From preparing for departure to reentering the United States, travel abroad is circumscribed by rules, regulations, and laws designed to protect you and facilitate your travel between nations.

Whether it means obtaining a passport, going through customs, or learning and obeying a country's laws, you should become aware of international travel procedures as well as the protections and services available (and not available) to U.S. citizens. This InfoGram™ cannot be comprehensive in detail, but it attempts to be comprehensive in scope to help you, a prospective traveler, understand basic considerations and find sources for official information.

PREPARING FOR TRAVEL

Passports. Your passport is the most important document you will carry abroad. Everyone traveling with you, including infants and children, must have their own passports. It proves U.S. citizenship and allows you to leave and reenter the United States. It is also required to enter most countries. (Exceptions include Mexico, Canada, and U.S. territories, for which another proof of U.S. citizenship and a photo I.D. will generally suffice. Check with your travel agent or nearest passport agency for information on which documents are accepted in these areas.)

Regional passport agencies, designated post offices, and most federal and state courthouses carry applications for passports. The U.S. Department of State suggests applying for a passport several months before your planned departure. At the very least, apply several weeks in advance, as there can be delays during peak demand times. For an additional fee, you can expedite the processing of your application if you have a legitimate, documented emergency. The initial application must be made in person, and you must show proof of U.S. citizenship (e.g., certified birth certificate); show proof of identity (e.g., driver's license); provide current, regulation photos; and pay a fee.

Adult passports (issued to those 18 years and older) are valid for 10 years and child passports are valid for 5 years. If your current passport will expire within six months, renew it before you travel to avoid unnecessary difficulties with immigration officials abroad. Adults who were at least 18 years old when last issued a passport may be eligible to renew their passports by mail, but children less than 18 years of age or adults whose passports were issued to them before they turned 18 years old must renew their passports in person.
Once you have your passport, make two copies of the data and photo pages. Keep one copy at home where a friend or family member can reach it in case of an emergency, and take one copy with you, kept separate from your actual passport. If your passport is lost or stolen, this copy will help establish your identity with local authorities and U.S. embassy officials; however, it will not be accepted as an actual passport.

Visas. In addition to a passport, you may be required to have a visa to enter a country. A visa is an endorsement or stamp placed by foreign officials in a traveler's passport that allows the bearer to travel in that country. Visas are issued by the host country, not the U.S. government. They can be obtained from the country's embassy (located in Washington, D.C.) or consulates (located in major U.S. cities). To promote tourism, many countries waive the visa requirement for those staying a short time (one day to several months, depending on the country).

To apply for a visa you need a valid passport. If you live near an embassy or consulate, you can apply in person and usually receive the visa within a few days. You can also mail your application and passport to the embassy, but allow several weeks or even months for processing. Always send your passport and any required fee via registered mail or other guaranteed courier. Provide a prepaid envelope for the same type of return delivery to minimize the risk of losing your passport.

Standard tourist visas allow you to enter the country and stay for a specified maximum period. Some are good for multiple entries over several years; others are good for only one entry. Your visa will be checked by immigration officials when you enter and leave a country. If your plans change and you think your stay will extend beyond the validation of your visa, contact the proper officials in the country you are visiting to apply for an extension. If you allow the visa to expire while still in the country, you may face legal action, fines, or other difficulties.

If you plan to conduct business or stay for an extended period of time, you may need to apply for a different kind of visa. Most visas will not give you the right to be employed; you must apply for a work permit if you wish to work abroad. If your itinerary includes multiple countries, you must comply with the visa requirements for each country. Some countries are sensitive about which other countries you will be visiting in your travels. For instance, some Middle Eastern or African countries will not issue visas or allow you to enter their countries if your passport indicates you will be traveling to Israel. For guidance in these situations, contact the National Passport Agency (see Additional Sources on page 8).

Visa requirements are revised from time to time, so check with a travel agent or the embassy of the country you plan to visit for current visa information.

Other Entry Requirements and Considerations. Many countries, while not requiring a visa or even a passport, do require a tourist card. This simple document, which allows authorities to keep track of travelers, is obtained from the country's embassy or consulate or through a travel agent. Keep your tourist card with your passport; you will need to present it when departing the country. Some countries require that you show proof of onward passage. That is, you must prove you have the intent and means to leave the country. An airline ticket or itinerary is the best way to prove this. In some countries, you may also need to prove you have enough money to cover your living expenses while you are there.

