



TRAVELING & SERVING INTERNATIONALLY

It seems almost impossible to turn on the evening news or scroll through a news website without being confronted by the things happening in our world. Whether it's crime in our own community, political debates, disease outbreaks, natural disasters or terrorist attacks—it can feel very hopeless.

Each of us may have different reactions. We may choose to tune it out, ignoring the harsh realities with the hope that they'll simply go away. We may choose to indulge in the chaos and negative reports, allowing fear to take over. Or we may choose to find a balance—staying up-to-date about what is happening in the world and making informed decisions about our response.

As an IMMERSION applicant considering international travel, we know you may have some real fears or questions about safety. Our hope is that you will consider the precautions that Experience Mission is taking, continue to do your own research, and then make a decision when you are comfortable.

It's important to note that any organization that tells you they have eliminated all risk related to international travel is either intentionally misleading or simply uninformed. Experience Mission can neither promise complete safety nor predict when an unforeseen issue will happen. **But safety is always a major priority.**

In a given year, over 3,000 short-term volunteers and 120+ IMMERSION team members will trust Experience Mission to lead them into communities around the world—everywhere from the inner-city of New York and the remote corners of southern Africa. We take this responsibility very seriously. Not only do we want each participant to have a great experience, but we also want everyone to feel safe and cared for.

Although Experience Mission cannot eliminate all risk, there are some key things we do as an organization to protect IMMERSION team members as much as possible.

- ▶ **Experience Mission follows international travel guidelines set by the U.S. Department of State.** Warnings and alerts are posted for countries—allowing us to make good decisions if any of our IMMERSION locations are affected.
LINK: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html/>
- ▶ **Experience Mission enrolls all IMMERSION teams in the Safe Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)** through the U.S. Department of State. This keeps us informed of any potential issues while teams are living in the country.
- ▶ **Experience Mission builds long-term relationships with pastors, teachers, and well-respected community leaders.** This gives us a sense of stability and security knowing that these leaders are on our side and care about our team members, too. It also allows us to get their perspective on issues from the ground level.
- ▶ **Experience Mission outlines rules and safety guidelines upon arrival in each new community.** This helps team members understand the issues or risks specific to that place. We expect team members to respect these guidelines and make mature decisions.

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- ▶ **Experience Mission will not hesitate to postpone, cancel or change a trip if there is a legitimate concern** from either an official source (U.S. Department of State) or a personal contact (staff or partners in the community). To date, we have encountered several such issues, demonstrating our ability to take the appropriate precautions and make adjustments. Here are a few examples:
 - ▶ **HAITI 2011:** Due to rioting and political unrest in the capital of Port-au-Prince, we made the decision to move the team from the community of Carrefour (just outside the city) to a rural farming community several hours away. Although the team was not in danger, we felt they would have a more positive experience and more freedom if removed from the activity happening in the city.
 - ▶ **SOUTH AFRICA 2013:** While one of our IMMERSION teams was living near the capital of Pretoria, Nelson Mandela died. Because of his status as former president of South Africa and a beloved figure for the anti-apartheid revolution, the world waited to see how the country would react to his passing. Our staff made the decision to break from the normal schedule for several days and find other opportunities for the team to ensure their safety. Thankfully, the country responded peacefully and there were never any cautions released to U.S. citizens. The team was able to confidently resume their normal schedule within a few days.
 - ▶ **LESOTHO (Africa) 2015:** The U.S. Department of State issued a travel alert for Lesotho due to an approaching election and concerns about riots surrounding the newly elected officials. Several months before this alert, we had already begun conversations with our staff and partners in Lesotho to keep a pulse on the election season and talk about an alternative scheduled, if needed. The election took place and was very peaceful. The official travel alert expired after sufficient time to gauge the reaction, and we allowed our team to transition from South Africa to Lesotho several days later.
 - ▶ **ISRAEL / PALESTINE 2020:** In March 2020, EM was hosting a one-week team in the Holy Land. Over the course of the day, it made local and then international news that there had been a COVID-19 outbreak in Bethlehem, tied to a group of tourists who had stayed in a hotel the week before. Although the team did not have any direct contact with the tourists or hotel employees, EM staff took precautions to keep them indoors at a local guesthouse and instructed them to follow the CDC guidelines regarding good hygiene. Within hours, it was announced the crossing between the West Bank and Israel would be closed for 30 days (no tourists allowed in or out of Bethlehem) to prevent the spread of the virus. Our staff worked through the night to make sure the team would have transportation to the airport and the ability to leave the country before the travel restrictions were enforced. The team was able to leave the country with minimal issues, due in major part to the quick planning of our local staff and insight from trusted partners in the community. All team members returned home safely.

We hope that this information has been helpful as you continue to move forward with the application process! Please feel free to contact us if you have additional questions. We would be happy to talk.

All the best,

EXPERIENCE MISSION IMMERSION STAFF

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