

The Ultimate International Move & Customs Guide

A step-by-step master checklist, customs duty exemption blueprint, and insider cost-saving strategies from 15+ years of managing cross-border household relocations.

✓ 8-Week Action Timeline

What to book, pack, deregister, and declare each week so moving day is calm and predictable.

✓ Customs Exemption (Duty-Free)

How to satisfy Transfer of Residence (ToR) rules and avoid paying 19–27% VAT on your own goods.

✓ Hidden Movers' Surcharges

Spot shuttle fees, demurrage, long-carries, and inspection charges before signing any contract.

✓ Insurance & Inventory Rules

The exact wording to use on your packing inventory to guarantee claims are approved, not rejected.

Phase 1: The Master 8-Week Timeline

Follow this chronological roadmap. International moves have rigid customs and freight booking deadlines. Missing a step early compounds into port delays or storage surcharges.

8 WEEKS BEFORE MOVE **SCOPING & QUOTES**

- ☐ **Decide what travels vs. what sells:** In international shipping, volume (CBM / cubic meters) directly drives cost. Selling heavy IKEA furniture often saves more in shipping than buying fresh at destination.
- ☐ **Request 3 independent visual/video surveys:** Insist on in-home video surveys. An estimate done over the phone without itemised inventory carries an automatic 15–25% variance risk on moving day.
- ☐ **Verify mover accreditations:** Prefer FIDI-FAIM, IAM (International Association of Movers), or FEDEMAC members. These networks hold mutual financial bonds protecting you if an agent fails mid-transit.
- ☐ **Check pet relocation lead times:** Rabies titre tests (RNATT) for countries like the UK, Australia, UAE, or Singapore take 3 to 6 months to mature. Start pet vet work immediately.

6 WEEKS BEFORE MOVE **CUSTOMS & PAPERWORK**

- ☐ **Initiate Transfer of Residence (ToR) application:** If moving into the UK, apply for your ToR URN. If moving into the EU, gather proof of 12+ months residence abroad + proof of new residence (lease/employment contract).
- ☐ **Request Certificate of Deregistration:** Many EU customs offices (e.g. Germany *Abmeldebestätigung*, France, Netherlands) require proof you deregistered at origin to grant duty-free import.
- ☐ **Review your building access at both ends:** Is there a lift? Does it hold a wardrobe? Is the street wide enough for a 16-ton truck? If narrow, a **shuttle van** will be required (budget ~€350–€650 extra).
- ☐ **Request parking suspension permits:** Never leave street parking to chance in European capitals. Movers cannot legally block traffic without a city municipality permit.

Insider Tip on Transit Times:

- **Intra-EU Dedicated Van:** 2 to 5 days door-to-door. | **Groupage (Part-Load):** 10 to 21 days.
- **Ocean Freight FCL:** 4 to 8 weeks depending on ocean lane and customs.
- **Airfreight (Essentials):** 5 to 10 days airport-to-door (best for work laptops and essentials).

4 WEEKS BEFORE MOVE **LOCKING DOWN CONTRACTS**

- ☐ **Sign quote and confirm insurance:** Review whether insurance is *All-Risk* (covers breakage and loss) or *Total Loss only* (only pays if the whole truck or ship sinks). Always take All-Risk.
- ☐ **Submit Valued Inventory for transit insurance:** List replacement values at destination. Under-insuring items means insurers apply the "average clause" (if insured for 50% of real value, they only pay 50% on claims).
- ☐ **Notify schools, utilities, and tax advisors:** Terminate internet, electricity, and local council tax. Obtain children's academic transfer transcripts.

Phase 2: Final Countdown & Moving Day

2 WEEKS BEFORE MOVE SEGREGATION & PREP

- ☐ **Create a strict "DO NOT PACK" sanctuary zone:** Use an empty bathroom or closet. Put your passports, visas, original birth/marriage certificates, medication, laptops, jewelry, and car keys inside. Tape the door shut.
- ☐ **Consume or gift perishables and open liquids:** International movers will NOT transport opened bottles of wine, olive oil, cleaning chemicals, perfumes over 100ml, or spray deodorants.
- ☐ **Empty & defrost refrigerators 48 hours prior:** If an appliance is packed wet, mold will grow within 5 days in a sealed shipping container, ruining nearby upholstered furniture.
- ☐ **Back up computers to the cloud:** External hard drives can suffer magnetic or physical damage during rough maritime transit.

MOVING & PACKING DAYS EXECUTION & INVENTORY

- ☐ **Let the professionals pack fragile items:** If you pack your own boxes (marked "PBO - Packed by Owner"), insurers typically deny liability for internal breakage because packing standard wasn't verified.
- ☐ **Audit the Bingo Sheet (Packer's Inventory):** Every single box and furniture piece receives a numbered sticker. Watch the team leader record item descriptions and condition codes (e.g. SC = scratched, CH = chipped).
- ☐ **Challenge inaccurate pre-existing damage marks:** If your brand new dining table is marked "M/S/C" (marred, scratched, chipped) just as a precautionary measure by the driver, contest it politely before signing.
- ☐ **Take timestamped photos of electronics and high-value pieces:** Photograph serial numbers of TVs, audio equipment, and appliances before they are wrapped in bubble-craft blankets.
- ☐ **Sign the Bill of Lading / CMR consignment note:** Keep one original copy physically with you. Never pack the CMR or transport contract in a box!

