



**World Nomads**

# CHINA

## Travel Safety Guide

Keep safe and informed as you explore a vast country with diverse landscapes, customs, culture and people.



Shichahai Hutong old town area, Beijing

## TRAVEL SMARTER

# WELCOME

China is a vast country with diverse landscapes, customs, culture and people – lots of people. **Joanna Tovia** shares her tips to keep you safe and informed while traveling around the country. Our common-sense guide to travel safety is a reliable, trustworthy source of up-to-date advice so you can bravely explore the world.

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### Joanna Tovia

Joanna is a freelance travel writer and photographer based in Australia's beautiful Blue Mountains. When she's not exploring far-flung lands, Joanna is writing for print and web.



# Visas & Registration

So you've planned your trip, but have you got your visa? Arguably the most important thing to do before you go, knowing when and how to apply is important. Here are a few tips to make the visa application process easy.

## Before you leave – visas

Planning ahead is wise when it comes to travel, but there is such a thing as planning too far ahead if you're going to China; apply too early for your visa and it will run out before you have a chance to use it.

Apply for your visa about a month prior to departure and keep in mind that the 'valid until' date indicates the date by which you must enter the country for your visa to remain valid.

A tourist visa generally allows you to spend up to 30 days in mainland China, but if you're planning on coming and going from Hong Kong, Macau or elsewhere, you'll need a double – or multiple – entry visa. A detailed itinerary and hotel booking confirmation, or a letter of invitation from a family member or friend living in China (along with a copy of the information page in their passport) will be required as part of your application.

Plans can change once there, of course, but it isn't difficult to organize a short visa extension on a single-entry tourist visa. The Foreign Affairs Branch of the local Public Security Bureau is your friend on this one. Just make sure you apply at least a week before your visa is due to expire, and make sure you have at least six months remaining on the validity of your passport from the date you intend to leave.

Whatever you do, don't overstay your visa. If you can't avoid it, expect fines of



up to ¥500 a day and a potential ban from returning for up to 10 years. If you happen to be arrested and detained while you're there, visa overstay fines will still apply.

## When you get there – registration

China takes security threats seriously, and officials like to keep an eye on where travelers go and what they're doing while they're there. Fingerprinting visitors on arrival has been standard procedure since 2017, and every visitor to China must register their place of residence with the local Public Security Bureau within 24 hours.

This is a simple process if you're staying at a hotel – it's part of check-in – but if you're staying at an Airbnb and your host doesn't take care of this for you, you'll need to pay a visit to your nearest police station to do so yourself.

Make sure you download the Google Translate app before you go (you won't be able to download it once you're in China) in case there isn't an English speaker at the police station.

If it seems a little extreme to have to register every time you travel on to a new town or city within China, avoid the temptation to skip this necessary procedure. Failing to register could mean you end up with a fine or an unpleasant stay in detention.

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# 10 Travel Safety Tips

From managing the sheer numbers of people in China and road rules to mobile phone payments and LGBTQ travel, here are the main concerns travelers should be aware of.

## Dealing with crowds

Almost 1.4 billion people call China home, so get ready to rethink your boundaries around personal space. Elbowing, pushing and cutting in line can be confronting to visitors, but try to accept it as part of the Chinese experience.

Rest assured that 'actively encouraging' you to step aside isn't intended to do you harm. Stand your ground if someone's trying to cut in front of you in line, and have fun being a little pushy in return if you're trying to navigate a crowd.

## Petty crime

There's a reason organized tours are the preferred way of seeing the highlights of this fascinating country – getting around as a group delivers safety in numbers.

Travelers are easy targets for pickpockets, bag snatchers and thieves looking to steal passports, phones, cameras and laptops. Avoid carrying anything in your back pockets, carry handbags across your body, and wear backpacks on your front.

Train and bus stations, busy shopping hubs, public toilets, and popular eating and drinking precincts in major cities are especially prone to petty crime. Trying to thwart a robbery has been known to lead to violence and injury, so it's best to do what a thief asks if you find yourself an unlucky victim. Carrying valuables such as passports inside your clothing is a smart move.

Report stolen items at the nearest



Foreign Affairs Branch of the Public Security Bureau to make a claim on your travel insurance.

