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Personal Safety Overseas: Safety Tips for Overseas Travel, An  
Update

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Living and traveling alone in a foreign country may present certain risks to your personal safety. Each individual can develop effective strategies to reduce exposure to these risks and have an enjoyable, productive and safe experience. Common sense is the watch word here. But given cultural differences, it is not always clear what "common" is. In this regard understanding the language and culture of the host country and developing relationships locally will provide the clues to determining the most appropriate strategies for reducing your exposure to risk. It takes time to develop the understanding and skills to recognize and accurately interpret the cultural cues and nuances that attend daily interactions. Your actions and exposure to risk should be guided by an appreciation of this vulnerability. If you spend time in a big city, exercise the same awareness and vigilance you would in the US. There are no firm guarantees for your safety, but there are attitudes you can develop and actions you can take to reduce the risk of being victimized. The Regional Security Officer (RSO) at the US Embassy can provide personal safety resources and support for you and your family. Immediately upon arrival make it a point to discuss your new environment and any safety concerns that you might have with the RSO. Fellow expatriates and local colleagues will also have a wealth of information and guidance for you. When it comes to personal safety in a variety of foreign environments, there are few definitive prescriptions. But experience has taught us some useful lessons.

#### Pre-Departure

As you prepare to travel, live and work overseas you can enhance your safety by informing yourself about the new environment. The internet and contact persons who have recently traveled to the same destination are valuable sources of useful information and lessons learned. Here are some basic measures that may prove useful.

- Travel light. Carry clothing that is conservative and practical. If you'd hate to lose it, don't bring it.
- Take an extra pair of glasses. Contact lenses can be problematic in many countries.
- Ensure that insurance policies are up to date and arrange for payment of premiums.
- Authorize a Power of Attorney for a trusted individual.
- Make out a will.
- Consider getting a telephone calling card and/or a GSM cellular phone that allows access to most local cellular systems (and provides a single contact number).

- Take out property insurance on necessary equipment (cameras, binoculars, laptops, etc.)
- Photocopy passport and visa, credit cards, other documents that need to be replaced quickly, if lost or stolen. Leave one set of copies with reliable person at home and carry extra copies in place separate from originals.
- Notify credit card company of intent to travel. Confirm credit limit.
- Bring extra passport photos.
- Make sure health insurance covers foreign service providers and medevac expenses.
- Visit country-specific websites for information on political, social, economic, geographic, and other characteristics of your destination country.
- Review project documents, demographic studies, economic surveys.
- Set up a hotmail account in order to communicate and/or electronically store communiqués and reports.
- Visit Dept. of State Consular Affairs website for security advisories and other travel guidance ([www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov)).
- Other useful websites are [peacecorps.gov](http://peacecorps.gov), [airsecurity.com](http://airsecurity.com), [fieldsecurity.com](http://fieldsecurity.com), [interaction.org](http://interaction.org), [usc.edu/globaled/safeti](http://usc.edu/globaled/safeti) or [fieldingtravel.com](http://fieldingtravel.com); [asirt.org](http://asirt.org) provides transportation safety information for many countries.
- If you plan to carry prescription medicines be sure to have authorization to carry such from your physician. Some prescription medicines are considered controlled substances in other countries.
- Start learning a few common phrases in the local language.
- Know the location and contact information for your consulate or embassy at the country of destination
- Leave travel itinerary and contact information with family or friends; otherwise keep this information confidential.
- If possible, pre-arrange transport from the airport to your hotel

## 2. Awareness

Personal safety begins with awareness. Awareness begins with a clear understanding of one's attitudes, values, self-esteem, personal strengths and limitations. What does your attitude, dress, and body language say about your vulnerability? It continues with insight into the host culture and environment - local attitudes toward strangers, gender perceptions, values, mores and means of communicating. In order to be alert to potential dangers and risks to your well-being, you need to be aware of what is going on in your immediate environment. Study. Observe. Ask. Some general themes for raising awareness follow:

- Assess your emotional and physical strengths and limitations.
- Be attentive to how you are perceived by local people and behave in a manner that is not provocative or draws unwanted attention.
- Set your watch to local time.
- Strive to understand the local language and cultural norms.
- Understand local currency exchange rates.

