

Travel advice

Safety

- Staying safe mainly falls into the following categories
 - Health (heat exhaustion, food poisoning...)
 - Traffic (crossing the road)
 - Money scams (counterfeiting, being shortchanged, local scams)
 - Pickpocketing / Theft
- There are not major safety concerns in the majority of popular travel destinations.
- The following will help you stay safe:
 - Traffic
 - Know the etiquette for crossing the street. In many countries, vehicles don't yield to pedestrians and traffic is more chaotic. In some places, the custom is for pedestrians to cross the street lane by lane.
 - Health
 - Be careful with sun exposure and hydration in the summer. Know the symptoms of heat exhaustion (dizziness, nausea, headache etc.), and rehydrate/cool down if necessary. If there's a heat wave, avoid going out in the afternoon.
 - If tap water isn't safe to drink in the country, also avoid food that may have been washed with tap water (salad) or that contains ice. Buy fruit and vegetables you can peel or wash yourself. Only eat cooked meat (and be careful about meat/seafood if refrigeration isn't available).
 - Eat at restaurants or street-food carts that you see locals using.
 - Scams and money issues
 - Use ATMs that are in a bank (rather than in a random wall or shop).
 - Be aware of popular scams in the country you're visiting (e.g. someone inviting you to a cafe and sticking you with the bill (see the "tea scam" in China)), giving you unsolicited advice on how to use metro machines and then asking for money (e.g. Italy), someone saying they don't have change etc.
 - Check/count the change you receive at a store/money exchange office so you're not short-changed. Be familiar with the local currency. Some countries have counterfeiting issues (e.g. Peru) so know how to check the bills if necessary.
 - Theft
 - Don't wander around looking lost with your map out.
 - Keep your passport and most cash in a money belt or a hotel safe.
 - Don't put your bags down where you can't see or touch them (e.g. not on the back of a chair, or behind you on a beach). If your bags are huge and you're travelling by train, you might have to put them in the luggage rack by the door. If you have concerns about theft, watch your bag when the train stops in stations.

- Don't put your wallet down on a counter. Always keep it in your hand.
- Wear your purse strap across your body.
- Make your backpack harder to open by closing zippers with twist-ties or something
- Pickpocketing is an important business in many places. Keep your purse in front of you on the metro and never put anything important in a back pocket (or open pocket). Other common pickpocketing areas are tourist sites and busy markets.
- Know what to do if you get robbed or injured (insurance info, embassy location/number)
- Don't leave stuff visible in a parked car - take it with you or put in the trunk.
- General safety
 - Ask locals if there are neighborhoods to avoid. In general, avoid walking around alone at night especially in dark streets, in parks or next to a river/canal. In Europe, the suburbs of a city are sketchier than the center.
 - Only use licensed taxis. In many countries meters aren't used so agree on a price before you get in.
 - Don't hike or camp alone.

In case you're wondering about safety Europe specifically:

Most people do not experience any problems, but in the past 15 or so years I have met people the following things happened to:

- Cellphone and wallet stolen out of a pocket while walking around
- Passport stolen out of a purse while on the metro
- Purse/bag stolen off her shoulder by someone on a vespa
- Drugged drink in a bar
- Overcharged in a restaurant and a taxi
- Sexual harassment
- Attempt to steal debit card pin at a street atm
- Incorrect change given at a tourist ticket office
- Wallet stolen off a counter in a cornerstore (by another client)
- Backpack stolen off a restaurant chair and in a park
- Camera stolen from a hostel (he left it on the bed)
- Racist comments (more in Eastern Europe than West)

Money

- If possible, bringing local currency with you is useful (especially small amounts) in order to get bus tickets from the airport etc.
- Use ATMs to get local currency (check your bank's foreign transaction fees and make sure they know you're away). Take out big amounts to avoid paying lots of fees.

