

With Pack and Planet Guides

So you have decided to head off overseas, following the call of so many other young people, the "big OE", i.e. "overseas experience" for those not in the know. Or maybe you are "long in the tooth" and going for a few months travel overseas on an extended holiday in your retirement. You have been faithfully attending church at home, with your friends and family, and the thought of how to stay true to Christ and your faith while overseas never even enters your mind. After all, why should it? You have not had any problems to date. You attended Sunday school and catechism classes since you were knee high to a grasshopper, you may have done Profession of Faith, and so what is the big deal; you are a child of the covenant, a committed Christian.

And yet.... When you decided to head off overseas for an extended working holiday or vacation, you probably checked out the internet, talked to others about job prospects - say in London, locum agencies, you probably bought the Lonely Planet guide to wherever, checked out exchange rates, places to stay, sights to see, the best clothes to bring, footwear etc, the list is endless. But where on your list was how to take care of your soul?

Oh yeah, you brought your Bible (maybe even got a smaller one to travel lighter), and thought, "there, covered that aspect" because that is all you kind of needed at home anyway. You may have heard about so and so who went overseas and came back having left the faith, and thought, "nah, that won't happen to me". Well it is time to put on top of your checklist - preserving my Christian lifestyle with the "God's Planet guide book". Why, you ask? Isn't it enough to throw the Bible in the pack? What more could I possibly need or do?

Because when you leave the safety and security of your home church fellowship (there's safety in numbers), you walk straight into the Devil's playground. You are now on his turf and you must arm yourself because he will tease and tempt you and try everything within his power to win you away from Christ. You will be on your own, no extended circle of family and friends to support and encourage you, the security of a routine, every Sunday in church.

It is so much easier to be faithful at home in the church; it is a routine, don't have to think about what church, where it is, can I get there, what time does it start, who will notice if I don't go and so on. No, you will be very lonely, even if you are with one or two of your friends, and if you don't take the necessary precautions, you will have a very tough time. It is important to put as much effort into preparing yourself spiritually as it is getting visas and the best sleeping bag/pack etc.

The first things that will be a hassle will be finding a church. Sure there are heaps of churches out there; but which one will be a true church, sound in doctrine, and will I have the time to go to different churches every week trying them out for size. How do I keep my spiritual life alive when all around me is lost - the glittering lights, transport problems, hostel / flatmates who think Sunday is a day for leisure and shopping. What about when I am in foreign countries that don't speak English? I am beset on all sides, with choices and freedom.

Well, I have been travelling on and off around this globe to many weird and wonderful places now for several decades, and I have had to learn the hard way. And over the years I have discovered that it requires a real effort and through many years of travail I have come up with a few pointers to share and make your expedition a little less hazardous.

So here is my version of "**God's Planet guide to travelling – 10 recommendations to survival**":

- 1. Keep membership with your home church** until you return or are settled and resident in another church. Then transfer your membership. If you have a travelling membership, it is a license to avoid committing oneself while travelling. Keeping your membership current at home, means that you will still be in the prayers of your home church, and you will have an ongoing relationship still with a church of God who knows you.

2. Access the Internet for church sites; look at web sites that will give you information about where you want to travel to and reformed churches there. It makes it so much simpler than going through dozens of churches or hoping to just come across a good one. I was once in a cheap flea ridden hotel in Bangkok one Sunday morning when through the window I heard the sound of hymns being sung. I followed the sound to a church that was just down the end of the street, to find it full of expatriate English speaking Baptists. What a joy it was to meet fellow Christians in a faraway place. Luckily in the 21st century we have better ways of finding churches so I have attached a list of websites that may help you. Not all are strictly reformed but these will have some form of affiliation with reformed beliefs.

3. Receive sermons via email; If you are travelling and you are on hotmail / yahoo etc, get sermons sent to you via email. I am fortunate to travel always with my laptop and I download these every week. I use them whenever I am in a country that doesn't have English speaking / Reformed churches, such as Russia / Argentina. You can access email anywhere now and you can print it out at an Internet cafe. You can get sermons through the NZ Reformed church website (www.rcnz.org.nz).

4. Take a good Christian book with you as well as Lonely Planet and your Bible. Lonely Planet guides always tend to be a bit out of date in my experience but the Bible never is. Your Lonely Planet tells you about the country you are in, your God's Planet guide will tell you how to live there. And a good way of keeping your faith fresh and new is to take a Christian book as well - one that will challenge and stimulate you, and one that you can read again and again. I would recommend one of J I Packer's or something similar eg "Knowing God" or CS Lewis' "Screwtape Letters". I had a book years ago that my mother gave to me when I left to go backpacking on my own through SE Asia. It had chapters with selected verses for those difficult times; "when you are lonely, when you are afraid, etc". I found it enormously useful for finding the appropriate verses when distressed or whatever. Once, I arrived late in Penang, Malaysia and all the cheap hotels were full as it was Chinese New Year. My bedjak (bicycle taxi) driver then took me to a place which had a room but it was four times the price that I usually paid as it was a double and in demand. That night I was worried about how my money would last (I was on a very tight budget!) and found the verses to comfort me under the heading "when you are worried and anxious". I then prayed and put it in the Lord's hands. The next morning I went downstairs to find the taxi driver standing there, saying that he had just found a single room for me at a quarter of the price and had asked the hotel to hold it for me if I was interested. Fantastic! God can answer in ways better than we expect.

