



Untamed Path

Traveling in South America

Please read this important document before traveling to South America. This is some general information, based on our experiences that can help you stay healthy and safe. Your experiences may be different but we hope this information can be helpful to you as you prepare for your trip. Conditions and specifics can change frequently.

General notes upon arrival:

Bathrooms: All used toilet paper should be put into the small trashcan next to the toilet unless noted otherwise on a sign or in any information from the hotel. South American plumbing systems tend to be very weak and clog easily. This takes a little getting used to, however, it is important.

Water: Boiled, bottled, treated or filtered water is the only water that is safe to drink. You cannot safely drink or brush your teeth with tap water. You can purchase bottled water at the reception of your hotel or at some hotels you can pay to fill your water bottle from a larger bottle or filter in the kitchen if it is not provided in your room (this will reduce the trail of plastic that follows a typical traveler). Ask at the reception.

Language: The official language in Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru is Spanish. There are many indigenous languages spoken as well including Quechua throughout the Andean highlands. Many locals also speak some English words and many tourist-oriented hotels have someone at the reception that speaks English. If you do not speak Spanish, a big smile, a Spanish dictionary and hand gestures will work. If you are attempting the language and you are friendly, local people will be very responsive regardless of your accent or accuracy 😊.

If you need something during your trip: If you need anything at all during your trip please ask your hotel, your guides, your hired driver etc. South Americans are very accommodating and helpful.

Staying safe in the cities of South America:

Please be extra careful and aware of what is happening around you at all times. With a healthy dose of awareness and careful practices chances are that you will not run into any problems. However, South American countries are experiencing difficult economic times and have seen a rise in crime over the years. Robbers or pickpockets are seeking an easy target. Do not allow yourself to be that easy target. We offer this section not to make you fearful of traveling in South America but rather to help you stay safe. There is no need to be paranoid but using your “second set of eyes” (in the back of your head) at all times, particularly in the cities will surely help!

What to carry with you when you go out in the city:

Carry a photocopy of your passport and the money that you need with you for a meal or transaction in your money belt or zippered front waist level pocket. Note: cargo pockets are an easy target for thieves. Technically you are required by law to have an ID on you at all times and a photocopy is fine. **DO NOT CARRY YOUR ORIGINAL PASSPORT AND ALL OF YOUR MONEY** on your person when you go out from the hotel. Leave your valuables at the hotel. If you need to carry a backpack wear it with your arms in the straps on the *front* of your body and be aware that a bag of any sort is a bit of a target as thieves know that you likely have a camera or some other valuables in it.

A backpack on your back or a bag on your arm may be easily stolen and your safety compromised (pulling it off, opening it up from behind, slitting the bottom and emptying contents etc.). Expensive jewelry and watches make you a target, leave these at home. When you are eating at a restaurant or sitting down in a public place keep your backpack on your lap and not at your feet or on an empty chair.

When you leave the city for other destinations you MUST carry your original passport with you as there may be occasional checkpoints along the way where officials can request to see your original documents. Opening your money belt in public as little as possible and being aware of how you handle your money in public is recommended. Although this goes without saying please do not carry your camera around your neck as this makes you an easy target.

A rain jacket and a warm jacket or sweater can be nice to carry as the weather in the mountains especially can quickly change from nice to wet/cold.

Leaving money at the hotel when you go out:

The hotels that Untamed Path works with are known for their honest staff and safe accommodations. Please tuck your money and valuables away inside your locked luggage or in the safe deposit box if your hotel provides this.

In the case of a robbery:

Do not resist or fight a thief. They most likely have more backup than you on many levels. Remain calm and hand over whatever valuables they are asking for. Problems typically occur when people resist or fight back. Your personal safety is more valuable than your watch. You may consider always having some money in your pocket as a decoy to hand over. If you have travel insurance and you are robbed you should go to a police station to fill out paperwork. Most travel insurance policies include coverage for theft excluding cash as a secondary benefit (so you would need to use your homeowners insurance first for example). If you need a translator for this Untamed Path can help you to hire an English speaker. The best prevention will be to avoid putting yourself in a compromised position using the tips in this document. Any credit or bank cards should obviously be cancelled right away.

