TRAVELING SAFELY: A PRIMER
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All travel should begin with an understanding of the risk environment of the intended destination, and contingency plans should be prepared in the event that environment proves too dangerous to stay. We will thus begin our series by addressing these issues.

Before You Travel

Perhaps the most important key to remaining out of harm’s way while traveling or working abroad is to know and understand—in advance—some of the idiosyncrasies of each country’s bureaucracy and the security risks that have been identified for your destination. This knowledge and guidance will then allow you to decide whether to even travel to a particular destination. If you do decide to travel, it will help you plan and implement proper precautions for the environment you will be visiting. Fortunately, finding safety and security information for your destination country is easier than ever in the Internet age.

Travel Advisories and Consular Information Sheets

One of the most important first steps U.S. travelers should take before beginning a trip is seeing what the U.S. government says about your destination country. A great deal of information can be obtained from the U.S. government. Travelers accordingly should read

Research Note: This new report on traveling safely relies on 10 years of Stratfor’s collective experience in providing top security reporting. Curated by our Research Analytics Department, it brings us up to 2016, taking into account the latest developments.
the consular information sheet and check for travel warnings and public announcements pertaining to their destination countries before embarking. Such information can be obtained in person at passport agencies inside the United States or at U.S. embassies and consulates abroad. This information can also be obtained by calling the U.S. State Department, but the quickest and easiest way to obtain it is online: The State Department publishes them all on its website.

A “travel warning” is a document recommending that travel to a specific country be deferred or avoided. A “public announcement” is intended to disseminate information about short-term conditions that could pose a risk to American travelers. Public announcements can be issued even when the U.S. government is not sure Americans will be specifically targeted but is concerned that a potential threat exists. The State Department often will issue public announcements regarding terrorist threats, coups and large public demonstrations, and sometimes will publish them to note upcoming anniversaries of significant past terrorist events.

The State Department issues travel warnings for only a handful of countries. Many countries do not have any active public announcements pertaining to them, but the department maintains a “consular information sheet” for every country, even countries the United States does not have formal diplomatic relations with, such as Iran. The consular information sheet is a useful document that provides information not only about what documents you need to enter the destination country but also on crime, safety, security, political stability, in-country medical care, currency regulations and road safety. It also contains contact information for the U.S. embassy and U.S. consulates (if any) in the country. The consular information sheet also usually contains a link to the local U.S. embassy’s website.

It is a good idea for travelers to print out a copy of the consular information sheet and take it with them on their trip. At the very least, travelers should be sure to print out or write down the phone number of the U.S. embassy or nearest consulate—including the after-hours phone number (which generally rings into the Marine security guard on duty at the embassy’s security command center, normally referred to as “Post One,” or to the embassy’s duty officer). The paper with the embassy contact numbers should be kept separate from the traveler’s wallet so that if the wallet gets lost or stolen, the contact information will not be lost with it. Non-Americans
should likewise obtain the information for contacting their respective embassy or consulate.

Significantly, consular information sheets generally do not provide advice or security recommendations to travelers. They are intended to provide just the facts, and travelers are then supposed to use the information provided in the consular information sheets to make their own judgments and determine their own courses of action. Because of this, if the consular information sheet for your destination country actually breaks this protocol and does make a specific recommendation, you should take that recommendation seriously.

It is also prudent for American travelers to register with the U.S. State Department before leaving the country. Registration is helpful not only in case something happens to you while abroad or if there is a crisis in the country you are visiting, but also if there is a family emergency in the United States and someone needs to locate you. Registration is free, is accomplished via a secure website and only takes a few minutes. You can register online with the State Department. Foreign citizens should also register with their respective embassies if their countries offer similar programs, like Australia’s Smart Traveler.

Other Government Travel Reports

In order to obtain a balanced look at conditions in a specific country and to obtain more detailed information, it is generally advisable to review travel advice from several additional countries—namely, the British, Canadian and Australian governments.

The U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs coordinates daily with the British, Canadian and Australian governments, so the four countries will have largely the same big picture of the security environment in a specific country. It is very unlikely that you would find a U.S. travel advisory warning against travel to country X and then visit the British travel advice site and read that visiting country X is fine because everything is “just ducky” there.

However, the real value to be gained by reading these different reports is at the granular level. The anecdotal cases the foreign governments discuss in their travel sheets may differ from those contained in the U.S. consular information sheet. For example, while compiling a travel briefing for a client once, we noted in a British advisory that British citizens in a particular city had been victimized by local criminal gangs who had begun to engage in “express kidnappings”—something that the U.S. consular information sheet did not note. Express kidnappings, which are short-term kidnappings meant to drain the contents of the victim’s bank account via his or her ATM card, were new for that country. Even though we had seen the tactic used elsewhere in the region, it was helpful to be able to warn our customer of the new threat. So in that case, reading the British advisory in addition to the U.S. consular information sheet was well worth our time.

Another great source of granular crime and safety information is the annual crime and safety report issued by the American Regional Security Officer for a particular country or city. Sometimes, these reports can be found on the embassy’s website, but they can also be read on the Overseas Security Advisory Council’s website. While some OSAC material is for constituent use only, crime and safety reports can be read by anyone and no login is required.

It is also important to remember that conditions in your destination country can change. Because of this, if government travel sites were checked far in advance of the trip, they should be checked again shortly before departure to ensure that no critical changes have occurred.
Other Information

When travelers leave the United States, they are no longer subject to U.S. laws and regulations but to the laws of the country they are visiting. Therefore, travelers need to learn as much as they can about those local laws before they travel.

Travelers should also keep up with the political situation in their destination country and that of the region it is in. Many websites, including Stratfor.com, are excellent sources of information pertaining to political, terrorism and security information. General information on the country, its government, culture, customs, etc., can be found at the library or online through any number of websites such as the National Geographic Society and the CIA’s World Factbook.

Travelers should also familiarize themselves with maps of the areas they will be visiting. This will not only help them avoid being victimized by unscrupulous cab drivers and identify key locations such as their hotel or embassy, but can also help keep them from wandering into dangerous areas.

The destination country may also have informative government websites, such as a site run by the government department of tourism or the country’s embassy in the United States. For obvious reasons, these sites should be read carefully. In most cases, the host country government will want to be as positive as possible to encourage tourism. Therefore, such sites rarely provide any information on crime and security because they fear it could scare tourists (and their money) away. If such sites do acknowledge security problems, this is a strong indicator that the problem is too large to ignore and you should pay close attention to any warnings the sites provide.

Health Information

Prior to travel, you should also go the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s travel health information site. This site provides a wealth of information about vaccinations required for specific countries and regions and provides important tips about avoiding insect-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria and Zika as well as food- and water-borne ailments such as cholera and amoebic dysentery. The CDC also issues travel health precautions and warnings as well as information on sporadic outbreaks of dangerous diseases.

An online checklist on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website to provide travelers with medical advice.
Travelers should also consult with their doctor well in advance of their trip to ensure their vaccinations are up to date and that they have time to receive all the required vaccinations for their destination before they depart. Your doctor can also prescribe anti-malarial medication if required. Even travelers in good health need to ensure they have the appropriate vaccinations and should take measures to avoid contracting dysentery and other food- and water-borne illnesses. (It is very difficult to have fun on a vacation when you are sick and unable to leave your hotel room.) Many times, travel health clinics will not only give vaccinations but will also issue handy medical travel kits that contain adhesive bandages and an assortment of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals such as pain relievers and anti-diarrhea medicines. Sometimes these kits will even contain prescription antibiotics for use in case of severe dysentery.

Insurance

Another consideration is insurance. You should check your homeowner’s insurance policy or call your insurance agent to determine if your property insurance policy will cover losses or theft abroad. It is also prudent to find out if your health insurance will cover you overseas. In many instances, insurance companies will pay for all or a portion of medical coverage overseas, but you will often have to pay for the services at the time they are provided and be reimbursed by the insurance company once you return home. Therefore, you should ensure that you have a way to pay for any necessary medical treatment. The U.S. embassy can provide assistance in the way of emergency loans to pay for your medical treatment, but such assistance requires a lot of paperwork.