Children traveling without an adult, with only one parent, or in someone else's custody should carry a notarized letter from the parents or guardian granting the children permission to leave the country in such circumstances. Many countries will not permit children to enter without this permission because of legal complications arising from child custody battles in the United States.

The citizenship laws of the country you will visit could affect your travel. You could be considered a citizen of a country if (1) you were born in that country, (2) you are married to one of its citizens, or (3) your parents—or even your grandparents—were born in that country. Such characteristics may qualify you for citizenship even if you are a naturalized U.S. citizen. If the host country claims you as a citizen, it may detain you for obligatory military service (lasting several months or years) or for payment of income taxes. Some countries might even disavow your U.S. citizenship and refuse to
let you leave the country. If you have questions about
your citizenship status related to another country, con-
tact the country’s embassy or consulate.
Customs. You will go through customs both when you
enter a foreign country and when you reenter the United
States. Some countries restrict or prohibit what you can
bring into the country, including food, plants, animals,
and plant and animal products. Certain products may be
commercially boycotted or considered immodest by the
host country. In some countries, religious materials are
considered offensive or illegal. You may also face diffi-
culty taking expensive electronic equipment into
another country. Contact the host country’s embassy for
a list of restricted items. Customs officials have author-
ity to seize items and charge you fines.

When entering a country, always refuse to carry pack-
ages through customs for other individuals. It is not
uncommon for persons returning to their own country to
ask foreigners to carry a bottle of liquor or a box of cig-
arettes through customs for them because of allowances
on what can be brought into a country. This is illegal and
can be dangerous if the requesting person conceals other
objects in the package. You may unwittingly be carrying
drugs or other contraband and could face arrest. At most
airports, you will be questioned about your luggage and
could be detained and searched if you personally have
not seen the contents of a package you are carrying.

Some personal items you may be taking abroad such as
foreign-made cameras, radios, laptop computers, or
watches are subject to duties each time they enter the
United States unless you can prove prior ownership.
Some items carry a sticker proving the item passed
through customs when it was originally imported, which
is sufficient proof. You may also show sales receipts,
insurance policies, or jeweler’s appraisals as proof of
prior possession, or you may register such property with
a U.S. customs office before you leave. Further, if plan-
ing to take more than $10,000 out of the United States
(regardless of form), you must register with U.S. cus-
toms officials before departing. There is no fee or
penalty to register, but failure to do so may result in
fines or criminal charges.

For more specific and timely information, contact the
customs office nearest you before your departure.

Immunizations. Though many countries have no immu-
nization or vaccination requirements, the Centers for
Disease Control (CDC) offers several recommendations
to better protect travelers. The CDC recommends those
going abroad be current on standard immunizations
given in childhood as well as tetanus and diphtheria vac-
icinations. The CDC also recommends additional vacci-
nations for diseases such as yellow fever, cholera, hep-
atitis B, and typhoid fever if you are traveling to countries
where such diseases are active, or if you are planning an
extended stay in high-risk areas. Review with your
physician the recommendations for the country you will
be visiting at least ten weeks before your departure so
you can plan a vaccination schedule.

Some countries require you to have an international
certificate of vaccination against yellow fever if you
have traveled through a country in the yellow fever
demic zone (parts of South America and Africa). Coun-
tries may also require a vaccination against cholera
if you are traveling from an infected area (parts of South
America, Africa, and Asia). An increasing number of
countries also have or are developing AIDS-test require-
ments for extended-stay visitors. For more specific
information, check with the embassy or consulate of your
destination, the CDC, the state or county health
department, or your doctor.

Medications and Drugs. What is considered legal med-
cication in the United States could be an illegal substance
in another country. If you are unsure of the legality of a
prescription drug you will be taking with you abroad,
contact the embassy or consulate of the host country
about the drug. You should document all medications
you carry. Keep prescription medicines in the original
bottles and obtain a letter from your physician verifying

**Traveler’s Tip**

Review with your physician the immunization recommen-
dations for the country you will be visiting at least ten
weeks before your departure so you can plan a vaccina-
tion schedule.
zen out of jail, and an offender may wait several months in jail before a trial is granted. In some countries, drug possession is punishable by lengthy prison sentences and even death.

