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Security

PERSONAL SECURITY WHILE DRIVING ABROAD [Back to Top]

When traveling abroad, many people like to have the option of renting a car to get around at the pace they enjoy. However, driving yourself around, instead of taking public transportation, may give you an inflated sense of security and control. The reality is that you may face a few issues, particularly when you drive an unfamiliar car, in an unknown location, with unfamiliar rules of the road. The following tips offer advice on the best way to protect yourself when getting around on your trip abroad:

Selecting a Car

- When you rent a car, choose one that, is a type commonly available locally, and not ostentatious in style or color. You want to blend in. Also take a good look at your car before getting in to see that it is in good shape.
- Do not get a Sport utility vehicles (SUVs or 4X4 vehicles) or luxury car which are prime targets of car thieves and carjackers.
- If available, select a car with an alarm system, preferably one with a "panic" feature; a steering wheel or brake locking bar or similar device; lockable gas cap, spare tire and engine compartment; air conditioning; universal door locks and power windows; a spare tire in good condition; both right and left side rear-view mirrors; and emergency gear, such as a flashlight, flares, fire extinguisher, and first aid kit.
- Ask that any rental car markings be removed.

In the Car

- Carry the registration documents with you. Never leave them in the vehicle.
- Carry a 3 x 5 card with useful motorist assistance phrases written by a local.
- Lock all doors and keep windows rolled up all of the time, particularly when stopped or parked. Thieves can snatch purses through open windows of slowly moving or stopped cars. Keep your valuables and any packages on the floor or in the trunk, but never in sight on the seat or dashboard.
- Never let anyone place a package inside the car or enter it unless you are present.
- On trips to isolated areas, keep extra water and oil in the trunk. Fuel should only be stored in approved metal containers.

- If possible, keep a communications device, such as a mobile phone or two-way radio, in your car, turned on at all times.
- Do not leave your passport or any personal belongings in the car at any time.

While Driving

- Avoid driving at night or during inclement weather, and never drive alone.
- Before leaving, let someone know your itinerary and your expected time of return.
- As you approach your car, scan the surrounding area for anyone loitering. Look under the car. Before opening the door, glance in the back seat.
- Consistently vary your routes from your lodgings to repeat destinations.
- Always drive with at least half a tank of fuel.
- On streets with more than one lane, try to drive in the lane away from the curb.
- If you see any indication that a street you are on has a work zone or other possible congestion ahead, try to avoid it.
- Be wary of anyone who hails you on the road or tries to get your attention when you are in or near your car. Never pick up hitchhikers.
- Avoid being boxed in by other cars.
- When coming to a stop, make sure you leave enough room to pull around the car in front of you in case someone attempts to enter your vehicle. When you stop, leave your car in gear (if it is a stick shift) so that you can start off quickly if needed. Be prepared to drive onto the sidewalk or over a curb to get away quickly.
- If you have a flat tire, drive on it to a safe location to change it.
- If you are threatened at or approaching a red light, drive through it carefully.
- Trips to isolated areas can be dangerous. If possible, travel in a convoy of two or more cars. Carry extra water, fuel, and a second set of keys.

At the End of Your Trip

- If there is two-way traffic where you intend to park, make your turns so that you can drive directly to the spot. Do not come to a full stop in traffic in order to turn.
- A lit, locked, and manned garage is the most secure place to park a car. Carports and driveways within fenced or guarded areas are more secure than street parking.
- If there are no secure parking areas, select a well-lit and non-isolated spot as close to your lodging as possible and away from sound and vision masking features such as trucks or buses, dense shrubbery, or small buildings that might conceal thieves.
- Do not get out of your car if you feel uncomfortable; if there are suspicious looking individuals nearby continue driving to a safer area.
- Always lock the car, and do not leave valuables behind.

WHAT TO DO BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER A FLOOD [\[Back to Top\]](#)

Floods are one of the most common hazards found throughout the world. However, all floods are not alike; some develop slowly, sometimes over a period of days, while flash floods can develop quickly, sometimes in just a few minutes, and without any visible signs of rain. Flash floods often have a dangerous wall of roaring water that carries a deadly cargo of rocks, mud, and other debris,

which can sweep away most things in its path. Overland flooding occurs outside a defined river or stream, such as when a levee is breached, but still can be destructive. Flooding can also occur from dam breaks, producing effects similar to flash floods.

