

TRAVEL INSURANCE

Prepare for the unexpected or expect to pay

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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Researching your insurance coverage is every bit as important as researching other aspects of your travels.

News headlines sometimes relate a horror story of travellers getting stuck with a huge bill because of an emergency. They bought insurance, but the insurance company won't pay.

We seldom know the full story of these disputes, but it reinforces the importance of paying close attention to travel insurance.

You can get insurance for a variety of potential travel-related glitches, such as cancellation insurance in case you have to cancel your trip before you leave, or trip interruption insurance in case something happens while you're travelling.

The big one is out-of-Canada emergency health coverage. This is where most is at stake, both for your health and wallet, and where we find the most ifs, buts, exclusions and seemingly endless pages of fine print.

Policies will almost inevitably have a pre-existing condition provision, meaning that if you went on a trip with a medical condition, you may not be covered if you need treatment while away.

How companies define and deal with the dreaded pre-existing condition clause is one of the most important factors to consider when choosing an insurance policy.

For many policies, you may be covered if your medical condition has been stable and under control for a long enough time. Exactly how long and precisely what is meant by "stable" can vary among policies.

One factor is how long you have been on the same medication. Some policies may deny coverage if your medication, or even the dosage, has been changed within a certain time frame.

Often this is within the past six months (or 12 months for those 60 and over), although this too can vary.

The insurance company might also have an out if your doctor recently sent you for tests for a condition, or if recent blood tests have shown a change to your health.

Some policies have a medical questionnaire to fill out and "incorrectly" answered questions could cause problems. For a major claim, you can bet that the insurer will delve deeply into your medical past.

You should answer questions honestly, but sometimes questions may be ambiguous or open to interpretation, and it's easy to unintentionally give an answer that the insurance company can later interpret as inaccurate.

If you're not sure how to answer a question, one option is to ask your doctor for advice. If you answer questions over the phone, be sure to ask for a written confirmation of

your responses.

Insurance policies always have a list of exclusions, often a long list. Most exclude coverage if you go to a country or region where the Canadian government has issued an advisory against travel. (www.travel.gc.ca)

Coverage is often denied if you take part in extreme sports such as mountain climbing or bungee jumping, although how this is defined varies.

According to the Travel Health Insurance Association of Canada (THIA), which represents the travel insurance industry, some policies consider hiking a form of mountaineering.

Reading through the list of exclu-

sions, you can't help but wonder what's left that actually is covered.

So what's a poor traveller to do? There's no escaping that travel insurance is a murky minefield, with the potential to save you in an emergency abroad, but also with the potential to throw you for a highly expensive loop because of gremlins lurking in the fine print.

Despite the potential pitfalls, more than 95 percent of travel insurance claims in Canada are successfully paid, THIA reports.

The best we can do is to compare policies carefully, since the provisions can vary widely, and pick the ones that best fit our needs.

This means taking the time to read the tedious fine print so you



know what is and isn't covered. If you're not sure what something means, ask for clarification. As with most insurance, the devil is in the details.

Besides comparing provisions, try to compare the reputation of insurance companies. While this is harder to assess, getting feedback

from friends who have had experience with insurance claims, or even doing searches on the internet, might shed some light on which companies tend to be fair and which ones have a reputation of being hard-nosed.

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