Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirit Canadians abroad

Most lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirit (LGBTQ2) Canadians experience no problems at all when they travel abroad. However, foreign laws and customs can be very different from those of Canada, which can result in increased risks. Researching and preparing for your trip in advance will help your travels go smoothly.

Before you go

- Check out a good travel guide. Most have sections that provide advice for LGBTQ2 people travelling to your destination.
- Visit online forums and blogs for information on your destination's LGBTQ2 events, culture, safety and laws.
- Consult our Travel Advice and Advisories for destination-specific information on laws that may affect LGBTQ2 people.
- If you identify your gender as "X" in your passport, or if your Canadian passport has an observation indicating "the sex of the bearer should read as X, indicating that it is unspecified," check with the Embassy, High Commission or consulate of all of the countries you intend to visit or transit through to enquire about their entry requirements.
- Research your destination's LGBTQ2 press and organizations, as they will be able to provide information on the local situation.
- Speak with your travel agent or tour operator about information on your destination that is specifically related to your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Passport policies

If you have changed your name legally, or due to a change in relationship status, you have to apply for a new passport. For more information on updating your passport, including updating your gender identity, see Canadian passports.

Local laws

While you are travelling outside Canada, you are subject to, and must follow, local laws, even if they are different from Canadian laws. Not all countries have the same values and legal system as Canada, so it is important to research laws relating to LGBTQ2 people in your destination country. For more information, see the State-Sponsored Homophobia Report and related links under Other resources.

Relationships

When you are choosing a travel destination, you should consider that same-sex marriages and relationships are not legal in many countries. You should carefully consider whether you are comfortable visiting a country where LGBTQ2 rights are not recognized, or where LGBTQ2 people are not socially accepted, as you may face discriminatory laws or practices that may be applied arbitrarily or inconsistently.

When you are planning to travel outside Canada, consider that:

- Legislation on same-sex relationships may change from one region to another, even within the same country
- There may be no laws prohibiting same-sex relationships, but they may be considered socially unacceptable
- Your destination may have laws that protect LGBTQ2 people but they are not followed or enforced
- Depending on your destination, you may not have access to certain services and rights. Health care institutions may refuse to treat you, hotels may not accept your booking, or your same-sex partner may be denied power of attorney or next-of-kin rights because of your sexual orientation.

Issues related to gender identity or expression

The Government of Canada cannot guarantee your entry or transit through another country, regardless of whether your passport or other Canadian travel document includes the "X" designation. When you travel abroad, you should be aware of all of the entry requirements of the countries you visit or transit through, as not all countries have the same values and legal systems as Canada. Current systems used by some countries and travel companies may not recognize the X gender identifier and you may still be asked to provide your sex/gender information as either Male or Female when travelling.

You should be aware that you may face discrimination because of your gender identity or expression, and you may not have access to services in your preferred gender while you are travelling abroad.

- Some border authorities may question or refuse to recognize your gender as indicated on your passport or supporting identification.
- Health services specific to transgender persons could be limited or non-existent in your destination country.
- You could face a discriminatory justice system if you get into trouble with local authorities.

Age of consent

You should be aware that the age of consent for heterosexual relations and homosexual relations can vary even in the same country. These laws may be applied arbitrarily or inconsistently. Even if there are no age of consent laws specific to LGBTQ2 people, you may be targeted because of your identity.

Family issues

LGBTQ2 people who would like to adopt or become parents through surrogacy while abroad should be aware that:

- Some countries may prevent LGBTQ2 people from adopting a child because it is against their laws, culture or beliefs. You could face discrimination from national authorities responsible for adoption. You should carefully research which countries have laws in place to allow LGBTQ2 people to adopt and work closely with your provincial or territorial adoption central authority to ensure the adoption process complies with both Canada's and the other country's legislation and procedures.
- Border officials may question a same-sex couple travelling with a small child and may request supporting documentation to explain why there is no biological other-gendered parent. Carrying certified copies of adoption orders and birth certificates that list the custodial parents may help you and your family pass through border control. We strongly recommend that Canadian children carry a consent letter if they are travelling abroad alone, with only one parent/guardian, with friends or relatives or with a group.
- If you are considering becoming a parent through a surrogacy contract, you should be aware that more and more countries consider surrogacy contracts illegal. LGBTQ2 couples may face difficulties because of discrimination from national authorities responsible for child welfare. There may also be legal difficulties transferring custody after the child is born. If you are considering a surrogacy arrangement, do your research and get legal advice.

