

A SAFE TRIP ABROAD

DEPARTMENT OF STATE PUBLICATION 10942

Bureau of Consular Affairs

March 2002

Foreword

When you travel abroad, the odds are in your favor that you will have a safe and incident-free trip. However, crime and violence, as well as unexpected difficulties, do happen to U.S. citizens in all parts of the world. No one is better able to tell you this than the U.S. consular officers who work in more than 250 U.S. embassies and consulates around the globe. Every day of the year, U.S. embassies and consulates receive calls from American citizens in distress.

Happily, most problems can be solved over the telephone or by a visit of the U.S. citizen to the Consular Section of the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate. But, there are less fortunate occasions when U.S. diplomats are called on to meet U.S. citizens at foreign police stations, hospitals, prisons and even at morgues. In these cases, the assistance that diplomats can offer is specific but limited.

In the hope of helping you avoid serious difficulties during your abroad, we have prepared the following travel tips.

Thank you for taking the time to become an informed traveler. We wish you a safe and wonderful journey!

BEFORE YOU GO

What to Bring

Safety begins when you pack. To avoid being a target, dress conservatively. Don't wear expensive looking jewelry. A flashy wardrobe or one that is too casual can mark you as a tourist. As much as possible, avoid the appearance of affluence.

Always try to travel light. You can move more quickly and will be more likely to have a free hand. You will also be less tired and less likely to set your luggage down, leaving it unattended.

Carry the minimum amount of valuables necessary for your trip and plan a place or places to conceal them. Your passport, cash and credit cards are most secure when locked in a hotel safe. When you have to carry them on your person, you may wish to conceal them in several places rather than putting them all in one wallet or pouch. Avoid handbags, fanny packs and outside pockets that are easy targets for thieves. Inside pockets and a sturdy shoulder bag with the strap worn across your chest are somewhat safer. One of the safest places to carry valuables is in a pouch or money belt worn under your clothing.

If you wear glasses, pack an extra pair. Bring them and any medicines you need in your carry-on luggage.

To avoid problems when passing through customs, keep medicines in their original, labeled containers. Bring copies of your prescriptions and the generic names for the drugs. If a medication is unusual or contains narcotics, carry a letter from your doctor attesting to your need to take the drug. If you have any doubt about the legality of carrying a certain drug into a country, consult the embassy or consulate of that country first.

Bring travelers checks and one or two major credit cards instead of cash.

Pack an extra set of passport photos along with a photocopy of your passport information page to make replacement of your passport easier in the event it is lost or stolen.

Put your name, address and telephone numbers inside and outside of each piece of luggage. Use covered luggage tags to avoid casual observation of your identity or nationality. If possible, lock your luggage.

Consider getting a telephone calling card. It is a convenient way of keeping in touch. If you have one, verify that you can use it from your overseas location(s). Access numbers to U.S. operators are published in many international newspapers. Find out your access number before you go.

What to Leave Behind

Don't bring anything you would hate to lose. Leave at home:

- valuable or expensive-looking jewelry,
- irreplaceable family objects,
- all unnecessary credit cards,
- Social Security card, library cards, and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet.

Leave a copy of your itinerary with family or friends at home in case they need to contact you in an emergency.

A Few Things to Bring AND Leave Behind

Make two photocopies of your passport identification page, airline tickets, driver's license and the credit cards that you plan to bring with you. Leave one photocopy of this data with family or friends at home; pack the other in a place separate from where you carry your valuables.

Leave a copy of the serial numbers of your travelers' checks with a friend or relative at home. Carry your copy with you in a separate place and, as you cash the checks, cross them off the list.

What to Learn About Before You Go

Security. The Department of State's Consular Information Sheets are available for every country of the world. They describe entry requirements, currency regulations, unusual health conditions, the crime and security situation, political disturbances, areas of instability, and special information about driving and road conditions. They also provide addresses and emergency telephone numbers for U.S. embassies and consulates. In general, the Sheets do not give advice. Instead, they describe conditions so travelers can make informed decisions about their trips.

In some dangerous situations, however, the Department of State recommends that Americans defer travel to a country. In such a case, a Travel Warning is issued for the country in addition to its Consular Information Sheet.

Public Announcements are a means to disseminate information about relatively short-term and/or transnational conditions posing significant risks to the security of American travelers. They are issued when there is a perceived threat, even if it does not involve Americans as a particular target group. In the past, Public Announcements have been issued to deal with short-term coups, pre-election disturbances, violence by terrorists and anniversary dates of specific terrorist events.

