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Travel Document Security 101

Document details from a fly-fishing travel insider.

By Jess McGlothlin | August 2021

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This might look like the easiest way to protect your cash and passports when traveling. But you'll be much better off if you plan ahead, make physical and digital copies of your travel docs, and understand where to look for help if things go south.

There are many things we love about international travel. Seeing new places, experiencing new cultures, seeing fisheries we'd never get a chance to explore if we just sat at home. Alongside that dose of adventure, however, comes a new set of logistical challenges. International travelers must juggle a passport, additional cash, tickets, and a variety of other

documents on each trip.

Managing the security of passports and paperwork while traveling abroad can require a bit of forethought, and a good dose of awareness. Knowing how to keep documents secure—and what to do in case something goes missing—is a good thing before you actually have to deal

with a problem.

I was recently at a lodge where a rogue wave hit a snorkeling boat (the snorkelers were already in the water) and the boat flipped over. Everyone was safely rescued, but several of the travelers had their backpacks in the boat, complete with wallets, phones, and passports. Divers were able to rescue the



A small duffel or backpack is a good place to keep your documents. You can carry it on your person and if you are forced to check it, you can place a passport and cash in a small notebook so nobody is any the wiser.

packs later that afternoon, but the incident brought to mind the question: What if the packs were lost? The snorkelers had no backups of their passports or driver's licenses; no copies stored in the cloud or filed away with family in the States. Without their packs, they would suddenly have been ID-less in a foreign country.

Keeping travel paperwork safe

might seem like a complex task, but it's really not. Here are a few key tips on how you can keep your paperwork secure, and manage any incidents if something goes missing.

Harding Bush, a former Navy SEAL and associate manager of operations for Global Rescue, notes it's worth protecting more than just your passport.

"Important documents during international travel go beyond just your passport and include a driver's license or other identity cards, medical insurance or evacuation service information, medical prescriptions, bank cards and credit cards, and your important contacts list," he said.



Don't turn your backs on a pile of luggage, especially if it contains the documents you'll need to get out of a foreign country and back to your home turf. Keep track of your docs, keep them on your body, and never check them, even if being ordered to by officials. Simply take them out of your baggage and carry on-person.

Keep Multiple Copies in Multiple Locations

Before you even leave home, make multiple copies of your passport, both physical and digital. Copy the page with your photo and name, as well as any relevant visas. Store one digital copy in the cloud and send one (or two) to trusted friends or family members. Keep physical copies in your luggage (I store one in each piece of luggage, in a hidden pocket or under the foam in a Pelican case). In case you have to replace your passport, consider keeping a few passport-style images with you as well, tucked into your wallet.

Use the Lodge or Hotel Safe

"Understand the laws of the country you are visiting," Bush said. "Is it a requirement that foreigners carry their passports at all times, or is a copy sufficient? The country you visit determines this requirement – not your home country. Use the room safe to store your passport if it's not with you."

No matter how homey your destination feels, go ahead and lock your passport in the room safe. It's too tempting to leave it on your bedside table or lying around, but it's worth locking up your passport, if for no other reason than, when it's time to pack up and go home, you'll know exactly where it is and won't have a panicked search. (I've seen this happen many times at lodges—an

angler will lose their passport the night before departure, only to have housekeeping find it behind the bed or between the cushions of a chair.)

If you do use the hotel safe, peek in on your passport and other paperwork every few days. Safes are easily broken into. And, while it's a more secure option than leaving your passport lying around, it's worth confirming its location a few times during your stay, and certainly in advance of your departure day.

Don't Advertise It

Sometimes you're going to be carrying your passport around. Maybe it's a travel day and you need it in your bag since you're going to the airport. Perhaps you're camping and there's no "hotel safe" to keep it in. Or it could be that you're in a country that requires you to have valid international ID on your person. Whatever the reason, just because your passport is within arm's reach doesn't mean that it's safe.

Bush seconds this. "The backpack goes everywhere with you—do not check it at the gate when offered by the airline. It goes in the taxi with you—not in the trunk. Ensure the specific documents required are accessible. You want to be streamlined and not have to fumble or search for these items when needed."

