

SAFETY TIPS ON TRAVEL

For Missions, Humanitarian, Government or Leisure Travel

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Traveling into Hostile Areas

Individuals travel abroad for many purposes, including business ventures, vacations, educational opportunities, humanitarian efforts, political and governmental relations, and evangelical purposes. The reason for the travel may seem insignificant when compared to the precautionary steps one should take before departure.

Many travelers have an awesome experience and return with a love for their new destination, memories of new friendships, and for some, a desire to return. Others while traveling may become victims of crime or accidents and they return with physical and emotional scars. Some may never return.

In many countries, the environment is hostile and changes quickly and without warning. No matter the level of planning and preparation, things can go wrong.

All travels are exposed to “travel risk” associated with the destination, the traveler, the mode of travel, the political climate, the very reason for travel and the inability to communicate due to language barriers. Religious missionaries or individuals on humanitarian missions may be exposed to risks specific to the reason for their travel. Additionally, any traveler could simply be at risk for things, whether it be money, medicine, supplies or food.

It is also important to know if any terrorist activities have occurred in the area you are visiting. Learn who was targeted and the tactics used.

The risk common to all travelers include transportation issues, assault, robbery, vandalism, prejudice, rape, killing, kidnap and being held hostage, imprisonment, accident, illness and/or injury, death (murder, illness, and accident).

Hostile Lands with Travel Adversaries

The State Department issues travel adversaries to areas that are considered hostile. However, this list is not inclusive of every area, noting that a climate can change in a moment’s notice as a once peaceful area becomes violent. Clashes can occur between opposing political parties or disagreement over governmental actions, or religious fighting among groups can send a country into lockdown. Sometimes, hostility occurs between “those who have” and “those who have not.” Areas suffering from financial loss due to natural disasters, illnesses or government oppression may harm those arriving to render aid in an attempt to provide for their needs.

Therefore, regardless of where you are traveling, there are many factors to consider, pre and post travel.

Preparing for Travel

Preparation is important to ensure a successful trip. If traveling with a group, it is important to build a good team while learning about the host culture, history, government, language, food, security issues safety issues, and health concerns.

Research the political and religious climate and understand the religious tolerance and the perceived welcoming of your group. Learn the laws and culture of the country. What may be appropriate in one country may be an offense in another. For example, tattoos and body art and piercings may have to be covered in certain areas.

Ensure that someone on your team is trained in fire safety and can effectively operate a fire extinguisher.

It is also recommended that travelers be trained in basic self-defense and situational awareness.

If at all possible, learn the language or at least have written language guides that you can show to the locals. The more you can hear and understand, the better you will be able to communicate and be aware of your surroundings.

Research the dress code and social norms of behavior. Define ways in which your group will “fit in” versus “stand out.”

Research the location and contact information of the country’s embassy and consulate. Check your country’s governmental online resources on countries and their characteristics and requirements. If your host country does not have an embassy in the destination country, then make inquiries with your government before departure as to the diplomatic arrangements.

Government websites list foreign embassies and their contact information. Ensure visa requirements are completed.

Research your options for medical and travel insurance. Insurance comes in all shapes, sizes and can tailor a program to fit the needs and budget of the group. Additional insurance consists of life, disability, lost baggage, lost or stolen personal property as well as extraction from the country in the case of emergency.

Risk Management Services include qualified counselors upon return, medical rehabilitation facilities when returned state-side, medical cosmetic, psychiatric and dental impairments. Some offer defense and indemnity to agencies from family or estate lawsuits. Others will cover loss of income or receipts resulting from the incident. Some policies provide payments for ransom. Other options include expert negotiation strategists, security consultants, and interpreters.

Prepare medically by ensuring that you have the appropriate vaccinations. Visit the website for the Centers for Disease Control to learn what is needed for the area you are visiting. Obtain documentation of your vaccinations.