STRICT BANNED ITEMS (Never Put in an International Shipment):

- **Lithium-ion batteries** (e-bikes, e-scooters, detached power banks) — strictly banned on ocean containers and air shipments without certified dangerous goods (DG) packaging.
- **Aerosols, flammables, paints, gas cylinders, matches, lighter fluid.**
- **Alcohol & Tobacco:** Even within parts of the EU, alcohol requires special excise declarations; outside the EU it triggers customs quarantine and steep duty.

DELIVERY DAY AT DESTINATION INSPECTION & SIGN-OFF

- ☐ **Perform the Bingo Cross-Off:** Stand at the entrance door with your copy of the packing list. As the crew carries each box inside, cross off its numbered sticker. If Box #47 is missing, write it down immediately on the delivery receipt before signing.
- ☐ **Note visible damage ON THE SPOT:** If a wardrobe mirror is cracked, write: *"Received with damage: Item #12 mirror shattered"* on the delivery sheet. Signing "Received in good condition" makes subsequent insurance claims 5x harder.
- ☐ **Claim notification deadline:** Most maritime and transit insurance policies require written notice of damage within **7 to 14 days** of delivery. Do not wait months to unpack.

Phase 3: Customs Duty Exemption & Hidden Costs

How to Qualify for 0% Duty & VAT (Transfer of Residence)

When moving across international customs borders (UK ↔ EU, USA → Europe, UAE → EU), you are entitled to import duty-free under **Transfer of Residence (ToR)** relief, provided you fulfill 4 universal criteria:

Criteria	Legal Requirement	Required Evidence
1. Previous Residence	Lived outside destination country for at least 12 consecutive months .	Utility bills, tax returns, tenancy contracts, deregistration papers.
2. Ownership Period	Goods must be owned & used by you for at least 6 months prior to export.	Items cannot be brand new in commercial packaging (import VAT applies).
3. Commitment	Cannot sell, lend, or rent out the goods for 12 months following import.	Signed solemn declaration / personal effects statement.
4. Timing Window	Goods must arrive within 12 months of establishing your official residence.	New local lease agreement, employment contract, or residency card.

The 4 Hidden Surcharges That Ruin Moving Budgets

- 1. Shuttle Service (€350 – €800):**
If your street has weight limits (< 3.5t), tight corners, or trees where a 16-ton truck cannot park, movers must transship your goods into smaller shuttle vans. Always disclose narrow streets upfront.
- 2. Long Carry & Stair Carry Surcharges (€150 – €400):**
If distance from truck to front door exceeds 25–30 meters, or no elevator beyond the 1st floor, hourly/fixed surcharges apply. Specify parking distance and elevator dims beforehand.
- 3. Customs Physical Inspection & X-Ray (Cost + 15%):**
Border authorities randomly pull containers for scanning (€150–€350) or physical devanning at customs sheds (€600–€1,500). Standard quotes exclude inspection fees as they are state-mandated.
- 4. Demurrage & Container Detention (€75 – €150 / day):**
If customs is delayed due to missing visas, shipping lines grant only 3–7 free port days before charging steep daily equipment rent.
-  **Golden Rule:** Always demand an *"All-In, Port-to-Door, Including Destination THC"* quote. Verify whether parking permits and shuttle are included or billed on actuals.

Phase 4: Volume Estimation & Packing Formulas

Movers calculate road and sea freight in **Cubic Meters (CBM / m³)**. Use these field-tested formulas to estimate your shipment volume before requesting quotes:

Home Size	Average Net Volume	Recommended Transport Mode	Estimated Boxes Needed
Studio / 1-Room Flat	8 – 12 CBM	Direct Sprinter Van (15m³) or Part-Load (LCL)	20–30 Standard Boxes + 8 Book Boxes
2-Bedroom Apartment	18 – 25 CBM	20ft Shipping Container or 24-ton Truck Share	45–60 Standard + 15 Book + 3 Wardrobes
3-Bedroom House	30 – 45 CBM	40ft Standard Ocean Container (67 CBM)	80–110 Standard + 25 Book + 5 Wardrobes
4+ Bedroom Villa	55 – 75 CBM	40ft High Cube Container (76 CBM) or Dedicated Road-train	140+ Standard + 40 Book + 8 Wardrobes

Packing Material Formulas (The Mover's Rule of Thumb)

- ☐ **Standard Moving Boxes (55 × 35 × 35 cm / ~0.07 CBM):** Budget **3 standard boxes per 1 CBM** of total shipment volume. (Linen, clothes, kitchenware, toys).
- ☐ **Book / Heavy Goods Boxes (40 × 30 × 30 cm / ~0.035 CBM):** Budget **1 book box per 1 CBM**. Never pack books in large boxes—they tear seams and cause spinal injuries.
- ☐ **Wardrobe Boxes (50 × 50 × 120 cm / with metal hanger bar):** Budget **1 wardrobe box per 7–8 CBM** of total household volume (holds 15–20 hanging adult garments).
- ☐ **Bubble wrap & Packing Newsprint:** Budget 1 kg of newsprint paper for every 2 CBM of fragile kitchen items. Bubble wrap is strictly for exterior cushioning, never directly on polished wood.

Need Personalized Advice on Your Move?

Got an estimate from a moving company and want an unvarnished second opinion? I review moving estimates, identify hidden fees, verify customs paperwork, and tell you if you're being overcharged.

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