Health & Safety Abroad

Consider the risks to enjoy your time abroad to the fullest!

Travel is freeing, inspiring and enriching! Fear should never govern your travel decisions. However, it’s still important to consider the health and safety risks of your destination before you set off. With a little bit of research and preparation, you can ensure that you’ll enjoy your time abroad to the fullest.

Do Your Research

Are tourists a target for crime in your destination country? What diseases, if any, are common? Are there particularly dangerous regions or districts that you should avoid? What is the political climate of the area? Are there any weather conditions to take into account (e.g. monsoon season, hurricane season, etc.)? Conduct general and specific research about your destination country so that you’re not caught off-guard. Check your government website for any permanent or temporary travel advisories, and check travel blogs and vlogs for personal advice for avoiding any unwanted health or safety hassles.

EDITOR’S NOTE: We advise women of all ages who are heading abroad to take a look at Women Living & Working Abroad for some important tips and info, including additional advice on health and safety. We also strongly advise that you consult with your college or university go abroad advisors for more specific and detailed info on health and safety abroad. Finally, you should check out government travel advisories for each country you plan to visit (Canadian Government, and US Government).

Safe Relationships

One of the best parts of cross-cultural travel is forming personal and/or professional relationships with locals abroad. But developing cross-cultural friendships while traveling does carry a certain amount of risk. This can be minimized by using common sense and street smarts:

- Avoid making friends with people who approach you in public places: It is generally safer if you initiate cross-cultural friendships. People you approach are likely to be genuine and interested in your friendship rather than your valuables.
- Never befriend someone who approaches you at a beach, bus stop, train station or airport: Be careful about making friends in tourist hot spots. Con artists flock to the same areas as tourists, purely to take advantage of them. And be aware of your surroundings when traveling on public transit and in crowded areas. These places are often hotbeds of pickpocket activity.
- Never engage in any financial transaction that does not seem legitimate: Tourists are the primary targets for scammers. If you’re offered a bargain that seems too good to be true, it probably is.
- Research your business connections: Although you may be on the hunt for a job or for professional connections, be sure to do your research and ask around about potential employers before you engage in any business dealings.
- Stay alert! Be prepared to flee the company of anyone who makes you feel physically threatened, shows erratic behavior, disregard or lack of compassion for others, who participates in illegal activities or who exhibits uncontrolled behavior.
- Be cautious with host families until you feel secure: You will know you’re in a trusting cross-cultural relationship when your host takes care of you, is considerate of your needs, inquires if you are hungry or have slept well and prevents you from making mistakes. Good cross-cultural relationships offer companionship and a sense of security.
- The no-brainer: No matter who asks you, never carry a package through customs for another person.

Online Safety

In the excitement of preparing for an international adventure, cybersecurity might be the last thing on your mind. However, your online safety is something to take into consideration before and during your time abroad. Though the Internet feels like it should operate the same way all over the world, using it poses different risks (and comes with different regulations) depending on what country you’re in. Following the guidelines below will significantly decrease any risk of issues, allowing you to fully enjoy your time abroad without any fear of cybercrime or legal trouble.

- Share wisely: Although online messaging, purchasing and other activities feel quite private in North America, government surveillance, censorship and cybercrime are prevalent in many areas of the world. Don’t put yourself at risk by sharing detailed personal information, strong political viewpoints or any compromising content while abroad. Depending on the laws in your host country, simply posting a seemingly harmless photo or opinion online can have major repercussions. To stay safe abroad, you’ll want to avoid the habit of constant sharing, updating and communicating on your device. Never provide personal information to a site or individual that isn’t 100% safe and secure. For many of us, who live our lives online, this requires a big — but necessary — mental shift.
- Prepare in advance: Before traveling, read up on the local laws regarding Internet usage and censorship. Adhere to them for the duration of your journey. In Germany, where copyright laws are stricter, illegal streaming or downloading of shows and music can easily land you a nasty fine. In China, the rules of what constitutes cybercrime are extremely blurry. In Turkey, posting anti-government views is considered a crime. By simply learning about your destination country’s relationship with the Internet and its history with cybersecurity, you’ll be preparing yourself to act appropriately.
- Update, back up and protect yourself: Whether you use a cloud, or a physical backup device (such as Seagate), take the time to back up every file on all your devices before leaving home. Most of us have felt the sinking feeling when we realize our device has “died” or been lost without any backups. Losing your device no longer has to mean losing all your information.
- Always use a VPN (Virtual Private Network): Avoid using public wifi. This will help secure your information and hide your location from potentially malicious cybercriminals. Check the plentiful VPN review information online before traveling, and ensure that the type of VPN you intend to use is allowed in your destination country, as rules and regulations for VPNs also vary from country to country. If you find yourself on a university campus, and you’re forced to use the campus wifi, take the time to read the details about which entities can access the information you send via the network.

By following these simple guidelines, you’ll be able to fully enjoy every step of your enriching international journey, without the risk of accidentally breaking local rules or opening yourself up to cybercriminals. We wish you a safe journey!

Staying Healthy

Falling ill while abroad can prevent you from enjoying your trip to the fullest. Although some illnesses and accidents are unavoidable, you can put yourself in a great position to stay healthy.

