



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

TRAVELLING WOMEN



smartraveller.gov.au

Every traveller, every trip.

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Australians are travelling overseas in ever-increasing numbers. Overseas travel can be both an exhilarating and daunting experience. All travellers may face risks overseas, but women, whether experienced international travellers or first-timers, may face greater risks in unfamiliar environments or cultures.

This publication is designed to provide women with information to help minimise these risks. It should be read in conjunction with *Travel smart: hints for Australian travellers*, available at **smartraveller.gov.au**.

When you travel abroad, you leave behind Australia's support systems, emergency service capabilities and medical facilities. The Australian Government will do what it can to help Australians in difficulty overseas, but there are legal and practical limits to what can be done to assist travellers in other countries. You should have realistic expectations about this and read the *Consular Services Charter* before you go, available at **smartraveller.gov.au**.

Before you go – be prepared

The better prepared you are, the safer and more enjoyable your travel will be.

Read the travel advice

Start with the latest travel advice for your destination, available at **smartraveller.gov.au**. This advice will give you information on the main risks you may face and precautions you can take while travelling overseas. The travel advice also includes practical information on the safety and security situation, local laws and health issues.

Register before you travel

Make sure you register your travel and contact details online at **smartraveller.gov.au** before you travel. This will make it easier to contact you in an emergency, whether it's a natural disaster, civil disturbance or family issue. The registration information you provide is protected by Australia's strict privacy laws.

Subscribe to travel advice

While at **smartraveller.gov.au**, subscribe to receive free email updates to travel advice. This will help you stay across any major changes to the safety and security situation, local laws and health issues in the countries you plan to visit.

Travel insurance

If you can't afford travel insurance, you can't afford to travel.

We strongly advise you to take out comprehensive travel insurance. You should make sure it covers all medical expenses for injury or illness, as well as theft of valuables, damage to baggage and cancellations or interruptions to flight plans. It will save you worry and

a possible financial burden. Medical costs overseas can be in the tens of thousands of dollars and many people have been burdened financially in paying these costs when things go wrong.

Compare travel insurance policies and make sure the cover you choose suits your needs and is valid for the whole time you'll be away. Always read the product disclosure statement carefully and ensure that you understand exactly what your travel insurance covers.

You may be able to obtain travel insurance for yourself and your travelling partner under the one policy. Cover, however, varies from policy to policy. Make sure you confirm all the details of your coverage with your insurance provider and ensure you receive written confirmation of your policy.

If you plan to rely on travel insurance provided through your credit card, you should obtain written confirmation that you're covered and ensure that you have the details of the policy clearly outlined in writing.

The Australian Government won't pay for your medical treatment overseas or medical evacuation to Australia or a third country. Travellers without travel insurance are personally liable for covering any medical and associated costs they incur.

For more information on travel insurance, including tips for choosing a policy that's right for you, visit **[smartraveller.gov.au](https://www.smartraveller.gov.au)**.

Case study

Three young Australian women, members of an international volunteer group, were travelling by road in East Africa when their minibus was involved in a collision. Two of the three Australian volunteers were severely injured and required urgent evacuation. The insurer, working with the Australian High Commission and the DFAT Consular Emergency Centre in Canberra, organised an air ambulance to transport them to another country for safer surgery and better medical attention.

Several weeks later, when their conditions permitted, they were medivaced to Europe for further treatment. Without the insurance covering the purpose of their visit to Africa, medivac by air would have taken much longer to organise or may not have been possible, potentially threatening the lives of the two volunteers and costing many thousands of dollars.

Smartraveller tip

- ☑ Take out comprehensive travel insurance for the complete duration of your stay overseas, and ensure that your policy will cover you for the activities you plan to do.

Passports and visas

Your passport is your most important travel document. All Australian citizens must have a valid passport before leaving Australia and maintain a valid passport while overseas. All children travelling overseas, including newborn infants, must have their own passport.

Be aware that countries have different passport validity requirements. Make sure your passport has at least six months validity from your planned date of return to Australia. Carry extra passport photos just in case your passport is lost or stolen and you need to replace it while you're away.

Find out early what visas you need by contacting the relevant foreign mission (embassy, high commission or consulate) of the countries you intend to visit. Some countries have specific entry and exit requirements, including compulsory vaccinations. Be aware that a tourist visa may not allow you to undertake any form of work—including voluntary or unpaid activities. Remember to check the visa requirements of countries you might be transiting. Contact details for foreign missions can be found in *White Pages* or online at www.dfat.gov.au/embassies.html.