Some situations to be aware of:

Pickpockets and petty thievery: These folks come in all shapes, forms and sizes as children, elderly, women, men, the sick, the poor or the wealthy. Crowded places such as; busy streets, airports, markets or stores where people are brushing up against each other or places where someone is distracted with making a purchase or with their luggage are places to be particularly aware. If you are being harassed the phrase "vayase" is a very direct and not so polite way to say, "GO AWAY". Be wary of stunts such as a young child coming towards you pretending to cry or hold their stomach, pull on your shirt etc.

Ladrones (robbers): Thievery is creative in these major cities just like anywhere in the world. Again though, they are ideally looking for an easy target. Pay attention and if someone appears to be following you, cross the street away from them. Be wary of distractions such as honking or swerving cars, loud voices, a mock fight or argument etc. These are sometimes used to distract your attention long enough for a quick thief to get away. A classic scam takes place with 2 or more well dressed people as one requests your help, notes a spill on your sleeve etc. with their counterparts working on your money and valuables or daypack.

Safety issues at automatic bank teller machines: There are various scams associated with these machines. Please only use them in the daylight and do not go alone. If at all possible use during open bank hours. After you take your money from the machine get into a taxi right away even if your hotel is only a few blocks away. Do not go shopping directly after getting cash from the machine. Do not accept assistance from any strangers (even if they are friendly and speak your language) at ATM machines, as this has been a reported scam to get your password and card information. There is no reason that you should need to scan your card when exiting an ATM booth, this is also a scam.

Scopolamine: Do not accept flyers handed out in the streets promoting events. There have been cases of flyers laced with large amounts of scopolamine, which eventually makes you drowsy, disoriented and an easy target. On the same vein do not accept any food or drink in the streets or on buses and do not accept an offer to smell something even if you will risk offending someone. If you are in a bar keep an eye on your drink at all times because similar to bars in the rest of the world, drugging drinks is another scam.

Getting around:

Walking: A few things to note:

- Pedestrians do not usually have the right of way. Cars may not attempt to stop if you are crossing traffic. The expectation of drivers is that you will stay out of their way.
- It is common to find uncovered holes in the street or sidewalks around the city, watch your step!
- Be aware of a Trolley (Trole) line in the main road or in a special middle corridor, as they cannot stop easily.
- **VERY IMPORTANT:** Do not walk on the streets after dark, take a taxi, even if you are only going a few blocks.

Taxis: Only use a taxi with a registered number in the windshield or on the dash. You can either ask your accommodations or restaurant to phone a registered taxi for you (safest option) or you can hail one in the street on your own. Phoning a taxi can cost slightly more but it may be worth it, particularly at night because there is a record (for your safety) with the dial-a-taxi service about which driver you were with from your location of origin. Or you can simply go out on a main street in the daytime and stick your arm out at a passing taxi that has a registration number.

In Ecuador taxis normally use meters during the day but not at night. You can negotiate a price for your ride at the beginning “Cuanto cuesta hasta [the place you want to go to]” or you can simply ask them to use their meter by asking, “taximetro por favor?” before getting in. This will indicate that you want to pay the metered rate. The meter is usually located on the floor in front or in the radio console and you can see if it is on from the backseat of the taxi. Taxis that have been called may be various makes and colors. Taxis on the street should be yellow.

In Peru meters are not used and you will need to negotiate a price before getting in. There have been various accounts of tourists assaulted by fake taxi drivers in Peru so be selective and only get in a taxi with a valid registration number or have one called for you. A few blocks around town anywhere during the day without traffic should be only a few dollars. Night travel, traffic or longer distances will of course increase the cost. It is not customary to tip taxi drivers in South America.

