

Is Your Holiday Safe?

In the case of holidays in general and riding holidays in particular, "safety" can refer to a number of different things. Firstly, there is financial safety; is the money you pay in advance for your holiday safe in the event of the travel company or airline going bust or your holiday being disrupted due to political or natural disaster. Then there is your safety when riding, always a potentially hazardous activity and lastly there is your general personal safety when visiting a foreign country. This last aspect of safety has been much in the news over the last couple of months as the revolution that started in Tunisia has swept through northern Africa.

Financial Safety

You should ensure you book your holiday with a bonded travel company. The best known bond is through ABTA which protects you for the land arrangements (accommodation, activities and meals).

If a company has an ATOL this means the entire holiday including flights is protected, but, this only applies if you buy a package of flights and accommodation from the same company. So, for example, if you buy a riding holiday from a travel company and you purchase the flights directly from the airline, then, if the airline cancels your flights you may have a problem. The travel company is fulfilling their part of the agreement, they can still provide the riding holiday you bought from them and it's not their fault that you can't get there. However, if you had bought your flights as well from the travel company then they are obliged to provide you with the holiday you have bought. If they cannot get you on your holiday (if for example the flight has been cancelled due to snow, or airline strike) then they have to offer you an alternative holiday that's acceptable to you or give you a full refund.

Traditionally airlines have given commission to travel companies which compensates them for the risk they take on when selling flights as part of a package. In recent years commission on flights has been slashed and low cost airlines don't pay any commission. Because of this you may well find that flights are more expensive when booked through a travel company, but when you think of the extra protection and peace of mind you get it's a small price to pay.

Ride Safety

Ensuring that you are booked onto a ride

that matches your riding level is a joint responsibility between you and the travel company. You need to be honest and open about your ability and fitness and in return the travel company must give you an accurate description of the pace of the ride, number of hours in the saddle and the style of riding. Matching rider to ride is the single most important thing a specialist riding company does. Getting this wrong can mean a ruined holiday, or worse!

Your travel company should regularly visit their rides to ensure their information is up to date and to carry out all their checks on every aspect of the ride. This regular inspection of the rides ensures you are booked onto a quality ride.

Before you go on your holiday you should receive a detailed kit list for that particular holiday; pack the wrong things and, even if you chose the right holiday, the experience can be spoilt.

So, you've chosen a ride that matches your ability and fitness and you've brought the right clothing, footwear and hat, what could go wrong now? Provided your travel company has done it's work you should have a fabulous experience. Canter along a golden beach, galloping over the African plains with a herd of zebra or riding the trail into the Rocky Mountains, is something most people only dream about, but you are actually there, doing it. On all good rides there will be a safety briefing before the start of the ride and either an introductory ride in an arena or a less formal assessment on the first out-ride. It's important at this stage to say if you have any incompatibility issues with the horse that's been chosen for you. Changing horses now should be fairly straightforward but it may not be so easy on day three or four of a trail ride. Equally the tack may be unfamiliar to you so if anything feels uncomfortable, speak up early.

Remember the basic safety rules of keeping your distance from other horses, not moving off until all riders are mounted and never go ahead of the guide.

Personal Safety

We always follow the advice of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk) who issue regular Travel Advice by country. Currently there are just two countries where the FCO advise against all travel (Somalia



and Ivory Coast) but there is a list of specific areas within countries which are to be avoided.

In the event that the FCO advises against all but essential travel to a country your travel company will offer you a suitable alternative holiday, the option to rebook for a later date, or if necessary, a full refund.

If the FCO go on to advise British nationals to leave an area, then the tour operator who has organised a client's flights must assist those on holiday to leave the country.

Over the last twelve months there have been many political and natural disasters which have disrupted holidays. As well as the unrest in many northern African countries, there was a massive earthquake in central Chile (Feb 10); the massive devastation in Christchurch after the earthquake in February 2011; widespread floods in Queenstown which dominated our TV screens for days; floods in Rio de Janeiro state; the Volcanic Ash crisis of April/May 2010 and the British Airways cabin crew strike in May/June 2010.

Unfortunately very few travel insurance companies provide any cover for holidays cancelled or disrupted due to these kinds of events. However, as a fully bonded and responsible travel company we worked round the clock to get our clients out on their holiday or at worst, we arranged a full refund if travel was impossible.

What will next year hold? More countries are likely to suffer political unrest and others may be subject to natural disasters. Holidays might be disrupted due to strikes in the UK or abroad or there might be something we haven't even thought of – who knows what will be next.

Olwen Law – Advanced Endurance Rider and Director of In The Saddle, a specialist equestrian travel company, has been arranging riding holidays for 16 years. In The Saddle is fully bonded with ABTA and ATOL.