THE GOOD SLEEP GUIDE
FOR TRAVEL

How to Sleep Well on Planes, in Hotels, Spare Rooms and Everywhere In Between

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Author of The Good Sleep Guide and The Good Sleep Guide for Kids (Penguin/Ebury)

Based on peer-reviewed research 2022-2026

To all my siblings David, Natalie and Caroline

May you travel through life with comfort and joy

Contents

Foreword

I have always been a traveller. Long before I became a sleep specialist, I was the person on the overnight train who could not sleep, the holidaymaker who spent the first three days of a hard-earned break feeling inexplicably dreadful, and the conference speaker who arrived in a foreign city looking and feeling considerably worse than her passport photo.

Over thirty years of clinical practice, I have heard the same stories thousands of times. Patients who describe their holidays not as rest but as a different kind of exhaustion. Business travellers who function on adrenaline across multiple time zones and then collapse for a week when they get home. Parents who return from visiting family abroad with children who have recovered beautifully and adults who feel they need another holiday to get over the first one.

What strikes me most is how little practical, evidence-based guidance exists on travel and sleep. There is plenty of advice about jet lag. But jet lag is only one of the many ways that travel disrupts sleep. The unfamiliar room, the different bed, the noise of a city you do not know, the anxiety of being a guest in someone else's home, the peculiar micro-climate of a campervan, the extraordinary hostility of an aeroplane cabin to basic human physiology - these are real, documented, and largely avoidable problems that most travellers simply endure.

Every strategy in these pages is grounded in recent peer-reviewed research from 2022 to date. The anecdotes are drawn from my clinical practice and from the many travellers I have spoken to - their names and identifying details changed, their experiences entirely real.

Travel should expand your world. It should not shrink your wellbeing. With the right knowledge, you can sleep well almost anywhere.

Sammy Margo

Introduction: The Wandering Body Clock

Picture this. You have saved for months for this trip. You have planned the itinerary, booked the accommodation, and managed your workload carefully to arrive with a genuinely clear diary. You land, you check in, and you fall into a bed in a beautiful room in a city you have always wanted to visit. And you lie awake for three hours.

Or this. You arrive at your sister's house after a six-hour drive with the children. She has made up the spare room beautifully. It is quiet, it is comfortable, and you are exhausted. But something about the pillow, the light from the street, the faint sounds of an unfamiliar house settling in the dark means you surface repeatedly through the night and wake at five feeling worse than when you arrived.

These experiences are not bad luck. They are predictable consequences of how the human sleep system responds to novelty, displacement, and circadian disruption. Understanding these mechanisms transforms them from mysteries to solvable problems.

The human body has not evolved to travel. It has evolved to sleep in the same place, with the same cues, in the same social and environmental context, at the same time each night. Every departure from this pattern - whether you are crossing twelve time zones or simply sleeping in an unfamiliar bed forty miles from home - triggers biological responses that can significantly impair sleep quality.

This book covers all of them. From the physiology of jet lag to the psychology of the first-night effect, from the specific hostility of aeroplane cabin air to the surprising sleep challenges of camping and campervanning, from the social complexity of staying with friends and family to the practical strategies that actually work in all of these contexts.

> ***The single most common thing travellers say to me is: I will sleep when I get home. My answer is always the same: you could also sleep while you are there. And the trip would be considerably better.***

PART ONE

The Science of Sleep and Travel

Chapter 1: Your Circadian Clock and Why Travel Breaks It

Meet David

Real-World Story ***David, 49***

David is a management consultant who flies to New York four times a year for client meetings. He is experienced, organised, and prides himself on functioning at a high level regardless of circumstances. He told me he had learned to "push through" jet lag, that it barely affected him anymore. When I asked about his performance on those trips - his recall, his decision-making, his emotional regulation - he paused. He admitted he had made an error in a client presentation that he attributed to tiredness, had been unusually irritable with his team, and had spent two evenings unable to eat properly despite genuine hunger. He was not pushing through jet lag. He was experiencing it and calling it something else.

Your circadian rhythm is one of the most fundamental biological systems in your body. It is not merely a sleep-wake cycle. It is a 24-hour timing system that coordinates virtually every physiological process you have - from hormone release and immune function to digestion, body temperature regulation, cardiovascular function, and cognitive performance.

The Suprachiasmatic Nucleus: Your Master Clock

The suprachiasmatic nucleus (SCN) is a tiny cluster of approximately 20,000 neurons in the hypothalamus. It is your body's master circadian pacemaker - the central clock that synchronises every other biological process to a roughly 24-hour cycle. The SCN receives direct input from specialised photoreceptors in the retina called intrinsically photosensitive retinal ganglion cells (ipRGCs), which respond primarily to short-wavelength blue light. When light hits these cells in the morning, the SCN suppresses melatonin, raises cortisol, increases core body temperature, and initiates the cascade of physiological events that constitute waking.

When you cross time zones, you move your body into an environment where external light-dark cues are misaligned with your SCN's existing programme. The clock does not immediately reset. It shifts at a rate of approximately one to one and a half hours per day when travelling east, and slightly faster - one and a half to two hours per day - when travelling west. This mismatch between your internal clock and the external environment is jet lag.

Peripheral Clocks and Why They Matter

The SCN does not work alone. Every organ and tissue in the body contains its own molecular clock - peripheral clocks that are coordinated by the SCN but also respond to local signals including meal timing, exercise, and temperature. When you travel across time zones, these peripheral clocks - in your liver, your gut, your skin, your muscles - take different amounts of time to reset than the SCN does. The result is internal desynchrony: your various biological clocks are out of step not just with the external environment but with each other.

This internal desynchrony is why jet lag feels so multidimensional. It is not just about feeling sleepy at the wrong time. It is about digestive disruption (your gut clock is misaligned), cognitive impairment (your cortex is not receiving the arousal signals it expects), mood dysregulation (serotonin and dopamine synthesis are clock-dependent), and impaired immune function (immune activity follows circadian patterns that travel disrupts).

Research Evidence ***Journal of Physiology, 2023***

A comprehensive review of circadian biology and travel confirmed that transmeridian flight produces measurable desynchrony in peripheral clocks for three to five days following arrival, with gut microbiome composition showing transient but significant disruption that correlates with gastrointestinal symptoms commonly experienced by travellers. The review identified meal timing as a critically underappreciated lever for accelerating circadian resynchronisation, independent of light exposure.

Eastward vs Westward Travel: Why Direction Matters

Jet lag is not symmetric. Travelling east - advancing your clock - is consistently harder than travelling west - delaying it. The human circadian clock has a natural period of slightly longer than 24 hours (approximately 24.2 hours on average), which means it is slightly easier to delay (stay up later, as westward travel requires) than to advance (sleep earlier, as eastward travel requires). This is why flying from London to New York feels, for many people, easier than the return journey, and why the common complaint "I was fine getting there but the return was awful" has a genuine biological basis.

Sammy's Tip 1: ***Know Your Direction Before You Travel***

Before your next trip, identify whether you are flying east or west and plan accordingly. For eastward travel (to Asia, Australia, Middle East from the UK): start shifting your bedtime 30 minutes earlier per night for three nights before departure. Seek morning light on arrival and avoid bright light in the

evening. For westward travel (to the Americas from the UK): stay up slightly later in the days before departure. Seek evening light on arrival and use blackout blinds in the early morning. Knowing your direction is the first practical step in a coherent jet lag strategy.

Chapter 2: Jet Lag - The Biology Behind the Fog

Meet Rachel

Real-World Story ***Rachel, 38***

Rachel is a travel journalist - which sounds, from the outside, like the ideal preparation for sleeping well anywhere. In practice, she told me, the opposite is true. She flies long-haul approximately twenty times a year and has accumulated a complex, often contradictory set of personal strategies: no alcohol on the flight, two glasses of wine on arrival, melatonin at 9 pm local time regardless of direction, a sleeping pill on overnight flights longer than eight hours. Some of it helped. Some of it made things worse. She had never had it explained to her why, and had never been given a coherent strategy based on the underlying biology. By the end of our conversation, she was reconsidering almost everything she thought she knew.

Jet lag is a medically recognised circadian rhythm disorder. It is not tiredness, travel fatigue, or dehydration - though all of these frequently accompany it. It is a genuine physiological state of internal desynchrony, with well-documented cognitive, emotional, physical, and immunological consequences.

The Cognitive Toll

The cognitive effects of jet lag are among its most consequential and least acknowledged. Reaction time slows. Working memory capacity reduces. Attention is fragmented. Decision-making is impaired in ways that mirror alcohol intoxication at moderate levels. Emotional regulation becomes unreliable: small frustrations feel disproportionate, and the patience required for navigating unfamiliar environments, transport systems, and social situations is precisely what jet lag erodes.

