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The devil's in the detail

Want to carry liquids in your hand luggage again? That's fine according to the US and Canadian authorities. Just make sure they're inside a 'quart-size' plastic bag. A clear one. With a zip. **Ros Taylor** wades her way through the small print

Just when you thought it was safe to board a plane – provided, of course, your carry-on bag is no larger than 56x45x25cm and you have no liquids – things just got even more complicated. Last month the US and Canadian authorities decided to allow passengers to take non-essential liquids on board with them. Before you gratefully stuff your sponge bag and make-up case into your child-sized case, however, pay heed to the small print.

"All liquids, gels and aerosols must be in three-ounce or smaller containers," say the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) instructions. They "must be placed in a single, quart-size, zip-top, clear plastic bag".

Any old transparent plastic bag won't do: it must have a zip. If, like most Britons, you have no idea what "quart-size" means, British Airways advises that it must not exceed 20x19.5cm. Three American ounces amount to 90ml, which is about the size of a small perfume bottle. Furthermore, "larger containers that are half-full or toothpaste tubes rolled-up are not allowed".

"Try not to over-think these guidelines," the advice continues, which presumably means that passengers can make the TSA's task easier by not taking any liquids into the cabin at all. But as business travellers are finding since the security crackdown began in August, the rules are changing from country to country and airport to airport – and it is more difficult than ever to pack a carry-on bag and avoid a long wait at the baggage carousel.

Indeed, at the time of writing, both Ryanair and BA were advising on their websites that all non-essential hand baggage was banned on flights from Poland to the UK. Yet a spokeswoman for the Polish national tourist office said this information was a "total misunderstanding" and that only liquids were banned: "I was flying a week ago from Poland and I had a handbag," she told the Guardian. But Ryanair passengers who expect a ban and pay for their hold baggage are charged £3.50 per item – and

double that at the airport.

Similarly, while liquids are still banned on all flights from the UK, passengers boarding flights to Heathrow from South Africa usually have no problems bringing them through security – despite advice to the contrary from the national carrier, South African Airways.

Even more confusingly, BA advises travellers flying out of Frankfurt airport in the morning not to carry liquids, gels and cosmetics because US flights are leaving from the same gate area at that time. But Frankfurt airport's own website makes no mention of the problem.

Then comes the confusion over what constitutes a solid. Gels are considered liquids, and so is lip gloss, but lipstick is acceptable. Deodorants must be of the "solid-stick" variety. Try demonstrating the difference between Mitchum and Mum to an official in a busy security queue. A number of countries – such as France and Switzerland – ban "cosmetics", full stop.

"It is very difficult at the moment for the business traveller to know what you can and can't do," says Neil Thompson, the director of security at Red24, a global personal security consultancy. "You will never get consistency throughout the world, because there are different threats against different countries." Eventually, he predicts, most countries will follow the rules adopted by the US, the UK and Israel. But many simply do not yet have enough security staff to implement tougher regulations.

Stringent rules

The TSA's stringent rules – which are set out in painstaking detail on its website – are not drawn up arbitrarily, he says. "They've looked at the threat and they've said, right, it takes more than three ounces to make a bomb." Similarly, the maximum dimensions for cabin baggage in Britain were chosen because they are easier to x-ray accurately.

In any case, he adds, the Department of Transport's requirements are only a minimum standard. "It all depends on the protocol the airport has put in place with the airline." In other words, if an airport

were to decide to make its employees' jobs easier by banning hand luggage altogether and the airlines based there agreed, passengers would not be able to cite the DoT's guidance when their possessions were confiscated.

When such confusion reigns, the TSA's advice not to "over-think" the problem of cabin baggage becomes almost tempting. Of course, one answer is to stock up on toothpaste, shampoo, shaving foam and moisturiser at the duty-free shops beyond airport security and leave them behind when you pack to go home. One US airport chain has already developed a quart-size bag of travel toiletries of the approved sizes, and British airport retailers will no doubt follow. Another is to embrace old-fashioned solid soap bars. In Britain, Oral B sells a product called Brush-Ups, which slip over the finger and clean the teeth reasonably thoroughly – and floss isn't banned. Replacing make-up is, of course, both difficult and expensive, and women who wear more than lipstick and powder may have to resign themselves to checking their bags for an overnight trip.

If your belongings are confiscated, however, you may have the right to claim them back. BAA, which runs most of Britain's larger airports, will send them to your home address for the price of postage or store an item for up to 90 days. Exeter airport is not so generous: it charges a £10 administration fee, which is donated to charity. Unclaimed confiscated items are auctioned off, also for the charity's benefit. BAA throws away partly-used toiletries and recycles items such as knives.

"It's inconvenient, but [businesspeople] know they'd rather get from A to B safely than not get there at all," says Thompson. "It's not whether we will get another terrorist incident, it's when." And the crackdown on cabin baggage does at least have one small upside: an end to overhead locker-hogging and the gentleman in blatant breach of the carry-on rules.

One US airport chain

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