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All That You Should Leave Behind

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Introduction

Seasoned travelers understand that laws in foreign countries can differ vastly from those in the United States, so they are usually prepared for an international trip. But some rules can catch even the savviest of globe trotters off guard, and a crash course can come as early as the security line. Something travelers may not think twice about carrying in the United States can raise a red flag in the destination country, resulting in a fine or even incarceration. Understanding as much as you can about local restrictions before you set out is, therefore, vital for any traveler.

That Can Stay Here

What foreigners can and cannot bring into a particular country is not always clear. Laws on the books can be ignored or arbitrarily applied. They can also change frequently and not be communicated (or even updated in the legal code). Spur-of-the-moment "rules" can also be concocted depending on who is working the customs line or, more legitimately, what is happening in-country. While this can be extremely frustrating, there are a number of import restrictions that are almost universal. For example, prescription drugs without the original doctor's prescription likely will not be permitted anywhere you go. Plant life – including fruit baskets and gift items – and live animals are not usually welcome; neither are guns or narcotics.

But even these known restrictions are nuanced. For example, in Japan, restrictions are not just limited to prescriptions. Vicks inhalers, Actifed, and Sudafed, due to the pseudoephedrine each contains, are all forbidden. Many over-the-counter medicines are also barred from entry in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and while narcotics are almost universally illegal, some countries deal with violators more severely. For example, 30 grams of cocaine will earn the carrier a death sentence in Singapore. Spent bullet shells can also put you on the wrong side of the law in places like the UAE, as can body armor, hand cuffs, or other pieces of security equipment. In Vietnam, military uniforms should be left at home; any literature, music, or paraphernalia that glorifies fascism, the Nazi past, or the Third Reich should skip the trip to Germany.

Religious Customs

In countries where a particular religion plays a strong role in the government or society, importation of a different religion's materials can face thorough scrutiny, if not outright prohibition. For example, Bibles face restrictions in places like the Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. In Saudi Arabia, Christmas decorations can also be confiscated and the owner subject to fines and penalties. Images of Buddha are very sensitive in Thailand, where Buddhism plays a central role in society.

Restrictions on religious material are also commonplace in countries where religion is expressly left out of government. Such items are forbidden in places like Burma, and those entering China could encounter challenges as well. In both classifications of countries, however, pornography and other material deemed indecent -- subjective decrees open to wide interpretation -- are also usually forbidden. Vietnamese authorities have been known to seize various personal effects, to include documents, compact discs, literature, and personal letters they deem to be pornographic or political in nature, or intended for political or religious proselytizing. Finally, alcohol too can carry very strict rules, if it is legal at all.

Electronic Devices Welcome, Sort of

Bringing electronic devices on your travels is complicated, and satellite phones provide a great example as to why. In some countries, such as India and China, rules for importing satellite phones can be confusing and sometimes arbitrary. In other countries, particularly in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, authorities reserve the right to inspect, question, and possibly harass if you carry one, regardless of codified law. In Russia, the importation and use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and other radio electronic devices are sometimes subject to special rules and regulations.

Thumb drives and other mobile devices are not illegal, but in places where political or religious sensitivities exist, expect no privacy. While it is safe to assume that all countries reserve the right to inspect your electronic equipment upon entry, governments in some areas will likely exercise that right more thoroughly. Furthermore, devices can be disassembled during the inspection process, and what condition they return in may be anybody's guess.

Strange but True

The above restrictions are by no means exhaustive. Some countries maintain unusually odd bans. For example, non-biodegradable plastic bags are banned in Rwanda. Travelers carrying them upon arrival at Kayibanda International airport may have them confiscated and be forced to pay U.S. \$4 for a reusable cloth replacement. Chewing tobacco is illegal in Singapore, as are cigarettes in Bhutan.

Conclusion

There are ways to keep yourself protected wherever you are traveling. First, travelers should consult the State Department's [travel page](#) for country-specific information dealing with local laws and customs. Second, if you have assets in-country (expatriates or nationals), ask their advice. They have likely been through the process many times before and can provide useful tips. Finally, if you do not need it, do not bring it. Few things are worth risking fines, deportation, or possibly even a stay in prison.

For Further Information

Please direct any questions regarding this report to OSAC's [Cross Regional Analyst](#) .

Attachments

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