

TRAVEL & LEISURE

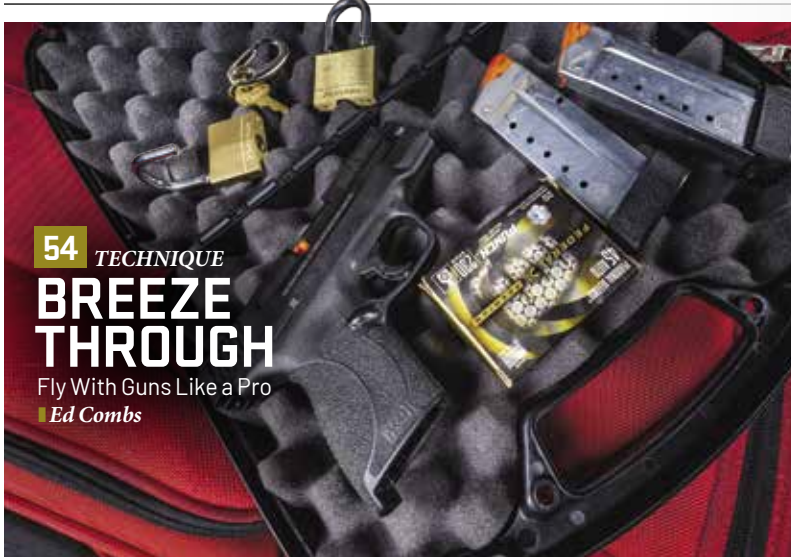
# CONCEALED CARRY

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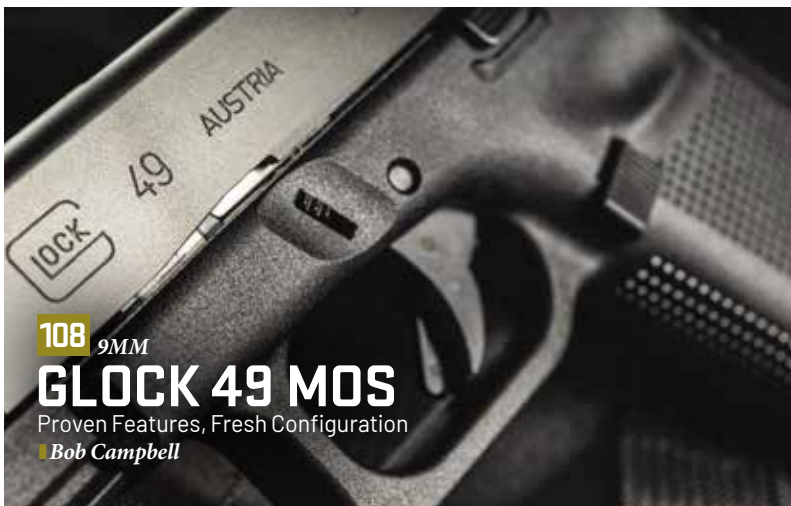
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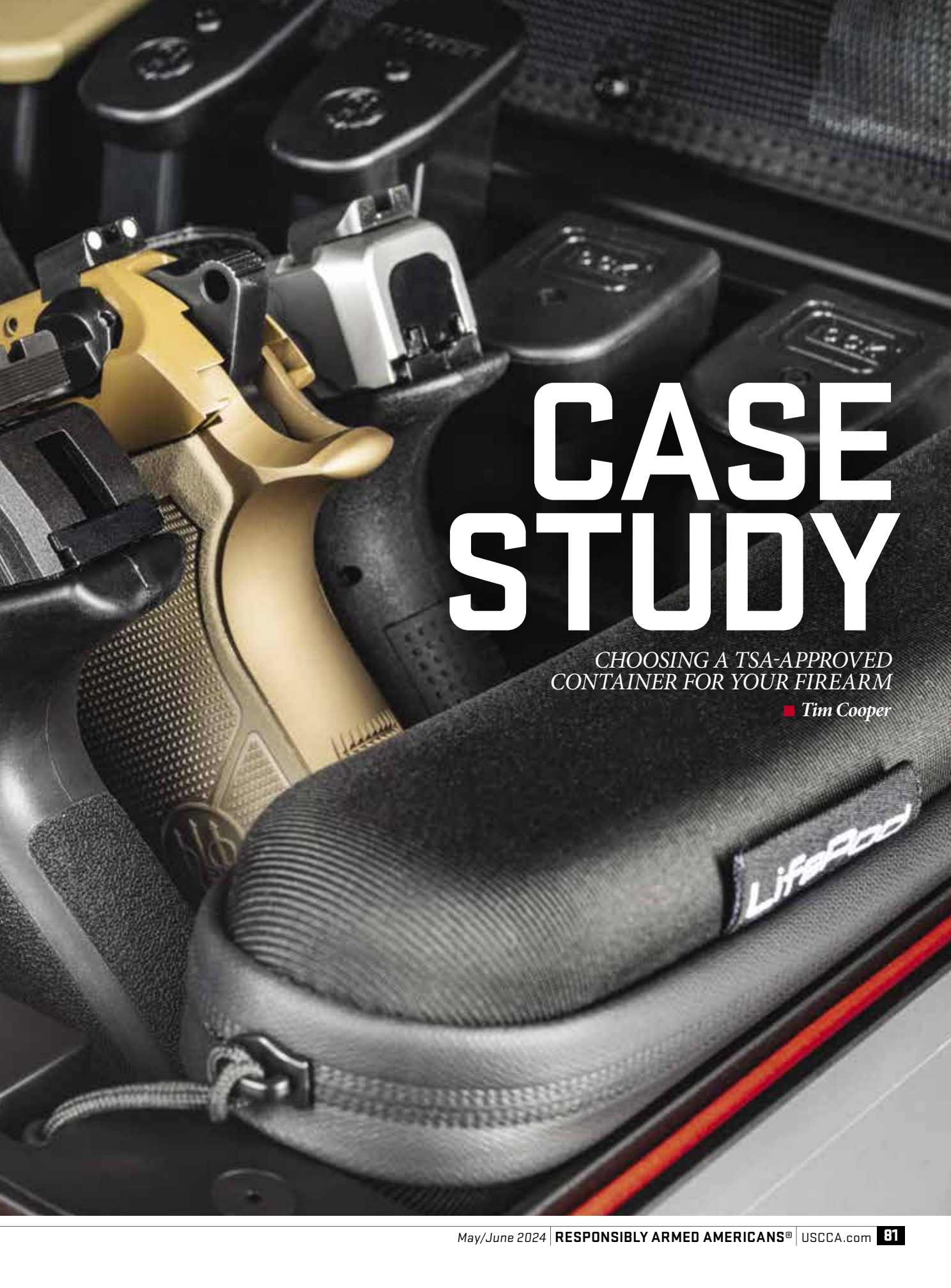
Understanding Firearms Confiscation  
During Air Travel ■ *Joel T. Nadler*



