

## An Inventory of My Own Current Luxuries/Their Rationales

**Heat and Electricity:** (Because I did without them for a short bit, now they feel like luxuries!\* \* But a day later they **no longer feel like luxuries—just standard!**)

**Some personal care products:** I'm particular about the brands of lip balm, shampoo/conditioner and deodorants I use. I **strongly prefer** liquid-capsule form Ibuprofen, 100% cotton panty-liners, OB brand tampons, and certain types of toothbrushes. I bought a fancy kind of dental floss before I came because it was on sale and I wanted to try it, but now I know I like the non-fancy kind a lot better.

*Known origins of preferences/marketing factors?:* Lip balm is common here and in US now, but when I first started using it, I was buying it in airports in the EU and UK and thought it was **better quality/operated in a preferred way/had more elegant packaging design sensibility** in comparison to the American options. Here, I know it is not fancy or particularly elegant. Shampoo/conditioner is especially good for "ethnic" hair, which mine is, and I found this brand by borrowing it from a friend who is of mixed race, with hair at least as ethnic as mine. It has a lot of marketing stuff going on in terms of being **free of various things, produced with very ethical/ecological principals**, and generally marketed to non-white people. It's not fancy, but a little more expensive than the lowest cost drugstore brands. The deodorant I use is marketed commercially as the strongest and seems to be. I alternate between it a very weak one, which has a whole other set of marketing tactics around **healthiness** etc. For feminine care products, I have always used OB tampons—my mother was an early adopter—and I always feel unsure when I have to use them that I am using the applicator ones properly. But somewhere in my heart of hearts I think there was a sense in her early adoption (which I carry with me) that it is **somehow more classy and educated and feminist** to recognize that an using an applicator is tied to sociocultural fears that one's own body is somehow dirty or otherwise untouchable. I remember her pointed defiance of how silly it was that women should feel they can't insert something directly into their own bodies. I think it's also related that sometimes when I use a giant maxi-pad from a gym or somewhere, I feel a thrill about it related to knowing that it is a bit backwards or religious (fear or tampering with virginity etc.) to use one even though it also feels ultimately is less efficient in terms of cleanup/disposal. I feel at one with women who have had to deal with bloody messes around the world because their culture dictates it and I like that feeling. Cotton panty-liners are marketed as less irritating to the skin than the alternatives and I have (genetically) overs sensitive skin in certain ways, so I listened to the marketing. I find them to be only about 20% better than the alternatives, but will grudgingly admit that the 20% better is worth the extra cost. With the Ibuprofen, maybe there is a marketing dimension because somehow **I believe it works more quickly** (I think it does!) than the pill format. And I do find the blue capsules **more esthetically pleasing** than the matte-brown or white tablets. I've fallen for ecology-based luxury marketing regarding toothbrushes and also am a little bit of a sucker for **ergonomics and design form factors** here. There's

also something about the **sturdiness and resistance** of the bristles that I can get bummed out about in economy toothbrushes when I have to use them. The floss, as I mentioned was a marketing fail for me. It has tea tree oil in it, so seems a bit lux and maybe “**better for you**” but I don’t like the way it works as much as I like the cheapest, economy variety.

**Art and writing supplies/tools/technologies:** I am fussy about pencil/pen/paper quality/brands, though to be fair to myself, I only bought what I bought because I received a gift card for art supplies—I never would have made such an investment in art supplies otherwise. I chose the particular Polaroid camera format especially because it was the **hippest** of the options in terms of final image format (but unfortunately the one model that they have stopped making color film for.) Even my pencil case is a little bit snotty or at least came from a snotty store. My audio recorder (now 2 years old) was hard to choose because I was tempted to get a different brand/model with a different type of **cachet**, but in the end the **value in terms of price for function** won out in my choice and I’m happy with it. My camera (now 3 or 4 years old) is probably the most expensive single thing I’ve ever bought alone (as opposed to cars and furniture, which I’ve bought with others.) Similar to the audio recorder, it was a tough choice—I was leaning towards a different brand/model that has **the top reputation** and was more expensive. In the end it was **a combo of price and form factors** that won out. I am still not sure I made the right choice.