What To Do If You Suspect You Are In a Potential Flood Situation

1. Inquire with the local officials or your lodging managers where the nearby flood-prone or high-risk areas are. Ask about official flood warning signals and what to do when you hear them.
2. If in an area prone to flooding, be prepared to evacuate. Learn the area's flood evacuation routes and where to find high ground.

What To Do During a Flood

1. Be aware of flash flooding. If there is any possibility of a flash flood, move immediately to higher ground. Do not wait for instructions to move.
2. Listen to local radio or television stations for up-to-date information.
3. Be aware of streams, drainage channels, canyons, and other areas known to flood suddenly. Flash floods can occur in these areas with or without such typical warning signs as rain clouds or heavy rain.
4. If local authorities issue a flood watch, prepare to evacuate:
 - Secure your lodgings. If you have time, tie down or bring outdoor equipment and lawn furniture inside. Move essential items to the upper floors.
 - If instructed, turn off utilities at the main switches or valves. Disconnect electrical appliances. Do not touch electrical equipment if you are wet or standing in water.
 - Fill the bathtub with water in case water becomes contaminated or services cut off. Before filling the tub, sterilize it with a diluted bleach solution (one part bleach to 10 parts water).
5. Do not walk through moving water. Six inches (15 cm) of moving water can knock you off your feet. If you must walk in a flooded area, walk where the water is not moving. Use a stick or pole to check the firmness of the ground in front of you.
6. Do not drive into flooded areas. Six inches (15 cm) of water will reach the bottom of most passenger cars causing loss of control and possible stalling. A foot (30 cm) of water will float many vehicles. Two feet (60 cm) of water can carry away most vehicles, including sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and pickups.
7. If floodwaters rise around your car, abandon the car and move to higher ground, if you can do so safely. You and your vehicle can be quickly swept away as floodwaters rise.

What To Do After a Flood

1. Avoid floodwaters. The water may be contaminated by oil, gasoline, or raw sewage. The water may also be electrically charged from underground or downed power lines.
2. Avoid moving water.
3. Be aware of areas where floodwaters have receded. Roads may have weakened and could collapse under the weight of a car.
4. Stay away from downed power lines and designated disaster areas.
5. Return to your lodgings only when authorities indicate it is safe. Stay out of buildings if surrounded by floodwaters. Use extreme caution when entering buildings. There may be hidden damage, particularly in foundations.
6. Consider your and your family's health and safety needs:
 - Wash any body parts that come in contact with floodwaters with soap and clean water.
 - Throw away food that has come in contact with floodwaters.
 - Monitor local radio and television news to learn whether the community's water supply is safe to drink.

Listen to local media for information about where to seek assistance for housing, clothing and food, if necessary.

Health

TRAVELING WITH DIETARY RESTRICTIONS [\[Back to Top\]](#)

Anyone who has food allergies or follows a special diet (such as kosher or vegan) knows that sticking to your food regimen can sometimes be tricky—especially when you're traveling overseas and struggling to explain exactly what ovo-vegetarianism is to a waiter who only speaks a dozen words of English. But your dietary restrictions don't have to keep you stuck at home and chained to your own kitchen. People on special diets travel all the time. Traveling with dietary restrictions takes careful planning and a willingness to communicate your needs clearly—and sometimes repeatedly. The following tips will help you overcome language barriers, find restaurants that fit your diet and stay safe in the case of an allergic reaction.

Trip Planning

Research your destination and be prepared for any food-related challenges you may face with regard to local eating customs. For example, nearly a third of India's population is vegetarian, so it's easy to find meatless dishes there. But vegetarianism is a foreign concept in most of South America. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't visit South America if you're a vegetarian or a vegan; however, you can expect to spend a lot of time explaining to befuddled waiters exactly what you're able to eat (and why vegetable soup made with beef stock doesn't qualify).

Call ahead—most travel outfitters can make arrangements to meet your dietary needs if they're given plenty of notice. You can also avoid the hassle of making your own arrangements by booking a trip with a specialty outfitter that caters to your particular dietary needs—like a kosher cruise with Kosherica or a vegetarian biking trip to England with Bicycle Beano, for example.