- Your debit card will need a 4-digit pin. If it's from a super small credit union, it might not work internationally. See if it has a Cirrus or Plus symbol on it.
- Credit cards can be used at most hotels. Using them at supermarkets, stores, and restaurants is country-dependant.
- Having some clean US dollar bills handy as back up is useful since it's the easiest currency to exchange.
- Learn how tips work in the country you're visiting. E.g. in most of Europe it is not necessary to tip in a restaurant.
- In some countries, stores will refuse to make change for large bills (because their cash register will run out of money). Break large bills at big supermarkets or at your hotel.

Transportation

- Trains
 - Types of trains:
 - Regional (cheapest, slowest, stops at all stops, no reserved seat)
 - Fast e.g. Intercity (more expensive, you get a specific seat)
 - Highspeed e.g. TGV (most expensive, crazy fast, reserved seats)
 - When to book:
 - Regional trains: whenever (the prices rarely vary). Just get a ticket at the station before you leave.
 - Reserved-seat trains: the earlier the better (in order to guarantee you get a seat, and to benefit from cheaper prices)
 - Train tickets usually go on sale up 1-3 months before the departure date
 - Companies/websites for timetables and tickets:
 - Italy - trenitalia: <http://www.trenitalia.com/>
 - There are some other companies in Italy e.g. in Puglia
 - Spain - renfe: <http://www.renfe.com/>
 - Northern Spain has a different company
 - France - sncf: <https://www.oui.sncf/>
 - Germany - deutsche bahn: <https://www.bahn.com/en/view/index.shtml>
 - UK - National Rail: <http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/>
 - Most countries have online booking you can do from Canada. For some countries, you'll have to use an agency since out-of-country sales aren't possible (e.g. China)
 - www.seat61.com has a lot of info on rail travel all over the world
 - In most countries, you can't buy train tickets on the train. The inspector will fine you/kick you off if you don't have a ticket.
- Bus
 - Bus is the primary intercity method in a lot of countries (such as Greece and the USA) and a cheaper alternative to the train in countries like the UK. Read up on whether you buy tickets on the bus, at the station, or online. Usually bus routes are run by a variety of companies.
 - US bus companies: Greyhound, Boltbus, Megabus etc.

- City buses: Be aware that some systems have you buy tickets when you board, some have you buy from the ticket guy in the bus aisle (e.g. Greece), and some you have to buy ahead of time (e.g. Italy)
- Ferry
 - Most countries with ferries have a variety of companies (e.g. Finland, Greece). Use a site like www.go-ferry.com to find out routes and prices, but buy your actual tickets from the company website.
 - Ferry amenities vary greatly e.g. wifi or luggage storage is not always available.
 - Bring your own food to avoid high restaurant prices
 - Some countries like Greece let you buy “deck” tickets even for overnight travel (this means you sleep on the floor or on a vacant seat)
- Plane
 - Plane tickets are usually more expensive but low-cost companies do exist. Check to make sure you’re flying to an airport that’s not too out-of-the-way and that there aren’t a lot of added costs for luggage.
 - I recommend taking the train / bus if possible so you see more of the countryside and not just the tourist sites.
 - Use google flights to get an idea of timetables and prices. It can be useful to buy from a good travel agent or directly from the airline, as opposed to a company like flight center which may be more expensive.
- Car
 - In some places, a car is necessary (touring the countryside, US national parks...)
 - Depending on your age, it may be impossible to rent a car or you will have extra insurance payments. Standard pricing usually starts at age 25.
 - Car rental prices vary depending on the company and the type of car. In Europe, manual is more common than automatic and therefore cheaper and easier to rent
 - Consider your insurance carefully - if you are already insured in Canada, bring proof with you and don’t get any add-ons from the rental company.
 - For most travel in Europe, car rental is not useful.

