

# Safety and Legalities Abroad

## Staying Safe

Personal safety is a universal concern. Most of the common sense precautions you undertake at home should be applied in a foreign land. However, while most of us feel relatively secure in Canada, many of the internalized defense mechanisms we've built up over the years do not come easily in new situations. This section will provide some safety tips to help make your trip as safe as possible.

## Canadian Embassies and Consulates

**You should register with the local Canadian embassy, high commission, or consulate if you are residing abroad for over three months.** This will make you easier to locate in the event of an emergency. You may be able to register on-line at <http://www.voyage.gc.ca/Consular-e/sos/rocapage-e.htm> If there is no [Canadian mission](#) in your host country, Canadian citizens may obtain the same services from an Australian mission. If there is neither, you will have to contact a Canadian or Australian mission in a nearby country.

## Consular Support

Government missions abroad can provide you with certain services or support if you need it. Canadian missions can:

- Contact family or friends in Canada to ask them to send you money.
- Help during natural disasters or civil or military uprisings.
- Assist you in medical emergency, including possibly finding you a doctor or contacting family or friends in Canada.
- Ensure you receive equitable treatment under local law if you are arrested or detained. They cannot get you off the hook or pay your fines.
- Replace your lost or stolen passport.

They cannot provide the services of a travel agency, give or lend money, cash personal cheques, arrange free medical service or legal advice, provide bail or get you out of jail, act as couriers or interpreters, search for missing luggage or settle disputes with local authorities. Remember, their primary occupation abroad is to help fulfill the diplomatic mission of the Canadian government; they are not there solely for wayward Canadian travellers.

**To get assistance from Canadian missions abroad, phone or visit the nearest mission during regular business hours. After regular business hours, you can phone consular officials in Ottawa: 1-800-387-3124; call collect 1-613-996-8885; call 1-613-943-1055; or fax 1-613-943-1054. In countries where there is no Canadian mission, the Australian or British mission may provide you with assistance.**

Check the [Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Website](#) for more information on consular services for Canadians. For those who are not Canadian Citizens, check the services your mission abroad provides.

## Safety Precautions Checklist

### Before you leave

- Plan your trip so that you arrive during weekday business hours, when taxis, banks, and other services are available. Avoid arriving on national holidays



and weekends when businesses may be closed.

- If possible, arrange to have someone meet you at the airport and try to have accommodation arranged beforehand. Preferably, stay at government-regulated hostel or hotel. Your travel agent can book you a room in a hotel and transportation for your first night.
- Being tired, jet-lagged and suddenly thrown into a melee of taxi drivers vying for your business can be a disconcerting experience. Until you are more familiar with the safety and cost of local services use government-regulated transportation rather than a private taxi or bus.
- Check your guidebook to find out about any possible airport scams where you're going. Most airports have them. Some taxi drivers take advantage of disoriented tourists, overcharge them and/or take them to expensive hotels where they rake in a commission. You can also check the [Scam watch](#) website.
- Make sure you have small amounts of local currency or that you can exchange money upon arrival in the airport. Credit cards or traveller's cheques are other options (see the section on [Minding your Finances Overseas](#).)
- Leave a list of addresses, phone numbers and a copy of your travel arrangements with a family member or friend.
- If you are concerned about the stability and safety of the country you are visiting, check with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade travel advisories: telephone 1-800-267-6788 or see their website: [http://www.voyage.gc.ca/consular\\_home-e.htm](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/consular_home-e.htm).
- Talk with people who have lived or worked in the country you will be visiting for specific tips.
- Read language phrase books or listen to instructional tapes to learn the basics of the language in your host region. Carry your phrase book with you at all times.
- Keep in mind the health precautions listed in the [Health](#) section, such as required immunizations, medical insurance and safe drinking water.

## When you arrive

- Conceal or secure all keys, wallets, handbags and baggage. Use a money-belt or neck pouch.
- Consult reliable local people about transportation, safety issues, how to handle beggars, etc.
- If you will be in the country for over three months, inform the nearest Canadian high commission, consulate or embassy of your whereabouts. You may be able to register on-line at <http://www.voyage.gc.ca/Consular-e/sos/rocapage-e.htm>
- Purchase a domestic phone card for the country you are in and carry this with you. You never know when you'll be in a situation where you have to make an emergency phone call without any money. Also, memorize your host home phone number or another emergency contact number. This could come in very handy, especially if you are lost in the wrong part of town with no English speakers around.

## In your home

- Doors and windows should be locked at all times. Do not open the door to strangers.
- Make sure that your personal documents are kept in a safe place.

