

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

Visiting for the first time

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Often, when you first hear that your relative or friend has been arrested abroad, one of the first decisions to be made is whether to visit them immediately. Many people's first instinct is to start arranging a visit but the shock of the situation sometimes means that it may be hard to know how to go about this. The aim of this fact-sheet is to help you think through and prepare to visit your relative or friend in prison overseas.

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1 Before you go

Listed below are some general issues that it may help to think about before your plan your trip.

1.1 *Will your relative or friend want you to visit*

Generally, a visit brings comfort and reassurance to someone who has just been arrested abroad but there are also times when that person may prefer not to be visited straightaway. This may be because they hope to be released soon and to spare their family/friends the expense and distress of travelling to visit them. Or they may feel it would be too upsetting to see their family/friends at this time. If it is possible, it may be worth checking whether your relative wants you to visit by sending them a letter or by asking the local Foreign Office representative to find out.

1.2 *Is it right for you*

It is also important to think about the visit from your own point of view. It may prove stressful, tiring and involve a lot of expense. There may be times when you feel that organising a trip and going through the experience of visiting would be just too much to cope with.

1.3 *Cost*

The cost of organising a visit to someone held in prison abroad is often considerable due to the price of travel and accommodation. There are times when this money may be needed to pay fines or legal fees. It is therefore worth exploring any sources of financial assistance.

1.4 *Children*

If you have children, you will want to decide whether to take them with you or whether to find someone to look after them in your absence. On a first visit, many people decide to travel without their children, knowing that it may be easier to take them on a later visit once they know what the journey, accommodation and visit is like. On the other hand, it may be important to take the children on the visit, particularly if there is little chance of being able to visit again in the near future. This is something you may like to talk through with a caseworker at Prisoners Abroad.

1.5 *Timing*

It is worth thinking about when to visit – whether it is best planning an immediate visit or whether delaying it may allow better arrangements to be made. Sometimes, attempting to visit immediately means that it is impossible to make all the necessary arrangements and the visitor is refused entry at the prison or has trouble finding somewhere to stay.

2 Practicalities

It is important to think about some of the arrangements you need to make in advance.

2.1 Passport

Obviously, the first thing is to ensure you have a valid ten-year passport and any necessary visas. Any children travelling with you who are not already on your passport will need to be issued with their own passport prior to travel.

2.2 Childcare

If you are not planning to take your children with you and are making arrangements for someone to look after them in your absence, it is important to choose someone with whom your child/children feel comfortable. You will also want to make sure that the person knows what the children have been told about the reasons for your trip. It is important that there is a means of keeping in touch throughout the time you will be away.

2.3 Someone to come with you

It may not be possible but you might like to think about asking someone to come with you on this visit. Even if they do not actually come in with you for the visit, it can be very comforting to have someone keep you company during the journey and during your time abroad.

2.4 Letting your relative or friend know you are coming

It is worth trying to let your relative or friend know that you are planning a visit. Sometimes a letter will reach them in time. In other situations it may be possible to send a message via the local Foreign Office representative, or ask Prisoners Abroad to contact a prison social worker or visitor. It gives your relative or friend a chance to plan for the visit themselves – perhaps to ask you to bring them things.

3 Money, medicines and clothing

You should also think about:

3.1 Travel insurance

Or, if you are visiting an EU country, getting hold of an E111 form from the Post Office which entitles you to free/reimbursable health care.

3.2 Immunisations

You should check whether you need any immunisations or anti-malarial drugs. In some countries, it is obligatory to have had certain immunisations. Advice can be obtained from the Department of Health leaflet “Health Advice for Travellers” (tel. 020 7210 4850, option 3) or from their website at www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice. If you have specific medical problems and need to take medication with you, you should get a letter from your GP (if possible, translated into the appropriate language. Prisoners Abroad may be able to help with this).

3.3 Clothing

You should check the climate of the country you are visiting so you are prepared with the appropriate clothing (e.g. via Teletext, Ceefax, newspapers or via the Internet).

3.4 Money

You should plan how you are going to have access to money whilst abroad – either by taking Travellers Cheques or cash with you or through cash-point machines locally. Check this with your bank at least a few days before travel.

3.5 Local information

It is worth getting hold of a phrasebook and map of the country so you can find your way around – or get help when needed.

4 Making arrangements for the visit

As you begin to plan the visit, it is critical to check whether you need to make any advance arrangements in terms of either getting permission to visit and/or booking the days and times of the actual visits. In some countries, it can take several weeks to get permission to visit and without booking the visits with the prison in advance, you could find yourself refused entry. Check with either Prisoners Abroad or the Foreign Office what regulations apply in the country you are visiting.

