

# Travel Tips 101

Essential travel tips for the backpacker,  
drawn from 28 years of experience  
travelling through 97 countries.

Tips for the traveller basically fall into two categories:

- Saving yourself money
- Being comfortable

No one likes paying more than they need to for the same thing and nobody likes to be uncomfortable.

There are some tips that do not fall into the two categories above at the end.

## Saving yourself money

You have worked hard to save money for your travels. You don't need to be paying over the odds for something. With some basic research and some forward planning, you can make your hard-earned cash go further.

## **Before going to a new country**

Check the exchange rates. I write down the following details on a scrap of paper and keep it in my pocket for quick and easy reference for the first day

1USD = ? in local money

10USD = ? in local money

And typically:

10 local money = ? USD

100 local money = ? USD

I also check the conversion rate from, for example, Albanian LEK to Macedonian denar. Good if you have some leftover currency and I like to compare how the new country fares in comparison to the one I have just left. I always refer to USD. Only in Euro Zone countries do I think in Euros.

In Albania, you'd always get quoted for hostel price in Euros. This is annoying. I know it's Booking dot com's issue where when you reserve a room, it's fixed in Euros and then they convert it on arrival. Tours are also quoted in Euro. WTF

Borders posts do not always have ATMs or money changers. I like remoter border crossings. I've just crossed from Albania to North Macedonia.

There were no facilities other than immigration offices. I had 4.20 worth of MD on me! Here, that's good enough to get you to a place with an ATM or money changer.

If there are ATMs at border crossings, I prefer not to use them. Wouldn't want the ATM in the middle of nowhere to swallow my card. If there are money changers, cash in 10\$ or 10€ or change your leftover money, just enough to get you to a town where banks give you a more favourable rate.

You must carry cash! What are you going to do if the power is down, the ATM is out of money or just rejects your card? I remember walking around Aleppo once with a girl who was looking for an ATM which accepted MasterCard. Out of 20 banks, only one had an ATM which accepted MasterCard.

Once in town, use an ATM inside the bank. If this isn't possible, use one on the wall outside. Do not use ATMs in supermarkets or metro stations. There are most likely hidden withdrawal fees and if the ATM swallows your card, getting it back will be difficult.

Forex bureaus give better rates than the banks. Check out a few before you exchange. Look to see if any commission is due. In many developing countries, money changers are not to be trusted.

Count the money in front of the teller and reject any old/torn notes (they have no qualms about rejecting your old 100\$ bills!

Do not change money on the street!

### **On arriving by plane:**

Check the availability of local buses and trains or airport shuttles. You can find these details on Wikitravel and most airports have their websites which detail how to get to and from the airport. I have never walked from any airport though I could have done in Bali as the airport isn't that far from Kuta.

### **Arriving at a new town by bus or train:**

Mostly, train stations and bus stations are within walking distance of the area where you are headed. Turkey and China are notable exceptions. Buses are always available to take you into town. The stop may be on the next street.

Do not believe taxi drivers!

I arrived once at Hua Lamphong station in Bangkok.

"Taxi sir, 600Bhat!" Or whatever the figure was.

"No, I am walking"

"Where to?"

"Koh San Road"

"Oh very far. 25 kilometres"

"No, it's not! It's less than 5"

"Sir it is much further. Ok 500Bhat"

On a previous trip, I had walked to the station. Koh San Road to the station, 43 minutes including stopping to buy some water. I know I am a walking maniac but I cannot walk 25 km in 43 minutes.

Moral of this story is, do your research! That's why you have Google Maps.

500Bhat better spent on enjoying life than giving it unnecessarily to a taxi driver. Think Beer Chang, Thai massage@ Chicken coconut curry.

Does taking the taxi save you time? Not always. By the time the taxi driver has gone up the freeway a bit, done a you-turn and got stuck in traffic, you have already checked in, showered off the sweat and are taking that first sip of a cold beer.

## **On buying stuff at a market:**

Where there are no bar codes, ask yourself, 'How much should this be?'

There is a weird situation in Albania where, when it's 70 they say 700. It is not a scam. It's something to do with their old currency. They write it as 70 but say 700.

Locally everyone knows about it so there is no reason to change but unaware tourists who do not question prices will pay 700, which is 7 USD and it is well known that locals won't tell them the 'mistake'.

So ask yourself, is this really 7 USD or is 70cents a better price? When locals earn 100-300 USD a month, a bag of veg is unlikely going to be 7 bucks!

## **On eating out:**

Long term travellers need to be thrifty. Food is fuel, nothing more.