**Health and Property Insurance.** Although international travel is generally safe, it is wise to have insurance for the same reason you have it at home: protection. Should you need medical attention or have a car accident in another country and you are not properly insured, laws governing payment may delay your trip or cause financial difficulties. Before you travel, check with your insurance agencies regarding the limitations on your health, auto, or personal property coverage while you are abroad.

Some health insurance policies, including Medicare, do not offer any coverage while you are abroad; other policies cover only emergency health services. You may need to purchase a short-term policy from an international insurance company. Coverage is also available for medical evacuation, a particularly good protection to have if you will be visiting a remote area or country where medical facilities are inadequate; such evacuation can cost thousands of dollars and may require payment up front. Your travel agent, health insurance company, or travel publications will have names of companies that offer international insurance.

Though not a form of insurance, the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT) is a nonprofit organization you may consider joining before going abroad. Among other medical information services, IAMAT offers a directory of physicians (most of whom speak English) in 125 countries and territories who have agreed to see travelers for a predetermined fee.

Make sure you have auto insurance if renting a car. In some countries it is illegal not to, and should you have an accident you could face penalties and fines. Most personal auto insurance policies do not extend coverage to vehicles rented outside the United States and Canada because of differences in liability laws. You usually can (and may be required to) purchase insurance for an additional fee as part of your rental car package.

Some credit cards offer basic rental car and traveler insurance (including baggage insurance, emergency translation services, and ticket replacement assistance) for no additional fee provided you pay for your car (airline ticket, hotel, etc.) with the credit card. Check with your credit card company to find out what insurance coverage they offer and the specific terms and limitations of the coverage. Some traveler's check companies also offer insurance policies to those who purchase their checks.

Most airlines cover lost or damaged luggage, but reimbursement is limited. You may consider purchasing additional insurance for your luggage. Check with your airline for details. To minimize risk, keep valuables on your person while traveling.

If traveling with a group, you may already be covered for most needs. Check with the tour agent to verify what is and is not covered. Whether covered by your own insurance policies or by specially purchased policies, be sure to take your policy numbers or identity cards with you abroad.

**Driving Abroad.** If you expect to drive while you are abroad, find out what type of driving license/permit you will need. International driving permits (valid only in conjunction with a current U.S. license) are available from a local automobile club such as AAA. The country's embassy or consulate or AAA can help you find out what permits or licenses are required.

Learn the driving laws and symbols of your destination country. Laws that differ most involve rights-of-way, speed limits, passing, seat belts, pedestrians, and parking. Laws regarding what to do when you have an accident also vary widely. Even if you do not know the specific accident law, practice common sense. Never admit fault; call the police immediately (even in minor accidents); obtain the name and license number of the other driver; and do not leave the scene. Above all, cooperate with local officials.

**TRAVELING ABROAD**

**Basic Considerations.** Once in a country, you are subject to its laws and protections. It would be impossible to list the many differences between laws and their enforcement around the world. You might think they will not affect you, but thousands of Americans are arrested each year in foreign countries. They discover that their U.S. citizenship does not merit them special treatment and
that U.S. government officials cannot “save their skins.” Indeed, they often find that a person is guilty until proven innocent, bail does not exist, and they can be held in substandard jails for months without being charged or tried. Respect and common sense generally will help you avoid discovering these truths firsthand. Respect local customs and obey posted restrictions. Disregard for such will not only put you at risk legally, but may also be interpreted as general disrespect for the country.

Officials in many countries are sensitive about photography of certain areas or objects, including government buildings, military and police installations, factories, works of art, religious structures, and transportation structures such as bridges. No Photographs signs are often posted near such areas, and officials will confiscate your film and possibly your camera if you disregard such postings. Often you can purchase slides and pictures of sites from local merchants.

Use crosswalks and other pedestrian walkways. Singapore, for example, strictly enforces its jaywalking laws. Other countries may not, but right-of-way laws may hold no protection for those injured while crossing illegally.

Do not carry weapons. You will not only have difficulty taking them through airports and customs, but some of the most popular destinations of U.S. Americans have stringent restrictions on firearms and other weapons.

Avoid loud and unruly behavior (such as public drunkenness) or any behavior that draws undue attention to you. Pay attention to local dress standards and customs regarding displays of affection. Inmodest clothing or improper behavior may not only insult a local population but could subject you to public decency laws.

