

How to be a responsible traveller



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When we think about responsible tourism, promoting respect for the cultures and the environment of our destination country come to mind. Health, on the other hand, is the other component that is not often talked about.

Learning about the cultures, regional geography, languages, and customs is key to being a responsible traveller, as is informing yourself about the potential health risks at your destination. While we have the means to protect our health, we also need to be mindful of how our health status affects the people we meet and the communities we visit.

When it comes to travel, getting immunized against vaccine-preventable diseases is not only for your benefit, but also for the people you encounter abroad. At home you may not consider vaccination for yourself, but as a traveller, even if you appear healthy, you risk being a conduit for infectious diseases.

Diseases that are considered eradicated or rare in our part of the world (polio, mumps, measles, meningococcal meningitis), are a serious concern for local populations where there are low vaccination rates and different immunity patterns. At home you may not be exposed to diseases because people around you are vaccinated (herd effect), but abroad – if you are not immunized – you risk catching an infection and unwittingly pass it on to someone who is not immune. Moreover, if you do get sick, you also put a strain on already taxed local healthcare systems.

The H1N1 and SARS outbreaks clearly showed us how infectious diseases leap from continent to continent in a matter of hours, not months or weeks or days. As travellers, we have the potential to bring over infections to places where there was little or no previous concern and we also bring them back with us, adding stress to our own medical system.

Like other infectious diseases, the spread of H1N1 also showed us how poverty plays a major role in health. Persons living in crowded conditions are more susceptible to contracting infections and fighting diseases is harder if you have little or no access to healthcare.


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Photo by Jeremy Goldberg, Unsplash.com

Judging from an online survey by the National Foundation on Infectious Diseases, many of us still have a long way to go toward becoming responsible travellers. According to the poll, 45% of travellers would travel if sick with the flu. Getting trip cancellation insurance or checking the fine print of your airline's policy for reimbursements on flu and major illnesses may be part of the solution.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are also linked to travel. The spread of STIs, including HIV, is in part due to the proliferation of sex trafficking and sexual tourism. If you are going to have sex with a new partner, use latex or polyurethane condoms consistently and correctly. Bring your own condoms from home.

As travellers, we not only have the responsibility to prevent the spread of diseases, but we should also be aware of the health of tourism industry employees who take care of us. Too often tourism sector employees work in unsafe conditions, for long hours, and poor wages. For example, trail guides may face frost bite in cold environments, scuba diver instructors may get decompression sickness, and hotel room cleaners work long hours, often with no benefits. These conditions may put their health at risk and we can look out for them by encouraging them to seek medical attention. 

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More information on groups promoting responsible and sustainable tourism:

[International Centre for Responsible Tourism](#)
[Sustainable Travel International](#)
[The Sustainable Tourism Gateway](#)
[ECPAT](#)