You can access Consular Information Sheets, Travel Warnings and Public Announcements 24-hours a day in several ways.

Internet

The most convenient source of information about travel and consular services is the Consular Affairs home page. The web site address is <http://travel.state.gov>. If you do not have access to the Internet at home, work or school, your local library may provide access to the Internet.

Fax

From your fax machine, dial (202) 647-3000, using the handset as you would a regular telephone. The system will instruct you on how to proceed.

Telephone

Consular Information Sheets and Travel Warnings may be heard any time by dialing the office of American Citizens Services at (202) 647-5225 from a touchtone phone.

In Person/By Mail

Consular Information Sheets, Travel Warnings and Public Announcements are available at any of the regional passport agencies and U.S. embassies and consulates abroad, or, by writing and sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the Office of American Citizens Services, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Room 4811, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C. 20520-4818.

Local Laws and Customs. When you leave the United States, you are subject to the laws of the country where you are. Therefore, before you go, learn as much as you can about the local laws and customs of the places you plan to visit. Good resources are your library, your travel agent, and the embassies, consulates or tourist bureaus of the countries you will visit. In addition, keep track of what is being reported in the media about recent developments in those countries.

THINGS TO ARRANGE BEFORE YOU GO

Your Itinerary. As much as possible, plan to stay in larger hotels that have more elaborate security. Safety experts recommend booking a room from the second to seventh floors above ground level to deter easy entrance from outside, but low enough for fire equipment to reach.

Because take-off and landing are the most dangerous times of a flight, book non-stop flights when possible. When there is a choice of airport or airline, ask your travel agent about comparative safety records.

Legal Documents. Have your affairs at home in order. If you leave a current will, insurance documents, and power of attorney with your family or a friend, you can feel secure about traveling and will be prepared for any emergency that may arise while you are away. If you have minor children, consider making guardianship arrangements for them.

Credit. Make a note of the credit limit on each credit card that you bring. Make certain not to charge over that amount on your trip. In some countries, Americans have been arrested for innocently exceeding their credit limit. Ask your credit card company how to report the loss of your card from abroad. 800 numbers do not work from abroad, but your company should have a number that you can call while you are overseas.

Insurance. Find out if your personal property insurance covers you for loss or theft abroad. More importantly, check on whether your health insurance covers you abroad. Medicare and Medicaid do not provide payment for medical care outside the U.S. Even if your health insurance will reimburse you for medical care that you pay for abroad, normal health insurance does not pay for medical evacuation from a remote area or from a country where medical facilities are inadequate. Consider purchasing one of the short-term health and emergency assistance policies designed for travelers. Also, make sure that the plan you purchase includes medical evacuation in the event of an accident or serious illness.

PRECAUTIONS TO TAKE WHILE TRAVELING

Safety on the Street

Use the same common sense traveling overseas that you would at home. Be especially cautious in or avoid areas where you are likely to be victimized. These include crowded subways, train stations, elevators, tourist sites, market places, festivals and marginal areas of cities.

Don't use short cuts, narrow alleys or poorly-lit streets. Try not to travel alone at night.

Avoid public demonstrations and other civil disturbances.

Keep a low profile and avoid loud conversations or arguments. Do not discuss travel plans or other personal matters with strangers.

Avoid scam artists. Beware of strangers who approach you, offering bargains or to be your guide.

Beware of pickpockets. They often have an accomplice who will:

- jostle you,
- ask you for directions or the time,
- point to something spilled on your clothing,
- or distract you by creating a disturbance.

A child or even a woman carrying a baby can be a pickpocket. Beware of groups of vagrant children who create a distraction while picking your pocket.

Wear the shoulder strap of your bag across your chest and walk with the bag away from the curb to avoid drive-by purse-snatchers.

Try to seem purposeful when you move about. Even if you are lost, act as if you know where you are going. When possible, ask directions only from individuals in authority.

Know how to use a pay telephone and have the proper change or token on hand.

Learn a few phrases in the local language so you can signal your need for help, the police, or a doctor. Make a note of emergency telephone numbers you may need: police, fire, your hotel, and the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate.

If you are confronted, don't fight back. Give up your valuables. Your money and passport can be replaced, but you cannot.

Safety in Your Hotel

Keep your hotel door locked at all times. Meet visitors in the lobby.

Do not leave money and other valuables in your hotel room while you are out. Use the hotel safe.

Let someone know when you expect to return if you are out late at night.

