

Travel Safety Tips

Ideas for planning and enjoying trips so the risk of assault, injury, or other emergency is reduced

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Personal safety traveling tips – when you act on them – can help make your trip as enjoyable as possible. Going to a new place can be a terrific, freeing experience. You can learn a lot, meet great people and have a lot of fun. At the same time, nothing wrecks the joy of travel more than getting hurt, robbed, beaten up, arrested, sick or in an accident. When people travel, they might not recognize potential dangers that would be obvious to them at home, and they do not have the resources that would normally be available to them at home.

Also, there are sometimes unfamiliar natural hazards such as earthquakes, blizzards, tsunamis, tornados, riptides or sandstorms. Get information about travel hazards specific to the places you are going, especially if you are planning to visit different countries or cultures than your own. Avoid the temptation to hurry and try to do too much in too short a time because hurrying creates stress and increases risks – this is true of personal safety traveling as well as staying close to home.

Pay attention to safety advisories. Remember that travel can be very dangerous in places where there is civil unrest or war. Pay attention to health alerts. Travelers are more likely to be targeted for theft or assault, because they are perceived as being vulnerable or as symbols of their government. Protecting personal safety traveling in these areas means being aware of the realities and being prepared to change your plan about where to go or whether to stay if the situation becomes unsafe.

There are many excellent travel books like "The Lonely Planet" and "Let's Go". Many governments have websites with personal safety traveling tips, like this one from the United States:
http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/safety/safety_1747.html

Remember that different is not wrong and that people in different places have different ways of doing things. If you treat people with respect, kindness and patience, most of them will respond with the same.

The good news is that most dangers are avoidable if you keep the following personal safety traveling tips in mind:

1. Watch out for cars. Yes, you know this, but it is easy to forget in a new place where there is so much to look at. Even very experienced people sometimes walk in front of cars and get hit when they are tired, talking on a cell phone, sightseeing or disoriented. In some places, you can get heavily fined for jaywalking or walking in front of a car. If you can, walk on the sidewalk facing traffic. That way you can monitor the movement of on-coming vehicles.
2. Keep track of your important documents. If you are traveling on an airplane or abroad, keep an extra copy of your passport, driver's license, student card and tickets at home and another copy in your baggage. You can also put a copy of important documents on the web through a web-based email account, so if you lose your documents you can easily retrieve the information.
3. Protect yourself from germs and illness - paying extra attention to your health is part of personal safety traveling because you can encounter very different germs. Wash or disinfect your hands before eating. Don't touch your mouth or eyes with dirty hands. You are more likely to get sick when you are tired or when you meet new germs that you have not yet developed a resistance to. Make sure you drink enough water so that you do not get dehydrated. Make sure that the food you eat and the liquids you drink have been properly prepared in a hygienic fashion. Protect yourself from mosquito and other insect bites. Get enough rest.
4. Make sure you take all the medicine, prescriptions and health aids - such as a thermometer, bandages, mosquito repellent, condoms, sun screen, moleskin/blister protection - you might need with you and a first aid kit equipped to stop allergic reactions, infections, bleeding, nausea, bacterial infections, pain, fever and other common problems. Keep medicines in the original containers for airport security. Get and carry copies of important health records such as what medications you are using and what you are allergic to. Bring your doctor's contact information.
5. Do preventative health care well ahead of your trip. Taking a few steps in advance of your trip can promote your health and personal safety traveling weeks or months later. Be up-to-date on your shots. Go to the dentist - a dental emergency is even more awful away from home. If you are going to a more adventurous place, check with your doctor and get any inoculations you need well in advance. If you need to take any medications for some regions, start them ahead of time and keep taking them for as long as recommended after you return.
6. In some places, the locals will be able to eat and drink things that you cannot. Unless you are sure that the local water is safe for you to drink, use bottled water without ice cubes instead of tap water. Being careful about the water won't help you a bit if you order drinks with the local ice. Even the water used to wash vegetables in salads can make you sick. In these places you should only eat well-cooked foods and fruits that you have peeled yourself. In out of the way places, especially in tropical islands, sometimes the bottled water isn't safe either because they just pour it from the tap. If in doubt, boil the water or use an adequate filter. Remember, if you are in a high altitude, it doesn't take as long for water to start boiling, but you have to boil it longer in order to get the sterilizing benefits.
7. If you start to feel unwell, don't ignore it or assume it is minor. Some bugs or allergic reactions can make you very sick, very quickly. . Educate yourself about when to go to the doctor. Know how to get health care where you are and how to take charge of your medical safety by speaking up and advocating for yourself. If you are too ill to speak up for yourself, ask others for help.

8. Avoid stress by planning to travel at a relaxed pace instead of hurrying to do everything. Leave something to enjoy for next time.

9. Figure out where you are going in advance when you can. Try to reserve a place to stay for at least the first night after a long trip and think through how to get there. Carry a map and know how to use it. If you get mixed up, ask someone in a shop or tourist office for directions. Being proactive can help protect your personal safety traveling in unfamiliar areas; people with bad intentions are less likely to choose you as a victim if you act as if you know where you are going and what you are doing.