*Known origins of preferences/marketing factors?:* Pens, I’ve learned of from trial and error what I like and don’t like—but probably someone, somewhere handed me the first instance of the pen model I’m **partial to** right now—and it influenced me. I guess it’s always possible I first sampled it in a store, as I do sample pens a lot. I am outright luxurious about ballpoint pens, spending proportionally too much per pen, but I have a lot **superstitions** about pens (even found ones,) I hold onto loved pens for an extremely long time, and I write a lot, so it’s an indulgence I’m fully comfortable with—except every now and then when I feel my (\$3.50, so not even *that* lux a pen investment!) pen is too awkwardly upscale for a situation. Paper, I am finding some balance of esthetics, quality and cost—usually landing in the middle regarding cost, or operating across the whole range, with the exception of the small notebooks I carry always for taking notes. These are fancy, but common-fancy, and I found out about them a long time ago through a friend for whom money is no object. I must have admired them, because, though it took awhile, they became “necessary”. Before this, I had another “necessary” kind of notebook, which was fairly **uncommon**, but then I think it became more common eventually. My audio recorder was recommended by someone very skilled in audio work that I trust, and was a newer model of my previous one, so a familiar interface, which made it an easy-ish choice. The thing I had to let go of in making the decision was **a fantasy about being a different kind of sound recorder than I really am**. Another note about recording: I usually have professional headphones and sometimes an external microphone with me, but I didn’t bring them to save space while traveling. I feel a little bit naked here recording without them—vulnerable not because I really need them for what I’m

doing right now, but because I look **less professional/authoritative** without them. I do genuinely need them sometimes, but the experience I am having here makes me realize (and confess) that I need them less than I use them, and that in truth, **part of why I use them is for the power dynamic they establish, which allows me more control** over certain situations. Regarding the camera I use, in choosing it, I eliminated a whole range of cameras that were probably just as good. I was younger when I bought it, and might not be so quick to eliminate them if I were making the choice now, but it's interesting for me to think about how I even know what to include among my possible choices... When I made this particular choice, I still **believed that there were two types of people—the type who used one brand of camera and the type who used another brand**. I happened to use both, regularly, for my job for many years, and mostly liked one brand better, except for one thing about it, which had to do with its tendencies towards color representation in digital formats—something very correctable “in post” but it bothered me because it felt like an ethical or even political choice that one brand designed its receptor chips to filter towards one color profile and the other towards another. The brand I liked (with this one exception) made kind of a cooler looking product, was more expensive, and was preferred by many other people that I admired, but in the end I chose the other brand when I purchased my personal-professional camera. My reasons were in this order: I couldn't bring myself to spend as much as the other brand's camera cost even though I knew **it would retain its resale value** better (it would have put me into debt I couldn't justify); I actually highly preferred the form of the model I purchased to any of the models available from the other brand (it was more discrete/less intimidating—so actually reduced the amount of power/control my technology was inserting into a situation, the opposite impact of my audio recording behavior); and finally, the brand I bought had the receptor chips with my preferred color leaning. I actually haven't touched here on my computing technology, software, smartphone choice and service provider, even though all of these things are also luxuries (which feel like necessities, much as electricity and heat do,) that I made hard choices and value judgments about, but these are just so complex and political, that I can't spend the time to go into them in detail. But I thought it was worth noting that. And it's also maybe worth acknowledging that all choices, value judgments and purchasing/use behavior around luxury objects is complex not just socially, but politically. Every pen I've bought is not only some kind of statement about who I am from either a fashion or functional point of view, something with a politics to it that generally goes completely unacknowledged because I rarely trace the economic, ecological and other production conditions more than superficially—and sometimes, with things like pens—not at all.

**Clothing and accessories:** There's not a lot to say here, but I'll say what I can. I brought 3 pairs of shoes with me, 4 pairs of jeans, 3 t-shirts, 3 long-sleeved shirts, a big sweater, a hooded sweatshirt, and a pullover sweatshirt. I also brought pajamas, a light robe, socks, underwear, leggings to wear under pants when it's very cold and to do yoga in, legwarmers, a light down vest and light down coat that can both fit under my winter jacket, a winter jacket, a hat, two pairs of gloves and two scarves—well, a wool neck/face thing for bike riding and a scarf. I also brought a travel towel

and a complex toiletry bag. I have two pieces of luggage—a hard case that fits in an airplane overhead compartment, and a (borrowed) large, light, floppy duffel bag, and also brought (empty) a small travel tote bag, a small laptop backpack, and “walking bag” and two simple tote bags for grocery shopping/carrying art supplies around. I brought a thermal water bottle and since arriving, I have purchased a “fitness mat.”

*Known origins of preferences/marketing factors?:* Some of these things I just bought the very cheapest versions of that I could find—they are my travel versions of these things, either bought on other trips, or disposable if I need to reduce the weight of my luggage. Rather than go through each item here, I’m going to skip to the ones where branding, fashion, form factors, people around me or other recognizable forces beyond pure functionality played a role.