Eating:

A traditional lunch called “almuerzo” is generally what the locals are eating. It usually includes; soup, a plate with rice and some type of meat and a juice or dessert. The dinner version of this is called a “merienda” or “cena”. Your hotel, inn or B&B reception can make a recommendation for you based on what is open with good reviews and what you are interested in.

Costs: Typically for mid range dining you will find that it costs around half the price as in the States. For fine dining you will find that costs are typically $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cost of a meal in the States. For very cheap eats along the same lines as what the locals are eating, ‘el menu’ (fixed menu), you can eat for \$3 per meal. Meals in hotel restaurants are often more expensive than restaurants on the street but not always.

Staying healthy: **Do not eat from vendors selling food on the streets!** For the short time you are in South America, it is just not worth the digestive risk for yourself but also for the travel plans of your companions. Please consult with the “Center for Disease Control” website or a travel clinic in advance of the trip about prophylaxis and remedies for food-borne illness such as Hepatitis A. Be aware of juice, ice cubes and hot tea or coffee water from questionable sources. In most reputable restaurants this should not be a problem. Washing hands completely and often is a key part of staying healthy in South America. The incidence of sickness transferred through unwashed hands is high throughout the developing world. Something as simple as conjunctivitis can be picked up from using a public computer then absentmindedly rubbing your eyes.

Cultural Awareness:

Most people find South Americans to be very warm and friendly people. As in any country this will vary depending on an individual, regional and interaction setting. In some areas people are more open and outgoing; in other areas they may take longer to warm up to you. In general they welcome tourism as an enjoyable source of income and potential to share their culture, customs and natural world with people from the outside. Greetings may vary depending on the region of the country you are visiting and how well you are acquainted with those you are interacting with. Most interactions begin with "buenos dias, como esta" or other niceties. Asking for what they want is often secondary to the social formalities. They are generally not as likely to be as direct in their communication as North Americans or Europeans. Politeness and social formalities are particularly important in Latin America. Because you are a foreigner people will often wait for you to make the first move in an interaction. Making the first move with a greeting, a smile or a conversation (no matter how basic or advanced your Spanish language skills are) normalizes the situation and you are likely to have more genuine interactions. If you sense that there is a miscommunication it could be due to cultural misunderstandings and differences and may be easily alleviated through open ended questions. South American culture places a strong value on the importance of the family. Asking about someone's family opens doors of communication with guides, drivers and other people you meet along the way. As a cultural ambassador we travelers have a great opportunity to influence people's opinions of foreigners and learn about their country and customs.

In the Andean highlands in general, shorts are only considered appropriate for sporting activities like playing soccer, etc. Overall, highland dress is more conservative than in the rainforest or on the coast and trying to fit within these societal norms will help bridge cultural gaps and avoid offending local sensibilities.

Drugs:

Drugs are not accepted by the local culture. There are harsh jail times of several years for any possession of drugs. South American prisons are not known for their comfortable facilities!

Begging:

Life can be very hard for people in South America and you will occasionally have interactions with beggars, particularly in the city. The disparity between rich and poor is as obvious here as in any developing nation. When confronted with this, it often sparks a desire to help in some way. Please consider that handing out loose change, trinkets and sweets is not a long-term solution for the recipients. Begging is not part of traditional cultures here as it is in other parts of the world. Instead of handing out sweets, pencils or coins consider donating money to an organization finding long term solutions for local people. You can find information about this at your hotel or from your guides or Untamed Path can tell you some of our favorite organizations doing great work in the area where you are visiting. As a secondary option consider getting your shoes shined, buying a wrapped consumable or souvenir from the multitude of street vendors.

If neither of these options work for you, maybe sit on a park bench and share some familiar and basic healthy foods with a child who is in need. If you are sharing some bread, a banana and some milk along with even the most basic conversation with a shoe shine boy you will have a chance for a more genuine cross-cultural interaction that is beneficial for both parties. By paying for a product or a service you can encourage people's enterprising spirit. One exception to this suggestion is the very elderly or severely disabled people who quite possibly are a financial burden for their family or are sometimes alone. In this case donations of healthy food, clothing or staples are also acceptable.