You should also determine whether your medical insurance will pay for the cost of medical evacuation (medevac) in the case of a dire medical emergency. Travelers going to a country with very poor in-country medical care and whose insurance will not pay for medical evacuation should give serious consideration to purchasing a medical insurance policy for the trip that will cover the cost of medical evacuation, which can run into the tens of thousands of dollars. Chances are, you will not need to be medically evacuated. But if you do, the cost of not having the coverage can be staggering.

Know Before You Go

Travelers should also be conscious of items they want to bring back into the United States as they are shopping or receiving gifts overseas. It is not unusual for Americans to buy or be given prohibited items, and being caught bringing such items into the United States can result in a fine or even criminal charges. Such items include foreign medications, animal and plant products, antiquities, and goods from embargoed countries. To avoid problems, you can go to the Customs and Border Protection “Know Before You Go Page.”

Mitigate the Risks

Of course, it is impossible to know everything about a location or plan for every possibility, but exercising proper situational awareness is essential for any traveler. Situational awareness necessarily calls for a relaxed state of awareness; constant stress and worry will only make a traveler less capable of handling any problems or risks he or she encounters.

The most common problem a traveler may encounter is street crime—though this is by no means the only threat in many areas of the world. There are a couple of cardinal rules for travelers to keep in mind as they are preparing to travel that can help them if and when they encounter street crime. First, no object or amount of money is worth your life. Most people injured or killed in such robberies resisted their attackers. Because of this travelers should never take anything on their trip they are not prepared to part with, such as items of high financial or sentimental value. If
there would be any hesitation about giving an item to a criminal, it is better to leave it at home. Thus, a business traveler should always leave backup disks at home and bring along only that which is absolutely necessary for the specific trip to minimize the loss of proprietary information.

In addition, travelers should keep a low profile, and this low profile starts at home when deciding what to take and perhaps more important what to leave at home. It is advisable to dress down while in public and carry less valuable luggage. A cheap watch and a scruffy pair of shoes could be the difference in drawing unwarranted attention to a traveler. Travelers should never carry large sums of money, and larger bills should be broken into smaller bills and smaller bills be kept separately from larger ones. Travelers should also use the smallest bill possible when making a purchase. Cash and credit cards should not all be carried in one wallet or pocket but placed in various locations. It is also advisable to only pack those credit cards required for the trip and to leave other cards safely at home. If you are taking an ATM card, make sure that it is connected to an account that only contains enough money for your trip and not a much larger account. In the event of a kidnapping having an ATM card connected to an account with a large balance can significantly lengthen the time of captivity. And it is important to remember that criminals are often satisfied with cash. When possible, identification and other important documents should be kept separate from money, and credit cards separate from cash, so that they do not have to be replaced after a robbery. Offer the criminal your small bills first, and then your larger bills if he is not satisfied. You should try to avoid surrendering your credit cards and passport, but if an armed criminal demands them, comply. Objects are not worth being hurt or killed for.

That said, it is important to make copies of passports and other important documents, leaving the originals in a safe location, such as a hotel deposit box at the front desk of a hotel—room safes are not secure. It also is a good idea to keep a copy of the front page of a passport with the relevant identification information along with a list of credit card numbers and contact information for the card companies at home with relatives or another trusted contact in case of an emergency.

Relatives, co-workers or friends should be provided a full itinerary before the traveler leaves home—as well as during the trip—so they can provide at least the basic information to the home office or to the appropriate government agency in case of an emergency. In locations where Internet access is readily available, it is a good idea to make daily contact with those at home to provide added accountability for your present and
future locations. Buying travelers’ insurance also is a good idea.

Some countries will react negatively or deny entry if a traveler’s passport contains a stamp from certain countries. For that reason, many travelers request that the visa stamp for a particular country be placed on a separate sheet of paper, in order to keep offending stamps separate. Notably, visa and passport information is primarily used by host governments for the purpose of collecting intelligence. There is little the law-abiding traveler can do to prevent revealing such information to a foreign government.

Preparations such as these can contribute to a traveler’s overall safety during a trip abroad. Arriving at a destination introduces a number of other issues, but being prepared and taking precautionary measures are the first steps a traveler should take to ensure a safe and secure experience.

Air Travel Security

Despite never having purchased a ticket, a dual U.S.-Nigerian citizen named Olajide Oluwaseun Noibi took a Virgin America flight from New York to Los Angeles on June 24, 2011, using a boarding pass with the wrong date and someone else’s name. Well after the flight had taken off with Noibi on board, two passengers seated near him complained to a flight attendant about Noibi’s body odor. After requesting his boarding pass and identification to make alternative seating arrangements, the flight attendant discovered Noibi had illegally boarded the plane, at which point he or she alerted the pilot that a stowaway was on board. The pilot decided to maintain course and keep Noibi under close surveillance, and when the plane landed in Los Angeles the authorities took Noibi in for questioning. (He was not arrested until several days later, when he attempted to illegally board another flight to Atlanta.)

No evidence suggests Noibi boarded the plane with any malicious intent, and reports since his arrest indicate he has a history of attempting (and on at least one other occasion succeeding in) similar ruses. His ability to pass through security checkpoints and board a jet without ever having purchased a valid ticket nearly a decade after the 9/11 attacks is an example of how no security system, however well-funded or well-designed, will be invulnerable to human error. For this reason, it is important for travelers to keep in mind the measures they can take to reduce the risks involved in air travel.

Passenger Awareness as Personal Security

Since the 9/11 attacks, a number of changes have been enacted to improve security for airline passengers. Air marshals are present on U.S. and many foreign airlines; cockpit doors remain locked while the plane is in flight; and international “no-fly” databases—aimed at ensuring that people who pose a potential threat do not board international flights—have grown extensively. But perhaps the most effective security improvement has been the heightened state of vigilance air travelers have adopted since 9/11.

Situational awareness is always the most important aspect of personal security, and for air travel this entails keeping a number of potential hazards in mind. When boarding an aircraft, passengers should pay attention to the locations of exits, and while in flight count the steps between their seat and the exit. If the plane fills up with smoke, visibility will be reduced, and it is good to know the approximate distance to exits. If possible, passengers should store baggage in an overhead compartment above or in front of their seat, both to keep an eye on it and make sure it is not tampered with—and to make disembarking quicker.

Communication is important between passengers and flight attendants; it is also important between passengers. If something seems unusual with another passenger or the plane, telling someone can help bring attention to a potential problem.
There are also a number of relatively inexpensive items passengers can purchase that could be useful in an emergency situation. Examples of these include a smoke hood (a protective device that prevents smoke inhalation) and a small flashlight among a passenger’s carry-on items that can be used in the event of an attack or accident. In such situations, smoke inhalation, especially from the extremely toxic burning plastics within a plane, poses a serious threat. In addition, a flashlight can be used to facilitate leaving an aircraft when the power is out and the air is thick with smoke—or as a striking weapon. Such emergency gear should be kept in a pocket or in a bag kept at the passenger’s feet.

‘Hard’ vs. ‘Soft’ Security

With more emphasis placed on securing aircraft in recent years, potential attackers may attempt to attack terminals rather than the planes themselves, where crowds of waiting people present an enticing, easier-to-attack target for militants aiming to cause mass casualties. It is useful to think of airport terminals as divided into two parts. The “soft side” is the area near a ticket counter and, in the case of the United States, before Transportation Security Administration checkpoints, where passengers and carry-on luggage are screened—while the “hard side” is past the security checkpoint. Time spent in line at the ticket counter and at security checkpoints should be minimized when possible, though as all air travelers know, this is often easier said than done.

In the first case, arriving at the counter early enough to avoid the rush of latecomers generally reduces the amount of time one will spend in line, and thus the time one is vulnerable to attack. This is one reason airports are set up to minimize loitering in the soft area. To expedite the process, one should avoid wearing clothes with lots of metal buttons and buckles and shoes that are not easily removed. One should also minimize the amount of carry-on baggage. It is likewise important to keep all travel documents easily accessible, such as by keeping them in a folder or travel pouch. Enrollment in trusted traveler programs such as the U.S. Transportation Safety Administration’s Global Entry and PreCheck can also help minimize time spent on the soft side of the airport.

