



C.7 TOWNS AND CITIES

Alasdair Kennedy (Revised 2010)

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

1. Towns are busy places, with lots of people, and lots of traffic. Most people will be friendly, and safe to be with, but a few will not. Most traffic will damage you if you get in its way. You might not understand the language, or be able to read the signs, and you might get lost.
2. Cities are VERY busy places. If they are old, they might have a maze of narrow, crowded streets at their centre, which can make them confusing and intimidating, particularly on first arrival.
3. These places are part of your expedition experience. You will make it a safe and rewarding one if you keep your wits about you, think ahead, and do nothing that you wouldn't tell your mum about.

BASICS

4. You acclimatise to a country's towns and cities in the same way as you acclimatise to the heat; do it in easy stages. Become familiar with walking around small places before venturing into bigger ones. Build up your confidence by going into a small place to do a specific task, such as buying the bread for lunch, before thinking you will enjoy exploring a big and crowded city. If your whole expedition has been spent in remote mountains or desert, then a final shopping day in the bazaars of Marrakech will be overwhelming, and full of hazards. Look for a more manageable alternative.
5. Know what you are in for by reading up on the place you are about to visit in the guide, before arriving. Lonely Planet and Rough Guide are accurate and practical. Photocopy copies of the town plan for your groups. Everyone should be well briefed before heading off from an easily identified point, which can be easily used as a rendezvous. A café or a vehicle can comfortably provide a contact point with a responsible member of the group in case of need. Make sure that you know the name of the rendezvous (or place where you are staying) and write it down including in the local language (and script, such as Arabic if appropriate).
6. There is safety in numbers. A group of four will not overwhelm the scene, and is less likely to lose a straggler. In many parts of the world it is still best to mix groups, so that female members appear to be teamed up with the males.

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FINDING YOUR WAY

7. Orientate yourself before you start out, and have an idea of where you want to go. Aimless wandering can lose you. Pick out landmarks as you go, and make a conscious effort to remember them. Even in a crowded bazaar, you can remember an individual landmark stall, shop, sign, or shopkeeper. Identify an obvious marker wherever you change direction. Look back, and see what it looks like from the opposite direction. But beware: it is easy to forget this advice if you are chatting to each other!
8. Take your compass as well as the copy of the map. The direction of the sun and any slope of the streets help you to keep orientated. Most people walk with their eyes at ground level. Look up to roof level as well. It is often possible to spot useful landmarks such as tall buildings, towers, higher parts of the settlement, or surrounding high ground across the rooftops when you come to an open space or wide street.
9. It is much harder to find your way around a strange place by night. Even a well-lit, modern city centre can become confusing at night. Finding your way round a remote town without public lighting, limited mains electricity, and no easily identifiable signs can be quite daunting, and unlikely to be a good experience.
10. If you do think you are lost, get to a main road and get a taxi [or bus: paragraph 20]. You will have your piece of paper with the name of your rendezvous [paragraph 5], so you will know where to ask for. The guide book, which you have already read, will give you an idea of how much you should expect to pay. [If you are lost and all else fails you may be able to avoid going round in circles in narrow streets by heading uphill until you find an identifiable point or road.]
11. Avoid clustering around your map on a corner; it suggests uncertainty, and may draw unwanted attention. It is better to sit down in a café to work out your location. If each person in the group takes responsibility for finding the way, you will avoid the pitfall of assuming that someone else is keeping an eye on where you are going.
12. Keep to busy thoroughfares. If you find that you are the only people in a quiet street, it is a good idea to re-trace your steps. Keep an eye open for each other. If you want to dart into a shop, make sure the rest of your group know, and you are not left behind. Check that nobody is left in a toilet or paying a bill when you leave a location.
13. The best way to explore a place is if you are with someone local. Going with local friends makes for a rewarding experience, and an expanding circle of friends. Going off with a casual acquaintance met on route needs sound judgment, and it is far too easy to be conned by an expert. Keep your brain in gear, and don't be persuaded to split off from your group, or go where you don't really wish to go.
14. Official guides can be hired through tourist offices. Agree the fee and the service before setting off. Such guides will have some identifying insignia or uniform, and will give a more or less professional service. Unofficial guides are best avoided. Be firm, but polite, in declining their services. They may have an ulterior motive for wanting you to come with them, and if they were any good, they would be working for the tourist office.