4.1 Arranging Your Journey

Information on the journey and how to travel is often best obtained from travel agents. You do not need to tell them the purpose of your visit if you do not wish to. Some of the places you might like to try are airlines (e.g. Ryanair, Go, Buzz, Easyjet); Internet sites (eg www.travelfinder.co.uk; www.cheapestflights.com; www.flightline.co.uk; www.bargainholidays.com; or simply do a search on “cheap flights”); Travel Agencies (e.g. Trailfinders (020 7628 7628); Bridge the World (020 7911 0900); Travelfinders (020 8517 5353); Flightline (0800 0360 777) and Bargain Holidays (029 2033 0052)).

4.2 Booking A Place To Stay

You will also probably want to book accommodation in advance. Prisoners Abroad or the local Foreign Office representative may be able to give suggestions. Otherwise a good travel agent or the Tourist board of the country you are visiting may be able to help. Guide books such as those produced by Lonely Planet or Rough Guides also give helpful suggestions and are a good source of information. Lots of this information is also accessible via the internet (e.g. www.lonelyplanet.com, www.roughguides.com).

5 Sources of help

There are a number of sources of help that may be useful:

5.1 *Prisoners Abroad*

Our team of caseworkers can provide specialist information on the country in which your relative or friend is held. Whilst they cannot always supply detailed visiting information on a particular prison, they can advise you on the necessary arrangements to make the trip as easy as possible. They can assist you if you are having difficulty booking visits or accommodation.

5.2 *The Foreign Office*

The local British Consulate, Embassy or High Commission can also help with making arrangements such as booking the visit, particularly when it is your first visit, and may be able to help with suggestions of places to stay or details of how to reach the prison. The Foreign Office has its headquarters at Consular Directorate Foreign & Commonwealth Office, King Charles Street, London, SW1A 2AH. Its Consular Section can be reached on 020 7270 1500 and the Travel Advice Unit (who can provide information on the risks of travelling to particular places) is on 020 7008 0136.

5.3 *Locally*

Prisoners Abroad may also be able to give you details of any local organisations or individuals who may be able to help you while you are out there. Sometimes, there are hostels where visiting families can stay or a local prison visitor who can accompany you to the prison.

5.4 *Other families*

If you wish, Prisoners Abroad can try and put you in contact with someone who has already visited that prison and who can give you information on travel, accommodation and the visit itself.

Please note that inclusion in this factsheet does not imply any endorsement or recommendation on behalf of Prisoners Abroad of any of the companies or websites listed here. Please use your own experience and judgement before making any purchase.

6 The visit

6.1 *What to take*

It is really important to check, before you set out, what you will be allowed to take with you into the prison. If your relative or friend has asked for anything specific, it is worth checking that these will actually be permitted. You will also need to take your passport for the visit itself and may need to bring other documents as well (again, check with Prisoners Abroad or the local Foreign Office representative).

6.2 *Confirming the visit*

Once you have arrived in the country, you may need to reconfirm your visits locally, either through the local Foreign Office representative or direct with the prison.

6.3 What to say/do

You may have a lot you want to ask your relative or friend – or it may be hard to know what to say to them. They may be feeling inhibited by the presence of guards or other prisoners.

They may not know whether you are going to carry on supporting them or not. It may help to think through, in advance, the essential things you have to talk to them about (e.g. arrangements for a lawyer, money, their affairs at home). It is also important to be aware of prison regulations as well as any cultural attitudes that you should respect (e.g. what you should wear and how to behave in the prison).

6.4 Your emotions

It is hard to prepare psychologically for the emotional impact of visiting. Many people describe the first visit as the most difficult. If you have someone with you, it will certainly help to talk things through with them. If not, it may help to talk to someone on your return, such as a friend or your caseworker at Prisoners Abroad.

6.5 Returning

Do remember that you may need to reconfirm your return flight at the end of your stay.

7 After you come back

7.1 Talking to someone

It may help to talk through your experiences – either with a friend or relative, with another family member who has a relative in the same place, or with a caseworker at Prisoners Abroad.

7.2 Passing on information

Once you have visited, it is always useful to pass on details of how you travelled, where you stayed and local visiting arrangements to Prisoners Abroad (who can send you a form to fill out). This will help other families visiting for the first time and helps Prisoners Abroad keep its information as complete and up-to-date as possible.

We hope that your visit goes as smoothly as possible – please do not hesitate to contact us for assistance and support.

If you require this leaflet in a large print format, please contact us. Our details are below.

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