

I deal with a lot of people from all over the U.S. and for some, their upcoming trip is the first time they have traveled abroad. So naturally, I get a variety of questions about a multitude of subjects. In this article, I thought I would try to share some of the things my wife and I have learned in our travels abroad. Hopefully, these tips will make your trip easier and more enjoyable plus eliminate some of the apprehension you may feel because you don't know what to expect.

Things to do before you leave home.

1. Make a color copy of your driver's license and passport. These will fit on an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper. Open your passport to the picture page and copy that page plus the page above it that has your signature. Put your driver's license above the passport before you make the copy. Take the copy to Staples/Kinko's and get it laminated. Store separately from your passport and license. This is extremely valuable if your passport is lost or stolen.
2. Remove all the credit, insurance, debit cards and driver's license from your wallet. Make a list grouping the cards into categories (licenses, insurance cards, debit/credit cards, other). For insurance cards, list type of card, insurer, Policy # and contact number. For debit/credit cards, list Bank/issuer, card #, including expiration date, and contact number. For driver's license, list the number and state. Keep this list in a safe place and separate from your wallet or purse. This comes in very handy if your wallet or purse is lost or stolen.

IMPORTANT: 800 Numbers for U.S. companies do not work when calling from abroad. Call the company before you leave and ask for a number that works from outside the U.S.

3. Call the customer service number on your credit card. Tell them where you'll be, but more importantly, ask what the fee is for foreign transactions. Every credit card company charges from 0-4% on the total amount charged for every transaction you make while in a foreign country. This can add up quickly and generally, you don't notice it until you get your bill **after** you've returned from your trip. I actually have a separate card I use while in Europe because the fee is only 1%. Capital One offers credit cards that charge no foreign transaction fee.
4. Buy or borrow the electricity adapter(s) and transformer applicable to the country or countries you are visiting. **Do not** try to use the outlet in the bathroom for other appliances if it says "for shavers only". It will blow out that appliance. Chargers for computers, cell phones and cameras only require the correct adapter; no transformer is necessary. This is also true for dual voltage appliances.
5. Call your mobile phone company. Ask if your phone will work overseas and what the charge per minute is from each country you are visiting. For example, my mobile company is T Mobile and the phone works fine in Europe, but in Italy the charge is \$1.29/minute. This can add up quick!

6. The emergency number worldwide for mobile phones is 112. Write that down or program it into your phone. For all calls from Europe, Asia, you must put a (+) before the 1, area code and number when calling the U.S. or another country.
7. If you plan on renting a car (this is the only practical way to tour Tuscany), go to AAA and get an International driver's license. You need a passport size picture (they can take it right there if you don't already have two). Cost is/was \$15.00 plus \$10.00 for pictures. You don't need this to rent a car, but do need it if you get stopped by the police as they don't accept a driver's license from a state in the U.S. as a valid form of ID. They want to see a valid Passport and an International driver's license.
8. If you are renting a car in Italy, your best choice is a manual transmission with diesel engine. Price of fuel in Italy has been \$5.00- \$6.00 / gallon or higher for years, so if you plan on driving a lot, this will save you many dollars. Ask if rental includes unlimited mileage; ask about insurance coverages and deductible amounts for collision and comprehensive. I recommend you call Auto Europe (1-800-223-5555) as they have excellent prices and great customer service. You are calling a number in the U.S. and you pay for the car before you leave, so there is no foreign transaction fee. They will email you a voucher that you must print and take to the rental car counter of the applicable company (Hertz, Budget, etc.)
9. I receive a lot of questions from people whose idea is to take the train from Rome to Florence or Siena after arriving in Rome and then rent the car in Florence or Siena. The thought is to avoid the drive from Rome after a long flight. My response to this suggestion is:
 - a. Rental car locations at the airports are open 7 days/ week; in the towns, most rental car locations close from 12:30pm – 3-4pm every day and on Saturday, they close at 12:30pm and don't reopen until Monday morning, so you must arrive at the location before they close on Saturday. This is very difficult to do; you must not only get an early train from Rome, but these locations are not at the train station, so you must take a taxi (or more than one if you have more than 3-4 in your party) from the train station to the rental car location. If you plan on returning the car to the airport, you should determine beforehand whether there is a drop off charge as you are not returning the car to the same place where you picked it up. **NOTE: If you take the train to Siena, you must change trains in Chiusi; it is not a direct train from Rome.**
 - b. I feel it is much easier to rent the car at the airport; you have a larger number of available cars and more flexibility in returning the car when you have an early morning flight back to the U.S.. All the car rental companies have drop boxes for your use when the office is not yet open.
10. If you use washcloths, pack some to bring with you, along with a plastic bag for the wet ones when you return home. You will generally not find these in Italy or in most European countries.
11. People always worry about what clothes to pack, but be **SURE** to take comfortable shoes. If you plan to visit the beautiful towns of Tuscany, you will be doing **a lot** of walking and comfortable shoes are

an absolute necessity.