Obtain medical documentation for any medications that you will take with you. Medicines including vitamins must be in their original containers. Make sure the name on the prescription matches the name on your Passport. Prepare your body for changes in diet and drink and include medications to assist with these changes.

It is also important that when preparing to travel that consideration is given to ensure there is a first aid capability within the group; especially when traveling to those locations where medical services and capabilities are poor or unknown.

The group must know the nearest hospitals and medical centers. Also be aware of what services

are offered at each site so that split minute decisions can send you to the correct location.

Unfortunately, many sites are not within easy reach of a medical facility and injured persons may need to be airlifted or transported by other means. Medical emergencies may not be brought on by third party causes but could be the results of various illnesses and pre-existing medical conditions.

The Transportation Security Administration website contains rules and regulations on packing and carrying medications. Obtain a letter from your physician that lists your medications and equipment used to administer them. Also, bring a second letter by using online translation software to translate the original letter to the language of your destination country.

Prepare for physical and mental health requirements of the trip. Consider exhaustion and perhaps the lack of sound sleep accommodations. Prepare for the mental exhaustion if you are traveling in a humanitarian or mission role.

Coordinate with your medical insurance provider to see if coverage is available in the area you are visiting.

Prepare for any and all types of weather, with the premise that additional supplies may not be available. Understand the potential impact of natural disasters whether earthquake, flood or drought. Plan and prepare for these events if in an area susceptible to them.

Research the type of currency used and how it is transferred. Limit the number of credit cards you take and advise the holder of your travel plans.

Ensure your Pass Port is not expired and will be good for a few months (six months) after your projected return. Make certain the PassPort and picture identification details are exactly the same.

Prior to traveling, also prepare a will and a power of attorney document for medical and physical administration.

If you are taking a laptop, tablet or smartphone, make a backup of everything and leave it at home. Remove anything that is not essential to your travels. Passcodes are recommended on each. Make sure the software is updated with the latest software and antivirus protection.

Purchase a card reader or two to copy pictures/files off devices during the trip in case something is lost and/or confiscated.

If taking a laptop, purchase a Laptop Lock Down Cable for when you are away from your computer.

Be cautious in promoting your planned trip online or in conversations with strangers.

Any person traveling should realize the potential risk of disease, sickness, inadequate health care, violence, robbery, kidnapping, arbitrary imprisonment, disaster, personal injury, property damage, and financial loss.

Departure Checklist

Register with and follow Governmental Travel Recommendations. Establish a connection with your host country's embassy, which should be done prior to travel. Arrangements vary between different countries, but for American visitors, the United States Department of State has many free enrollment avenues that a missions group may take advantage of to ensure safe and secure travel to and during the group's duration. The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), a subdivision of the United States Department of State, allows individual travelers and groups to register with the local U.S. Embassy or Consulate. STEP is designed for those who travel abroad individually or with a group.

The Department of State offers a 24/7 hotline in Washington, DC (888-407-4747 or 202-501-4444) for emergencies.

Designate a 24/7 contact person who will monitor the travels of the group and will be prepared to take any actions necessary should contact be non-established.

Ensure that each member of your travel group has memorized the address of where you are staying and where you are going.

Safety While Traveling

Ensure the safety of all travelers, especially children, teenagers and the vulnerable. Establish a “buddy system” where each team member has another person to whom they are responsible. If an exceptionally large travel group, the numbering system is beneficial.

Practice good “situational awareness” skills. Be vigilant to the surroundings, people, and movements of things. Be aware of distractions, tricks, and ploys that are aimed at making you a victim.

Leave expensive jewelry and other expensive items behind.

If you are staying in a hotel, there are many things to consider. First, attacks often occur at hotels because Western Cultures often choose to stay in a hotel and their belongings are secured there. Additionally, there may be travelers from many areas staying there, therefore; broadening the publicity of an attack. Additionally, hotels contain restaurants, bars, meeting rooms and banquet halls that may have limited security.

