

International Travel: What You Need to Know Before You Go

Alex Elswick and Jennifer Hunter, Family Sciences

Individuals and families are planning leisure trips to destinations all over the world. Among Americans, some of the more popular international destinations are those in the Western Hemisphere, such as the Bahamas or Mexico as well as those in Western Europe, such as France, Italy, and Germany.

Regardless of which international travel destination you choose, careful planning is a must. Aside from booking plane tickets and accommodations, international travel involves special considerations such as familiarizing yourself with the local culture and customs, knowing what to pack in your luggage, and understanding the local currency. While planning an international trip may seem daunting, there are a few tips that you can follow to make sure that you have the best travel experience possible whether you are a novice or seasoned traveler.

Planning for an International Trip

Determining where you would like to travel is the first step. The destination that you will choose depends largely on what kind of experience you wish to have. For instance, if you are interested in digging your toes into a sandy beach, you may consider an island in the Bahamas. Or, if historic architecture interests you, you may wish to jet off to Europe. Identifying your travel destination will help you to focus on the special considerations that you need to keep in mind for your trip. Planning for international travel is not a one-size-fits-all approach – there are hundreds of destinations to be explored, each with their own attractions, currency, and customs.

Once you have chosen your international travel destination, keep the following considerations in mind. Remember that each destination is unique so be sure to do your own research on each of the topics discussed below!

Passport

While not every country requires a passport for entry, the United States requires a passport for reentry, making it a necessary international travel document for U.S.



citizens. A passport is a document that is used to verify your identity and citizenship. To apply for a United States passport, you must apply in person at a regional passport agency or at an officially recognized facility such as a post office or courthouse.

If you are applying for a passport for the first time, you will need the following documents:

- Proof of citizenship such as a certified copy of your birth certificate
- Proof of identity such as a driver's license
- Passport photo taken within the last six months
- Completed passport application

Keep in mind that the standard processing time can take anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks. Information about the entire passport application process as well as processing times can be found on the U.S. Department of State's website or at any approved application center.

If you have a passport, check the expiration date. If your passport is expired or will expire within 6 months of your travel date, you will need to renew it before you travel as most countries will not allow entry if your passport expires within that time frame. Most passport renewals can be completed through the mail if your most

recent passport was issued within the last 15 years, you were 16 years of age or older when your passport was issued, and if you have your old passport. If your name has changed since the original issuing of your passport, you will need to provide legal documentation of the change. If you have a valid passport, be sure that you have enough empty pages for entry stamps.

Once you have your passport, make two photocopies of the passport identification page. Keep one copy with you while you travel (separate from the original document) and ask a trusted friend or family member to keep another copy for you in the event that your passport is lost or stolen while you are traveling.

Register Your Trip with the U.S. Department of State

Registering your trip with the U.S. Department of State is the best way to ensure your safety while you are traveling internationally. You may sign up for the Smart Travel Enrollment Program (STEP) online at the U.S. Department of State's website to receive e-mail notifications about any travel alerts or warnings as well as to register your travel dates with the U.S. Embassy or Consulate in your destination country. In the event of a family emergency at home or an emergency in your destination country, registering your trip will make it much easier for the U.S. government to contact you.

Healthcare

It is very important that you check with your healthcare insurance provider to determine what medical expenses, if any, will be covered while you are traveling internationally. Most major insurance providers will cover medical expenses that are "customary and reasonable" but will not pay for a medical evacuation back to the United States (the average evacuation costs around \$100,000). You may wish to consider purchasing a supplemental travel healthcare insurance policy to ensure that all costs, including an evacuation, are covered. Supplemental insurance is particularly important for older adults as Medicare does not cover healthcare costs outside of the United States.

Be sure that you have all essential prescription medications with you before embarking on your trip. Pack enough of your medication to last you for your entire trip as well as a few extra in the case of an unexpected delay. Medications in the original labeled container and packed in your carry-on bag. It is also a good idea to have the generic name and dosage of your medications written down in the event that you need your prescription refilled while traveling. Also, be aware that nonprescription medications and vitamins may not be available or in the same form that you take.



If you wear eyeglasses, be sure that you have extra pair with you in the event that they are lost or stolen. Individuals who wear hearing aids should also bring spare batteries with them, as it is difficult to find the right size batteries in many international destinations.

Financial Considerations

Before leaving for your trip, be sure that you understand the exchange rate for the country to which you are traveling. Depending on which country you travel to, the American dollar may not have the spending power that you hope for, leaving you without enough local currency to do everything that you want to do on your trip. When you arrive at your destination country, seek out an ATM or bank to convert your money – doing so will allow you to avoid high fees and an exact conversion.

It is important to have local cash on hand while you are traveling internationally. Not all merchants will accept a credit card, especially transport services. However, be sure that you are not carrying large amounts of cash with you in the event of theft. Purchasing a money belt that can be easily concealed beneath your clothing is a great way to carry your cash while taking in the local sights!

It is also important to check in with your bank before leaving for your trip. Alert your bank to where and when you will be using your bank card; a failure to do so may result in the bank deactivating your card as a way to prevent fraud. Also, ask your bank about foreign transaction fees – most bank cards will tack on a foreign transaction fee up to 3% in addition to your purchase.

Most European businesses no longer accept bank cards with magnetic strips. If you have yet to receive a

bank card with a microchip, ask your bank if it is possible to receive yours before leaving for your trip.

For more information on financial considerations during international travel, see publication FCS 5-470: “Money and International Travel.”

