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Sunblock, swimsuits, goggles, used books

By **Michelle Slatalla**

New York Times News Service

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As we arrived poolside, I checked the second hand on my watch.

Before I even had time to shout "Positions, everybody!" my family instinctively sprang into action.

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Responding to years of training, the 6-year-old unscrewed the lid from the sunblock, the teenager pulled a pair of plastic goggles from a backpack and my husband settled into a chaise. Time elapsed: 24 seconds.

From a distance, last week's maneuver looked professional. But I noticed some amateurish problems, specifically a big wasted blob of sunblock that lay squirted on the cement. Then the goggles strap broke as my daughter tried to adjust it. And my husband's nose already was turning red in the sun.

If this had been a real vacation, it would have been a disaster.

But luckily, it was just a test--a shakedown trip over spring break to prepare for the real vacation, a two-week summer trip to Maui, where we will be renting a house. We still have nearly two months to prepare.

From the look of things, we will need to use every minute wisely.

My first step was to identify shortcomings: the wrong sunblock and cheap goggles purchased frantically at a convenience store. They were symptoms of our core deficiency: We're last-minute packers.

Life leaves us no time to get organized to relax. We're the family that hauls the suitcases down from the attic the morning of departure, the family that prints out driving directions only after the children are already strapped into the back seat. On our way out the door, we add final P.S.'s to the dog sitter's instructions ("No matter what he says, he is not allowed on the red sofa"), hunt for a house key that actually works in the lock and forget to check if the toaster oven is unplugged.

Only while on vacation last week did I finally catch up. The sole time life is calm enough to plan a vacation is when you are on vacation. So I decided to shop ahead--online, of course--for items we'll need.

First, essentials. That means reading materials. The next time I'll have time to read a book will probably be my next vacation anyway. I like to take a pile of used, inexpensive hardcover copies; that way no one will be upset if a book falls into the pool and later puffs up like baklava. Heading to Maui on the airplane, I'll want to read James A. Michener's "Hawaii."

Although I will rely on a number of used-book search sites like BookFinder.com, Bibliofind.net and Alibris.com when I'm hunting for a rare title, for more common quarry I frequently find myself at Abebooks.com. The site's design is streamlined and convenient, my shipping information is stored online, and I can quickly use the Advanced Search option to specify "hardcover."

For \$1.50, I could get "a good reading copy but the white cloth is dirty and so is the spine." I ordered it; at \$3.50, the ground shipping cost was more expensive than the actual book.

A travel guide was next on my list.

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Sites like Fodors.com and Frommers.com sell a wide range of reliable titles online. But picking a guidebook is as personal a choice as choosing a pediatrician. I like Lonely Planet's books for their frugal tone and for their assumption that "travel" is a synonym for "quirky adventure." So I went to LonelyPlanet.com and ordered a copy of "Maui" (which for \$14.99 promised a discussion of "dining with any size wallet, from plate lunches at kaukau wagon to five-star Pacific Rim cuisine").

Next I bade goodbye to gloppy sunblock and red noses. Last summer I had great success with a solid sunscreen stick--imagine a glue stick that you rub all over your face--called Sunsmart Maximum Protection SPF 30 Sun Stick. I replenished my supply, ordering three Sunsmart sticks from Applied Therapeutics' site (www.atforyou.com), for a total of \$23.16, including shipping (with plenty of time to spare, I promptly opted for the slowest ground shipping option).

Goggles came next.

When it comes to goggles, either we break them or we lose them. It's an intractable problem, dooming me to annual purchases of replacements. Wondering briefly if there was a better solution, I conducted some price comparisons at Yahoo.com, where I could read manufacturers' product descriptions side by side. Then I read reviews at Amazon.com, where I learned this about a particular pair of \$2.95 Swedish goggles: "These goggles rock. Once you get the fit adjusted correctly they absolutely won't leak."

Adjusting the fit was exactly what I wanted to avoid. With three daughters and three goggles, adjusting the fit can take up the better part of an otherwise sunny day by the pool. So next I browsed at a number of online stores, including SwimOutlet.com, FogDog.com and WalterSwim.com. There, I confronted 43 kinds of Speedo goggles in three categories (molded polyseal gasket goggles, nongasket and foam, at prices ranging from around \$5 to nearly \$20).

In the end, I ordered two kinds of goggles from WBHSwim.com, Eyeline Aquamates for my two teenagers ("excellent swim goggle for smaller faces") and a pair of Eyeline Bambinos ("designed for children") for the 6-year-old. The total cost of the three pairs, including shipping, was \$20.83. At that price, when the goggles break or disappear, it won't ruin the vacation.

I feel I must also mention swimsuits, although I solved that problem last month, not last week, by visiting ClothingStudio.com. I turned out quite pleased with last year's Anne Cole maillot--slate blue with white contrasting stitching--but this year, for a change, I bought light blue (\$80).

I also shopped for old-fashioned entertainment--miniature versions of our favorite board games--because we'll be staying in a house that has no high-speed Internet access or cable television. Sites like Fun Again.com, AreYouGame.com and CherryGames.com sell travel versions of games.

At Amazon.com, a travel version of backgammon manufactured by Fundex Games zips into a miniature leatherette case (\$9.99) for handy transport. I also considered some of the company's other travel games, like checkers, Chinese checkers and cribbage (\$9.99 apiece).

In the end, I reverted to type: Scrabble. To find the best price for Hasbro's travel Scrabble, I entered my ZIP code at the search site Shopping.com, which calculated sales tax and shipping costs into final totals. Following the site's recommendation, I landed at BoardGames.com (\$22.90 was the total), and found a whole category of electronic hand-held & travel games.

If we were playing a word game, electronic would be the last word I would associate with vacation, so I steered clear. But I did add a folding wood Mancala game (\$9.95) and Travel Battleship (\$4.95) to my cart before checking out.

Total time elapsed: under three hours to provision for the next vacation. That leaves plenty of time to devote to making house-key copies and to composing a new note to the dog sitter: "No, not the green sofa either."

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