If you are alone, do not get on an elevator if there is a suspicious-looking person inside.

Read the fire safety instructions in your hotel room. Know how to report a fire. Be sure you know where the nearest fire exit and alternate exits are located. Count the doors between your room and the nearest exit. This could be a life saver if you have to crawl through a smoke-filled corridor.

Safety on Public Transportation

If a country has a pattern of tourists being targeted by criminals on public transport, that information is mentioned in the Consular Information Sheets under the "Crime Information" section.

Taxis. Only take taxis clearly identified with official markings. Beware of unmarked cabs.

Trains. Well organized, systematic robbery of passengers on trains along popular tourists routes is a serious problem. It is more common at night and especially on overnight trains.

If you see your way being blocked by a stranger and another person is very close to you from behind, move away. This can happen in the corridor of the train or on the platform or station.

Do not accept food or drink from strangers. Criminals have been known to drug food or drink offered to passengers. Criminals may also spray sleeping gas in train compartments.

Where possible, lock your compartment. If it cannot be locked securely, take turns sleeping in shifts with your traveling companions. If that is not possible, stay awake. If you must sleep unprotected, tie down your luggage, strap your valuables to you and sleep on top of them as much as possible.

Do not be afraid to alert authorities if you feel threatened in any way. Extra police are often assigned to ride trains on routes where crime is a serious problem.

Buses. The same type of criminal activity found on trains can be found on public buses on popular tourist routes. For example, tourists have been drugged and robbed while sleeping on buses or in bus stations. In some countries whole bus loads of passengers have been held up and robbed by gangs of bandits.

Safety When You Drive

When you rent a car, don't go for the exotic; choose a type commonly available locally. Where possible, ask that markings that identify it as a rental car be removed. Make certain it is in good repair. If available, choose a car with universal door locks and power windows, features that give the driver better control of access to the car. An air conditioner, when available, is also a safety feature, allowing you to drive with windows closed. Thieves can and do snatch purses through open windows of moving cars.

Keep car doors locked at all times. Wear seat belts.

As much as possible, avoid driving at night.

Don't leave valuables in the car. If you must carry things with you, keep them out of sight locked in the trunk.

Don't park your car on the street overnight. If the hotel or municipality does not have a parking garage or other secure area, select a well-lit area.

Never pick up hitchhikers.

Don't get out of the car if there are suspicious looking individuals nearby. Drive away.

Patterns of Crime Against Motorists

In many places frequented by tourists, including areas of southern Europe, victimization of motorists has been refined to an art. Where it is a problem, U.S. embassies are aware of it and consular officers try to work with local authorities to warn the public about the dangers. In some locations, these efforts at public awareness have paid off, reducing the frequency of incidents. You may also wish to ask your rental car agency for advice on avoiding robbery while visiting tourist destinations.

Carjackers and thieves operate at gas stations, parking lots, in city traffic and along the highway. Be suspicious of anyone who hails you or tries to get your attention when you are in or near your car.

Criminals use ingenious ploys. They may pose as good Samaritans, offering help for tires that they claim are flat or that they have made flat. Or they may flag down a motorist, ask for assistance, and then steal the rescuer's luggage or car. Usually they work in groups, one person carrying on the pretense while the others rob you.

Other criminals get your attention with abuse, either trying to drive you off the road, or causing an "accident" by rear-ending you or creating a "fender bender."

In some urban areas, thieves don't waste time on ploys, they simply smash car windows at traffic lights, grab your valuables or your car and get away. In cities around the world, "defensive driving" has come to mean more than avoiding auto accidents; it means keeping an eye out for potentially criminal pedestrians, cyclists and scooter riders.

How to Handle Money Safely

To avoid carrying large amounts of cash, change your travelers' checks only as you need currency. Countersign travelers' checks only in front of the person who will cash them.

Do not flash large amounts of money when paying a bill. Make sure your credit card is returned to you after each transaction.

Deal only with authorized agents when you exchange money, buy airline tickets or purchase souvenirs. Do not change money on the black market.

If your possessions are lost or stolen, report the loss immediately to the local police. Keep a copy of the police report for insurance claims and as an explanation of your plight. After reporting missing items to the police, report the loss or theft of:

- travelers' checks to the nearest agent of the issuing company,
- credit cards to the issuing company,

- airline tickets to the airline or travel agent,
- passport to the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate.

How to Avoid Legal Difficulties

When you are in a foreign country, you are subject to its laws and are under its jurisdiction NOT the protection of the U.S. Constitution.

