

5 Tips For Traveling Abroad

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Monday, 11 February 2008

Overseas travel can be an exciting and enriching experience. It can also be a nightmare if the right things go wrong. Fortunately, you can learn from my past mistakes and missteps, so that you can relax and enjoy yourself.

Research Your Destination - This one is simple. Learn about where you're going. Know the customs and culture, as it helps you avoid embarrassing social blunders. Know the major cities and safest methods of travel. Most importantly, use this research to start picturing what you would like to do while you're there. There are thousands of internet resources for key information about your travel destination, but nothing has been as helpful to me in my wanderings as Lonely Planet guidebooks. Lonely Planet guidebooks provide near encyclopedic knowledge about a country, its cities, hot spots, out-of-the-way spots, hotels and hostels, restaurants and just about anything else you can imagine. They are written by people who have been there, eaten in the restaurants, stayed in the rooms, visited the sights, and occasionally they write their opinions on some of it. They can also be very helpful for finding safe places to eat in developing countries.

Hold Your Cash Close - Nothing is scarier than losing your valuables 12,000 miles from home and it is one of the most common travel disasters for unprepared tourists. In developed countries, it can be a serious hassle and, at the least, could mean losing a healthy day or two from your vacation time. In developing countries though, that hassle can quickly turn into the worst experience of your life.

You can find money belts and other similar products at major retailers and specialty retailers alike. It is a pouch that can be worn around the waist, (some can be worn around the neck) tucked out of sight. Keep your passport, rail pass, cash, credit cards, contact lists, etc., inside the money belt. I can personally recommend that you sheath everything in a plastic bag since sweating through the pouch is inevitable. Please do not try and hide your pouch on the beach or side of a pool while swimming. It is an old hiding spot, and your money will probably get stolen. **Are Backpacks a Bad Idea?** - I was in Salvador, Brazil in February a few years back in a densely populated public square. I had on my trusty Jansport backpack with the leather bottom. I had always said they were the best you could buy, ever since they carried all my heavy loads in high school. A close friend and I were having a good conversation, when I noticed my backpack was about ten pounds lighter. I reached around and realized that the main pocket was completely empty. The bottom was sliced open and I had relieved of my personals rather quickly. Luckily for me, all I was storing in that pocket was an extra change of clothes, backup sunglasses, sunblock and a hard plastic water bottle. I had a good laugh about it later, but couldn't help thinking about how much differently it could have turned out. If I had carried anything I had considered valuable, even my favorite t-shirt, I would have been a lot more miffed. I know fanny packs are old news, but I got a really nice one from North Face. It was large enough to store the portable valuables. Instead of wearing it on the hips, I slung it over my shoulder so I could keep an eye on it at all times. Don't get me wrong. Backpacks are fine alright, but if you absolutely don't need to bring it to a crowded place, don't bring it.

Clothes DO Make a Difference - Have you ever been skiing in shorts? How about sunbathing in a winter coat? Consider the climate of the places you intend visit and use that to help plan what clothing you intend to bring. You can consider buying clothing at your destination, but some places are just plain expensive. I once ended up in Hong Kong for a short period. I had been in the tropics for the 2 months prior, so I didn't have a single rain jacket or heavy coat.

Go figure that the entire week I was visiting, the temperature didn't rise above 60 degrees. The burn you can get from and equatorial sun is one of the most intense sunburns you can get. Believe it or not, long thin cotton shirts and thin khaki pants are actually very comfortable in sunny areas. They also help in areas with a lot of insects. Dark shirts are a bad idea in any hot climate.

They trap the heat on your body and cause your shirt to turn into a swimming pool. Shorts are a bad idea if you plan on walking through heavy brush or if the culture does not like seeing knees. Consult your trusty guide book for climate and cultural information. Keep Track of Conversions - In the age of the credit card, conversions are not as necessary when you travel to the big cities.

However, a lot of places still prefer that you pay cash (even in highly developed areas like Japan) and very few countries accept the US Dollar universally. That is not to say you can't find places that do, but it is a bad idea to bank on finding one that does. I find it best to always carry some cash in both US Dollars and the other currency (there are noted exceptions in places like Cambodia, where they take the dollar so frequently that they bring out the calculator if you try to pay with their currency) That being said, you'll need to convert your money. My suggestion is to exchange a small amount every day or every few days. I'll let your spending sensibilities determine how much, but my suggestion is to have enough for spending and set aside some in case of an emergency. Keep track of the exchange rate by finding a newspaper, or find an internet caf? and look it up. Do the conversion yourself first. That way if someone tries to pocket a few, you'll pick up on it. Never trust any currency exchange from anywhere without at least knowing an estimate of how much you'll get back.

Now you know the things I wish I knew the first time I traveled internationally. You can sleep a little easier and concentrate on experiencing whatever culture you've decided to experience. Please travel with consideration of the cultures and people. Remember that when you visit another country, in many ways, you act as an ambassador of the country you are from. I hope your travels always lead you to exciting and beautiful places. If you have been wondering, my favorite cities are Havana, Cuba and Hong Kong, PRC. My favorite place was Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Bon Voyage!

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