

Safety Issues for Women Traveling Solo

Stay Safe But Don't Stay Home

By Zahara Heckscher



Zahara Heckscher(left) with a Musonda friend in Zambia from Safety Issues for Women Traveling Solo: Stay Safe But Don't Stay Home.

Women are frequently warned about independent international travel. Unfortunately, it is true that women are much more likely than men to be the victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault. In virtually every country I have visited I heard from female travelers and volunteers who had been subjected to "frequent come-ons, unwanted touching, or inappropriate comments," in the words of one Peace Corps volunteer. Harassment and assault range from verbal harassment, to crude propositions, to groping (especially by men in buses or trains), to, in rare cases, rape.

Sexual harassment is particularly common in the developing world, but women are also targeted in Western Europe. In addition, female travelers face the other dangers that challenge all trekkers: illness, accidents, and, rarely, political violence. After traveling in numerous countries on five continents, I would hate to suggest that women should stay home. But I do urge female travelers to think carefully about safety issues before leaving home and to take prudent steps to increase safety on the road.

Sensitivity vs. Safety

One of the challenges for women volunteers overseas is that we may focus too intensely on being culturally sensitive and allow our personal safety to become a secondary issue. An American traveler in East Africa allowed a local acquaintance into her hotel room because she did not want to appear racist and

was shocked when he made sexual advances. A volunteer let her host father put his arm around her when they walked around the village, which he interpreted as a green light to initiate a sexual relationship. Follow your intuition about a situation—it's better to risk offending someone than to risk being assaulted.

You should know that in many places if a woman invites a man to her home he thinks that she is inviting him to have sex, especially if she is a North American. If you do not want romantic involvement with someone, be sure to avoid compromising situations—situations where it would be difficult to get out if you felt endangered.

Remember that there are various ways to respond to harassment. Responses can range from saying "No," firmly but nicely, to screaming, fighting, or running away. Modify your response according to the situation. In some cultures, a simple "No" is a polite way of saying "Maybe." Some situations may require a more forceful message. Women abroad, as well as at home, are much more likely to be sexually assaulted by men they know than by strangers.

Sexual Stereotypes

Baywatch is the most watched television show in history, and European and American porn flicks are seen by audiences around the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that many people overseas think Western women, including women of color, are "loose." This assumption almost inevitably leads to harassment and misunderstanding. When you fight back against harassment you are fighting years of Hollywood imagery as well.

Unfortunately, you will need to modify your behavior to combat these stereotypes and avoid unwanted attention. Most women travelers act more conservatively overseas than they might at home, giving up certain freedoms in exchange for an enhanced sense of safety. In many cultures smoking, barhopping, or simply drinking beer could put you in the "sexually available" category. I advise you to leave your skimpy clothes at home. In rural areas, tank tops or shorts may be considered inappropriate, as are clothes that show cleavage or belly buttons. Several Africans I interviewed urged travelers to dress modestly and explained: "Your American styles are offensive here and set a bad example for our children." Avoid sexual dancing and flirting. Behavior you might consider normal at home may be scandalous or even dangerous overseas.

There are a number of strategies that women have used to avoid harassment. Some women wear a wedding ring to discourage would-be suitors. (In India, a toe ring on your second toe means you're not available.) Many volunteers learn strategies from local women. In Mexico, for example, women often sit together, even if they don't know each other. Other tips, in the words of previous travelers, include:

- "Be careful about letting your guard down while on vacation."
- "Travel with a group at night."
- "Before you leave home, talk to other women who have traveled in the countries you plan to visit."
- "The in-country program director cautioned us against looking or staring at the men for too long at a time; this could be misinterpreted since the women in the local villages were taught not to make eye contact with the men."
- "Be ready to give up some freedoms that you are used to at home."
- "Females must take care with their dealings with any male older than 14 and younger than 75. I was often misunderstood at first and didn't realize that plain speaking and looking at a man directly when speaking to him could be misinterpreted as flirting. I learned quickly to be very formal and to always involve several people in any conversation."
- "Don't be afraid to ask about the security situation where you are posted and find out about any prior incidents that may have occurred in the area."
- "When it comes to your life, you can't be too cautious."