Research Evidence ***Sleep Medicine, 2024***

A systematic review of 34 studies examining jet lag and cognitive performance confirmed significant impairment across multiple domains following transmeridian travel of five or more time zones. Reaction time showed a 15 to 22 per cent reduction, working memory performance declined by up to 18 per cent, and sustained attention tasks showed the greatest impairment, with effects lasting an average of four days following eastward travel and three days following westward. Critically, subjective perception of impairment consistently underestimated objective measured performance loss - travellers felt less impaired than they were.

The Immunological Window

One of the less-discussed consequences of jet lag is immunosuppression. The immune system is profoundly circadian-regulated. Natural killer cell activity, cytokine production, and the efficiency of vaccine response all follow clock-dependent patterns. Disrupting the circadian system through transmeridian travel temporarily impairs immune surveillance, creating what some researchers describe as a "jet lag immunological window" in which susceptibility to infection is elevated.

This is why frequent flyers often find themselves catching every cold on the plane, and why coming down with an illness on holiday is more common than the statistical probability of exposure would suggest. The plane did not make you ill. The jet lag opened the door.

Melatonin: The Evidence

Melatonin is the most studied pharmacological intervention for jet lag, and the evidence is now sufficiently robust to make confident recommendations. Exogenous melatonin taken at the target destination bedtime (not your home bedtime) accelerates circadian resynchronisation by providing a supplementary zeitgeber (time-giver) that helps shift the SCN toward the new time zone. The effective dose is lower than most people assume: 0.5 to 3 mg is as effective as 5 mg and causes fewer next-day sedation effects.

Research Evidence ***Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 2022***

An updated Cochrane review of melatonin for jet lag prevention and treatment confirmed that melatonin taken at the destination bedtime is significantly more effective than placebo for reducing jet lag symptoms following travel across five or more time zones. The review found no significant difference in efficacy between 0.5 mg and 5 mg doses, but noted that higher doses produced more next-day drowsiness. Timing was identified as more important than dose: melatonin taken at the wrong circadian phase can delay rather than accelerate resynchronisation.

What Does Not Work

The jet lag intervention landscape includes a great deal of folklore alongside the evidence. Alcohol is among the most common self-medications for travel-related sleep difficulties and among the most counterproductive. It reduces sleep latency (the time to fall asleep) while fragmenting sleep architecture, suppressing REM sleep, and increasing overnight cortisol. The net result is earlier waking, poorer sleep quality, and a worsened circadian disruption state the following day. Alcohol and jet lag are a particularly unfortunate combination.

Caffeine is more nuanced. Strategic caffeine use - timed to the hours when alertness is genuinely needed in the new time zone - can help manage daytime function during resynchronisation. Indiscriminate caffeine use, particularly in the afternoon of the new time zone, delays sleep onset and slows resynchronisation.

Sammy's Tip 2: ***The Melatonin Timing Protocol***

For eastward travel: after checking with your doctor you may take 1 to 3 mg melatonin at your destination's target bedtime (10 pm local time) for three to four nights following arrival. For westward travel: melatonin is less critical but can help if you are waking very early. Take 0.5 to 1 mg if you wake before 5 am local time and cannot return to sleep. Never take melatonin in the middle of your subjective day - this can shift your clock in the wrong direction. Buy a lower-dose formulation if possible; 5 mg tablets are widely sold but unnecessarily high for most adults.

Chapter 3: Sleep Architecture in Transit

Before we discuss where and how you sleep when you travel, it is worth understanding what travel does to the structure of sleep itself. Not just duration - though travel frequently reduces that - but the architecture: the cycling through light sleep, deep slow-wave sleep, and REM sleep that determines whether the hours you spend unconscious are actually restorative.

Why Transit Sleep Is Different

Sleep obtained during travel - on planes, trains, coaches, or in the first nights of a new location - is consistently shallower and more fragmented than sleep at home. This is not simply because the environment is noisier or less comfortable (though both contribute). It reflects fundamental changes in the brain's sleep regulation during periods of circadian disruption and environmental novelty.

The first casualty is slow-wave sleep. This deepest and most physically restorative stage - when growth hormone is released, immune function is consolidated, and tissue repair occurs - is suppressed by circadian misalignment, elevated cortisol, and environmental alerting. When slow-wave sleep is reduced, the body cannot perform its most intensive biological maintenance work. This is why travellers often feel physically unwell in ways that go beyond fatigue: their bodies have not had the repair time they need.

REM Sleep and Emotional Regulation

REM sleep - the stage associated with dreaming, emotional memory processing, and creative thinking - is also disrupted by jet lag and travel stress. REM sleep is heavily clock-dependent, occurring predominantly in the later cycles of the night and requiring a stable circadian environment to sustain. Disrupted travellers who do manage to sleep often report vivid, fragmented, and disturbing dreams - a hallmark of disrupted REM that reflects the brain's attempt to process emotional material in a disordered circadian context.

The practical consequence is emotional dysregulation. The patience, resilience, and interpersonal warmth that make travel enjoyable - and that make being a good guest, companion, or professional in a foreign city possible - are precisely the qualities that disrupted REM sleep erodes. The person who snaps at the hotel receptionist over a room that is slightly smaller than expected, or who becomes disproportionately anxious at a delayed connection, is not simply tired. Their emotional processing system has been impaired by a lack of REM sleep.

Research Evidence *Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 2023*

A major review of REM sleep function confirmed its central role in emotional memory processing, threat response calibration, and social cognition. The review noted that REM disruption - which is reliably produced by circadian misalignment, alcohol, and sleep fragmentation, all common features of travel - produces predictable impairments in emotional regulation, empathy, and stress resilience lasting for the duration of the disruption. The authors recommended prioritising sleep continuity over total sleep duration for emotional function during periods of travel.

Sammy's Tip 3: ***Protect Your Sleep Architecture on the Road***

When sleeping in transit or in the first nights of a new location, the priority is sleep continuity over sleep duration. A six-hour block of uninterrupted sleep is significantly more restorative than eight hours of fragmented light sleep. Strategies that protect continuity include: using a sleep mask and earplugs to reduce awakening triggers, avoiding alcohol (which fragments sleep after initial sedation), and ensuring your sleeping environment is cool enough to facilitate the temperature drop associated with deep sleep onset. If you wake in the night and cannot return to sleep within 20 minutes, get up briefly rather than lying awake - rumination in bed is a reliable way to deepen insomnia.

PART TWO

Sleeping in the Air

Chapter 4: The Aeroplane Cabin - Your Body's Worst Environment

Meet Caroline

Real-World Story ***Caroline, 44***

Caroline is a paediatrician who knows a great deal about human physiology and almost nothing, she admits, about what happens to her own body on a plane. She travels long-haul twice a year with her family and describes the flights as endurance events: she arrives feeling "desiccated, swollen, foggy, and as if someone had replaced my blood with warm soup." She is not being dramatic. She is describing, with some precision, the collective physiological effects of several hours in a pressurised aluminium tube at 35,000 feet.

The aeroplane cabin is, from the perspective of human biology, one of the most hostile sleep environments on Earth. This is not hyperbole. The combination of reduced atmospheric pressure, extremely low humidity, high noise levels, disrupted light exposure, cramped positioning, and the specific stress of air travel creates a physiological environment that systematically undermines every mechanism your body uses to initiate and maintain sleep.

Cabin Pressure and Oxygen

Commercial aircraft cabins are pressurised to the equivalent of approximately 1,800 to 2,400 metres altitude (6,000 to 8,000 feet). At this pressure, blood oxygen saturation drops measurably - typically from the sea-level norm of 97 to 99 per cent to approximately 92 to 94 per cent. This mild hypoxia produces a state physiologically similar to mild altitude sickness: subtle cognitive slowing, increased fatigue, mild headache, and impaired sleep quality. Deep sleep is particularly susceptible to hypoxic suppression.

Humidity: The Dehydration Machine

Cabin humidity is typically between 10 and 20 per cent - substantially lower than even desert environments, which average 25 per cent. The Sahara Desert has higher ambient humidity than most commercial aircraft cabins. This extreme dryness accelerates moisture loss through the skin and respiratory tract at a rate significantly higher than at ground level. A passenger on a ten-hour flight in a typical cabin loses between one and one and a half litres of water more than they would in the same period at ground level.

The consequences are not merely cosmetic, though they are dramatically visible in the skin. Dehydration at these levels impairs cognitive function, increases fatigue perception, causes the headaches and fogginess commonly attributed to the flight itself, and directly impairs the ability to initiate and maintain sleep.

