



Ten Mission Trip Land Mines

by Bill Allison

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We had just put the finishing touches on what I thought was a great summer mission trip. For a number of people in our group, this was their first time on any sort of mission trip, and since I love watching God use first-hand mission experiences to transform lives, I was pumped up.

As our group was saying goodbye to our newly-made friends overseas, I watched a fifteen-year-old girl from our group walk over to a teenage male, a national and friend of the missionary who hosted us. I was sure she just wanted to say farewell to him. But she didn't say a word. To my total astonishment, she simply walked up to him, put her hands on his shoulders, tilted her head, leaned into him, and gave him a l o n g, s l o w k i s s... a kiss that, from my perspective, seemed to last for an eternity. The young man looked stunned but delighted. (Let's just say that he didn't run away crying to his mommy, nor did he file a sexual harassment complaint. He may, however, still be telling the story to his friends some twenty years later.) I, along with the rest of our group, the hosting missionaries, and the other national believers, didn't enjoy the kiss nearly as much. I felt my heart jump out of my chest and flop hopelessly on the ground in a mixture of blood-boiling anger and deep discouragement.

Talk about missing the point of a mission trip! How could she even think that was in the realm of the appropriate? How could we ever undo the collateral damage of this little but profoundly inappropriate goodbye kiss?

This young girl had stepped on a mission trip land mine. Our group and God's work in that area of the world paid the price in damage.

Make no mistake about it: On a mission trip, the collateral damage of one small misstep could have a profoundly negative effect on you, your group, and your ministry.

The fact is that there are a lot of mission trip land mines buried just beneath the surface... waiting patiently... for you or someone from your group to make one wrong step. Shouldn't you know where these land mines are buried so you can avoid stepping on them?

It's my desire to show you and those in your group where some of the most common mission trip land mines are hiding so that you can avoid stepping on

them and, thus, suffering the consequences. The list that follows is not exhaustive or prioritized in order of importance. I simply offer these ten mission trip land mines in the spirit of Proverbs 22:3: "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it."

Mission Trip Land Mine #1 Romance

Since many people who go on short term mission trips are young and single, a further word of caution needs to be said here. Under "normal" circumstances, romance between two single people of the opposite sex and appropriate age can be a wonderful thing. However, mission trips are hardly normal circumstances.

Romance between two unmarried people while on a mission trip tends to disrupt the unity of the team because those romantically involved only want to be around each other, rather than be a part of the team. The impact of the trip for those who become romantically involved is thwarted because they tend not to be concerned about the mission experience and what God is doing in and through them. They're focused on their love life. This unmarried lovey-dovey couple can send all kinds of potentially inappropriate messages to the people of the country you are in. (In some countries I've been in, just taking a walk alone with a person of the opposite sex carried with it immoral connotations.) We would do well to live above reproach and live life well on the safe side, especially while we are on a mission trip. Short term missionaries must be taught to be very careful in this area because one wrong move could set a missionary's work back for a long time.

Mission trips are not the time or place for romance.

Compounding the problem is the fact that people from other countries watch American movies and/or television. Consequently, they have ill-informed, preconceived ideas about what American men and women are like based on what they have seen. While we know that this would be like doing a study on rabbits based on Bugs Bunny cartoons, it doesn't change the way American men and women are perceived. You need to know this.

To avoid all possible hassles, I recommend that you have everyone sign off on a "no romance with anyone" rule while on the mission trip. The rule should include no-romancing with anyone on the team, anyone from another visiting team, or anyone living in the country in which you will be serving. It would be to your advantage to repeat the "no romancing with anyone" rule regularly at your orientation meetings and while you are on the mission trip whenever necessary. If Lance Romance is unwilling to put his love life on hold for the short time it takes

to go on the mission trip, then I wouldn't bother taking him. The same goes for Lucy Lovesick. Those who get involved in romance while on a mission trip often end up missing the whole point of the trip and cause unnecessary problems for the rest of the team—and the hosting missionaries.

* How will you ensure that you and those on your team will avoid stepping on the land mine of romance?