Food Allergy Translation Cards

If you're traveling to a country where you don't speak the local language, food allergy translation cards can be a lifesaver, literally. Several companies offer these wallet-size cards, which explain your allergy or other dietary restriction in the local language of wherever you're going. They usually can be customized to include multiple allergies and food restrictions. Be sure to order multiple copies of your travel cards in case you lose one or leave one at a restaurant. Companies like Allergy Translation, Dietary Card and SelectWisely all offer food allergy translation cards. You may also be able to make your own cards. Some travelers print out photos of the foods they can't eat and draw a large X (or a circle with a slash) over them to indicate that these items are prohibited. Whether you buy cards or make your own, it's a good idea to research how to read and pronounce the word(s) for your particular dietary condition -- this will help you decipher menus and nutrition information labels, and enable you to communicate with anyone you encounter, regardless of their level of literacy.

Restaurants

Talk to your innkeeper or hotel concierge about which nearby restaurants or grocery stores would be suitable for your needs. Calling well in advance of your trip will give them time to do a little research on your behalf. When traveling within your own home country, it's often useful to seek out chain restaurants where you've eaten in the past -- that way you'll already be familiar with the menu and know which items you can eat without a problem.

At restaurants, address your dietary needs with your waiter or, better yet, the chef (who may be the only person who knows exactly what ingredients are in each dish). Show your food allergy card if you have one; if you don't, and you don't speak the local language, see if you can find another diner at the restaurant to help you translate. Don't be afraid to ask the kitchen to modify a dish or to prepare something that isn't on the menu—most restaurants can quickly throw together a veggie-only salad or another simple dish.

Accommodations

The best way to control your diet on the road is to book accommodations where you can cook for yourself. Vacation rentals are a good choice, as are home exchanges—or look for a hotel with a kitchen. You can stock your pantry with food from local grocery or health food stores; just be sure you know enough of the local language to read the nutrition labels.

Another option to consider is a bed and breakfast. The owners of these small properties can often take more time to accommodate their guests' special needs and in some cases they may grant you access to their kitchen.

Trains, Planes, Cars and Boats

When possible, bring your own food with you onto the plane or train. Just be sure to follow all pertinent airport security rules for liquids and gels if you're flying—and if you're traveling to another country, check its customs regulations to be sure your food is permitted to cross the border. (Many countries do not allow travelers to bring animal products or fresh fruits and vegetables from other nations.) Packing your own grub is even easier if you're traveling by car. You can stow your goodies in a cooler for longer freshness.

Most airlines can accommodate a wide variety of special diets as long as they have advance notice. You must usually request a special meal at least 24 hours before your flight. The day of your trip, speak with the gate agent or a flight attendant to confirm that your special meal has made it onto your plane.

Cruise lines have grown increasingly accommodating of special diets and should be able to handle most common allergies and dietary restrictions. Vegetarians in particular will find at least one option in most on-board restaurants, while travelers with other diets should call ahead of time to make arrangements.

Peanuts on Planes

For fliers who are sensitive to peanuts, air travel can be a source of worry. Check your airline's Web site for its policy on snacks with nuts. Many airlines no longer serve peanuts on flights, while others will refrain from serving them if they know a passenger has a severe allergy. You can also ask your flight attendant to make an announcement on your behalf, requesting that other passengers not eat peanut products during the flight.

No airline can guarantee a peanut-free plane because it's impossible to control what passengers bring with them on a flight. However, you can take more control over your situation by explaining your allergy to passengers around you. You may even wish to bring your own alternative snack to share with your neighbors.

Pack sanitary wipes to rub down your tray table, arm rests and other surfaces before eating. And consider taking a morning flight -- most planes are at their cleanest then.

FROM THE ASSIST AMERICA CASE FILES [Back to Top]

Pancreatitis in Russia

Jeremy* had traveled to Russia for a conference, leaving his wife Vera back home in Ohio. While there, however, he began suffering from abdominal pain and was taken to a local hospital in St. Petersburg. Local physicians diagnosed him with pancreatitis and he was admitted for treatment. As his condition continued to worsen, it seemed that surgery would be eminent.

Vera called Assist America looking for help. She wanted to travel to his bedside, but wouldn't be able to do so without a visa to visit Russia. To obtain one quickly would require an emergency trip

to Washington D.C. before she could even begin planning to travel to Russia to see Jeremy.