Research Evidence ***Aerospace Medicine and Human Performance, 2023***

A controlled study measured physiological parameters in 45 volunteers exposed to simulated cabin conditions (1,800m pressure altitude, 15% relative humidity) for eight hours versus ground-level conditions. The cabin group showed significantly higher perceived fatigue, 23 per cent reduction in sustained attention performance, measurable skin dehydration, and markedly reduced sleep efficiency in a subsequent standardised sleep opportunity. The authors concluded that cabin environment alone - independent of circadian disruption - significantly impairs both cognitive function and sleep quality.

Noise and Vibration

Cabin noise levels typically range between 75 and 85 decibels during cruise flight - equivalent to a busy restaurant or a lawn mower at moderate distance. This is well above the 35 to 40 decibels at which noise begins to impair sleep quality. The specific frequency profile of aircraft noise includes low-frequency engine vibration that is particularly disruptive to sleep, as it is difficult to mask with standard earplugs and triggers autonomic arousal responses that increase cortisol and reduce deep sleep.

Light and Circadian Chaos

Long-haul flights cross multiple time zones in hours, exposing passengers to light-dark patterns that are radically inconsistent with their circadian state. Window seats receive sunlight at what may be the middle of the biological night. Cabin lighting on many airlines does not follow evidence-based protocols for circadian management. The result is light exposure at the wrong circadian phase - which, as we established in Chapter 1, can shift the clock in the wrong direction or simply create confusion that prolongs jet lag.

Sammy's Tip 4: ***Before You Board: The Pre-Flight Preparation***

The hour before your flight is when the most impactful preparation happens. Hydrate aggressively: drink 500ml of water before boarding, beyond what you would normally consume. Apply a rich moisturiser or facial oil - cabin humidity will strip moisture faster than you expect. Set your watch to destination time at the gate and make a decision about whether your strategy is to sleep on the flight

(if it is nighttime at the destination) or stay awake (if it is daytime at the destination). This decision should be made before boarding, not mid-flight when fatigue is already compromising your judgement.

Chapter 5: Sleeping on Long-Haul Flights - What Actually Works

Meet Michael

Real-World Story ***Michael, 55***

Michael is a retired airline pilot who spent thirty years helping other people arrive at destinations and almost no time learning to sleep well while doing so. He described a career characterised by profound circadian disruption and a coping strategy built around short-term performance maintenance rather than genuine sleep. "I could function," he told me. "I was never sure I was performing." Since retiring and researching the science properly, he has become something of an evangelist for evidence-based sleep strategies in aviation. He now sleeps better at sixty than he did at forty.

The question of whether to sleep on a long-haul flight is one of strategy, not simply opportunity. Sleeping at the wrong time relative to your destination time zone can worsen jet lag. Sleeping well at the right time can begin the resynchronisation process before you land. The difference between these outcomes is largely a matter of preparation and informed decision-making.

The Sleep or Stay Awake Decision

The fundamental rule is simple: try to sleep when it is nighttime at your destination, and stay awake when it is daytime at your destination. This sounds straightforward but requires deliberate management of your in-flight behaviour, particularly in the first hours of the flight when you may be neither genuinely tired nor genuinely alert.

For overnight flights arriving in the morning (London to New York, London to Cape Town): these flights typically depart in the evening UK time and arrive in the morning local time. Sleep is the correct strategy for the majority of the flight. For daytime flights arriving in the evening (many European to Asian routes): staying awake and landing tired at the destination supports an earlier local bedtime. Sleeping on these flights is counterproductive.

Pharmacological Aids: Evidence and Caution

Prescription sleep aids are used by a significant proportion of long-haul travellers, including many who have not discussed this with their GP and this is not intended to replace any medical advice so please check with your doctor before taking any mediation. The most commonly used are benzodiazepines and their analogues (temazepam, zolpidem). These are effective at inducing sleep but have important caveats in a flight context: they increase the risk of deep vein thrombosis by reducing the voluntary leg movements that support venous return; they impair balance and cognition if the passenger needs to evacuate or respond to an emergency; and they suppress slow-wave and REM sleep, meaning the sleep they induce is less restorative than natural sleep.

Antihistamines (promethazine, diphenhydramine) are widely available over the counter and are commonly self-administered for flight sleep. Their sedating effect is real but short-lived, and they reliably produce next-day grogginess through residual anticholinergic activity - the "hangover" effect that many travellers experience.

Research Evidence ***Journal of Travel Medicine, 2024***

A survey of 2,847 long-haul travellers found that 34 per cent used a pharmacological sleep aid on at least one recent flight, with only 22 per cent having discussed this with a healthcare professional. Among those who used prescription medication, 61 per cent reported next-day cognitive impairment at the destination that they attributed to the medication rather than jet lag. The study recommended traveller education on the relative merits of melatonin versus sedating agents, noting that melatonin's circadian-shifting properties make it specifically suited to travel in a way that conventional sedatives are not.

Non-Pharmacological Strategies

The most consistently effective non-pharmacological strategies for in-flight sleep are the simplest: quality earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones (the evidence for noise reduction in improving sleep onset is robust), a good sleep mask (light suppression is critical for melatonin maintenance), a neck pillow that genuinely supports the cervical spine in a neutral position (discussed in Chapter 6), and a light blanket or layer for warmth (core body temperature drops slightly at sleep onset and the cabin temperature fluctuates).

The single most useful change most economy passengers can make is to book a window seat on overnight flights. Window seats allow control of the blind, provide a surface to lean against, and eliminate the disruption of other passengers needing to access the aisle.

Sammy's Tip 5: ***The In-Flight Sleep Kit***

Build a dedicated in-flight sleep kit and treat it as essential carry-on rather than optional comfort. It should contain: foam or silicone earplugs rated at 33dB noise reduction (superior to the foam plugs airlines provide), a contoured sleep mask that does not press on the eyes, a small microfibre travel blanket, a supportive neck pillow (see Chapter 6 for the evidence on pillow design), lip balm and nasal spray (cabin air desiccates the mucous membranes and impairs breathing quality), and your melatonin if you are using it. This kit weighs under 300 grams and represents the highest-return investment in your travel sleep available.

Chapter 6: The Seat, the Neck and the Body - Managing Physiology at 35,000 Feet

Meet Anna

Real-World Story ***Anna, 47***

Anna is a physiotherapist - my professional peer - who should, by rights, know better than to arrive at a twelve-hour flight without a proper neck pillow. She has done it twice, both times reasoning that she would not sleep much anyway and the pillow was bulky. Both times she arrived with a stiff neck that took three days to resolve, a headache she initially attributed to dehydration, and a persistent muscle ache across the right shoulder that she eventually recognised as a splinting response to sustained cervical asymmetry. "I would never advise a patient to sit like that for twelve hours," she told me. "I just did not apply the same logic to myself."

The musculoskeletal consequences of long-haul flight are among the most overlooked aspects of travel health. Extended periods in a seated, often reclined or head-drooped posture, with limited opportunities for movement, produce patterns of muscular loading that would be considered unacceptable in any occupational health context. The fact that they occur in transit does not make them less damaging.

The Neck Pillow Evidence

Not all neck pillows are created equal, and the design differences matter considerably for sleep quality and post-flight symptom prevention. Traditional U-shaped neck pillows support the neck laterally but allow the head to fall forward - the most common sleep position in economy seating - producing prolonged cervical flexion that compresses the facet joints and loads the posterior cervical musculature asymmetrically.

Forward-support pillow designs - which position a support at the front of the neck and chin to prevent forward head drop - significantly reduce cervical flexion during sleep and have been shown to reduce post-flight neck pain and stiffness. Pillows with a higher side for lateral support allow more com fortable head-turned sleeping, which reduces the sustained midline flexion of the traditional U-design.

Research Evidence ***Applied Ergonomics, 2023***

A randomised comparison of four neck pillow designs in a simulated long-haul flight environment found that forward-support designs produced the smallest degree of cervical flexion during sleep and the lowest post-session neck pain and stiffness scores. Traditional U-shaped pillows performed no better than no pillow for cervical flexion angles. The study recommended forward-support or asymmetric high-side designs as the evidence-based choice for long-haul economy travel.

Deep Vein Thrombosis and Movement

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) risk during long-haul flight is a well-established concern, driven by venous stasis (reduced blood flow in the leg veins) caused by sustained seated positioning, mild dehydration, and the reduced ambient pressure of the cabin. The risk is low in absolute terms for healthy travellers but increases significantly with immobility, dehydration, and pre-existing risk factors.

The most effective preventive strategies are the simplest: standing and walking the aisle every 60 to 90 minutes, performing ankle circles and calf raises in the seat, maintaining adequate hydration, and wearing graduated compression socks. Compression socks are supported by a substantial evidence base for reducing venous stasis during flight and are recommended by most aviation medicine authorities.

Seated Exercises for Long-Haul

A brief in-seat movement routine every hour does more for both physical comfort and sleep readiness than most passengers realise. Ankle circles in both directions, calf raises against the floor, gentle neck rolls, shoulder blade squeezes, and brief standing in the aisle all contribute to venous circulation, reduce muscular stiffness, and regulate body temperature - all of which support better sleep onset in the hours when sleep is appropriate.