Once on the hard security side, travelers should attempt to avoid the congested waiting areas at the gate, if possible, by utilizing the members-only lounges operated by many airlines. This helps to keep the traveler
out of a potential attack zone, away from crowds and out of plain view.

Passengers using airport wireless Internet services should be careful to only connect to the airport’s official wireless hub and avoid using public networks for anything deemed sensitive—such as banking information, anything involving a social security number or work-related confidential information.

**International Travel**

In many parts of the world, air travel can be dangerous because of inadequate safety, maintenance and security procedures. This is especially true in the developing world, where maintenance regulations and procedures often are not strictly enforced. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration prohibits U.S. carriers from flying into foreign airports that do not meet security and safety standards. Although this information is not readily available to the public, determined travelers could contact the FAA for a list and then avoid those airlines and airports that are considered substandard. The consular information sheets issued by the U.S. State Department also provide information about air travel safety. In addition, airport terminals, especially in the developing world, are notorious for criminal activity. When on the soft security side, unattended luggage can be stolen, and travelers can be victimized by pickpockets—especially when they are less vigilant after a long, exhausting intercontinental flight.

At the destination airport, transportation should be arranged in advance to further minimize time spent on the soft side of security. For traveling executives, discretion should be employed in finding the local driver on the other end of a flight. A driver who holds up a sign bearing the executive’s name and company could tip off potential kidnappers or militants to the presence of a high-value target. If signs are used the driver’s name can be listed on the sign with no company affiliation noted.

Situational awareness and preparation are the most effective personal security measures a traveler can take to avoid this and other potential hazards. Paying attention to people and events in the area and avoiding potential attack zones are two basics for self-preservation while in the terminal and on the plane.

**Hotel Security**

Some 1,500 guests at the Park Lane Hilton were forced to leave the hotel at 7 p.m. on July 1, 2011, when a basement fire spread to the London hotel’s second floor. Firefighters were able to extinguish the fire, and no fire-related injuries were reported. Three days later, a shooting at the Doubletree Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, left one guest dead and one of the two responding police officers dead after he separated from his partner to find the assailant.

That two people were killed during the Doubletree shooting is regrettable and should not be understated. However, both situations had the potential to be much worse than they were—in terms of human casualties—and are all the more reason for travelers to understand the various emergency situations they may encounter while staying at a hotel. Knowing what information is needed and what steps should be taken in those situations will give a traveler the best possible chance of survival. It is important for travelers to recognize the personal security issues relevant to a typical hotel stay.

**Fire Safety in Hotels**

Fires are deadly enough in the United States and Europe, where there are strict fire codes. But they are even more lethal in less-developed countries, where fire codes are often nonexistent or poorly enforced. For example, though sprinkler systems are mandatory for hotels in the United States, this is not the case in many parts of the world. Even in hotels that have sprinkler systems, it is common to find that they have not been properly maintained and are not functional.
The same can be said for fire alarms. There are reports that the fire alarm and suppression systems did not function properly during the January 2016 fire at the Pearl Intercontinental Hotel in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, which started in a basement records room and then spread upward. Negligence is also an issue: Hotel staff reportedly told concerned guests who smelled smoke that there was nothing to worry about and to go back to bed.

In hotels in the developing world, it is not uncommon for items to be stored in emergency stairwells, leaving stairs obstructed and sometimes impassable. It is also not unusual for employees to chain fire doors shut because of criminal or terrorist threats. Therefore, one way to diminish the threat from fire is to check that emergency exits are clear and unlocked. Doing so is important not just in hotels but also in apartment and office buildings, and can help avert catastrophe. In the August 2011 Casino Royale fire in Monterrey, Mexico, cartel gunmen ordered guests out of the building before dousing it with gasoline and lighting it on fire. Unfortunately, 52 people died because they were trapped inside by a fire exit that had been chained shut.

While staying in hotels overseas, travelers should try to stay between the third and sixth floors. Doing so is advisable for security reasons, and it also puts guests within range of most fire department rescue ladders.
Travelers should always check that there are functional and tested fire extinguishers and hoses at their hotel. Asking about sprinkler and fire alarm systems while making reservations is helpful, but sometimes reservation clerks will be uninformed or deliberately misleading. Therefore, it is prudent to check with in-country contacts who might know about a hotel’s fire protection systems.

Smoke inhalation is the primary cause of fire deaths and accounts for 50-80 percent of all deaths from indoor fires. Though this is somewhat obvious in confined spaces such as an aircraft fuselage or a subway tunnel, it is also true for buildings. Even concrete or cinderblock structures that would seem fire resistant can confine smoke to deadly levels, which was the case with the U.S. diplomatic facility in Benghazi. Video after the attack showed that the fire had not badly damaged the building’s structure—smoke is what killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and communications officer Sean Smith.

Smoke hoods should be part of everyone’s personal safety plan. They are easily carried in a purse or briefcase and can provide the wearer with 15-30 minutes of safe air to breathe, which makes a world of difference to someone attempting to escape a burning building. A small, high-intensity flashlight to help you find your way through the smoke or dark once you have donned your smoke hood is also very useful.

If you wake up to the sound of a smoke alarm or to the smell of smoke in your hotel room, go down to the floor and grab your room key and flashlight from the bedside table (the best place to keep these items—it is also advisable to keep a spare hotel room key in your pants so that you have it if you are forced to leave your room due to a fire alarm or other event.). Then, don your smoke hood if you have one. Smoke and toxic gasses tend to rise, so it is best to stay low. At this point, pause for a moment to assess your situation rather than running out into the hallway in panic—you could be running into trouble. Instead, you should prepare yourself to exit carefully.

Before opening the hotel room door, check it with the back of your hand. If either the door or doorknob is hot, there could be a fire in the hall right outside the room. Even if it is not hot, the door should be opened carefully. Be ready to quickly slam it shut if there is fire in the hall.

If the hallway is clear of fire, begin crawling out of your room. Again, staying low will help protect against
smoke and toxic fumes. Close the room door behind you—it will help keep out smoke in case the exit route is obstructed and you have to return to the room.

Move down the hallway, staying next to the wall to use it as a guide and as protection against being trampled by panicking people. Follow the hallway to the closest stairway fire exit and use it. Remember, never get in an elevator during a fire. When you reach the exit stairs, walk down to the ground floor. Use the handrail as a guide and safeguard against any rushing people.

If there is smoke in the stairwell, do not try to run through it. Instead, turn around and try to find another emergency exit. If there is also smoke coming up the second emergency staircase, you must choose between returning to your room or climbing the stairs to the roof. If you opt for the roof, remember to prop the door open to allow smoke to leave the stairwell and to make sure you will not be locked out on top of the building. Try to find the part of the roof that is best protected from fire and smoke and sit down.

Now, if all the exits are blocked, or if fire in the hallway prevents you from leaving your room, try to ventilate the room by turning on the bathroom fan and opening a window if possible. Avoid breaking the window unless you have to; shards of glass are dangerous and you may need to close it if smoke begins to pour into the room. Being able to re-close the window is especially important during exterior fires such as the one in Dubai. Then, if the room telephone works, or if you have a cellphone, call the front desk or the fire department to tell them your location. Hanging a bed sheet out your window can also serve as a signal to firefighters.

If the water is still working in your room, fill the bathtub and find an ice bucket or a trashcan you can use to bail water onto the door or hot walls. Wet towels will also come in handy. You can use them to keep smoke out of the room by wedging them into the cracks around the door, or as a makeshift smoke hood. Tying a wet towel around your head and over your nose and mouth will help reduce the amount of smoke you breathe in. (Unfortunately, it will not protect against dangerous gases such as carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide.)

