

Your guide to safe international travel

3 Once you're there

Getting used to a new culture in a strange place can be a steep learning curve. These guidelines will help you settle in with the minimum of stress, and also offer tips on how to avoid being the victim of crime or misunderstanding.

3a Hotel safety

- If possible, find out about the hotel and the area it's in before you arrive
- Avoid ground floor rooms
- Always lock the door and use the safety chain and window locks if fitted
- Use the spyhole, if there is one, before opening the door to someone, and phone reception if you're unsure who's there
- Find the nearest fire alarm and extinguishers, and make sure you know your emergency exit route. Follow the emergency route to the final exit and make sure you can actually get out of it easily
- Carry a personal fire/security alarm that can be fitted to your room door so that it'll sound if the door opens or it detects smoke
- Keep important and valuable items (including computer files) in the hotel safe when you're not in your room
- Avoid keeping large amounts of cash in your room
- Get reception to call you if you have visitors and meet them in a public area rather than your room

3b Culture

- Look up guide books or websites to find out about local traditions, customs, laws and culture
- Learn the local language or at least take a phrasebook
- Respect local customs and dress codes. For example, it's illegal to import or consume alcohol in some countries. Consider what to wear to fit in and dress appropriately, particularly when visiting religious sites, business contacts and rural communities
- Avoid haggling aggressively or for too long. In most countries where haggling is common practice, it's done with humour – remember that the discount may be significant to the seller, even if it's relatively small to you
- Be discreet when expressing views on cultural differences – take care not to make offensive comments about customs of dress, relationships, alcohol and drugs
- Ask for permission before taking someone's photograph

3c Incidents and accidents

- If your luggage has been tampered with, report it to the police immediately
- Never take on a mugger – quickly give them what they demand. Ideally, hand over your 'dummy' wallet or purse
- If you're robbed or have an accident, report it to the police – even if they can't do anything, you'll need the crime number to claim on the insurance

3d Taxis and drivers

- If you're not confident about driving or there's a high risk of car-jacking or kidnap, hire a reliable driver
- If possible, book taxis through your hotel or a reliable local contact
- Make a note of the driver's name and the approximate fare when you book, and check them again before you get into the taxi
- Travel in a licensed taxi with a meter, and make sure the driver uses it
- Don't get into a cab if there's another passenger already there
- Taxi drivers could take criminal advantage if they see a passenger as a newcomer – act naturally and don't ask too many questions

3e Driving

- Carry an up-to-date driving licence and insurance documentation
- Understand local driving practices and ask about bad driving habits, such as for giving way and overtaking. Check on local police methods and carry money for fines
- Carry a local map, be aware of 'no go' areas, and plan the route thoroughly
- Learn some useful local phrases in case you break down or have an accident
- Ask to inspect and try out a hired vehicle before accepting it – check tyres, brakes (ask for a demonstration) and oil and water levels
- Make sure there's enough fuel for your journey and check ahead for petrol stations on long journeys
- Drive unobtrusively and be observant, particularly of following vehicles. Note familiar landmarks
- Lock the vehicle even if you're leaving it for only a few minutes, such as when refuelling. Keep the passenger doors locked while driving. Leave nothing valuable inside
- Carry emergency equipment (eg fire extinguisher, first aid kit, tool kit, spare bulbs and warning triangle) in the vehicle. In many countries, this is a legal requirement
- Don't get out of the vehicle if you're unsure of your surroundings, or if you're involved in an accident that appears in any way contrived
- Be wary of locals pointing out 'problems' with the car. Carry on to the next busy public place to inspect the vehicle

3f Personal security

- Phone a contact at your home base regularly to let them know where you are, where you're going and when you expect to get there. Always make sure your contact knows your plans, including any last minute changes
- Carry a copy of emergency contact names and phone numbers, including details of your country's consulate and your credit card company's hotline
- When travelling, make sure you know what route you're taking in advance and how long you expect the journey to take
- If you have a meeting or you're away from your base, tell your hotel or another contact person when you expect to return
- Be aware of 'no go' areas and stay away from them. Keep to well-lit streets and always walk on the outside of the pavement, purposefully and confidently
- Don't display obvious signs of wealth, such as expensive watches or jewellery. Keep clothing simple and businesslike and don't dress like a tourist – avoid carrying a camera round your neck
- Wear a shoulder bag across your body, not just over one shoulder
- Avoid walking around alone if possible, and be aware of who's around you
- Be particularly alert for pickpockets on public transport and in crowded areas
- Be alert with strangers and cautious in conversation. Don't give away personal information
- Never agree to carry packages out of the country for people you don't know, and never leave your luggage unattended
- Carry two wallets or purses. Prepare one as a 'dummy' to be handed over if you're threatened – it should contain around US\$50 and some local currency, together with a couple of old receipts, expired credit cards and a few banknotes from your home country. The other one is your real wallet or purse – keep this safely on your body and only carry the money you need for one day
- Don't carry weapons
- Take a good pocket torch in case of power cuts
- If you're going to a potentially unstable country – even for a short stay – always register with your country's consulate
- Keep copies of important documents and information – including your passport, insurance policy, 24-hour emergency numbers and ticket details – in a safe place