

Travel Tips by Pete

These are some suggestions and guidelines that will make your international travel easier, more enjoyable, and set you up to maximize your experience. I have been fortunate enough to visit 22 countries in Europe, South America, and Asia. I also believe that much of these suggestions are just good overall travel guidelines.

Before visiting any foreign country, take the time to do some basic research on their culture, customs, and daily life. A Google search and/or YouTube search will reveal a wealth of information. Keep in mind that you will be a guest in their country and having a basic understanding of their mindset will help make the most of your visit.

Any comments or suggestions can be sent to bwb@boomerswithbeverages.com

How to Plan a Trip

Once you have decided on your destination and the number of days abroad, you want to prepare for a fun and adventurous trip. One of the biggest mistakes I see inexperienced travelers make is trying to do too much in a short period of time. I strongly recommend that you pick a couple of cities in a particular country or even just one landing spot and take the time to soak in the sights, sounds, and food. Having a base camp and taking day trips gives you flexibility and minimizes fatigue. For example.....don't try to see Rome, Florence, Venice, and the Amalfi Coast in one trip. You will be exhausted and will just end up feeling like a hurried traveler. I have been to Italy eight times and feel like I have just scratched the surface of the many cultural gems that it offers. Of course, if you only plan to take one trip abroad, then the whirlwind tour may be a good option.

I prefer to make my own itinerary and accommodations but utilizing a group tour package can be a good way to see the highlights and have most of your planning done ahead of time for an initial trip. Keep in mind that these type of group formats leave only a small amount of time for down time and personal exploration. The meals included in most group tours are usually at touristy restaurants. Good travel agent can be of assistance and ease much of your travel anxiety.

If you do choose to travel by group, I strongly recommend that you limit the group size to no more than 12 people if possible. Even at that relatively small size, there will be someone in the group that will be utterly annoying. If you are lucky enough to avoid that scenario..... then you are probably that person. LOL.

Pro Tip: Flights to Europe and many other destinations depart in the evening and land in the morning. Get as much sleep on the plane as possible. I realize it likely won't be a very restful sleep and you will be tired when you land. Resist the urge to check in and take a long nap. Stay up, do a little walking around and go to bed early. The next morning you will be well rested and in sync with the local time.

When to Travel: If possible, avoid summer travel. This is prime time for many countries in North America and it will be crowded, hot and more expensive. I prefer early spring and early fall because the weather will be moderate and comfortable for walking and other excursions. Typically, prices will be more favorable and the lines for popular attractions will be minimal or non-existent. Always check the weather forecast before packing. If you are traveling to South America, note the seasonal inversion.

Where to Stay: There are a lot of options. If you have hotel reward points, this would be a great time to cash them in. As someone who traveled 100 nights per year for nearly 20 years, I have learned a thing or two about various accommodation choices. My personal preferences are VRBO/Airbnb. They are typically less expensive and offer more of a "home" feel where you can prepare some meals, do laundry, and have more room than a hotel. Many offerings are in a more residential environment away from the tourist noisiness. I suggest renting only 4–5-star units. I have never had a bad experience and the reviews are typically spot on and revealing.

Passport: Make sure that you have a valid passport with at least 6 months left before expirations. One year of eligibility is even better. If you are applying for a new passport or renewal, allow at least 2-3 months to receive your documents. Many post office locations can accommodate the passport application/renewal process.

Currency: Know the exchange rates before you leave (they fluctuate). Sign up for a credit card that offers no transaction fees for purchases or ATM withdrawals. ALWAYS get some local currency through your bank before your leave. Airport and local exchange kiosks will charge a significantly higher exchange rate. You don't want to be scrambling for local currency when you land and need a taxi etc.

Transportation: I am a big believer in getting to know the public transportation in your city of destination. Most major metro areas have efficient and cost-effective subway, train, and bus systems. Consider an all-inclusive public transportation pass for the duration of your stay. Metro/bus/train routes can typically be downloaded. Many cities now offer Uber and Lyft options as well.

Once you land, unless you have pre-arranged transportation to your accommodations, I suggest taking a taxi as you will be tired and probably don't want to figure out the metro/bus/train system at that time. Your hotel site, front desk staff, or host should know the cost of a taxi ride from the airport to your destination. Knowing this will make sure that you don't get ripped off. NEVER take a ride from someone that approaches you at the airport. Always use a licensed taxi service. Many cities have flat rates in certain districts. This information is easily available.