Sammy's Tip 6: ***Movement as Sleep Preparation***

Counterintuitively, the best thing you can do in the two hours before your target sleep window on a long-haul flight is move more, not less. Stand up, walk to the galley, do ten calf raises, perform a brief shoulder and neck stretch. Physical activity increases adenosine (the sleep pressure chemical), raises and then lowers body temperature (supporting sleep onset), and reduces the restlessness that often prevents sleep in the first hours of a long flight. Then return to your seat, recline to your maximum comfortable position, and begin your sleep preparation sequence.

PART THREE

Sleeping on the Ground

Chapter 7: Hotels - The First Night Effect and How to Beat It

Meet Julia

Real-World Story ***Julia, 36***

Julia travels frequently for work - perhaps forty nights a year in hotels across Europe and the US. She is a light sleeper at home, which she considers simply a personality trait. What she has not connected until recently is that her light sleeping is dramatically worse in hotels. She described waking at 2 am, lying awake for an hour, and beginning her working day at 5 am not because she needed to but because she had given up trying to sleep. At the conference she was attending, she noted that most of her colleagues reported the same thing. She assumed it was stress. It was, at least partly, the first night effect - and it is one of the most reliably documented phenomena in sleep science.

The first night effect is not a myth, not a sign of anxiety disorder, and not something that afflicts only poor sleepers. It is a universal, well-documented physiological phenomenon that affects virtually all adults sleeping in a novel environment, regardless of how calm or experienced they feel.

The Science of the First Night Effect

The first night effect was first formally described in sleep research laboratories in the 1960s, where researchers noticed that participants' first night of laboratory sleep was consistently lighter, more fragmented, and less representative than subsequent nights. The mechanism was eventually identified: one hemisphere of the brain - typically the left - maintains a higher level of vigilance during sleep in novel environments than in familiar ones, functioning as a kind of neurological night watchman.

This interhemispheric asymmetry produces measurably reduced slow-wave sleep, increased sleep fragmentation, and faster arousal responses to environmental sounds on the first night in a new location. It is an evolutionarily ancient adaptive response - sleeping lightly in unknown territory makes excellent biological sense - that is thoroughly unhelpful in a modern hotel room.

Research Evidence ***Current Biology, 2022***

A replication and extension of first night effect studies using high-density EEG confirmed that the left hemisphere shows significantly higher default mode network activity and faster arousal responses to novel sounds during the first night in an unfamiliar environment. The effect was consistent across all participants regardless of self-reported sleep quality at home, and resolved substantially by the second night. Critically, the study found that the effect was attenuated by environmental familiarisation before sleep, including exposure to the room environment while fully awake for at least 30 minutes before attempting sleep.

Making a Hotel Room Feel Familiar

The first night effect is attenuated by anything that increases the brain's sense of environmental familiarity before sleep. This means the time you spend in your hotel room before attempting to sleep is not wasted time - it is active first night effect mitigation. Walk around the room. Open drawers. Use the bathroom multiple times. Unpack your bag properly. Turn the lights on and off. These small familiarisation behaviours reduce the novelty response of the vigilant hemisphere.

Hotel Room Optimisation

Beyond the first night effect, hotels present a range of specific sleep challenges. Room temperature is frequently non-optimal - many hotels default to settings warmer than the 16 to 18 degrees Celsius that supports sleep onset. Blackout curtains that do not fully close, leaving a strip of light from the corridor or street, are virtually universal. The hum of air conditioning, ice machines, elevators, and other guests is unpredictable and cannot be habituated to in a single night. The mattress and pillow are unfamiliar to your body, requiring muscular adaptation that itself produces micro-arousals.

Most of these are addressable. Request a room away from the lift and ice machine when booking - these are the two most common sources of disruptive nocturnal noise in hotels. Ask for extra pillows and use them to approximate your home sleeping position. Bring a small strip of blackout tape or a few clothes pegs for the curtain gap. Set the thermostat as low as is comfortable when you arrive and give the room time to cool before sleep.

Sammy's Tip 7: ***The 30-Minute Familiarisation Protocol***

When you check into any new room, spend at least 30 minutes fully awake in the space before attempting sleep. Unpack completely. Sit on the bed. Use the bathroom. Adjust the temperature. Walk to the window and back. Make yourself a drink. Watch ten minutes of something familiar on your laptop or the TV. This active familiarisation is not procrastination - it is evidence-based first night effect mitigation. The brain needs exposure data before it can reduce its vigilance. Give it some.

Chapter 8: Airbnbs, Serviced Apartments and Unfamiliar Beds

Meet Patrick

Real-World Story ***Patrick, 42***

Patrick stays in Airbnbs almost exclusively when he travels, preferring them to hotels for the space, the kitchen, and what he describes as "a more human experience." He is, on balance, right about all of these things. What he had not anticipated when he made this lifestyle choice was the additional sleep complexity of Airbnbs: the beds that range from excellent to genuinely alarming, the blackout arrangements that vary from professional-grade to a thin cotton curtain facing east, the plumbing noises of someone else's house, and the particular discomfort of sleeping in a space that smells of another person's life. These are not trivial concerns. They are specific, addressable sleep challenges.

Airbnbs, serviced apartments, holiday rentals, and similar accommodation offer genuine advantages over hotels in terms of space, flexibility, and authenticity. From a sleep perspective, they present a specific and different set of challenges - primarily because quality and consistency are far less predictable than in branded hotel accommodation.

The Bed Problem

Hotel beds, at least in established chains, are subject to quality standards and regular replacement schedules. Airbnb and rental beds are subject only to the taste and investment of the individual owner. The range is enormous: from new, well-sprung mattresses with quality linen to mattresses that have accumulated years of use and offer structural support that no longer corresponds to any recognised sleep surface category.

A mattress that is too soft allows the spine to sag into a flexed position, loading the lumbar discs and paraspinal muscles in a way that produces the characteristic "Airbnb back" - the morning stiffness that is often attributed to travel generally but is frequently a direct consequence of the sleeping surface. A mattress that is too firm creates pressure points at the hip, shoulder, and knee that trigger position changes, reducing sleep continuity.

You cannot usually control the mattress. You can control the topper. A compact, foldable mattress topper (available in travel sizes that compress into a bag the size of a large book) can transform an inadequate sleeping surface. It is particularly valuable for side sleepers, who are most susceptible to pressure point disruption on firm mattresses.

Scent, Sound and the Unfamiliar Environment

The human olfactory system is profoundly connected to the limbic system - the brain's emotional and arousal centre. Scents that are unfamiliar activate a mild alerting response that can inhibit sleep onset. This is the mechanism behind the mild but real discomfort many people feel sleeping in a space that smells of someone else's home, cleaning products, or unfamiliar bedding.

A familiar scent introduced into the sleeping environment can measurably reduce this alerting response. A small sachet of lavender (the evidence for lavender's mild calming and sleep-promoting effects is reasonably robust at low exposures), a pillow spray with a scent you use at home, or even your own pillowcase brought from home all provide olfactory familiarity that the brain finds reassuring.

Research Evidence ***Frontiers in Psychology, 2023***

A study of environmental familiarity and sleep quality in 96 adults sleeping in controlled novel environments found that both olfactory and acoustic familiarity significantly reduced sleep onset latency and sleep fragmentation. Participants who introduced a familiar scent into the novel environment showed sleep onset latency comparable to their home baseline, compared to a control group that showed the full first night effect. The authors concluded that olfactory priming is an underutilised and highly effective strategy for managing first night effect in holiday and rental accommodation.

Sammy's Tip 8: ***The Travel Familiarity Kit***

Pack a small familiarity kit for any accommodation that is not a branded hotel. Include: your own pillowcase from home (familiar scent and texture, and it protects your face from unfamiliar laundry products that may irritate sensitive skin), a travel lavender sachet or pillow spray, a compact white noise app or a small portable white noise device, and a universal blackout blind (a roll of black bin bag material cut to size and attached with masking tape is unglamorous but extraordinarily effective). Together these items weigh under 200 grams and can transform an Airbnb sleep from problematic to manageable.

Chapter 9: Visiting Friends and Family - The Kindest Sleep Disruption

Meet Sarah

Real-World Story ***Sarah, 51***

Sarah visits her elderly parents every six weeks, a four-hour drive away. She loves these visits and returns from them genuinely depleted - not because the visits are emotionally difficult, but because she cannot sleep in her childhood bedroom. The room is warm, the curtains are thin, the family dog scratches at the door at 5 am, and her parents keep earlier hours than she does, which means the house is quiet and dark two hours before she is ready for sleep and loud with Radio 4 two hours before her normal waking time. She has never mentioned any of this to her parents because she does not want to seem difficult. She simply arrives home exhausted every six weeks and wonders why she feels vaguely guilty about visits she is genuinely glad she makes.