Mission Trip Land Mine #2 An Inflexible Attitude

Often, mission trips take people to places that tend to be a little more politically, socially, and economically volatile. Consequently, any given situation on a mission trip can change quickly. How will your group handle this volatility? Furthermore, what many of us consider to be necessities are not always assessable abroad. (Sorry ladies, that 110 curling iron will get fried when you plug it into a 220 outlet... and thus... no more primping.) How will your group make due with what is available? Flexibility is imperative while on a short term mission trip.

One of your rigid rules must be: "Be flexible!"

Once while we were in a very poverty-stricken part of the world, our team bought thirty bags of cement and headed out to build a church. Much to our dismay, we couldn't get any water! (Where we were, the water came in trucks and you had to buy barrels of it.) We waited for a couple of hours and still no water. We ended up donating the cement to the church for a different group to use at another time when water would be available, and then we went and did some landscaping and a roofing job at another location. Not exactly what we had set out to do that day, but it was a great lesson in flexibility.

Being flexible tends to drive certain personality types crazy because they desire to have everything planned out ahead of time. The hard truth is that ministry in another culture isn't that cut and dried. That means you **MUST** be flexible. It's a real drag for the hosting missionary or mission agency if you and your team are not flexible.

* What will you do to make sure that you and those on your team avoid stepping on the land mine of an inflexible attitude?

Mission Trip Land Mine #3 An Undefined Work Project

Not having a clearly defined work project is a fast track to trouble. Many times we create our own problems because of the lack of a simple plan of action.

Each day there should be at least a basic idea as to what the team will be doing. Even things such as mowing the grass, painting the church, and helping in the kitchen can be great daily work projects and help in keeping the team's focus on serving. Without a daily work project, the team's focus tends to move from the idea of serving others to being served, from being a short term missionary to a tourist. Keeping in mind what I just said about being flexible, it wouldn't hurt you to have a daily Plan A, Plan B, and a Plan C just in case. Do your best to have a clearly defined work project each day.

* What do you need to do before you leave on this mission trip to avoid the land mine of an ambiguous work project?

Mission Trip Land Mine #4 Focusing Too Much on the Work Project

Considering what I just said about not having a clearly defined work project on which to focus, it's also critically important to point out that it is possible to focus too much on a work project. A daily work project is very important, but not more important than interacting with people, especially the nationals!

A mission trip, like all ministry, is about people, not projects.

Think about it. All work projects have their end in serving people. Many short term mission groups expend all their money and energy in a work project without ever really interacting with anyone outside of their group. Then they have the nerve to go back to their church and talk about their great mission trip. What good does it do a group of Americans to go on a mission trip, do a work project and not interact with any of the nationals? (It's possible to feed the homeless but never interact with them... or even smile at them.) That's not missions. That's American. Don't just build a home. Build a friendship. (It's amazing how much of a connection one can build even with a language barrier.) While on a mission trip, it's vitally important to keep in mind that missions is people, not projects. Work projects are important, but not all important.

* What do you need to do right now to make sure that you and those in your group don't step on the land mine of focusing too much on a work project?

Mission Trip Land Mine #5 Withdrawal

When someone is in a strange environment, surrounded by unfamiliar people speaking an unfamiliar language, immersed in a totally different culture, the natural tendency is to shy away from it all. However, withdrawing from these diverse cultural situations will greatly hinder the mission trip's effectiveness. Experiencing a different culture is an important part of a mission trip. Therefore,

it's very important to have a "go for it" attitude! When you come to a cultural situation that is strange to you, don't shy away. Go for it!

The food? Go for it!

Eating the food of other cultures seems to be a problem for many Americans. But think this through with me. Why would you want to travel all the way to Mexico and turn down the opportunity to eat authentic Mexican food? You may never pass this way again... and Taco Bell is NOT a legitimate substitute! But people often push back and say, "But Bill, if I eat this food, I'm going to get diarrhea." I smile, look them in the eyes, and say, "Of course you will. But is it a *real* mission trip if you don't get diarrhea? I think not." I then put my arm around this person, double check to make sure we have our diarrhea medicine, and we go eat real tacos. (They are delicious!)