Do not exchange currency on the black market. This is illegal and can be dangerous. You run the risk of incurring a fine or penalty much larger than the few dollars you might have saved by getting a slightly better exchange rate. Deal only with legitimate exchange authorities and always keep exchange receipts.

Passports. Because altered passports are popular on the black market, passport theft is not uncommon. In October 1996, the London Times reported an incident in which a man was found dead in Malaysia. He was identified from a passport he carried, and relatives in England were notified. Shortly after, a traveler reported his passport missing to the British Embassy in Malaysia. They discovered it was his passport found on the dead man and his family that had been notified.

Guard your passport carefully. When traveling, keep your passport on your person (in a money belt or neck pouch). Do not put it in your luggage or leave it in your hotel room. Should your passport be lost or stolen, you could have serious difficulties leaving the country, exchanging money, or proving your citizenship. Report the loss of a passport immediately to local authorities and then to U.S. embassy or consulate officials. Passports lost in the United States should be reported to the nearest passport agency.

Do not give your passport to merchants to hold as collateral for rental items. If they insist on having the passport, you should consider doing business elsewhere.

Some hotels may require you to leave your passport as guarantee of payment. While most hotels can be trusted, some cannot; and it is not wise to be without your passport when away from the hotel. Therefore, pay for your room in advance or try to make other arrangements with the hotel.

You may be required to register with the local police if staying for an extended period of time. They might ask for your address, contacts at home and abroad, and the purpose of your visit. If you must register, carry your registration papers with your passport, as both are important for identification purposes. If a hotel requires you to leave your passport overnight for registration with the police, you should cooperate.

**Traveler’s Tip**

You receive a better exchange rate on traveler’s checks and on credit card purchases (even with credit card exchange fees) than you do on U.S. cash.

**Buyer Beware!** When shopping abroad there are a few facts to consider. Most nations prohibit the removal of antiques and endangered animals from their countries. Others have laws, in keeping with international accords, against the sale of products made with various wildlife skins, furs, shells, or horns. Avoid purchasing any products made from wildlife. While you may find vendors who will sell you an ivory pendant or crocodile-leather boots, you may encounter difficulties taking such items through customs. You may lose the item and be subject to criminal prosecution.
When purchasing anything that might be mistaken for antiques (particularly replicas), always ask for and keep documentation and receipts. This will help you avoid confusion and potential problems with authorities who may mistake replicas for genuine antiques. If you will be taking antiques out of the country, obtain an export permit; such permits are usually issued by the country's national museum.

In some countries, exceeding the credit limit on your credit card is cause for arrest; be sure you know the limits on your card(s) before you leave, and stay within them. Also, know how to report the loss of a credit card when you are outside the United States.

Counterfeit brand-name items (usually electronics, clothing, and watches) are sold at extremely low prices in some countries. If you purchase counterfeit items, you are not protected by warranties, are likely to be getting substandard goods, and could be subject to legal action either in that country or in the United States. Brand-name items purchased from reputable merchants are usually authentic. In Hong Kong, for example, such businesses are distinguished by a special emblem in their store windows. In any country, back-alley vendors are likely not selling authentic items and may be associated with the black market.

Open and inspect all purchases. Some travelers have bought stereos only to discover upon inspection that the stereos lacked internal parts. Also make sure your purchase is accompanied with warranties and assembly instructions as these tend to indicate authenticity.

Sometimes travelers think they are getting a better deal by purchasing items abroad, but they forget to consider shipping costs, the inconvenience of carrying the item personally, or any customs duties or local taxes. Such additional costs may negate the savings of purchasing some items abroad rather than in the United States.

The American Embassy or Consulate. You will probably never need or even see the U.S. embassy or a U.S. consulate when traveling. However, it is wise to obtain their addresses before your departure. The embassy is not a home away from home, but it can provide many services you may need.

An embassy is usually located in a nation's capital, whereas consulates (much like branch offices) are located in other large cities or ports of entry. While their respective diplomatic missions differ somewhat, each can provide you with the same services.

What To Expect of an Embassy or Consulate. You can, and should, register at an embassy if you are going to travel to a remote or unstable region, will be in a country for more than one month, or are traveling to a country where there are no U.S. representatives. If you have difficulties, officials have a better chance of helping you if you have registered. If any kind of turmoil erupts in

Traveler's Tip
Keep a copy of your itinerary separate from your plane tickets. In case your tickets are lost or stolen, the itinerary and reservation numbers thereon serve as proofs of purchase and will help in getting replacement tickets.
Embassies and consulates also carry information on absentee voting, Selective Service registration, travel advisories for the region, and birth certificates for children born to U.S. citizens abroad. They can also provide U.S. income tax forms and notarize documents.