Guidebooks/Apps

It is a good idea to invest in a good guidebook and/or apps for your international trip. Be on the lookout for a guidebook or app that includes maps and provides you with enough details on major cities that you will not need to purchase additional guide materials. If you will be downloading a travel app, do so before leaving for your trip to avoid charges from your wireless carrier.

If you are nervous about figuring out the local language while you are traveling, you may wish to pick up a small book or download an app that includes key words or phrases in the local language. There are even some apps that will allow you to practice speaking simple phrases in the language before you leave for your trip. In many cases, you will be able to find someone who speaks English but it is not a guarantee!

Fortunately, most major international cities have tourism offices that are very welcoming to travelers and provide maps, itineraries, city guides, and free brochures. It is a good idea to surf their websites before going on your trip—you may also find that some of the cities you wish to visit also have websites that provide information on local arts, culture, food, and drink.

Transportation

The majority of international travelers rely on public transit and walking to get around. Be sure to check out the local tourism office’s website for information specific to the city that you will be traveling in. There are often various options available to you including buses, trains, and local taxis. If you are taking public transit, be sure that you have local currency on hand. If you are planning on walking, it is essential that you pack a pair of comfortable walking shoes—you may be surprised at how many miles you will log on your trip!

In the event that you are planning on renting a vehicle and driving on your trip, check with the U.S. Embassy or Consulate to see if you need to apply for an International Driving Permit (IDP). In many countries, it is illegal to drive without an IDP.

It is also a good idea to take a hotel business card or ask an employee at the place you are staying to write down the name, address, and telephone number of the establishment in the local language in the event that you get lost so that you can find your way back.

Tourist Destinations

If you are interested in visiting a popular tourist destination, consider purchasing tickets in advance of your trip. Doing so will help you to avoid long lines, making your trip that much more enjoyable. If you are a senior citizen, inquire about special discounts, even if they are not posted.

Also, be sure to do your research before going on your trip. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn that a local festival or ceremony is occurring during your visit—these types of events are the places in which you will learn the most about the local culture and customs.

Communication

If you are planning to bring your cell phone with you, purchase an international/global plan prior to your trip to avoid outrageous charges. You will also want to be sure that your cell phone is not roaming while you are on your trip. When possible, do everything (e.g., phone calls, texting, downloads) while connected to a Wi-Fi hotspot (you will find Wi-Fi hotspots in most major cities). If you will be making numerous phone calls while you travel, consider purchasing a SIM card while in your destination country.

Packing

While it may seem counterintuitive, packing light is essential for an international trip. Plan on packing a capsule wardrobe consisting of clothing items that you can easily mix, match, and layer. You can always find a local Laundromat or laundry service to wash clothes while you are traveling.

It is a good idea to try to fit all of your clothing in roll-aboard luggage. You will want to avoid bringing bulky luggage while traveling, especially if you plan on taking



public transit or walking. If you are checking your bag at the airport, be sure that your prescriptions, valuables, travel documents, and one extra set of clothing are safely packed away in your carry-on bag.

Limit the number of valuables that you carry with you. Plan places to conceal valuables, such as using a pouch under your shirt. Do not pack IDs, tickets, and other vital documents in bags, backpacks, or other locations that you cannot see at all times.

You will also want to purchase a voltage converter or power adapter to take with you—many countries have different size plugs and voltages that are different from those found in the United States!

Social Experience

Travel is often a great opportunity to meet new people or to travel with large groups of people. There are a number of social travel groups that provide travelers with a great international experiences. Also, if you are over the age of 55 and are interested in turning your trip into an educational experience, there are companies that offer study abroad experiences ranging from 1 to 4 weeks. Like anything, be sure to do your research first to better your chances of having a great experience. Traveler reviews are a great way to learn about various travel groups.

International Travel Checklist

Provided below is an international travel checklist that you may use when planning your international trip. Bon voyage!

International Travel Checklist		
Task	Completed	Needs to be Completed
Passport		
Obtain or renew if necessary		
Make 2 photocopies		
Pack 1 copy in carry-on, separate from original		
Give 1 copy to a trusted friend or family member		
Register your trip with the U.S. Department of State		
Healthcare		
Check your health insurance coverage while out of the country		
Purchase supplemental travel insurance, if necessary		
Refill and pack all essential prescriptions		
Pack a spare pair of glasses/spare hearing aid batteries		
Financial considerations		
Research the exchange country in your destination country		
Plan for a way to conceal cash and important documents while traveling		
Alert bank of your upcoming travel destination and dates		
Check to see if your bank card will work in your destination country		
Other considerations		
Purchase a guidebook, if desired		
Download travel apps, if desired		
Visit destination country's tourism website		
Check with the U.S. Embassy or Consulate to determine if you will need an International Driving Permit (IDP)		
Purchase tickets for tourist attractions in advance		
Pack a pair of comfortable walking shoes		
Pack an international converter for electronics		
Contact your wireless carrier to purchase an international/global data plan		

Additional Resources

University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service: Food Safety for Travelers Abroad, <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/hes/fcs/factshts/FN-SSB.155.PDF>.

University of Kentucky Healthcare: Medical Precautions While Traveling Abroad, <http://ukhealthcare.uky.edu/uploadedFiles/health-and-wellness/publications/health-smart/healthsmart-traveling-abroad-medical-precautions.pdf>.

References

U.S. Department of State. Traveler's checklist. Accessed at: <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/go/checklist.html>.

U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Consumer Affairs. Accessed at: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel.html>.

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