

PRIME ADVICE ON HOW TO STAY SAFE AND SECURE (AND AVOID BECOMING A STATISTIC)

Excerpted from an Article Written by Andrea Sachs - The Washington Post - Sunday, December 4, 2016.

Seventy-three million Americans travel abroad every year. In the 2015 fiscal year, the State Department issued nearly 50,000 emergency passports, responded to 31,581 “welfare and where about” queries and scheduled 9,425 visits to Americans imprisoned overseas. More than 10,500 U.S. citizens also died on foreign soil (the data includes tourists and expats). The moral of these statistics: stuff – serious stuff- happens during international travel. The State Department assists Americans in trouble, but we can also help ourselves. Several tips on how to travel smartly and safely are listed below. Heed this advice, so that you can avoid calling the embassy for H.E.L.P.

#1 – Download the State Department app, so that you can receive notifications – if the political climate changes or the place you are traveling to become dangerous – or any other pertinent information concerning your travel plans. Always have identification on you. Have your passport and a copy of your passport, kept in a different place, readily available. Have the telephone number to the U.S. Embassy and also locate the nearest consulate office for the region you will be in. When traveling, be aware of your surroundings. U.S. citizens are not warmly welcomed by everyone in the world. Go out of your way to know local customs and learn a little bit of the language. Be respectful, because you are representing the United States when you are in another country. Most important, enjoy your traveling experience and have fun!

#2 – It is recommended that U.S. citizens traveling abroad, either temporary or long-term, should register online with the local U.S. embassy. This free program is known as the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or STEP. This will ensure that they are kept up-to-date with any important information about that country and in an emergency situation, whether it is a natural disaster, health concern or upheaval of the government. The U.S. Embassy is excellent about keeping its citizens apprised via email.

#3 – Americans should adjust their expectations regarding the service industry standards as you will be less frustrated and more able to enjoy and appreciate some of the heartfelt services that are unique to the United States. For example it may be difficult and frustrating to get a proper cup of tea or coffee with milk (to an American, a simple request), but the same staff who wasn’t helpful will then walk you to a bus stop, hail a taxi for you or go beyond common expectations in order to be hospitable.

#4 – Always purchase travel medical insurance. Know that most U.S. travel insurance companies are pay, submit a claim, and then get reimbursed. Travel with multiple credit cards in case you might need to pay a hefty hospital bill up-front. Never travel alone. Carry a list of medicines and your medical history. Watch out for others wanting to offer “help” to include questionable translators and nurses or intermediaries who will tack charges onto your bill without your consent. Remember, you are visiting a foreign country, so things might be different from what you are accustomed to. You may need to fend for yourself in a different culture.

#5 – The Department of State frequently updates the Worldwide Caution to provide information on the continuing threat of terrorist and violence against U.S. citizens and interests throughout the world. Recent terrorist attacks serve as a reminder that U.S. citizens need to maintain a high level of vigilance and take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness wherever they may travel. Given the frequency of natural disasters, it is simply good policy that American Citizens Services is aware that you are in the country and might need assistance. If they are not aware, they cannot assist you in the event of an emergency.

#6 – Additional Tips. The State Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs can help Americans in many situations, such as severe illness, violent crimes, lost passport and fatalities, but not all: The agency cannot get you out of jail, for instance, but the staff can drop off toiletries and advocate for humane treatment while you are incarcerated. If you run out of money abroad, the embassy can offer you a loan to get you home. However, it will cancel your passport until you have repaid the money. Leave an itinerary with a friend or family member at home and check in with them frequently. Check your health insurance before you go to see if you are covered. Remember, Medicare does not extend beyond U.S. borders. Some credit cards cover disruptions of trips, as long as you booked the travel components on that card. Invest in a cellphone plan or a SIM card with international service. Andrea.sachs@washpost.com