Most Western hotel chains have safety protocols for emergencies, and the employees for those hotels are trained and competent in security procedures. In ad-
dition, government agencies in Western countries will, for the most part, respond promptly and reliably to emergency situations. Equipment such as fire alarms, water sprinklers, closed-circuit television cameras and emergency exits all function properly. However, as noted in the Pearl Continental example above these things must not be taken for granted. Hotel guests need to assume responsibility for their own safety and security.

Like fire alarms and sprinkler systems, the mere presence of security equipment in hotels is no guarantee of security. Even when the camera systems are functional, and there is someone somewhere monitoring them, it is impossible for hotel staff to watch everyone at all times. Of course some hotels, especially smaller hotels in smaller towns, may have no security measures or procedures in place at all. The security equipment they may have, such as metal bars on windows, can actually cause more harm than good, locks on doors may be easily picked or manipulated, and hiring practices can be substandard, especially when the hotel does not have the wherewithal to perform thorough background checks for potential employees.

When possible, a guest should choose a room location above the ground floor of a hotel, decreasing the room’s accessibility to criminals. Once inside the room, a guest should avoid opening doors to unannounced visitors, all of whom should be told to wait in the lobby so the front desk can verify their identity and reason for being there. Most important, a guest should ascertain whether someone has a reason for knocking on the door and asking for entry. When in doubt, do not open the door.

A traveler should accept at least two keys when checking in to the hotel, and he or she should clarify to the front desk who is allowed to receive a key if one is lost or stolen. Travelers should also avoid returning their room key to the front desk—this allows people to easily see that a room is unoccupied. It should be kept in mind that a room safe is not safe, so a traveler is better served keeping important valuables on his or her person or at a secure location at the front desk. Security door locks should be used at all times, and the door should never be propped open when going out—a thief needs only a small window of opportunity to enter a room. For the frugal traveler, an inexpensive wedge door lock (a rubber wedge placed between the floor and the bottom of the door) can also provide added security.

If driving a car, a traveler should park only in hotel parking lots that are well lit—preferably near the lobby or in a spot visible from the hotel room. When walking in the parking lot, a traveler should have the keys in hand, always checking inside the car before getting in. Valuables should be kept out of sight or in the trunk of the car, as thieves are more likely to target a car known to contain valuable items.

In some countries, such as China, hotels are used to gather intelligence on guests. Using Internet services at a hotel can make a guest’s computer vulnerable. A traveler should assume telephone conversations on hotel lines are tapped and rooms are bugged for sound—and probably video. He or she should never leave a laptop, PDA or important documents in the room when away because the devices could be stolen, cloned or copied.

Hotels—often erroneously—are seen as a secure location where every need of travelers is cared for, from turning down guests’ beds to ensuring their personal safety. Indeed, hotels try very hard to make a guest feel at home; the onus of the guest is to remember that he or she is not. A false sense of security can lull a traveler into letting his or her guard down and abandoning the state of relaxed awareness needed to practice personal security when traveling.
Responding to an Attack Against a Hotel

The terrorist threat to hotels is not new, and neither is the threat posed specifically by jihadists. In fact, the first al Qaeda attacks to target U.S. interests were the December 1992 twin bombings of the Gold Mihor and Movenpick hotels. The attacks were directed against U.S. military personnel stationed in Aden, Yemen.

The intervening decades have done little to dilute the attractiveness of hotels as targets. Despite increased security at international hotels, they remain vulnerable to terrorist attack. One factor leading to the continued allure of hotels as targets has been the hardening of embassies and other diplomatic facilities. Embassies became iconic terrorist targets in the 1980s, and attacks against them resulted in major programs to defend against hostile activities. As embassies became harder targets, terrorist planners shifted their attention to easier targets with less security—what we refer to as soft targets.

Unlike an embassy, a hotel is a commercial venture. To make money, the hotel needs to maintain a steady flow of visitors who stay in its rooms, eat at its restaurants, drink at its bars, use its gym facilities, and rent its banquet and conference facilities. On any given day, a large five-star hotel can host hundreds of guests and have hundreds of additional visitors using other amenities.

In cities such as Peshawar, Pakistan, or Kabul, Afghanistan, such amenities are often difficult to find outside of hotels. Therefore, these hotels become gathering places not only for foreign businesspeople, diplomats and journalists residing in the city, but also for wealthy residents, including government officials. It is fairly easy for a militant operative to blend in with the visiting throngs to conduct surveillance as a restaurant patron or shopper. Large hotels are akin to miniature, never-sleeping cities with people, luggage, food and goods coming and going at all hours. The staff required to run such facilities can number in the hundreds.
Many hotel security programs have dramatically improved in response to the threat against them. As a result, we have seen terrorist planners shift their tactics in an effort to create larger death tolls that draw more attention. One shift was away from large vehicle bombs detonated outside hotel perimeters to smaller bombs carried into hotels by individuals. Armed assaults have become a favored method recently. In places such as Kabul, we have also seen attackers target smaller hotels and guesthouses, which are often chosen by travelers attempting to avoid higher-profile hotels. Attacks have also been directed against restaurants and shopping malls in other places.

Armed assaults against hotels or other soft targets are fairly easy to plan and execute. They are also cost-effective because they do not require many resources other than firearms and willing suicide operatives. For the price of one large vehicle bombing, a terrorist group could fund several armed assaults.

Armed assaults also do not require much in the way of special training. Most jihadist recruits are trained to use small arms and grenades, so are well prepared for an armed assault on a hotel or other soft target. The simplicity of conducting an armed assault means that such attacks are not limited only to professional operatives. They are well within the reach of grassroots operatives—those inspired by but not directed by a movement. Such attacks can occur outside of areas considered traditional operational territory for jihadists. Generally, however, those attacks tend to happen more against hotels in the developing world—which tend to draw a greater concentration of Western visitors—than hotels in the West. Grassroots operatives in the West also have a far wider selection of soft targets, and hotels are only one type of many potential attack sites.

**How to ‘Stay’ Safe in Hotels**

Since terrorist attacks against hotels are going to remain a problem for the foreseeable future, travelers should consider taking steps to help avoid becoming a victim.

First, as previously noted, travelers should learn whether adequate security measures are in place at a specific hotel before making a reservation.

Once a hotel is selected, we advise that guests follow an expanded version of the “avoid, deny and defend” active shooter advice. We encourage guests to avoid rooms that face the street near the main hotel lobby, which is where bombing attacks and armed assaults are most frequently focused. Those rooms can be damaged by bombs or receive stray fire from an armed assault.

Upon check-in, hotel guests also should learn where emergency exits are located, and then physically walk the exit route to verify that doors and stairwells are unlocked and free of obstructions. As noted in the fire threat section we recommend you keep a flashlight, a smoke hood, a cell phone and your hotel key on the nightstand next to your bed. In some cases attackers have intentionally set hotels ablaze, and in other cases grenades or bombs have ignited fires.

Hotel guests should also avoid lingering near high-risk areas such as the front desk and entrance areas, or lobby cafes and bars. People gathered in these areas have been killed or wounded in past attacks. Armed assaults also generally start from the outside and progress inward, so a restaurant or cafe well inside the hotel or on an upper level is safer than one on the sidewalk or in the lobby.

If an attack occurs while you are in a hotel, avoid the area where the attack is taking place and get to safety either by leaving the hotel and running to a safe place or by staying in your room. If you do shelter in your room, use all available locks and resist the temptation to look out the window or peek out your door to see what is happening. Draw the shades or drapes, because in the case of a bombing, flying glass can be deadly. Attackers generally travel light and do not bring tools
to breach doors, although they could possibly take master keys from hotel staff, so it is prudent to use additional locks and items of furniture to barricade the door. If you travel with a door wedge, use it to help secure the door. Try to move the items used to barricade the door as quietly as possible so that an attacker in the hall cannot hear you. Also turn off the television or radio, silence your cell phone and turn off the lights if at night—you want the room to appear unoccupied.

In the past, people have survived attacks because assailants have bypassed locked doors in favor of open ones. People sheltering in their rooms should remain there until authorities arrive. They should also keep low and find as much cover as they can. In a hotel, attackers’ bullets will likely penetrate many interior walls and doors. But such features provide concealment, so attackers would be firing blindly. Heavy wooden desks or tables and mattresses can provide extra protection from gunfire that might come through doors or walls and even through exterior windows.

