

Traveling Abroad

Safety when traveling abroad is an important issue for men and for women. Most American students are not aware that women, who comprise 70% of U.S. undergrads abroad, will have different experiences in their host countries than their male counterparts. Many women may find themselves the object of unwanted attention. It is important for their male colleagues to be aware of these challenges as well as their own safety issues.

At the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, women students who study abroad are urged to be more careful about where, when, and with whom they go out than they are accustomed to being at home. This is not to say that women shouldn't go out and establish relationships of various kinds with people from their host countries. It is, however, to warn women about casual encounters, possible misreading of non-verbal cues, potential misunderstandings due to language difficulties, and inaccurate notions about American women.

Despite the fact that the rate of violence towards women, including rape, is higher in the U.S. than in many other countries, facing the unfamiliar can raise a student's anxiety level when studying abroad. This is compounded by language and cultural differences.

American women have a reputation for enjoying a lifestyle which contrasts with more traditional behavior in many countries. This image is reinforced by distorted stereotypes used in TV, movies, and advertising. One common assumption made by people in other cultures is that American women are "easy." This belief is manifested when men in other countries harass American women abroad although they might not treat local women in similar ways.

In many countries if women are out alone - even during the day - their solitude may be construed as an invitation for company. Women need to be firm in rejecting such behavior. If the behavior continues or the woman is followed, she should approach a couple or family and say – loud enough for the intruder to hear - that someone is bothering her and ask for help. Most men do not want to create trouble or embarrass themselves and will stop the behavior when it becomes obvious to others. Many women find that ignoring the harasser works

best - conversation is often seen as an invitation. Don't be afraid to create a scene to get the harasser to leave.

Harassment Issues

Cultural differences extend to misunderstandings about the meaning of body language. U.S. students may encounter people who do not understand that their familiar, easy going way with strangers is a gesture of friendship. A smile, a hairstyle, the way an individual carries him- or herself, eye contact, and the distance between people can have profoundly different interpretations from culture to culture.

Students may find that the problem of sexual harassment of women by local men sometimes occurs. In some countries the barrage of comments, hissing, whistling, chirping, leering stares, lecherous grins, and blatant sexual advances can just about destroy a woman's enjoyment of the country. If the behavior escalates to physical touching and groping, it can become quite frightening.

In some other countries, constant harassment on the street is pleasantly missing. But women still need to be cautious of men making sexual advances when any opportunity arises, such as sitting or standing next to you on a bus, or catching you in a situation away from other people. Often the more conservative the local social and religious standards are, the more a female student's very presence provokes this behavior in local men. Local women may also be scandalized by the presence of female students, not to mention their dress and behavior.

Students often find a completely different environment from what they are used to. Students need to deal with the situation as it exists since the cultural mores of entire populations do not change overnight. Female students may find that they need to wear clothing that is more modest than they are accustomed to, stay off the streets at night, or avoid contact with local men. It won't always be fun or easy, but there are a number of things students can do which can significantly reduce the problem.

Being Aware

Be aware of the local standards of dress and behavior. The simplest way is to observe how the local women and girls dress

and behave. Preferably, students should try to get information about the local customs from other travelers who have already been there before they leave the U.S. By doing some research before leaving home, students may be able to determine the types of clothing and behaviors that are acceptable in the host country. These topics will be covered during your on-site orientation.

Going Out With Others

Make friends with fellow student travelers and take them with you wherever you go. This is your best protection. The more friends, the better - take two or three along – there is safety in numbers. A woman traveling alone is much more of a target for harassment than two women together. Students in groups can really do a lot to help protect and support each other. It may be advisable for men to escort women students home.

Additionally, contrary to most students' usual habits, study abroad students will need to do some homework before meeting in public places. It may be unsafe for a male student to suggest that a female student meet him in a bar. It may be unacceptable in the local culture for a female to go to a bar or other public place unaccompanied.

Students can learn a lot by observing how the local women protect themselves. For example, in most Third World countries, women commonly walk arm in arm, or holding hands. Couples frequently do not hold hands, since public displays of affection are improper in many places.

Watch how local women avoid the attentions of men. You may notice that they walk arm in arm, with their heads together, constantly laughing and deep in conversation with each other. This is not just an expression of their personalities; it is their protection from the intrusions of men. If a strange man says something to them, they will most often ignore him.

Listening to Your Instincts

Until you know a place and a culture, you may be in danger of misjudging the situation. Listen to your instincts and think and act on the safe side, even if that may not be the most "exciting" side to be on. And most importantly, do not abuse alcohol while

in a foreign culture. Losing full use of your faculties can cause errors in judgment and other situations that may lead to unwanted sexual harassment or assault.

Sex and Gender Issues

Sexual behaviors and gender relationships vary around the world. It is important to take some time before you leave the U.S. to learn more about this aspect of your host culture to avoid difficult or even dangerous situations. Because of different laws, customs, and attitudes regarding drinking, nightlife, and relationships, and because students want to fit in, they sometimes feel very bold and invincible. At all times, students should listen to their gut instinct and not take unhealthy risks.

Sexual norms and behaviors may be very different in your host country. As mentioned before, it is very common for study abroad participants to want to fit into their host culture, to act like a native, and to lose their inhibitions because they are feeling adventurous. Always be aware of compromising situations, and do not feel pressured to do anything that is uncomfortable to you. Sexual harassment, date rape, STDs, and AIDS are a part of EVERY country. Do not let your common sense be numbed by the romanticism of the foreign country. Take care of yourself and listen to your intuition!

Some Questions to Think About

- How do men portray women in the host culture?
- Does eye contact, a smile, even simply being alone constitute an invitation?
- Are short skirts acceptable attire, while shorts are not?
- What are the expected behaviors on a first date?
- What are the implications of being alone with a man?

Male Travelers

Pay attention to how women view men in your host culture:

- How do you approach a woman for information, for friendship, for a date?
- What is expected of you on a first date?
- What constitutes sexual harassment, and how do you avoid unwittingly offending someone?

- How will you deal with sexual norms that are more conservative or more liberal than you are comfortable with?

Staying Safe

The most important thing to remember is to stay safe. If you do not feel safe in a particular situation remove yourself or distance yourself from that situation immediately. Go to the in-country program director or foreign student adviser, or stay with a friend you can trust. If the adviser or director cannot or will not help you, call your program office and the Center for Study Abroad at the University of Rochester for assistance. Do NOT hold off on contacting someone in the hope that the situation will improve. Maybe things will work out, but do it with the assistance of the program director and someone in the Center for Study Abroad.

What to Do If You Are Assaulted, Robbed or Attacked

If a crime is committed against you, immediately notify your program director who will advise you of the best course of action. You may also choose to go to the police. The consular officers at your embassy will probably do little more than tell you to report it to the police, although they may keep a statistical account of the complaints they receive.

There are several attitudes that travelers (and locals) may have about reporting crimes to the police. The first is natural indignation and the belief that crime must be stopped and criminals apprehended. Second is the belief that going to the police won't help. Third, going to the police could be dangerous and just get you into more trouble.

In countries with reasonably civilized and passably honest systems of government and policing, reporting crimes can be the best thing to do. While you may not get any personal satisfaction, an increase in reported crimes against tourists could eventually mobilize the authorities to take more effective action to prevent crime.

This brochure contains information obtained from the Study Abroad Office at Northern Illinois University.

Staying Safe

When You

Go Abroad

Information for Men and Women
About Avoiding Sexually Harassing
Situations in Another Country

**University Intercessor
Health Promotion Office, UHS
Study Abroad Office**

University of Rochester