You can be arrested overseas for actions that may be either legal or considered minor infractions in the United States. Be aware of what is considered criminal in the country where you are. Consular Information Sheets include information on unusual patterns of arrests in various countries when appropriate.

Some of the offenses for which U.S. citizens have been arrested abroad are:

Drug Violations. More than 1/3 of U.S. citizens incarcerated abroad are held on drug charges. Some countries do not distinguish between possession and trafficking. Many countries have mandatory sentences - even for possession of a small amount of marijuana or cocaine. A number of Americans have been arrested for possessing prescription drugs, particularly tranquilizers and amphetamines, that they purchased legally in certain Asian countries and then brought to some countries in the Middle East where they are illegal. Other U.S. citizens have been arrested for purchasing prescription drugs abroad in quantities that local authorities suspected were for commercial use. If in doubt about foreign drug laws, ask local authorities or the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate.

Possession of Firearms. The places where U.S. citizens most often come into difficulties for illegal possession of firearms are nearby - Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean. Sentences for possession of firearms in Mexico can be up to 30 years. In general, firearms, even those legally registered in the U.S., cannot be brought into a country unless a permit is first obtained from the embassy or a consulate of that country and the firearm is registered with foreign authorities on arrival. (Note: If you take firearms or ammunition to another country, you cannot bring them back into the U.S. unless you register them with U.S. Customs before you leave the U.S.)

Photography. In many countries you can be harassed or detained for photographing such things as police and military installations, government buildings, border areas and transportation facilities. If you are in doubt, ask permission before taking photographs.

Purchasing Antiques. Americans have been arrested for purchasing souvenirs that were, or looked like, antiques and which local customs authorities believed were national treasures. This is especially true in Turkey, Egypt and Mexico. In countries where antiques are important, document your purchases as reproductions if that is the case, or if they are authentic, secure the necessary export permit (usually from the national museum.)

Terrorism

Terrorist acts occur at random and unpredictably, making it impossible to protect yourself absolutely. The first and best protection is to avoid travel to unsafe areas where there has been a persistent record of terrorist attacks or kidnapping. The vast majority of foreign states have good records of maintaining public order and protecting residents and visitors within their borders from terrorism.

Most terrorist attacks are the result of long and careful planning. Just as a car thief will first be attracted to an unlocked car with the key in the ignition, terrorists are looking for defenseless, easily accessible targets who follow predictable patterns. The chances that a tourist, traveling with an unpublished program or itinerary,

would be the victim of terrorism are slight. In addition, many terrorist groups, seeking publicity for political causes within their own country or region, may not be looking for American targets.

Nevertheless, the following pointers may help you avoid becoming a target of opportunity. They should be considered as adjuncts to the tips listed in the previous sections on how to protect yourself against the far greater likelihood of being a victim of crime. These precautions may provide some degree of protection, and can serve as practical and psychological deterrents to would-be terrorists.

- Schedule direct flights if possible and avoid stops in high-risk airports or areas. Consider other options for travel, such as trains.
- Be aware of what you discuss with strangers or what may be overheard by others.
- Try to minimize the time spent in the public area of an airport, which is a less protected area. Move quickly from the check-in counter to the secured areas. On arrival, leave the airport as soon as possible.
- As much as possible, avoid luggage tags, dress and behavior that may identify you as an American.
- Keep an eye out for suspicious abandoned packages or briefcases. Report them to airport security or other authorities and leave the area promptly.
- Avoid obvious terrorist targets such as places where Americans and Westerners are known to congregate.

Travel to High-Risk Areas

If you must travel in an area where there has been a history of terrorist attacks or kidnapping, make it a habit to:

- Discuss with your family what they would do in the event of an emergency. Make sure your affairs are in order before leaving home.
- Register with the U.S. embassy or consulate upon arrival.
- Remain friendly but be cautious about discussing personal matters, your itinerary or program.
- Leave no personal or business papers in your hotel room.
- Watch for people following you or "loiterers" observing your comings and goings.
- Keep a mental note of safehavens, such as police stations, hotels, hospitals.
- Let someone else know what your travel plans are. Keep them informed if you change your plans.
- Avoid predictable times and routes of travel and report any suspicious activity to local police, and the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate.
- Select your own taxi cabs at random. Don't take a vehicle that is not clearly identified as a taxi. Compare the face of the driver with the one posted on his or her license.
- If possible, travel with others.
- Be sure of the identity of visitors before opening the door of your hotel room. Don't meet strangers at unknown or remote locations.