Hotels and Hostels

- Hotels and hostels will generally have the following: wifi, reception that can help book taxis and maybe book tickets for tours or shows. Check in usually starts at 2, but you can always leave your bag if you arrive earlier.
- Hotels - You have your own room
 - Hotels are more expensive but offer more privacy. You might get a mini-fridge in the room and breakfast may be included. You usually won’t have to share a bathroom. Check out in usually noon or before.
- Hostels - You share the room with other travellers and usually have a common kitchen
 - How the room works: You sleep in a dorm with with other travellers (probably in a bunkbed). Rooms usually have between 4 and 10 beds. Some hostels have individual curtains for each bed, and individual power outlets for charging stuff.

Rooms will have lockers for security so bring your own lock (or rent one). Most hostels have gender-based rooms available, some have mixed dorms. Earplugs and an eyemask are useful if you're easily affected by noise and lights going on and off. The quality of the mattress may not be great.

- Hostels sometimes have private rooms available for couples or groups.
- The hostel will provide sheets, so don't bring your own (you can't use your own bedding or sleeping bag because it increases risk of bedbugs).
- Not all hostels provide towels, so it's a good idea to bring one.
- There is usually a common area to hang out in with books/games etc., and a kitchen you can use. Some hostels have washing machines (usually 5\$-ish).
- It's easy to meet other travellers and there are often organized events like walks and pubcrawls.
- Hostelling International hostels may charge you a couple extra dollars if you're not a member.
- Bathrooms and showers are shared. Sometimes one is in the room (an "ensuite"), sometimes they're located elsewhere in the building.
- Checkout is usually between 10 and 12, but lots of hostels will let you use the common space afterwards.
- Other types of accommodation
 - Couchsurfing
 - Airbnb
 - Hotels through a service like Expedia
- How and when to book
 - I recommend booking early, especially in high season/popular destinations. By early, I mean sometimes several months in advance.
 - Hostelworld.com is a hostel booking service. You'll have to pay a 10% deposit. Another similar website is hostelbookers.com
 - Booking.com is a good hotel/apartment booking service (it sometimes has hostels too). Properties often offer free cancellation.
 - You will need a credit card to book, but some properties may only take payment in cash so read the details.
 - Read the reviews before booking. I personally don't book in places that are lower than 4/5 unless there are no alternatives.
 - It's worth paying a bit extra for a nicer place or better-located place.
 - Have map-access on paper or phone so you can find your place :)
- Go to your hotel / hostel as soon as you arrive even if it's before check-in to drop off your bag.

Respectful travel

- Environment
 - Avoid flying when possible
 - Avoid giant resorts
 - Avoid bottled water when possible and don't use lots of water in countries in drought (e.g. Italy)
 - Don't visit a natural site like a coral reef that is being extremely damaged by tourism
- Culture
 - Learn some of the local language and history
 - Spend money at local businesses/hotels rather than big chains
 - Be aware that mass tourism may have driven up rental prices, pushing locals out of their own city, and that unregulated services like airbnb may have reduced available rental stock in a city. Some cities like Barcelona and Venice have had anti-tourism protests as a result.
 - Based on what I've seen happen - don't be like these people:
 - Don't be annoying, loud, rude... - for example, don't have loud public conversations about the country being dirty or full of scams
 - Don't take pictures of people without their permission
 - Don't write or carve your name on stuff
 - If you see another tourist doing something awful, say something