5. Keep Sundays different; make a real effort - try and get to church, and spend the day reading that book you bought with (see it does come in handy!). Find a nice park somewhere, do a walk, avoid sightseeing and other tourist activities, however tempting, because the minute you give in once, it becomes so much easier the next time round. The "I didn't get struck by lightning" logic means I can do it again next Sunday. But do try and get into a routine for the Sunday. This is the hardest bit of all. Because when you are on a working holiday overseas, those little devils whisper in your ear; "who will ever know?", "it is just once", "it is not such a big deal" "what else is there to do?" "You won't be here again, take the opportunity, God won't mind" and so on. I have some bad news for you; He does mind, very much so.

6. Take a couple CD's of church music to help you on Sundays. I travel with several of my favourite church music, and that way I can have my own little "church service" in the remoter parts of the planet. Don't just have contemporary Christian music but include one of hymns/psalms. The sound of familiar hymns is a remarkable way of feeling "normal" in a non-normal setting on a Sunday. Keep to the familiar ones, tunes and words you know. Some people hate mood setting music but I disagree. It is important to put yourself into the right frame of mind for worship, and church music can help put your mind ready to read a sermon or go to church.

7. Don't forget your tithes and offerings - you can arrange for this to be done at home if you are sending money home, but it is too easy to fall into the trap of not giving anything to God because of your itinerant lifestyle. The "why should I give to this church when I am not really a member and I am only here sometimes" concept. So don't stop just because you are overseas. You are only giving back to God what is His anyhow, and you can't take it with you! There are other options too such as supporting mission work etc. Don't stop just because you are not in a regular job or at home.

8. Be sensible about where you go; don't deliberately put yourself into dangerous places full of temptation or personal danger. Don't put God to the test. If you find yourself in such circumstances beyond your control, that is a different matter. Then remember that God will never leave you nor forsake you. He is always there.

I once found myself with several travelling companions surrounded by several dozen armed men in the wilds of Pakistan near the Afghanistan border. As it was they had heard about this blond female doctor and her companions from some visitors we had, and wanted to offer us their protection, as there were many bandits about. So we took it and stayed the night in their fortress compound in northern Pakistan. It transpired that the leader was the Chief of the tribe in that area responsible for manufacturing and selling arms to the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan. The thought of a blonde female doctor adept with weapons so appealed to him that he "adopted" me along with my companions. (I noted that their favourite video was Rambo 2!). We were feted and taken on a tour of the arms manufacturing factories (they made AK47's - Russian automatic rifles, to order). The incidence of travellers being robbed and murdered in this region is pretty high, but it was an area that had to be traversed and I recalled Psalm 23 and its promise of help even in the valley of death. God was very good to us.

But it is not just the wild places that can be dangerous. Those bright city lights, pubs and nightclubs that can persuade you away from Christ - be sensible about your leisure time, however exciting it may seem, and how strong in your faith you think you are. No one is immune from temptation.

9. Get into a flat with other Christians, if you can. It is so much easier than having to deal with drunken flatmates, blasphemy, a non-Christian lifestyle and Sunday observance that is not religious. When you are on your own in a foreign country, you tend to make friends with those you live with and hence you do things together. It becomes very difficult to keep a Christian perspective when you are desperate for friendship. If getting into a Christian flat doesn't work out for whatever reason (eg your contract puts you into a work hostel), then you have it a bit tougher but it is not insurmountable. Just go to church as per normal on Sunday; it is no big deal, and most flatmates will respect that as long as it doesn't impact on them. You just have to rely heavily on God to withstand the temptation but remember; God won't lead you into any temptation greater than you can stand without leaving a way of escape (and that might be "find another flat").

10. Don't forget your daily devotions; just a few minutes per day to take time with God in prayer. Read your Bible so you become familiar with it, or have a devotional guide or an inspirational booklet to remind yourself. There are plenty good ones to choose.

These are just a few pointers that I have found through the years through trial and error (a lot of error!) to have helped me. Hopefully, they may help some of you avoid the trial and error approach. You will find that you have lots of motivation when you start out from home, but be warned; it often wears off through constant battle and attractive bright lights. Like any soldier, you will need to be encouraged and refreshed, and this is where your friends and family can help at home plus those who are travelling with you. You must encourage each other. Don't be afraid to challenge each other's behaviour and actions, in a loving manner of course. It is so essential that you look out for each other, whether you are in the same house, or thousands of miles away. Ask about church attendance, encourage each other to read the Bible, attend local Bible study groups etc, get involved in your local church, and support each other. But above all, remember that you are never alone, it does not matter where in the world you are, He will never forsake you. God's grace is awesome, and it is a constant source of amazement to me, that however little I deserve it, God continues to pour out His grace on me. One of the nicest things about travelling is meeting so many Christians from many different walks of life and being a part of the universal church of all ages, that body of believers who belong heart and soul to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is a wonderful experience.