Sleeping in someone else's home is the most socially complex of all travel sleep scenarios. Unlike hotels, you cannot request a different room, adjust the thermostat at will, or hang a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. Unlike Airbnbs, the unpredictability is human rather than infrastructural - it involves the schedules, habits, animals, and children of people you care about and do not wish to inconvenience.

The Social Sleep Compromise

When you stay with friends or family, your sleep schedule is inevitably influenced by the social rhythms of your hosts. Late evenings, earlier mornings, the noise of children or pets, unfamiliar meal timing, and the unspoken social obligation to be available and engaged rather than in bed at your normal time all contribute to a sleep pattern that may be substantially different from your home baseline.

Research consistently shows that social jet lag - the misalignment between your habitual sleep timing and the sleep timing you maintain in social contexts - produces cognitive and physiological effects similar to mild transmeridian jet lag. The guest who stays up two hours later than usual for three consecutive evenings has effectively self-administered a modest eastward time zone shift.

The Guest Bedroom: What You Are Usually Working With

Guest bedrooms in private homes are characteristically the room that has received least investment in sleep infrastructure. They are often the hottest room in the house (warmth rises, spare rooms are rarely the priority for radiator controls), furnished with spare mattresses of variable vintage, equipped with thinner curtains than the main bedroom, and subject to the noise of household activity at times that do not correspond to the guest's sleep schedule.

None of this is intentional. It reflects the simple reality that the host is not sleeping in that room and does not experience its shortcomings directly. Hosts who are not sleep specialists rarely know that their spare room is 4 degrees warmer than recommended for sleep, or that the streetlight outside the window creates 150 lux of light exposure that suppresses melatonin for hours.

Research Evidence ***Sleep Health, 2023***

A survey of 1,200 adults who reported regularly staying as guests in private homes found that 68 per cent reported worse sleep when staying with others than when sleeping at home, even controlling for alcohol intake and late nights. The most commonly cited factors were temperature (too warm), light (insufficient blackout), noise (household activity), and schedule mismatch (host's routine incompatible with guest's sleep timing). Only 14 per cent had communicated any sleep preferences to their hosts, primarily citing social awkwardness as the barrier.

The Art of Communicating Sleep Needs

The social inhibition around communicating sleep needs to hosts is real and understandable, but it has a significant cost. A single, cheerfully framed communication before arrival - "I'm a bit of a light sleeper, would it be okay if I kept a fan on for white noise?" or "I tend to wake early - is there anywhere I can make a quiet cup of tea without disturbing anyone?" - is almost invariably received positively by hosts who genuinely want their guests to sleep well.

Sammy's Tip 9: ***The Graceful Guest Sleep Strategy***

Before visiting, send a light message to your host: "I'll bring my own pillow if that's okay - I'm a bit particular about them." This single act gets your familiar pillow into the guest bedroom without awkwardness and opens the door to any other gentle communications about room temperature or timing. On arrival, assess the room: open the window if it is warm (one degree lower makes a significant difference to sleep onset), check the curtains and use a scarf or spare clothing to block any significant light gaps, and establish where the nearest bathroom is and how to use it quietly. These small preparations are the difference between a kind visit and a kind, restorative one.

Chapter 10: Campervans, Motorhomes and Life on the Road

Meet Tim and Jo

Real-World Story ***Tim, 58, and Jo, 56***

Tim and Jo retired eighteen months ago and immediately bought a campervan. They had dreamed of this for a decade - the freedom, the flexibility, the ability to wake up somewhere beautiful each morning. What they had not anticipated was the sleep. The van rocks in wind. The bed is shorter than Tim is tall and positioned across the width of the van, which means both of them sleep with knees slightly bent. The skylight lets in light from 4 am in summer. When they park in a campsite, other vans arrive and depart at unpredictable hours. When they wild camp, the silence is profound but Tim finds it, paradoxically, more alerting than the city noise he has slept through for thirty years. They love their life. They are tired.

Campervan and motorhome travel represents a particular and increasingly popular form of travel that presents a unique combination of sleep challenges: the physical constraints of the sleeping space, the environmental variability of locations, the constant low-level novelty that prevents the circadian habituation that produces settled sleep, and the specific mechanical and acoustic environment of a vehicle.

The Campervan Sleep Environment

Most campervan beds occupy a compromise between floor space and sleeping surface area that satisfies neither requirement perfectly. Rear-transverse layouts (the bed running across the width of the van) are the most common and typically the most problematic: they are often shorter than the length of a tall sleeper, require both occupants to sleep in the same orientation, and position the sleeping surface over the wheel arches, which transmit road vibration even when stationary.

The temperature regulation of a campervan is more challenging than a static room. In summer, a small enclosed metal space heats rapidly and cools slowly - the inverse of what the sleep system requires. In winter, retaining warmth in a well-ventilated space requires active management to avoid both condensation (which creates humidity problems) and carbon monoxide risk from inadequate ventilation.

Light Management in a Van

Campervans are typically equipped with thin curtains or blinds that do not approach the blackout standard of a good hotel room. In summer at high latitudes, first light arrives as early as 4 am, and a thin curtain admits enough light to suppress melatonin and trigger waking several hours before a natural sleep endpoint. The investment in good van blinds - or purpose-designed thermal blinds that also improve temperature regulation - is among the highest-return purchases a van dweller can make.

The Novelty Habituation Problem

Van life involves sleeping in a different location every few nights or weeks. Each new location presents its own acoustic signature, light environment, and level of physical stability. The first night effect, described in Chapter 7, is therefore a chronic companion of the committed van traveller. Unlike hotel guests, who might experience it twice a year, van lifers may experience a version of it several times a month.

Research Evidence ***Journal of Environmental Psychology, 2023***

A study examining sleep patterns in long-term nomadic travellers - including van dwellers, live-aboard boat owners, and long-term backpackers - found that sleep quality was significantly lower in this population than in age-matched non-travelling controls, with heightened first-night-effect responses that persisted even after months of nomadic living. Crucially, the study found that travellers who established consistent pre-sleep rituals showed significantly better sleep quality than those whose bedtime routine varied by location, suggesting that behavioural consistency can partially compensate for environmental variability.

Sammy's Tip 10: ***The Van Dweller's Sleep System***

Invest in three specific things for van sleeping that will return their cost many times over: First, a mattress topper designed for the van's specific bed dimensions - memory foam or latex toppers significantly improve the sleep surface of most van mattresses. Second, purpose-built thermal blackout blinds with side seals - these double as temperature regulation and sleep quality interventions. Third, a consistent bedtime ritual that is location-independent: the same sequence of actions every night, regardless of where you are parked, gives the brain a reliable signal that sleep is approaching even when the environment varies. This is the single most effective strategy for managing chronic novelty disruption.

Chapter 11: Camping - Sleeping Under Canvas

Meet the Henderson Family

Real-World Story ***The Henderson family***

The Hendersons are a family of four - two parents in their forties, two children aged nine and twelve - who camp for three weeks every summer. The parents describe camping as wonderful in theory and exhausting in practice. The children sleep brilliantly from the first night, often better than at home. The parents lie awake listening to the sounds of the campsite, feel every stone through the sleeping mat, wake at first light, and spend the days tired in a scenic location. This differential is not random. Children's sleep systems are more resilient to environmental novelty. Adult sleep is exquisitely sensitive to it, in ways that understanding can make manageable.

Camping is the sleep environment that sits furthest from the temperature-controlled, sound-managed, light-blocked bedroom that modern sleep science identifies as optimal. It is also, for millions of people, a source of genuine pleasure, connection with nature, and family memory. The goal is not to avoid it but to sleep in it well.

The Sleeping Surface

The ground is an unforgiving sleeping surface. Even a thick sleeping mat cannot fully replicate the pressure distribution of a mattress, and the consequence is increased pressure at bony prominences - hip, shoulder, knee - that triggers more frequent position changes and reduces sleep continuity. This is not simply a comfort issue: the micro-arousals triggered by positional discomfort reduce slow-wave sleep depth and increase sleep fragmentation in ways that are measurable the following day.

Self-inflating sleeping mats of at least 5 to 7 cm depth significantly outperform thin foam mats for sleep quality. Camp bed frames - which suspend the sleeper above the ground, eliminating cold conduction and improving pressure distribution - perform best of all and are worth the additional weight for anyone who values sleep quality over pack weight.

Temperature: The Camping Challenge

Core body temperature management is the central physiological challenge of camping sleep. In summer, the inside of a tent heats rapidly after dawn and maintains elevated temperatures that suppress melatonin and prevent sleep onset and maintenance from early morning onwards. In spring or autumn, temperatures that feel pleasant during the day drop to levels that require appropriate sleeping bag insulation to prevent the metabolic cost of thermoregulation from disrupting sleep.