**LOCKDOWN POLICY**

Most people who travel with a pistol don't feel the need to secure it at their destinations because they will be carrying it the whole time. But certain circumstances call for the ability to physically guard a firearm against theft, and there's no shortage of options in that department.





# CASE STUDY

CHOOSING A TSA-APPROVED  
CONTAINER FOR YOUR FIREARM

■ *Tim Cooper*

**C**ontrary to what we hear from the anti-gun press these days, people who carry concealed are not paranoid. However, new concealed carriers may admit to feeling a sense of urgency that wasn't there five years ago. Are we on the brink of a major financial crisis? Is another global pandemic around the corner? And what of the potential for terrorism and civil unrest as we face another contentious election season? One thing is certain: There is a "disturbance in the Force."

It's scary enough to contemplate what might happen if "the balloon goes up" while we're going about our normal routines within familiar surroundings, but these concerns would be exponentially magnified if things were to go south while we're away from home. For this very reason, more and more of us are choosing to travel with our firearms.

#### DEFINING 'TSA-APPROVED'

The mission of the Transportation Security Administration, part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, is to "protect the nation's transportation systems to ensure freedom of movement for people and commerce" and, thus, to regulate airport security around the country. Per TSA.gov, an approved firearms case is a "locked hard-sided

container," transported as "checked baggage only." In other words, the case cannot be in the passenger's possession or in a carry-on bag.

The TSA does not stipulate that the travel case must be packed inside a larger suitcase; as long as it meets the minimum requirements, it can be checked as a standalone piece of luggage. That said, it's important to understand that travel cases are not necessarily considered safes. Some are more secure and rugged than others.

