

Personal safety

Take care of your personal safety abroad

Key messages

- **Travellers should be aware of how to protect their personal safety abroad.**
- **Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office advice on safety and security for the destination should be checked (ideally before booking the trip).**
- **Travel health insurance should be obtained to cover planned activities, pre-existing health problems and belongings.**
- **Road traffic accidents are a significant cause of injury and death for travellers. These are more common in low- and middle-income countries.**
- **Alcohol is a frequent factor in accidents and injuries and can encourage risky behaviour. Excessive alcohol use may invalidate insurance claims.**
- **Informal and illegal production of fake alcohol is common in many parts of the world and may be a poisoning hazard (e.g. methanol). Methanol poisoning can be fatal.**

Overview

Most travellers enjoy a safe trip without any problems, but basic precautions should be taken to help maintain personal safety. The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) recommend all travellers from the United Kingdom (UK) prepare well and research their destinations before they go.

[FCDO Foreign travel advice](#) website contains country specific safety and security advice, along with information about local laws and customs. Researching destinations before departure (ideally before booking a trip) and following FCDO advice helps travellers stay safe.

Take care with important documents, insurance details, contact numbers and belongings. Travellers should avoid obvious displays of wealth, dress suitably and behave appropriately. For example, public displays of affection are unacceptable in some regions and alcohol is banned in certain countries.

Some accidents and injuries can be prevented by careful behaviour. Alcohol may be a factor, as it can affect judgement and lower inhibitions. Ideally, alcohol should only be drunk in moderation.

Possessing or smuggling (trafficking) illegal drugs, even in very small amounts, are serious crimes in many countries. This includes cannabis. UK residents caught carrying illegal drugs while visiting or passing through a country will face that country's laws. These may be much stricter than UK laws, as some countries have a zero-tolerance policy to drug offences. Punishment could include arrest and detention, with a long prison sentence if charged and convicted.

Many international airports, train stations and ports have excellent technology and security for detecting illegal items, which may be used to scan the baggage of transiting passengers.

FCDO advise that attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) travellers worldwide can be very different to those in the UK. They advise LGBT+ travellers to find out about local laws and social attitudes towards same-sex relationships, gender expression and identity before visiting a country [1].

Risk for travellers

Transport safety

Road traffic accidents (RTAs) are a significant cause of injury and death for travellers, with young travellers at greatest risk [2, 3]. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that over a million people are killed and 20-50 million people are injured worldwide every year as a result of RTAs. Most of these deaths and injuries occur in low- and middle-income countries [4, 5].

Travellers may feel safe because they are not planning to drive overseas. However, they can be injured as passengers, pedestrians or cyclists. WHO estimates that there are 1.19 million road traffic deaths each year and RTAs are the leading cause of death for children and young adults aged from five to 29 years old [6, 7].

For drivers and passengers, factors increasing risk of traffic injuries include: excess speed, not wearing seat belts or not using child restraints, drinking and driving, two- and three-wheel motorised vehicles (motorbikes, mopeds, scooters and Tuk Tuks) and not wearing helmets. Old, poorly designed and/or badly maintained roads and vehicles also contribute to RTAs [7].

Emergency care availability, including ambulance services and accident and emergency departments, varies worldwide and can be very poor or even non-existent in low-income countries. Lack of emergency care can adversely affect the outcome of accidents or injuries [8]. Death rates

after RTAs are higher in resource poor countries, with highest rates in Africa and lowest in Europe [6, 7, 9]. Even in resource rich countries like New Zealand, foreign drivers have been identified as a major problem in rental car crashes [10].

Being unfamiliar with driving on the right-hand side of the road can be dangerous for UK drivers abroad. In the US, tourists were found to be at greater risk of injury from an RTA than local people [11].

Rail, air and large cruise ship travel is usually safe. However, overcrowding, and poor maintenance may lead to unsafe conditions on many local buses and ferries.

Other safety risks

[Drowning](#) is a potential hazard, one study looking at tourist accidents, found drowning was second to RTAs as a cause of death [12].

Falls from balconies have become more common in UK travellers and can cause serious injury and death [13].

