

Away.com's Expert Travel Advice
Tips for International Travel

First time overseas? Follow these steps and you'll be good to go.

By **Catharine Fleury**



Whether you're going to see the great sights of Europe or to a tiny village in the South Pacific, traveling internationally takes some planning. (Andrew Ward/Life File/Photodisc)

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Visas, vaccinations, teeny-tiny rental cars—international travel sure sounds daunting, but it doesn't have to be. The key lies in good planning. "I recommend keeping a list of how you did it the first time and improve it every other time," says Cassandra Wallace, a seasoned Intrepid Travel employee with an impressive 82 countries under her belt. "I can be out the door in half an hour now if I need to." Here are our seven essential steps to guide your research.

1. Get your paperwork in order

When: Eight to 12 weeks before departure

It's never too early to start thinking about passports and visas. Ideally, you should do this as soon as you make your travel arrangements, but if you give yourself two to three months, you should be in good shape.

The very first question to ask yourself: Does everyone in my travel group have a passport—including the kids? All minors, even newborns and infants, must have their own passports when traveling internationally by air. Question two: When does my passport expire? Certain countries require

visitors' passports to be valid for at least six months *beyond* the dates of their trip. Finally: How many blank visa pages are left in my passport book? Some countries require a minimum of two to four. And watch out for those "endorsements" pages at the very back of your passport book. They may look like blank visa pages, but they're not. Once you've collected this information, visit the [State Department's passport page](#) for detailed instructions on how to apply for, renew, or add pages to a passport. Note that these services typically take four to six weeks to come through (two to three weeks if you cough up an extra \$60 plus overnight delivery charges for expedited processing).

Visas take a bit more research. Some countries require them, others do not; some take weeks to process applications, others can turn them around within 24 hours. Your job is to find out: Does my destination country require a visa? If so, how long will it take to obtain one? How long will it remain valid? This last question is an important one, as certain countries require you to apply months prior to visiting the location. Get the visa too early and it could expire before you even depart. Start with the State Department's [Country Specific Information sheets](#) and skip to the "Entry/Exit Requirements" section, which provides a detailed overview of your country's passport and visa requirements, as well as a link to its embassy website. Be sure to confirm everything with the embassy directly.

"It can be a bit of a juggling act as to what to organize first," admits Intrepid's Wallace. "So that's why the more preparation, the better—to save those desperate minutes waiting at the postbox for your passport to come back. I don't want to go through that again."

2. Pay the doctor a visit

When: Four to six weeks before departure

The single most important resource for planning a healthy trip abroad is the "Destinations" section of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Travelers' Health website](#). Pull up the health information page for the country you plan to visit and read it from top to bottom, paying special attention to the list of recommended vaccines. Note that all international travelers should be up to date on routine shots (tetanus, measles, etc.), so if you don't know your immunization history by heart, now is the time to dig it up. You should also contact your insurance company, as many do not offer full coverage for vaccines like yellow fever and rabies.

Next, schedule an appointment with a health-care provider, ideally four to six weeks before your departure. "If you have complicated health histories, start with your primary-care doctor," advises Dr. Lin Chen, a member of the International Society of Travel Medicine (ISTM) executive governing board and director of the Travel Medicine Center at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. But if your overall health is good, consider a travel medicine specialist. ISTM has a useful [global travel clinic directory on its website](#), as does the [CDC Travelers' Health site](#).

Be sure to provide your doctor with your itinerary as well.

