

Travel Safety Tips for Women Volunteering Overseas

When traveling abroad, there are certain challenges that every gap year volunteer faces—saving money to fund the trip, overcoming culture shock, and learning the native language, among others. But for women, there are some unique difficulties men don't always encounter. We've all heard the terrifying stories about sexual harassment, theft, and even abduction. In spite of these risks, the female international volunteer shouldn't be deterred from an opportunity for a gap year away. If you travel following the guidelines below and exercise judicious common sense, it is possible to enjoy a productive, enriching, and—above all—safe volunteer program.

Carry money safely. If you're out for a walk or venturing into town, keep your money, checks, or credit cards in a hidden spot inside your clothing rather than carrying an easily snatched purse. Consider sewing pockets into your undergarments for folded cash, or invest in a money belt.

Leave flashy jewelry at home. This can be a beacon for thieves. Not only can a bracelet or necklace be yanked right off, it indicates that you're wealthy and may have even more goodies elsewhere.

Be cautious in crowded areas. Many thieves prefer to work in highly-trafficked areas with plenty of distractions, making it easy for them to pickpocket. In busy areas, try to avoid getting shoved by the crowd.

Dress inconspicuously. Before packing for your volunteer trip abroad, research the local customs and bring attire that mimics the way the natives dress. This will help you to blend in and prevent unwanted attention. Also keep in mind that in many cultures, showing certain amounts of skin can be offensive and/or inflammatory.

Talk with local women. Females who have lived in the area for an extended period of time will be able to offer expert advice about the do's and don'ts. They can tell you where it is and isn't safe to walk and what specific behaviours to avoid (such as eye contact or certain mannerisms) that may signal unwanted attention.

Learn how to pronounce important phrases. Even if you're not fluent in the language of your host country, you should at least know how to say things like "No," "Help," "Go away," and "Call police." If you're in danger, yell as loudly as you can, and if all else fails, run away.

It's an unfortunate fact that hundreds of traveling women are harassed or assaulted each year when visiting a foreign country, but it doesn't have to happen to you. During your gap travel abroad, be aware of your surroundings and approach situations with caution to avoid becoming a target.