FCDO provide information for people with [additional needs or disabilities](#), [solo travellers](#) and anyone planning [adventure or volunteering holidays](#) abroad.

While most trips are trouble free, FCDO reports that sexual assault of both female and male travellers is becoming more common. Unfamiliar surroundings and lack of local knowledge may increase vulnerability. Sexual assault is traumatic anywhere, but can be more difficult to deal with abroad, in unfamiliar surroundings.

Specific [advice on rape and sexual assault for travellers](#) is available from the FCDO. In the UK, Returning travellers can get free, confidential support and advice from their local NHS [sexual health clinic](#) if they have not been able to access these services abroad.

[Drink spiking with drugs or alcohol](#) is a risk worldwide and all travellers should be alert and aware when drinking and socialising [14].

Fake alcohol is a risk in some countries, including local spirits spiked with methanol [14-18]. People, including UK travellers, have died or suffered serious illness abroad after drinking alcoholic drinks contaminated with methanol [17, 18].

Methanol is a clear, colourless, flammable liquid alcohol made from distilling wood. It is used in many commercial products, like antifreeze, fuel and paint thinners. It is not fit for human consumption [19].

Methanol has been used in the manufacture of fake (counterfeit) replicas of well-known alcohol brands like vodka or illegal local spirits and 'bootleg alcohol'. Drinking methanol, even in very small

amounts, is extremely dangerous and can cause coma, convulsions, blindness, nervous system damage and death. Symptoms are often delayed for 12-24 hours and occasionally up to 48 hours [20].

Symptoms of methanol poisoning can be similar to those of [alcohol poisoning](#) and may include:

- Confusion.
- Dizziness.
- Drowsiness or feeling very tired.
- Vomiting.
- Eyesight changes including blindness, blurred vision or difficulty looking at bright lights.
- Abdominal and muscle pain.

All travellers should seek urgent medical attention if they (or anyone they are travelling with) shows signs of alcohol-induced methanol poisoning or drink-spiking [15,15]. See '[Know what is in your drink?](#)' and [Spiking and methanol poisoning](#) for more information and advice about methanol.

Ayahuasca ceremonies

Ayahuasca is a traditional plant used in 'spiritual cleansing' ceremonies by some local communities in South America. At these ceremonies, people drink a brew containing a hallucinogenic drug called dimethyltryptamine (DMT). This is a class A (banned) substance in the UK. Ayahuasca's interaction with existing medical conditions is not well understood. People have suffered serious illnesses, and in some cases death, after consuming it. Some Ayahuasca retreats are in remote areas, making it difficult to get medical help [21].

Kava ceremonies

In some South Pacific islands, a traditional drink called Kava is used in ceremonies and sometimes offered in bars and hotels [22, 23]. Kava has been associated with liver toxicity [23], including fatal liver failure, and has been banned in the UK since 2003 [24].

Fake (counterfeit) medicines are also an issue in some countries. Travellers should make sure they carry a supply of any medication they take in their hand luggage. See our [medicine and travel factsheet](#) for more advice about taking medicines abroad and the health risks of counterfeit drugs.

[Carbon monoxide poisoning](#) can be an accommodation hazard if fuels such as gas, oil, coal and wood don't burn fully. Breathing in this poisonous gas (that has no smell or taste) can make people unwell and can kill those exposed to high levels. Incorrectly installed, poorly maintained or badly ventilated appliances like cookers, heaters and boilers are the commonest cause of accidental exposure to carbon monoxide.

When the overseas deaths of UK residents are studied, the same trends are seen. Deaths from natural causes (such as heart disease) are most common with those from accidents and injuries

second most common [13, 25]. Travellers should make sure that any pre-existing medical conditions are evaluated and stable before their trip.

Before travel

[FCDO advice](#) on specific risks should be checked before travel. Travel insurance is likely to be invalidated (cancelled) if visiting a country against FCDO advice. Consider what equipment might be needed, such as car seats for children. Carrying a [medical/first aid kit](#) tailored to the destination is recommended.

Take photocopies or scan in travel documents, passports and emergency contact details and store away from the originals and/or online in a secure place. Keep family/friends informed of travel plans.

