6 Travel Planning Tips for the Perfect Vacation With Bipolar

by KIKI WOODHAM

How to Travel With Bipolar: Tips for Going on Vacation With Bipolar

Vacation: just the word is enough to make me giddy. It makes me think of far-off destinations, exotic foods, sleeping late, trying new things, suntans and partying.

Most of my vacations are a little tamer; I have a partner, two children (both still in grade school), and a limited budget. We live in the Netherlands, and the reach of our vacations extends about as far as we can drive in a day.

Less is better because the kids don't do well on long car trips. Neither do I, sometimes.

This year we've planned a vacation to one of my favorite parts of the world: the Eiffel region of Germany. I grew up there, and it's not just nostalgia that makes me yearn to go back as often as possible.

It's rural and quiet, and practically unchanged in the 25 years since I left it. The people are unfailingly friendly, the food is delicious, and the area is brimming with beautiful scenery, untouched nature, astonishing gothic cathedrals, ruined castles, and so many other amazing places to visit.

My familiarity with the local customs and language is something I treasure and do my best to pass on to my children whenever we visit.

Booking our vacation this year got me thinking about some of the odd things I have to keep in mind when planning a vacation. Being bipolar, stability is both a daily challenge and a tremendous reward.

Vacations, especially longer ones, can really throw off the daily rhythms I've built up at home, which can, in turn, upset that precious stability I've worked so hard to build.

They also present plenty of opportunities to overeat, spend too much, and drink too much. But with a little careful planning (not too much, there's still room for spontaneity!), we can avoid some of those stumbling blocks and keep our vacations healthy and happy.

Take Your Meds

If you take medication to help manage your bipolar symptoms, remembering it while on vacation (and bringing enough along) can be challenging. Some medications might require special letters or 'passports' to allow you take them out of the country, or may even be banned in some countries.

To help prevent some surprises at the airport or border, check with your doctor or pharmacy ahead of time if you're traveling out of the country. Get all the information you need about traveling with your prescription(s), and make sure the right forms and letters are prepared ahead of time.

Bring extra along if possible — having some stashed back at your hotel is always a good idea in case a bag is lost or stolen while you're out.

As far as remembering to take your meds regularly while you're taking in the sights, a simple digital watch is one of the best helpers available. Your phone might get lost, broken or stolen, but an inexpensive watch with basic alarm functions is much less likely to meet any of these fates.

This means you're less likely to forget your medication, which means you're more likely to stay healthy and stable.

Go to Sleep

Consistent sleep — and enough of it — is key to bipolar stability. For me, it's the foundation on which everything else is built.

When my sleep rhythm changes too drastically or for too long, everything else starts to unravel on top of it. No matter how fun it might be to go out clubbing late into the night every night while on vacation, too much of that kind of behavior will ruin that lovely stable sleep routine.

Next page: making a budget, eating well, and more tips for going on vacation with bipolar.

Go to Sleep

And that's not even taking jet lag or time zones into account. That doesn't mean you can't stay out late at all — as with everything, practice moderation. I use a 'one in four' rule.

Staying up too late more than one out of every four nights will usually wreck my day/night rhythm, and I'm back to square one, trying to figure out how to sleep properly again. If going to bed at the same time you do at home is too unrealistic, set a bedtime for the duration of your vacation and stick to it as much as possible.

Make a Budget

Most of us have at some point spent far more money than we had or should have spent. And it's not just when I'm manic — I'm as capable of spending far too much money when I'm depressed as well.

Be careful when you're vacationing. You don't have to take a vow of poverty, but you don't have to burn through all your savings and credit cards, either. Make a budget ahead of time that includes realistic estimates for food and other necessities, as well as a reasonable amount of spending money.

If you feel you need an emergency fund, try a prepaid credit card. This will allow you to have a little extra nest egg in case money, tickets or credit cards are stolen or lost, but won't leave staring into a bottomless pit of spending potential if the urge to go a little wild strikes.

Eat Well

Sometimes a meal might consist of a couple of granola bars from your backpack or a hurried burger at a fast-food joint, but do your best to eat well. Healthy eating is an important key to a healthy mind.

Eating regularly also plays an integral part — if you're skipping meals or eating at drastically different times every day, it's not going to make you feel any healthier or happier. Take care of your body — you deserve it. Stay hydrated and try not to fall into the vacation trap of drinking a lot of alcohol.

Expect the Unexpected

Stuff happens while you're on vacation that you could never prepare or plan for even on your best day. A purse is forgotten in a taxi, a suitcase is lost by an airline, an unexpected rainstorm catches you without shelter, or that interesting local dish you tried has you running for the bathroom all night.

You can't prevent these kinds of things, and you can only do so much to prepare for them, but doing what you can will help ensure that your vacation goes as smoothly as possible and you stay healthy and happy.

Pack a first-aid kit — band-aids, antiseptic ointment, aspirin or other painkillers, antacids, petroleum jelly, sunburn relief, basic sewing kit, superglue (instant shoe repair!), disposable rain poncho, etc. Be as thorough as possible, and take it with you when you go out on longer excursions.

My partner always teases me about this, but more often than not he's the one who needs whatever is in that little bag (I remind him of this regularly).

If you're flying, spread your belongings out as evenly as possible between your suitcases (don't put all your pants in one bag, for example), and make sure your carry-on contains a change of clothes and a few extra pairs of underwear. This way, if anything is lost or delayed by the airline, you won't be left entirely out in the cold.

Have Fun!

Above all, have a great time! You're on vacation, you deserve it, and it's going to be awesome. Making some basic preparations before you leave and having a few little helpers in place for when you arrive will make sure you have the best vacation possible.