10. Most of the time, you are safer with people who you approach than with people who approach you. That said, there are many kind people in the world who might offer useful suggestions. Thank them but notice whether they are acting in a way that makes you even a little bit uncomfortable. Is someone just being helpful? Or is she trying to get too close to you? Is he being too pushy? You can interrupt someone and leave politely by saying, "Gotta go. Bye. Thanks!"

11. Carry yourself with awareness, calm and confidence, no matter how you feel inside, making sure you are noticing what is happening around you in all directions. Don't stare at people but look around with a "soft eye." Keep assessing your environment. Neighborhoods can change quickly from one block to the next. Places that are safe by day are not always safe by night. Isolated places are usually less safe than places where there are more people around. Places where gangs hang out are to be avoided in any country. You want to stay away from people who might select you as a target because they feel you are on their turf.

12. Pay attention to who is around you and move away from people whose behavior is unexpected, especially if it seems to be oriented towards you. Leave *any time* you feel uncomfortable. This might mean walking into a shop, crossing the street, leaving a restaurant or nightclub -- or changing your plan and going to where more people are. Your intuition is one of the best tools you have for protecting your personal safety traveling as well as at home. Don't ignore it.

13. Watch out for sob stories that can distract you from protecting your personal safety traveling on foot. If you want to help people, give money to organizations, not to people of any age, gender or ability who approach you with a sad story on the street. Remember that stopping and listening to a sad story identifies you as an easy target.

14. If anyone, for any reason, starts walking with you and talking, make sure that this is something you are choosing. Scan in all directions in case this person has a friend who is approaching from behind you. You can disengage by going into a store or by saying firmly, "SORRY NO!" or "NO THANK YOU!" Use your peripheral vision and keep your awareness on where that person is after you have disengaged.

15. If something looks too good to be true, it probably is. Remember that "all that glitters is not gold" and that "a sucker is born every minute." Don't let yourself be talked into buying stuff unless it is truly something you want and need. Be wary of "instant friends" who invite you to parties or offer you drinks. Remember that there are odor-less, taste-less drugs that can be put into food and drink to cause someone to become semi-conscious for the purposes of sexual assault, robbery or other violence.

16. If someone tries to pick a fight with you, de-escalate the confrontation. Walk away from insults rather than getting into an argument. If somebody claims you did something wrong, apologize. This does not mean that you agree but just that you are sorry that this person is upset. Remember the "I'm okay, you're okay" self defense tactic and be friendly while you leave, even if the other person is acting ugly. It is not your job to fix this person, and you do not owe someone who is trying to attack you the truth.

17. Remember that thieves sometimes work in teams with one person distracting you by bumping into you or talking to you while the other person sneaks up on you. Even groups of children or well-dressed people in public places might try to trick you into letting them get close. One person might squirt something on you and another distract you by pointing it out and offering to help and a third might grab your wallet. One cute child might approach you to have her picture taken while another picks your pocket.

18. Keeping your valuables hidden and close to your body can reduce the chance of hassles and challenges to personal safety traveling in other areas. An outside pocket or backpack is *not* close to your body. A pouch under your clothes or inside pocket works best. You might want to carry a fake wallet or purse with a little money and keep your most important valuables elsewhere. Use traveler's checks instead of carrying too much cash. If you must use a purse, carry it under your arm like a football. Do not wrap the strap around any part of your body. People have been hurt when the purse strap they had wrapped around their neck was grabbed by a person in a passing vehicle.

19. Do what you can to prevent robbery but remember that you are more important than your stuff. If you are dealing with a thief who is armed or threatening, give up your valuables without arguing. Your stuff can be replaced. You cannot. After you have given up your stuff, do not just stand there. Without waiting to see what the robber is going to do next, run to safety. In some places, thieves might try to harm you rather than have you report the robbery.

20. Even if someone has a gun or a knife, do not allow yourself to be abducted. Do not cooperate with commands to be tied up, to have a hood or bag placed over your head, to get into a car or trunk, or to turn your back to the robber or kneel down. These are all bad signs. Almost always, you will be safer running away instead of cooperating. Accept the risk of some injury to avoid much worse injury. If you cannot get away at first, keep looking for a new chance to get away. People are sometimes kidnapped for theft as well as for violence. In some countries, kidnappers take people, perhaps in a fake taxi, and keep them for quite a while, getting them to make withdrawals with their ATM cards.

21. Be polite and persistent about getting help if you need it. You might need to interrupt busy people and tell them what you need more than once. If they cannot help you themselves, they can at least call someone like a security guard or the police who can. In a few countries, law enforcement officials can cause problems for you. Know the risks and local customs ahead of time. In most countries, offering a bribe will get you in jail -- in some, it can keep you out. Know how to get hold of your local embassy in order to protect your legal personal safety traveling outside your country.