**What Not To Expect of an Embassy or Consulate.** Officials cannot get you out of jail or demand special treatment for you. They cannot give you refuge if you have committed a crime. If you are taken hostage in a crisis situation, they cannot offer concessions for your release. However, if civil unrest threatens your personal safety, you should go to an embassy and officials may arrange for your evacuation with other U.S. nationals.

An official cannot be your lawyer, banker, financial advisor, travel agent, or employment consultant. Officials will not perform marriages or other personal services. Neither can they arrange for your foreign visa or foreign driving permit.

If you need help in areas not serviced by embassies and consulates, often officials can direct you to the proper local sources. While embassies and consulates mainly function to represent U.S. interests abroad, they are also mandated to serve U.S. citizens traveling or residing internationally.

**RETURNING TO THE UNITED STATES**

**Customs.** As you leave a country and as you reenter the United States, you will be required to declare what you are taking out of the country and bringing into the United States, including large sums of money. (Some nations restrict the amount of its currency that can be taken out of the country.)

You will be expected to declare and pay duty on the U.S. dollar amount of all items or articles acquired while abroad, including items you purchased, gifts given to you, repairs or alterations made on any article you took abroad, items you have been requested to bring home for someone else, and all items you intend to sell or use in your business. International flights are also subject to U.S. immigration and U.S. customs fees that are usually paid in advance as part of your ticket.

Returning residents—those traveling, working, or studying abroad—receive duty exemptions of either $200, $400, $600, or $1,200, depending on the length of the stay abroad and the countries visited. Nonresi-

**CONCLUSION**

Most travelers never face difficulty with the law and have a safe and enjoyable experience abroad. However, improper planning, misinformed assumptions, and careless actions can lead to unforeseen legal troubles. By researching the countries you will be visiting, informing yourself of the laws that impact your particular journey, and cooperating with authorities, your journey will be safe and pleasant.

**Traveler's Tip**

The U.S. prohibits or severely restricts some items from being brought into the country. Your nearest customs office can provide complete details on prohibited and restricted items.
**ADDITIONAL SOURCES**

**Centers for Disease Control.** 1600 Clifton Rd. NE, Atlanta, GA 30333; (404) 639-3311; Web site www.cdc.gov.

**CultureGrams™ and Infograms™ series.** The CultureGrams™ series offers information on the culture and customs of more than 170 countries and can be purchased individually or in sets. The Infograms™ series includes the titles "Taming Travel Stress," "International Travel and Law," "Coming Home Again," and "Families Moving Abroad."

**Information Sheets and Travel Warnings.** Office of Overseas Citizens Services, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 2201 C Street NW, Room 4811, Washington, DC 20520-4818; (202) 647-5225; Web site travel.state.gov.

**International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT).** 417 Center Street, Lewiston, NY 14092; (716) 754-4883.

**Passport Agencies.** Check your local telephone directory under Federal Government, Department of State or Postal Service, Passport Information, or contact the National Passport Information Center at (900) 225-7778.

**U.S. and Foreign Embassy and Consulate Addresses.** The Worldwide Government Directory, found in most libraries, contains the addresses and telephone numbers for the United States embassy located in each country or region as well as the addresses and telephone numbers for all foreign embassies and consulates in the United States. You may also request addresses from the Bureau of Consular Affairs, US Department of State, 2201 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20520, or see its Web site travel.state.gov (foreign embassy addresses are listed on the web site under Visa Information, Foreign Entry Requirements).

**U.S. Customs Service.** Check your local telephone directory under Federal Government, Department of Treasury, U.S. Customs Service for the nearest customs office. See also Web site www.customs.usptreas.gov. For additional customs information, request the pamphlet Traveler's Tips on Bringing Food, Plant, and Animal Products into the United States from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, US Department of Agriculture, 4700 River Road, Riverdale, MD 20737-1228; (301) 436-8645.

**Visas and Foreign Entry Requirements.** Contact the embassy of the country you will be visiting. See also the Bureau of Consular Affairs Web site travel.state.gov for a complete list of embassy addresses; passport, visa, or tourist card requirements; and departure tax information.