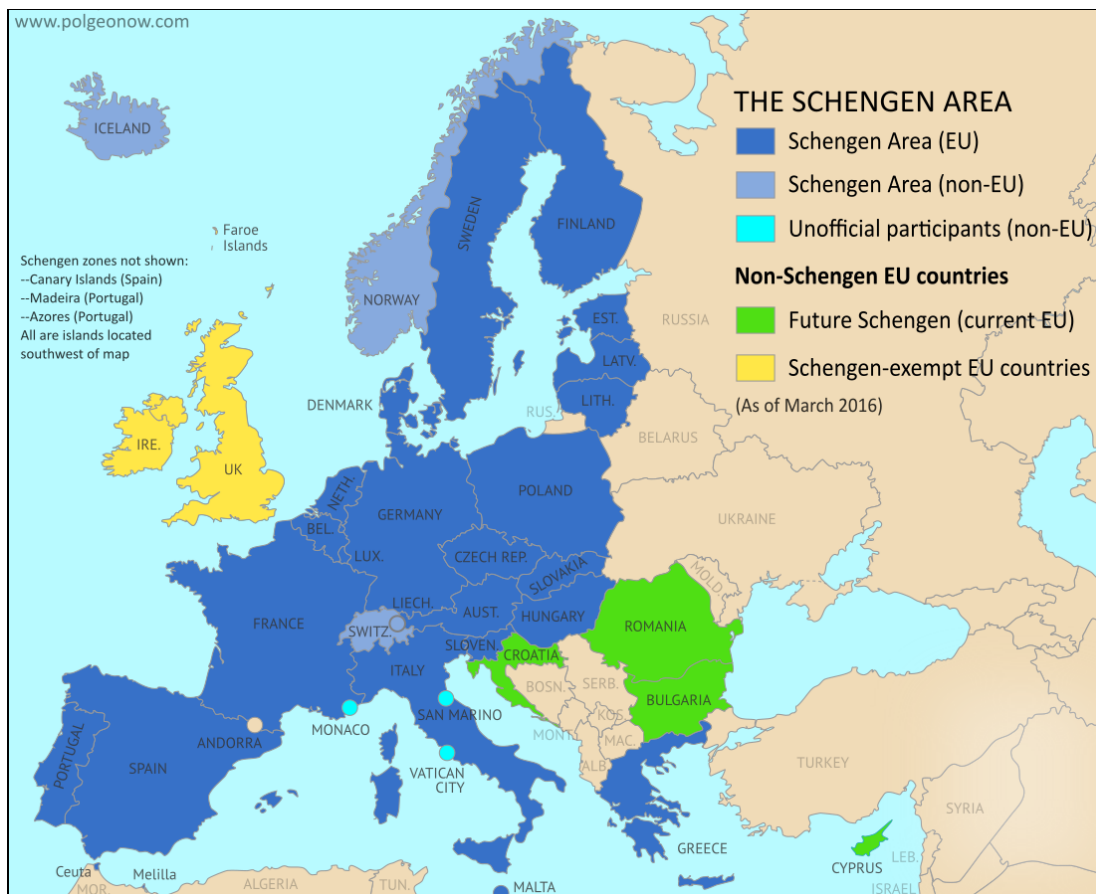
Language

- English is being learned by young people in most countries, and many people speak English in touristy areas. It is unlikely that you won't be able to use English at your hostel/hotel or at a tourist site.
- Learning some of the local language is always appreciated
- Some countries have less English (like Russia or China) so you may have to try other languages or just gestures. For example, in Romania I was only able to use English in big cities. I ended up using French, Italian, German, and my super paltry Romanian to communicate in small towns.
- The main topics the local language is useful for are ordering food, buying bus/train tickets, greetings/thanks, saying where you're from, and commenting on the weather/how much you like the country.

Visas and customs

- Some countries ask questions when you cross the border (or you have to fill out an entry card that you keep with you until you leave). Questions may include: where you're staying, how long the trip is, why you're travelling, your job, if you're visiting someone, if you have any food with you...
- "Visa" has 2 meanings: a visa credit card (not the topic here) or a travel visa (a type of document or stamp allowing you to enter a country). There are different types of visas: tourism, study, work, re-entry etc.