It might take hours for authorities to reach all the rooms in a hotel under attack (in the case of Mumbai, it took days). Be patient and wait for them to do so. They will work through the hotel room-by-room to clear it of attackers. When authorities do arrive, comply with all instructions and keep your hands empty and in sight. Unless instructed otherwise, it is a good idea to be on the ground with your hands visible as the authorities conduct a dynamic entry. Attackers could try to blend in with survivors in an effort to escape, and to prevent this, it is possible that the responding forces will want to restrain and control everyone until they can sort out who is an attacker and who is not. Travelers should be aware of this possibility and comply if authorities decide to use restraints.

If you cannot avoid the attackers or deny them entry, then you must fight, viciously and with any weapon you can improvise. Generally, a number of items inside a hotel room can be used as improvised weapons if you employs a little creativity. Such weapons could include a table lamp, a glass bottle, an electric iron or even your computer’s power adapter, swung by the cord.

Millions of Western travelers stay in hotels around the world each year and very few will ever encounter this type of threat. However, by being prepared, remaining vigilant and reacting at the first sign of danger, people can greatly increase their chances of survival if they get caught in a hotel attack.

Public Transportation Security

International travel necessarily entails logistical concerns—scheduling flights, tracking luggage, finding accommodations. Indeed, it can be easy to forget that such travel does not end when a traveler arrives at the airport of his or her destination country. Once a traveler has arrived, he or she must get from one place to another within the country—an act that presents entirely new risks to a traveler.

In general, it is safer to use low-profile private transportation than public transportation when traveling abroad. Safety, however, is not the only consideration most travelers have when planning to get around in their destination country. Money and convenience also play a part, in which case they may want to consider using public transportation. The safety of public transportation varies by type and by country or even region, and public transportation is one thing that should be researched when planning a trip. Some types of public transportation should be avoided in some places. However, if the decision is made to utilize public transportation, there are ways in which travelers can protect themselves while doing so.

What to Expect

The majority of crimes committed against travelers using public transportation in foreign countries are not violent but petty, non-violent property crimes such as pickpocketing. (This is not to say serious crime is
unheard of: in Tokyo and Cairo, women-only subway cars are maintained to prevent women being groped, a huge problem in those cities, and rape has become a serious public transportation problem for female travelers in India.) In fact, airports, subway trains and stations and bus stations all over the world are notorious for pickpockets, as criminals look to prey on tired and disoriented travelers, who are typically flush with cash and other valuables. The simplest and most frequently used tactic in these locations is the “bump and grab.” In this tactic, pickpockets will misdirect their victim’s attention while removing a wallet from a pocket or backpack. Other methods involve the criminal using a razor blade to cut the bottom of a backpack or purse and removing the contents within, especially if the thief has observed a person putting their money in the bottom of a bag where they think it is safest. The “grab and run” is also popular method, especially if a person has put their purse or laptop bag on their shoulder and not across their body, or left it on a chair next to them.

On a bus or a subway car, travelers can fall victim to all manner of schemes. In Guatemala, for example, pickpockets frequently target foreign travelers packed into old school buses—the country’s version of municipal buses frequently referred to as “chicken buses” by expatriates. Many travelers keep valuables in side pockets and in cargo pockets, which criminals will cut open to remove the contents. Baggage stowed under a seat is liable to be stolen by a thief sitting behind the owner. In some instances, thieves will take a bag from an overhead bin and quickly throw it out the window to an accomplice. It is not uncommon for street gangs to board buses and demand a tax be paid for passage through their territory—although they usually target the bus drivers. Moreover, buses and private shuttles also can be targets for criminals in rural areas where there is little or no law enforcement presence.

Travelers can counter these threats in a number of ways. The best place to put a bag is above or in front of
the seat if possible, with other valuables placed in the lap. Important documents should be located on a traveler's person, separate from money and other valuables. They should always keep important items well inside their bag, rather than in the outer pockets, especially in the top section of a backpack. Travelers should wear a smaller bag or purse across the shoulder and position it in front—men can place a smaller backpack with important documents on their chests instead of their backs. It is a good idea to keep small locks on bags because despite being seemingly easy to break, they deter theft by causing a criminal to move on to easier targets. When exchanging money for a ticket or fare, a traveler should take care to not flash all his or her money at once—this is a surefire way to get unwanted attention. Travelers can keep a small amount easily accessible in a front pocket for small purchases but can keep the bulk of their money hidden elsewhere. Also, if a traveler is forced to evade criminals, keeping in mind possible safe areas—a ticket booth in a subway, for example—is highly advisable. It should here be noted that airports and bus and metro stations are prime targets for terrorist attacks. These locations both offer militants the opportunity to inflict mass casualties and allow them to attack specific groups, such as U.S. tourists on their way to see a historic site or Israeli soldiers waiting at a bus station in Tel Aviv. Thus, situational awareness, the knowledge of how to identify threats and communication with employees or other passengers is critically important.

Taxis

Taxis present a problem for travelers all around the world and should only be used if deemed safe by an associate or trusted local. Taxi drivers pose a number of threats, some of which, like overcharging for a ride, are relatively benign. Other, more sinister ones involve actively helping a criminal gang rob or conduct an express kidnapping of a traveler. Taxi drivers are naturally in a position of power because they know where they are going and how much the ride should cost. One way to mitigate the driver's power is through preparation prior to the ride. This can be done by researching travel blogs, contacting a hotel or asking business associates and contacts in country. A traveler should only use official taxis. Many cities will have designated taxi stands where a person can go to hail a taxi. A traveler can often get an estimated fare from this stand. It is generally advisable to never hail a taxi from the street. In some places, such as Mexico City or San Salvador, hailing a cab in such a manner makes it easier for kidnappers to grab a person standing on a curb.
A traveler should never take a “black” taxi, which can be an unofficial taxi or even a normal car. Not only is it illegal to do so, it also puts a traveler at risk for crime. Moreover, the drivers themselves run the risk being assaulted by official taxi drivers who see black taxis as an encroachment on their business. When getting in a taxi, a traveler should check to see if the door locks and the windows are operable. A traveler should never allow the driver to bring along a “brother” or “friend”—such a scheme is likely a prelude to an attack. More often than not, there will be metered taxis in a country. A traveler should never use a taxi if the driver refuses to turn on the meter, and if there is a question about the price in most developed cities, asking a witness at the final destination how much a taxi ride should cost is a good way to avoid being overcharged. In places where taxis do not have meters, a traveler should negotiate the price beforehand.

Taxi riders should also be aware of common taxi driver scams such as the one in which a driver will secretly swap out a large bill with a small one (say swapping a 5 for a 50) and claim the rider did not give them enough money to pay for the fare.

**Alternatives**

There are alternatives to public transportation. As stated before, using private transportation is generally safer than using public transportation. Cars and drivers can be hired in advance, upon recommendation by reliable local sources, other travelers or business contacts. Hotels can also make recommendations for private drivers or accredited taxi companies. A traveler can usually trust these drivers because they likely have a longstanding relationship with the hotel—they would not want to jeopardize that relationship by putting the passenger in danger. Private transportation is expensive, however.

Like other places, situational awareness is the key to being safe and protecting one’s property while on public and private transportation. A traveler’s awareness of the risk environment he or she is in can prevent risks before they occur—listening to music loudly with headphones or having one’s nose in a book is generally inadvisable. Even in relatively safe cities, absent-minded travelers can fall victim to petty crime on a subway or bus.

**Mitigating the Threat of Street Crime**

Part of the allure of international travel involves walking the streets and seeing the sights of an unfamiliar locale. Whether it is done for professional or recreational reasons, venturing out onto the streets of a foreign city is inherently risky for visiting foreigners.

Criminal elements in developed and developing countries alike tend to target travelers—Westerners in particular—because of a general belief that they carry or have access to large sums of money.

Whether this belief is accurate or not is irrelevant; that criminals hold this belief renders a traveler a tempting target for criminal activity. Therefore, travelers can and should take a number of precautions to avoid being the target of street crime.

