



Guidelines for Safe Travel

International travel can be an exciting and rewarding experience. Along with the joys of travel, however, come concerns about safety. General issues of personal safety should be considered by any traveler to an unfamiliar area. Common sense and staying alert are often the best means of maintaining safety in any situation.

Some students and parents focus their safety concerns on terrorism and civil unrest abroad. In reality, however, it's much less likely for students to be hurt in a terrorist act, for example, than in more mundane situations, such as traffic accidents. For instance, it is common for Americans to look the wrong direction when crossing a street in London or Australia because traffic moves in the opposite direction from traffic in the U.S. This is a frequent mistake that can be deadly.

In a foreign culture, it is more challenging to read situations and to assess risks to your physical safety than it is at home. In other words, you can no longer rely completely on your "common sense" to get a feel for what kind of situation you're in and how you might deal with it. At a minimum, you must be aware that some behaviors that may be culturally and legally acceptable and seemingly safe at home may not be safe (or legal) in your host country. There are four things that you can think about to develop your own, personal strategies for staying safe while abroad. Following these guidelines listed below can lessen feelings of vulnerability and help put you in control.

Developing Strategies for Staying Safe

1. Understand the cultural and political environments of the countries where you'll be studying and traveling. You will be living in the midst of these environments, which means that you must understand what they are, where you fit into it as an American, a student, a male/female, etc. and how others will view you and your behavior within the context of these environments.

Questions for Thought: How do host nationals generally see Americans? What are the stereotypes/general sentiments? How should this affect your behavior? What are people's attitudes in these countries about gender relations, race, sexuality, etc.? How are these attitudes reflected in the host country's laws? What are your own stereotypes/views of the people in the country where you're going? Are they accurate? How will they affect your behavior?

2. Think about what you like to do in daily life here that you plan to continue doing while living abroad. Then come up with some strategies for how to go about doing these things in the foreign country where you'll be living, including how to modify your own behavior, if necessary.

Questions for Thought: Is there something that you do every day, e.g., go jogging or stay at the library until late at night? What do you tend to do on weekends? How often do you go out at night, and what time do you usually come home? What should you think about/research/check into before doing these same things abroad? Is there anything you do here that you perhaps shouldn't do in the country where you're going?

3. Figure out what you can do to BLEND IN so that you're not targeted as a tourist.

Questions for Thought: What behaviors would identify you as a "tourist"? How can you avoid acting like a tourist abroad? What will be "firsts" for you, e.g., taking a long train trip alone, eating alone in a restaurant, reading a map in a foreign language, etc.? How can you prepare for these situations before you leave so you understand how to handle them abroad without standing out? If possible, try rehearsing these things before you leave for abroad so that you can figure out how to do them in a comfortable manner.

4. Identify your instincts, and learn to pay attention to them and trust them.

Questions for Thought: What types of specific situations make you feel uncomfortable or just feel out of the ordinary? Are you worried about encountering any specific unsafe or uncomfortable situations abroad? If so, what are they? How do you know, physically, mentally, and emotionally, when you feel uncomfortable? For example, does your heart start to beat quickly? Do you start perspiring? What tips you off to the fact that "something's not right"? What do you do if you feel like you're getting into one of these situations, or if you're already in one? When in a situation that makes you endangered, always trust your instincts. Even if you feel that doing so may cause you to act in a way that may be regarded as culturally insensitive, it is important to trust your gut. If something feels uncomfortable, don't do it.

Additional Safety Suggestions While Abroad

Americans have a reputation abroad as being easy targets for theft and assault. Therefore, it is important that you use good judgment and caution when navigating your new environment. Here are some general tips to help you stay safe:

- Carry an Emergency Contact Card and your ID with you at *all* times.
- Register for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at <https://step.state.gov/step/>. This free service allows you to enter information about your trip abroad so that the Department of State can better assist you in an emergency.
- Don't draw attention to yourself as a foreigner/American. College sweatshirts, baseball caps, and the like could be bad clothing choices in an area with strong anti-American sentiment.
- Know how to ask for help in the native language of the country.
- Know local emergency telephone numbers.
- Don't dangle purses or cameras from your wrist.
- If you choose to bring electronic devices abroad (personal computers, cell phones, etc), conceal these as best as possible. They are common targets for theft both in the US and abroad. Backpacks and big purses can also be targets.
- Don't carry large amounts of cash. Don't carry all of your money and documents in one bag or in back pockets. Consider wearing a money pouch.
- Be alert in crowds, especially in train stations or popular tourist attractions, because thieves often use distractions in these locations to their advantage.
- Don't hitchhike, rent cars, motorcycles, mopeds, or scooters.
- Don't stay out late at night.
- When traveling long distances by train or bus, attach your bag to the luggage rack with a bike chain or lock.
- U.S. foreign policy affects how people overseas will treat you. You will often be seen as a representative of your country—whether you want to be one or not. If your travel destination is having political or military difficulties, ranging from demonstrations to terrorist attacks to civil war, stay away from all sites of such activity.

These guidelines are adapted from guidelines developed by the Study Abroad Office at Northwestern University.

Last Updated: August 2012