These broad TSA guidelines give manufacturers plenty of leeway to explore different designs. Whether you're looking for a simple, low-cost, keyed lockbox to securely stow a single handgun and a few magazines or a more advanced solution that incorporates the newest materials and electronic technologies, there are plenty of options out there. Here are some key considerations to help you narrow the field.

#### BUDGET

We may as well get to this one early. As my father-in-law Tony used to say, "All it takes is money." This truism applies to all consumer products, firearms travel cases included. However, the good news is that even the lowest-cost options will allow you to securely and

legally transport a firearm.

If you have basic needs — for example, packing a single handgun and a few magazines — you should be able to find a case for less than \$40. The higher price tags have more to do with customization and convenience than TSA compliance. Larger cases with all of the proverbial bells and whistles will obviously cost more. Depending upon specific features, \$100 to \$400 is not out of the question, and, yes, you can spend even more.

#### SIZE AND CAPACITY

Next, consider the overall footprint required to accommodate your cargo. Naturally, a Ruger LCP II will occupy a much smaller footprint than a full-sized 1911. What if you want to take both of those firearms? Size up accordingly.

And don't forget to allocate space for ammunition. The same TSA rules that apply to transporting firearms also apply to ammunition: It must be packed in a locked, hard-sided case as checked baggage. While federal guidelines require packed firearms to be unloaded, it's acceptable to pack ammunition in the same case as the firearm itself. All rounds "must be packaged in a fiber (cardboard), wood, plastic or metal box specifically designed to carry ammunition."

As I hinted above, size matters when it comes to cost. Remember that, to a degree, more capacity means more money. So if you're on a limited budget, carefully consider your "need to have" versus "nice to have" travel requirements.

#### CONSTRUCTION AND WEIGHT

Hard-sided travel cases for guns can be made of metal, polymer or a combination thereof. While all of these designs meet TSA regs, there are pros and cons with each, which can be magnified or minimized by your unique travel environment or needs. For example, a low-cost travel case might be made of thin plastic, vulnerable to cracks and cuts. However, if you pack that case inside a larger suitcase where it is surrounded by clothing, the quality of the plastic shell is of little concern while the baggage is under the airline's control. Checking that same case as a

#### GOING KEYLESS

*The Vaultek LifePod is available in multiple sizes and color schemes and provides sufficient security for air travel and hotel use.*



stand-alone piece of luggage would likely be risky.

The most obvious difference between a metal case and a plastic case is weight. While the former offers more safe-like security, it is the heavier option that could push a checked bag over the allowable weight limit. Conversely, the latter is lighter and easier to carry.

A case that offers extreme protection generally wears a thicker shell, which means it will tend to be larger than other brands or models offering the same internal capacity. Packing it inside your suitcase will leave less room for other necessities.

Finally, understand that most TSA-approved plastic cases lack an integrated locking system and will therefore require one or more external locks to make it past the check-in counter.

## SECURITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

While the TSA requires firearms to be locked inside travel cases, there is no language that defines the type or quality of the lock mechanisms themselves.

Per TSA.gov, "You may use any brand or type of lock to secure your firearms case, including TSA-recognized locks." By most definitions, a TSA-approved lock is actually less secure than a standard padlock. That's because it's designed to make it easier for the TSA to defeat the lock if there is reason to open your luggage. When you declare a firearm at check-in, your bag is automatically set aside for special screening. If the TSA officer has questions, you won't be able to board your flight until he or she gets answers — and that will likely require you to unlock the firearms case. So there's nothing to be gained by using a TSA-approved lock.

Whether the case is secured with an old-school padlock, combination tumblers or an integrated electronic system, it will meet TSA guidelines. If you opt for a padlock, the size and shape of the hardware should prevent someone from cracking the lid open wide enough to reach in and remove items. Look for a lock with a short, wide-diameter shackle that leaves minimal play in the hasp.

If TSA security requirements for firearms stowage seem minimal, that's because they are. Remember, these

guidelines are intended to secure a gun only while it moves through the baggage-handling system and during flight — when your baggage is inaccessible to passengers. That also means TSA compliance, in itself, does not make your travel case a gun safe. In other words, when it comes to preventing unauthorized access, not all cases are created equal.

An inexpensive case with marginal security may protect your firearm while the airport and airline have control of it but fail miserably at the hands of a determined individual outside the secure area of the airport. Unless you will be staying with friends or family members who own a safe, consider a travel case that offers hardened security, such as a model that cannot be cut open with a box cutter or one you can tether to a fixed anchor point with a steel cable.