It's important to note that, in some cultures, if food is refused even in a polite way, it is nearly equal to a rejection of the people and their culture. A person with a "go for it" attitude will eat whatever the nationals are eating and not complain! (A simple prayer that I have said a few times before a meal goes something like this, "Lord, if I can get this down, you keep it down!") A "go for it" attitude is a must for a positive missions experience—especially at dinner time. Besides it is not everyday you get to eat a grub worm, a lizard tail, or an ostrich! It is a shame to pass by experiences you are not likely to ever have again. Don't withdraw. Go for it!

One time when I took a group to Mexico, we worked at an orphanage laying cement for a basketball court. The orphanage director wanted to do something special for us, so he had some of the ladies make us some soup. The main ingredient was cow intestines. We told our group in advance at our orientation meetings that they were to eat whatever was set before them, as much as possible. I was so proud of one young man who ate what he could and then went outside to discretely vomit. The irony of this situation is that when this group sits around reminiscing about the good times, this soup story usually comes up—no pun intended.

The once-in-a-lifetime opportunities? Go for it!

When I went to Brazil, they needed someone to butcher chickens so we could have chicken for dinner. Growing up in a housing project, I didn't get too many opportunities to butcher chickens, so I volunteered. It was quite an experience—especially since I had to use a knife (they didn't have a machete). I haven't been asked to do something like it since (thank God), but I'm glad I did it then.

The language? Go for it!

Even though I am among the worst at learning foreign languages, I always just dive right in and try to use what little I know when I am on a mission trip. I always get laughed at by the nationals because I so badly butcher their language, but they seem to appreciate me trying. I have said some real dumb things on accident, but that's just part of a good mission experience. (One missionary asked me, "Why do you keep calling that kid 'dog'?" Oops! I guess there is a difference between "Pedro" and "perro." My bad. No wonder the kid never responded to me. But boy, the dogs hounded me—pun intended this time.)

Having a "go for it" attitude will help you shed the ugly American image that we have in many places. Also, it gets you out of your comfort zone, where you have to trust God. And anytime you're trusting God, that's a good thing. Keep in mind that when you get back to America, it's too late to take advantage of the diverse cultural experiences you could have had during your mission trip. Withdrawing hinders the impact of the mission trip, so have a "go for it" attitude.

* How will you ensure that you and the people in your group avoid the land mine of withdrawal—and not miss the opportunity to trust God in a new way?

Mission Trip Land Mine #6 A Lack of Orientation

If you haven't picked up on the idea that this article should be used in your orientation BEFORE your team leaves for a mission trip let me underscore that right now. Why wouldn't you want to warn your team about the mission trip land mines out there as a part of your orientation meetings? Prefield training is often the difference between a good short term mission trip and a bad one. During orientation, the leader must communicate pertinent information about such things as culture, interpersonal relationships, and any rules for the team's trip. Without a thorough and engaging orientation program, the team doesn't have a chance to build momentum for the mission trip.

Mission trips would be great if it weren't for the people on the team...

Since I've been on mission trips where the interpersonal relationships have gotten ugly (some of our groups put the "FUN" in dysFUNctional), I highly suggest that you strategically invest some time in your prefield orientation training those on the team to love God and each other. You're going to need this! Cadre Ministries can connect your team with a trainer who can bring [Ministry Is Relationships](#) training to your team. At a minimum, you're going to need a devotional guide that will daily encourage and equip those on your team to love God and people in practical, hands-on ways. For this, we suggest Cadre's [One Another Living Guide](#). This devotional is a journey through the adventure of living out twenty-five "one another" verses in the Bible. (For example, love one

another, pray for one another, and encourage one another.) If your mission trip is a ten-day trip, you can start everyone in the devotional guide fifteen days BEFORE you leave... and walk through the last ten “one anothers” as a team while on the mission trip.

*To whom do you need to give this article and how can you use it in your next orientation meeting?

Mission Trip Land Mine #7 Fatigue

Almost every short term mission trip that I have had the privilege to participate in has been physically exhausting. That's why I always laugh inside when I hear comments like, "They go on a mission trip every year because it's more or less a vacation." This comment usually comes from a very uninformed person. The truth is that the schedule starts around 6 AM and runs till around midnight. This is okay for the first two or three days, but then the emotional unravelling begins to show. People get on each other's nerves. Words are said. Emotions run high to low. Also, work ethic slips and complaints start to surface. Team unity hits a low.