LGBTQ2 youth

If you are a Canadian LGBTQ2 youth who lives abroad and is concerned about your safety and well-being, including issues related to forced marriage, please see What to do if you need help. There is also a list of resources available to LGBTQ2 youth under Other resources.

Social and personal safety

While some countries have specific laws in place to protect LGBTQ2 people, it is important to remember that you should always be conscious of your personal and online safety while you travel.

- Be wary of newfound "friends", especially those that you meet online through dating apps, as criminals sometimes target the LGBTQ2 community, putting you at an increased risk of robbery.
- Police may create fake online profiles to entrap users. In countries where LGBTQ2 persons are persecuted, you should assume that police are monitoring LGBTQ2-themed websites and whoever is visiting them.
- Some police can easily track your location through your phone and the websites you visit. Learn how to minimize the risks before you travel. Assume that your Facebook and other social media profiles can be viewed by immigration and police officers.
- When researching LGBTQ2 activities online, double-check to make sure the information is accurate and up to date.
- Never leave food or drinks unattended or in the care of strangers. There is always a risk of spiking, and drug-enabled rape is common worldwide.
- You should always be aware of your surroundings and be discreet, especially in countries where LGBTQ2 people face discrimination.
- In more conservative countries, avoid any kind of public display of affection, including kissing and holding hands.
- Find out what is socially acceptable to wear at your destination before you arrive. The dress code is especially strict in some societies, where bare shoulders, short pants, miniskirts and other revealing attire may cause offence.
- Be aware that in some countries a victim of rape (both opposite and same sex) may be considered to be the perpetrator of a crime. You should consult consular officers on how you would report this incident.

Health

- Pack all of your medications in your carry-on baggage in their original, labelled containers to simplify airport security and border control screening. For more information, see Travelling with medication.
- Be sure to practise safer sex, as some countries have higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than Canada, especially in the LGBTQ2 community. See Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections for more information on safe sex and ways to protect yourself.
- In many countries, especially in the developing world, many people do not have access to HIV testing and because they are not regularly tested they might believe they are HIV negative when in fact they are HIV positive with highly infectious viral loads because they are not taking antiretroviral drugs. Travellers should practise safer sex when engaging in sexual activity with other people who state they are HIV negative.
- HIV is a disease that can affect people from any cultural background or sexual orientation and has had a significant impact on men who have sex with men. Some countries ban or place travel limitations on people who are HIV-positive. If you are HIV-positive, check ahead of time to make sure you will be allowed to enter your destination country. You should also consult local HIV resources about how to best transport your HIV and AIDS medications.
- If you think you may have been exposed to HIV, treatment can prevent you from becoming infected with HIV. You should: first, see a health care provider immediately to find out if treatment is right for you and second, start treatment within 72 hours of a possible exposure if your health care provider recommends treatment.
- If you have engaged in activities that may have placed you at risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), see a health care provider immediately to get tested, counselled and treated if necessary. Be aware that in some countries, a physician is legally obligated to report STIs, sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriage, and pregnancy.

What to do if you need help

The nearest Canadian government office abroad or the Emergency Watch and Response Centre may be able to help you if you run into trouble while you are abroad, especially if you feel uncomfortable about approaching the local police.

- Consular officers are there to help. Inform them of any harassment or inappropriate treatment you may have faced.
- Any information you provide will remain confidential, subject to the provisions of the Privacy Act. For further information see Consular Policy Regarding the Use and Disclosure of Personal Information under the Privacy Act

Other resources

The International Lesbian and Gay Association publishes a world map summarizing sexual orientation laws by country.

Human Dignity Trust has lists and fact sheets on countries that criminalize homosexuality or maintain discriminatory age of consent laws.

The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association provides travel advice for gay and lesbian people.

The Trevor Project is a US organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. You can access the Trevor Support Center and their social networking site, TrevorSpace, which connects LGBTQ2 youth and their allies around the world.

The Global Database on HIV-Specific Travel & Residence Restrictions lists countries that restrict the entry, residence and stay of HIV-positive foreigners.

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