- Refuse unexpected packages.
- Formulate a plan of action for what you will do if a bomb explodes or there is gunfire nearby.
- Check for loose wires or other suspicious activity around your car.
- Be sure your vehicle is in good operating condition in case you need to resort to high-speed or evasive driving.
- Drive with car windows closed in crowded streets. Bombs can be thrown through open windows.
- If you are ever in a situation where somebody starts shooting, drop to the floor or get down as low as possible. Don't move until you are sure the danger has passed. Do not attempt to help rescuers and do not pick up a weapon. If possible, shield yourself behind or under a solid object. If you must move, crawl on your stomach.

Hijacking/Hostage Situations

While every hostage situation is different, some considerations are important.

The U.S. government's policy is firm. We will negotiate, but not make concessions - to do so would only increase the risk of further hostage-taking. When Americans are abducted overseas, we look to the host government to exercise its responsibility under international law to protect all persons within its territories and to bring about the safe release of hostages. We work closely with these governments from the outset of a hostage-taking incident to ensure that our citizens and other innocent victims are released as quickly and safely as possible.

Normally, the most dangerous phases of a hijacking or hostage situation are the beginning and, if there is a rescue attempt, the end. At the outset, the terrorists typically are tense, high-strung and may behave irrationally. It is extremely important that you remain calm and alert and manage your own behavior.

Avoid resistance and sudden or threatening movements. Do not struggle or try to escape unless you are certain of being successful.

- Make a concerted effort to relax. Prepare yourself mentally, physically and emotionally for the possibility of a long ordeal.
- Try to remain inconspicuous, avoid direct eye contact and the appearance of observing your captors' actions.
- Avoid alcoholic beverages. Consume little food and drink.
- Consciously put yourself in a mode of passive cooperation. Talk normally. Do not complain, avoid belligerency, and comply with all orders and instructions.
- If questioned, keep your answers short. Don't volunteer information or make unnecessary overtures.
- Don't try to be a hero, endangering yourself and others.
- Maintain your sense of personal dignity and gradually increase your requests for personal comforts. Make these requests in a reasonable low-key manner.

- If you are involved in a lengthier, drawn-out situation, try to establish a rapport with your captors, avoiding political discussions or other confrontational subjects.
- Establish a daily program of mental and physical activity. Don't be afraid to ask for anything you need or want - medicines, books, pencils, papers.
- Eat what they give you, even if it does not look or taste appetizing. A loss of appetite and weight is normal.
- Think positively. Avoid a sense of despair. Rely on your inner resources. Remember that you are a valuable commodity to your captors. It is important to them to keep you alive and well.

ASSISTANCE ABROAD

If you plan to stay more than two weeks in one place, if you are in an area experiencing civil unrest or a natural disaster, or, if you are planning travel to a remote area, it is advisable to register at the Consular Section of the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate. This will make it easier if someone at home needs to locate you urgently or in the unlikely event that you need to be evacuated in an emergency. It will also facilitate the issuance of a new passport should yours be lost or stolen.

The Consular Section can provide updated information on the security situation in a country.

If you are ill or injured, contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate for a list of local physicians and medical facilities. If the illness is serious, consular officers can help you find medical assistance from this list and, at your request, will inform your family or friends. If necessary, a consul can assist in the transfer of funds from family or friends in the United States. Payment of hospital and other medical expenses is your responsibility.

If you run out of money overseas and have no other options, consular officers can help you get in touch with your family, friends, bank or employer and inform them how to wire funds to you.

Should you find yourself in legal difficulty, contact a consular officer immediately. Consular officers cannot serve as attorneys, give legal advice, or get you out of jail. What they can do is provide a list of local attorneys who speak English and who may have had experience in representing U.S. citizens. If you are arrested, consular officials will visit you, advise you of your rights under local laws and ensure that you are held under humane conditions and are treated fairly under local law. A consular officer will contact your family or friends if you desire. When necessary, consuls can transfer money from home for you and will try to get relief for you, including food and clothing in countries where this is a problem. If you are detained, remember that under international treaties and customary international law, you have the right to talk to the U.S. consul. If you are denied this right, be persistent. Try to have someone get in touch for you.

Planning Another Trip?

The following pamphlets published by the Bureau of Consular Affairs can be found on our web site at <http://travel.state.gov>. Copies may also be ordered from the

Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402; tel: (202) 512-1800; fax: (202) 512-2250. If ordered from the GPO, prices and availability are subject to change without notice. Please check with the Government Printing Office for more information.