Another important security consideration is the speed with which you can open the case and gain access to your firearm. Keyed and mechanically operated combination locks are effective at deterring unauthorized access, but they can also slow you down when seconds count. Waking from deep sleep in unfamiliar surroundings can increase your confusion and decrease your dexterity as you fumble with a key or combination.

To improve access time, look for a travel case that offers one or more electronically assisted lock interfaces.

- **Electronic Keypad:** This locking system uses numeric keys to input a security code to open the case. The number of keys depends on make and model. The speed with which you can access the interior is limited only by the length of your code and how quickly you punch it in. A keyboard can be backlit, making it visible in the dark.

- **Biometric:** This type of locking system is designed to open the case instantly by recognizing some unique physical characteristic (normally a fingerprint).



**BUCKLED IN**  
*Some safes, such as this LifePod, can be configured to prevent your gear from moving during transit.*

The disclaimer here is that biometric devices work better for some than others. If possible, try before you buy.

- **Radio Frequency Identification (RFID):** This locking system is a touchless, instant-access alternative to biometric security. The case opens when a special tag is waved in close proximity to a sensor on the case.

The downside to these options is that they require batteries to power the electronics. Most designs include a backup key that bypasses the electronic system in the event of power loss. However, if you choose a case with an electronically assisted lock, it's in your best interest to replace or charge the batteries before every trip.

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## INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

Finally, when you're selecting a travel case, carefully consider the items you wish to transport and how you'll organize them. For example, will the ammo be stored in a box or inside the magazines? Are there other everyday carry items you plan to pack inside the travel case? Are any of those items potentially fragile?

You should line your firearms travel case with protective foam padding — usually a layer inside the lid and another in the base. These two layers sandwich the contents, providing adequate compression to prevent most items from moving around. Some cases provide a perforated base layer of "pluck foam," or small cubes that can be removed to create recessed storage compartments.

While pluck foam works well for making simple, uniformly (rectangular) shaped cavities, it cannot accurately trace the contours of most firearms. If you desire a snug, tailor-made fit for your items, consider a customized foam insert.

## PACKABLE OPTIONS

If you're looking for a low-cost travel case for a single handgun that checks most of the boxes, it's hard to beat the portable SnapSafe Lock Box. It comes in three different sizes to accommodate various handguns and can be purchased in a keyed or combination-lock configuration. All models include a heavy-duty, 1,500-pound-rated steel cable that can be secured to any stationary object. Most feature all-steel construction. However, a polymer version is also available that is two-thirds lighter than the others. The entire family (LG, XL and XXL) offers excellent, safe-like security with a small footprint (\$37.99 to \$54.99).

The Vaultek LifePod series is another affordable, slim-profile option for firearms travel. Constructed of a proprietary T3-polymer skin that's available in many colors and patterns, the LifePod is weatherproof, lightweight and amazingly rugged. It incorporates a touch-activated, four-digit, backlit keypad that engages and disengages the integrated lock, making the LifePod the first TSA-approved polymer firearms case with built-in security. A pair of latches on either side seals the lid tightly, protecting the interior from moisture and dust. This case even floats on water.

Vaultek includes backup keys and a steel security cable with every LifePod. Some models are available with a biometric fingerprint scanner, a pluck-foam interior and an organizer pocket that fits into the lid (\$109.99 to \$167.99).

The newer LifePod 2.0 version has a bigger footprint than the original, providing space for a large pistol or additional EDC items. This model also includes a removable tray that enhances interior organization (\$159.99 to \$259.99).

## PLUS-SIZED STORAGE



### BIG BIRD

*Pelican is one of the biggest names in the travel-case industry, and its reputation for quality and ruggedness is well-deserved.*

Perhaps your collection of road firearms is a bit more diverse. If so, Vaultek's LifePod XR lineup may be the ticket. Measuring 13.875 by 12 by 6.125 inches, this case has space for multiple pistols and corresponding ammo. Like others in the LifePod family, the XR offers the same backlit keypad and lightweight, T3-polymer, weatherproof construction. Additional premium features include a waterproof biometric scanner and an illuminated interior.

While you could technically check the XR as a stand-alone piece of luggage, I don't recommend it. While it's tough enough, it could be susceptible to cosmetic damage inflicted by baggage handlers and airport conveyor systems.

The XR comes in three options.

