

9. Travel safety

Your safety is paramount – prepare for the worst and expect the best. Remember, gap year activities are often by their very nature challenging, and overcoming unexpected difficulties is part of that challenge.

Good preparation and planning is the first step to keeping safe and being able to cope with the unexpected. It is important to learn as much as you can about the risks associated with travelling and the risks specifically relating to the areas in which you are travelling.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice has handy hints and travel tips for gap year travellers. It is recommended that you:

- Buy insurance
- Have local knowledge
- Check visa requirements
- Be health aware
- Do not take drugs
- Be careful with alcohol
- Be vigilant
- Take care of your belongings
- Take enough money and several means to access it
- Keep in touch with contacts at home
- Keep abreast of what is happening in the country you're visiting from a political, social and environmental point of view

The FCO website has travel advice and individual country profiles, including details of any common scams or crimes and any particular areas to avoid.

Supplement this with other information from sites such as Journeywatch www.journeywatch.com a travel network that keeps you updated about the country you are going to or travelling in; travel forums such as www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree where travelers exchange travel information, advice, hints and tips; and on the 'Safety net' in www.objectivegapyear.com designed to give travellers safety tips and advice from the road.

Use the information on individual country profiles, guidebooks, and other sources, to find out:

- How the safety of your destination country is rated by the FCO
- Whether or not it is politically stable
- Whether there any particular risks or dangers you need to consider whilst travelling in the country, for example weather/climate, particular areas of the country and common scams or crime
- What precautions you can take against these, for example specific equipment or kit, changing your timings or altering your travel route.

There are many things that you can do to keep both your personal possessions and yourself as safe as possible when you are travelling. Advice can be found on many of the gap year websites and the FCO website. Some of the basic advice will recommend NOT taking expensive or valuable items with you and being careful not to advertise possessions such as cameras or personal money. Keeping spare copies of personal documents such as your passport, visa, insurance details etc is also highly recommended.

If you are travelling independently or feel that you would like additional assistance to that provided by the company with which you are travelling, you may wish to attend a specific travel safety course. RGS-IBG can supply you with a list of these.

If you want local advice, one option is to use a company called Tripbod www.tripbod.com. This site links travellers to local people all over the world which means you have access to local advice before you leave, when you get there, and throughout your trip. Tripbod local contacts can provide local knowledge of hidden places, help you make the most of your time and save money, help you travel safely, make sure you spend money locally and link you to volunteering opportunities and home stays.

Placement safety

If you are using a gap year provider they should also be giving you advice on preparation and training either in the UK or in-country, and should be able to supply you with a Risk Assessment and Safety Management Plan, either for the venture or the activity that you are going to do. The section on 'Choosing a Provider' goes in to more detail on this.

In the event of an emergency

Even on the best-planned gap years, things can and do often go wrong. You need to have a plan for both minor and major incidents. This involves knowing who can help and how to contact them. Often you will need to get yourself to a place where there is someone to assist you, so you also need to plan how you might get there. This is your Emergency Response Plan.

UK Embassies and High Commissions overseas can help travellers who get into trouble overseas but there are strict limitations on what they can and cannot do. For more information and to find the website of the British embassy in the country you're going to, see: www.gov.uk/government/world/organisations. Remember that emergencies can also happen at home, so it is important that your family know how and when they can contact you.

Before you depart, sign up for Foreign Office country-specific travel advice updates via email www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice and follow the FCO on Twitter @foreignoffice and Facebook www.facebook.com/foreignoffice to keep updated with the latest information and advice on what you should do if you need help in the event of a crisis.

Exploratory questions to ask yourself:

- What are my apprehensions or safety concerns about my gap experience?
- Are there any particular safety issues I need to be aware of in the country/countries or particular regions I'm travelling in (for example weather/climate, remote/hostile environment, any common scams or crimes)?
- What precautions could I take against these (for example specific equipment or kit, timing or route of travel, behaving in a certain way)?
- How will I ensure the security of my luggage during travel?
- What are local attitudes to women in the country? How would a lone female traveller be viewed? Are there any behavioural aspects I should consider whilst travelling (for example not going to bars alone, keeping knees and shoulders covered)?