- Keep all emergency numbers close to the phone.
- After dark, close all curtains, blinds and shutters.
- Leave the radio or some lights on when the house is unoccupied, day or night.
- If your accommodation is not secure, arrange to improve this immediately.
- If you have to go out after dark, prepare for your return by leaving outside lights on.

### **In the street**

- Be discreet in your public behaviour. Avoid uncontrolled crowds and do not get involved in local disturbances.
- Look like you know where you are going. Try not to stand on street corners for extended periods of time with your map unfolded and a puzzled look on your face.
- Avoid wearing expensive jewelry or flashing about large sums of money when walking in the street or driving with the car window open.
- Try not to walk the streets at night. If you have to, choose well lit, busy streets. Be aware of potential hiding places. Do not walk along building walls.
- Avoid short cuts through deserted parks, vacant lots and dark alleys.
- If a beggar or hustler is harassing you, do your best to get out of the situation. Go into a nearby store, ask someone for assistance.
- If an assailant demands your wallet or handbag, give it up.
- Carry money in several locations on your person, not just in your wallet. Consider carrying a "fake wallet" or a leather money belt, which holds a small amount of cash.
- Do not hitchhike!
- If you are even the slightest bit uneasy about getting into a car, don't! Tell the driver you are going in another direction.
- Never cross a border with a hitchhiker or as a hitchhiker. If you must, go through customs and immigration separated from your driver. You can meet up on the other side.

### **In the car**

- Learn the rules of the road and be prepared for local driving conditions.
- Keep the doors locked and try to keep the windows closed, especially in slow traffic.
- Consider getting a cellular phone if you will be driving your own car.
- Know what side of the road to drive on and where to look when you cross the road.

- Check the DFAIT advisories regarding driving conditions in your host country

## Gender Safety Issues

Whether you are a woman or a man, you should be aware of cultural restrictions and expectations concerning dress and behaviour. These can be very different from those in Canada and will affect how you or your peers will be treated, what will be expected of you and what you are allowed to do. The casual male-female interactions and freedom of movement and dress common here may embarrass or offend people in other cultures. Seemingly inappropriate actions can jeopardize your safety.

- It is hard to give concrete advice on what to do if you are physically assaulted. Taking a personal safety course before you leave may give you some strategies and skills to protect yourself. You may try to memorize the assailant's features and report the incident to the police. However, in some countries you may have more harassment problems with the police than with the assailant.
- Understand the laws regarding rape, sexual assault and self-defense in your host country. What constitutes rape and sexual assault and how are these crimes adjudicated? What are the reporting procedures?
- Check local customs and abide by them carefully. There are often strict rules that apply to religion, dress, food, drink, business procedures and social behaviours.
- Watch your body language for different meanings than you intend. Extended eye contact can be misinterpreted as flirtatious or intimidating.
- It may not be considered appropriate for a woman to eat alone in a restaurant.
- Do not accept drinks from strangers.
- In some countries, both men and women may consider wearing a fake wedding ring. Some women may even find themselves calling a trusted male companion their husband!

## Travelling Solo

The sense of freedom and independence gained from travelling alone in a foreign country can be enriching and exciting. But some precautions apply:

- Know enough of the language to get around and get yourself out of trouble.
- Seek out other travellers if you need to. They can be goldmines of current travel information and friendship. Be wary though - just because someone is a foreigner does not mean they are automatically trustworthy. Use the same precautions you would with strangers you meet in Canada.
- Do not just pass through an area but talk with the people, spend time with them.

## Troubleshooting: What to do When Things go Wrong

Should you encounter serious social, political, health or economic problems, the nearest Canadian embassy, high commission, or consulate can offer some assistance. They can provide you with a list of local lawyers and physicians, contact your next of kin in the event of an emergency, contact friends or relatives to request funds or guidance, provide assistance during civil unrest or a natural disaster, or replace a lost or stolen passport.

**Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) has a general website with instructions for dealing with any problems you may encounter while abroad** [http://www.voyage.gc.ca/Consular-e/problems\\_menu-e.htm](http://www.voyage.gc.ca/Consular-e/problems_menu-e.htm)

## Medical Emergency: Finding Medical Care Abroad

The standard of medical care in your host country will likely be different from Canada. Most countries in the world have excellent medical facilities available but sometimes these are only in the capital cities. The hospital where you are treated may not provide the standard of care you are used to.

