Legal Issues When Traveling Abroad

You’ve booked your flights, purchased travel insurance, and created an itinerary for the trip. But, have you considered the unique legal issues you can face when traveling to a foreign country?

When you are in a foreign country, you are subject to that country’s laws — which may differ vastly from those in your home country. It is important to take into account the country’s rules and regulations, customs and social etiquette, and political atmosphere.

David W. Patterson, PhD, a Criminal Justice professor and program director at South University, Richmond, offers an outline of the political, legal, and social issues one should consider when traveling abroad:

- **Political:** Be aware of U.S. Department of State prohibitions about travel to some countries (ex., Cuba) and warnings about traveling to dangerous countries where the U.S. government’s ability to assist American citizens is constrained because of the closure of an embassy or consulate or because of a drawdown of its staff (ex., northern Mexico, many countries in Africa, and the Middle East).

- **Legal:** Meet all requirements for entry, including passport, travel visa, inoculations, and don’t bring items that cannot be carried into the country.

- **Social:** Educate yourself on cultural expectations, including dress codes and restrictions on alcohol consumption. Also, consider the social climate of countries that may be undergoing political corruption and financial turmoil.

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Many of the freedoms Westerners take for granted are not universal. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to assemble may not apply at all in some countries.

**Customs Regulations**

There are rules regarding what can be brought back into the United States when returning from a trip. U.S. travelers are advised to be aware of the U.S Customs and Border Protection list of prohibited or restricted items.

Prohibited means the item is forbidden by law to enter the United States. Examples of prohibited items are dangerous toys, automobiles that don’t protect their occupants in a crash, or illegal substances. Restricted means that special licenses or permits are required from a federal agency before the item is allowed to enter the United States. Restricted items include firearms, certain fruits and vegetables, animal products, animal byproducts, and some animals.

**Crime and Punishment**

Many countries have extremely strict punishments for crimes considered minor in the United States. Drug convictions, even for possession of a small amount of illegal narcotics, can result in life imprisonment or the death penalty in some countries.

If arrested in a foreign country, a U.S. citizen should ask to contact the nearest American embassy or consulate. Most countries give foreign nationals the right to talk to a consular representative if arrested. Consular officers provide a wide range of services to U.S. citizens incarcerated abroad. Services vary depending on local laws and regulations, the level of local services available in the country in question, and the circumstances of the individual prisoner, according to the State Department.
“Anyone traveling abroad should always have access to the phone numbers of the U.S. Embassy in every country they pass through,” Patterson says. “They should also be in regular touch with someone in the U.S. who will be aware of their travel plans.”

**Surprising Foreign Laws**

According to a Budget Travel article, there are many foreign laws that can catch travelers off guard:

- In Canada, there is a limit on how many pennies can be used at a time. The maximum number allowable per transaction is 25.
- Medicines that can be bought without a prescription in the United States are sometimes illegal in Japan, and that includes Vicks and Sudafed products, and anything else containing pseudoephedrine.
- Failure to flush a toilet in Singapore may result in fines.
- In Germany, dog breeds that the government considers dangerous aren’t welcome for more than a four-week visit — and they aren’t allowed to live there at all.
- Wearing a mask in public can lead to your arrest in Denmark.
- In many of the major cities of the Philippines, a vehicle can only be driven on days determined by the last digits of its license plate.
- In Finland, taxi drivers playing music in their cars are required to pay a copyright fee. Why? The music is being presented to the public.