Travel Smarts

MY WORLD ABROAD
QUICK GUIDE

Making the decision to go abroad is one of the most exciting and rewarding moments in a student or young professional's life. Once you've decided to take the leap outside your comfort zone, you'll likely be eager to pack up and start your adventure as quickly as possible. But hold on! Taking the time to plan, prepare and anticipate your travels will help you make the absolute most of your upcoming journey. This must-read Quick Guide will give you a few crucial tips on how to get ready, how to stay safe and how to make the most of your time abroad.

PRE-DEPARTURE BASICS

One of the most important elements of a successful voyage abroad is preparation. From climate to transport and currency to security, there's so much to consider before you leave.

Get the Ball Rolling

Make sure you have the basics in order: passport, visas and travel insurance should be arranged up to six months in advance. Start your application processes as soon as possible, then think about transportation and accommodation.

Packing

We can't stress this point enough: Pack lightly! This is especially important if you're backpacking. Have one professional-looking outfit in your luggage in case a job opportunity arises – but pack for functionality, not fashion.

- **Have your travel documents in order:** Print multiple copies of tickets, insurance information, program acceptance letters and emergency numbers. Make note of the contact details for your country's embassies, your go abroad program officials, insurance company, and any other relevant numbers. Have your passport, visas and all proof of identity and purpose at the ready. This will keep your mind at ease.
- **Medicine and first aid:** If you have any prescriptions, be sure to bring enough to last you the duration of your travels. Contact lens wearers should also bring lenses, solution, prescription glasses and a copy of the prescription. A small first aid kit is always a good idea, especially if you're backpacking, hiking, or working in a labor-intensive environment.
- **Currency:** Have a small amount of cash in the currency of your destination country, as well as your home country currency.
- **Gifts:** If you're staying with a host family or visiting a needy organization, you might consider taking a small gift to show your appreciation.
- **Adapters:** Remember that plugs and voltage numbers are different all over the world – if you're taking any device requiring electricity, be sure you've purchased the correct adapter cables.
- **The professional edge:** You never know who you might find yourself next to on the airplane – and you'd certainly make an impression on a potential employer by having a resume or business card easily accessible.
- **What to leave at home:** It's always a good idea to leave expensive or sentimental items at home. Anything that could draw attention to you or that you would be sad to lose.

Research and Planning

Preparation isn't just about packing and documentation, though; it's also a mental process. Research is a key component of successful pre-departure strategy.

- **Cultural and practical research:** Read everything that you can about the culture of your destination country. Be conscious of the fact that no matter how much you read, you won't understand a culture until you have lived in it, and culture shock is inevitable, but do your reading. Also read country reports, weather patterns, crime rates, demographics and other basic info as well.
- **Travel practicalities:** What are the baggage allowances on your various flights? Do you have any tight flight connections? Will you need to take a taxi or train upon arrival? Think through each step of your journey before leaving.
- **Budgeting:** Have you saved enough to support yourself during your travels? Do you have a safety net in case something unexpected happens? It's easy to get swept up in the excitement of travel plans but don't avoid thinking about the financial commitments that can be involved in international travel.
- **Know why you're going:** Are you going abroad to develop a professional skill set? Learn a language? Engage with a foreign culture? Knowing what you want to achieve will help you stay focused while abroad.
- **Are you flying solo**? It is easiest to integrate into another culture (and stay on your own schedule) if you travel alone. If you plan to go abroad with another person, consider taking a short trip with your intended travel companion first. Travel can place unique stresses on friendships and partnerships, so it's important to judge your compatibility before jumping in.

STAYING SAFE

As Westerners, we sometimes have a tendency to feel safe in areas where we perhaps should not. While fear should definitely not govern your travel decisions, you should take the time to consider the health and safety risks of your destination. Proper research and preparation isn't about being fearful, it's about ensuring that you're able to enjoy your time to the fullest.

- **Find out the answers to these questions**: What diseases, if any, are common? Are tourists considered targets for crime? Are there districts or regions that are considered more dangerous than others? What is the political climate of the area?
- **Conditions:** If you have a pre-existing medical or mental condition, make sure your program advisors are aware of it. Conditions like diabetes or asthma shouldn't stop you going abroad, but you must make sure you have an adequate supply of necessary medication. Always bring prescriptions and written instructions from your physician.
- **Food and water:** Use your discretion when sampling the culinary riches of your host country. Don't miss out on expanding your culinary horizons, but be smart: Raw meat from a street vendor, for example, might not be your healthiest option. Contaminated water can be a problem, especially in developing nations, so if you're unsure, 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.
- **Altitude:** Altitude sickness can strike anyone, regardless of physical fitness. It is most common above approximately 8,000 feet, but can begin as low as 6,000. If you're mountain climbing or staying for a long period at a high altitude, read up on prevention.
- **Vaccinations:** 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 immunization, and you should plan to receive them four to six weeks prior to departure to let them take effect.
- **Exercise:** Staying active is important abroad, especially for those who find themselves suffering the effects of culture shock and jet lag. Exercise can reduce or even eliminate the symptoms of these ailments, not to mention keep you fit and happy.
- **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.
- **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. And it's best to avoid taking drugs of any kind while abroad.
- **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.

