



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

# TRAVELLING WOMEN



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**A must see destination.**

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

This brochure is designed to provide women with information to help minimise these risks. It should be read in conjunction with the *Travel Smart: hints for Australian travellers*, *Travelling well* and, if travelling with children, the *Travelling parents* publications.

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, available on [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au), before you go.

## BEFORE YOU GO – BE PREPARED

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

If you are travelling in an organised tour group find out what arrangements are made on your behalf and what you need to arrange for yourself.

Do some research on your destinations, make sure you have the necessary documentation, information and items you will need. Start with the latest **travel advice** for your destination at [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au). This will give you information on the main risks you may face and some precautions you can take. Also check out the latest guidebooks, talk to other travellers and organise comprehensive **travel insurance**. Make sure you **register** your details at [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au) before you leave, so you can be easily contacted in an emergency.

## TRAVEL INSURANCE

### If you cannot afford travel insurance, you cannot afford to travel.

You are strongly advised 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.

Shop around when choosing an insurance policy and make sure the cover provided suits your needs and is valid for the whole time you will 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. Be sure to confirm all details with your insurance provider and receive written confirmation of your policy.

The Australian Government will not 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.

### Case Study

Three young Australian women, members of an international volunteer group, were travelling by road in East Africa when their mini-bus 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.

## 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**. More information on Australian passports can be found at [www.passports.gov.au](http://www.passports.gov.au) or by calling the Australian Passport Information Service on **131 232** in Australia.

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 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. Remember to check the visa requirements of countries you might be transiting. Contact details can be found in the White Pages or online at [www.dfat.gov.au/embassies.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/embassies.html).

### Remember

- Australian missions overseas cannot help you arrange visas, work or residence permits for other countries.
- A visa does not guarantee entry to a foreign country.
- A tourist visa in most cases does not allow you to work in a foreign country.

## RESEARCH AND PLAN AHEAD

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

- **Airlines** – if you are concerned the airline may question your fitness to fly we recommend you obtain a letter from your doctor stating that you are fit for air travel.  
If you have a disability, call your airline to find out about services provided including shuttle services, seating arrangements and special meals.  
If you need to carry needles and syringes on to the plane, 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.
- **Medication** – if you are travelling with medication, make sure it is legal in the countries you are visiting by contacting the relevant foreign mission in Australia. Contact details are available at [www.dfat.gov.au/embassies.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/embassies.html).  
If you need to travel with large quantities of medication, it is good practice to separate the quantity between your luggage, in case bags go missing. Keep all medication in the original, labelled container to avoid problems with Customs.  
Make sure you carry a copy of a letter from your doctor explaining what the medication is and stating it is for personal use only.
- **Accommodation** – if you are travelling independently, it is recommended that you book your accommodation prior to arrival, especially if you are 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 under your clothes or in a money belt.

Information on luggage security and safety is available from the Australian Civil Aviation Safety Authority at [www.casa.gov.au](http://www.casa.gov.au) and the Australian Government's travel security website [www.travelsecure.infrastructure.gov.au](http://www.travelsecure.infrastructure.gov.au).

If you are travelling to the USA, make sure you familiarise yourself with their specific airline baggage lock requirements. Information is available from the United States Department of Homeland Security's at [www.tsa.gov](http://www.tsa.gov).

## STAYING SAFE

There are a number of practical steps you can take to avoid running into difficulties and dangerous situations overseas.

### REGISTER BEFORE YOUR TRAVEL

Registering your personal and travel details on [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au) before you travel is highly recommended. If you do not have access to the Internet you should telephone **1300 555 135** to register. It will make it easier to contact you in an emergency, whether it is a natural disaster, civil disturbance or family issue. The registration information you provide is protected by Australia's strict privacy laws.

## RESEARCH YOUR DESTINATION

Find out about the political, cultural and economic environment of your destination so you will know what to expect on arrival. Consult the travel advisory for your destination at [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au) and either purchase a guide book or search the internet for recent information.

## MONEY AND VALUABLES

Always protect yourself against loss and theft of your money and valuables.

- Organise a variety of ways of accessing your money overseas, such as credit cards, travellers' 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 leave your credit card out of sight.
- Make two photocopies of valuable documents such as your passport, tickets, visas and credit and ATM cards. Keep one copy with you in a separate place to the original and leave another copy with someone at home.

## LOCAL LAWS AND CUSTOMS

Familiarise yourself with and show sensitivity to local customs.

In some cultures people are deeply offended by revealing or inappropriate clothes. Breastfeeding in public may also be considered offensive. Purchase a guide book or search the internet for information on local customs and laws and consult the travel advisory for your destination at [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au).

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.

## 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 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 are 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, get a copy of the brochure *Travelling dual nationals* available from [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au).