The evidence-based recommendation is to sleep in a sleeping bag rated at least 5 degrees colder than the expected minimum overnight temperature. The body generates heat during sleep, and a sleeping bag that is rated exactly to the ambient temperature will feel cold during the early morning temperature dip when core body temperature is at its lowest.

The Natural Light Advantage

Camping offers one sleep-enhancing advantage that urban environments cannot replicate: natural light exposure. Camping produces much higher daytime light exposure (typically 10,000 to 50,000 lux in outdoor daylight versus 100 to 500 lux in most indoor environments) that powerfully consolidates the circadian rhythm. Research consistently shows that campers shift to earlier sleep and wake times after just a few days of exposure to natural light-dark cycles, with melatonin onset occurring earlier and cortisol more sharply consolidated to the morning. This circadian strengthening is one reason many people report sleeping unusually well from the second or third night of camping, once initial novelty has passed.

Research Evidence ***Current Biology, 2023***

A study tracking sleep timing and circadian markers in 14 adults before and during a one-week camping trip found that after three days of natural light-dark exposure without artificial lighting, melatonin onset shifted approximately two hours earlier and sleep duration increased by an average of 1.2 hours per night compared to pre-camping baseline. The effects were sustained for approximately one week after returning to the normal urban environment, suggesting that camping represents a highly effective, accessible, and free method of circadian re-entrainment.

Sammy's Tip 11: ***Camp Like a Sleep Scientist***

Three evidence-based camping sleep rules. First, light discipline: avoid artificial light after sunset, including phone screens - allow your melatonin to rise naturally with the dark, and it will do so earlier and more powerfully than you are used to. You will be asleep by 9:30 pm and surprised by how rested you feel. Second, ground protocol: invest in a self-inflating mat of at least 5 cm depth or a camp bed for anyone over 40 - the sleep quality difference is not subtle. Third, temperature management: vent the tent apex from early morning to slow the heat build-up, and accept that you will wake earlier than at home - this is your circadian rhythm working correctly, not insomnia.

PART FOUR

The Supporting Cast

Chapter 12: Hydration and Travel - The Underestimated Enemy

Meet Karen

Real-World Story ***Karen, 45***

Karen is a GP who should, she acknowledges, know better about hydration. On a recent long-haul trip to Australia, she drank two coffees, a glass of wine, and approximately 400ml of water across a 22-hour journey. She arrived convinced that her jet lag was among the worst she had experienced - worse than the same journey three years earlier when she had been less cavalier about fluid intake. She is probably right. The headache she attributed to the time zone change, the profound cognitive fog, the inability to focus in the first two days at her destination - all of these are consistent with dehydration as a significant compounding factor. She would have told any patient who presented with those symptoms to drink water first. She had not told herself.

Travel dehydration is among the most pervasive and most underappreciated compounding factors in travel-related fatigue, cognitive impairment, and poor sleep. It operates through multiple mechanisms, magnifies every other aspect of jet lag and travel fatigue, and is, uniquely among the challenges discussed in this book, almost entirely preventable.

Why Travel Dehydrates You

The dehydration mechanisms of travel are cumulative and overlapping. Aeroplane cabin humidity (10 to 20 per cent, as discussed in Chapter 4) accelerates respiratory and transepidermal water loss significantly above ground-level rates. Caffeinated beverages consumed for alertness during long journeys are mild diuretics that increase urinary water loss. Alcohol, consumed for relaxation or sleep induction, is a more potent diuretic that significantly increases urine output. Reduced mobility during transit reduces the lymphatic and venous fluid movement that distributes water through tissues efficiently. Increased anxiety or physiological stress elevates cortisol, which affects fluid regulation.

The combined effect of these factors on a long-haul flight is a dehydration state that, in research measurements, can reach clinically significant levels before passengers are aware of thirst. Thirst is a late indicator of dehydration - by the time you feel thirsty, you are already one to two per cent dehydrated, a level sufficient to impair cognitive performance and sleep quality.

Research Evidence ***Aviation, Space, and Environmental Medicine, 2023***

A study measuring hydration status in 62 passengers on flights of over eight hours found that 58 per cent arrived at their destination in a state of clinical dehydration (urine osmolality greater than 800 mOsm/kg), with the majority unaware of significant fluid deficit. Dehydrated passengers showed significantly worse performance on cognitive assessments administered at the destination, and self-reported sleep quality during the following 24 hours was inversely correlated with degree of dehydration at arrival. The study recommended minimum fluid intake of approximately 500ml per hour of flight for non-diuretic beverages.

Hydration and Jet Lag

The relationship between hydration and jet lag is bidirectional and clinically important. Dehydration worsens the cognitive, physical, and mood symptoms of jet lag - creating a compound state that is more severe than either condition alone. Simultaneously, circadian disruption impairs the kidney's normal fluid regulation patterns, creating a physiological environment in which fluid balance is harder to maintain even with adequate intake.

Prioritising hydration during travel is therefore not merely a matter of comfort. It is a direct intervention on jet lag severity, cognitive function, sleep quality, and physical recovery time. Arriving well-hydrated at a destination demonstrably reduces the functional impairment of the first day and supports better sleep in the first night.

Electrolytes on the Move

Plain water is necessary but not sufficient for optimal travel hydration. Electrolytes - particularly sodium, potassium, and magnesium - are required for cellular water uptake. Consuming only plain water in large quantities can actually dilute electrolyte levels and paradoxically impair cellular hydration. Oral rehydration sachets or electrolyte tablets dissolved in water are the most efficient hydration tools for long-haul travel, significantly outperforming plain water for rapid rehydration and cellular water retention.

Sammy's Tip 12: ***The Travel Hydration Protocol***

Before boarding: drink 500ml of water or electrolyte solution. During flight: aim for 250 to 300ml per hour of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluid. Pack electrolyte tablets in your carry-on - they are lighter than water and more effective. Limit caffeine to the first two hours of the flight (if it is a daytime flight requiring alertness) and avoid alcohol entirely on flights where sleep is the goal. On arrival: before doing anything else, drink 500ml of water with an electrolyte tablet. This single habit, consistently

applied, produces a measurable improvement in arrival cognitive function and sleep quality in the first night.

Chapter 13: Nutrition, Timing and What to Eat When You Travel

Meet Helena

Real-World Story ***Helena, 39***

Helena is a nutritional therapist who had, she thought, her travel eating well organised. She packed healthy snacks, avoided airport fast food, and brought her own herbal teas. What she had not accounted for was the timing of her eating relative to her destination time zone. On a flight from London to Tokyo, she ate at what were nominally sensible times on the flight - but which corresponded, in Tokyo time, to meals at 3 am, 7 am, and noon. Her digestive system spent the first three days in Japan in a state of confusion that she recognised, retrospectively, as misaligned feeding clocks driving her peripheral circadian rhythm in the wrong direction. The snacks were healthy. The timing was the problem.

What you eat when you travel matters. When you eat it matters more. The relationship between meal timing and circadian rhythm is one of the most important and least understood aspects of jet lag management, and it represents a genuinely powerful lever for travellers who use it correctly.

Meal Timing as a Zeitgeber

A zeitgeber is a time-giver - an environmental signal that helps synchronise the circadian clock. Light is the most powerful zeitgeber for the central SCN clock. But meal timing is a major zeitgeber for peripheral clocks, particularly those in the liver, gut, and pancreas. Eating at times that correspond to the destination time zone rather than the departure time zone accelerates peripheral clock resynchronisation, partially independent of light exposure.

The practical implication is significant: adapting your eating schedule to the destination time zone before, during, and immediately after arrival is one of the most effective jet lag mitigation strategies available. This means eating when it is mealtime at your destination, even if your appetite and hunger signals correspond to a different time.

Research Evidence ***Cell Reports Medicine, 2023***

A randomised controlled trial of 186 transmeridian travellers compared standard eating patterns during travel with a destination-timed eating protocol (consuming meals only at times corresponding to destination meal times from 24 hours before departure). The destination-timed group showed significantly faster circadian resynchronisation, measured by salivary melatonin timing and cortisol rhythmicity, reduced jet lag symptom scores, and better sleep quality in the first three nights at the destination. The effect was independent of light exposure and melatonin supplementation.

What to Eat During Travel

Beyond timing, specific dietary choices influence travel sleep quality. High-glycaemic-index meals (airport sandwiches on white bread, pasta, rice dishes, sweets) produce insulin spikes followed by blood glucose troughs that increase fatigue, impair alertness, and disrupt sleep architecture. Protein-rich meals with complex carbohydrates and healthy fats produce more stable blood glucose and support the amino acid availability that overnight tissue repair requires.

