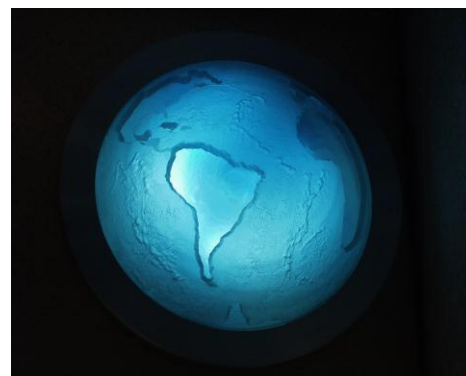


WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW BEFORE TRAVELING ABROAD

CULTURAL, HEALTH AND SAFETY ADVICE FOR WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

- **I was assaulted in front of my hotel.**
- **While traveling, I started feeling nauseous and thought I may be pregnant.**
- **I was treated very differently than my male coworkers while on a trip abroad.**

Three different women, three different situations. Each day, female travelers around the world are faced with these or similar concerns. As women are traveling more today than ever before, they are encountering travel, medical and security incidents that male travelers frequently do not experience. A recent poll by UnitedHealthcare Global revealed that 95% of female travelers face different concerns than men do when they travel abroad, and female travelers are more likely than men to be victimized or experience a unique medical concern abroad. This is reinforced by the survey, which showed that women are concerned with personal safety and cultural perceptions, as well as health and wellness, when traveling abroad.

Women travel for a variety of reasons. They travel for business and for pleasure: they are students going abroad, executives on business trips and vacationers in locations throughout the world. Regardless of the reason for travel, women face a different world than their male counterparts and should be prepared to deal with a myriad of circumstances when traveling abroad, including unique personal health and safety concerns.

Most people traveling internationally know to expect differences, but they don't necessarily know what differences to expect. This is especially true for female travelers. This guide provides information on cultural perceptions, medical concerns, and safety and security issues that many women face during their international travels. While this guide provides an overview of such information, each continent, country, and city may present differing concerns. Take the time to become familiar with your destination prior to travel or, if you frequent a location, refresh your memory and seek updates about common safety and health concerns each time you travel there.

CULTURAL CONCERNS

Being immersed in a new culture can be an exciting, yet challenging, experience. It is important to recognize that, as a woman, you may be treated differently in each destination. Some countries view men and women as equals, while others give women few rights. In 1980, the United Nations summed up the differences between men and women throughout the world: *Women, who comprise half the world's population, do two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income and own one-hundredth of the world's property.* You can expect to experience and observe this difference on your journey abroad.

As a woman, you may be respected in one culture and harassed in another. You may be expected to wear certain clothes, and you will be expected to obey certain laws. Being aware of these differences prior to leaving can help ease your assimilation into a culture.



The most effective means of preparation is to thoroughly research your destination. Learn about the culture, know what to expect and develop plans for potential medical and security emergencies.

GENDER PERCEPTIONS

Each culture perceives gender differently, and women may be highly respected or, alternatively, they may be treated as second-class citizens. In some cultures, women are subservient, uneducated, and often abused simply because of their gender. As a foreigner, you will most likely not experience such treatment; however, you may witness it and encounter local women who experience it daily. It is important to be aware of such differences and be prepared to possibly deal with them in your travels. In certain areas of the world, the perception is that an independent woman is unacceptable and travelers may be targeted for harassment and abuse. As in some Middle Eastern countries, it may even be illegal for a woman to be in public unless accompanied by a male relative. Additionally, as an outsider, many locals will be suspicious of you and may be hesitant to welcome you into their culture.

On the other hand, there are several countries around the world in which women are treated as equals to men. For example, in New Zealand, women have been voting since 1893 and currently hold one-third of the seats in their Parliament. A study by the World Economic Foundation compared the cultural gender gap between men and women in 58 countries. In the study where the United States ranked 17th, the top five countries for women were Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland. If you are traveling to such a country as a Western woman, chances are that you will receive equal treatment as well.

DRESS AND CUSTOMS

Wearing the correct style of clothing can have a strong influence on how you are treated by local people. In *Tales of a Female Nomad*, Rita Golden Gelman writes about how dress can have an impact on how a culture perceives a foreigner. Ms. Gelman unsuccessfully tried for days to immerse herself in a small Zapotec village in Mexico. Children ran from her, women ignored her, and she was frequently harassed by the men in town. However, when she began to dress in typical local attire, she became accepted into the community. The very first time she

appeared in public in the traditional clothes of the village, she was welcomed by the people.