Assist America's coordinators assured Vera that they would help the couple and immediately began monitoring Jeremy's care. With his condition growing more dire, it became clear that the hospital in St. Petersburg was not equipped to handle his condition. Assist America stepped in, arranging and paying for Jeremy to be evacuated via air ambulance to a reputable facility in Helsinki, keeping Vera updated every step of the way.

With her husband being transported to Finland instead of staying in Russia, Vera no longer had to worry about visa issues. Assist America's coordinators offered Vera two fully-paid options: if she could be at the airport in one hour, they could secure her passage to Finland on a flight that left that same day; or, she could wait to take the flight the following day. Vera only lived about five minutes from the airport so she took the first option and was on a flight shortly thereafter.

She warned Assist America that she hadn't had time to obtain a cell phone she could use internationally, but they assured her they would plan for everything. Assist America arranged for a car service to pick Vera up for the airport, and instructed her to look for a sign with her name in the Arrivals Hall. They also explained how she could contact them for free at any time by making a collect call.

Finally by Jeremy's bedside, Assist America helped connect Vera with the couple's loved ones back home, as well as physicians who could help her put a plan together for Jeremy's continued care upon his return.

With the intervention of his new medical team, Jeremy's condition continued to improve daily. Vera stayed by his side as he recovered and regained his strength. In a few weeks' time, Jeremy had recovered to the point that he was able to fly home on a commercial carrier.

**name changed for privacy*

Member's comment:

"All of the services provided were extraordinary. Assist America was my life line as I dealt with the circumstances around my husband's condition. I don't know how I would've handled things without their help."

Travel

WINTER CAR TRAVEL: HOW TO AVOID FROSTBITE [Back to Top]

Are you planning to drive and take a family vacation this winter? If you are traveling by car, bus or RV during extremely cold weather, it's important to equip your vehicle with the necessary supplies. Put together a winter survival kit and place the items in your vehicle. Winter survival kit items

should be available at a variety of stores and serve several functions. These supplies should include items to keep you warm (and help you avoid frostbite), get your vehicle back on the road if you are broken down and help signal assistance if you are stranded.

Even if temperatures are not near zero, cold temperatures can still present a danger to you, and frostbite can set in within a matter of minutes. The outside ambient temperature can feel even colder when combined with wind. You may hear weather reports which discuss the "wind chill factor." The Wind Chill Factor is an index that tells us the "feels like" temperature when the outside air temperature is combined with wind speed. Forty degrees Fahrenheit can feel like anywhere from 34 degrees to 25 degrees depending on the wind speed. That might not sound like much difference, but when you get down to temperatures hovering near zero, the time it takes for frostbite to set in decreases from 30 minutes to 5 minutes.

Following are some important tips for traveling safely this winter:

Travel Cautiously

- Stay alert and listen to travel advisories
- Do not travel in low visibility conditions
- Carry additional warm clothing
- Avoid bridges and overpasses if possible—ice freezes first in these areas
- Use tire chains (in extreme cases of snow for traction)

Personal Items

- Additional warm clothing for each person traveling
- Blankets and sleeping bags for long trips (enough to cover everyone in the car)
- Enough water, a first aid kit, and working mobile phone

Vehicle Items

- Windshield scraper, booster cables, road maps, tool kit
- Waterproof matches, paper towels
- Tire chains, tow rope, flashlight, bright colored clothes (so the other vehicles can see you in trouble)
- Sand bag or cat litter (for traction, in case you are stuck)
- Compressed air for temporary flat tire repair

What To Do If You Are Stranded

- Stay in the vehicle - use the mobile phone to call or help
- Retrieve emergency items from the trunk to keep warm
- Use the bright colored cloth around the antenna so others can locate your vehicle
- Stay warm by layering up with the clothes you packed away
- Determine if the vehicle is a quick repair item
- Run the heater in the car to keep warm every 10 minutes
- Huddle with others traveling and continue to keep warm

TRAVEL PLANNING TASKS THAT CAN'T WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE [\[Back to Top\]](#)

When it comes to travel, some people prefer to pack at the last minute or read up on their destination en route, while others always keep a suitcase packed with essentials, and research locales for months before booking a trip. Whatever your travel style is, there are some things that any traveler should take care of before setting off. Following are some things to think about before your next trip:

Get immunizations

Heading to Argentina? Make sure you have your typhoid shot. Going to China? You'll need a hepatitis A vaccine. Since getting the proper vaccinations means booking medical appointments and sometimes requires more than one dose (often spaced a few weeks or months apart), it's not something you can do at the last minute. The CDC's Travelers Health tool offers comprehensive information about vaccination recommendations by country. Keep in mind that even in countries where special vaccinations aren't necessary, it's important to make sure you're up-to-date on all your routine vaccinations—including measles-mumps-rubella and diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis.