I am very much into self-catering now. Hostels have a kitchen. I buy a bag of lentils for 1\$ which does 4 meals and cook up some veg. 1 medium onion costs around 5cents, a medium tomato 15 cents. Do you get the drift? Cheap and nutritious.

But when I do eat out I head away from the Old Town where richer local tourists and foreigners go. You pay for the ambience.

If I need a coffee, I find a place which has old men sitting in. I do not need to be served by a waiter in a crisp clean shirt. Coffee is a coffee. Avoid places with table cloths! It's

October 2020. I am on 'Dry October'. But when I drink a beer, I go to the supermarket and find a nice place to sit! Shop prices are 4 times cheaper than those in a bar!

# On being comfortable

There is an army expression, 'any fool can be uncomfortable'. Not that I was ever in the army. But hey, it's worth thinking about.

You need to feel well-rested to complete your day of doing whatever is on your agenda. So you need to choose your lodgings with caution.

## **Things to look for when choosing a hostel:**

Booking sites have their uses. I look for details such as 'party hostel', 'bed bugs'. If one guest complains that the place was dirty and no one else mentions it, maybe the cleaner was having a bad day or maybe it as a flashpacker wanting hotel comforts at hostel prices.

It's good to know the location. Hostels are many times right in the heart of the ACTION. Kotor, Zürich for example. If possible, I will very often choose a place a bit further out. 15 to 20 minutes is good. But 30 is ok too. An hour out is a bit much, even for me.

I do not want to be next to a freeway, Bratislava in 2010 or next to the train station, Zermatt Backpackers. Earplugs can only block out so much noise.

In West Africa, you take what you can get. As long as the bed is clean, it'll do. If the bathroom is bad I won't use it. If I need to pee, anywhere is good. If I need more, take a bottle of water. If it's the middle of the night, tough shit. Endure the filth.

I have slept in quite a few brothels. Bangkok, Banjul, Koundara. The girls are ok. They are just trying to make a buck. Once you have said 'no', they leave you alone and go chasing better customers.

## **Pack lightly**

A heavy backpack will after time, become your own worst enemy.

At the moment, I have 2 T-Shirts, 2 thin long sleeve thermal tops, 1 jeans and a pair of zip-offs. When it's hot, I wash my stuff nightly. More often than not, it's dry the next morning.

I was once told that I 'must be dirty' as I travelled with so little, said the traveller with 10 smelly T-Shirts and underwear in his bag as he waited for laundry day.

travel with a small amount of soap powder. When the sinks don't have plugs, ask for a bucket. Mostly I just use my dry bag, leave it all to soak and come back later.

Another reason for packing lightly is so I can walk from the bus station to the hostel. Thus saving myself a bus fare. Money that can be spent on enjoyment. And of course, nothing wrong with a bit of exercise after sitting on the bus for many hours.

### **Kit to promote comfort level:**

Earplugs for blocking out other people's noise, mosquito net with hooks, Gaffa tape, 10m of thin nylon rope. This can also be used to hang up your clothes as a way to maintain some sort of order when there is no chair in the room. Sleeping bag, you never know when it might get chilly. Sarong. Good as a towel, blanket, bed sheet and a curtain. A decent pair of runners/trainers/sport shoes. Long term travellers hike lots. Here in Ohrid, I am walking 15km a day. Wearing flip flops for this number of kilometres is not recommended.

### **Other tips:**

Learn a few words of the local language. It'll go along way to bring smiles; to their day and yours. Typically 'thank you', 'good morning', 'goodbye', 'please', 'yes', 'no'. And some numbers, 1-10 at least.

Familiarise yourself with some local customs. Taking shoes off at the door, various handshake techniques or fist-bumping, most noticeable in West Africa.

Avoid giving and receiving with your left hand. Do I need to explain? Maybe I do. The left is reserved for washing your butt!

## **Security:**

I am not going to divulge all my secrets here otherwise you might want to rob me as I sleep but don't use a wallet. You only lose your wallet because you have one. Keep your main supply hidden out of reach. Keep money for the day in a front pocket.

Sitting in a street cafe, clip your backpack to the chair. Of course, not everywhere is 'dangerous', it just becomes second nature.

I was attacked at knifepoint in Cape Town. Take a taxi if arriving after sundown and there are no more local buses, in countries with a reputation. Dakar, Abidjan Nairobi, Cape Town. Bamako bizarrely is not on this list.

I didn't lose my bags in Cape Town as they were clipped to the loop of my jeans with a simple karabiner. They struggled and it was taking too long. They scarpered. Lesson learned, for them maybe and definitely for me.

Don't risk a cab fare. It could have ended very badly.

In hostels, watch your stuff. The chances are that if you do get robbed on your travels, it will be by someone in the dorm room you are sharing with.



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