As in the case above, western-style clothing is often inappropriate in many cultures. In some locations, exposed arms, knees, and even wrists may be considered risqué and improper. For example, it is considered offensive for women in Uganda to wear pants, split skirts, or shorts. In Ecuador, athletic shoes and shorts are considered inappropriate for women in most locales. In other locations, typical western-style dress is perfectly acceptable. Chances are, though, that if it is considered suggestive at home, it is inappropriate abroad. As with everything else, this varies from culture to culture, and it is important to recognize these differences and prepare yourself prior to departure.

You should also apprise yourself of special events and social customs. Holidays and celebrations, greetings and personal interactions, meal times and bed times all change from culture to culture. For example, in Argentina, what you may consider a random day in March is a day of gatherings and demonstrations commemorating the 1976 coup. Learn the social customs and know what to expect when you travel to your destination. Be prepared to deal with any national holidays that may occur during your stay and how they may affect your personal safety. In many countries, such an event could mean no public transportation is available and tourist attractions may be closed. Q++ Studio, a professional software system used to generate calendars, provides an extensive list of holidays around the world. To search for holidays by country, visit www.qppstudio.net/publicolidays.htm.

AWARENESS OF LOCAL LAWS

Do not expect the women in the countries you visit to be treated the same way you are treated at home. In many countries, women's rights are severely limited: women cannot own property, they require their husband's permission to leave the house, and they must wear specific clothing when appearing in public. It is critical that you are aware of any local laws that may affect you during your trip abroad. Are you expected to wear certain clothing? Will you be forced to eat separately from male traveling companions when dining out? Can you appear in public without a male escort?

While women may be limited in their rights in some locations of the world, in others they have just as many rights as the men. Read about the cultures you intend to visit. As a business traveler, anticipate how you will be treated by the local business men and women. Other female business travelers who had already visited the destination are some of the most reliable sources for information. WomanRoadWarrior.com offers advice and tips from women business travelers. Wyndham Hotels and Resorts has created an online community for female business travelers (www.wyndham.com/wotw/main.wnt). This site was designed to educate and inform women about business and travel, with travel tips from other travelers, book recommendations, and information on business leadership.



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SAFETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS

According to the UnitedHealthcare Global poll, female travelers believe personal safety is the biggest difference between themselves and male travelers, particularly when traveling alone. A single female traveler is more likely to be targeted than a lone male traveler and most female travelers have experienced harsh treatment during a trip abroad, according to the UnitedHealthcare Global survey. This can range from condescending behavior from the locals to assaults and muggings.

Many female travelers have discovered that one of the best ways to avoid such treatment is to travel with a male companion. While this may interfere with the idea of an independent woman traveler, women who are accompanied by men often experience less harassment and are generally safer than their single, female counterparts. While traveling with a trusted male companion is not always an option, nor is it always welcomed, women should consider the following advice to ensure their safety and security:



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1. Wear a wedding ring, even if you are not married. Married women are less likely to be confronted by a male. It is often assumed that a married woman will be in communication with others at home.
2. Avoid wearing your hair in a ponytail. While this is often an easy hair-do for women with long hair, it also makes an easy handle for attackers to grab. Opt for a shorter cut or wear your hair loose.
3. If you plan on exercising while abroad, work-out in the hotel if at all possible. Frequently, women who are running in public do not carry essential personal items, such as identification or cell phone. Depending on your location, a female runner may easily be identified as a foreigner and will probably be by herself. All of this makes her more vulnerable to attackers and more likely to become a victim of crime.
4. Be cognizant of your transportation options, especially when leaving the airport. Many assaults and kidnappings occur from people posing as drivers in the baggage claim area. Make reliable arrangements for transportation to your hotel prior to arriving at your destination.
5. Know the local events. Read local papers and speak with expatriates to know the culture and the current events.
6. Most importantly, be informed. Talk to other female travelers who have been to that location and learn what to prepare for. Follow the customs that are respected by the local females. If none of them are exposing bare knees, then it is probably best that you do not either.