More information on Australian passports can be found at www.passports.gov.au or by calling the Australian Passport Information Service on **13 12 32** in Australia.

Remember

- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in Australia and Australian missions overseas cannot help you arrange visas or work and residency permits for other countries.
- A visa does not guarantee entry to a foreign country.
- In most cases, a tourist visa does not allow you to work in a foreign country, including voluntary or unpaid activities.

Dual nationality

Being a national or citizen of more than one country is called dual nationality.

Some countries offer citizenship to people who marry their citizens, or to persons whose parents or grandparents were born in that country. You should be aware that if you have dual nationality, it may have implications when you visit the country of your second nationality.

You may be prevented from obtaining Australian consular assistance if the country you're in considers you to be one of its citizens.

If you hold another country's passport, seek advice about using it. Take your Australian passport and use it to depart from and return to Australia.

For further information, read the *Dual nationals* publication available at smartraveller.gov.au.

Planning your trip

Research and preparation before you leave can save you a lot of hassle.

Research your destination

Find out about the political, cultural and economic environment of your destination so you'll know what to expect on arrival. Consult the travel advisory for your destination at smartraveller.gov.au and either purchase a guide book or search the internet for recent information. Talk with family or friends who are familiar with the countries you'll be visiting. You could also consult DFAT's country briefs available at www.dfat.gov.au to learn more about your destinations.

Airlines

If you're concerned the airline may question your fitness to fly, we recommend you obtain a letter from your doctor confirming that you're fit for air travel.

If you have a disability, contact your airline to find out about services such as shuttle services, seating arrangements and special meals.

If you need to carry needles and syringes with you, obtain a letter from your doctor explaining why you need them and seek early advice from your airline on how to comply with enhanced airport and air travel security regulations.

Accommodation

If you're travelling independently, it's recommended that you book your accommodation prior to arrival, especially if you're due to arrive at your destination late at night.

Luggage

Protect yourself against loss and theft by carrying minimal pieces of luggage. Overloaded, you make yourself more vulnerable to bag

snatchers and pickpockets. Secure credit cards and passports in a money belt or under your clothes.

Information about what you can and cannot carry in your luggage is available from the Civil Aviation Safety Authority at **www.casa.gov.au** and the Australian Government's travel security website, **www.travelsecure.infrastructure.gov.au**.

If you're travelling to the USA, make sure you familiarise yourself with their specific airline baggage lock requirements. Information is available from the US Department of Homeland Security website at **www.tsa.gov**.

Staying safe overseas

You can take practical steps to stay safe overseas and avoid running into difficulties and dangerous situations.

Money and valuables

You can take a number of steps to protect yourself against loss and theft of money and valuables.

- Organise a variety of ways of accessing your money overseas, such as debit and credit cards, traveller's cheques and cash.
- Check with your bank whether your ATM card will work overseas.
- Register with your bank the period you expect to be travelling.
- Never let your credit card out of your sight.
- Make two photocopies of valuable documents such as your passport, tickets, travel insurance policy, visas and credit and ATM cards. Keep one copy with you in a separate place to the original and leave the other copy with someone at home.

Local transport and tours

When organising how to get around overseas, check out the local travel section in our travel advisories at [smartraveller.gov.au](https://www.smartraveller.gov.au) and read our travel bulletin on 'Overseas Road Safety'.

Be aware that the safety standards you might expect of transport and tour operators, including adventure activities, are not always met. Sufficient safety equipment may not be provided and recommended maintenance standards and safety precautions may not be observed.

Make sure you organise an International Driving Permit before you leave Australia if you're planning to drive overseas. In some countries women are not allowed to drive vehicles. Learn about road conditions and traffic culture of the places you plan to visit. If you're renting a car, make sure it's roadworthy.

Local laws and customs

Familiarise yourself with local laws and show sensitivity to local customs.

Read the travel advice for your destination at **smartraveller.gov.au** for practical information on local laws and customs. In some cultures people are deeply offended by revealing clothing and overly affectionate behaviour. Breastfeeding in public may also be considered offensive.

