



Sexual Harassment When Traveling Abroad: 20 Tips for a Safe Trip

Harassment issues may be particularly difficult to identify abroad, where cultural norms are often different than those in the U.S. However, cultural sensitivity does not mean that you need to submit to behaviors that invade your personal boundaries or that feel unsafe or uncomfortable. The following guidelines are intended to help you identify and avoid situations that could lead to harassment or assault, so that you can stay safe while traveling abroad.

1. **Educate yourself about your host country.** Learn as much as possible about your host country's language, religion, customs, and dress. If possible, talk with someone who has visited or is from your host country. Find out whether the person witnessed or experienced harassment and, if so, how he or she dealt with it.
2. **Find out how to ask for and obtain help.** Learn some basic "help phrases" in the local language. Know how to find police, proprietors of stores, or train conductors, and appeal to such authority figures if you feel you are being harassed.
3. **Watch and learn.** Study interactions between local men and women for appropriate nonverbal ways of interacting. Respecting the social rules will facilitate relationships with people. For example: Do men and women who are strangers make eye contact when speaking? How far apart do women and men sit or stand from one another when conversing? Watch how the locals avoid advances and follow their cues – they may even teach you a few choice phrases to deter unwanted attention.
4. **Be aware of your surroundings.** Avoid unwanted encounters by staying alert, looking confident, traveling with someone, avoiding eye contact with strangers, and avoiding unnecessary risks such as hitchhiking or walking alone at night.
5. **Trust your gut.** When someone gets too close and an alarm sounds inside you, respond to that alarm. Trust your judgment and intuition – that sense that something does not "feel right." Do not dismiss or deny your own instincts.
6. **Never let your guard down.** Drinking too much or using any mood-altering substance sets you up to be vulnerable. Being alert and aware allows you to pick up on warning signs. Avoid napping at the beach, in the park, or in any other public place. Staying in control can save your life.
7. **Err on the side of caution.** Be cautious until familiar with local values and customs.
8. **Value safety in numbers.** It is always a good idea to go out in groups. Adopt the buddy system. If you need to go out alone, always tell someone where you're going. Be sure to keep the resident director, a roommate, or your host family apprised of your plans.
9. **Do not assume.** Trust needs to be earned. Many students have the mistaken notion that people should be trusted until proven otherwise. Never make judgments regarding your safety based on a person's appearance or financial status.
10. **Be careful in one-on-one situations.** Do not agree to meet a person whom you do not know in a non-public place. Similarly, avoid going to a secluded area (or even being alone in a room) with a person you do not know well. For example, male-female interactions in some cultures are not as casual as in the U.S.; female students have told stories of men who assumed they wanted sex just because they let them into their room. Staying outside or in a public area is a safer way to entertain guests.
11. **Be smart about dating.** If you plan to date, learn the norms of your host culture. Educate yourself on appropriate opposite-sex or same-sex behavior. Be aware that, in some countries, the concept of date rape is unknown.
12. **Control your information.** Give your address and phone number only to people who you trust.
13. **Consider your attire, body language, and behavior.** Your appearance may generate more attention when you are abroad. It is safer to dress more conservatively; while short shorts and tank tops may be comfortable, they may encourage unwanted attention. Clothing that is acceptable in the U.S. may be seen as provocative or even disrespectful in certain situations, such as when visiting a religious site. Consider modifying your behavior, body

language, and dress to blend in with the host culture. Blending in with your surroundings will make you less of a target. Be careful that your own behavior cannot be viewed as flirting and realize that behaviors such as hugging or touching may be viewed differently in the local culture.

14. **Don't take the bait.** When you are approached by a stranger or unwelcome individual, keep the conversation to a minimum. Don't feel compelled to return unwelcome attention or to engage in conversation. For example, if a person sits next to you on a bus and begins an uninvited conversation with, "*Oh babe. I love you,*" resist the temptation to react by lecturing the person. Don't let your irritation escalate to anger and retaliation. These individuals are trying to get your attention and reaction, even if the reaction is negative. By engaging them, you may find that the behavior will only continue and may escalate. If you ignore them, they may get bored and look elsewhere.
15. **Don't be a victim of a power differential.** Situations where someone has a position of authority over you, such as a teacher or resident director, could lead to *quid pro quo* harassment. *Quid pro quo* harassment is when sexual favors are used or threatened to be used as a basis for an academic or other decision, such as "kiss me and I'll make sure you get an "A" in the class," or "sleep with me or else you won't pass the class." If you feel someone is using the power of their position to get you to do something you're uncomfortable with, report it to one of the contacts listed below right away.
16. **Watch out for "freebies."** Be aware of the forced sense of indebtedness that can occur when someone buys you a drink or meal. This gesture often comes with the expectation that you will repay in the form of attention, or worse, a sexual favor. Always make sure to carry enough money for a cab ride home so that you won't need a ride from someone who might then feel that you "owe" them.
17. **Consider how you will respond to unwelcome attention.** A little advance planning can help you prepare for the unexpected. You will need to decide what responses you are comfortable with and what is most suitable for the situation. Consider the following measures:
 - Redirect the person by changing the topic of the conversation;
 - Ignore the person and/or the harassing behavior;
 - Feign confusion, ignorance, or a lack of understanding;
 - Flash your meanest "don't even think about messing with me" glare;
 - Shout "No!" or "Leave me alone!" or "Help!" or "Police!", so others will hear you;
 - Walk away or remove yourself from the situation. If someone sits down next to you, get up and leave without comment. If someone walks alongside you uninvited, turn around and walk in the other direction;
 - Join others or get help from a local person at the scene, such as an older person or shopkeeper; or
 - Make a scene, create a commotion, and embarrass the person into leaving you alone.
18. **Actions speak louder than words.** Make sure your body language is congruent with your words. If you say "no" to an unwanted advance, make sure that everything in your gesture and demeanor indicates "no." A "no" that is accompanied by a smile or is conveyed in an unconvincing voice will lose its force and power. Try to appear confident even if that is not the way you are feeling.
19. **Do not yield to persistence.** Do not be coerced into backing down from your position by the persistence of the harasser. Just because he or she did not accept your "no" does not mean you now need to come up with another reason or excuse. Instead, one option is to become a broken record – saying the same answer over and over again, without developing a new reason or excuse each time the harasser doesn't accept it. You don't have to be creative. Stick to your answer and don't budge.
20. **Know that help is available to you.** If you are facing a situation in which you feel uncomfortable, it is important that you let someone know and seek help in addressing the situation. If you have questions or need additional support, be sure to talk with program staff onsite, and/or contact the following offices at Northwestern:

Please remember that even if you follow all of these tips, you are not completely protected from being sexually harassed and/or assaulted.

It's important to understand that if you are sexually harassed and/or assaulted while abroad **it is not your fault**. Please seek help by contacting someone onsite, and/or by contacting these NU resources.

Sexual Harassment Prevention Office
847-491-3745
sexual-harassment@northwestern.edu

Sexual Health Education and Violence Prevention
847-491-4618
l-stuart@northwestern.edu

The Study Abroad Office
847-467-6400
studyabroad@northwestern.edu