

# Five myths about State Department travel warnings

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**W**hen the U.S. State Department issued a worldwide travel alert in November, it left many travelers wondering what they should do, where they should travel and what it all really meant. With the alert in effect through February 2016, confusion still reigns, so here is the reality behind U.S. State Department alerts and warnings.

## 1. Travel warnings and alerts are practically the same thing.

Actually, they are quite different and distinct.

"Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts are different, and they are issued based on the nature of the security situation in a country," says William Cocks, a spokesperson for the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs. "We issue Travel Warnings when we want U.S. citizens to consider very carefully whether they should go to a country at all because of a chronic threat. We issue a Travel Alert for short-term events we think U.S. citizens should know about when planning travel to a country. Travel Alerts are always issued for a defined period."

Both travel alerts and travel warnings can have a huge impact on the business of tour operators like Greg Geronemus, co-CEO of smarTours. Geronemus says that the "warning for travel to Iraq makes sense given the significant and prolonged nature of the security threat, whereas the recent alert for Myanmar focused on a slightly elevated, shorter term concern surrounding the country's recent election."

If you're planning on going abroad, visit the State Department's website, travel.state.gov, where you can search, country-by-country, for the most up-to-date security information on every travel destination in the world.

## 2. If there's a warning or alert, you should avoid the entire country.

Not true.

"That's analogous to saying that you should wear a raincoat in Philadelphia when you see that it's raining in Miami and Los Angeles," says Geronemus. "Much like the climate, security levels can vary from region to region, and it is critical to read warnings very closely to understand the specific nature of the security threat."

In fact, they should be read with a good map at hand, before making a sweeping generalization about a country.

"Countries generally don't fit in a one-size-fits-all category," says John Rendeiro, vice president of global security and intelligence at International SOS. "Variable levels of risks exist within countries, as there are safer and more dangerous parts of the United States as well."

In short, unless there's an ongoing war or a government in deep turmoil, it's unfair to simply dismiss a country out of hand. This seems especially apt for Americans who are thinking of going to Mexico but are fearful of reports of drug-related violence. Or maybe contemplating a trip to a shaken France.

Spencer Coursen, a former Army Ranger, U.S. Marshal and president of the Coursen Security Group, says that "Mexico's outbreak of drug violence in areas like Juarez and Tijuana are well-known, but the recent government warnings do not affect popular tourist destinations such as Cancun and Puerto Vallarta. While Paris may have been targeted by a recent terrorist attack, the rest of the country remained perfectly free from harm."

Cocks clarifies that "our Travel Warnings clearly state if they apply to a country or a particular area within a country to provide clear and specific information to keep U.S. citizens overseas safe. U.S. government employees are sometimes restricted or prohibited from traveling to a certain part of a country because of security conditions. In those cases, our Travel Warnings always warn U.S. citizens of travel to those areas as well."

## 3. There's currently a worldwide alert from the State Department so travelers should stay at home.

"Absolutely not," says Scott Hume, associate director, security operations, at Global Rescue. "Get out, travel, explore. This worldwide alert is published to inform citizens about risks that they may encounter during their travels. The alerts and warnings should be used as a tool to help travelers make informed decisions about their journey or allow them to make important changes to their itinerary while on a trip abroad."



(Photo: Mark Ralston, AFP/Getty Images)

So pack your bags and choose your destination wisely. Even the State Department takes pains to explain that such a sweeping warning is not to turn us into a nation of fearful couch potatoes.

"We do not issue Worldwide Travel Alerts to stop U.S. citizens from traveling," confirms Cocks. "The Travel Alert informs U.S. citizens of the current threat level and reminds travelers to maintain a high level of vigilance and exercise particular caution during the holiday season and at sites frequented by tourists."

## 4. If I still want to travel despite the State Department's warning, I'm left to fend for myself.

You're not alone. The State Department and leading security experts recommend enrolling in the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), which makes it easier to receive security messages and to be located by the U.S. government in the event of an emergency. As a part of your personal security plan, you should make note of emergency telephone numbers abroad that may be needed, such as police, fire, and the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate.

The government aside, Steve Loucks, chief communications officer of Travel Leaders Group, a consortium of travel agencies, says that this "is one of the major reasons why consumers should give serious consideration to using a travel agent professional to book their travel, particularly one who specializes in a particular destination. Travel agents do more than book your travel. They act as a safety net for you until the time you return home safely by keeping abreast of ongoing issues that might impact your trip as you're traveling. While the need to get a client out of a volatile situation abroad is thankfully rare, it does occur."

Then there's the financial protection that a good travel insurance policy can offer. Mark Murphy, founder of TravelPulse.com, advises "buy travel insurance that allows you to cancel for any reason. It costs a little more, but let's you off the hook should your travel plans change."

## 5. Travel warnings issued by other countries don't affect Americans.

On the other hand, they just might. The United Kingdom, the Canadian and the Australian governments all have websites similar to the U.S. State Department's, where they offer their own citizens country-by-country advice on security. It can also help you get a clearer picture of where you're going since some observers, like Geronemus, say that warnings and alerts "should both be taken with a grain of salt, especially in light of the biases that are inherent in State Department decisions, namely whether or not a foreign country is an ally of the U.S."

Whether you agree with that observation or not, the sage advice is to look at several of these government websites and then make a decision that you're comfortable with.