

PERSONAL SAFETY & SECURITY OVERSEAS

International travel and living overseas offer opportunities to engage other cultures and broaden one's life experiences, but also present certain personal safety and security risks. Each individual can develop effective strategies to minimize these risks in order to enjoy a productive and safe experience. Common sense is the watchword here. But given cultural differences, it is not always clear what "common" is. In this regard understanding the language and culture of the host country and developing relationships locally will provide the clues to determining the most appropriate strategies for safely navigating new environments. It takes time to develop the understanding and skills to recognize and accurately interpret the cultural cues and nuances that attend daily interactions. Personal behavior and exposure to risks should be guided by an appreciation of this vulnerability. While there are no firm guarantees for personal safety, there are attitudes you can develop and actions you can take to reduce the risk of being victimized.

Every destination is unique as are individual characteristics, strengths and vulnerabilities. No one resource can address all eventualities. This reference, culled from years of personal experience living overseas and travelling internationally, offers guidance and tools for international travelers to more confidently navigate new environments through simple yet effective risk mitigation strategies.

1. Pre-Departure

As you prepare to travel, live and work overseas you can best enhance your personal safety and security by educating yourself about the destination country. The internet and contact persons who have recently traveled to the same destination are valuable sources of useful information and lessons learned. Here are some measures that may prove useful.

Know Before You Go

- Visit country-specific websites for information on political, social, economic, geographic, and other characteristics of your destination country.
- For LGBTQ travelers, understand the laws, levels of enforcement, and cultural restrictions toward homosexuality in destination countries.
 - ISOS has produced a useful white paper *Managing and Mitigating Risks for the LGBT Mobile Workforce* (2018)
<http://learn.internationalsos.com/LGBTWhitepaper?elqTrackId=566E8039A2719080D4D6C5A3F8EADCA2&elq=9e8fc69e83564323a860c22cc6172cf1&elqaid=8366&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5496>
- Review project documents, demographic studies, economic surveys.
- Register with your embassy. Many countries offer on-line registration. For US citizens, visit the Smart Travelers Enrollment Plan at [STEP](#)
- For additional US traveler information and travel advisories, visit <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>.

- Other useful websites are [UK Foreign Office](#), [CDC Travel](#) or [ASIRT](#) (provides transportation safety information for many countries).
- Consider the climate and weather at your point of destination and/or any layover cities. Check out www.weather.com.
- If possible, establish a reliable, personal contact in the destination country to clarify information, respond to concerns, offer guidance, etc.
- Know the location and contact information for your consulate or embassy at the country of destination.
- Complete a personal safety course for travelers. Many courses are available at www.disasterready.org. You'll need to set up an account and log in (it's free!). Check out these two courses. [Travel Safety and Personal Security Part 1](#) and [Travel Safety and Personal Security Part 2](#).

Health

- Determine whether your health insurance coverage extends to destination country.
- Consider augmenting health insurance with additional medical/medevac insurance.
- Take an extra pair of glasses. Contact lenses can be problematic in many countries.
- Inform your personal physician of your travel plans.
- Visit a travel clinic to get any necessary vaccines/medications
- Get a dental check-up and cleaning
- Assemble a personal travel medical kit to include:
 - Anti-diarrheal medication
 - Antibiotics
 - Anti-malarial prophylaxis (if appropriate)
 - Antihistamine and decongestant
 - Antacid and laxative
 - Anti-bacterial cream
 - Anti-bacterial hand wipes
 - Hand sanitizer
 - Pain reliever /fever reducer
 - Gauze, band-aids, bandages, medical tape
 - Insect repellent with DEET 35%
 - Sunscreen
 - Thermometer
 - 2-3 ziploc bags
 - First aid manual

Personal Affairs

- Get an international driver's license (from AAA). NOTE: driving in other countries entails significantly greater risks than driving at home. See guidance below under **Ground Travel**
- If you plan to carry prescription medicines, be sure to have authorization to carry such from your physician. Some prescription medicines are considered controlled substances in other countries.