Be aware that local laws and penalties, including ones that may appear harsh by Australian standards, apply to you. Age or health concerns are not valid excuses. Many countries apply capital punishment, including for narcotics-related crimes. Every year, many Australians of all ages are arrested overseas on drug charges.

Women travelling alone

Take particular care.

Most women experience trouble-free travel; however, women face greater risks, particularly if travelling alone. You should be aware that in some countries you may become the focus of unwanted attention. This could take the form of hissing, passing comments, obscene behaviour, stalking or unwanted physical contact such as pinching. In these situations, maintain your composure and remove yourself from the situation as quickly as possible.

You should avoid walking alone after dark or in isolated areas to minimise the risk of harassment. You should also be sensitive to local standards of dress and behaviour. If in doubt, seek local advice.

You could unwittingly find yourself in danger simply by accepting an invitation to go out with a stranger alone. In societies where this is not an accepted practice, just saying 'yes' to an invitation may give the wrong signal and expose you to the risk of sexual assault.

Case study

Belinda was visiting friends in Asia on her way to Europe. Her friends took her to a bar to show her the local night-life. Belinda decided to stay longer despite her friends' insistence that she leave with them. She returned to her friends' place the following morning and explained that a group of students, male and female, invited her to their table to practise their English. Only one male student was with her at closing time. He convinced her that walking alone late at night was very dangerous and therefore she should wait for daylight at his place only a few minutes away. She vaguely remembered feeling very tired immediately after arriving in a dark room. When she woke up, she was alone in a dirty storeroom and undressed. She found that her handbag had been ransacked and her money had been stolen. She was certain that her drinks had been spiked and that she had been raped. She returned to Australia to have a medical check-up and seek counselling to recover from her traumatic experience.

Smartraveller tip

- ☑ Try to stay in the company of people you trust and avoid accepting drinks from others or leaving your drinks unattended.

The *Sexual assault overseas* publication, available at [smartraveller.gov.au](https://www.smartraveller.gov.au), provides guidance on how to deal with this traumatic experience and provides details on the support available to victims and their families overseas and in Australia.

Additional safety hints

- Never leave your drink unattended or in the care of a stranger. Drink-spiking is common around the world.
- Be wary when travelling on crowded public transport as it can provide opportunities for unwelcome harassment or theft.
- Avoid travelling in a train carriage where you are the only passenger. Attackers are known to target women travelling alone on trains.
- Avoid hitchhiking. There are no countries in the world where hitchhiking is safe for women, particularly for women travelling alone.
- Avoid shopping in isolated areas and trying on items in back rooms at bazaars and markets.
- Use only officially licensed and reputable taxis.
- Always ensure that the door of your room at your accommodation is firmly secured.
- Keep your bag firmly tied to your body and avoid displaying items such as jewellery and cameras. Bag snatching and theft of valuables is common in many countries.
- Be aware of credit card fraud. Credit card details are frequently copied for later illegal use. Never let your credit card out of your sight.
- Do not use, carry or get involved with drugs. Minimise your chances of getting into trouble with drugs overseas by:
 - obeying the law
 - locking your luggage
 - never leaving your bags unattended in public areas or in the care of a stranger
 - never carrying anything into or out of a country for someone else.

Case study

Jean, a young Australian woman, was shopping in a crowded bazaar in the Middle East. She wanted to buy a new outfit and was asked by the male shopkeeper to come back later when he would have the outfit in her size. Jean returned late in the afternoon when the bazaar was much quieter and there were no other customers in the shop. Jean was led to a room at the back of the shop to try on the clothes and was assaulted by the shopkeeper. She had been placed in a situation where she was extremely vulnerable. Jean was isolated from the help of other shoppers or passers-by and had no means of escape from the room. Jean suffered a traumatising experience and without witnesses she was unable to press charges.

Smartraveller tip

- ☑ Try to avoid entering locations that are isolated and, if possible, try to be accompanied by a friend or family member.

Developing a relationship overseas

Some countries impose strict limits on women's rights, with possible restrictions on:

- establishing a relationship with a foreigner
- property entitlements, inheritance, divorce, alimony, child support and custody
- leaving the country without their husband's permission.

Women in some countries are also subject to strict family controls. If you plan to marry overseas, learn about the legal, cultural and religious implications for yourself, your intended spouse and any existing or possible future children.