Store your passport in an internal pocket of your bag, jacket, or even your waders (if you're actively fishing)—never use the outside pockets. They are easy to access, sure, but exterior pockets, especially on bags, are also ridiculously easy for petty thieves to access. (I often travel with a roll-top bag with no external zippers for this very reason . . . I'm going to hear and feel someone unrolling the crinkly waterproof fabric.) If you're in a high-rise area, consider concealing your passport inside a book or notebook as well. The less you advertise it, the less likely it is to go missing.

Cash Management

The same "don't advertise it" theory holds for cash. Keep a small number of small bills in your wallet, with the less-value bills on the outside (i.e. if you have \$10s, \$20s, \$50s, and \$100s, wrap the \$10 bills on the outside of the wad). There's no need to flash high-value bills around.

Keep the bulk of your cash out of your wallet. I typically split my travel cash into three piles: the small bills for daily use go into my wallet, then the remainder (often larger bills for guide tips, incidental fees, etc.) is split into two piles. Each of the two piles go into plain white envelopes—document envelopes, never bank envelopes—and one is stored in a very deep internal compartment near the bottom of

my roll-top bag, the other hidden underneath the foam padding of my Pelican case. Both these bags are my carry-ons and rarely—if ever—leave my sight when I'm away from home. If I burn through the funds in the wallet, I'll refill from one of the envelopes at night in my room, in private.

Protect It

Fly anglers are not necessarily known for being easy on our gear. By the very nature of fishing, we spend a lot of time out in the elements, on water, and in generally damp conditions. Bad conditions for documents and paperwork.

Modern passports are remarkably sturdy critters. But, as the snorkelers whose boat overturned learned, even passports are subject to saltwater damage and ruination. Consider keeping your passport in a simple ziplock bag when traveling, which helps mitigate humidity and water damage, even when it's stored deep in your bag. One or two drops of water damage is fine, but if your passport receives water damage to the front cover or the personal information page, it means you'll have to replace the whole thing—which also means an emergency trip to a consulate or embassy abroad. Not how you want to spend your fishing days.

Bush also recommends using a carabiner on your backpack's top

carrying strap so you secure it while onboard a boat. (This would have been useful in the case above, where the boat flipped and the bags were not secured.) He adds that if you plan to use your phone while on a boat, it should have a lanyard attached to your person, as well as being in a waterproof container.

In Case You Lose Your Passport

"Losing your passport is inconvenient, but it's not the end of the world," notes Bush. "As soon as you realize your passport is missing, you should notify local law enforcement and your home country's consulate or embassy. Your hotel or guide service can likely assist you with contacting law enforcement and establishing a police report for the missing passport. Embassies will require a police report to move forward with replacing the passport. There's also a good chance your lost passport could be turned into the police if found, and the police report can also function as a way to board aircraft for a domestic flight without having the usual required identification."

It's important to remember the embassy will not consider your lost passport an emergency, and the replacement process will happen on their schedule, not yours. You may have to wait over a weekend for the embassy to open,

or divert your travel for a visit to a consulate or embassy, a potentially inconvenient and expensive process. US embassies can issue an "emergency passport," which may not be suitable for onward travel to countries other than America.

Use Common Sense

As with most things, security while traveling is largely common sense. Pay attention to what's happening around you. If you're in a crowded street swing your backpack around to the side so you can monitor it. Don't store things in outer pockets. And, just like all the airport PA systems so helpfully remind you, never leave your bag unattended.

If you're traveling in a group, it's tempting to give everyone's passports to the "group mom"—don't do it. If everyone's ID is stored together and that pile of passports goes missing, you're all in trouble. Take control of your own documents.

In case you're storing documents or extra money in a carry-on bag, be prepared to quickly fish it out in case you have to check the bag. The spare money I keep in my Pelican case is carried in a plain envelope which is then placed in a thin notebook, so if I have to shift luggage in a busy airport, it just looks like I'm grabbing my notebook and not a stack of bills. With a little forethought and

planning, travel documents should not be something you're overly worried about. Store spare copies in multiple locations and with friends or family. Don't use exterior pockets on your bags. Take the extra 30 seconds to secure your documents in the hotel room. A bit of effort on the front end lessens your chances of being the angler running around without a passport when your travel buds are navigating immigration, tired and eager to get home, just like you.

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For more than fifteen years, photographer and writer Jess McGlothlin has worked in the fly-fishing industry in several countries. Her work has taken her around the globe, leading her to chase fish on six continents, and she still somehow enjoys airports. See more jessmcglothlin.com

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