

**Title:**

Travelling to Africa - A Guide for the Single First Timer

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**Summary:**

Travelling to Africa for the First Time? Going it alone? This article has some things you need to know. What to do, what not to do, and how to avoid trouble if trouble comes looking for you.

**Keywords:**

africa travel

**Article Body:**

Travelling to Africa

If you're from the West and your thinking of travelling to Africa for the first time or for a holiday, or to meet someone you've met from a dating site such as AfrikaDating or others, then congratulations! If you've been before you can probably ignore all this, but if it's your first time, then it might be of use to you.

Firstly, you're a lucky person. Not many people can afford to travel to Africa, it's a long-haul flight in most cases and a lot of Africans would like to be going the other way! Now, do you have family there? Are you meeting someone for the first time? Are you going on a package tour? If you've got family or you're going on a package tour, most things like where you'll stay and your safety will be taken care of.

How are you travelling?

If you are going alone, then its best to make sure that the person you are meeting at the other end is genuine and you trust that person. If you're not sure, make a contingency plan in case you get into trouble. Find out where your country embassy is in that country and their phone number. If you're worried try and make a number of bookings yourself, such as your hotel. A lot of hotels will take email bookings but you can use cheap international calls to phone up a hotel to make your reservation. You'll be charged a lot if you book into a Sheraton or Holiday Inn however, and sometimes those places can be strict, especially they will charge you more if you bring a guest to your room.

## Health

Before you go make sure you've had your relevant jabs. There are certain health risks, the most significant of which are Malaria and HIV/AIDS. Take a trip to your travel clinic, GP or doctor and get the relevant jabs. These can take weeks to get, so its best to plan in advance or you may want to find a private travel clinic. Even if you are of African origin, its best to be sure since viruses and other bugs mutate over time and when you might previously have been immune, you might not be to more recent viruses.

## Malaria

Check if your travelling to a malarial area. Get the relevant anti-malarial medication from your doctor, and take it. Malaria is a killer and its best not to mess about. And get an idea of the symptoms of malaria so you can recognise it in case you catch it anyway. The general symptoms include headache, nausea, fever, vomiting and flu-like symptoms, although these symptoms may differ depending on the type you've contracted. Malaria can come on several months after returning from an infected area, and if you get ill after you come back, make sure you mention to any doctor treating you that you've been to a malarial area.

## Sexual Health

If you're intending to be sexually active then take condoms with you. Some people slur the standard of African condoms however, they are generally of a high standard and can be bought readily and cheaply in most African countries. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Syphilis, Gonorrhoea are common. HIV/AIDS, while treatable in the west, is still one of the major killers in Africa, so take care. If you're going to get married then you can take all the relevant tests then, in the meantime simply play safe. That's use CONDOMS!

If it turns out you or your partner are HIV positive, its not the end of the world and there are organisations out there to help you cope with the diagnosis and help you find the course of action you are most comfortable with. This is a highly sensitive and complex area, and we'll be adding further information on this site in due course.

## Country Background

Most developed countries will have detailed country information for travellers available over the internet. The most extensive of these are with the Foreign

and Commonwealth Office in the UK, and the US Department of State. Read them and absorb them but take them with a pinch of salt as they can scare the living crap out of you and put you off travelling. In the bureaucrat's world, everything foreign is bad and everything indigenous is good. For example, you might find warnings against travelling to Bali due to terrorist activity, but not to Spain although both countries were attacked by al-Qaida terrorists.

Basically your government is risk averse and doesn't want to get sued for giving wrongful advice, for example if you based your trip abroad on favourable country advice and then got bombed, you might be able to sue them. So bear that in mind. For example the FCO still advises on Kenya that "Do not accept food or drink from strangers as it may be drugged" although there is no evidence of Kenyan locals running around with drugged sweets forcing them into foreigners mouths, and it may even be based on a rumour that is several years old.

However, before I run the risk of pooh-poohing the whole country reports system, they do contain valuable information and valuable warnings. It's a good idea to read them and familiarise yourself with the contents and the particular thing that you MUST take notice of, such as health information, visa requirements and do's and don'ts.

## Money

The banking system in Africa generally does not provide as many services as you may expect in a Western country. You might be able to use credit cards and your current bank cards in some countries, but not in others. You may be able to use your bank card in certain establishments, or there may be just one. For example, if you wanted to make a cash withdrawal on your credit card in Uganda (last time I was there), there was only one place you could do it: Barclays Bank on Kampala Road. On the other hand, throughout Kenya you can use a UK bank card in the machines there. You'll need to check it out. Speak to your bank

Avoid taking travellers cheques. These are widely used in fraudulent activities and many places will not accept them. You might not be able to change up into local currency before you travel (you still can't buy Zambian Kwacha in the UK!) and might not get good exchange rates anyway.