## Road risks

Although you are unlikely to drive yourself around in China (international drivers' licenses aren't recognized), traveling by road does not come without risk. The World Health Organization estimates there are at least 600 traffic deaths per day in China. The sheer number of vehicles is one contributing factor, but so is driver inexperience and a flagrant disregard of traffic laws.

Making matters worse, there aren't likely to be seatbelts on long-distance buses, and don't expect to find them in the rear seats of taxis either.

## Pedestrian smarts

The biggest danger visitors are likely to face in China is in crossing the street. Road rules are often ignored, and pedestrians are expected to get out of the way – even if they're crossing the street on a green walk sign.

Beware too the cyclist in a hurry. A bicycle may round the corner at speed when you least expect it, piled high with precariously balanced goods. Shouted orders to get out of the way may give you the warning you need to step back – or

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not. Rely on your eyes more than your ears to check the coast is clear. Electric cars can be almost silent when they approach.

### Passport protection

Leave a photocopy of your passport and visa with a trusted friend or family member before you depart, and take an extra copy to carry around with you. If you're staying at a hotel, ask staff to also photocopy the page showing your entry stamp. The easier you can make it to replace your visa and passport, should it be lost or stolen, the more grateful you'll be that you took these precautionary steps.

Passports are valuable everywhere, but in China they are especially sought after by shady individuals looking to commit crimes using your identity. If it does go AWOL, alert your embassy and contact local police to obtain a loss report. This is essential when checking in to a new hotel or applying for a replacement passport.

Carry your passport with you rather than locking it in the hotel safe. Police are known to carry out random checks and you'll need it to enter many tourist attractions and museums.

### Mobile payment apps

Traveling as part of a tour group has its benefits, and the limited payment methods available in many bars, shops and restaurants can make it challenging to venture off on your own. WeChat



and Alipay apps are now used by most Chinese people to make payments, but these require you to have a Chinese bank account.

Calling ahead to check if a restaurant accepts credit cards or cash will save you time and disappointment – an increasing number accept neither form of payment.

If you're keen to live like a local and go cashless, it is possible to use an overseas credit card to make payments via WeChat, but you can't top up your account or retrieve unspent money without a Chinese bank account or phone number.

Watch this space, though, as this may change. China may be the e-commerce capital of the world, but it remains to be seen whether foreign visitors will be allowed to join their digital revolution.

### Beggars

Be alert to beggars who ask you for money then pursue you or become aggressive if you ignore them. They are common throughout China, but are especially concentrated in Beijing's Silk Alley, the Forbidden City, and other areas that attract crowds of visitors.

Child beggars can pull at your heartstrings and be as pushy as adults, but resist the urge to open your wallet or you'll soon find yourself surrounded by others hopeful for a hand-out. Also, giving to beggars encourages the practice, so don't do it.

In restaurants, staff will usually assist in encouraging beggars to leave you alone, as will police in crowded spots such as public parks. Otherwise, it will be up to you to dissuade them.

### Travel for people of color

Despite a growing number of people visiting from across the world, anyone who looks a little different to the Chinese norm tends to stand out like a beacon. But that needn't be a bad thing. If you find yourself attracting attention (some people may even form a circle around you to gaze

**The World Health Organization estimates there are at least 600 traffic deaths per day in China**

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at your intriguing features), why not use it as an opportunity to interact with the locals?

Chances are high that their interest in you isn't coming from a place of malice or prejudice. They may simply never have come across someone quite like you before. This applies as much to people of ethnically African origin as it does someone with pale blonde hair and skin. Just don't be surprised if you get asked to pose for photos. Lots of photos.

## LGBTQ travel

Although homosexuality has been legal in China since 1997, same-sex marriage remains illegal and there aren't any anti-discrimination laws in place. Strident censorship laws include LGBTQ-related content, which means tour companies and other organizations can't openly promote themselves as being LGBTQ-friendly.

Although there are a range of views on homosexuality within the country – how could there not be, with a population so large – travelers are unlikely to encounter hostility. It's customary for friends of the same sex to walk along hand-in-hand, so displays of affection such as this won't attract any attention.

