The economics of packing light

Professor Pang Eng Fong and his wife’s bag was snatched in Barcelona. Luckily, they lost only a pair of sunglasses and a phrase book.

I had always been Professor Pang Eng Fong’s dream to visit Bhutan, which is why his 2004 trip there is something he’ll never forget, including the scenic descent to Paro airport.

The 62-year-old dean of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University (SMU) was formerly the Republic’s High Commissioner to Britain, and ambassador to Ireland, Belgium, the Republic of Korea and Mongolia.

He was a lecturer of economics at the National University Of Singapore. The father of three – two daughters and a son – has written several books on Singapore’s labour economics, and travels about eight to 10 times a year for work. His wife is a yoga teacher.

A trip that I’ll never forget was...

A one-week guided trip to Bhutan in autumn 2004 with my wife, my SMU predecessor Dave Montgomerie, his spouse, my sister-in-law and a yoga teacher friend who was interested in Buddhism.

It was a small group tour. The place was unforgettable because of the gentle piety of its people. The dzongs (fortress-monasteries) and bracing climb to view the awe-inspiring Tiger’s Nest – a famous monastery perched on the side of a cliff – was also amazing, not to mention the plane’s descent into Paro airport, one of the loveliest in Asia, and the beautiful clouds above pristine mountains.

The trip was great because it was one I had always wanted to make, to Shangri-la – the last of the Mahayana Buddhist Himalayan kingdoms – although I’m not Buddhist, and I had great company.

I had my worst trip in...

Barcelona. When I was there with my wife in 2003, a thief snatched the tote bag she was carrying and it was in broad daylight on a busy side street. A man approached us soon after, offering to help us get it back.

We waited for him for a few minutes – in retrospect, a rather rash decision – before we left. He was probably an accomplice and might have ended up demanding more money from us.

Fortunately, having been forewarned about snatch thieves targeting Asian tourists who are believed to be loaded with cash, we carried only a pair of prescription sunglasses and a Spanish phrase book in the bag.

The thief must have been disappointed with his loot.

Taxi drivers are a nightmare in...

Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. The few cabs I took, when I was there for work in 1988, had drivers who had mastered the art of misunderstanding directions, taking roundabout routes, weaving across many lanes at high speed, scolding the horn, tailgating and taking off without giving change.

However, other aspects of the city, like its music, architecture and juicy steaks, more than compensated for these rides.

The most unbelievable transport I’ve encountered was...

In Britain when I rode in a splendid open carriage, drawn by four horses, in bright July sunshine down Pall Mall to present my credentials as High Commissioner of Singapore to the Queen in Buckingham Palace in 1999.

If I were Robinson Crusoe, I’d choose to be stuck with...

Tim Birkhead, a behavioural ecologist and author of Promiscuity: An Evolutionary History Of Sperm Competition – a book about the many surprising and strange plays different species use to maximise reproduction success.

Anyone who can write this “ultimate guide to the battle of the sexes”, which covers the sex lives of species from gorillas and ostriches to screwworms and zebra finches, has to be a great person to have around and root for food.

The strangest food I’ve ever tasted was...

A deep-fried, battered, but far from tender, trio of meats which had crocodile, kangaroo and a malodorous meat, camel, I think.

The crocodile meat tasted like chicken, which was not a surprise since its diet consisted mostly of the fowl, while the kangaroo meat was as tough as a rubberised car fender.

I sampled them at a Darwin wharf restaurant early last year.

I never leave home without my...

Book of crostics. A crostic is a word puzzle which, when solved, reveals a quotation, the title of the book it came from and the author’s name. I write in each crostic the date I start, and solve, the puzzle.

There are still many I have yet to solve after 20 years and probably never will. They help me pass time in many places and at odd hours, while waiting for things to happen, which is the lot of many travellers.

frankiec@sph.com.sg