It's best to take cash, in such currencies as British Pounds, Euros or US Dollars. The US Dollar is the most widely accepted. Take how much you are going to need and an extra 100 to 200 for contingencies. A lot of people in Africa will instantly convert their prices to US dollars for foreigners anyway, and the dollar is especially useful if you are travelling outside major capital cities where the only foreign money banks will take will be the US Dollar. So, even if

you're travelling with Pounds or Euros, its best to get a few US Dollars to be on the safe side. Another thing to take account of is that some countries had a lot of fake US bills distributed after the Iraq wars and may even refuse US Bills which are dated before 1999. So get US Bills which are dated 2000 and later if you are unsure.

Keep your money safe. Don't put it all in the same place and don't put any in your suitcase. If you're out and about put some money in each pocket. Africans like stuffing it in their socks so you might want to put some there as well. Check if your hotel or accommodation has security for passports and money and use them if necessary. Bigger hotels will have a safe in the rooms.

### Travel Insurance

Don't ask. Just get it. On one trip to South Africa I was set fire to in a barbecue accident (DON'T light barbecues with petrol) and robbed at gunpoint in central Johannesburg a week later - they took everything including my passport. And I was travelling with a Xhosa local who carried a semi-automatic pistol everywhere we went. So get travel insurance. It's mostly sold under "World Wide" policies. You're worth it.

### Cultural Awareness

If you are from the west or other rich country it's almost inevitable that local people will have certain perceptions of you. The most commonplace is that you are rich. If you're white it's even worse and they might assume you have a dollar tree growing in your garden. Remember a lot of these people are broke, in countries where social security is limited to running orphanages, and thousands of westerners have passed through throwing money away on silly projects or in expensive hotels. So, you're rich. Expect to be hassled and overcharged, and if you're travelling alone get a local to look after you. Taxi drivers are sometimes a good choice. On the positive side, most people will just ask for the price of a beer, which is about a dollar.

But whatever you do don't be an ass with a big head and don't treat the locals like idiots. There will be lots you might not understand but there's no excuse for treating people with a lack of respect. Mind your language; swearing is often frowned upon in many African countries.

### Visa

In most cases you'll need a visa when travelling to an African country. These can be bought in advance at the relevant embassy or consulate in your home

country, and often can be bought at the border when you arrive, although sometimes there are long queues which can be worrying if you've got a connecting flight. Visas can cost more than 65 dollars depending where you go, and generally you can pay in Euros, Pounds or Dollars. If in doubt, take dollars. If you want to be safe you might want to get your visa in advance, especially if your country has poor relations with the country you are visiting. Most visitor visas will be issued for up to three months, or the duration of your stay.

### Avoiding Trouble

There's a few of things you can do before and after you get into trouble.

**Information:** Tell people where you are going and when you'll be back. If you're going for a long time then inform the embassy or consulate on your arrival of your stay in the country. Tell your friends or family back home where you'll be staying.

**Documents:** Make two photocopies of your passport - the identity page, and if relevant, any visas you need. If it gets stolen then a photocopy is often good enough to prove who you are to get an emergency replacement. Leave one copy at home, and take another with you. If you have a driving licence take this also, as it can be considered evidence of identity if your passport goes missing.

**Mobile phones:** get your phone unlocked - that's network unlocked - so any SIM card in the world will work in it. Buy a local SIM card when you get there - they are usually pay as you go, and cost about £10. Then SMS your family back home to give them your number there. They can use a cheap international call service to get hold of you if necessary. Get the emergency number for your local embassy or consulate on the phone so you can call your country representatives if necessary.

**Money:** Western Union offices are all over the place in Africa. It's a growth industry. So if you get robbed or need money in a hurry, you can get someone in your home country to send it to you. They can SMS the details to you on your local phone number, but you'll need some ID to pick it up, and they may ask you a test question ("What's your dog called?", for example).

**Police:** If you get into trouble with the police then stay calm. Sadly, a lot of police officers are very poorly paid and only too happy to take a bribe. If you've been really criminal then you are certainly in trouble so insist on your right to see your ambassador or consul. If it's something petty or something you've just been accused of for the hell of it, it will almost certainly be easier to pay whatever is needed to have the matter buried. HOWEVER WE ADVOCATE

THAT YOU DO NOT BREAK THE LAW WHEREVER YOU GO, and you should know differing laws for where you go. For example, in a lot of African countries homosexuality is illegal. Information such as this is held in country reports that we discussed earlier.