There's no need for concern when it comes to accommodation either. Same-sex couples booking a room in a high-end

city hotel won't raise an eyebrow, and the polite and reserved nature of the Chinese people generally means surprise is unlikely to be expressed at the smaller hotels, hostels, or guesthouses either.

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If you're looking for a more sociable holiday, connecting with open-minded travelers is possible but make sure you've set up a high-quality VPN on your phone before you leave home. This will protect your privacy and ensure you can still access apps and websites that allow you to connect with others.

## Natural disasters

Just what you don't need on your travels. Fortunately, the chances of your plans being disrupted due to major weather-related incidents are slim in China. The following natural disasters are the only ones that could disrupt your plans, however unlikely.

**Typhoons:** Between May and November, typhoons (mature tropical cyclones) occur along China's south and east coasts. Keep an eye on weather reports (and your weather app) for typhoons in the region; they can change in direction and strength without much warning.

**Earthquakes:** China is in an active seismic zone but earthquakes typically occur in the remote and mountainous non-tourist areas of western China. A magnitude-5.9 earthquake struck Sichuan province in 2019, and this occurred in an area visited by tourists, so don't completely disregard it as a possibility.

**Flooding:** There are distinct rainy seasons in China that can lead to flooding. Between May and September, rural areas along the Yangtze River are particularly prone to flooding.

**Landslides:** The mountainous areas of southwest China can be affected by landslides in the rainy season. Between May and September, Sichuan province (home of the giant panda), Yunnan province and Tibet are more likely to face heavy rain and landslides.



Getty Images / Sochi China Morning Post

# Travel Cons to Avoid

Criminals with faulty moral compasses are adept at coming up with novel ways to fleece the unsuspecting visitor. Here are 10 common scams to watch out for:

**Taxi scams:** Your driver insists you pay a higher fee than the price you agreed on before you left. To reduce the likelihood of this happening to you, stick with licensed, metered taxis arranged through your hotel. Avoid riding in pedicabs and motorized three-wheelers. They are far more likely to overcharge you for their services. If you're traveling for longer than an hour in a taxi, it's not uncommon for a driver to arrange to meet another driver half way. If the drivers attempt to split up your party into two taxis (thus doubling the total cost), refuse.

**Shopping scams:** Even in large shopping malls selling high-end goods, ignore offers of special deals to be had on 'designer' items held in a back room. If you do go, don't be surprised when the door is locked behind you and you are prevented from leaving until you've made a purchase.

**Left with the check:** Disheartening it may be, but invitations to take part in a tea ceremony or to join someone for a meal so they can practice their English are often ploys for con-artists to get fed for free. At the end of the meal, they up and leave you with the hefty bill.

**Special massages:** Foreigners are lured into a building with the promise of a cut-price massage (an enticing offer if you've been on your feet seeing the sights all day), only to be assaulted by a group of thugs and robbed.

**Fake products:** Poor-quality designer knock-offs are pedaled to foreigners at inflated prices, complete with assurances they are the real deal. Have your wits about you and inspect goods closely before haggling for a better price. Nanjing Road in Shanghai and Beijing's Silk Alley are notorious for knock-offs.

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**Switched goods:** Beware the last-minute switcheroo if you've made a purchase at a market or store. Keep watch as your goodies are bagged lest what you end up with is different to what you paid for.

**Counterfeit currency:** Pay the exact cost of an item or bill whenever you can to avoid ending up with counterfeit notes as change. Most shopkeepers use cash detectors or hold money up to the light to check yuan is real before accepting them for payment. To conduct your own check, hold a note up to the light and look for a metal ribbon that runs from top to bottom.

**Stranger danger:** Refuse offers of food, drink or transportation from anyone you don't know. Reports of visitors being drugged and robbed are more common than you might think.

**Art exhibitions:** Students are known to coerce visitors into viewing a free art exhibition at their school, only to find they've done you a drawing while you're there and push you into paying for it.

**Fake ATMs:** Try to only use ATMs at your hotel, a bank or shopping center. Otherwise you risk using an ATM that takes your card or issues counterfeit notes.

# Health & Hygiene

While traveling in China, you need to be aware of potential health risks from illness, drinking water, pollution and public toilets.

Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time to complete all the recommended vaccinations before leaving for China.