3. Learn the roads

When: The same time you book your other travel arrangements

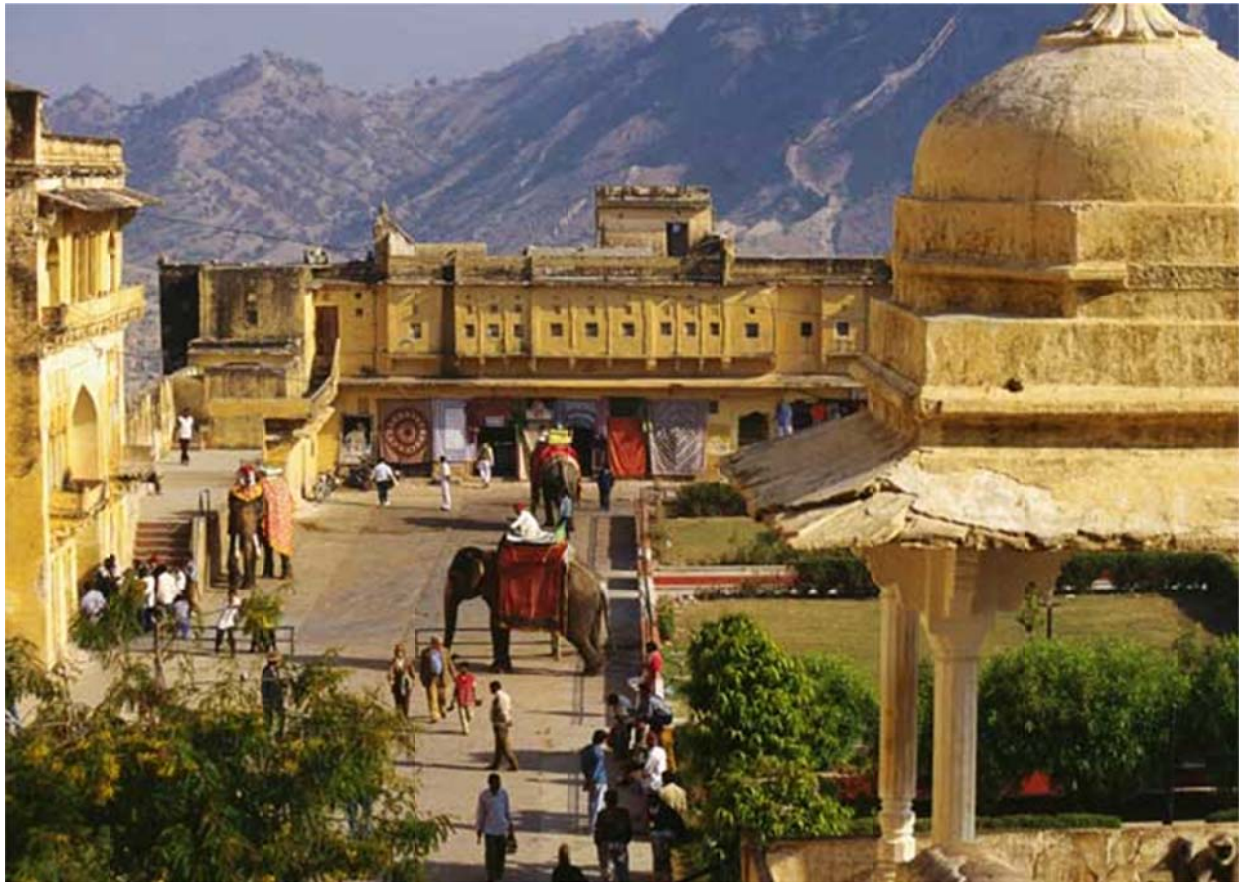
Did you know that the Czech Republic is one of the most lethal places to drive in Europe? Or that Belizeans pull to the right before making a left turn? Before you decide to rent wheels abroad, read up on the driving scene in your destination. The Country Specific Information sheets on the U.S. State Department's International Travel website offer detailed overviews of local driving conditions, laws, and customs (scroll down to "Traffic Safety and Road Conditions").

Still game? "You definitely should book the car before you get there," says Jill Rosenberg, the manager of group and executive travel services for AAA. Early birds tend to score lower rates and a better selection (i.e., your family of five won't get stuck with a subcompact). Be very specific about your needs: How much space will you require? Can you drive manual transmission? Do you want liability insurance in addition to a collision damage waiver (highly recommended)?

Many countries do not recognize regular U.S. driver's licenses but will honor an International Driving Permit (IDP), which is essentially a translation of your license into ten languages. Only two agencies are authorized to issue IDPs: AAA and the National Automobile Club (be aware that there are many scammers out there). AAA has a useful description of the IDP and application process here: www.aaa.com/vacation/idpf.html. Give yourself a month if applying by mail, or just drop into a local agency office for same-day service. Lastly, make sure you fill out the forms correctly—AAA's New York office alone sends back 30 percent of its IDP applications due to incomplete submissions

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Tourists mingle with local, um, transportation at a palace in Jaipur, India. (Glowimages/Getty)

4. Tee up your mobile devices

When: Four weeks before departure

It's time to think about how you want to use your cell phone, if at all, while overseas. Planning on making a bunch of international calls from the road? Call your carrier and find out (a) whether your phone can operate in your destination, (b) how much it will cost if so, and (c) what the international

customer service number is, should issues come up while you're traveling. It may make the most financial sense to sign up for an international service plan—or just leave your phone at home. "I would use local phone shops," advises Intrepid's Wallace. "They are quite common in a lot of parts of the world, particularly Europe. They're basically little booths around the streets where you just pop in and use a phone, and they just charge you landline rates." If you plan on *receiving* a bunch of calls from home or elsewhere overseas, Wallace advises buying a local SIM card for your phone, which enables you to take international calls for local rates (unbeknownst to many, carriers can charge a fortune for received calls, even if you have a good international roaming plan).