12. Buy a small travel dictionary at Barnes & Noble/Borders with Italian phrases used in everyday situations (shopping, driving, road signs, restaurants, food names, etc.) and study this before you leave. Practice some of the more common phrases and try to use them when needed as Italians appreciate Americans trying to speak their language. **You should not assume everyone in Tuscany will understand and speak English as this is not the case!**

While in Italy

1. Use your bank debit/ATM card to get currency from machines. No need to bring a lot of currency; if you wish to change some before you leave home, fine. Machines are located in arrival halls at airports and in towns all over Italy and I always get Euros before we leave the airport. Your card may not work in every machine; it depends on the bank, etc. If you have any doubts, call your bank before you leave home. **You must have a PIN number to get cash.**
2. If you are renting a car in Italy, check it over very well before you leave the lot. If there are scratches, etc. get the lot attendant and note them on the form while he/she is with you and ask them to sign it. In Italy, when driving on any four lane highways, you must have your headlights on. If you are driving in Tuscany, buy a "Black Rooster Map" in Radda,(at the Tobacco sign) Castellina,(at the Tourist Office) or Greve.(at the first shop in the Piazza where they have racks outdoors with maps). This is a locally produced map that shows all the Chianti Classico wineries in Tuscany, but better yet, it lays out in great detail, all the local roads in Tuscany that you won't find on the maps you buy at the airport. This is well worth the 2 euro cost and has saved me many times!
3. If you are pumping fuel yourself, be sure to check you are using the correct grade. I have seen people pumping gasoline into a car requiring diesel fuel--- no, it doesn't work and if you're trying to catch an early morning flight home, you just made the day very complicated!
4. Road signs in the countryside of Italy are very good (I think they are better than in the U.S.), but the roads of Tuscany are very hilly with a lot of curves. You should designate a person to be the navigator, so the driver can focus solely on driving. It is illegal to be using a cell phone while driving! One kilometer (km) is .6 miles.
5. Parking in the small towns of Tuscany can be a challenge. First, to find a parking spot, and second, to get the car into that spot. Small cars are more common and have an advantage here, so your challenge will be greater if you have a larger car or a van. On the right front inside windshield of most rental cars, you will find a "clock". You must set this at your arrival time when you park, as most parking in small towns is for a certain period of time (generally one hour). The parking areas are policed strictly in Radda, and in Greve centre, you must pay for parking before you leave your car and place the receipt on the dash. Also be sure to read the signs where you park---I had a bad

experience in Sorrento years ago for not paying attention to those signs!

6. If you park in a lot where you must pay for parking, you must pay by using a machine **before** you go to your car. Then take the ticket with you; you must slide this ticket into the machine when you exit so the barrier will rise and you can drive out.
7. a. A new issue to be aware of is that speed cameras are located on the autostradas and in most towns. By law, they must inform you before you come to the camera, so watch for signs on the right showing a policeman with a camera and then shortly after that, you will see a square box on the right side of the road that is about four feet high. The camera is located inside this box. You should also notice the Italian drivers slowing down as they approach the camera location, so take your cue from them and do the same. We see more of these cameras each time we return to Tuscany.

b. Be very aware of road signs, particularly in towns like Siena, Lucca, Florence where driving may be prohibited because only locals are permitted or it is an area where no cars are permitted. There are cameras in some of these areas and they will capture your license plate, find your U.S. address through your rental car company and send you a ticket. One client just received one for 115 euro (about \$152.00, as of Feb. 27, 2012). If you have an iPhone or iPad, download a Language Translator App before you leave home. When you are in this situation, open the App, type in the words from the sign to translate from Italian to English and you just may save yourself not only some grief, but also some \$\$ you can spend on wine, food, cheese (the important things).
8. It is not necessary or recommended that you leave a 15-20% tip in a restaurant. 10% is the max you should tip as service charges are included in the prices in most restaurants.
9. When planning your itineraries, remember that, in most towns, stores and restaurants close for an afternoon break. Restaurants open around 12-12:30pm and close at 2:30pm; then re-open at 7-7:30pm. Restaurants close on different days, so try to call if you can before you leave your accommodations. Stores are open from 9am to 1pm and then re-open at 3:30-4:00pm until 7-7:30pm. Some stores are closed Monday morning and most stores are closed on Sunday with the exception being Siena and San Gimignano. On Saturdays, some stores close at 1:00pm for the day.
10. In Tuscany, there is a market somewhere almost every day of the week. The markets sell food, clothing, shoes, housewares, & jewelry. When you rent from to-Tuscany, you will find a list of these markets in your accommodation showing the day and the town. In Arezzo, there is a huge Antiques market the first Sunday of every month.
11. When you are returning your rental car to the airport, fill up your tank before you get to the airport. The Florence airport has several gas stations along the road (after you get off the autostrada, but before you turn into the airport). I always charge my gas so I have a receipt—just in case the rental company says I didn't fill up before I returned the car. (This has happened more

than once to me.)

Returning home

1. With the new security regulations on liquids, you must pack any wine/olive oil in your **checked luggage**. This is particularly true if you have a connecting flight after you land in the U.S. If you forget, once you claim your luggage in the U.S., pack any liquids over 3 ounces in your checked luggage **before** you recheck it and go through security to catch your connecting flight. Remember, there are **no exceptions** to this; even for duty free purchases.
2. Airlines are now very strict on weight of luggage and number/size of carry on bags. Many times, we have seen people forced to redistribute clothing, etc. from one bag to another at the airport after being told their bags were overweight. At Florence, we were told one of our carry on bags must be checked as it was too large. This is particularly true with Lufthansa, so be forewarned.
3. If you have a connecting flight coming home, be very sure to ask for **all** your boarding passes when you check in at Florence, Rome, etc. Often, you don't have much time to catch your connecting flight, and you will have to go through immigration and security before you proceed to your gate to get this flight. In a large airport like Frankfurt, you will lose valuable time trying to find the right desk to obtain a boarding pass and you can't go through security without one.