Rabies is a growing problem in China, and more than 2,000 people die from it here each year. If an animal (typically a dog) with rabies licks or bites you, treatment is much more of a hassle if you haven't been vaccinated. Either way, seek medical treatment as soon as possible after contact with an animal you suspect is infected.

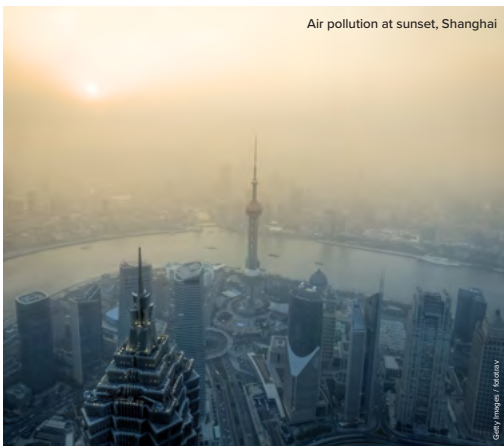
Medical facilities of an international standard are expensive (be sure to take out travel insurance) but available in major cities. In other areas, it can be a bit of a lottery and you may have to pay cash before any treatment is carried out.

Hygiene practices can be questionable, as can the level of medical training staff members have received. On a recent trip to China, one visitor on an organized tour reported having to get stitches at a local (and not terribly clean) medical center after having a fall. The doctor stitching him up was eating his lunch at the same time!

Here are some of the other health risks to watch out for:

**Bird flu:** Strains of the avian influenza virus continue to circulate in chickens. The only way to minimize your risk of exposure is to avoid live poultry markets in rural areas.

**HIV/AIDS:** Apart from taking obvious precautions during any sexual encounters, be sure to request the use of sterilized equipment if you need medical care outside major cities and insist on the



Air pollution at sunset, Shanghai

Hygiene practices can be questionable, as can the level of medical training staff members have received

use of new syringes (even if you have to pay for them).

**Japanese Encephalitis (Encephalitis B):**

This mosquito-borne illness is endemic in rural areas of southern China between June and August. Make sure this is one of the vaccines you get before you travel.

**Malaria and dengue fever:** The risk of contracting malaria is highest if you're traveling to rural areas during the warmer months. Consider taking preventative medicine before and during your trip.

Wearing long sleeves and using repellent and mosquito nets will reduce your risk of dengue fever.

**Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease:** HFMD outbreaks occur most commonly between March and October, and usually affect children younger than 10 years old. Careful and frequent hand washing is the best method of prevention.

**Typhoid:** This serious bacterial infection spreads via contaminated food and water. Be sure you've been vaccinated against typhoid and take extra care with food and drink to be on the safe side. Don't drink tap water, eat only freshly cooked food (avoid buffets), and always choose busy





restaurants over quiet ones.

**Hepatitis A:** This virus infects the liver and can't be treated. Pre-travel vaccination will give you effective protection.

**Schistosomiasis (Bilharzia):** Avoid swimming in fresh water around the central Yangzi River (Cháng Jiāng) basin. If infected, symptoms may not show up for months or years, by which time internal organ damage is irreversible.

## Pollution

Efforts are being made to create vast green corridors in many cities, and China is leading the way in a quest to become the world's renewable energy superpower. In the meantime, high levels of pollution affect cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu because of the sheer number of cars, and the incredible amount of manufacturing and construction activity going on.

Authorities issue red alerts if pollution levels are especially bad, and you can check Air Quality Index (<http://aqicn.org/city/beijing/>) or Air Matters (<https://air-matters.com/>) for real-time pollution readings.

If you do want to venture out on high-pollution days, do what the locals do and wear a mask. Be aware that flights in and out of cities can be cancelled when pollution affects visibility.

## Water quality

Always boil water before drinking or brushing your teeth – tap water is not safe to drink in China. Instead of purchasing plastic water bottles, pack a water bottle with a filter. Avoid ice at restaurants, and ask for a sealed bottle of juice rather than a glass of juice – it may have been diluted with tap water.

## Toilet matters

You'll need to keep your sense of humor when you visit some of the toilets in China, whether they're western-style toilets or not. Outside of your city hotel, squat toilets are standard across the country, and they are usually neither clean nor tidy.