Break in new shoes

Breaking in new shoes, especially the pairs you'll be using intensively on your travels, should never be left to the last minute. It can take days or weeks of short-term wear to effectively and painlessly get a new pair of shoes vacation-ready. Try to cram the breaking-in process into a few days pre-trip and you may end up with blisters that will not only make you hate the shoes but can also make walking uncomfortable right from the start of your trip.

Download movies

Traveling with your own entertainment is great. Layovers, long flights and delays simply aren't as bad if you can fill the time catching up on movies. But even with a fast Internet connection, downloading movies is still a surprisingly slow process. As a general rule, it's a good idea to prepare your tablet (or phone, or laptop) at least a day in advance, giving your device plenty of time with a fast connection so you can add whatever movies, TV shows or books you want to take.

Order special meals for the plane

If you're expecting a vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, kosher or other special meal on a flight, you can't leave it to the last minute. Most airlines require at least 24 hours' notice to accommodate alternative meals. In fact, the best time to make your request is at the time of booking, when you're already on the website or phone and already thinking about it.

Update your operating system

Downloading the latest operating system for your phone on the way to the airport can throw a major wrench in the works. Not only does it mean rebooting at a time when you're likely to need the device to make last-minute phone calls or check your flight status, but your phone's fresh outlook on life means you may need to re-log in to some of your apps. And if you're a person who doesn't

know all of your passwords off the top of your head, this can leave you without travel vitals like itinerary information and access to communication tools.

Book house sitters and pet sitters

It's always wise to lock in your preferred house sitter or pet sitter well in advance of your trip, particularly during the summer or during holidays when home-care providers are in high demand and book up quickly. Even if your plan is to ask a family member to pick up your mail or pay a neighbor kid to clean the litter box, you'll need to make sure they'll be around to manage the home front while you're away.

Download and update apps

Without a fast connection, downloading and updating apps can be frustratingly slow. And deciding which new apps you'll need (which HDR camera app? Which map app? Which public transportation app?) can be a time-consuming process. It's a good idea to download new apps and update any apps you'll rely on while traveling (since older versions may crash or just not work as they should) the day before you leave, at the latest.

Sort out your adapter and converter needs

Will your electronics simply require an adapter, or will they need both a converter (also called a transformer) and an adapter? These are important questions to clear up well before you travel. Many electronics (such as Apple phones and tablets) have a converter built into the charging plug, so if you're traveling somewhere with 240 V current, you'll just need an adapter for the plug shape. But if you try to plug in something (for instance, a hair dryer or white-noise machine) that doesn't run on dual current, you'll break it. Figure this out before your trip and avoid electronic meltdowns.

Book popular restaurants

If you've got your heart set on eating at a specific restaurant in a city you're visiting, you should seriously consider reservations. If a restaurant is popular enough for word of it to have reached foreign shores, chances are it's going to be hard to get into. Brush up on your language skills and make the phone call, or if you have a credit card with a concierge service, you can enlist the help of a professional. OpenTable allows you to book online at many restaurants in the U.S., as well as an increasing number of spots in 19 countries and regions including the U.K., Japan and Mexico. Or use a country-specific restaurant-reservation site such as Lafourchette in France.

Check your passport's expiration date

Are you traveling anywhere within the next year? Then stop reading this, go find your passport, and make sure the expiration date isn't within six months of your travel dates. Take this small but vital step because some countries won't allow you in if your passport expires too close to your travel dates. Known as the six-month passport validity rule (and the similar three-month passport validity rule), it can ruin a vacation even before it begins.

Check baggage restrictions of connecting airlines

On some connecting flights, you only need to know the baggage restrictions of the airline you booked through. But other times, you'll be expected to abide by multiple airlines' baggage policies.

And if you book a separate flight at your destination, you'll need to make sure your baggage abides by those rules or risk paying a hefty fee. It's an irritating process, and on some foreign carriers without clear information posted online it may require a phone call, but it's better than getting to the airport and discovering you'll need to pay an extra \$50 to bring your toothbrush and clean socks.

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