- Ensure your home is secured and protected while you are away.
- Ensure that insurance policies are up-to-date and arrange for payment of premiums.
- Authorize a Power of Attorney for a trusted individual.
- Make out a will.
- Ensure mobile phone calling plan applies to destination country. Or that your mobile device accepts local SIM card.
- Insure valuables and equipment (cameras, binoculars, laptops, etc.)
- Subscribe to a new credit card with low credit limit separate from existing credit cards.
- Notify your credit card company of your intent to travel. Confirm credit limit.
- Ensure passport is valid for at least six months and has two blank pages.
- Scan passport and visa, credit cards, passport photo, other documents that need to be replaced quickly, if lost or stolen. Email scanned copies to your email account.
- Bring several extra passport photos.

Packing

- Pack your luggage wisely. Be aware of any security restrictions and prohibitions for carry-on and checked-in luggage
- Travel light. Carry clothing that is conservative and practical. If you'd hate to lose it, don't bring it.
- Be sure to pack 2-3 day 'survival items' in your carry-on bag. This includes: medicines and toiletries, extra change of clothes and undergarments, important documents, dry food snack, journal, etc.). Add drinking water once you clear security.
- In your carry-on bag include: a personal first aid kit, dental floss, antiseptic wipes, a small flashlight and extra batteries, sun screen, sewing kit – no scissors).
- Leave travel itinerary and contact information with family or friends; otherwise keep this information confidential.
- Understand the laws and currency exchange rates in destination country.
- Carry foreign currency in small denominations for tipping and minor purchases while in transit.
- Do not openly display your name tags on your luggage. Do not include your address, only first name and contact telephone number.
- Do not display company logo on luggage. Place a business card in a visible place inside each piece of luggage.

2. Air Travel

The hassles and stress of airline travel can be distracting and make you vulnerable to criminal activity. Those who prey upon travelers are ready to take advantage while waiting in line or pre-occupied with checking-in, negotiating your luggage, or changing money. Given the high state of security at many airports expect delays and sudden changes in flight schedules. You may wish to consider the following:

- Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothing and durable slip-on shoes.
- Arrive at the airport in plenty of time. Usually two hours before departure should suffice, but extraordinary security measures may mean longer delays than usual.

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- Move through passenger security immediately after ticketing and locate departure gate.
- Stay with your bags at all times.
- Be careful about how much of your personal/business information you share with fellow passengers. After all, the other person is still a stranger.
- Limit intake of alcohol in flight. Drink plenty of water to counteract 'jet lag'. This will help limit stress and increase alertness.
- Set your watch to local time.
- Have your immigration and customs documents in order and available. A durable folder secured by a buckle or elastic band may be useful.
- Be patient. Fatigue and jet lag will conspire with long lines to try your patience.
- Beware of airport 'expeditors' who offer to process your documents. If they are legitimate, they should have valid airport photo identification.
- Change some money into local currency (at least double the amount of taxi fare).
- If possible, pre-arrange transport from the airport to your hotel. Be clear about confirming identity of person/service providing transport.
- Consider booking a hotel that provides shuttle service to and from the airport.
- Only take official, licensed taxis. Note the license plate number of taxi – write it down.
- Avoid getting into a taxi already occupied by others. If necessary, pay extra for a single fare.
- Negotiate price before getting in taxi. Have money ready to pay in appropriate denominations.
- Take a seat on a bus or train that allows you to observe fellow passengers, but does not preclude options to change seats if necessary.

3. Awareness

Personal safety begins with awareness. Awareness begins with a clear understanding of one's attitudes, values, self-esteem, personal strengths and limitations. What does your attitude, dress, and body language say about your vulnerability? It continues with insight into the host culture and environment and how you might be perceived based on local attitudes toward strangers, gender perceptions, values, mores and means of communicating. Major risk factors associated with assault are: being alone, out at night, under the influence of alcohol or drugs and frequenting high-risk locations. Choose to control for these risk factors. In order to be alert to potential dangers and risks to your well-being, you need to be aware of what is going on in your immediate environment. Study. Observe. Ask. Some general themes for raising awareness follow:

