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5 Things You Need to Know Before You Go to the Caribbean



Before you go on that Caribbean dream vacation of yours, there are some things that need your consideration first. These are, listed in this order:

- Costs and how to take funds
- Immunizations and malaria prophylaxis
- Insurance
- Buying a ticket
- Visas and general safety

While these aren't the only things that you should pay attention to, these are the five absolute must-haves for your Caribbean travel. This guide will teach you how to deal with these things that may be a source of potential problems while you're out there having fun.

#1 - Costs and How to Take Funds

First question on your list of questions to ask during the planning stage of your Caribbean trip is: How much will my trip cost? The answer depends, of course, on where you're planning to go, where to stay once you get there, how to get around, what you eat or drink and what you buy. The Caribbean is wholly diverse and is comprised of thousands of tiny islands so there's plenty of that to go around. Now, add in some other factors that would make your Caribbean stay even more enjoyable – such as what activities you're going to engage in, what sports, places to see, and all that – and you have one nice, potentially costly trip ahead of you.

If you're traveling to the Caribbean on a budget, then all the more reason for you to ask this question as this will give you some idea on how much you're going to have to spend while enjoying your vacation. Try not to make your budget too shoestring or back breaking. You can probably add a little bit of extra and that would make a whole lot of difference to your vacation of dreams. For instance, you can try to cut down on food and drinks and instead use the extra money for tours and activities. You can do it the other way around as well.

Often, the key to handling costs in your Caribbean travel is balance. In fact, the question is a lot like asking how long a piece of string is. You can't possibly know, so you make assumptions based on typical travel experiences you've had in a wide range of destinations. And if anything, costs are over-estimated, which isn't bad really when you think about it.

Currency is really not a problem in the Caribbean. As a rule, USD is the de facto in most countries, but EU is accepted, especially in the French and Dutch part of the Caribbean. Other currencies are accepted as well and if not, there are plenty of money-changing centers and banks in large towns. Be wary of money changing tricks – the easiest way to getting burned while abroad.

Here are two very common money changing tricks you should watch out for:

- The money changer voids the deal and your original money is returned to you but it turns out that it is a fake or of lower denomination note. One way to avoid this happening to you is to make a note of serial numbers of larger bills before you pass them over. That way you can make sure that you get back the original. Also, after handed back the money, do not return their money yet until you make sure that that carefully folded \$100 bill is not really a \$1 bill – it's easily done!
- There is a successful change but you realize that the money you receive is no longer bank-recognized or it is carefully folded to deceive.

Taking a lot of cash with you when you travel to the Caribbean, or any part of the world, is probably not a good idea. Not only is it courting trouble with the authorities, it's also courting trouble with bad elements of the population. Nevertheless, it is advisable that you take at least some back-up emergency cash with you, something around USD 600, just to be safe, but be sure to keep it well hidden.

Your Visa and MasterCard will come in handy when you're staying at a big town in the Caribbean or in developed countries such as Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Belize, Jamaica, and other tourist-laden territories. Other credit card types you may have may not be accepted by Caribbean stores and shops. You can use your Visa and MasterCard to obtain cash advances in most banks, but always with a commission. Also, remember to consider all the bills that are piling up at home with surcharges of interest while you're having a wild ride in the Caribbean. It is prudent if you pay more money onto your card before leaving home or asking your folks to pay your bill while you're away.

#2 - Immunizations and Malaria Prophylaxis

It's a given. You will need to head down to a clinic or a center where the attending physician will give you a variety of jabs before you have to disappear to anywhere exotic. It's only common sense. Majority of the important immunization shots you get will be boosters of the one you had as a kid. Think twice before getting the whole deal as these shots are expensive and many, such as Japanese B Encephalitis and Rabies, are of debatable necessity considering where you're going.

Some common shots recommended if you're traveling to the Caribbean include the following:

- Typhoid (3 years)
- Meningitis (A+C)
- Diphtheria (10 years)
- Hepatitis A (two doses, 10 years – or immunoglobulin that will last for 3-6 months)
- Polio (10 years)
- Tetanus (10 years)
- Yellow fever (10 years)

After these shots, you will feel groggy. That's normal so don't worry about that. As for Malaria, there's a ton of misinformation floating around on the net and

among travelers in general. If you've decided not to do any rainforest hiking in the Caribbean, then you probably shouldn't take the shot, considering how effectivity of some Malaria drugs is in question. But note that some Malaria strains are deadly and kill fast, especially if you haven't been exposed to malaria since birth.