- If you are travelling on a Canadian passport, you can travel in many countries (most European and American countries) without a visa.
- Some countries require you to buy a visa when you arrive (price is usually between 15 - 80 USD). In 2009, this included Egypt and Turkey.
- Sometimes countries require you to get a visa before you arrive. It may be an online form, or you will have to send your passport and application to the visa service. The costs vary and go up to hundreds of dollars. These countries include China and Russia. If you send your passport somewhere, make sure you get a tracking number.
- Check the Canadian government's travel advisories for up-to-date information on visas and stay restrictions. For Canadians, a visa-free stay in a country is often between 30 and 90 days.
- Schengen: Most of Europe (not including the UK) has open borders in what is called "Schengen" territory. This means that if you're going to France but flying in via Amsterdam, you go through customs in Amsterdam. Despite having open borders, there are sometimes still document checks by police in random spots. Anti-refugee/migrant movements have re-closed some borders (mostly in Eastern Europe). The map below is for 2016.



How long to stay somewhere

- This obviously depends on personal choice. I generally spend one night if I'm staying in a village/small town, and 2-3 nights in a city. If a city is gigantic like New York or Moscow, I would spend more time.

Budgeting

- If you include the flight to your destination, 1000 dollars a week is a good estimate for low-cost travel in developed countries.
- Budget example: My sister and I travelled for a month through Greece, Albania and Italy for approximately 2500 each (without using hostels). This doesn't include the flights from Canada.
- Saving money on accommodation: hostelling is cheapest, but hotels/airbnb have a huge range of prices. If you're travelling with another person/group, it may be a better deal to get private rooms.
- Saving money on transportation: unless you're hitchhiking, transportation can be a big cost. In most countries, buying tickets early is cheaper. In Europe, train tickets go on sale up to 3 months before the travel date (depending on the country). I got a 15 euro chunnel train ticket this way for a seat that would have been 180 euro if bought day of.
 - Regional trains are slower but much cheaper than high-speed ones.
 - Overnight trains (or ferries) can save you the price of accomodation.
- Railpasses can save you money, but calculate carefully before getting one. They usually only include regional trains for free (with a "reservation" fee for high-speed trains). You have to get them before you arrive. If you're living in Europe, there are better railpass deals for residents and lots of countries have discount programs.
- Saving money on museums and sites: Having a student card can sometimes get you a discount. A lot of museums have one free day per month though it can be crowded. Only get combo tickets if you actually want to see all the stuff.
- Saving money on food: Staying at a hostel is ideal because you can make your own meals if it has a kitchen. Go to the supermarket instead of eating out all the time. If you do eat out, find places that cater to locals rather than tourists and don't buy water at the restaurant. Drink tap water if tap water is safe, or buy bottled water at the supermarket or cornerstore.
 - For example, in Greece you can easily buy dinner for a couple dollars if you go to a simple local place, but a touristy restaurant might be 4 times as expensive.
- Save money by choosing a cheaper destination: some countries are much cheaper than others.

Packing

- Being able to travel carry-on only is great.
- If you can, don't take accessories like hairdryers and stuff.
- I usually take enough clothes for 3 or 4 days and then just frequently handwash them
- A backpack is better than a rolly-bag for most places (cobblestones, uneven sidewalks) and it lets you walk
- I usually bring a backpack (7-8 kilos) and a smaller day-pack.

Insurance

- **Do not travel without travel medical insurance.** Seriously.
 - You can get insurance through your bank/credit card, your university, a private company like the Cooperators (discount if you're a MEC member), your work benefits...
- Other travel insurance that covers lost/stolen luggage, trip cancellation etc. can be useful but is less important

Step-by-step - How I plan a trip

- 1 choose my general destination country / countries
- 2 decide what city/site to stay in each night
 - I research this by looking at maps, guidebooks, and stealing itinerary ideas from travel companies like Intrepid
 - I'll stay in small towns for one night, and in cities for 2 or 3 usually
- 3 research transport (to make sure I can get between each place in a reasonable amount of time) and check that any tourist site (like a museum) that I really want to see is available on my planned date
- 4 finalize my itinerary dates
- 5 start booking (accommodation + transport reservations/flights)
- 6 check if I want any tickets to events / need any visas
- 7 finish the rest of the trip paperwork: visas, insurance etc.