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Making Connections

Successful cross-cultural travel is about interacting with locals and forming friendships (which we will discuss below), but there's always a certain amount of risk. This can be minimized, however, 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 a cross-cultural friendship. People you approach are likely to be genuine and interested in your friendship rather than your pocket book.
- **Be careful making friends in tourist hotspots:** Never befriend someone who approaches you at a beach, bus stop, train station or airport. There are con artists everywhere you find tourists. Also 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, who 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 are 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.

Common Sense

- **Know the local laws:** Don't assume that you can act as you would at home anywhere in the world. Something as innocuous as a hand gesture can be perceived as a major offense in certain countries. You can avoid missteps by reading the country's official Web site before your arrival.
- **When you're out and about**: Don't take short cuts through poorly lit areas or along back alleys in unfamiliar areas. If you must take a short cut to avoid a disturbance or get somewhere quickly, do so with at least one or two other people. And keep your distance from public demonstrations, civil disturbances, loud arguments and other public clashes.
- **Keep plans to yourself:** Don't discuss detailed travel plans with strangers while abroad. As tempting as it may be to share your journey with friends on social media, don't post public notices about your plans. These sites have recently become targets for hackers and criminals using travel details to solicit money from family and friends.
- **When things go wrong:** It's very likely that at some point during your time abroad, you will face disappointment or discomfort. You could fall ill or be the victim of petty crime. 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. Stay positive!

MAXIMIZING YOUR EXPERIENCE

Cross-cultural travel has little in common with tourist travel. It's not about lounging on beaches, shopping for souvenirs or touring the sights. It's about immersing yourself, integrating and cultivating experiences that will serve you both personally and professionally. It's also about getting to know our levels of tolerance, your limitations and your strengths. The self-knowledge, observational skills and global perspective that you develop while abroad will prove invaluable in your personal life and professional career. So, what are some ways to step beyond the tourist boundary?

- **Offering your services:** To make contact with the local culture, you need a vehicle that allows you to interact. Volunteering your services to an organization is one of the best ways to integrate into a community. Why not approach a local NGO for work? You might also offer to give a talk about your home country to a local school, teach English at an adult learning center, or assist at a local orphanage?
- **Professional networking:** Making professional connections in your field is a great way to meet like-minded people and develop career-boosting contacts. Find businesses and organizations in your area of expertise and approach them. Offer your services and if they have an opportunity, accept it!
- **Invest in your host family:** If you're invited to stay in someone's home, you should participate in their family activities. Show respect and interest in their daily lives. Until you become familiar with your hosts and their cultural norms, friendship can be a roller-coaster. Just remember: You're there to learn. Enjoy connecting with your host family and accept the roles of observer, student and visitor.
- **Cultivate friendships:** Forging bonds of friendship with locals is a fantastic way to get to know a culture. Be bold: strike up a conversation in the line at the post office, speak with a fellow passenger on the bus, become involved with a local cause or take a hobby class. Learning the local language will help you connect – and, likewise, connecting will help you learn the local language!
- **Share your journey:** Although you should be careful about how publicly you share your itinerary, be sure to keep your friends and family updated on your plans. Travel blogs, video updates, email newsletters, Instagram feeds and good old-fashioned postcard updates can be a fun way of documenting your adventures and keeping in touch. You might even consider starting a public travel blog, or connecting with a school in your home country to share your travels and get others excited about following in your international footsteps.
- **Describe your surroundings:** Whether you're writing a postcard or a travel blog, be as descriptive as possible. How does this place differ from your home country? How do people eat, dress and interact? Talk about the religion, the festivals and the communication style of the country.
- **Maintain balance:** Be sure to take a few days off to relax and recuperate while you travel and integrate into a new culture. The time off can be refreshing and will allow you to reflect on your experiences and intentions for the rest of your trip.

Follow the guidelines above, and you'll be on your way to having an exciting, enriching and superbly-planned experience abroad. We wish you happiness and cross-cultural growth!

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