Some things were gifts: the pajamas, robe, one pair of the gloves and the most sturdy of the socks were things I never would have chosen myself but am very happy to have. I never use the robe at home, but have already used it here multiple times, the gloves I have almost worn to death, and the socks I am making use of daily. There are certain things about all of these things that used to make me feel like I was improperly represented because I did not choose them myself, but I’m so over that now that each thing has proved itself very useful and durable. None of them are unattractive at all—just maybe not colors, patterns or materials I might have chosen myself. In general, I shy away from things that attract attention, except under certain conditions, but also avoid things that are too easy to identify the make of at a glance, or which are 100% predictable in terms of how they work. I also avoid things that I am certain are made under slave-like conditions, or out of certain materials that just bother me in one way or another. Actually, there is a whole complex web of things I am trying to navigate among when I make esthetic choices and it’s hard to articulate them well. They involve having things that look similar to but not exactly like very common things, finding slightly unusual details, perceived quality of construction and then, of course, how things fit. On this trip, I have put function before form, but at home I’m a little pickier, though still not usually very fashionable. I spend more energy trying to get the way I smell right than getting the way I look right, because I’d rather make a more subconscious impression than a conscious one—there’s too much information competition at the conscious level.

I will mention one pair of jeans that are a relatively high-end pair. I bought them used in the men’s section of thrift store and they fit very nicely, and seemed very well made, though had some very noticeable wear that worried me—I was replacing my last pair of jeans that fit really well, and these seemed like they might not last as long as I’d like them to. I tried to talk the manager down because of the wear—they seemed overpriced to me for a pair of used, fairly worn jeans—and she told me to look the brand up on my phone. I looked it up and it turned out that she was offering a relatively good price despite the wear. They are a luxury brand of jeans that retail for \$250 new, and went for about \$75-100 used. She was asking \$40. Because of the wear, but did drop her price down to \$32. I bought them and they became my new

favorites, though I know they will not last. I liked them so much that I researched online and found another used pair, the same size but a slightly different color and less worn down and bought them from someone on eBay for \$45, but they turned out to fit completely differently. Still, they are very sturdy and I've worn them almost every day here. I went into all of this detail because this is often how I develop a loyalty to a luxury brand: by accident. I don't recognize a thing as a high-end brand, I notice it for some other reason, but then use the brand as a way of finding that same quality again. But if it is too obviously branded, I'll avoid it—or even go so far as to remove the label etc. If I like the way something is made or fits, but it has visible branding on it, I'll usually find a way to cover or remove this.

Another thing worth mentioning is the sweatshirt I wear almost daily. It's not glamorous in any way, but I did fall for some marketing when purchasing it. It was marketed as especially for journalists and has 14+ pockets for notebooks, pens, recorders, traveling documents etc. It also has a hood that zips all the way up. I typically only use about half of those pockets. It is starting to wear out, and I already have another one in storage for when that happens. So what in the marketing sold it to me? It looked sleek in the promotional images (it is less so in real life) and sturdy. I am a journalist, but often don't feel like a "real" one, so there was something ego-boosting about having something target-marketed to me as one, though I don't need so many pockets for doing that work. But it did appeal to me conceptually that I could store money and travel documents safely on my body while traveling in places that are notorious for pick pockets, and that I can always have a small notebook and a pen on me. And I found the "infinity zipper" fashionable (though chunky looking) and practical for napping while flying.

My scarf is a belt from a traditional Ethiopian dress. A friend who lives in Ethiopia bought one of those dresses while I was visiting her gave it to me because she liked the dress better without the belt. It is a completely unique scarf because no one else has one and also works very well because it is a loose weave, but wraps many times, and so traps heat well. It is light colored and delicate though, and impractical to clean.

I have not brought any particularly elegant underwear with me, but one pair I brought is a pair I consider "lucky". I don't know why. They don't look special, and they aren't a special brand—I have 3 other pairs in different colors of the same ones, but this pair is the pair I wear when I have to do something and I want it to go right. I can't find anything that makes this a luxury, but it seemed worth noting that one thing I own that has several analogues to it right along side it, but stands out as special to me.

In terms of accessories, I didn't ever think I would need hardshell luggage with wheels of any kind—I have perfectly good soft luggage, without wheels—but someone close to me whom I trust convinced me I did and now I don't regret the purchase. I chose my backpack because I saw someone with a similar one and thought it had a slick lines, but it has a detail—I shiny silver handle—that I don't

like. It's **too showy** in some way—**too high tech looking** maybe. I tried to cover it with yarn, but that made it worse, so I've just gotten used to it. My "walking bag" I chose because I had **a strong affinity for the brand—it used to be a small local company** that had its workshop close to an apartment I used to live in. I also **trust** them, they stand by their products forever and have **very good customer service**. Also, a very key factor in my choosing it was that it was **marketed as a gender neutral** "walking bag." I would not have been comfortable somehow carrying something marketed as a "purse" even if it looked exactly the same as my "walking bag". The thermal water bottle is something I use at home every day but it turns out I don't really need here. I spent way too much on it (I think \$28) when I bought it, especially considering that water bottles always get lost in the end, because it can keep things hot or cold, and because it had several **features I prefer** in a water bottle. But again, as with everything else mentioned here, deciding factors beyond functionality were the **(perceived) fine fabrication and operation quality**, and the bottle's **design in terms of both construction and details**. In fact, **I wanted the particular color I got, and would not have been willing to buy the same product in some of the other color options**. (Why? I don't know the answer to why this color was so important to me.)