Be aware that an apparent strong relationship pursued on the internet could be a planned fraudulent internet dating scam. You could be asked by a prospective marriage partner to send money for them to travel to Australia. Some Australians have lost large sums of money this way. Any chance of recovering lost funds is highly unlikely. In some instances, people who have travelled overseas to meet their prospective marriage partner have been kidnapped and held to ransom.

It's not uncommon for the relationship to end once suspicions are raised that it could be a scam. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's SCAMwatch website, www.scamwatch.gov.au, has further information on how to recognise, protect yourself from and report scams.

Staying healthy overseas

Think about your health needs before you travel.

Health checks and vaccinations

Make an appointment with your doctor or travel clinic for a basic check-up at least six to eight weeks before you depart and find out if any vaccinations or health checks are required for your destination.

Medication

If you are taking medicines overseas, we recommend that you:

- discuss with your doctor the medication you'll need to take
- carry a letter from your doctor detailing what the medication is, how much you'll be taking with you, and stating that it's for your own personal use
- leave the medication in its original packaging so it's clearly labelled with your name and dosage instructions.

If you're travelling with medication, make sure it's legal in the countries you're visiting by contacting the relevant foreign mission in Australia.

Contact details are available at www.dfat.gov.au/embassies.html.

If you need to travel with large quantities of medication, it's good practice to separate the quantity between your luggage, in case bags go missing. Keep all medication in the original, labelled container to avoid customs problems.

If you have to inject your medication, it may be preferable to carry your own needles and syringes, if it's allowed in the countries you're visiting. If you buy needles and syringes overseas, make sure they are sealed and sterile.

Take enough medication to cover the length of your trip. If you need to purchase medication at your destination, be careful not to buy imitation

or counterfeit medications and prescription drugs, and always check the strength of a medication with a doctor. Be aware that packaging and labelling may be similar to those available in Australia, but the strength and active ingredients can vary from country to country.

It's an offence to carry or send Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medicine overseas unless it's for your own personal use, or for the use of someone travelling with you. You could be fined \$5,000 and spend two years in prison if you break the law. Additional information is available at **www.health.gov.au** or by calling the PBS information line on **1800 020 613**.

More information on travelling with medication is available at **www.medicareaustralia.gov.au** or by calling the Overseas Drug Diversion information line on **1800 500 147**.

Prescription glasses

If you wear glasses, take along a spare pair and/or a copy of the prescription so that they can be replaced more easily if lost or broken.

Additional health tips

- Do not use or get involved with drugs.
- Be aware of the risk of hepatitis and HIV – avoid ear-piercing, acupuncture, tattooing, beauty treatments such as manicures and pedicures, or dental work while travelling in countries with lower health or hygiene standards.
- Practise safe sex. Never assume that your partner is free of HIV or a sexually transmissible infection. Carry a reliable brand of condom as they may not be available at your destination.
- Avoid temporary ‘black henna’ tattoos as they often contain a dye which can cause serious skin reactions. For further information see the Australasian College of Dermatologists website at **www.dermcoll.asn.au**.
- Medical tourism, including cosmetic surgery and sex-change operations, is common in Asia. Be aware that while the range of medical and dental services available may be impressive at first sight, standards can be low, resulting in serious and possibly life-threatening complications.
- Take feminine hygiene products and contraceptives if you’re going to places where they may not be available or may be expensive.

Reciprocal health agreements

Australia has reciprocal healthcare agreements with Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

These agreements enable Australians to access urgent or emergency treatment overseas. However, medical services are only provided when it would be unreasonable to delay treatment until the person returns to Australia. It’s important to remember that healthcare agreements are no substitute for travel insurance. They won’t cover you if a doctor recommends medical evacuation back to Australia.

Useful links

To find out more about healthy travel and vaccinations you can visit:

- World Health Organization – **www.who.int**
- Australian Immunisation Handbook – **www.immunise.health.gov.au**

Further information about health care when travelling overseas and international health agreements is available at the Medicare website, **www.medicareaustralia.gov.au**, or by calling **13 20 11**.

Getting help overseas

The Australian Government will do what it can to help Australians in difficulty overseas, but there are limits to what can be done.

Consular services

DFAT provides assistance to Australians who find themselves in trouble overseas. This support is referred to as consular services; however, there are legal and practical limits to what can be done.