Carry your own toilet paper or tissues around with you, tossing the used ones in the bucket next to the toilet when you're done. If you forget or run out, you can buy toilet paper from shops, restaurants and bars.

Soap may not be provided either, so carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer with you. Public toilets are free or attract a small fee. *Joanna Tovia*

Authorities issue red alerts if pollution levels are especially bad



# Law & Crime

China is known for its strict laws with harsh penalties, police corruption and a high degree of surveillance. Here's everything you need to know to stay out of harm's way.

## Big brother is watching

Surveillance is not new in China – it began as a method of social control under Chairman Mao's communist party in the 1920s – but, visitor or not, technology now enables your every move to be tracked and recorded.

Surveillance smarts and artificial intelligence are becoming so sophisticated that, as well as dramatically improving the odds that you'll be caught if you step out of line, your next move may be anticipated before you've even decided what that next move is.

With the government reportedly spending more on surveillance than national defense, and pilot programs in place to rate each citizen on a social credit system, China is on its way to becoming a digital dictatorship.

High-definition cameras (at least 200 million of them) with facial recognition, directional microphones, night vision and motion tracking are installed not just on lamp posts and buildings, but also cars, buses, drones, markets, schools and the jackets of police officer uniforms.

The degree to which visitor movements are being tracked is anyone's guess, but don't rule it out. Mandatory registration every time you check in to a new hotel is one way to monitor your movements, of course, but it pays to expect the unexpected when it comes to Chinese security measures.

Entering Xinjiang by land from Central Asia, for example, may mean you have to hand over your smartphone (and



passcode) before you're allowed in. An app may then be installed that collects data such as contacts and text messages, and checks whether the content on your phone triggers any of the 73,000 red flags that indicate you're a security risk. Geotracking is also likely to have been enabled by the app when it's returned to you.

## Police corruption

Where there's money to be made, corruption follows and that's certainly true in China. Bribery of police is common, and foreign visitors can be targeted in elaborate set-ups designed to extract money from their families overseas.

One such incident involved an attack on a young male visitor outside a nightclub in Beijing. Police detained the foreigner, rather than his attackers, and forced his family to pay large sums of money before allowing him to leave the country.

## Death penalty and laws in China

Drug offences and crimes such as murder can lead to the death penalty, no matter where in the world you're from, and even minor drug-related offences are taken very seriously. Penalties are severe for drug use, possession, distribution, or

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trafficking. Even small quantities of 'soft' drugs such as marijuana don't escape police attention, and laws are strictly enforced.

Children over the age of 14 are tried as adults in China and are subject to the same conditions in detention.

Consular assistance will be of limited use if a crime has been committed in China, and you won't be allowed to leave the country until any legal matters are resolved. Less than 1 per cent of cases tried in Chinese courts result in a not-guilty verdict.

### Women's safety

Women traveling alone in China don't have any reason to worry about catcalling or harassment, however you should exercise usual safety precautions: avoid walking alone down unlit alleyways at night, never accept a drink from a stranger, keep your wits about you at all times.

Culturally, Chinese people are very accepting of women traveling by themselves. You may be asked questions such as why you are alone, or where is your partner, but solo travel is not frowned upon or discouraged.

Remember: intrusive questions are not meant to offend, the Chinese are just curious people.

The Forbidden City, Beijing



Drug offenses and crimes such as murder can lead to the death penalty, no matter where in the world you're from



## Banned Activities

Activities you might take for granted might be viewed as national security threats in China. Taking part in any of the following will land you in serious trouble:

- **Gambling.** You won't find any poker machines or casinos in China, but illegal gambling does go on. If you find yourself invited to play cards or Mahjong – and money is involved – it's wise to walk away. Even online gambling is considered a breach of the law
- **Taking photos of military or government buildings.** Many tour operators also warn visitors against asking political questions when visiting sites such as Tiananmen Square. The site's 1989 student protests and subsequent massacre is still one of the most censored topics on the Chinese internet
- **Prostitution**
- **Organizing a demonstration without getting government approval**
- **Taking part in preaching, distributing literature or associating with unapproved religious groups**
- **Participating in Falun Gong activities.** Although devotees consider Falun Gong a spiritual practice involving meditation and compassion, the Chinese government sees the movement as an evil cult and has actively been working to stamp it out since 1999.