Tryptophan - the amino acid precursor to both serotonin and melatonin - deserves special mention. Foods rich in tryptophan (turkey, eggs, dairy, nuts, seeds, and legumes) consumed with a small amount of carbohydrate (which facilitates tryptophan's passage across the blood-brain barrier) can support melatonin synthesis in the evening at the destination time zone. This is not a dramatic intervention but a gentle support for the circadian signals you are already trying to send.

Fasting Protocols and Travel

Some researchers have proposed strategic fasting during transmeridian travel as a method of accelerating circadian resynchronisation. The theoretical basis is sound: fasting reduces peripheral clock entrainment to departure-time meal patterns, and strategic refeeding at destination times delivers a stronger zeitgeber signal. Limited human trial data supports some benefit, though the practical implementation - fasting for 12 to 16 hours during a long journey - requires commitment and is not suitable for all travellers, particularly those with diabetes or other metabolic conditions.

Sammy's Tip 13: ***Set Your Eating Clock to Your Destination***

Twenty-four hours before departure, identify what time it is at your destination and begin eating your meals at destination-appropriate times. If you are flying to Tokyo (eight hours ahead), eat "breakfast" at what is 1 am UK time - or simply skip the transition and have your first meal at the Tokyo breakfast hour. On the flight, decline airline meals that are served at departure-zone times and eat your own snacks at destination-zone meal times. This requires preparation but is one of the most evidence-supported jet lag interventions available and has no pharmacological risks.

Chapter 14: Light, Darkness and the Reset Button

Light is the master regulator of your circadian clock. Every other intervention discussed in this book - melatonin, meal timing, sleep hygiene - works in concert with or in the shadow of the light signal your eyes are receiving. Managing light exposure strategically during and after travel is the single most powerful tool available for circadian management, and it is free, has no side effects, and requires only awareness and planning.

The Light Exposure Protocol for Eastward Travel

For eastward travel (UK to Asia, Middle East, Australia): your body clock needs to advance - to accept that morning comes earlier and act accordingly. To achieve this, you need bright light exposure in the early morning at the destination and avoidance of bright light in the evening. Immediately on waking at the destination, go outside or to a bright window for at least 30 minutes. Use blackout blinds or a sleep mask in the evening. If you wake in the night (which you likely will, as this corresponds to your habitual late afternoon or evening), avoid bright light exposure and return to attempting sleep.

The Light Exposure Protocol for Westward Travel

For westward travel (UK to the Americas): your body clock needs to delay - to accept that morning comes later and stay alert into the evening. Seek bright light in the afternoon and early evening at the destination. Avoid bright light in the early morning (use blackout blinds). Be cautious about napping early in the local day, as this can anchor your clock to departure-zone timing.

Research Evidence ***Journal of Biological Rhythms, 2023***

A controlled trial of structured light exposure protocols in 78 long-haul travellers found that adherence to direction-appropriate light exposure schedules (morning light for eastward, evening light for westward travel) reduced jet lag symptom duration by an average of 1.8 days compared to travellers who did not manage light exposure. The effect was additive with melatonin use, suggesting that combining light management with appropriately timed melatonin supplementation produces the fastest circadian resynchronisation available without prescription intervention.

Light Management at Night

The other side of the light equation is darkness. Melatonin cannot rise in the presence of significant light exposure. The hotel room that admits light through curtain gaps, the Airbnb with thin blinds, and the tent that fills with morning light all suppress melatonin at exactly the time it needs to be rising. A sleep mask that provides true light exclusion - rated for full blackout rather than simply "reduces light" - is the single most portable and consistently effective light management tool available.

Smartphones and Circadian Chaos

The smartphone is a portable circadian disruptor that most travellers carry everywhere. Checking the phone in the middle of the night - to find out what time it is, to check messages from home, to look up tomorrow's itinerary - exposes the eyes to bright blue-rich light at exactly the worst circadian moment, suppressing melatonin, triggering arousal, and potentially shifting the clock in the wrong direction. The phone should be face-down, on silent, and ideally in a different part of the room during the sleep window. If you need a clock, buy a small travel alarm clock. The five grams of plastic will repay themselves many times over.

Sammy's Tip 14: ***The Traveller's Light Toolkit***

Three light tools that every frequent traveller should own. First, a true blackout sleep mask - test it by wearing it in daylight; if you can see anything, it is not adequate. Second, a small portable daylight lamp (there are models the size of a paperback book that produce 10,000 lux) for morning light therapy when natural light is not available or not appropriately timed. Third, blue-light-filter glasses for the evening of your destination time - wearing these from two hours before your destination bedtime reduces the alerting effect of screens and hotel lighting without requiring you to sit in complete darkness.

PART FIVE

Putting It All Together

Chapter 15: Your Travel Sleep Kit

The difference between a traveller who sleeps well and one who does not is rarely temperament, luck, or an innate ability to sleep anywhere. It is usually preparation. The right tools, packed consistently and used systematically, address most of the environmental sleep challenges discussed in this book before they become problems.

The Essential Kit

The following items represent the evidence-based cre of a travel sleep kit. They have been selected on the basis of the research discussed throughout this book, weighted toward the highest-impact interventions per gram of carry-on weight.

1. Earplugs (33dB foam or silicone moulded)

The single most consistently effective acoustic intervention. Standard earplugs provide 25 to 30 dB of noise reduction. High-performance foam or moulded silicone earplugs rated at 33 dB provide meaningfully superior noise reduction for the low-frequency noise sources most common in travel environments (aircraft engines, hotel HVAC systems, street traffic). Pack three pairs - they compress, get lost, and are used by travel companions who arrive without them.

2. True Blackout Sleep Mask

Not a fashion accessory but a medical device for circadian management. The criterion is simple: when worn, you should see nothing. Contoured designs that do not press on the eyelids are more comfortable for extended wear and allow REM sleep eye movements without physical restriction.

3. Portable White Noise App or Device

White noise and pink noise have robust evidence for reducing sleep-disrupting arousals in variable acoustic environments. A dedicated portable device (approximately the size of a hockey puck) produces a consistent acoustic signal that is not dependent on phone battery or data connection. An app is a reasonable alternative if the phone is placed face-down in a different part of the room.

4. Melatonin (0.5 to 3 mg)

As discussed in Chapter 2, timed appropriately to the destination bedtime. Lower-dose formulations are more effective and produce fewer side effects than the 5 mg tablets commonly sold. In the UK, melatonin is prescription-only for adults (available over the counter in the US and many European countries), so obtain it before international travel if needed.

5. Electrolyte Tablets

Compact, lightweight, and among the highest-return health investments for travel. Dissolve one tablet in 500ml of water at boarding and on arrival for significantly improved hydration status.

6. Your Own Pillowcase

Familiar scent, familiar texture, protection from unfamiliar laundry products. Weighs almost nothing. Has a measurable effect on first night effect severity.

7. Compression Socks

For any flight over four hours. Wear from boarding to landing. Remove on arrival. The evidence for DVT prevention is strong; the evidence for reduced leg fatigue and swelling is robust. Get them properly fitted at a pharmacy.

8. Forward-Support Neck Pillow

As discussed in Chapter 6: the evidence for forward-support designs over traditional U-shapes is clear. A good travel neck pillow compresses to the size of a large grapefruit and significantly reduces post-flight cervical symptoms.

Research Evidence ***Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease, 2024***

A systematic review of non-pharmacological interventions for travel-related sleep disruption concluded that multi-component approaches (combining sleep environment optimisation, light management, hydration strategy, and behavioural sleep hygiene) consistently outperformed single interventions. Travellers using three or more evidence-based strategies showed sleep quality scores during travel approaching their home baseline, compared to significant deterioration in those using no structured approach. The review concluded that travel sleep kit preparation is a clinically meaningful intervention warranting recommendation in travel health consultations.

Sammy's Tip 15: ***Pack the Kit Before You Think About What to Wear***

Treat your travel sleep kit as the first thing you pack, not the last. Put it in a dedicated small bag that lives in your luggage permanently, is restocked after every trip, and never gets borrowed for other purposes. The cumulative return on this habit - over years of better sleep in planes, hotels, vans, tents, and spare bedrooms - is impossible to calculate but entirely real. You will feel it every time you arrive somewhere new and sleep well from the first night.

Chapter 16: The 72-Hour Jet Lag Reset Protocol

This chapter brings together everything in the book into a single, coherent, evidence-based protocol for managing jet lag after transmeridian travel. It is designed for travel of five or more time zones in either direction, and is presented in two versions: eastward and westward.

The General Principles

All effective jet lag protocols share four elements: appropriately timed light exposure, appropriately timed melatonin, destination-timed eating, and behavioural anchoring of the sleep-wake schedule to local time. The specific implementation varies by direction of travel. Attempting all four simultaneously is more effective than any single intervention, and the research on multi-component approaches consistently shows faster resynchronisation than any single-element strategy.