22. If you are in a place with a different language than your own, knowing a few words can create good will and increase your ability to get what you want. At least, learn how to say crucial phrases like: "Hello," "Good-bye," "Please," "Thank You," "I need help!" and "Where is the nearest toilet?"

23. Carry a cell phone that works locally if you can. However, any safety plan that involves a cell phone should also have a backup plan because cell phones, while very convenient, do not always work. Having a back-up safety plan that does not rely on functioning technology is important for your personal safety traveling even a few miles from home!

24. Be able to close securely the places you are sleeping, especially in hotels. Make sure you can lock the door well from the inside or use a rubber doorstop. Sometimes, even hotel employees will steal from guests. *think* before you open your hotel room door instead of just assuming that the person at the door is safe. Have a flashlight and know how to get out in case there is a fire.

25. Know the local laws and respect them. Getting arrested is just not worth it. Check with airlines, trains

and buses ahead of time and make sure you understand the rules about what you may carry with you and what you may not.

26. Make sure you are covered by insurance if you drive. Call your credit card and car insurance company and find out ahead of your trip how much of the automobile insurance they actually cover. Consider buying special travel insurance or rental agency insurance. Be sure you understand the local laws. In some countries, stopping to help a victim of an accident can involve you directly in the incident and you could be arrested. In some places, getting in an accident can get you in jail, even if the other person caused it, unless you have the right insurance. These steps can help protect your legal and financial personal safety traveling in regions with different laws and regulations.

27. Drive defensively – this crucial for personal safety traveling in cars anywhere! Be calm and focused, not distracted by sightseeing or conversations. Remember that drinking or using drugs and driving can get you in serious trouble. Pay attention to what is happening in all directions, scanning what is happening with the environment, pedestrians, bikes and other cars so you can avoid trouble sooner rather than later. Slow down to allow extra space from other cars and the edge of the road. Watch out for kids, bikes, people getting out of cars and pedestrians suddenly jumping in front of you -or cars suddenly turning into you. Not only do you not want to have to live with having hurt someone, but an injury accident will put a miserable end to your trip.

28. Protect your personal safety traveling by car, bike, or public transit by being aware of potential danger from other people. Watch out for someone deliberately running into you and then assaulting you when you stop to help. Stop far enough from the car in front of you at intersections to be able to see the rear tires. That way you have enough room to drive away quickly in an emergency. If you are approached while inside your car by anyone for any reason, including a minor accident, in a dark or secluded area, do not get out of your car. If you need to talk to the person, you should leave your car running and in gear. Roll down your window one inch and ask the other person to follow you to a well-lit public area. If the person does anything scary, including producing a weapon of any kind, drive away fast.

29. Don't get into a car as a passenger with a driver who is impaired by alcohol or drugs. Use your seatbelt. Be prepared to ask the driver to drive more safely and protect everyone's personal safety traveling on the roads by not talking on the cell phone, by paying more attention to the road, or by slowing down.

30. Choose legitimate businesses rather than just letting someone charm you into using their business. Many governments supervise tourism such as hotels, boating trips, scuba diving, buses, taxis, etc. Look for recommendations in travel books. You want to be sure that the people you are trusting with your body are what they seem to be and know what they are doing.

31. Have good communication with the people you are traveling with - about where you are going to go, what you are going to do or not do, where you will meet if you separate, how you will handle conflict, steps you will take to take care of personal safety traveling together, and how you will make decisions. Discuss the ideas above so that each person is prepared and on the same page. Help children adapt the personal safety rules they have at home into 'personal safety traveling rules' that make sense when they are on a trip. Make sure that everyone in your traveling group has crucial information such as where you are staying and how to get help if someone is lost or bothered.

32. Let people who care about you know where you are and what you are doing - both for your personal safety traveling and their peace of mind at home. Give people at home your itinerary and how to get hold of you. Let them know when your plans change. Call your parents, partner, kids or other people who might worry about you. Emotional safety for the people who love you lies in their knowing that you are okay and

that you have not forgotten them. Taking a few minutes to give someone who might be worrying about you the gift of peace of mind is *good karma*.

The bottom line is that your personal safety traveling – and at every other time as well – is more important than ANYONE'S convenience, embarrassment or offense, even your own. To be safe, you need to take the time to prepare adequately for your trip. To be safe, you might need to walk away from a mean, unfair person instead of getting into an argument. To be safe, you might need to overcome your embarrassment and yell for help. To be safe, you might need to give up your stuff. To be safe, you might need to use the longer, much less convenient route to get somewhere you want to go because the short cut is isolated. To be safe, you might need to offend someone and not let him or her get close to you. To be safe, you might need to wait to eat or drink. To be safe, you might need to change your plan.

Personal safety traveling tips, when you use them, can help you achieve the most important travel goal of all – to HAVE FUN! Enjoy your journey. Remember that most people are good, that life is an adventure and that the world is a wonderful place to explore.