

# International Society of Travel Medicine

## The Responsible Traveler

### A Brief Guideline to the Health Issues and Cultural Codes of Traveling

Whether traveling from state to state or across the ocean, cultural, hygienic, agricultural and ethical differences often pose challenges to journeyers.

Taking precautionary measures to avoid health problems such as gastrointestinal disorders, fevers or infections is important, but does not cover all the challenges presented on some excursions. Beyond health issues, it is important for travelers to also educate themselves on other crucial information about their destination to avoid any unintentional conflict or disrespect to their host country.

Over the years, travel has brought millions of much needed dollars to countries around the world. While contributing to these countries' economic prosperity, travelers have, unfortunately, also shared diseases and infections, and have used – and abused – valuable resources, such as water and electricity. And, due to the emergence of resorts and time-share condominiums, local residents often find that tourism has taken away much of the affordable land, the cost of housing often out-of-reach for many residents.

As a result, resentment toward travelers in some countries has grown, making it crucial for them to educate themselves about not only any medical and health concerns but also the cultures and the local lifestyles before leaving on their trip.

The International Society for Travel Medicine Council has created a guide for “The Responsible Traveler” to help ensure cross-cultural travel remains safe and beneficial to travelers as well as host countries.

### 1. Be an Informed Traveler

Did you know that tipping is frowned upon in many societies? Or, that sitting with your legs crossed is considered rude in some countries? Or, that you should ask permission in some countries before you can take a photo? These little issues could turn into major problems all because a traveler was not well informed. The more a traveler knows about a host country the more fulfilling a trip can be.

- Travelers should **utilize all the valuable resources** now available, such as the Internet and a vast array of guidebooks, to educate themselves on the specifics about potential health risks, agricultural and lifestyle differences, and the cultural and ethical codes of the host country.

- By educating ourselves and **being respectful of a host country's lifestyles** and cultural codes, tourists can remain “good neighbors” and keep traveling safe, fun and educational for the visitor as well as the visited.
- With most Western societies used to a rapid pace, some adjustment usually needs to be made to acclimate to the slower, more relaxed pace of another country. By realizing that you will **need to exercise patience** before you embark on your journey, it may eliminate much frustration during your trip.
- **Be open-minded.** Many aspects of life will differ when you leave home, this is one of the main reasons for travel – to learn and absorb other countries.

## 2. Know the Dos and Don'ts of a Country

- In many countries the **dress code** is much more conservative than in Western cultures. Some countries still frown upon women exposing their shoulders or baring their legs. Therefore, when visiting these countries travelers should be respectful of the culture and adhere to dress codes.
- Public **displays of affection** often cause embarrassment for local residents in countries where there are such strict dress and honor codes. Likewise, visible anger is also perceived as offensive.
- **Listen to the way the locals address each other**, the senior residents and those with religious affiliations. By being respectful of those titles and mannerisms, often times, unintentional ill will can be avoided.
- **Gestures can also be misinterpreted** or carry a different meaning – for instance, in India shaking the head from side to side means “Yes.” In other countries, pointing your finger at an object or when asking directions is considered rude, it is best to make indications with a flat hand.
- **Be aware of religious holidays** and observances and be respectful of the customs that accompany those events.
- **Don't take souvenirs** from a historical, cultural, natural or archaeological site.

## 3. Respect Your Host Country

It has become quite popular to visit third-world and developing countries as romantic getaways or adventure trips. These countries present special challenges to travelers who need to be mindful of the health and medical hazards that accompany visiting a country with less advanced medical practices. The fact that you are able to visit exotic places means that you have the income to afford such luxury, which may not be the case with many of the residents of the countries that you visit. By understanding and being respectful of the socio-economic

differences between countries, a traveler can not only enjoy his trip, but also enhance the economic situation for the host country.

- Avoid obvious displays of wealth or handing out money, this may create an immediate barrier and build resentment between you and the locals.
- Bargain for food/products only if it is an acceptable custom, but do not be too aggressive, for many local people these sales are their livelihood.
- At all costs avoid exploitation of the residents of your host country – if a service is provided, make sure that person has been monetarily cared for either by the hotel, or through tipping. Many local tourism employees receive very low pay for long hours, so you want to be sure that you reciprocate when they provide assistance that helps make your vacation go smoothly.
- Support local communities, hotels, restaurants and churches whenever possible. This not only helps the country economically, but it also allows the traveler to fully embrace the feel and culture of a country.
- Avoid the use of renewable resources – don't insist on a daily bath if water is a scarce commodity.
- Avoid pollution wherever possible, e.g. re-use towels and bed sheets to reduce use of laundry powder.

#### 4. Stay Healthy

While many travelers are concerned about the health hazards that will be posed to them, they may not realize that they also present health issues to the persons they are visiting, especially in developing countries. Like you would at home, be considerate in your behavior to safeguard your own and your hosts' health.

- Sexually transmitted diseases are particularly linked to travel. **Avoid unsafe sex** to protect yourself and your partner.
- Flu epidemics in susceptible local populations have been linked to tourism (e.g. cruise ships). If you are traveling in a group or on a cruise, **get vaccinated** against the flu before you leave.
- A cold is a common problem among tourists. Sharing a cold is particularly easy when in crowded conditions such as a market or on a bus, therefore, try to **avoid spreading your cold** by washing your hands with soap and water and limiting personal contact with others.
- Diarrhea or gastrointestinal disorders are very common ailments among travelers. While only a minority of cases should cause concern, please be sure to **bring over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medications** and to retain the same high-level of hygiene that you would at home to avoid infections.
- Poor working conditions of tourism employees often have severe health implications, such as frost bite or decompression sickness in scuba guides. Stay

aware of possible health problems with your assistants and **help them get the proper medical attention if necessary.**

**Remember you are visiting someone else's home. The local people are the core of any destination, respect and be considerate of them so they can make your trip a pleasant, enjoyable experience.**

For more information to help be a responsible traveler, visit:

[www.tourismconvern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconvern.org.uk)

[www.ippg.net](http://www.ippg.net)

[www.ecpat.net](http://www.ecpat.net)

[www.icrtourism.org](http://www.icrtourism.org)

[www.iipt.org](http://www.iipt.org)