- Assess your emotional and physical strengths and limitations.
- Be attentive to how you are perceived by local people and behave in a manner that is not provocative or draws unwanted attention.
- For LGBTQ travelers, understand the legal and cultural environment with respect to explicit declarations and behavior.
 - Act with discretion
 - Avoid public declarations of sexual orientation or gender identity

- Be aware of places under surveillance
- Avoid using technologies (meet up groups, dating apps) that can be monitored by authorities
- Strive to understand the local language and cultural norms.
- Understand local currency exchange rates.
- Familiarize yourself with your neighborhood and work environment.
- Use street smarts. Beware of pickpockets, scam artists, over-friendly strangers, loiterers, etc.
- Remove name tags or convention badges outside venue.
- Pay attention to local media (newspapers, radio, television, gossip).
- Be aware of the people nearby, of dark streets, of parked cars.
- Beware of strangers who try to engage you to gain your trust.
- Keep alert to potential trouble and choose to avoid when possible. Trust your instincts.
- Educate yourself of any pending events (elections, demonstrations, anniversaries) that may cause civil disturbance, and avoid unnecessary risks.
- Establish a support network among your colleagues and embassy personnel.
- Inform yourself of the availability and reliability of local support services (police, security, medical, emergency, fire).
- Confirm with the embassy the procedures for you and your family in the event of a crisis or evacuation.
- Politely decline offers of food or drink from strangers.
- Accept beverages only in sealed containers; make sure there's been no tampering.

4. Personal Conduct

It is important to appreciate the image you project and thus, how you are perceived by others. The choices you make regarding behavior, attire, travel, possessions, relationships, etc. will influence how other perceive you and thus your exposure to risk. How you behave affects not only your personal safety, but the safety of others with whom you are associated. It is incumbent upon the traveler to behave in a manner that is neither disrespectful nor provocative.

- Behave maturely and in a manner befitting your status in the local society. Insist on being treated with respect.
- Dress in a manner that is inoffensive to local cultural norms.
- Avoid clothing that shows your nationality or political views.
- Establish personal boundaries and act to protect them.
- Exercise additional caution on occasions when displaying conspicuous possessions (jewelry, phone, sunglasses, camera, etc.).
- Vary the patterns of your behavior to be less predictable.
- Divide money among several pockets. If you carry a wallet, carry it in a front pocket.
- If you carry a purse, carry it close to your body. Do not set it down or leave it unattended.
- Take a patient and calm approach to ambiguity and conflict.
- Radiate confidence while walking in public places.

- Follow your instincts. If a situation is uncomfortable, remove yourself from that situation.
- Be cool when facing confrontation; focus on de-escalation and escape.
- Respect local sensitivities to photographing/videotaping, especially at airports, police and government facilities.
- Carry official identification with you at all times.
- Report any security incidents to the embassy security officer and your organization (as appropriate). They will advise you of options - reporting to local authorities, prosecution, corrective measures, etc.
- Maintain a low-key profile, especially in places where there may be hostility toward foreigners/westerners or people that match your personal profile.
- Avoid public expressions about local politics, religion and other sensitive topics.
- Understand that as the sun goes down risks go up.
- Avoid being out late at night or after curfew.
- Watch for surveillance. Beware of anyone taking unusual interest in your activities or movements

5. At the Hotel

When you arrive at your point of destination, you will be eager to settle-in, unpack your bags, take a shower and get your bearings. Opportunistic and predatory criminals often target hotel guests who are deemed to be rich, unlikely to engage the local authorities, or to remain in country to prosecute, thereby, making travelers a desirable target. Here are a few tips to consider:

- Use reputable hotels, hostels or boarding houses – your safety is worth any added cost.
- Thoroughly research alternative lodging options (AirBnB) and seek organizational guidance before using.
- Remind hotel staff to not give out your room number to anyone.
- Keep your room number to yourself. If your room key is numbered, or has your room number on a key holder, keep it out of sight.
- If a hotel clerk announces your room number loud enough for others to hear, ask for a new room.
- Take a walk around the hotel facilities to familiarize yourself with your environment.
 - How is access to the room floors controlled?
 - Are hotel personnel located on each floor?
 - Are they in uniform? Do they display any identification?
- Avoid ground floor rooms at the hotel. Second through fifth floors are desirable (harder to break into, but still accessible to firefighting equipment).
- Inspect room carefully. Look under the bed, in the showers and closets.
- Call the front desk to ensure telephone works.
- Ensure door and window locks are working. Don't forget the sliding glass door.
- Ensure door has a peephole and chain lock.
- Read the safety instructions in your hotel room.
- Familiarize yourself with hotel emergency exits and fire extinguishers.