One of the great benefits of traveling abroad is that many cities are small in area and are still accessible to walk. Walking the streets of a city is still my favorite way to experience the ambiance and cultural nuances. Local metros and trams can be a good way to get to different sections and then you can explore more by foot.

Phone/Internet: Internet service will be widespread and available in many public locations/cafes/restaurants. I suggest that you check with your phone service provider and get a daily data/calling plan. This will allow you to utilize Google Maps to navigate your way around when walking. Call home using Facetime or other internet-based services to avoid long distance calling charges. Viber is a good option.

Language: Most people in the major cities speak English, especially service workers at restaurants, hotels, museums etc. I strongly urge you to learn a few basic words of the native language. This is a respectful gesture and will be appreciated. No one will expect you to be fluent in their language, but learning **Please, Thank You, Good Morning, Good Evening, Where is the Bathroom, and Do you speak English** will go a long way in creating a good impression.

Google translate is a good app to download. This can help you in situations where items or services are not in English.

Where to Eat: I am a self-avowed food snob, so my comments may reflect this attitude. Bear with me. A good rule of thumb is that if a restaurant is near an historic site or popular area with a view, it's likely a tourist trap. This means average food at high prices. ALWAYS ask the locals where they eat. Hotel workers, shop owners and baristas, and people on the street are good sources to find these off the beaten path eateries. Be relentless in hunting down these gems..... you won't regret it.

In most other countries, dinner is served later in the evening. In some countries like Spain, most of the local restaurants don't take reservations before 8:30-9:00pm. Over the last decade or so, many restaurants have modified this approach to accommodate tourists. **ADAPT.** If you do find places that have early dinner arrangements, it's probably touristy and the quality of the food and service will reflect this. Don't go into a restaurant and try to "Americanize" the menu. After all, what's the point of experiencing a different culture if you don't partake. Be adventurous and occasionally let the waiter/waitress bring you their favorite dish. What could possibly go wrong (unless you are allergic to certain foods).

Other Dining Tips: Know the tipping policies of each country. Believe it or not, waiters are paid a living wage (what a concept) and tips are not most of their income. In most cases, a tip of 5-10% is adequate. In many countries, overtipping is considered rude and insulting. If visiting a café, perhaps a Euro or smaller amount is considered adequate. Again, check the local customs. You don't want to be that "cheap" or "gaudy" American tourist.

Excursions/Sites/Museums etc.: While I am a big believer in exploring your destination in a leisurely pace on your own, some popular sites are most efficiently seen by booking a small group tour that typically have a guide that will offer an historical perspective and you circumvent long lines. This is well worth the extra cost and will save you time for other things. The tour guides are often the best people to ask for restaurant suggestions. Many popular attractions will have vendors outside selling preferred passes. Some are legitimate.....but it's hard to know. My preference is to make these arrangements before you leave. Viator www.viator.com is a tour company that I have used for a dozen or more bookings and have always been more than pleased.

Many major cities have a Hop on/Hop off bus tours that provide an overview of the metro area. This is a great way to get a general lay of the land. Once you have that perspective, you can decide what areas you might want to spend more time during your stay.

Many museums will sell tickets on-line that have specific date and entry times. Again, this circumvents the long lines and allows you to plan your day more efficiently.

How to Blend In: At some point, it will be known that you are an American tourist. Most countries are welcoming and enjoy the fact that we tend to spend a lot of money when travelling.

One comment I often hear about travelling abroad is **“someone told me that there are a lot of pick pockets in (pick your city)”**. News flash.....there are pick pockets everywhere. Even in your hometown. If you appear to be out of place, vulnerable, unaware, or generally clueless, you are a target anywhere. Do not take things from strangers. These are often ways to distract you so that someone else can pickpocket.

So how do you blend in and not appear to be so “American”.

1. Do not wear athletic gear as your normal attire. In general, Europeans and other cultures do not wear sweatsuits, athletic shoes, or other workout gear other than going to the gym.
2. Do not wear college or professional team apparel. Just don't.
3. Do not wear shorts unless you are at the beach. Seriously.
4. Do not wear baggy cargo shorts, flip flops, or Hawaiian shirts. You may as well have a neon sign on your head that says, “Rob me Now”.
5. If you are having a hard time communicating, speaking louder will not help. Try Google translate.
6. Observe all local customs and church protocols. Once again...do some research.
7. Don't complain if things are not like “home”. What did you expect?
8. Remember that you are a guest.

Drink Eat Explore Talk Be Kind