After I got here I bought a "fitness mat" for 7 francs at the Aldi. I wanted it for doing yoga in my room with the internet, but then found a class here that is very affordable, so have been bringing it with me to that as well. I have always resisted carrying a yoga mat in public. Am I ashamed of doing yoga? Maybe—not really of doing it but of people I don't know knowing that I do it and jumping to any kinds of conclusions about me as a result. **I don't like to carry anything or wear anything that telegraphs instantly anything about me** that isn't something I can't hide easily (like my skin color and hair texture telegraphs some aspects of my race for example.) Except when I do: sometimes, usually for (performative) art reasons, but also sometimes to alter power dynamics, I do consciously try to present myself in ways that telegraph certain things. In any case, at home I fold my yoga mat up into a puffy square and stuff it in a backpack when I have to bring it to a class. This one is not really a yoga mat—it's giant exercise mat and I don't have anything I can put it in that will make it look less ridiculous, so it has been an interesting experiment for me to explore what it feels like to carry it around this city very visibly. I find I am caring much less here what kind of pre-judgments (or even actual judgments) people might make about me here than I do at home. Some of the marketing/social pressures I might feel that might influence my purchasing at home don't seem to have any weight here. I think it is because I know that I am so far from knowing what the subtle rules of social engagement are supposed to be, that I don't even try to do anything other than be as comfortable as possible, along with friendly and curious.

**Things that feel like luxuries to me here that just don't exist where I'm from:**

The portable/remote dimmer switch that changes the lighting brightness and color in my room here feels like a miracle. (Something like this probably does exist where

I'm from geographically, but not where I'm from socio-economically.) The fountains everywhere that have free, very drinkable water in them, run continuously and never freeze. Complete lack of rats, garbage and people living on the streets, and the general safety level overall. Efficient, reliable public transit. In general, the lack of poverty and the impact on people's (visible at least) stress levels feels like an enormous luxury to me—I am so used to thinking about exactly how much each onion I buy will add to the debt I am getting into between freelance projects, and figuring out how few hours I can get away with sleeping once I do have some freelance projects to do. Here, it feels like everyone is ok, no matter what their expenses or level of employment, and the feeling that everything is going to be fine is a little contagious (even if an illusion) that I am reveling in the luxury of.

\*\*My electricity (and thus heat/cooking range) was off for a few days right after I first arrived. They are back on now and by the time I finished writing this I had completely forgotten they were ever off.

### **Key Words and Phrases Extracted from Luxury Inventory**

#### **Positive Reasons for Luxury Choices**

- strongly prefer
- better quality
- operated in a preferred way
- more elegant packaging design sensibility
- produced with very ethical/ecological principals
- healthiness
- more classy and educated and feminist
- I believe it works more quickly
- more esthetically pleasing
- ergonomics and design form factors
- sturdiness and resistance
- “better for you”
- hippest
- has cachet
- value in terms of price for function
- has the top reputation
- a combination of price and form factors
- partial to
- uncommon
- a fantasy about being a different kind of X than I really am
- more professional/authoritative
- for the power dynamic they establish, which allows me more control

- it would retain its resale value
- makes me feel like properly represented/interpreted
- is durable
- look similar to but not exactly like
- slightly unusual details
- quality of construction
- how things fit
- use the brand as a way of finding that same quality again
- sleek
- sturdy
- ego-boosting to have something target-marketed to me
- completely unique
- no one else has one
- special to me.
- someone close to me whom I trust convinced me to get it
- a strong affinity for the brand—it used to be a small local company
- trust
- very good customer service
- marketed as a gender neutral
- features I prefer
- fine fabrication and operation quality
- design in terms of both construction and details
- I wanted the particular color

### **Negative Reasons for Luxury Choices**

- marketed as free of various things (sulfates, chemicals etc.)
- superstitions
- believed that there were two types of people—the type who used one brand of X and the type who used another brand
- shy away from things that attract attention
- avoid things that are too easy to identify the make of
- made under slave-like conditions
- certain materials just bother me
- if it is too obviously branded, I'll avoid it—or even go so far as to remove the label If I like the way something is made or fits, but it has visible branding on it, I'll usually find a way to cover or remove this.
- too showy
- too high tech looking
- would not have been willing to buy the same product in some of the other color options
- I don't like to carry anything or wear anything that telegraphs instantly anything about me