

Know Before You Go

Some common sense things to know and do

Being a quick and dirty guide to what your country's consular services can and cannot do for you and some common sense precautions you can take to avoid meeting them altogether.

News Flash!

Foreign travel is generally very safe. Millions travel outside of their own countries every day. Very, very few get sick, are hurt, or robbed. That said, part of the appeal of foreign travel is the fact that it is, well, foreign. Thus it never hurts to prepare and to remember that one is a guest in a foreign country. Learn lots and assume little. (Remember, Assume makes an Ass of U and Me.) Most of the horror stories about poor consular services are from people who get themselves in trouble and then make incorrect assumptions about what their country's consular officers can and cannot do for them.

Start Here:

"Experienced" travelers love to dismiss the travel information at the Department of State/ Office of Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs/Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada as being overhyped and too restrictive. Perhaps, but remember, that information is compiled by consular officers who actually live in country for years and interview hundreds of their citizens every year. There is, of course, an element of cover-your-ankles in the compilation of this information; no wants something to befall one of their citizens and have the person discover that it had happened before and was not listed. So take some time to peruse these sites, there is a lot of information on everything from crime to driving to medical services. The Canadian site is exceptionally well laid out in terms of what can and cannot be done to help a citizen in distress. The rules are basically the same for Brits and U.S. citizens.

Canada: <http://travel.gc.ca>

United Kingdom: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>

United States: <http://www.state.gov/travel/>

Next, U.S. citizens should register with the US embassy in your destination country at <https://step.state.gov/step/>. This is important for everything from worried relatives to natural disasters to civil unrest to disease outbreaks. For your own protection, assume that your country's consular officers are lazy and will want you out of the way in the event of trouble – make it easy for them to find you. To this end, the Department of State has a new and useful app: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/smart-traveler/id442693988?mt=8>

Finally, if your country's diplomatic mission is drawing down ("voluntary" or "ordered" departure, in the trade), or worse, closing, it really is time for you to be elsewhere else. **Immediately.** Get out early, when you can fly commercial (or drive). You REALLY don't want to be one of those people you see on TV who have been standing for hours to get on a charter flight or ship. And remember, the longer you wait, the fewer your options to take your possessions, pets, or even to travel with family members. (Don't ask me how I know this.)

Drugs, Sex, and Rock and Roll

One of these is usually fairly safe. Add money, as in black marketing, and the others are some of the most common causes of trouble.

So what to do? First of all, don't be stupid. If it is illegal at home, you can bet that it is illegal in a foreign country. Not everyone who approaches you will be attempting to defraud or entrap you, but when someone proposes something that sounds illegal, it is safe to assume that it is. And be really cynical and assume that they turn you in to the local authorities for the reward as soon as they complete the deal with you. Be safe, not sorry. You REALLY don't want to see the inside of a Third World prison. It is a lot less fun than it appears in the movies.

I Don't Need No Doctor!

Getting sick, or worse yet, being injured is never fun and it is a lot less fun when you are far from home and may not speak the language. Nobody wants to get sick while on a trip, but you can do some simple things to make sure you're prepared, just in case:

- Consider whether you need travel health or evacuation insurance. Hint, if you are traveling in the Third World, especially by bicycle, motorcycle, public transport (e.g. bush taxis or lorries), or personal vehicle (e.g. overlanding), you NEED medical evacuation and repatriation insurance. Period. Check your health insurance; know what it will and will not do overseas. The CDC offers this on insurance: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/travelhealthinsurance/index.html>
- Bring any medicines you may need (pack extra, in case of delays) from your home country. Medicines in other countries may be counterfeit.
- Carry a card that identifies, in the local language(s), your blood type, any chronic illnesses you have, any medicines you are taking, and any allergies you have.
- Wear a MedicAlert bracelet if you have serious medical conditions. (<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/GetCareAbroad/index.html>)

Remember, your host country's medical programs probably do not cover you (Remember all the protests about illegals coming to the U.S. for medical treatment?), nor are U.S. citizens covered by Medicare. Sometimes your health insurance will compensate you after the fact, but hospitals abroad will want money upfront, and costs can be exorbitant. Under special circumstances, a consul may be able to give you a loan for an evacuation flight, but you'll have to repay it. A medical evacuation (medevac in the trade) can easily reach \$100,000 and you front it all upfront. Buy insurance.

The Centers for Disease Control has lots of very good information. The following are extracted from their site, but the best advice is to simply spend a day reading all of the information at the CDC site and make note of what applies to you. Take steps to anticipate any issues that could arise during your trip. The information in this section is condensed from the CDC and will help you plan for a safe and healthy trip.

- Learn about your destination.
- See a doctor before you travel.
- Think about your health status.
- Are you too sick to travel? (Recent illnesses, injuries, or surgeries)
- Do you have any special health needs? (Babies and small children, pregnant women, people with disabilities, people with weakened immune systems)

It is important to practice healthy behaviors during your trip and after you return home.

- Pay attention to your health during your trip.
- Use sunscreen and insect repellent as directed.
- Be careful about food and water.
- Limit alcohol intake, and do not drink alcohol and drive.
- Wear a seatbelt. Wear protective gear when doing adventure activities.
- Respect your host country and its people by following local laws and customs.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, pay attention to your health when you come home. If you are not feeling well, you should see a doctor and mention that you have recently traveled.