## WOMEN TRAVELLING ALONE

Most women experience trouble-free travel, however women face greater risks when travelling alone. You should be aware that in some countries you may become the focus of unwanted attention if you are unaccompanied. This could take the form of pinching, hissing, passing comments, obscene behaviour, stalking or unwanted physical contact. 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 places 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 man 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 looking very distressed. She explained that a group of students, males and females, invited her to their table to practice 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 store-room 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.

The *Sexual assault overseas* publication, available from **smartraveller.gov.au**, provides guidance on how to deal with this traumatic experience and provide details of the support available to victims and their families overseas and in Australia.

## ADDITIONAL HINTS

- 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.
- Avoid hitchhiking. There are no countries in the world where hitchhiking is safe for women, particularly for women travelling alone.
- Avoid travelling in a train carriage where you are the only passenger. Attackers are known to target women alone on trains.
- Be wary when travelling on crowded public transport as it can provide opportunities for unwelcome harassment.
- Use only officially licensed and reputable taxis.
- Avoid looking at goods in isolated areas and trying on items in back rooms in bazaars and markets.
- Always ensure that the door of your room is firmly secured.
- Be aware of credit card fraud. Credit card details are frequently copied for later illegal use. Never leave your credit card out of sight.
- Never leave your drink unattended or in the care of a stranger. Drink-spiking is common around the world.
- 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. Without witnesses, Jean was unable to press charges.

## DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP OVERSEAS

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

- property entitlements, inheritance, divorce, alimony, child support and custody
- leaving the country without their husband's permission as well as becoming subject to strict family controls.

If you plan to marry overseas, check out 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 developed overseas and 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 is 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](http://www.scamwatch.gov.au) has further information on how to recognise, protect yourself from and report scams.

## STAYING HEALTHY

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.

It is recommended that if you need medication you:

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

If you wear glasses take along a spare pair or a copy of the prescription as they can be easily lost or broken.

If you are taking Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medication with you, be aware that since the National Health Act was amended in 1999, it has been an offence to carry or post PBS medication overseas, unless it is for personal use. Additional information is available from [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au) or by phoning the PBS information line on 1800 020 613.

More information on travelling with medication is available from [www.medicareaustralia.gov.au](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au) or by phoning the Overseas Drug Diversions information line on 1800 500 147.

If you need to purchase locally, be careful not to buy imitation or counterfeit medications and prescription drugs. Be aware that packaging and labelling may be similar to those available in Australia, but the strength and active ingredients can vary.

If you buy needles and syringes overseas ensure they are sealed and sterile.

Always check the strength of a medication with a doctor. Do not buy off-the-shelf medication even if an Australian doctor has prescribed it, as strengths may vary from country to country.

If you have pre-existing medical conditions you may wish to purchase a Medic Alert bracelet or necklace to wear while travelling. They are available at chemists in Australia. Medic Alert Foundation keeps a database of patients' details and medical history, and is accessible by phone worldwide +61 8 8274 0361 or [www.medicalert.com.au](http://www.medicalert.com.au).

## USEFUL LINKS

World Health Organization - [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

Immunise Australia Program - [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

## ADDITIONAL HINTS

- Do not use or get involved with drugs.
- Be aware of the risk of HIV - avoid ear-piercing, acupuncture, tattooing, hair-cut or dental work while travelling in countries with lower health or hygiene standards.
- Practice safe sex. Never assume that your partner is free of HIV or a sexually transmitted 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](http://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 are going to places where they may not be available or may be expensive.

## RECIPROCAL HEALTH AGREEMENTS

Australia has reciprocal health care agreements with Finland, Italy, Norway, Republic of Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Belgium 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 is important to remember that **health care agreements are no substitute for travel insurance**. They will not cover you if a doctor recommends medical evacuation back to Australia.

Further information about health care when travelling overseas and international health agreements can be found at [www.medicareaustralia.gov.au](http://www.medicareaustralia.gov.au) or by calling **132 011**.

## GETTING HELP OVERSEAS

Travel insurance companies often have in place a 24-hour assistance call centre that you can call 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.

## CONSULAR SERVICES

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides assistance to Australians who find themselves in trouble overseas. This support is referred to as consular services.

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

The *Consular Service 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 on [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au).

A directory of Australian overseas missions appears in the 'Getting Help Overseas' section of each edition of Travel Smart: hints for Australian travellers. This publication is issued with your passport and available online at [smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au). 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 (CEC) in Canberra can also be contacted for assistance from anywhere in the world on +61 2 6261 3305 or 1300 555 135 (local cost within Australia).

## COUNSELLING SERVICES

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



**Australian Government**

**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**

- 1** Take out **travel insurance** to cover hospital treatment, medical evacuation and any activities in which you plan to participate.
- 2** 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 an emergency.
- 3** 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.

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](http://smartraveller.gov.au).

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