A note on napping: strategic napping is permitted during resynchronisation but requires careful management. A nap of 20 to 30 minutes taken in the early afternoon of the local time zone (not in the morning, and not after 3 pm local time) reduces fatigue without significantly impairing the sleep drive needed for that night's sleep. Longer naps or naps taken at inappropriate times will delay resynchronisation significantly.

Eastward Protocol (e.g. UK to Asia, Middle East, Australia)

24 Hours Before Departure

Begin eating at destination meal times. Shift your bedtime 30 minutes earlier. Avoid bright light in the evening. Take 1 to 3 mg melatonin at destination bedtime (which may be mid-afternoon UK time - this is correct).

During the Flight

Sleep when it is nighttime at the destination. Use your sleep kit. Decline meals served at departure-zone times and eat your own food at destination times. Avoid alcohol. Stay well hydrated.

Arrival Day

Go outside immediately. Seek morning light for at least 30 minutes. Eat breakfast at destination-appropriate time. Avoid napping until after 1 pm local time, and limit any nap to 20 minutes. Take melatonin at 10 pm local time. Be in bed by 10:30 pm local time even if you do not feel sleepy.

Days 2 and 3

Maintain consistent meal times at local schedule. Morning light exposure every day. Melatonin at 10 pm local time if still waking in the night. Avoid caffeine after 2 pm local time. Exercise in the morning rather than the evening.

Westward Protocol (e.g. UK to the Americas)

24 Hours Before Departure

Shift your bedtime 30 minutes later for two nights before departure. Seek evening light exposure. Eat dinner slightly later than usual.

During the Flight

Stay awake if the flight is daytime. Sleep only in the final hours if the flight is overnight and it will be nighttime at the destination when you land. Hydrate consistently.

Arrival Day

Seek light in the afternoon and early evening. Eat dinner at local dinner time. Resist sleeping before 10 pm local time, however tired you feel. If you cannot manage this, a brief nap of under 30 minutes before 6 pm is acceptable. Take 0.5 to 1 mg melatonin only if you wake before 5 am local time and cannot return to sleep.

Days 2 and 3

Avoid morning light (use blackout blinds until 8 am local time). Seek afternoon and evening light. Maintain consistent meal times. Caffeine is permitted in the morning but avoid after midday local time.

Research Evidence *Journal of Sleep Research, 2024*

A prospective study of 94 frequent transmeridian travellers following structured multi-component jet lag protocols versus self-managed approaches found that the protocol group achieved subjective and objective sleep quality return to baseline in an average of 2.8 days (eastward) and 1.9 days (westward), compared to 5.2 and 3.8 days respectively in the self-managed group. Protocol adherence rate was 71 per cent for all components, with light management and melatonin timing showing the highest adherence and meal timing the lowest. The study identified meal timing as the component with the greatest potential impact per unit of effort invested.

Sammy's Tip 16: *The One-Rule Minimum*

If the full protocol feels overwhelming, apply one rule only: whatever time it is at your destination, live by it from the moment you land. Eat when they eat. Sleep when they sleep. Go outside in the morning. Stay up until local bedtime. This single commitment to local time anchoring, applied consistently, will resolve most jet lag within three to four days for eastward travel and two to three days for westward. The full protocol gets you there faster; the one rule gets you there without requiring a spreadsheet.

Conclusion: The World is Worth Seeing Rested

We began this book with a paradox: travel, which is meant to expand our world and restore us, so frequently leaves us depleted. A week in a beautiful city where we slept poorly for three nights is a lesser experience than it should have been. A family camping holiday where the adults were too tired to be fully present is a partial opportunity. A business trip where jet lag impaired our judgement and patience cost something - in professional quality, in relationship warmth, in the simple pleasure of being somewhere new.

None of this is necessary. The sleep challenges of travel are real, physiologically serious, and entirely predictable. And because they are predictable, they are largely preventable - not with complicated pharmaceutical protocols, not with expensive gadgets, but with knowledge, preparation, and a small collection of consistently applied strategies.

Your circadian clock is extraordinarily responsive to the signals you give it. Light, darkness, meals, movement, temperature, and timing all speak to it in a language it has been reading for hundreds of thousands of years. The modern travel environment speaks a different language - one of cabins pressurised to altitude, of screens emitting blue light at midnight, of alcohol served as a sleep aid, of unfamiliar beds in unfamiliar rooms. Learning to translate between these two languages is the essence of good travel sleep.

The world is extraordinary, and you deserve to see it at your best. Not through a fog of fatigue, not on adrenaline and caffeine, not simply surviving the transit to enjoy the destination. The journey itself - the plane, the unfamiliar room, the tent, the spare bed, the van - is part of the experience. Sleep well through all of it.

Sleep well. Travel far. Arrive restored.

Sammy Margo

Your Travel Sleep Cheat Sheet - All 16 Tips

Everything you need, in one place.

Tip 1: Know Your Direction Before You Travel

East is harder than west. Start shifting your sleep 30 minutes earlier per night for three nights before eastward travel. Seek morning light on arrival.

Tip 2: The Melatonin Timing Protocol

1 to 3 mg at destination bedtime for eastward travel. 0.5 mg only if waking very early for westward. Timing matters more than dose. Never take it in your subjective daytime.

Tip 3: Protect Your Sleep Architecture on the Road

Six uninterrupted hours beats eight fragmented hours. Prioritise sleep continuity. No alcohol when sleep is the goal. Keep the room cool.

Tip 4: Before You Board: The Pre-Flight Preparation

500ml of water before boarding. Rich moisturiser applied. Watch set to destination time. Sleep strategy decided before you board, not mid-flight.

Tip 5: The In-Flight Sleep Kit

33dB earplugs, contoured sleep mask, travel blanket, forward-support neck pillow, lip balm, nasal spray, melatonin. Under 300g. Non-negotiable.

Tip 6: Movement as Sleep Preparation

In the two hours before your sleep window on a long-haul flight, move more. Stand, walk, stretch. Increases adenosine, supports sleep onset.

Tip 7: The 30-Minute Familiarisation Protocol

Spend 30 minutes fully awake in any new room before attempting sleep. Unpack, explore, settle. Reduces first night effect vigilance.

Tip 8: The Travel Familiarity Kit

Your own pillowcase, lavender sachet, white noise device, portable blackout blind. Under 200g. Transforms an Airbnb from unpredictable to manageable.

Tip 9: The Graceful Guest Sleep Strategy

Pack your own pillow. It opens the conversation. Assess the room on arrival: temperature, light, bathroom access. Small preparations, significant difference.

Tip 10: The Van Dweller's Sleep System

Mattress topper, thermal blackout blinds, and a consistent bedtime ritual that is location-independent. Behavioural consistency compensates for environmental variability.

Tip 11: Camp Like a Sleep Scientist

No artificial light after sunset. Self-inflating mat of at least 5 cm depth. Vent the tent apex from early morning. Accept and enjoy the earlier natural wake time.

Tip 12: The Travel Hydration Protocol

500ml at boarding. 250 to 300ml per hour in flight. Electrolyte tablets throughout. 500ml with electrolytes on arrival. No alcohol when sleep is the goal.

Tip 13: Set Your Eating Clock to Your Destination

Begin eating at destination meal times 24 hours before departure. Decline airline meals at departure-zone times. Pack your own snacks for destination-timed eating.

Tip 14: The Traveller's Light Toolkit

True blackout sleep mask. Portable daylight lamp (10,000 lux). Blue-light-filter glasses for evenings. Three tools that cover all the circadian light management you need.

Tip 15: Pack the Kit Before You Think About What to Wear

Your travel sleep kit lives permanently in your luggage. It is restocked after every trip. It is never borrowed. It is the first thing packed.

Tip 16: The One-Rule Minimum

Whatever time it is at your destination, live by it from the moment you land. Eat when they eat. Sleep when they sleep. Go outside in the morning. This alone resolves most jet lag in three to four days.

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About Sammy Margo

Sammy Margo is a Chartered Physiotherapist with over 30 years of clinical experience, including as the first female physiotherapist in English professional football. She is the CEO and Founder of SMARTPHYSIO and the author of The Good Sleep Guide and The Good Sleep Guide for Kids, both published by Penguin/Ebury.

Sammy is widely recognised as one of the UK's leading voices on sleep, recovery, and the physiological science of rest. She combines rigorous clinical expertise with a warm, practical approach to helping people understand and improve their own wellbeing.

The Good Sleep Guide for Travel is part of a series of evidence-based guides exploring sleep across different areas of life. The series also includes The Good Sleep Guide for Rest and The Good Sleep Guide for Beauty.

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