You may wish to consult with an infectious disease doctor or travel medicine doctor. Most doctors who specialize in the diseases of travel are infectious diseases (ID) physicians. To

find a list of private doctors who specialize in travel health, consult the directories located at: <http://www.astmh.org> (American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene - ASTMH) or <http://www.istm.org> (International Society of Travel Medicine - ISTM). CDC provides these directories as a courtesy to the public but does not endorse any health-care provider.

If you have visited a malaria-risk area:

- It is very important that you continue taking your antimalarial drug for 4 weeks (if you are taking doxycycline or mefloquine) or seven days (if you are taking atovaquone/proguanil) after leaving the risk area.
- Malaria is always a serious disease and may be a deadly illness. If you become ill with a fever or flu-like illness either while traveling in a malaria-risk area or after you return home (for up to 1 year), you should seek immediate medical attention and should tell the physician your travel history.

From personal experience, I would add that Malaria does not always present as the classic sweats and chills. If in a Malarial area, insist on a peripheral blood test early on and, if back in Europe or North America, make sure that the health provider knows that you have been exposed to Malaria. Contact the CDC if the health provider is not responsive.

Send Money, Guns, and Lawyers

Buddy, can you spare a dime?

Consular officers cannot loan you money to continue your trip abroad. They can:

- Help you contact someone at home to send you money, or,
- Repatriate you.

And that is pretty much it. In some cases, there may be a local citizens' group or missionary society that is willing to make loans, but don't bet on it. So make sure that you have a way to get more money, especially for emergencies.

What to do if it all goes wrong.

Too many people have watched "Midnight Express" and have exaggerated expectations of what can be done if they fall afoul of local law. In simplest terms, a Consular Officer will attempt to " ... ensure that Americans are afforded due process under local laws." (http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/emergencies/arrest/arrest_3879.html) This is not, of course, what you want to hear when you are detained, but it is the truth. (Consider for a moment,

how you would feel if a foreign consular officer tried to get a foreign national out of jail without respect for local law and process.)

A key thing to remember is that local law, not your law, is what counts. And the legal systems of other countries may be very different. For example, United States law contains a strong presumption of innocence. This means that a prosecutor must prove your guilt or release you. In some countries it works the other way around; you must prove your innocence or remain in prison.

I like the Canadian page on arrests better than the U.S. page. The rules are basically the same; the Canadians just do a better job of laying out the many permutations:

Consular officials can:

- Notify your family or friends if you are arrested or detained and inform them if and how they can help, with your authorization.
- Request immediate and regular access to you from the appropriate authorities.
- Recommend that you hire legal counsel and seek funds from family, friends or a local legal aid society if you cannot pay for legal counsel.
- Provide an up-to-date list of local lawyers and legal translation services.
- Help you communicate with your legal representative, family or friends if direct contact is not feasible or if an urgent need occurs.
- Make every effort to ensure that you receive equitable treatment under the local criminal justice system, that you are not penalized for being a foreigner and that you are neither discriminated against nor denied justice because you are Canadian.
- Obtain information about the status of your case and encourage authorities to conduct proceedings without unnecessary delay.
- Provide you, your legal representative or your family with information on the local judicial and prison system, approximate times for court action, typical sentences for the alleged offence and bail provisions.
- Accept applications for clemency intervention if you have been charged with and convicted of a crime punishable by death, subject to approval by the governor in council.
- Inform you of any transfer of offender treaty with the country of incarceration, which may allow you to serve your sentence in a Canadian institution, and provide you with documentation to apply for a transfer, if eligible.

- Seek to ensure your health and well-being are protected, including adequate nutrition and medical and dental care.
- Where international human rights have been violated, urge foreign authorities to abide by their obligations and provide basic standards of protection.
- Transmit concerns about any treatment that could affect your health and well-being to local officials, prison representatives and relevant non-governmental organizations.
- Arrange for the purchase of required nutritional supplements, essential clothing and other basic items not available through the prison system, at your expense and if permitted.
- Deliver letters and permitted reading material if normal postal services are unavailable.
- Contact relatives or friends to request funds on your behalf.
- Facilitate the transfer of funds to you if other means are unreliable or unavailable.
- After exhausting all other financial options, issue a temporary loan from the distressed Canadian fund for the provision of food, water, bedding, nutritional supplements and/or essential medication, subject to consular fees and strict conditions.

Consular officials cannot:

- Interfere in private legal matters, including criminal defense cases, or in another country's judicial affairs.
- Seek preferential treatment from you or try to exempt you from the due process of local law.
- Get you out of jail.
- Post bail or pay legal fees or fines.
- Use the distressed Canadian fund to pay legal expenses.
- Provide legal advice or interpret local laws.
- Recommend lawyers or law firms or guarantee their reliability or expertise in a particular field.
- Become involved in important matters between you and your lawyer.

- Forward or deliver parcels entering or leaving the country or clear them through customs.
- Circumvent rules regarding what can and cannot be brought into or taken out of a detention facility.
- Make travel or accommodation arrangements for your family or friends.
- Forward medical supplies prescribed or recommended by a doctor or take steps to clear them through detention facilities.

(<http://travel.gc.ca/about/assistance/consular/arrest>)

So what is the really bad news? Consider:

- “Regular” visits may be every month or six weeks, depending on staff and workload. That can seem like an eternity.
- The “recommended” legal counsel may be of unknown quality. Known bad lawyers will be removed from the list, but only after several complaints are received. There is really no way to assure the quality of a lawyers list. To again quote the Canadian site, there is no way to “guarantee their reliability or expertise in a particular field.”
- All of this can get very, very expensive.

Just Remember:

- Know before you go, and,
- Don’t be stupid.