ready-to-eat meals by MTR!**

They are real life-savers! Really easy to make and super delicious! I shall confess, I bought like, 10-15 of those and trust me, I have never made a better decision than that! It really comes handy when you are too lazy to cook something or just missing tasty food in your mouth.

NOTE: You also get instant meals in any Indian Store. There is a famous brand ‘Swad’ that sells these items.

**Bathing essentials:**
Well, get yourself a body wash (but not in the hand-baggage. Please keep it in the check-in bag). Will be needing it after a 30-40 hour journey halfway across the world! Shampoo, get it only if you are very picky. You will get almost the same brands (probably sold under different names) here. Also, cosmetics are cheaper here.

**Medicines:**

Whatever you are carrying, please check if it is permitted to be used in the US. Also, please carry a certified Doctor’s prescription with you. A good idea to keep it in your first-aid kit itself. Get all the trivial medicines - for cold-cough, fever, indigestion. Get some pain relief for any physical injury, get a crepe bandage, band-aids. Let us hope it never comes down to using these. Take care! Get your vaccines on time! And keep others around you safe as well!

**Sports Equipment:**

I do not think it is advisable to bring your gear here. If it is badminton, I would say, a straight NO. Badminton is my patron sport and I used to play a lot. But it is not a common sport in the States. You will be surprised if you find a badminton court. So no, don’t get your dear kit. (I miss mine)

All my loved Football fans! Get ready to calling it Soccer.

If you have a cricket ball or something, get it if you love our country’s national sport. **Oops, I forgot it isn’t; I am usually never factually incorrect, but almost always sarcastic.**

**Stationary:**

Yes, this would a good idea to get stuff from India. The usual bundle of Rs 5 ball/gel pens and a couple Nataraj Pencils!! You do not wanna spend a two or three dollars on one pen over here!

Also, get a stapler or a punching machine. Do not get a pair of Scissors, better buy one here.

Please do not even think of getting any subject-related books, unless you would really need one. We have a splendid Library here that houses vast variety of books! More so, you can borrow books for nearly a year! So do not worry about getting books from India or buying them!

Your parents and/or relatives who have never flown or stayed in a foreign nation are basically going to test your nerve, and ask you to carry a whole house with you. You
must remain calm. It is your uncles and aunts who have traveled great distances who will become your hope of sanity. Bring them to your side and ask them to assure your parents that packing is not a big deal. Your relatives who sent their children to the US a few years ago will share/enforce a list of items they prepared for their grown-up kids and will invariably ask your parents to follow the same, but soldier, you must stay strong and light! This is the myopic attitude we grow up with, which is something you will have to fight and forget along the way.

Show them this chapter that you read. Tell them that it is really not that big a deal! Packing is as simple as anything. You just need to be good at folding your clothes and arranging them properly. Distribute the weight evenly across your baggages. You will mostly be allowed an additional baggage if you are flying as a student (on an F visa), check with your airline, please! But above all, travel light and fly safe!

So...

Once you are done with your VISA process and interview and have your Passport and VISA in hand (and, you have booked your flight tickets), you can proceed with your shopping. You should start with whatever you need - be it clothes, accessories, essentials, medicines, etc. Good to carry one regular hand-baggage. I highly recommend an American Tourister 30L bag. Comes in with all the cool features - including an in-built rain cover! I bought one for about Rs 2,500. Totally worth it!

And all of this should be done by Mid-July.

Next week, do a rough pass of your packing, to see if your bags are good enough.

Would recommend carrying a travel bag (30 L), one small 60L suitcase, one 80L suitcase and a large 110L suitcase. So you have your small, medium and large set with you. Keep one or two tees and shorts handy with you in your travel bag, just in case, the airline misplaces your check-in bags (Highly unlikely, but plausible)

Then check for TSA locks and all.

And, you should be set to sail, well, fly! :)