What if you are injured or fall ill while overseas? Do you know when to get medical attention, what your options are and where to go for it? Your guidebook, travel agents, the Canadian mission or local missionary groups can usually provide the names of hospitals, clinics and physicians. In rural communities you may find missionary sponsored clinics that are quite good. If you are not fluent in the language of the host country, seek out an English-speaking doctor to avoid any miscommunication. Contact the [International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers](#) (IAMAT) for information regarding English-language medical services worldwide, but remember many of these are located in the capitals.

Completing a Medical History Form will help to provide medical authorities with sufficient information to respond quickly and effectively. If you are injured while abroad and require medical attention get yourself to a local hospital or clinic.

It is a good idea to carry with you at all times:

- Identification cards.
- Health insurance details.
- A list of items you are allergic to or medication you may need to take.
- Contact information for a local doctor you can communicate with.
- A letter written in the local language explaining who you are, where you live locally, why you are there, and who should be contacted in case of an emergency. These should include the exchange coordinator at your host and home university, and the nearest mission of your country of citizenship.
- Emergency Contact Information for your home institution
- Keep in close contact with your family.
- Keep in touch with the host institution.
- If there is a national security or safety issue, heed the [Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade \(DFAIT\) Travel Information Report](#). Students should check the website regularly.

### **Lost or Stolen Passports**

Lost your passport? Had it stolen? Passports from several countries, especially Canadian passports are highly valued by many people around the world, including terrorists and aspiring illegal immigrants. If you part with your passport while abroad, you should report the loss or theft immediately to the nearest mission representing your country. Mission representatives will conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the loss or theft. You may be issued a replacement passport for a limited period of time, provided you fill out all the forms, supply them with passport photos, pay a fee, and provide documentary proof of your citizenship. Leave a photocopy of the identification page of your passport with someone at home who can fax it to you if need be.

If you find your old passport, report that immediately as well. You are not permitted to be in the possession of two valid passports from the same country. If your Canadian passport is lost or stolen in Canada, report that to the nearest Passport Office.

### **In Trouble with the Law: Arrested or Detained**

While you are overseas, the laws of your host country apply to you. Do not get in trouble with the law in a foreign country. You don't want to spend time in a foreign jail. It is your responsibility to know what these laws are. "Innocent until proven guilty" may not apply. In case of arrest, Canadian consular staff can help ensure you receive fair treatment under the host country's laws but they cannot get you off the hook.

### **Some Notes:**

- Never joke about carrying bombs or drugs, not even to a friend. If overheard, you will be arrested immediately, even if it was obviously meant in jest.
- Under Canadian law, you can be charged in Canada with the sexual exploitation of children while in other countries.
- Do not get involved with the politics of a foreign country. If you find yourself at a political rally, demonstration or riot, you could get into a lot of trouble. You may also jeopardize the safety of your friends or host. Being a Canadian does not grant you immunity.

"A Guide for Canadians Imprisoned Abroad" is published by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT).

If you are arrested or detained in a foreign country, you should immediately contact the nearest mission of your country of citizenship. See "Consular Support" section for assistance available from Canadian missions.

### **Theft**

You have a few options if you have personal belongings or money stolen while abroad, depending on where you are and your situation. If the theft is inconsequential or merely annoying, you may choose to ignore it. If the theft is more substantial, you should report it to the local police, especially if you are planning on filing an insurance claim for lost goods. Insurance companies require a police report before considering reimbursing losses.

### **Victim of Crime?**

If you are the victim of a serious crime, you should report the incident to local authorities as soon as possible. Keep in mind that treatment of victims may be

different from the way Canadian police do things. You may also consider contacting the university's international office or the nearest mission of your country of citizenship for advice or assistance.

### **If you need to return to Canada or your country of citizenship quickly.**

Accidents at home, or a death in the family, while rare, do occur. If something happens while you're away, first decide if it is truly necessary that you go home - sometimes the answer will be obvious, other times, less so. Once you decide you are leaving, contact your airline. They may offer "compassionate fares" for people who must travel quickly in unfortunate circumstances. Some airlines will refund part of your airfare if there has been a death in your immediate family; you will have to produce a death certificate sometime after you get home.

When you first purchase your tickets, ask about insurance options which cover you if you must change your return date.

Don't forget to notify your International Office at home and your local hosts that you are leaving.

### **If you lose your luggage**

Losing all your luggage is not the end of your trip, but it can be a major headache. Ensure that your carry-on luggage has the essentials to last you a few days, for instance: money, passport, a change of clothes, toiletries, and snacks. Beyond informing the proper airline authorities that your luggage is lost, there is not much else you can do but get on with the reason for your trip and hope that your luggage is found. Does your property or accident insurance allow compensation for lost or damaged luggage? Will it allow you some financial aid to help you buy a few things until your luggage is found?

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**Health and Wellness**