- Get your vaccinations: Your pre-departure planning program should include research on what immunizations and vaccinations are required in order for you to visit your destination country/countries. Be aware that it may take up to a week to book an appointment for an
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- immunization, and you should plan to receive the immunization four to six weeks prior to departure in order to let it take effect. Some vaccines require multiple injections over a period of time. Covid-19, for example, requires two and sometimes three doses to be considered fully vaccinated. Covid-19 testing and travel passports are often also required.
- Get your Covid-19 tests: The "new normal" includes Covid-19, and depending on where you’re traveling to, it will have varying impact. Developing nations may not have a widely vaccinated population, and you may have to take significant precautions. Do your research in advance about the prevalence of coronavirus, testing requirements and the ease of accessing PCR and antigen tests.
- Manage pre-existing conditions: If you have a pre-existing medical or mental condition, make sure your program advisors are aware of it. Conditions like diabetes, epilepsy or asthma shouldn’t stop you going abroad, but you must make sure you have an adequate supply of necessary (or potentially necessary) medication. Always bring your prescriptions and written instructions from your physician and never carry medications in unmarked containers.
- Be smart about food: Use your discretion when sampling the culinary riches of your host country. Be smart: if a street vendor offers you a dairy-based dish that looks like it may have been sitting out a while, perhaps you should pass. Raw or uncooked meat, poultry, eggs and seafood can also carry unwanted bacteria. And if you’re in a location known to have a contaminated water supply, you may choose to avoid all raw food, including fruits and vegetables that may have been washed in contaminated water. Be careful, but don’t miss out on trying unusual local dishes and expanding your culinary horizons!
- Watch the water: Contaminated water can lead to diarrhea and other unwanted illnesses such as hepatitis, typhoid and cholera. Avoid drinking tap water, particularly in developing nations, unless you are confident that it is uncontaminated. Be aware of the many ways you might ingest water unconsciously; for example by drinking a beverage with ice in it, or while brushing your teeth. If you suspect contaminated water, stick to bottled water and canned beverages, use water purification tablets, or boil all tap water for a minimum of three minutes before using it.
- Check the altitude: Altitude sickness can strike anyone, regardless of physical fitness. It can generally be avoided by ascending slowly to allow your body to acclimatize to its new environment. Some symptoms of altitude sickness include fatigue, dizziness, insomnia, headaches and shortness of breath. Altitude sickness is most common above approximately 8,000 feet, but can begin as low as 6,000. If you are mountain climbing or staying for a long period at a high altitude, make sure you read up on prevention.
- Stay fit: Staying healthy while abroad will help you enjoy life to the fullest. Depending on the reason for your travels and the region you’re visiting, you may be doing plenty of walking, hiking and sightseeing — but if not, you should make exercise a priority. Staying active is particularly important for those who find themselves suffering the effects of culture shock and jet lag, as exercise can reduce or even eliminate the symptoms of these ailments.
- Bring a first aid kit: So what should you pack in a kit? Aspirin, bandages, hand sanitizer, motion sickness pills, small scissors, antibiotic cream, prescription antibiotics and tweezers are a good start. The contents of your kit will depend on where you’re headed and what physical activities you plan to take part in. You can often find pre-made packs on survival sites and on Amazon.
- Practice safe sex: Even if you don’t expect to meet anyone on your travels, keep in mind the “better safe than sorry” mantra and always travel with protection.
- Be careful with alcohol and drugs: Many countries have lower legal drinking ages than the United States. Even those traveling abroad from Canada (where the legal drinking age is as young as 18 in certain provinces) may find drinking laws to be somewhat relaxed. Enjoy yourself while abroad, but be careful not to over-consume. Hundreds of North Americans are arrested abroad each year for public intoxication and drug charges — and those who find themselves in dangerous situations overseas often do so while under the influence. Be your best self while abroad. We recommend avoiding intoxication altogether.
- Avoid Enterovioform: This drug is distributed in some regions as a treatment for diarrhea and other fungal infections, but has been linked to nervous system complications and should be avoided. If you are ill abroad and a doctor prescribes this drug, ask for a different treatment plan.

When Things Go Wrong
It’s very likely that at some point during your time abroad, you will face disappointment or discomfort. There’s a high likelihood that you could be the victim of petty crime or a tourist scam. You could fall ill (as many travelers do) with food poisoning or another illness. Experienced travelers know not to let such challenges interfere with the overall travel experience. If something negative happens, be sure to maintain perspective and an understanding that this too shall pass. Attitude and outlook are a matter of personal choice, so stay strong and positive!

Finally, we suggest that you consider any possible political ramifications of your cross-cultural travels. In some instances, traveling to a country may lend support to, or help finance, an oppressive government. Be conscientious about where you choose to travel to and spend your money. Complacency and ignorance are not characteristics of truly responsible international citizens. By traveling internationally, you are more than a tourist; and your destination is more than a theme park.

You are a participant in your host culture, which is a wonderful thing, but it does sometimes come with responsibility.

Consider the checklists above to be your roadmap for health and safety. Keeping these tips and tricks in mind while abroad will ensure that you get the very most out of your time overseas. We wish you a safe and enriching journey!
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