If you are staying in a hotel, choose a room on the third or fourth floor on an inside wall with windows. Avoid rooms near roads in case of a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED). Avoid first and second floor rooms and rooms with walk-up entry doors. If something

should happen, such as a fire, your chances are good at surviving a jump from a third or fourth floor. Chances of surviving a burglary at the hotel door are probably not as good.

When arriving in the room, check all doors and windows. Do anything you can to provide extra security at all points of entry.

It is debatable as to the amount of documentation you should carry with you at all times. You should have a Pass Port, picture identification, credit cards, a form of currency, and other belongings. It is difficult to know if you can “trust” the hotel safe. It is challenging to carry everything with you in the event you are robbed. Make paper and scanned copies of everything and have it on a thumb drive and on your phone. Be sure to include a complete list of emergency and medical contacts. Provide a copy of everything to your travel buddy in the event something should happen.

It is recommended in some countries that travelers carry a photocopy of his/her passport. Additionally, one should keep a copy of everything back home with an emergency contact should a document become lost or

Carry only sufficient money needed for the journey or specific visit. If you are carrying money on your body, keep it in more than one location. For example, use several locations such as a back pocket, front pocket, shoe, tape money to your stomach, etc.

If you carry a bag, carry a sturdy bag or a backpack, but carry it on the front of your body.

Establish financial resilience for emergencies where access to ATM’s or financial exchanges may be limited or not available.

Only connect to Wi-Fi networks for a limited time and never surf directly. Use a VPN to connect you to the Internet, if possible.

If you are traveling for more than a week, make sure to update the security, antivirus software on the device on a weekly basis. If staying for more than 30 days, make sure you update all software with the latest patches.

Keep lock codes and passwords on all devices.

Each day, copy all pictures/documents off to SD/USB/Thumb drive in case the device is damaged or confiscated. If asked by law enforcement to turn over the device, do not resist.

Kidnap Avoidance

There are many reports of kidnapping while traveling abroad. An American missionary from Seattle was kidnapped by masked gunmen according to the New York Times Daily News on February 24, 2015.

A Catholic Missionary priest was kidnapped in Nigeria in September 2018 according to the Catholic News Agency. He was released and/or escaped the next day; however, he died four days later, suspected from the injuries he sustained during his kidnapping.

Islamic militants kidnapped a U.S. Missionary couple and beheaded another American after an audacious raid at a holiday retreat. They were held captive 367 days as reported in the Chicago Tribune.

While traveling, it is important to understand the risk of being kidnapped. Although perceived as random acts against vulnerable targets, kidnapping in foreign countries are a well-planned and often targeted to maximize the rewards. Local knowledge and awareness can prevent travelers from entering areas or locations that play into kidnappers' advantage.

The first and probably most important rule is to never go anywhere alone. Adhere to the buddy system. Do not go out at night.

Try to meet the locals who can offer advice on safe places to visit. Follow their advice.

If you are dressed expensively and are attending a function, wear a coat over your clothes so as not to appear richly dressed.

Avoid excessive alcohol and in any setting, protect your drink. Remember that alcohol may have much stronger ratios than in the states.

Only go to establishments that are well-lighted and avoid dark or non-tourist areas at night.

If you think you are being followed, do not go to the location you are staying. Step into another building or change course until you feel it is safe and clear to proceed to your destination.

Militant groups are renowned for demanding ransoms. Thus, kidnapping, extortion, and detention are their goals. Other militant groups are conducting surges in their countries of individuals associated with Christianity.

Be on the alert at all times when traveling in areas of hostility.

Law Enforcement Concerns

Common sense and situational awareness play a large role in ensuring a safe and secure trip. Many travelers inadvertently make themselves attractive targets for criminals as they have been known to carry large amounts of cash, credit cards, and original documents. Therefore, it is important to understand security and law enforcement agencies in the country of travel. "DK Eyewitness Travel Guide" is an excellent reference source for this. This provides a detailed list of whom to contact in the event of an emergency and provides a detailed list of whom to contact in the event of an emergency and provides a picture of the security or law enforcement entity in full uniform. Many countries have different levels of security and law enforcement agencies which are confusing to travelers. It is helpful to have this knowledge

in the event you approach a roadblock/security check or if someone should approach your location.