Travel health insurance should be obtained; the FCDO website contains advice on [what the policy should cover](#). Travellers should be aware that pre-existing health conditions and certain activities, such as adventure sports may be excluded unless they have been specifically declared to the insurance company.

If visiting European Union (EU) or European Economic Area (EEA) countries UK travellers can apply for a free [UK Global Health Insurance Card GHIC](#) (EHIC arrangements expired on 31 December 2020). A GHIC allows UK travellers access to state emergency healthcare in EU and EEA countries, at a reduced cost, or sometimes for free. However, a GHIC **is not** an alternative to travel insurance.

Consider packing a carbon monoxide monitor which has been approved to the latest UK or European Standard (BS Kitemark or EN50291). These are available from DIY or hardware stores.

During travel

Be aware of risks and follow the common sense precautions below:

- Check the tyres, brakes, lights and safety belts on any hire vehicle and use vehicle safety belts and child safety restraints (take these from UK if necessary). Never exceed local speed limits.
- Avoid driving or being driven at night, especially in areas with poor roads and lighting, where possible.
- Be aware of local traffic patterns even if walking or cycling.
- Avoid travelling alone at night.
- Wear a helmet if riding a horse, bicycle, moped or motorbike.
- Ask a reputable source (e.g. airport or hotel information, restaurant) for details of a reliable taxi service.
- Consider obtaining safety statistics for your airline, cruise ship, or for driving in your destination country (see resources below).
- Drink alcohol responsibly and be aware of your limits.

- Never accept drinks from strangers, including free "shots" in bars, or leave your drink unattended and make sure all drinks are prepared in front of you.
- Always buy alcoholic drinks from a reputable vendor and check bottle seals are intact. Take extreme care when buying spirit-based drinks. Bottles may appear to be genuine when they're not, and labels may not be accurate. If the price of alcohol looks too good to be true, it probably is. Check branded products; do not purchase products with labels that are poorly printed or with typographical errors.
- Contaminated drinks can include:
 - Local spirits such as rice or plum liquor.
 - Free "shots" of spirits.
 - Spirit-based drinks, such as cocktails.
 - Brand name alcohol - criminals may make counterfeit replicas of well-known alcohol brands containing high amounts of methanol [18].
- Never drink and drive or swim after drinking.
- Dress modestly and avoid expensive jewellery or clothes that attract attention. If appropriate, use a safe to store valuables.
- Remain vigilant at all times with money and valuables.
- Be aware of scams and be cautious of strangers approaching you in the street. It is generally advised not to resist muggers.
- Check fire exits in discos, clubs and hotels.
- Avoid sharing rooms with strangers and try to book accommodation ahead.
- Check locks work properly.
- Get reliable local advice on avoiding marine / land animal hazards and safe places to swim.
- Check water depth before diving (feet first, first time) and never swim alone.
- Supervise children at all times in and near water.
- NEVER dive into a swimming pool from a balcony.
- Avoid contact with fresh or salt water known to contain [harmful algae \(sometimes called blue-green algae\)](#). This algae can produce toxins (poisons) that make people and animals sick. Follow local safety guidance.
- Never use illegal drugs or carry them for others.

Remember when abroad, you need to obey the laws of the country you are visiting, which may be very different from UK laws.

Resources

- [Association of British Travel Agents: Staying safe on holiday](#)
- [Association for Safe International Road Travel: Planning a Trip Abroad?](#)
- [Food Standards Agency: Fake alcohol](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Advice for women travelling abroad](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Air travel: safety and security](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Support for British nationals abroad](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Reduce your risk from terrorism while abroad](#)
- [Royal Society for Prevention of Accidents: Staying safe on holiday](#)

- [Suzy Lamplugh Trust: Personal safety advice](#)
- [Travel Aware: Travel Aware](#)
- [US Centres for Disease Control: Cruise Ship Travel](#)
- [UK Civil Aviation Authority: Passengers and public](#)
- [UK Health Security Agency: Methanol health effects, incident management and toxicology](#)
- [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Harmful algal Blooms and Your Health](#)
- [World Health Organization: Death on the roads](#)
- [World Health Organization: Global status report on road safety 2023: country and territory profiles](#)

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