No amount of medication and immunization protects 100%. So the best thing you can and should always do is not to be bitten, which is pretty hard to do if you're a backpacking, adventure-seeking Caribbean traveler. Remember that of the 3500 types of mosquitoes, only a few carry killer diseases such as Malaria and only female members of the species have infected bites, biting mainly between 2300 and 0400 at night. This is when it is important not get bitten.

#3 – Insurance and Buying Tickets

Whenever you travel to the Caribbean, or to any part of the world for that matter, it goes without saying that you need insurance. It doesn't even have to be much, but you do need some advance time to study the policies and read all the fine print. For instance, most cheap policies often do not include cash and other valuables in their coverage. That's fine if you're only concerned about the health aspect of your travel. However, if you're carrying a \$2000 camera and equipment, don't expect it to be covered as well. You may need to pay excess to include that and the cost might cause you to think that a more expensive policy seems sounder. Consider your options well.

Geographic regions factor in on varying the price of policies. Try to get polices that exclude North America and specifically includes the Caribbean. Know that it is often not possible to start a new policy for another geographic region during your trip. So, for instance, you've decided to take a round-trip tour and you have a cheap European policy. When you go to the Caribbean to taste the tropical

treasures there, your policy may no longer cover you for that. What's more, most companies do not give cover online while you are away.

Watch out for multi-trip year long policies as they limit the length of your trip to 30 or 60 days. There are some that extend up to 90 days but that's usually the maximum for this type of policy. So think about how long your stay is going to be. Understand that good insurance with loads of protection is normally expensive. The cheaper policies will not cover personal possessions, only medical costs.

#4 – Buying Tickets

When it comes to buying tickets, round the world (RTW) options are the cheapest. But RTW only works if you've decided to take a particularly long vacation, because what round the world really means is Australia and back with stop-offs. If you break this mould, you pay for it.

Getting a good deal with tickets normally means picking up a promotional fair. That, of course, goes without saying that you need to plan this far ahead. Not only that, but you also need to be flexible and get there early before all the cheap tickets are gobbled up. Cheap tickets are aplenty before peak season deadlines, such as the end of June and Christmas. And the cheapest flights are usually the least convenient and non-direct.

Charter flights are very common in the Caribbean and are probably more practical if you've decided to stay at a slightly isolated island. However, they can be costly. Not expensive like a room at a five star hotel expensive, but something a bit more than you would expect from such a short flight. Charter flights are a gem if you're leaving on short notice, as well.

It's better if you do your own research first before you phone in for a ticket. Some good established agents such as Expedia and Opodo can give you high prices, but

if you are very flexible with your dates (if you could avoid Friday/Saturday/Sunday), then keep trying different options until you hit the right deal. Sure, it takes time, but that's why you have to do weeks – even months – before you leave home.

Other good sites you may want to visit for some general information on airline tickets:

- Faqs.org – go to their FAQs section, hit travel, and then click on the link for air.
- Charterflights.co.uk – for charter flights if you're traveling from Europe

#5 – Visas and General Safety

They may be a pain, but they are a fact of travel. The costs for visas can really add up. Not only that but you can end up stranded for days, waiting for them and even have to back track for days if your planning is off or your visa is wrong or expired. Visas in the Caribbean and most of Latin America, however, are mostly hassle free.

In Caribbean territories most commonly visited by tourists, visas are available on the border or on arrival at a main airport for free or a fee. You don't even need a lot of advance planning, apart from the usual planning needed, such as getting up-to-date visa information. This information can be hard to come across, unless you're on the ground and in the area. Don't rely too much on guidebooks, unless they're online, as they are often out of date.

Safety is not really an issue in the Caribbean. And really you shouldn't worry too much about it anyway. All you need to do is check your government's travel

advisory website for information on the territories you are visiting in the Caribbean region. Find out the areas you really should stay away from or take special care in, what the latest scams and dangers are, and generally stay in touch with the news.

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