No matter what you do or don't do, remember that it is not your fault if you are assaulted. If you are raped or assaulted, it is most important to get to a safe place, then seek medical care and emotional support. The local police station may not be a safe place. A friend, neighboring family, or hospital may be safer. If you are overseas as part of a program you will want to notify your school, host family, or organization's staff for support. You are not alone, and you deserve support.

Illness

After sexual harassment, illness is the most common danger for travelers. Don't drink unbottled water or use ice. Even in Western Europe, local microbes may be a shock to your system. Visit the Centers for Disease Control web site and a travel clinic before you leave home and get all the necessary shots and prescriptions. If you do get sick, visit an embassy-recommended doctor.

Common Crime

Street crime is an increasing problem. I met a woman whose gold chain was ripped from her neck only five minutes after she arrived at the Nairobi bus station. Moral: don't arrive in a strange town after dark. I try to travel with a group of friends (local or international) when I go out at night in urban areas of Africa

and Latin America. I have also found that local bus drivers and passengers can often provide tips about the relative safety or danger of certain areas. Put most of your money in a money belt, but always have enough on hand to give to a thief if you are held up.

Accidents and Drowning

Car and bus accidents are the leading killers of overseas travelers. Remember that cars may drive on the "wrong" side of the road, traffic signals may be ignored, and even some sidewalks may not be safe. On trips on winding roads, try to travel during the day and know that first class buses may be safer than third class. Know where the life preservers are if you travel by ferry. Exercise extreme caution when swimming. A good friend of mine was swimming on an innocent-looking beach in Mexico while on spring break. The undertow sucked her under and dragged her out to sea. She was rescued by a surfer and resuscitated, but the surfer was unable to rescue my friend's travel partner. Don't let this happen to you. Swim only on well-marked beaches with other swimmers and take extra care after rains that could change tidal flows.

Political Violence and Terrorism

Compared to sexual harassment, crime, and illness, political terrorism is rare. American citizens are much more likely to get hit by lightning than to die of overseas terrorist attacks. Still, some choose to protect themselves by sewing a Canadian flag to their luggage and by closely following State Department warnings, which usually err on the side of caution.

Life-threatening dangers are rare for travelers. Don't let fear prevent you from going overseas, and don't let fear ruin your trip. Be smart. Be prepared. Stay safe, but don't stay home.

Useful Web Sites

These and other useful links are available at www.volunteeroverseas.org.

Travel tips for women: Journey Woman (www.journeywoman.com).

Information for survivors of sexual assault: National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (717-728-9764; ncasa@redrose.net, www.ncasa.org); National Alliance of Sexual Assault Coalitions (www.connsacs.org); Rape Abuse and Incest National Network Hotline (1-800-656-HOPE).

Health Issues: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov).

Road Safety: Association for Safe International Road Travel (www.asirt.org).

Travel Warnings: U.S. State Department (travel.state.gov).

ZAHARA HECKSCHER is the co-author of [How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas](#) (with Joseph Collins and Stefano DeZerega, Penguin Putnam, 2002), available at most bookstores or at www.volunteeroverseas.org. See her [bio](#) for more information.

Source: http://www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0311/safety_issues_for_women.shtml

Study Abroad Safety Tips for Female Students

By Sara E. Savage

Studying abroad is often associated with excitement, personal growth, and cultural awareness. But students should be aware that in some study abroad destinations, keeping safety in mind is just as important.

In most large cities, female students need not worry about their safety more than they do in the United States. When negative incidents have occurred in these areas, they are often highly avoidable. In these destinations, a good rule of thumb is that if you wouldn't do it at home, you shouldn't do it here. Much of remaining safe has to do with trusting your instincts, as well as with projecting a confident and assertive attitude.

But female students inevitably will have to fend off unwanted attention more than their male counterparts. And simply because your new surroundings will be unfamiliar to you, you need to be more vigilant than you would be on your home campus or in your hometown. Of course, you will want to avoid taking shortcuts and routes that are off the beaten path, especially late at night. You should also travel around with at least one other person. Cat calls or other unsolicited attention from the locals should remain unacknowledged in these situations. Much of staying safe abroad is common sense.

Awareness and Research

Awareness of yourself and your surroundings is an essential skill to have while studying abroad. David S. Katz, president and CEO of the Global Security Group, has written an article titled "[Personal Safety for Women Traveling Abroad on](#)

[Business](#)," in which he calls this awareness of personal security a "state of relaxed alertness." He stresses that women are advised not to be paranoid, but rather to be more aware. This is an important distinction, because female students should not live in fear while studying abroad.