The first couple of nights, the excitement of the trip keeps people up at night. If a group is sleeping in the same room (males with males and females with females), the first couple of nights mean a lot of conversation. About the third day of the trip, you need to make sure everyone gets right to sleep, because if they don't, you will have problems that you wouldn't otherwise have had. If you need to, sleep in one day or take one day off. A team that is physically exhausted is not likely to have a positive mission experience. Vince Lombardi said, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." Fatigue can turn an otherwise loving person into an angry and emotionally out-of-control idiot—just ask my kids. Learn to read your group, lest a lack of rest hinders the impact of the trip.

*What would be the signs that those in your group are leaning on the land mine of fatigue?

Mission Trip Land Mine #8 A Lack of Food

On a mission trip life can get very busy. You might be tempted to skip a meal or eat very little because you don't have time. Been there, done that, and didn't like it. (Nor did those in my group.) That's why I'm telling you: Don't do it! A well-fed group is a happy group. And a happy group stands to gain much from a mission experience. Your team should have plenty of food to eat. Ideally, water should be available at all times. It may be to your advantage to have light food/goodies/snacks available too, but not enough to take away appetites for the main meals.

This “feed-the-team” principle especially goes for young men. Young men can eat like horses. I've seen the nicest men turn into monsters when their stomachs were empty. But enough about my issues. Save yourself some trouble. Feed the team.

* What do you need to do before the mission trip to ensure that you and your team don't step on the lack of food land mine?

Mission Trip Land Mine #9 A Lack of a Biblical Foundation

It seems that fewer and fewer people who claim to know and love God are intentional about reading, studying, and applying the Bible. Yeah, they go to church and are conversant *about* God and spirituality. But a mere 9 percent of all people who claim to have a relationship with Jesus Christ actually hold to a biblical worldview. Something is missing in our Christian lives. I think it's the APPLICATION of the Bible to every nook and cranny of our lives... also known as discipleship (Luke 6:46-49) and spiritual maturity (Hebrews 5:13-14).

A mission trip is an opportunity to reengage Christians with God via *The Holy Bible*. That's why I require everyone going on a mission trip to find a verse of Scripture that they can base the trip on and then memorize it. People need to have a foundation in the Word of God for missions involvement. Without a biblical foundation for missions involvement, people will base their trip on emotions. The problem is that our emotions change. When things get tough (and they will), our emotions tell us to quit and complain. The Word of God is stable, and it doesn't change like our emotions tend to. With a verse or two of Scripture firmly fixed in the mind and heart through memorization, God's stable Word can override our unstable emotions. As we make our emotions subject to the Word of God, the result is stability in our lives.

Emotional Roller Coaster in Brazil

Let me illustrate what I am saying with an experience that I had when I was on a short term mission trip. Right before I left to go to Brazil for six weeks, my church had a commissioning service for me. One of our spiritual leaders read and expounded on II Timothy 2:3, "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (KJV). I decided to make that verse the verse I would base my trip on.

Three weeks later, I was out in the middle of nowhere in a tribe in Brazil, sick and dehydrated from experiencing dysentery for ten days. I remember laying in my hammock when a tremendous fear and doubt came over me. I started to panic. Did I have something internally wrong with me? I was afraid that I'd die

and never see my family and friends again. Just about the time my emotions had a good hold on me, my mind flashed back to my commissioning service three weeks earlier. In my mind, I watched one of the elders of our church read, "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." I can't explain the peace that came over me as I understood that God wanted me to endure this little inconvenience I was going through and that He would take care of me. The Word of God stabilized my emotions, and I was able to continue on even though my emotions were telling me to panic.

At some point on every mission trip, the flesh will run out of gas and the emotions will start to take over. At that point, people will need to rely on the Word of God—not their emotions.

* What practical steps will you take to equip yourself and the team to avoid the land mine of a lack of a biblical foundation?