- **Standard Edition (\$299.99):** This model takes full advantage of case depth and includes a highly configurable, padded divider system.
- **Range Edition (\$349.99):** This model replaces the padded divider with snap-in racks for up to three pistols and a padded storage module for up to six magazines.
- **Special Edition (\$399.99):** This model is configured for dual-layer storage. The bottom provides full-width, padded dividers, and the upper takes the form of a removable tray.

## EXTREME PROTECTION

We all know that airlines do not handle checked baggage with kid gloves. If you want to check your firearms travel case as a piece of stand-alone luggage, it had better be tough as nails. Metal is certainly tough, but it's heavy and easily scratched or dented.

Enter Pelican, a leader in manufacturing military-grade portable storage solutions for more than 45 years. Many of the same Pelican products sold to the public have been tested for battlefield and aerospace applications. Features such as metal lock hasps, an automatic pressure-equalization valve and ultra-high-impact exteriors make Pelican cases a great choice for firearms travel.

Most are crushproof and dust-proof, and many are waterproof as well. The Air series is considered Pelican's top-of-the-line offering. These cases are incredibly lightweight and come in many sizes and shapes. The 1485 Air Case (\$222.95) is a popular option for full-sized handguns. With a spacious interior measuring 17.75 by 10.18 by 6.15 inches, it provides plenty of room for pistols, magazines and other accessories. The standard configuration includes a layer of pluck foam. However, for an upcharge, Pelican can fabricate custom foam for a more precise fit.

## FAST ACCESS

If minimizing the time it takes you to open your travel case is a priority, you may want to take a look at the RAPiD-safe series by Hornady. These cases take a unique approach to security, relying upon touch-free RFID-impregnated tags to open the locks. The tags replace the need to carry a key or remember a code or combination.

RAPiD safes can be programmed to remember up to five RFID tags. A watchband tag, fob and two decals (which can be affixed to a wallet, phone or other item) are included with each model. In addition, Hornady provides both a key and keypad as backup methods of entry.

The 2700KP (\$289.99) and 4800KP (\$322.99) models — for compact and full-sized handguns, respectively — are specifically designed for travel. Given their all-steel construction and included security cables, these options not only meet TSA guidelines but also can serve as effective hotel-room safes.

## ULTRA-CUSTOMIZATION

The interior configuration for an off-the-shelf case is usually good enough

to protect your firearm and accessories. However, to make the best use of space and deliver a precision fit, some veteran travelers spend a little more to upgrade a stock interior with custom, laser-cut foam inserts.

To meet this need, Pelican recently created its own custom foam shop. Customers can select a case for purchase and then, for an upcharge, choose the option to customize the foam interior. The site allows you to select from a library of common firearms shapes or upload personal photos to create your own. The exact cost of custom foam depends upon dimensions and complexity, but \$100 per insert is a good rule of thumb.

Family-owned MyCaseBuilder offers a similar service to a broader audience. This company can create a custom foam interior for any case it sells – Pelican, SKB, Nanuk and many others – and can do the same for any case you already own. If your particular make and model is not identified in its database, you can simply provide the dimensions and proceed with your design.

Another unique offering from MyCase-

Builder is the capability to take full advantage of internal capacity by stacking multiple layers of foam, such as a base for your firearm and a removable top tray for your magazines. The layers and thickness of each will, of course, be directly dependent upon the overall depth of the case.

Again, the “your cost will vary” disclaimer applies here. Most of MyCaseBuilder’s custom foam inserts for handgun-sized cases will run \$50 to \$100, depending upon dimensions, tray options and printing.

MyCaseBuilder can create case inserts using polyester (ester), polyethylene (PE) or pro-cell foam, each offering unique properties clearly explained on the website. The site also allows you to add graphics and printed labels to any base or lid foam insert.

I found the website and associated measurement tools to be intuitive and incredibly accurate. However, for those who may be a little skittish about making a mistake, MyCaseBuilder offers FailSafe protection for a nominal upcharge at checkout. If something doesn’t fit quite right or your measurements were off, the

foam can be returned within 30 days and remade at no additional cost.

## SAFE TRAVELS

Remember, when it comes to travel firearms cases, TSA approval only establishes a few basic requirements that are designed to discourage tampering, reasonably prevent damage and keep the contents from spilling out during baggage handling. Within these guidelines, there is more than enough room for you to explore your individual needs and to do so at a wide range of price points.



## SOURCES

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