**Minimize the Risks**

A traveler should understand the culture in which he or she is traveling. What may be an appropriate response to a potential crime in one country may be completely inappropriate in another—a point to which we will return. Cultural differences notwithstanding, no amount of money is worth a person’s life. A traveler should concede his or her money or possessions during a robbery rather than risk violent reprisal from the culprit.

If a traveler believes he or she is under surveillance from a potential thief, an effective way to deter the criminal is by making eye contact. When doing so, a traveler should not act aggressively or maintain
eye contact for more than a moment. If a suspicious person indeed has malicious intentions, he or she will likely move on to an easier target. A traveler should immediately move to a safe location if the criminal is undeterred by eye contact.

In fact, such safe locations should be noted while a traveler walks about the city streets. They should be secure locations that can be entered quickly—small cafes and shops are two examples of such locations. Most locals and proprietors will disapprove of and discourage a criminal’s attacking potential clientele. Banks, shopping malls and some hotels are even better locations because they usually employ security personnel, who may even be armed.

Travelers can employ a number of other measures to minimize the risk of attack. Walking about unfamiliar streets while listening to music generally is inadvisable because it lowers a traveler’s situational awareness. In many countries, an iPod or iPhone, for example, can equate to a month’s wages for a local. In addition, exploring the streets in groups is better than doing so alone. Criminals may target a group in hopes of a larger payout, but they will usually avoid them because such targets increase the chances of a criminal’s detection.

When renting a car, a traveler should request an older model to keep a low profile. New and luxury cars, especially those driven by foreigners, are prime targets for car thieves and kidnappers.

Male travelers looking to commingle with female locals need to be aware of one piece of advice in particular: If beautiful women do not approach a given man in his home country, the chances are high that any woman who approaches him in his destination has ulterior motives. It is a common tactic, in places as different as Budapest and Miami Beach, for a beautiful woman to ask a man to buy her a drink—at a highly inflated price. After receiving the bill, the victim will be forced, often by much larger men, to withdraw enough money from an ATM to cover the bill. In China, the “tea room” scam is a variation of this scenario. A young man or woman will ask a traveler if they would like to have a cup of tea, only to take him or her to a location where a pot of tea costs an exorbitant amount of money. Many travelers will neglect to ask for prices beforehand, something that should always be done when traveling.

Prostitution, aside from generally being illegal, also can facilitate crime in many countries. Prostitutes can be used to lure a victim into a location where kidnappers or thieves are waiting, or they can drug victims in order to rob them, so good judgment should be used when accepting a drink from a stranger.

One way to have an effective countermeasure to criminal activity is to make an ally or friend wherever possible. When dining at a restaurant or bar, a traveler should have a conversation with the bartender or waiter. Courtesy goes a long way in many cultures, and if a traveler falls victim to criminal activity, he or she benefits from having someone who knows or remembers him or her. In parts of Africa, for example, a kind word to a bus driver can engender a sense of responsibility for a traveler’s well being.

In cases of kidnapping or violent assault, a traveler must be able to decide at a moment’s notice whether to fight or submit to an assailant. So many factors come into play in such scenarios that it is difficult to generalize a standard procedure—training of the target, at what point in the attack cycle the assault was identified, and the type of force employed against the target. The intent of the assailants is also important. The dynamic of locations in which kidnappings occur frequently or where hostages are killed for political theater is much different than that of locations where express kidnappings are the norm. In short, there is no standard for countermeasures for an attack; they should be determined on a case-by-case basis.
Perhaps the best way for a traveler to avoid being targeted for a crime while abroad is to maintain a low profile—wearing casual clothing and inexpensive jewelry, shoes and bags. Donning flashy accessories or pulling out large amounts of cash will invariably draw attention to a traveler. If a traveler must bring along large amounts of money, he or she should keep it separate rather than in one wallet or purse. A moderate amount of cash—the equivalent of $25-$50, for example—kept in one’s front pocket can be handed over to a thief without incident or regret, keeping the duration of the confrontation to a minimum.

Foreign travelers tend to focus on their vacation or business trip when they should be thinking about their inherent vulnerability. Many countries in the world can be overwhelming for travelers, so a few minutes of observation can ease their state of mind. They should find a place to survey their security environment, particularly in situations where they are spending money.

**Monetary Transactions**

Travelers need to exercise extra caution when withdrawing money from ATMs, recognizing that location matters. The best place to use an ATM is in a secure location, such as the inside of a bank or hotel lobby (because many banks are surveilled by criminals, travelers should put away the money they withdraw before leaving the building). Many hotels abroad also will process cash advances from the traveler’s credit card account or exchange U.S. dollars into local currencies. Traveler’s checks also can reduce dependence on ATMs. The key to avoid using ATMs at risky times or in risky locations is to plan ahead and to have the correct amount of cash needed for the day’s or night’s activities.

Another way for a traveler to mitigate the threat posed by withdrawing cash—not to mention that posed by express kidnappings—is to travel with a prepaid bank card, acquired from his or her own bank with a small, finite amount of cash. Also, having the bank card’s international assistance number in a secure location is helpful in the event an ATM card is stolen.

An increasingly prevalent type of fraud at ATMs is known as “skimming.” This involves placing a device that looks like part of the machine over the card slot. The device contains a card reader that records account information when the ATM is used, allowing cyber-criminals access to bank account information. In other instances, a camera is placed on the machine to record PIN numbers.
The exchange rate in some countries, which can be artificially skewed in the host country’s favor, could tempt some travelers to engage in informal currency exchanges on the street or in established places of business that are unauthorized to exchange cash. Visitors who participate in such illegal practices put themselves at risk of deportation or incarceration. This practice exposes the traveler to the risk of receiving counterfeit money, which in turn puts the traveler at risk when he or she tries to use the money. It is not unheard of for business executives, having been apprehended exchanging money on the black market, to be blackmailed by foreign governments, who force them to commit industrial espionage on their companies.

Moreover, exchanging money on the street can put the traveler in close proximity with the local criminal element, which is often tied to organized crime. What begins as an informal money exchange can easily evolve into a kidnapping scenario. If the exchange rate offered by someone on the street sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

There are inherent risks involved when a foreigner wanders the streets of an unfamiliar city. However, travelers can reduce the chances of becoming a victim by being aware of their surroundings and taking certain precautions.

Protecting Information in Electronic Devices When Traveling

Mobile devices are more vulnerable to criminals when traveling, particularly in unfamiliar places. Business travelers often depend on devices such as laptops, mobile phones, PDAs or tablet computers. They also carry mobile storage devices, such as USB keys, MP3 players and external hard drives. Travelers who fail to secure these devices while traveling abroad expose the devices and the information they contain to data theft and infiltration by malware that can be installed on the device.

Travelers’ devices also are vulnerable to physical theft. Criminals target laptops and smartphones for their high resale value. These devices are frequently stolen in airports, bars and restaurants as well as on trains and buses—and even in the street. Laptops and mobile devices should not be set down anywhere a thief can quickly snatch it and run. Even carrying a laptop or mobile device in something other than its case, such as a backpack or a buttoned pocket, will push a criminal, who is looking for the easiest target, to go after someone else.
There are more risks, however, than physical theft. Private competitors or foreign governments may seek to access devices in order to glean valuable company-specific information such as client lists, account numbers and, most valuably, intellectual property.

Some countries use their national intelligence services to spy on visiting executives, especially when the executive’s competition in the host country is state subsidized or the technology involved is considered a national priority by the host government. This makes the visitor’s information vulnerable not only to hostile intelligence, but to hostile intelligence backed by state resources, which are significantly greater than those of corporate spies. This has been known to occur in Russia, India and China as well as in countries that many executives might not consider hostile, such as France and Israel.