- Count the doors between your room and nearest emergency exit (in case of fire or blackout). Rehearse your escape plan.
- Keep hotel door locked with dead bolt or chain at all times (don't forget the sliding glass door and windows).
- Consider traveling with rubber door stop, smoke detector, motion detector.
- Identify anyone who knocks at your door before you open the door.
- If you doubt room delivery, check with the front desk before opening the door.
- Meet visitors in the lobby. Avoid entertaining strangers in your room.
- If you are out of your room, leave television/radio on with volume turned up. Place "do not disturb" sign outside door.
- Do not leave sensitive documents or valuables in the open, unattended in the room.
- Keep valuables in room safe with programmable PIN code.
- Keep your laptop out of sight, in a safe or in a locked suitcase. You may wish to use a laptop cable lock to secure your laptop to a window frame or bathroom plumbing.
- You may wish to use a hotel safety deposit box. Be sure you can gain access to your valuables when you need to.
- Avoid using a hotel front office safe. Because many individuals may have access, should anything go missing finding the culprit, let alone recovering your property will prove difficult.

6. Residential

When residing overseas it is critically important to understand the threat environment and to put in place reasonable measures to address any safety and security risks. Contact the embassy or access on-line crime data, or seek local professional support to access security information.

Here are some security measures you might want to consider:

- Avoid single entry or dead-end streets and cul-de-sacs.
- Choose a location with multiple avenues of egress.
- Ensure building is solid, secure structure.
- Strictly control access to and distribution of keys.
- Install adequate lighting, window grilles, alarm systems, perimeter walls, as necessary.
- Establish access procedures for strangers and visitors.
- Hire trained guards, night patrols. Periodically check-up on guards.
- Set-up a safe room in your house.
 - Ensure hard boundary with rest of house
 - Ensure the following supplies are set aside:
 - Water – 4 liter/person/day
 - Candles and matches
 - 7-day food supply (foods that do not require refrigeration).
 - Canned food (sardines, tuna fish, fruit)
 - Dry goods (cereal, biscuits, protein bars)
 - Dry fruit (raisins, apricots, figs)
 - Juice cartons
 - Flour, sugar salt, tea, coffee
 - Camping stove and propane gas

- Cooking utensils and can opener
 - Blankets/sleeping bags
 - AM/FM Radio with spare batteries
 - Flashlights/lamps with spare batteries
 - Fire extinguishers, smoke detectors
 - First aid kit
 - Personal hygiene supplies
 - Scissors, Swiss army knife, Leatherman
 - Toiletries (towels, soap, toothpaste, toilet roll, etc.)
 - Cleaning equipment, garbage bags, towelettes, buckets
 - Redundant communications (mobile phone, landline, VHF radio)
 - Entertainment (books, playing cards, etc.)
 - Mobile phone and sufficient air time
- Replace external locks.
 - Establish rapport with neighbors. Is there a 'neighborhood watch' program?
 - Seek guidance from local colleagues or expatriates who have insight into local housing arrangements.
 - Ensure adequate communications (telephone, radio, cell phone) with local colleagues and embassy.
 - Install back-up generator (with spare fuel) and/or solar panels.
 - Install smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and carbon monoxide monitors, as appropriate.
 - Avoid sleeping with the windows open or unlocked.
 - Ensure windows have treatments that prevent external observation
 - Keep a go bag available in case of emergency departure.
 - Passport
 - Driver's license
 - Credit cards, debit cards
 - Cash in multiple denominations
 - Airline tickets
 - Laptop and charger
 - Medications and prescriptions
 - Phone and charger
 - Contact list/constant companion
 - Notebook and pen
 - Personal items and toiletries
 - Change of clothes
 - Dry foods and drinking water