# Essential Travel Insurance Tips

1.4 billion people, countless adventures; make sure you're covered before you head off on your Chinese adventure. We share our tips to help keep you and your belongings safe.

Whether you're braving the crowds of Beijing or retracing the footsteps of nomads before you on the Silk Road, China is as diverse as you'd expect a country of 1.4 billion people to be. Such uniqueness brings surprises – some amazing, others not so. This is where travel insurance comes in. World Nomads policies may help in the face of the unexpected, allowing you to explore China with a support team behind you.

## Conquering the language barrier in a crisis

Emergencies abroad are stressful enough, but try navigating the Chinese system when you don't speak Mandarin, Cantonese or the local dialect... lucky you have travel insurance!

In a medical emergency, contact World Nomads 24/7 Emergency Assistance team who can direct you to nearby appropriate care, talk to doctors, help out with admin and pay for expenses upfront if necessary. They can also help in other sticky situations, such as if your passport is lost or your checked-in bag ends up in Hunan instead of Hainan.

It's worth knowing that while we can help with communication on the ground, you'll need to translate paperwork into English when you lodge your claim.

## Getting the right cover for your adventure

If you're the kind of nomad that likes to see a country from all angles, including upside-down, underneath and above, keep in mind that many adventure activities have travel insurance

restrictions. You may need to compare activities coverage in World Nomads' Standard and Explorer Plans before you buy, or add activities to your policy when you buy, depending on your country of residence.

Coverage for an activity may have special requirements too and if you don't comply with them, your travel insurance may be void. For example, if you plan to drive you must be licensed for that type of vehicle both at home and in China... that means getting a Chinese driver's license (International Driving Permits aren't recognized).

You may also need cover upgrades, licenses and safety gear for activities such as riding e-bikes, scuba and hiking – check out your policy wording and contact customer service if you're unsure what your cover includes.

It's important to choose your level of coverage carefully when you buy as you can't upgrade after purchasing. Please also check your policy for activities we don't cover and other exclusions, such as search and rescue.

## Common sense in large crowds

While diving into the crowd is part of the experience of traveling China, it's worth brushing up on ways to protect yourself, your stuff and your insurance.

## Theft

Where there are crowds there are often pickpockets. You must take reasonable care to protect your belongings or they may not be covered if stolen. This includes carrying with you valuable items

Get our smart, flexible **Travel Insurance** here



such as electronic devices, jewelry, cash, travel documents and credit cards and never leaving them unsupervised. You must also report any theft to the local authorities as soon as possible and retain documentation to support your claim.

### Civil unrest

If a crowd suddenly becomes a riot, it may impact your cover. Contact our 24/7 Emergency Assistance team if you're affected by civil unrest so they can establish your safety and advise on what to do.

Follow the advice of local authorities, warnings and directions, and listen to local news and media for alerts.

### Traffic accidents

Traffic accidents are unfortunately too common in China, whether you're driving, on a bicycle or on foot. If you're involved in an accident, you'll need written confirmation from the local authority to support any claim. Please also contact 24/7 Emergency Assistance if you're injured.

Find out more at [www.worldnomads.com/travel-insurance](http://www.worldnomads.com/travel-insurance)

*This is only a summary of cover and does not include the full terms and conditions of the policy. You should read your policy wording in full so you understand what is and isn't covered. That way there won't be any surprises if you need to use it. If you have any questions, customer service is here to help.*

## Browse our guides, phrasebooks and storytelling masterclasses

The screenshot displays a grid of travel resources. The top section, 'Free destination guides', features 12 guides for Argentina, Australia, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Iceland, India, Japan, and South Africa. Each guide includes a small image and a brief description of its content. Below this is the 'Travel storytelling masterclasses' section, which offers four courses: 'Introduction to Travel Photography', 'Beginner's Guide to Travel Photography', 'Travel Visual Storytelling', and 'Travel Documentary Filmmaking'. Each course also includes a small image and a short description.

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countless adventures;  
make sure you're covered.

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