There's a particular kind of bad day that travel insurance creates rather than prevents. You file a claim. You're confident it's legitimate. Then the denial letter arrives, citing a clause on page 34 of the policy document — a clause you never read because it wasn't in the summary, and it wasn't mentioned when you bought the plan.

The five exclusions below are the ones that catch nomads most frequently. Not because they're obscure, but because the way they're written makes them easy to misunderstand or miss entirely.

1. The "Known Event" Exclusion — And Why the Date You Buy Matters

Every travel insurance policy excludes coverage for events that were already known, foreseeable, or in progress at the time you purchased the policy. This is standard and logical. What catches nomads off guard is how broadly and strictly "known" gets defined.

How it works in practice

If a hurricane is named and tracked in the Atlantic, and you purchase travel insurance the day after it's named, your policy will exclude any hurricane-related claims for that storm — even if the hurricane ends up hitting your destination two weeks later. The insurer's argument: the risk was already knowable at purchase time.

The same logic applies to political instability, airline strikes, pandemic-related travel disruptions, and natural disaster warnings. If it's been reported on CNN by the time you buy, it's typically "known" for exclusion purposes.

What this means for nomads

Buy insurance early — ideally within 24–72 hours of booking your first paid trip expense. The earlier you buy, the smaller the window of pre-known events that can be used to deny claims. Buying insurance the day before your flight, when your region is already under a weather advisory or strike warning, dramatically narrows your coverage.

2. Motorbike and Scooter Exclusions — The Bali Trap

In Canggu, renting a scooter is as routine as opening a laptop. Practically every traveler does it. And practically every standard travel insurance policy has language that can void your medical coverage the moment you do.

The specific exclusions to watch for

No valid license clause: Many policies state that motorbike accidents are only covered if you hold a valid motorcycle license in your country of residence. A standard car license does not qualify. If you've never ridden a motorbike at home and therefore have no motorbike license, you may be uninsured the moment you get on one abroad.

Engine displacement limits: Some policies cover motorized bikes only under a certain engine size (typically 50cc or 125cc). A 150cc or 200cc scooter — which is common in Southeast Asia — can fall outside coverage.

Helmet requirement clauses: A handful of policies explicitly require helmet use as a condition of coverage. If you're in an accident not wearing a helmet, even if you weren't at fault, the claim can be denied.

What to do

Read the motor vehicle clause carefully. Look for explicit scooter/motorbike language. If it's ambiguous, call the insurer before your trip and ask: "If I rent a 150cc scooter in Bali without a motorcycle license and am injured in an accident, will my medical claim be covered?" Get the answer in writing via email.

3. The Alcohol Clause — The One Nobody Talks About

Most travel insurance policies include a clause excluding claims that occur while the policyholder is under the influence of alcohol. The threshold is usually not specified — it's often phrased as "while intoxicated" or "while under the influence."

Why this matters more than it seems

You don't have to be blackout drunk for this exclusion to apply. A single drink before an accident can give an insurer grounds to investigate whether alcohol was a contributing factor — and to use it as a basis for a partial or full denial.

This exclusion comes up most commonly in:

- Motorbike accidents (especially late at night)
- Falls and injuries at social events, bars, or hostels
- Water-related accidents (swimming, boating)

The insurer's standard of proof is not "legally intoxicated by your country's standards." It can be interpreted as loosely as "any measurable consumption."

What to know

This doesn't mean never have a drink abroad. It means be aware that if an accident happens in a context where drinking was plausible, your insurer may ask for a blood alcohol report — and use whatever they find to reduce or deny your claim. Nomads who are honest in their claims sometimes get surprised by this.

4. "Remote Work" as Grounds for Business Travel Exclusions

This is an increasingly sharp issue for nomads, and it sits at the intersection of how insurance policies were written (for tourists) and how nomads actually travel (as location-independent workers).

The problem

Many travel insurance policies distinguish between "leisure travel" and "business travel." Policies sold as leisure travel policies are cheaper but explicitly exclude certain coverage while the policyholder is engaged in business activities.

The exclusion language varies, but it often appears as something like:

"This policy does not cover losses arising from or occurring during the course of any employment or business activity."

For a traditional tourist, this is irrelevant. For a nomad who is simultaneously "on vacation" in Lisbon and "on the clock" for a client — sometimes simultaneously — the line is murky.

What can go wrong

If you file a claim for a laptop stolen during a "work day" (sitting in a café, on your computer, billing hours), an insurer could argue this occurred during business activity and therefore falls outside the leisure travel coverage. The same could apply to an injury that occurred during a work commute (walking to a coworking space).

What to do

Look for insurance specifically designed for remote workers or digital nomads. Providers like SafetyWing and Heymondo have explicitly structured their policies around the nomad use case, removing the ambiguity around remote work activity. This is one of the clearest cases where provider selection matters more than coverage limits.

5. Pre-Existing Conditions and the "Stable" Definition

This is the most consequential exclusion, and it's the one with the most legal complexity.

Most travel insurance policies exclude coverage for pre-existing medical conditions. The definition of "pre-existing" is typically anchored to a You can find out more look-back period — any condition diagnosed, treated, or consulted about in the 90, 180, or 365 days before the policy purchase date.

The "stable" exception — and what stable actually means

Many policies offer a partial exception: a pre-existing condition is covered if it has been "stable" for a defined period (often 90–180 days). But "stable" has a specific legal meaning in insurance context:

A condition is stable only if, during the stability period:

- No new medications were prescribed
- No existing medications were changed in dosage
- No new symptoms appeared or existing symptoms worsened
- No new consultations, tests, or investigations were ordered

A single doctor's appointment to "check in" on a managed condition — even if nothing changed — can restart the stability clock. A medication dosage adjustment for blood pressure, even a routine one, can disqualify the entire condition from coverage.

The compounding issue for nomads

Nomads often have fragmented healthcare relationships: a GP at home, telehealth consultations on the road, specialist visits when convenient. This pattern of care can create documentation gaps that make it difficult to prove stability — and inconsistencies that give insurers grounds to dispute claims.

What to do

If you have any managed condition — diabetes, hypertension, asthma, anxiety, thyroid issues — get the specific stability definition in writing from your insurer before purchase. Ask: "Given this medication history, would my condition be considered stable under your policy?" Consult a broker if needed.

Knowing What You're Not Covered For

Exclusion Common Trigger How to Mitigate Known events Late policy purchase Buy within 24–72 hours of first booking Motorbike accidents No license, wrong CC, no helmet Get written confirmation of coverage before renting Alcohol-related claims Any accident in a social context Understand the insurer's definition of "intoxicated" Business activity Remote work during a claim Buy nomad-specific policy, not generic leisure policy Pre-existing conditions Any managed health condition Get stability definition in writing; use CFAR or nomad-tier plans

The goal isn't paranoia — it's clarity. An exclusion you know about is a gap you can plan around. An exclusion you didn't know about is a denied claim and a bill you didn't budget for.

For a full breakdown of which travel insurance providers have the most nomad-friendly terms on these specific exclusions, the comprehensive guide to the best travel insurance for digital nomads details how SafetyWing, World Nomads, Heymondo, and others handle each of these categories — including their actual policy language on motorbike coverage and remote work activities.

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