



Safety Considerations for Water Activities Abroad

University of Wisconsin-Madison
International Safety and Security Director (ISSD)

<https://internationaltravel.wisc.edu>

Enjoying the Water Responsibly

- Many travelers enjoy beaches, lakes, and rivers while traveling abroad. But water activities come with increased risk – drowning remains one of the leading causes of death among travelers overseas.
- The following slides will provide general considerations and reminders for planning water activities.



General Considerations for Water Activities

- Learn to swim before you travel. Formal swimming lessons can help to keep you safe around the water.
- Always do water activities in groups. Never go out in the water alone.
- Always tell someone where you are going, how long you will be gone, and when you will return.
- Choose activities and locations that match your skill level and the skill level of your group. Avoid taking unnecessary chances.
- While you're out doing an activity, always have a way to communicate in case of an emergency. Know how and when to call the local emergency number. Keep your items, including your cell phone, in a watertight container. A functioning cell phone could save your life on the water.

Considerations for Water Activities

- Always use a reliable guide, tour service, or host organization when going out on the water.
- Always have the necessary safety equipment, know how to use it, and follow all safety protocols.
- Keep an eye out for boats, jet skis, and other watercraft that may be in the area. Ensure there is proper signage to notify boaters that there are people in the water.

General Considerations for Water Activities

- Develop a medical plan. If you can, learn First Aid before you travel. Before you take part in an activity, know how you can get emergency medical treatment if you or someone in your party becomes ill or injured.
- Prepare for the heat, stay hydrated, wear sunscreen, and know the [signs and symptoms of heat illnesses](#).
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine and never take part in water activities while intoxicated.

General Considerations for Water Activities

- Respect the environment and minimize your impact on natural areas. Some areas may be protected (reefs, beaches, wetlands, etc.), and countries/regions can have strict laws meant to protect these areas.
- Understand local regulations and laws associated with your planned activities. These are often in place for your safety and violating them could put you in danger or lead to severe legal consequences.

Weather and Natural Hazards

- Understand potential hazards in the area.
- Monitor the weather. Being on or near the water can put you at greater risk from high winds or lightning strikes. If severe weather is possible, reschedule your activity.
- While you're out, have a reliable way to get an early warning in case of developing weather (i.e. charged phone, weather radio, etc.).
- Be aware of changing conditions. Swift currents, storms, rogue waves, flash flooding, or even tsunamis can happen in an instant.

Weather and Natural Hazards

- Understand the risks posed by riptides, strong currents, snags, strong waves, etc. Know the local terrain and be aware of your surroundings. Lakes, rivers, beaches, and streams may have sudden drop-offs, uneven bottoms, or unseen limbs, rocks, and other objects.
- Respect wildlife and keep your distance in the water. Know where dangerous animals may be present and avoid those areas!
- Talk to trusted local sources about the best place to enter the water – life guards, a dive shop, a sports store, a kayak or canoe rental shop, etc.

Swimming Considerations

- If possible, swim in designated areas supervised by lifeguards. Always swim with a friend or group and don't allow anyone in your group to enter the water alone.
- Designate a “water watcher” to monitor people in a group setting.
- Wear flotation devices when appropriate and take breaks often.

Paddleboarding, Kayaking, and Canoeing

- Wear a personal flotation device and make sure it fits.
- Always go in a group and use a local guide, especially if you're inexperienced or in an unfamiliar area. Stay within visual or verbal contact with your group.
- Carry a whistle or other signaling device in case you become lost or separated.
- If an accident occurs, know how to safely pull another person on board your vessel or tow them to safety. Know how to self-rescue if you fall into the water or the vessel capsizes.
- Use extra caution in cold water. Accidents have a higher likelihood of being fatal if the water is cold. Cold water can slow a person's reflexes and decision-making and lead to hypothermia.

Boating Considerations

- Only travel on boats with a qualified operator. Safety standards abroad are not always high. Use a quality provider with a proven track record.
- Don't operate a boat yourself when traveling abroad, especially if you don't have experience. Operating a boat takes skill and some countries may require a license or special certification.
- If snorkeling from a boat, always stay with the group and remain aware of your surroundings. Use a life jacket when appropriate, even if you're a good swimmer.

Boating Considerations

- If a vessel appears unsound or overloaded, or if you're concerned about the weather, don't go out.
- Never get on a vessel with an operator who may be intoxicated or is drinking or using drugs of any kind.
- Ensure the vessel has appropriate safety equipment such as a fire extinguisher, flares, first aid kit, radio, and operable boat lights.
- Have life jackets for each person onboard. Make sure they fit. Use your life jackets, especially when the vessel is moving. Have at least one throwable device in case someone goes overboard or there is an accident.
- If you're in the water around the boat, know where the engines and propellers are and stay away from them!

Safety Considerations for Summer Water Activities Abroad

Visit the UW-Madison International Safety and Security website for more resources, travel tips, and linked information:

[International Safety and Security – UW-Madison International Division – UW–Madison \(wisc.edu\)](#)

Enjoy a fun and safe summer!