Mission Trip Land Mine #10 Culturally Insensitive Dress

It's very important to know what the appropriate dress is for the country in which you will be working. Here are some clothing issues that could cause problems:

- 🗣️ Bright colors scream "look at me." When you are in another country and culture, the goal is to blend in as much as possible—not to stick out as much as possible. I was reminded of this recently during a trip to Egypt. It was quite easy to identify the tourists from the nationals... and that is not a compliment. Do not wear bright colors unless it's considered the normal dress for that culture.
- 🗣️ Rethink wearing gold and diamond jewelry. If it's not your wedding band, you may want to leave it at home.
- 🗣️ At the risk of sounding like a guy with five daughters (yep... it's true), women have to be very sensitive about their shirts. The problem is, for obvious reasons, women's shirts can be too tight, too loose, too high, or too low. (Sorry ladies.) The less revealed the better. Be sure to have this clothing chat with the young women in your group before you leave.
- 🗣️ Guys working with shirts off is offensive in some cultures. Find out from the hosting missionary what is culturally acceptable.
- 🗣️ Wearing shorts can also be a problem in some cultures. Again, before you leave, find out what is culturally acceptable from the hosting missionary. Use discretion.

Perhaps the safest bet is to wear modest jeans and a comfortable fitting work shirt to work in. You may want to take something a little nicer for church or special occasions. Do your homework and find out what is proper in the culture in which you will be living. It's safe to always err on the conservative side.

*What homework do you need to do to make sure you and your team don't step on the land mine of culturally insensitive dress?

What Now?

1. Give this article to each person on your mission team and have them read it—marking it with a pen as they read.
2. Gather the team together to discuss the article.
3. Have each person sign off on the Checklist Covenant on the next page.
4. Guide the team through the **Free Mission Trip Training Session** included in this article.
5. Contact info@cadreministries.com to bring Cadre's **Ministry Is Relationships** training to your team.
6. Visit www.cadreministries.com/store to get Cadre's devotional, the **One Another Living Guide**, for each member of your team.

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A Checklist Covenant to Help You and Your Team Avoid Stepping on a Mission Trip Land Mine...

Check off and sign.

- I have read the article, *Ten Mission Trip Land Mines*.
- I understand and will obey the "no romancing with anyone" rule.
- I understand and will obey the "be flexible" rule.
- I know what work projects we will be doing on the mission trip. Our work projects are

- I clearly understand that missions is about people, not projects.
- I will do my best to have a "go for it" attitude and not withdraw when I encounter culturally different circumstances.
- I understand that orientation meetings are critical to the success of our mission trip and will participate in each orientation meeting.
- While on the mission trip, I will go to sleep when my leader tells me.
- While on the mission trip, I will keep hydrated by drinking water and take time to eat even when I get incredibly busy.
- I have a biblical foundation for my involvement on this mission trip. I have memorized the following passage of Scripture:

- I will dress in such a way as to honor Jesus Christ and the culture of the people whom I am serving.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

A Free Mission Trip Training Session...

On Your Own:

Create a list of at least five more mission trip land mines not touched on in the article:

Why is this a land mine?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

With Your Team:

Gather your team together and have everyone share their lists of mission trip land mines. On a piece of large poster board, create your group's top ten mission trip land mines. Be sure to discuss these questions:

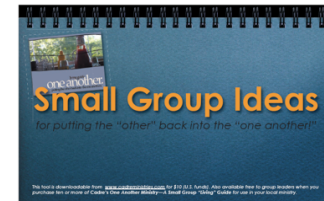
1. Why are these mission trip land mines?
2. What could happen if a team member steps on each of the land mines on your list?

Recommended Resources for Mission Trips

At a minimum, **you're going to need a devotional guide** that will daily encourage and equip those on your team to love God and people in practical, hands-on ways. For this, we suggest Cadre's **[One Another Living Guide](#)**. This devotional is a journey through the adventure of living out twenty-five "one another" verses in the Bible. (For example, love one another, pray for one another, and encourage one another.) If your mission trip is a ten-day trip, you can start everyone in the devotional guide fifteen days BEFORE you leave... and walk through the last ten "one anothers" as a team while on the mission trip.



Note: For orders of 10 or more, you get a FREE PDF download of the **[One Another Small Group Guide](#)**.



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