Doing research on your study abroad destination is crucial to learning how to stay safe while abroad. Information is available about security warnings, crime rates and political stability. The [U.S. State Department](#) offers up-to-date travel alerts and information on most foreign countries. Be sure to locate the nearest U.S. embassies and consulates at your destination. You can visit [foreignborn.com](#) to view a list of embassies and consulates by country on the website, as well as access travel information on visas and passports.

Keep in mind that while consulates can help you in the event of an emergency, illness, injury or other situations, they cannot cash checks for you, lend you money or provide you with legal counsel. Consulates can help you replace a stolen passport, contact family and friends, and obtain appropriate medical care. They can also help you to obtain general information about the local criminal justice process, as well as to obtain a list of local attorneys who speak English.

Study abroad students should register their travel with the State Department. This way they can be reached in the event of a family emergency back home. Registration is free and can be done online at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/>.

New Culture, New Safety Concerns

Female study abroad students should look into the cultural norms and religious codes in the country in which they will be studying. Find out what behavior, dress, etc., is acceptable for women in your destination country and learn about the role gender plays in the society. Social gestures that may seem innocuous in your culture may be interpreted in radically different ways in other societies. Find out what strategies that the local women use to keep safe and to stave off unwanted male advances, as well as what comes across as an invitation to romance. Understanding local culture will help you stay safe. It is also helpful to speak with students who have returned from studying in your destination country, as they will share their experiences and give you advice on safety precautions.

Female study abroad students should be culturally sensitive, but not to the detriment of their safety. You want to be open-minded but not to the extent that you place yourself in danger. When you reach your study abroad destination, locate the nearest police station and hospital. Take any issues or concerns you may have while abroad to your program director or university administrators. If you are feeling harassed or being made uncomfortable by another person, don't

feel compelled to deal with the disturbance in a pleasant manner. Sometimes people need to be told directly and bluntly to refrain from bothering you.

Become as familiar as possible with the foreign currency you will be using while studying abroad. You may want to consider wearing a money belt to carry your cash and identification. Another idea is to keep your cash separate from your credit card in case of theft. Carrying a single credit card, as well as photocopies of your identification and important documents, is also advised.

The same intuitive rules you learned to be safe in the U.S. also apply when studying abroad. If you are paying cash, be careful not to expose your money to anyone watching. When it comes time to tip someone, have the tip ready in advance. Never exchange currency with individuals on the street who offer to "help" you. When using an ATM, it is wise to withdraw money in small amounts.

Other Safety Advice for Females Studying Abroad

Tourists are easy targets for theft, so try to be inconspicuous. Carry a pocket-sized map so you look less like a tourist and if you need directions, your best bet is to ask women and families. You may find that referencing your "husband" is a useful fiction, both for discouraging the romantically inclined and for explaining a male friend who may be accompanying you. Every study abroad student should avoid bringing strangers back to his or her place of residence. The place where you stay should be a safe haven for you, and taking people you don't know well to your new home is not the best idea.

In situations where poverty and social disparities are evident, women should refrain from exhibiting jewelry that appears expensive, whether it is in reality or not. Some unmarried women traveling abroad, however, opt to wear a fake wedding ring to discourage male attention. It is best to wear loose-fitting clothing in neutral colors, as well as to attempt to dress like the local women. Flashy and expensive clothing will cause you to stand out, which may not be the best decision from the point of view of safety.

The most common type of crime encountered overseas is pickpocketing. Pickpockets often have highly developed strategies: they may work in pairs, and also may ask you for directions or otherwise distract you. Even though you may wish to be helpful to others while studying abroad, do so cautiously.

This article can make the idea of studying abroad seem daunting. Remember though, every destination requires a different level of vigilance, and it may be advised to keep this in mind when choosing a program. Study abroad should be a time to step outside of one's comfort zone-you may find a moment in which you adjusted to an uncomfortable situation to be one of great personal growth and insight-but female students especially should balance their zest for the new and

challenging with awareness of when a situation has moved from challenging to unsafe.

