



Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography

Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

The following is based on open-source reporting.

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Summary

Just about everyone has a camera at his or her immediate disposal through a smartphone. It is not uncommon to want to immortalize certain individuals, experiences, sites, or scenery, especially when traveling abroad. However, individuals to be photographed might have religious or animist/indigenous beliefs that photographs steal the soul (particularly of children) or disrespect the spiritual world; gender roles may make photography difficult, precluding women from being photographed; and security apparatus (police and military) generally do not want to be photographed. Some people simply want to be paid for being photographed. However, foreign laws and customs governing what is permissible to photograph can vary vastly from U.S. norms.

Dos & Don'ts for Photography Abroad

Behavior that might be deemed inappropriate includes: lewd or lascivious acts, kissing, drinking alcohol, and immodest skin exposure. Edifices that might be deemed sensitive might include: government buildings, voting centers and processes, embassies, military facilities and vehicles (including airplanes), religious structures, and palaces. Scenery might include: war zones, sacred grounds, archeological sites, and tribal artifacts.

The use of the "selfie stick," a telescoping rod to take photographs of oneself from approximately one meter's distance, is banned in many locations, to include museums and art galleries, particularly in Europe.

Villagers in rural areas are sometimes suspicious of strangers, especially if they are not prone to seeing many people from outside their own community or country. There have been several incidents of violence in rural areas of Kenya, for instance, against Kenyan and foreign adults suspected of stealing children. Be aware that close contact with children, including taking their pictures or giving them gifts, can be viewed with deep alarm in some cultures, and may provoke panic and/or violence.

In some cases, anti-photography laws exist but are generally not pursued. For example, photographing the Eiffel Tower in Paris at night is [technically](#) a copyright infringement and, thus, illegal. Or, in Romania and Bulgaria, public buildings can be photographed, but those images cannot be sold. Further, in March 2014, [Hungary](#) made taking a photograph of people illegal unless everyone included has given permission; however, vagaries in the civil code leave room for interpretation.

Case Studies in 2014 and 2015

In mid-March 2015, OSAC staff members visited Turkmenistan and were told not to photograph government buildings, which are rarely clearly identified as such but are numerous in Ashgabat. After photographing carcasses in a meat market, they were approached and told not to do so again. The staff members left the stall but were overtly surveilled and followed by two men for some time.

Also in mid-March, [Thailand](#) made posting specific 'selfies' online, a trend common with female tourists, illegal under the Computer Crime Act, [punishable](#) by five years of jail time and a 100,000 baht (U.S.\$3,035) fine.

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In early March, two U.S. citizens carved their names into Rome's [Coliseum](#) walls and then photographed themselves and their act of vandalism. The two were arrested for [aggravated damage](#) and may face fines and jail time. The Coliseum has [signage](#) in English and Italian that defacing the structure is prohibited.

In early February 2015, U.S. sisters were [arrested and deported](#) from Cambodia for taking inappropriate photographs of themselves in the Preah Khan Angkor temple, a World Heritage site. They were [charged](#) with "indecent trafficking of pornography and exposing sexual organs." The sisters were sentenced to a six-month suspended prison term, fined the equivalent of U.S.\$315, and banned from the country for four years.

In October 2014, a U.S. citizen was [arrested](#) in the United Arab Emirates and charged with charged with taking pictures of a restricted area. He was held in the al-Wathba prison, charged, fined the equivalent of U.S.\$135, and [released](#) after 29 days incarceration. The U.S. citizen was to speak at a conference and then travel on to Malaysia. However, as in many cases, the detention was allegedly not communicated to the Embassy or to his contacts, and only after the U.S. citizen did not appear in Malaysia days later did his friends become concerned and begin searching for him.

Impact to Private Sector

Depending on what country is involved, visitors who violate local law or custom can be detained for lengthy periods, charged stiff fines, and/or be declared *persona non grata*. Not knowing local laws and customs is not excusable in the eyes of the court or police. Further, photographic [documentation](#) of illegal activities can be used in most judicial trials, as was the case when a fish poacher photographed himself with an illegal weapon in Wales, U.K. Prisons overseas are not kept to U.S. standards, and prolonged detainment under such conditions may lead to biological and psychological maladies. Further, should a detained individual be representing a corporate entity, an arrest could cause unwanted business tensions. The notoriety that would likely come, at least online if not in mainstream media, may be damaging personally, making future academic or professional pursuits challenging. For example, in March 2014, four U.S. citizens were arrested for 'streaking' at [Machu Picchu](#) in Peru, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. They were photographed by other tourists, and these and other 'streaking' photographs and videos have circulated online. Peruvian Ministry of Culture [authorities](#) are increasing surveillance measures, requiring guides and specific routes, and cracking down on a behavior that tarnishes the ancient citadel.

Guidance



In tourist destinations, including museums or galleries, and near diplomatic buildings signs will often be posted if photography is not allowed. These signs generally have a traditional camera, or increasingly an image of a cell phone, with a red circle and single diagonal line (see right image). However, in other cases, there is no signage or it is unclear. A similar sign may restrict flash photography (see left image) or videography. When traveling overseas, it is always a good idea

to ask an individual directly if he or she is agreeable to being photographed or to ask the authorities if photography is permitted in the area. Perusing OSAC [Crime and Safety Reports](#) is a best practice, as they often include information on photography.

For Further Information

For additional information on global diseases and pandemic outbreaks, please contact OSAC's [Health and Disease Analyst](#). For country-specific concerns, please contact the appropriate regional analyst.

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