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15. Chance conversations in the street or in a café are part of the fun, and young people of your own age will often want to try out their English on you. Avoid being overly defensive. A smile and a joke are great ice-breakers if someone comes to talk with you. It will add to your visit, but again, keep to public places. [See also paragraph 25].

TRAFFIC

16. This is by far the greatest hazard in a strange place. Traffic might come from unexpected directions, at unexpected speeds, in unexpected variety and states of roadworthiness.
17. At home, we tend to cross roads on autopilot. In a strange place, make a conscious effort to look at the traffic before crossing. It will generally drive on the right, but beware of one-way streets and dual carriageways, where traffic might appear from the “wrong” direction. Bicycles may ignore any rules.
18. Street crossings may be different from those at home. Check to see if traffic has to give way on crossings. Check the phasing of traffic lights. The amber is not used in some places, and the change of lights heralds something like the start of a race. Cycles, mopeds, horse-drawn carts, and wandering animals might all have to be allowed for, and meeting a loaded pack mule or porter in a narrow lane needs you to take avoiding action.
19. The key is to keep your eyes open for traffic, even when enthralled by the sights, or deep in conversation with the members of your group.
20. Buses, trams, metros, and taxis are good ways of getting around. Have some idea of the prices you need to pay. Giving a large note to a bus driver will not make you very popular, and not checking a taxi fare might make you very poor.

SECURITY

21. This is really a matter of common sense, and maintaining your standards.
22. Wear clothing which will not draw attention to yourself, and which will not cause offence. Keep money and valuables well out of sight, and avoid carrying more money with you than you need on the day. Flashing wads of notes is a bad idea. Divide up your notes before setting out, so that you can take out approximately the correct money for any situation, without displaying your money by the handful. A bum-bag or neck wallet under a shirt is good, as is a shoulder bag at just the right length to rest your hand on. If you have to wear a pack or bum bag, wear it in front of you, not on your back.
23. Being festooned with cameras will inevitably draw attention to you. It might be worth dividing your time between days when you go out to photograph the sights, and days when you leave your camera gear behind. Be aware of people’s sensitivities over photography. A long lens will enable you to get a sneaky shot, but it takes longer to compose.

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24. Humour can often defuse a potentially difficult situation. If you are being pestered, it is easy for a situation to spill over from annoyance to aggression, especially with children. Even if there is no common language, tone of voice and body language are easily recognised. Playing the clown is preferable to being subject to a shower of abuse, or stones.
25. In most places, and for most of the time, you will be perfectly safe. However, some scenarios attract danger like flies to dog dirt. These include adolescent adventures into red-light districts, or to “meet my sister / brother”, where you might be ripped off, catch something nasty, or worse. They include dabbling with drugs, deals for alcohol in “dry” countries, black market currency deals, and inducements to take a parcel home to “a good friend in England”, especially if they have to be done somewhere quiet, and away from your companions. If it’s not main-stream, forget it!
26. Be careful of somebody, perhaps quite young, who offers to show you the way. Although often harmless it could lead you into trouble – or at least to his uncle’s shop.
27. Finally, in many parts of the world you will come face to face with extremes of wealth and poverty in cities. You will see the flash cars, glitzy hotels and office blocks, and expensive shops. You may also see the beggars, where there is no social security, and the people on bread-line wages. You may be regarded as a person of unimaginable wealth, so be discreet. A discreet few coins to a beggar can make a difference, and a tip to the waiter may be part of his pay.

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