Be cautious and aware that police in certain countries are not as trustworthy as in other countries and levels of corruption may be high.

Avoid civil disturbances by registering with the U.S. Department of State and other organizations such as the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) report will provide alerts when protests or civil disturbances occur and where they are occurring. Although a protest may appear lawful and peaceful, things can quickly change.

The OSAC constituency is available to any American-owned, not-for-profit organization, or any enterprise incorporated in the United States (parent company, not subsidiaries or divisions) doing business overseas. If you do not meet the criteria, you can become a newsletter subscriber.

Also, register with www.Travel.State.Gov and register to begin receiving alerts and obtaining pertinent information on criminal and terrorist activities.

Maps and Travel

When traveling abroad, it is important to have a local contact to provide transportation, language interpretation, situational knowledge, etc. This person can be instrumental in protecting your group. However, keep in mind that even if you have someone hired to provide this service, prepare for the unexpected, such as he/she does not meet you as planned and you begin your venture on an unplanned route.

Be prepared by taking paper maps in the event electronic mapping and aids such as Google Earth in the event of a malfunctioning electronic mapping application or a weak signal. Knowing the surrounding terrain could assist in survival.

For example, plotting out sources of water and vegetation can be useful in the event food and water become scarce. Also, be aware of how far you are located from bordering nations, the consulate, embassy or other areas that are potentially secure.

Also, it is important to note where medical and police facilities are located.

While traveling, where possible it is best to secure private transportation. Uber would not be advisable. Check with the local embassy or other businesses to obtain reliable information.

Avoid traveling during darkness and travel on well-used roadways, keeping doors locked when traveling.

Always keep vehicles locked when not in use and where possible, park off of the street.

If you are renting a car, try to use a reputable dealer to ensure the car is in good condition and always check the gas tank, not just the reader.

When driving, alternate your daily route and have an alternative driver available in the front seat should the driver become incapacitated.

If driving in other countries, especially developing ones, consider taking a defensive driving course.

Staying Alert While Traveling

Be aware of your surroundings and what is normal. Listen to trusted partners. When driving, alternate your daily route and have an alternative driver available in the front seat should the driver become incapacitated.

Learn from the locals the safe places to walk, shop and eat.

Until you are familiar with the area, travel with those who are experienced so that you do not end up in locations with safety and security issues.

Consider using Tile Mate, Find My iPhone and other tracking devices.

Let travel friends know where you are doing and your estimated time of return.

Dress appropriately in clothing similar to the culture, so as not to attract attention as a tourist. Avoid wearing jewelry or other items to indicate wealth.

Post Assessment of Travel

After the trip is completed, conduct a debriefing session in which you discuss what went well, what did not and how to improve the next trip. If areas of improvement are identified, then you can review and adjust plans to reflect where these improvements can be made. For example, if maps were poor or out of date, if translators were unreliable, or if currency rates were worn, these should be reflected in your review.

If things went wrong and resources were lost or abandoned, equipment is stolen or damaged, people injured or illnesses contracted, consider how things could be improved for the next trip.

A good debriefing should happen as quickly as possible once arriving home. Locate a quiet place and discuss all issues. Talk through the whole mission in a chronological process which breaks the trip into segments. Record the views and produce a report and/or a checklist to assist with the next trip. Include lessons learned and recommendations for future use.

As a precaution, when arriving home, scan laptops and memory sticks for viruses before

connecting to other networks. Return the devices to factory default for the next trip.

Conclusion

The Houses of Worship Subcommittee is supportive of travel, whether traveling abroad or traveling to the United States. We are supportive of missions and humanitarian efforts! We encourage safety and security regardless of your destination. Take precautions to ensure a safe departure, safe arrival, and safe return.