Happy travels.

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Church Web sites for overseas travellers

The Reformed Churches of NZ have sister church relationship with several other churches overseas and contact with several more with which we have strong affiliation. We are also members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, which is a group of churches who hold similar confessional beliefs. I have also included Reformed Baptists, who may provide a useful alternative for church attendance in some areas that don't have a church with whom we have an official relationship. So I have included their websites, particularly for the UK.

This is not an exhaustive list and as I have not attended all these churches I cannot vouch for them with any degree of certainty. My experience has been that sometimes you get a very good church and other times you wonder how they got on the website. If you mention the word reformed, this does not always register, even in those who are reasonably orthodox. This list is merely to assist you in narrowing down your choices when faced with thousands in your travels. The only real test is the acid test - attend and find out. Do not expect that it will be the same as "home". NZ churches have evolved into a unique kiwi flavour; a porridge of English and Dutch reformed liturgies. Have fun!

A. Europe and the United Kingdom:

1. De Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt) in Nederland (Liberated); (contact church -close to NZ style, member ICRC)
www.gkv.nl
2. De Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland; (sister church, member ICRC)
www.cgk.nl
3. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales; (member ICRC)
www.epcew.org.uk (Not many congregations though)
4. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ireland; (member ICRC)
www.epc.org.uk
5. Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland; (member ICRC)
www.rpc.org
6. The Free Church of Scotland; (member ICRC)
www.freechurch.org (includes links to other Free Churches in the UK, North and South America, South Africa, India, and Australia).
7. General listings:
 - a) GraceNet UK; lists Reformed Evangelical Churches in the United Kingdom, mostly Evangelical and Reformed Baptist and Evangelical Presbyterian, also includes Free Churches. www.grace.org.uk (Has links to other similar churches in Europe (Belgium, France, Malta and Switzerland), the Pacific, and North America).
 - b) www.evangelical-times.org Evangelical Times (ET) is a monthly newspaper published in England. The paper's main constituency is among reformed churches. Its readership is wide and composed mostly of people who hold to reformed theology and the doctrines of grace - Presbyterians and Baptists make up a large proportion of the readers.
 - c) www.reform.org.uk Reform is a network of churches and individuals within the Church of England, committed to the reform of ourselves, our congregation and our world by the gospel.
 - d) www.spindleworks.com a world-wide resource for sermons and other reformed literature

B. North America:

1. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church; (sister church, member ICRC)
www.opc.org
2. The Canadian and American Reformed Churches; (sister church, member ICRC)
www.canrc.org
3. The United Reformed Churches in North America; (church we have contact with, member ICRC)
www.urcna.org
4. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America; (member ICRC)
www.reformedpresbyterian.org
5. The Reformed Church in the United States; (member ICRC)
www.rcus.org
6. The Free Reformed Churches of North America; (member ICRC)
www.frcna.org
7. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church; (member ICRC)
www.arpsynod.org
8. Free Churches
access through www.freechurch.org
9. Reformed Baptist Church Directory
www.farese.com
Includes USA, Canada and abroad (Pacific; Australia, NZ, Singapore, Malaysia. Europe; France, Germany, Italy, Malta, Nth Ireland, UK, Spain, Yugoslavia. Africa: South Africa, Zambia. Caribbean; Dominican Rep, Puerto Rico, West Indies. Others; Hong Kong, India, Israel, Mexico, Philippines.).
10. ReformedNet; a general listing of Reformed type churches in North America, some of whom are members of the ICRC and many are not.
www.reformed.net

C. Asia and the Pacific

1. Singapore: Evangelical Reformed Churches of Singapore; (no official relationship),
www.antioch.com This website has links to other churches throughout the region not necessarily Reformed (Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Hong Kong).
2. Australia:
 - a) Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (sister church)
www.crca.org.au
 - b) The Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (sister church, member ICRC)
www.pcea.org.au
 - c) Reformed Baptist
access through www.farese.com

3. New Zealand:

- a) The Reformed Churches of New Zealand; (ie. us!)

www.rcnz.org.nz

- b) Grace Presbyterian Church of New Zealand (church with whom we have contact)

www.gpcnz.org.nz

D. Africa

1. South Africa: The Reformed Church in South Africa; (sister church, member ICRC)

www.gksa.org.za

E. International Conference of Reformed Churches: also includes these (no web sites found).

1. The Free Church in South Africa (probably access through www.freechurch.org)

2. The Free Church of Central India (probably access through www.freechurch.org)

3. The Presbyterian Church in Korea (Kosin)

4. Gereja Gereja Reformasi Musyafir N.T.T. (Indonesia)

5. Gereja Gereja Reformasi di Indonesia

6. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North East India

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