The *Consular Services Charter* sets out the standard of services all Australians can expect to receive from consular staff, including what they can and cannot do, and is available at **smartraveller.gov.au**.

Contact details for Australian missions overseas are available at **www.dfat.gov.au/missions**. A directory of Australian missions also appears in the 'Getting Help Overseas' section of *Travel smart: hints for Australian travellers*. This publication is issued with your passport and is also available online at **smartraveller.gov.au**.

Australia has an agreement with Canada to provide consular assistance to Australians in some countries. Canadian missions providing consular assistance to Australians are also listed in the *Travel smart: hints for Australian travellers* publication.

The 24-hour Consular Emergency Centre in Canberra can also be contacted for assistance from anywhere in the world on **+61 2 6261 3305** or **1300 555 135** (local call cost within Australia).

Contact your travel insurance provider

Travel insurance companies often have 24-hour call centres that you can contact from anywhere in the world. If you get sick overseas or are involved in a medical emergency, you should contact your travel insurance provider as soon as possible. Make sure you take your travel insurance policy information and contact numbers with you so you can easily contact your insurer from overseas.

For more information on insurance, read the 'Travel Insurance' section of this brochure.

Counselling services

Australians in need of counselling services overseas can contact our Consular Emergency Centre on **+61 2 6261 3305** to be transferred to a Lifeline telephone counsellor.

Other Smartraveller publications

DFAT publishes a range of brochures with travel hints for specific travel groups, and information about how to cope with unexpected events, available at smartraveller.gov.au.

Titles include:

- Travel smart: hints for Australian travellers
- Consular Services Charter
- Arrested or jailed overseas
- Backpacking overseas
- Death overseas
- Dual nationals
- Living and working overseas
- Sexual assault overseas
- Travelling with children
- Travelling seniors
- Travelling well
- When someone is missing overseas

Copies of these brochures are also available at DFAT state and territory offices, Australian Passport Offices, and Australian missions overseas. You can also order copies online at smartraveller.gov.au.

The brochures *Travelling well*, *Travelling seniors* and *Dual nationals* are also available online in a number of community languages at smartraveller.gov.au.

Top 10 travel tips

1. Check the latest travel advice at **smartraveller.gov.au** and subscribe to receive free email notifications each time the advice for your destination is updated.
2. Take out comprehensive travel insurance and ensure it covers you for the places you plan to visit and the things you plan to do.
3. Before travelling overseas, register your travel and contact details online at **smartraveller.gov.au**, or at the local Australian embassy, high commission or consulate once you arrive so we can contact you in case of an emergency.
4. Obey the laws of the country you're visiting even if these appear harsh or unfair by Australian standards. Don't expect to be treated differently from the locals just because you're Australian.
5. Make sure you have the right visas for the countries you're visiting or transiting and check any other entry or exit requirements.
6. Make copies of your passport details, insurance policy, traveller's cheques, visas and credit card numbers. Carry one copy in a separate place to the original and leave a copy with someone at home.
7. Check with health professionals for information on recommended vaccinations and other health precautions. Remember that vaccinations can be an entry requirement to some countries. Also find out about taking medication overseas—certain medicines aren't allowed in some countries.

8. Make sure your passport has at least six months' validity from your planned date of return to Australia. Carry extra passport photos in case your passport is lost or stolen and you need to replace it while you're away.
9. Keep in contact with friends and family back home and give them a copy of your itinerary so they know where you are.
10. Check to see if you're regarded as a national of the country you plan to visit, and whether dual nationality will have any implications for your travel plans.

smartraveller.gov.au

Every traveller, every trip.

1. **Register** your travel and contact details online at smartraveller.gov.au before you travel overseas—or at the local Australian embassy, high commission or consulate once you arrive—so we can contact you in an emergency.
2. Check the latest **travel advice** for your destination at smartraveller.gov.au before you go. **Subscribe** to receive free email notification each time the advice is updated.
3. Take out comprehensive **travel insurance** to cover hospital treatment, medical evacuation and any activities you plan to undertake in the countries you intend to visit.

While every care has been taken in preparing this brochure, neither the Australian Government nor its agents or employees, including any member of Australia's diplomatic and consular staff abroad, can accept liability for any injury, loss or damage arising in respect of any statement contained herein.

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Information for travellers and travel advisories are available from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Smartraveller website smartraveller.gov.au.

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