7. Ground Travel

Experience suggests that one's vulnerability to accident or crime increases while traveling overland. Not only may the environment and road conditions be unfamiliar to you, you may also encounter unsafe road conditions; untrained or unlicensed drivers; drivers operating under the influence of alcohol or drugs; vehicles that are poorly maintained and therefore hazardous

(no headlights or tail lights, faulty brakes, smooth tires etc.); police checkpoints or roadblocks; bandits and other criminals. Some recommendations for ground travel follow:

- If you are going to drive educate yourself about local laws and customs regarding rights of way, licensing and insurances.
- Plan your trips carefully. Always know where you are going.
- Study a map. Identify potential hazards and safe havens.
- Park in a manner that will allow you to exit safely and quickly.
- Before you leave, let a trusted person know your itinerary, but otherwise safeguard your plans.
- Use a common vehicle model (local taxis may be a good indicator). If you rent, remove any markings that identify vehicle as a rental.
- Carry a cell phone, first aid kit, maps, flashlight, and official documents in your vehicle.
- Use the seat belts.
- Restrict night travel.
- Travel with others when possible.
- Avoid hitchhiking and/or picking up hitchhikers.
- Do not take shortcuts through remote or unlighted areas.
- Have someone meet you at your destination point. When you arrive, let others know.
- Keep the vehicle windows rolled up and the doors locked.
- Be alert to scam artists and carjackers while stopped in traffic.
- Understand the local “rules” for response should you be involved in or witness a traffic accident. In many cases, stopping for an accident can put your life at risk.
- Thoroughly research ride-sharing services in country and seek organizational guidance before using.

8. If You Become a Victim

Despite all of your efforts to reduce exposure to risks and to avoid threats, you may still become the victim of a crime or critical event. Following are some general response strategies:

- Remain calm and alert.
- Carefully note details of the environment around you (license plate #, distinguishing features, accents, clothing, etc.).
- Try first to defuse the situation.
- If an assailant demands property, give it up.
- You can create a timely diversion by tossing your wallet, watch, etc. to the ground in the opposite direction you choose to flee.
- Against overwhelming odds (weapons, multiple assailants) try reasoning, cajoling, begging, any psychological ploy.
- If you feel your life is endangered and you decide to physically resist, commit to the decision and fight with every fiber of your being. Turn fear into fury.
- Report any incident to your organization/embassy.
- Seek support for post-traumatic stress (even if you exhibit no symptoms).

9. Kidnapping

Kidnapping of foreigners is a growing phenomenon in many regions of the world. Those who perpetrate these crimes are either promoting a political agenda and/or seeking to gain a financial or political dividend. Travelers are highly advised to be aware whether there is a history or risk (known threats, targeting) of kidnappings in places they intend to travel and take necessary precautions. Because hostage situations vary greatly, the following considerations should be applied based on one's best judgment at the time. For more information go to:

[Hostage Survival](#)

- Familiarize yourself with the policy of your organization/government re: managing kidnapping cases and paying ransoms.
- The greatest risk of physical harm exists at the point of capture and during a rescue attempt or upon release.
- Remain calm and alert, exert control on emotions and behavior.
- Be passively cooperative, but maintain your dignity.
- Assume an inconspicuous posture, avoid agitating your captors.
- Avoid resistance, belligerence or threatening movements.
- Make reasonable, low-key requests for personal comforts (bathroom breaks, a blanket, exercise, books to read, etc.) that humanize you in the eyes of your captors.
- If questioned, keep answers short. Volunteer nothing.
- Focus on resilience – mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological well-being.
- As a captive situation draws out, try to establish some rapport with your captors.
- Avoid discussing contentious issues (politics, religion, ethnicity, etc.)
- Establish a daily regimen to maintain yourself physically and mentally.
- Eat what your captors provide. Consume little food and drink. Avoid alcohol.
- Keep a positive, hopeful attitude.
- Attempt to escape only after weighing the risks and when the chances of success are in your favor.