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## Spring Break safety: Travel tips for teens & college kids

# AVOID & SPRING BREAK DISASTERS

Elizabeth Weiss McGolerick

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Ever since Natalee Holloway disappeared during her celebratory high school graduation trip to Aruba in 2005, it is natural for parents to balk at their child's desire to travel either domestically or internationally. These safety tips will ease your mind and help your son or daughter have fun safely on their spring break.



Many people are unaware that Natalee Holloway and her travelmates had several chaperones on their adventure... and even that wasn't enough to avoid such a tragedy. You can't take precautions after the fact. Whether or not your child will have chaperones on their spring break, it's crucial to arm your teen or college-aged student with knowledge so they can protect themselves, no matter what happens.

Follow these spring break travel safety tips from experts so that you can have some peace of mind and your child can get their kicks the smart way.



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## BOOKING THE TRIP

Your child's spring break begins before they actually get in a plane, train or automobile. Many people choose to make their own travel arrangements, but sometimes it's easier to book a trip with a tour operator. Anne Banas, executive editor of [SmarterTravel.com](#), says, "Make sure you choose a reputable company with experience running trips to the area you wish to visit."

Banas offers the following suggestions:

- Book a tour through a student travel agency. StudentUniverse, STA and Travel CUTS all partner with well-established spring break tour operators.
- Get information about unfamiliar tour operators. Contact the Student and Youth Travel Association or the Better Business Bureau for details about a company's reputation.
- Choose a tour operator that educates travelers about their destination. Melissa Cocca of StudentCity.com says her company has mandatory destination-specific safety orientations for students upon arrival.

## DO THE RESEARCH

For some kids, this spring break journey may be their first big trip. But even if your child is a seasoned traveler, it's important to learn as much as possible about the destination before departure. Every country's laws, customs, and standards for safety and healthy differ, says Banas.

"Learn about the local people's cultural beliefs. Women especially should be aware of cultural attitudes regarding dress and behavior to avoid harassment or worse," says Banas. She also suggests that it's wise to learn at least a few words or phrases in the local language. "Learning how to say 'help' or 'police' or 'I need a doctor' may prove invaluable later on."

### Other tips from Banas:

**Get background information about a specific destination.** The [U.S. State Department website](#) has Consular Information Sheets for about 170 countries as well as travel tips written especially for students. Bonus: This site also posts travel warnings and public announcements detailing any serious crime, terrorism, health risks, natural disasters or other dangers for specific countries.

**Read up.** Check out the [website of the nearest U.S. embassy](#) or consulate in your child's chosen destination. Read guidebooks and the materials provided by your tour operator or university travel office. Even visit online travel forums such as [Lonely Planet Thorn Tree](#) to talk about a particular city or country.

**Get info about possible scams.** Find out if there are any particular areas that should be avoided in the destination of choice and the crimes and scams common to that area. For example, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico warns that local police in Cancun's hotel district have been known to extort tourists for bribes.

**Know your rights, or lack thereof.** Learn about the laws governing alcohol consumption and other activities in your child's chosen destination. Penalties for behaviors such as public drunkenness or drunk driving may be much harsher than in the States. Having U.S. citizenship isn't enough to save your child from being prosecuted under a foreign country's justice system.

**Protect your health.** Steve Dasseos, president of [Trip Insurance Store](#), advises that you learn as much as you can about your health insurance policies before your child travels to a foreign country, including if your child will have coverage outside of the U.S. and how much you would have to pay out of pocket for medical treatment.

## PACK CAREFULLY

Packing for spring break is about more than taking the right clothes and toiletries. "What you bring and what you leave behind can make a big difference," says Banas, who also suggests the following:

**Forget about the bling.** Discourage your child from taking along expensive (or expensive-looking) jewelry or wads of cash that could make them attractive targets for thieves. They also shouldn't take along any unnecessary items they'd regret losing, such as iPods or DVD players.

**Make copies.** Make sure your child provides you with various ways to get in touch with them, a copy of their itinerary and copies of important documents such as their passport. [CrimeZilla.com](#) advises that your child should also pack an extra set of passport photos along with a photocopy of their passport information page to make replacement easier in case the passport is lost or stolen.

**Have I.D.** Your spring breaker should be sure to take all necessary forms of identification with them, as well as information for the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate and a phone number for their tour operator, school travel office or travel agent.

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## UPON ARRIVAL

Once your child has actually departed for their spring break trip, they're on their own. While specific safety tips vary from one destination to another, Banas says, some general precautions apply for trips anywhere. Even if your child tells you they already know what they're getting into, she suggests reviewing the following precautions and safety measures with them – every little reminder helps.

**Stick with friends you know and trust.** Never go out alone or leave a safe place with strangers. Even if you meet people or locals on your trip and they seem friendly, they might not have the best intentions. While indoors, also be careful of going into closed spaces such as elevators and stairwells by yourself.

**Be a stranger.** Don't give out personal information, or tell strangers what hotel you're staying in or where you're going.

**Drink responsibly.** If you consume alcohol, make sure you get your drinks directly from the bartender or a person you know and trust. Don't leave your drinks unattended.

**Go with your gut.** Be aware of your surroundings. If you feel like something is amiss, trust your instincts. If you're being followed, the Office of International Education at the University of Richmond suggests, "Step into a store or other safe place and wait to see if the person you think is following has passed. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask someone to double-check for you to see if all is safe. Display confidence. By looking and acting as if you know where you're going, you may be able to ward off some potential danger."

**Lock up.** When going to the beach or pool, leave important valuables and documents (especially your passport) in your hotel's safe deposit box, not in your room.

**Stay safe in your hotel room.** A spring break safety tip sheet from Longwood University recommends the following: "Ensure there is a peep hole in the door and that the dead bolt and other locks are in good working order. Never open your door to anyone you do not know. If the person states they work for the hotel, call the front desk and confirm this before allowing them entry."

**Choose transportation wisely.** Use recommended shuttle services or buses to get around. Only use reputable, licensed taxi services.

While you want your child to have the trip of a lifetime and enjoy themselves, there's nothing wrong with putting a little bit of fear into them through modern representations of student trips gone wrong. Movies like *Taken* (Liam Neeson's daughter is forced into the slave trade when she and a friend trust the wrong man on their trip abroad) and *Hostel* (three backpackers head to Slovakia for hedonistic fun... except it doesn't turn out that way) may dramatize the worst that could possibly happen but, if nothing else, your kids will recognize the mistakes these travelers made... and refrain from making the same ones themselves.

### MORE SAFETY TRAVEL TIPS:

- [10 Tips for parents of college students](#)
- [When should kids fly alone?](#)
- [Teaching street smarts to kids](#)

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