Regardless of how you choose to make and receive calls, it is imperative that you come up with a data plan. "We actually have experience with a lot of people who are very concerned about massive phone bills," says Wallace. "And it's not the calls that they're making, it's the actual data that's being pushed to their phone—because it's accessing the Internet on roaming rates, which are incredibly expensive." As in thousands of dollars expensive. Wallace simply asks her carrier to shut off data roaming before she travels (you can also do this manually on most smartphones, but settings can be tricky, so always call if you're unsure). If you decide to keep data roaming active, consider downloading an app such as [Netcounter](#) or [e-office Mobile Data Alerter](#) to help you keep close track of those pricey megabytes.

5. Buy travel insurance—if you need it

When: Up to two weeks after you book your trip

To buy or not to buy? According to Travel Guard Vice President Carol Mueller, only about 25 to 30 percent of American travelers purchase trip insurance. But if you want to play it smart, ask yourself two critical questions: Can I afford to lose the money I've invested in this trip so far? Can I afford to pay \$50,000 or more for medical evacuation if I have an emergency overseas? If the answer is "no" in either case, start looking for a plan. "The best time to buy your travel insurance is when you've made your initial trip deposit," says Mueller. Not only will you minimize your exposure to cancellation losses, but you might also land additional benefits if you buy early.

Before you rush to the nearest travel insurance agency, take stock of your current benefits. Contact your domestic health insurance provider and ask what kind of medical coverage, if any, you have overseas—and pay extra attention to emergency protocols. "Read the policy really carefully," advises Graham Kingaby, the director of insurance at WorldNomads.com. "Does it cover repatriation ... in every destination? And can your American health insurer come and get you if you need evacuation?" You should also check in with your credit card company, as many offer some form of free travel insurance. Coverage can be spotty and/or subject to a litany of conditions, but it's worth investigating.

When choosing a policy, think carefully through the specifics of your trip. Many plans don't cover adventures like caving, motorcycling, or even horseback riding, so check the activity exclusions carefully. Bringing your new telephoto lens? Make sure to cover the cost of your most precious valuables, even if that means pushing up the premium. All told, you can expect to spend about 5 to 7 percent of the total trip cost on travel insurance—and receive a safe, worry-free trip in return.

6. Stock your wallet

When: Four weeks before departure

"You can never have too many backups when it comes to money," says Leah Griffin, a destination manager for Gap Adventures and a veteran international traveler (44 countries and counting). She's

right: All international travelers should depart with two to three credit cards and enough emergency cash to cover their first day or two on the ground. Traveler's checks are becoming more obsolete, but if you still prefer that method, it can't hurt to bring a few of them along, too.

"I usually research the place that I'm going to, to figure out what's recommended for that particular place," says Griffin. Call your credit card companies and ask if you will be able to make purchases in your destination (Visa and MasterCard are the most widely accepted names worldwide). If the answer is no, it's time to apply for a new card—and ideally one with a reasonable foreign transaction fee. Capital One is probably the only issuer that charges 0 percent; all other credit cards typically charge 2 to 3 percent.

A week before you leave, alert your credit card companies to your travel plans (this is critical—most banks will put a freeze on your account if you don't); make copies of the front and back of each credit card and pack them separately from your wallet (be sure these copies include the card's 24-hour emergency phone number); and stock your wallet with some cash. "I usually try to have a couple of hundred dollars, usually in U.S. [currency], but it depends on the country you're going to," says Griffin.

Read more about [safeguarding your cash while abroad](#).

7. Learn the cultural code

When: One week before departure

If you haven't done so already, familiarize yourself with your destination's culture. It sounds obvious, but a lot of travelers skip this step and their experience suffers for it. Pick up a phrase book (or download one to your phone) and learn the basics: hello, yes, no, please, thank you. Find out if there are any sensitivity issues. In certain parts of Asia, for example, it's considered extremely inappropriate to point with your hands or feet. "I've just learned over time that being able to do what the locals do and say a couple of things that they say makes the whole trip so much better," says Intrepid's Wallace