Protecting Data

Commercially available encryption programs can help protect sensitive information on computers when traveling. But the program’s password should never be saved on the computer; in fact, it is best to avoid saving any passwords, or at least to use different and more secure passwords for important accounts. In addition, icons for the encryption program should not be displayed on the desktop or task bar. Airport security personnel in some countries have been known to start up a visiting executive’s laptop and, upon finding a software encryption program icon, have attempted to retrieve the computer’s data and have even damaged the computers when they could not gain access. For another layer of assurance, entire or partial disk encryption minimizes the exposure of data and takes the burden off the user to manually encrypt and decrypt files and folders.

The best way to protect sensitive information contained on a laptop or mobile device is to avoid exposing it to potentially compromising situations. The computer should only contain information specific to the current trip and, when possible, should not contain account numbers, passwords or other sensitive information. Then, should the device be compromised, the executive can take some comfort in knowing that not all of the company’s sensitive information has leaked out. The same rule pertains to personal information. Don’t take a laptop with all your personal tax returns, banking records and family photos on a trip. When traveling, it is best to replace the regular computer or hard drive with a clean one. This helps protect the data abroad and avoid compromise when the trip ends. Methods described below used to access a traveler’s electronic device can also be used to plant malware that will extract information through online networks only after the user returns to his office.

It also is important to ensure that all important data on a laptop is backed up in another location. In high-crime areas it is advisable to carry data in an external hard drive or a mobile storage device, separate from the rest of the computer. This approach involves security concerns of its own, outlined below. However, should the laptop be stolen, the thief will not get the data, which is likely far more valuable to a traveling executive than the machine itself.

In some countries, the local intelligence service may try to access laptops or mobile devices left in an executive’s room in order to extract data or place malware. They may even steal the devices to make the incident look like a common theft. For this reason, laptops and mobile devices should never be left in a hotel room, or even in the room’s safe—especially in a country in which the government needs only to ask for a key from the hotel.

Ensuring the constant, physical security of mobile devices and computers is necessary to effectively secure important information. Executive protection personnel should take custody of a traveling executive’s electronic devices when they are not in use—for instance,
while the executive is making a speech or attending an engagement.

One alternative is to carry only a smartphone or tablet computer, especially if it can be done without carrying sensitive information, and only used for less-sensitive email communication through encrypted servers. These devices are smaller and easier to carry at all times. But wireless devices have their own inherent security risks and are still vulnerable to theft. Moreover, mobile devices are not nearly as secure as laptops and usually do not encrypt their data.

The prevalence of information breaches over computer and phone networks may make some of this advice seem less important. Yet while networks provide access across continents, devices in physical proximity remain much easier to breach. The basic ability to intercept signals, which criminals can easily do on Wi-Fi networks, is a concern for all encrypted communication, and it is undetectable because it intercepts the data on radio waves rather than by infiltrating the computer. Even the best encrypted communication has its failure points. One simple and important way to mitigate the risk of compromise is to turn off all network interfaces until they are needed. Most laptops and mobile devices leave Bluetooth on by default, and this is often easily compromised in its standard configuration. Other interfaces like infrared, GPS radios and 2G or 3G radios should be disabled to avoid the risk of compromise or tracking via tower triangulation.

When traveling in a country considered hostile or known to be involved in corporate espionage, a traveler should assume that all communications networks, both wired and wireless, are compromised. Researchers have demonstrated how GSM phone networks can be compromised using a few phones, a laptop and the right software. A virtual private network, which many companies use to partially encrypt their communications, is best used for email and similar communications. Individuals can set up their own VPNs fairly easily at no cost.

Any traveler, from a student to an executive, can take key preventive measures to help ensure security. An individual can help prevent compromise by locking devices and requiring password access; not installing software, particularly mobile applications, from unknown developers; diligently installing software updates; and not accessing sensitive information, particularly bank accounts, through mobile devices. It is never a good idea to check bank accounts through a mobile device’s browser—a trusted application from the individual’s bank is a better idea—and the same applies to company email and other communications that should remain secure. Consider that with all advancing technology, security is a step or two behind.
Smartphones in particular are running on new operating systems. This means that mobile devices are often more easily breached than computers.

Laptops, tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices have become essential travel accessories. They hold a vast amount of information in a relatively small space and offer easy access to communications. For this same reason, these devices and the information they contain are very valuable for anyone with hostile intentions. Travelers who safeguard the information on these devices and take precautions to mitigate the effects of a compromise could be sparing their companies serious harm. As previously noted, if possible, travelers should go without their usual electronic devices. A company can designate certain laptops for foreign travel, to be sanitized by an IT department or contractor on return. Any mobile storage devices, which can easily carry malware, should also go through such a sanitation process, and disposable phones can be purchased overseas.

Of course, this advice may seem impractical. Given the number of vulnerabilities, it is always best to assume electronic devices and data are compromised. The surest way for travelers to protect their electronic data is to keep the most important information in their heads, offline or in secure storage.

**Common Sense When Traveling Abroad**

Traveling abroad is generally a positive experience, and while travelers who leave their comfort zone for a foreign land should be aware of their surroundings, they should not feel fearful or paranoid—which can actually be counterproductive to good security. While there are risks, travelers who exercise proper situational awareness and follow the basic rules outlined here can enjoy the experiences and perspective traveling offers.

It is always important for travelers to take time to observe and think before acting. A traveler can learn a tremendous amount about a location and its customs by paying attention to the surrounding environment. Travelers should make a conscious effort to study their environment in an effort to determine what is normal—and what is not. If something feels wrong, even subconsciously, it probably is. This process also works in an emergency, first in recognizing the threat then understanding it, making a plan to address it, and finally acting to either counter the threat or escape the situation. Finally, a traveler must trust his or her instincts about what is normal and what is anomalous or even potentially dangerous.

**Be Smart**

Travelers who engage in illegal activity while abroad can find themselves in serious trouble. These activities naturally bring travelers in close contact with criminal elements, increasing the potential for threats. Moreover, if the traveler is caught and arrested, he or she becomes open not only to criminal prosecution but also to extortion by corrupt elements of the local police. Local law enforcement officials in many countries literally have the power of life and death over people who break the law in their jurisdictions. They can be just as likely as a criminal element to beat, rob or even kill someone in their custody. Business people can even be blackmailed by intelligence services into giving up company trade secrets or committing treason against their country.

Ignorance of the law is never a defense, nor is the idea that “everyone else is doing it.” It is the traveler’s responsibility to know the law and culture of a travel destination. Illegal activity is no less illegal simply because others are observed engaging in it.

Westerners must understand that if they are arrested, the police may not care where they are from. No traveler, regardless of country of origin, has the right to be belligerent or break the law. Nationality will not save anyone from the consequences of their actions. In fact, depending on the crime and other factors outside the
traveler’s control—such as politics and international tensions—nationality can prove a liability. A traveler’s embassy can make sure an arrested citizen is not subjected to human rights violations or abuse, but it will not be able to save a person from the consequences of the law he or she has broken.

When abroad, it is common for travelers to want to take part in local entertainment. Such activities can lower the traveler’s guard, especially if alcohol is involved. Add to this a prevalent feeling among travelers that they are allowed to behave in ways normally unacceptable in their home countries, and it can be a volatile mix. While some tourist locations allow some leniency regarding public drunkenness or disorderly conduct, it is a mistake for travelers to think they can act without consequences.

Bars and casinos, especially those that facilitate prostitution or drug trafficking, can present several threats. Travelers could find themselves in the middle of an illegal transaction or armed confrontation between gangs. Furthermore, a traveler who is persuaded to engage in a sexual liaison may find that their companion has accomplices lying in wait to commit a robbery—or worse.

Street vendors or other locals may also be looking to make a victim out of an unwitting visitor by offering to escort the foreigner somewhere to look at merchandise or to meet local artisans. These scenarios sometimes end in a bad part of town where accomplices are waiting to commit robbery or cause bodily harm.

Children are known to be expert pickpockets in many countries. They often surround a traveling Westerner, seemingly to talk or ask questions, but in reality to remove his or her possessions. Adult criminals will also use children as a diversion, and swarm attacks by groups of criminal children are common in some parts of the world. Criminal elements also will take advantage of a visitor’s lack of familiarity with local geography and customs.

