

DON'T LOOK LIKE A TOURIST

YOU can spot them in any big city: gaggles of backpack-lugging, snapshot-taking outsiders who always seem to be at every major landmark. They're often loud, sunburned and dragging along a bunch of screaming kids. They're tourists.

While not all tourists are that bad, when strangers come to your town or city, you can usually spot them a mile away. And that means that con artists, pickpockets and people who are just looking for "easy marks" spot them too.

Here are some tips to help you blend in and get the most out of your trip:

Do your homework: It always helps to have some background information on where you're going. Knowledge of the local customs or history can help you avoid sticking out - or even offending the locals. You don't want to try to get a meal in a small town in Spain, for example, when everyone has closed up shop for their afternoon siesta.

Know the currency: Familiarise yourself with the exchange rate so you don't have to figure out how much the local money is worth every time you pay for something. Avoid having to say things like: "How much is this worth in Australian dollars?" Find out the exchange rate the day before you leave, apply it to a \$10 purchase, and use this scale to calculate the value of your expenditures. For example, if you know that €10 is worth A\$14, you'll know that a €20 purchase is worth around A\$28 at the same rate.

Get familiar with your surroundings: You can buy maps and guidebooks for most major cities around the world in big bookstores or on the internet. Once that's done, you can plan your itinerary and get familiar with the areas you'll be visiting. Of course, it's not the same as being there. However, if you do your prep work, you're much less likely to be caught off guard by cabbies who like to take the scenic route. Furthermore, you don't want to get lost, or appear lost, in public.

Learn a few words of the language: Get as familiar as you can with the local language. You don't have to be fluent, but it's very helpful to memorise a few basic words, handy phrases (such as "Where's the bathroom?") and common slang. A real help would be to get yourself a dictionary - a pocket or travel-oriented one is best - before you go.

Get directions discreetly: Ever see a tourist standing on a street corner with a huge map unfolded? Would you want to look that clueless? If you do get lost, find a quiet place to open up your map - a store or restaurant will do, providing they let you sit down for a while. Local businessmen and merchants, being established in the area, are also more likely to know the neighbourhood and to give you better directions than passersby.

Dress the part: Make sure your clothes are appropriate for the local culture and climate. Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt may be great for St. Petersburg, Florida, but they won't do in St. Petersburg, Russia. Don't wear souvenir clothes that will give you away as a tourist instantly. If you bring your camera, don't leave it hanging around your neck all day, or even in your hand. Keep it and your guide book in an anonymous carry bag, preferably from a local store.

Keep a low profile: Always be polite and unobtrusive. Remember, you're a visitor, so act as you would expect someone who is visiting your home to act. If there's a misunderstanding, don't lose your cool. Keep in mind that yelling won't help you be better understood. If possible, make sure you have enough cash on hand so that you don't have to keep getting your currency exchanged, which is often less convenient and more expensive abroad.

Stray off the beaten path: Stay away from the obvious tourist traps. When picking restaurants, try some local cuisine instead of visiting a chain that you have back home. You didn't cross an ocean just to eat at another McDonald's.

Get help from the locals: If you already know someone who lives where you're going, get them to help you and show you around. They'll know where all of the good places to go are, and you'll likely be better treated if you're with a local. Even if you don't want to stay with them, contact local 5W members, who usually welcome the opportunity to meet members from another country.