Luckily, there are people who have already thought through these issues and are available to help you navigate them successfully. Most study abroad programs and host universities take extensive measures to ensure the safety of their students. For more information on safety precautions for females studying abroad, check out the Canadian publication "[Her Own Way](#)" online. It provides female students with detailed information on health and safety while traveling overseas. These and other resources will help you thrive in your destination country and ensure that safety is a consideration, not an obsession.

Source: <http://info.iiepassport.org/tipsforfemalestudents.html>

Ten Travel Tips for Women Traveling Alone

Sharon O'Brien

Each year, more and more Americans travel abroad, but according to the U.S. State Department the sharpest increase is among women traveling alone. Whether they are on a business trip or a vacation, women traveling alone are more likely than men to encounter problems in certain cultures. These travel tips for women traveling alone can help to make women travelers feel more secure.

When in Rome...

Every country and culture has its own views of what is appropriate behavior for women, and the reaction to violations of those standards can range from quiet disapproval to criminal charges and punishment. For example, in Laos it is illegal to invite a Lao citizen of the opposite sex to your hotel room, and in Saudi Arabia foreign travelers have been arrested for "improper dress."

While few Americans would agree with these views or the double standard for women, it is obviously in the best interest of women traveling alone to become familiar with the laws and customs of countries you plan to visit, and to abide by them once you arrive.

It's also a good idea to check the [U.S. State Department Consular Information Bulletins](#) to see whether there are any travel warnings for countries you intend to visit.

Travel Tips for Solo Travel

Following these simple travel tips can help make your trip safer and more rewarding.

1. **Travel Tips for Passports and Visas** Make sure your passport is still valid, and if it's not apply for a new one 3-4 months before you plan to travel. Make sure you have any other necessary travel documents or visas for the countries you plan to visit.
2. **Travel Tips About What to Leave Behind--** Leave the following at home with a friend or relative or relative at home:
 - Your detailed itinerary. Include names, addresses and telephone numbers of every place you will be staying.
 - Photocopies of your passport identification page
 - Your flight and ticket information
3. **Travel Tip: Don't Carry Valuables--** Leave all valuables, such as extra credit cards and jewelry, at home. Even costume jewelry poses an unnecessary risk to your safety, because thieves are not likely to know it's not the real thing until after they steal it.
4. **Travel Tips for Health Insurance--** Make sure you have adequate health insurance coverage for your trip abroad and that your coverage includes medical evacuations. If your policy does not cover you overseas, you may need to purchase supplemental traveler's insurance.
5. **Travel Tips for Medications--** If you take prescription drugs, make sure you have enough to last the length of your trip, including enough extra medication to keep you supplied in case of delays, and bring along your prescription information and the names of the generic equivalents in case you need them.

Always carry your prescriptions in their labeled containers, because many countries have strict laws against drug trafficking and may be suspicious of pills in unlabeled bottles.

6. **Travel Tips for Safety and Security--** Stay alert, use common sense, and be aware of your surroundings. If you think you are being followed, step into a store or another safe place and wait to see whether the person passes by. Don't be embarrassed to ask someone to make sure everything is safe

before you venture out again. If you are still unsure, call your hotel for assistance.

7. **Travel Tip: Be Confident--** Look, act and move as though you know where you're going and what you're doing. This will prevent you from looking like an easy target and may help you avoid potential danger.
8. **Travel Tip: Ask for Directions--** Before you set out from your hotel, ask the concierge or other hotel staff for directions to the places you plan to visit each day. This will help you avoid unsafe areas and also prevent you from looking confused and potentially vulnerable. If you get lost, ask directions from a family or a woman with children.
9. **Travel Tips for Hotel Safety--** Choose a hotel where security is good and public transportation or taxis are readily available and close by. Once in your room, check to make sure that all of the doors and windows have working locks. If you feel uncomfortable, ask hotel security to escort you to and from parking lots or your room at night. Always use your peephole before opening your door.
10. **Travel Tips for Clothing--** It's always best to dress conservatively and inconspicuously when traveling. Whenever possible, take your fashion cues from local women. In some cultures, what you consider attractive casual clothing may be seen as provocative or inappropriate, even offensive, which could spark harassment. In addition, your style of dress, or the amount of makeup and jewelry you wear, could make you a more likely target for thieves.

Source: <http://seniorliving.about.com/od/travelsmart/a/womentravel.htm>