Travelers who walk around a foreign city with the idea of taking in the local color risk wandering into a dangerous neighborhood. Every city has areas that are dangerous for local inhabitants, let alone conspicuous strangers. This risk can be compounded when the wandering occurs at night, even when travelers are in a small group.

To keep a low profile, visitors should dress modestly, especially in a conservative or religious country. They should also know local customs before dressing in native clothing; certain colors and patterns have special, subtle meanings in native cultures. Missing these meanings could be offensive to these cultures—and dangerous for the traveler. Also, wearing a jersey or other clothing representing the wrong sports team, such as a soccer club, in the wrong location can lead to violence.

The desire to videotape or photograph travel memories also can lead to problems for travelers who are unaware of local laws and customs. In many countries, it is forbidden to photograph military installations or government buildings. Security forces also can take offense when being photographed, and in some parts of the world may respond by confiscating film, breaking cameras or worse. In many countries, photographing civilians, especially children, can be considered offensive behavior. This is especially true for locals taking part in religious rituals. They may react negatively, perhaps even aggressively, to even being asked to be photographed by an outsider.

To avoid trouble abroad, travelers should use common sense and always maintain a high state of situational awareness. The same general rules apply to any city around the world: Avoid hustlers, muggers, gangsters, pimps, grifters and pushers.

When preparing for a trip abroad, travelers should consult consular information on the destination country. This document, as well as any recent warning messages from their home countries’ embassies, will contain information on potential threats and recent
trends in local criminal activity. For further information about generally safe places to visit (as well as those to avoid), the concierge in most quality hotels can be a reliable, knowledgeable guide. In some cities with critical crime or terrorist threats, it might even be advisable not to leave the hotel or resort property at all during leisure times, especially after dark. By staying in the hotel or resort and taking advantage of the services in the resident bar or restaurant, the visitor minimizes contact with potential criminal elements. Furthermore, by charging meals and drinks to the room, travelers avoid having to carry a large amount of cash.

Westerners who want to avoid danger while traveling abroad will arrive in their host country with a basic knowledge of local threats, laws and customs. Furthermore, they will avoid danger zones and maintain situational awareness—and exercise common sense—at all times.

Security During Adventure Travel

Adventure travel involves traveling to remote locations and natural environments with little, if any, public infrastructure. Increasingly popular over the past 10 years or so, adventure travel typically involves a physical component, such as hiking or river rafting, and it has become an industry unto itself. All of the security suggestions and advice given in previous installments of this series are relevant to adventure travel, but this installment aims to highlight some of the issues a traveler should understand—and some of the risks a traveler should accept—before venturing into remote locales and undeveloped country.

Practice Adventure

Before going to a remote village in the mountains or embarking on a sailing trip around the world, a traveler must ask himself or herself if they really want adventure, or if they just want photographs of adventure. There is a reason adventure travel destinations are sparsely populated: They are extremely difficult places to live. A critical safety precaution for an adventure traveler is to not take lightly or cavalierly the decision to travel.

Indeed, the best preparation for adventure is adventure closer to home. When planning a trip, a traveler should not plan a three-week climb to the base camp on Mount Everest unless he or she has spent time in the mountains at high altitudes carrying 70 or more pounds on his or her back. It is advisable to become practiced at one’s adventure of choice, river rafting, for example, before making it the focus of a two-week trip to Costa Rica. A traveler should begin with small excursions—a day hike in places where there is no cell phone service—to experience what it feels like to be without water for up to six hours or to sleep outside when it is cold and rainy. These hardships will not endanger a traveler and will prepare him or her for the real thing.

An adventure traveler must be adaptable and accepting of hardship. The whole point of adventure travel is to abandon one’s comfort zone. Whether hiking through the jungle, kayaking down a river or staying in an indigenous community in the Andes, travelers are bound to encounter problems not easily solved—or problems that are impossible to solve. Buses may not arrive, guides will quit and the hostel might not even remotely resemble its online pictures. The biggest mistake a traveler can make in those situations is to spend too much time figuring out why something went wrong and not enough time figuring out how to resolve the situation. In an adventure situation, food, water and shelter are the only things that matter. Weather, while a consideration, is less of a concern if a traveler has appropriate shelter and the ability to protect himself or herself from the elements. All other considerations, such as a soft bed or a shower, should be considered luxuries.

Preparation, situational awareness and thoughtful action remain the foundation for mitigating risks in
all forms of travel, but they become more important in adventure travel because, given the destinations, immediate support is difficult—if not impossible—to find. In major cities of developing countries, an injured traveler can seek treatment at a hospital or clinic. A traveler who has lost his or her money can locate a bank to get more. If the hotel in which a traveler is staying is dangerous, there are other hotels in safer areas. Once outside of major cities, an adventure traveler’s options are more limited.

**Plan Adventure**

In the wilderness, the consequences for inadequate planning, lack of situational awareness or impulsive decisions can be death. In the event of an injury, very few options exist for a traveler, other than to stabilize the injury as much as possible and seek help. Planning is very important before going on an adventure trip, but planning a trip can be difficult in places of the world where little information is available. Travel guides, webpages and blogs can be valuable sources of information in such instances. Adventure travel by its nature, however, means less information will be available.

It is critical that a trusted friend or family member not going on the trip have a detailed itinerary and an emergency plan, including important phone numbers for the local consulate in a foreign country and the authorities, such as the local police, in developed countries. Because communication equipment can be nonexistent in some remote destinations, travelers should decide prior to departure when they will return, designating a deadline after which their emergency contact will call the authorities.

Travelers should always leave a trail to be followed. They should sign and date as many guest books as pos-
sible at hostels and the front gates of parks or reserves or historical attractions they visit. They should also make allies and friends along the way with people who could remember them if shown a picture.

Another aspect of planning—and, thus, risk mitigation—is understanding what equipment is necessary for a specific location. Advances in technology have made adventure travel more accessible than ever. Water filtration devices, lightweight, easy-to-use white gas stoves and clothing technology advancements have all made adventure travel easier. But travelers should never rely on technology to save them in an emergency. Lighters stop working, batteries run out and water filtration units break. Even satellite phones and other emergency response technology, while valuable, cannot always guarantee one's safety.

Notably, preventable diseases in the developed world can be fatal in the wilderness and in the developing world, requiring travelers to have a different mindset. They should be up to date on vaccines, especially hepatitis and tetanus. Doctors are sometimes willing to give travelers a few antibiotics or pain medications before they go to remote locations. Travelers should understand and be prepared for the indigenous flora and fauna, as well as for diseases that are specific to a location.

Medical care in remote locations is sometimes non-existent, and having some training can sometimes save a life. Travel insurance that covers a traveler on adventure trips is also very important.

Threat recognition is paramount, and many travelers misread a situation because they do not understand the environment in which they find themselves. It becomes the responsibility of the traveler to have a plan in place in the case of emergency, to have proper training to know how to deal with the emergency and to make decisions after thoughtful consideration (if time allows).

Outdoor adventure schools such as National Outdoor Leadership School or Outward Bound can be great places to learn survival skills in the wilderness. These skills also translate to remote locations in developing nations, and these schools allow novices to experience the wilderness while being trained in proper survival skills. At minimum, every adventure traveler should take a wilderness first aid course. Wilderness First Responder courses are highly recommended.

Many travelers are more comfortable going on pre-packaged trips with an adventure travel company rather than attempting to plan the trip themselves, especially if time is a factor. If a traveler chooses to go it alone, adaptability becomes all the more crucial because it is very difficult to make arrangements for nonexistent amenities. After all, one cannot plan a bus schedule where there are no buses, and one cannot make hotel reservations if there are no hotels. Pre-planned trips, especially for one's first time in a location, remove much of the stress involved in such scenarios. They do, however, place limitations on the traveler—seemingly counterproductive for one seeking adventure in a foreign country.

Travel is exciting and fun if it properly planned and undertaken with the proper care and the appropriate level of situational awareness. But a dream vacation can quickly turn into a nightmare if the traveler is robbed, injured or kidnapped. We hope that the guidance in this report will help you enjoy your travel safely.

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