HARASSMENT

For many women traveling abroad, sexual harassment is a frequent occurrence. This is often due to the fact that the definition of “harassment” varies throughout the world. What is considered unacceptable behavior in one location may be considered perfectly harmless in another, such as whistling, making comments, or staring. Many Western women may inadvertently send signals to men in foreign countries; making eye contact, standing too close when speaking, and even being friendly can be perceived as sexual advances by men. Be prepared to alter your behavior to curtail harassment. Keep in mind that how you act at home is not always an acceptable way to act abroad.



Harassment also stems from the perception many cultures have of Western, particularly American, women. For many people throughout the world, American women are represented by television shows and movies as promiscuous and welcoming of sexual advances. Women who travel should learn to cope with such treatment; know how to react to what is acceptable in that culture, and know what is unacceptable. If you ever feel uncomfortable, the best solution is to remove yourself from the situation.

What is considered Unacceptable behavior in one location may be considered perfectly harmless in another, such as whistling, making comments, or staring.

PHYSICAL THREATS

Physical threats to your safety can include anything from muggings and kidnappings to assault and murder. When at home, it is easy to let your guard down and forget that such incidents can happen. Traveling necessitates constant awareness and vigilance.

Prior to leaving, be sure to research the safety and security threats in your destination. Travel books, websites, and magazines that are specifically written for that location are good sources. If your organization has a travel assistance company, this is also an ideal source for reliable information.

Stay smart while traveling. Often, people will deviate from their normal routine while in a foreign country, forgetting to do simple tasks that they automatically perform at home. As a general rule, if you would do it for your own protection at home, be sure to do it abroad, as well. Keep your hotel room door locked at all times, using a rubber door jam if necessary; don't flash cash around or wear expensive jewelry; and always be able to quickly locate the contact information for where you are staying.

When faced with street fighting outside of her hotel, one woman became so terrified to leave her room, she was essentially trapped for three days. Her fear had paralyzed her and kept her in her room, even after the fighting stopped.

HEALTH CONCERNS

Worrying about maintaining your health while traveling abroad is often lost in the preparations for transportation, activities, and accommodations. However, leading a healthy lifestyle while traveling is important, as healthcare around the world varies. Female travelers face different health concerns than their male counterparts. The *Psychiatric Times* reports that women are twice as likely as men to experience depression, and treatment for these women's health concerns abroad may differ from the typical treatment received at home.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCERNS

A survey by the World Bank examined psychological distress among international business travelers. It revealed that traveling abroad alone can take a toll on any person's psyche, and that women are frequently willing to discuss their feelings and experiences they had on their last trip. Separation from family, feelings of isolation and insecurity are often the causes of stress and psychological issues faced by female travelers. Knowing to expect these concerns and how to cope with them can help alleviate the impact that they may have on travelers.

Separation from Family

Extended separation from family can cause anxiety for many people. Parents may miss baseball games and dance recitals, or a sick family member may be left at home. Planning ahead to alleviate these heartaches may make things easier for both the traveler and her family. Leave notes for your loved ones so they can read them while you're away and establish a time to call and be with your family by phone each day. Finding a way to show you care while you're gone is essential to maintaining family dynamics and can make the adjustment period after your return home easier.

Isolation

Many women are frightened by the thought of being alone and traveling abroad. Feelings of isolation and loneliness are often amplified in a foreign country, when the comforts and routine of home are far away. This can lead to depression and sometimes increased alcohol consumption. Frequent phone calls and emails to friends and family can help lessen the effect of isolation on travelers. Also, be sure to network prior to your departure. You never know who may be visiting the same location.



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Insecurity

Being alone in a foreign country causes many women to feel anxious and insecure. Unfamiliar with their surroundings and not knowing anyone combines to create a fear many people may not have previously experienced. When faced with street fighting outside of her hotel, one woman became so terrified to leave her room that she was essentially trapped for three days. Her fear had paralyzed her and kept her in her room, even after the fighting stopped.

Regardless of the psychological issue, the best way to combat it is to plan ahead. Research your destination before you leave. Talk to your family about where you are going. Become familiar with the local landscape so that, once you are there, you will be able to enjoy your destination.

PHYSICAL CONCERNS

Regardless of whether you are male or female, travel is likely to upset your biological system. Time zone changes, dietary changes, and personal care changes can all wreck havoc on your body. The problem most frequently encountered by international travelers is travelers' diarrhea. It is estimated that as many as 30% of travelers experience this uncomfortable illness. This can be avoided by paying special attention to any food you eat. Make sure that all of it is fully cooked, and avoid foods that are hard to clean, such as lettuce. Dairy products are often unpasteurized and it's therefore best to steer clear of milk, cheese, and similar foods. While water quality is often blamed for causing travelers diarrhea, food preparation is the most common cause. Water quality throughout the world has improved dramatically in recent years and is generally safe for travelers. Most international hotels ensure that their water quality is acceptable for travelers.

Being away from home, many travelers become careless. They may drink more, causing them to be more likely to have an accident, or they may forget daily preventative measures, such as sunscreens. Many international travelers develop skin irritations, such as sunburns or infections. These can easily be prevented with sunscreen and other skin care products.

All travelers are susceptible to accidents and illness, however, many of the calls UnitedHealthcare Global receives from women concern falls and accidents, strokes, and gallbladder problems. This is different from the men, who usually call about trauma, cardiac problems, and alcohol abuse. As with medical concerns at home, men and women face differing medical concerns abroad.

Female travelers have additional concerns to take into consideration, as gynecological health is particularly affected by travel. It is common for menstrual cycles to become irregular, become more painful, or even stop altogether. Whether you anticipate menstruation during a trip or not, it is important to always pack a supply of tampons and sanitary napkins, as they may be difficult to find and may be very expensive abroad.

If you use oral contraception and will require other medication, such as antibiotics, during your trip, talk to your doctor beforehand. This could have an effect on the reliability of the contraception. Pack enough for the entire trip and be sure to factor in the time change to your schedule for taking them. Be sure you take a pill every 24 hours for it to be most effective. Also, keep in mind that oral contraception does not protect against sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, and it is recommended to pack condoms in addition to your regular contraception.

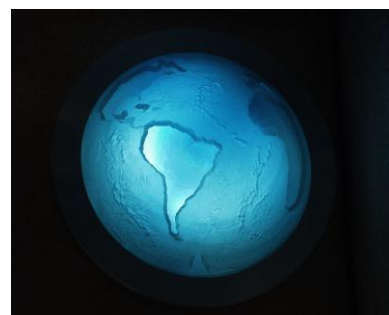
If you are pregnant, a good rule of thumb is to avoid all travel if possible, particularly during the third trimester. If you must travel, consult with your obstetrician about any conditions that may develop or be exacerbated while abroad. Prenatal care varies throughout the world, and if complications arise, you will want to receive the best care possible. Are you comfortable with the medical capabilities in your destination location? If you went into labor or had a pregnancy complication, would you be comfortable receiving medical treatment? Talk to your travel assistance company to develop a plan of action, should anything threaten your health while traveling. Know which hospital to go to and how to get any necessary help you may need.

RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH

The best way to prepare for any trip abroad is to do proper research before your departure. Whether you are a first-time traveler or a veteran traveler, and whether it is your first time to a specific destination or your hundredth, staying current on information for your destination can minimize your security risks and help ease travel anxiety. While a wealth of information is available online, be sure to confirm that it is from a reliable source. Travel magazines, books, and associations are good sources of information, particularly for general destination and cultural information. Medical and security information is most reliable from a travel assistance provider, as many of these companies can identify local resources and up-to-date information for your specific destination.

Prior to your departure, visit a travel clinic for any appropriate medications and immunizations you may need. A travel healthcare professional should be able to address your concerns regarding healthy travel that is specific to your destination. Your general practitioner may not be current on the medical needs for that location, and therefore a travel health professional is the best source of information.

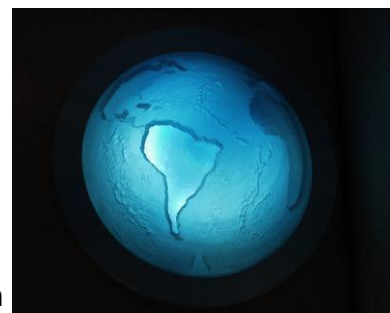
Another reliable source of information is other travelers. Speak with women who have been to your destination. Learn from them. Ask them if there is anything that they wish they had known before they went there. They may be able to suggest a good restaurant, hotel, or local guide to assist you!



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