- Familiarize yourself with your neighborhood and work environment.
- Use street smarts. Beware of pickpockets, scam artists, over-friendly strangers, loiterers, etc.
- Pay attention to local media (newspapers, radio, television, gossip).
- Be aware of the people nearby, of dark streets, of parked cars.
- Take a seat on a bus or train that allows you to observe fellow passengers, but does not preclude options to change seats if necessary.
- Be alert to potential trouble and choose to avoid when possible.
- Educate yourself of any pending events (elections, demonstrations, anniversaries) that may cause civil disturbance, and avoid unnecessary risks.
- Inform yourself of the availability and reliability of local support services (police, security, medical, emergency, fire).
- Confirm with the US embassy the procedures for you and your family in the event of a crisis or evacuation.
- Politely decline offers of food or drink from strangers.
- Accept beverages only from sealed containers; make sure there's been no tampering.

### 3. Personal Conduct

It is important to appreciate the image you (as an American abroad) project and how this is perceived by others. MTV, CNN, and television programs that depict violent conflict and/or promiscuous, well-to-do Americans are widely watched. Local people of all stripes may look upon you and your behavior in light of these predominant images. While the RSO will surely provide you with some safety guidance, the choices you make regarding behavior, attire, travel, possessions, relationships, etc. can influence your exposure to risk. How you behave affects not only your personal safety, but the safety of others with whom you are associated. It is incumbent upon each one of you to conduct yourself in a manner that is neither disrespectful nor provocative.

- Behave professionally and in a manner befitting your status in the local society. Insist on being treated with respect.
- Dress in a manner that is inoffensive to local cultural norms.
- Avoid clothing that shows your nationality.
- Establish personal boundaries and act to protect them.
- Exercise added caution on occasions when displaying conspicuous possessions (jewelry, walkman, sunglasses, camera, etc.).
- Divide money among several pockets.
- Take a patient and calm approach to ambiguity and conflict.
- Radiate confidence while walking in public places.
- Follow your instincts. If a situation is uncomfortable, remove yourself from that situation.
- Be cool when facing confrontation; focus on de-escalation and escape.
- Respect local sensitivities to photographing/videotaping especially at airports, police and government facilities.

- Carry official identification with you at all times.
- Maintain a low-key profile, especially in places where there may be hostility toward Americans.

## 5. While Traveling

In many of the countries where you will work extreme caution should be exercised while traveling. You may encounter dangerous road conditions; untrained or unlicensed drivers; drivers operating under the influence of alcohol; vehicles that are poorly maintained and therefore hazardous (no headlights or tail lights, faulty brakes, smooth tires etc.); police check points or roadblocks; bandits and other criminals. Some recommendations follow:

- Plan your trips carefully. Always know where you are going.
- Before you leave, let someone know your plans.
- Avoid night travel.
- Travel with others when possible.
- Avoid hitchhiking.
- Do not take shortcuts through remote or unlighted areas.
- Understand the local “rules” for response should you be involved in or witness a traffic accident. In many cases, stopping for an accident can put your life at risk.
- Only take official, licensed taxis. Note the license plate number of taxi write it down.
- Avoid getting into a taxi already occupied by others. If necessary, pay extra for a single fare. Negotiate price before getting in taxi. Have money ready to pay in appropriate denominations.
- Avoid ground floor rooms at the hotel. Second through fifth floors are desirable (harder to break into, but still accessible to firefighting equipment).
- Meet visitors in the lobby. Avoid entertaining strangers in your room.
- Familiarize yourself with hotel emergency exits and fire extinguishers.
- Count the doors between your room and nearest emergency exit (in case of fire or blackout). Rehearse your escape plan.
- Keep hotel door locked with dead bolt or chain at all times (don’t forget the sliding glass door and windows).
- Identify your visitor before you open the door.
- If you doubt room delivery, check with the front desk before opening the door.
- If you are out of your room, leave television/radio on. Place “do not disturb” sign outside door.

## 6. If You Become A Victim

Despite all of your efforts to reduce exposure to risks and to avoid threats, you may still become the victim of a crime or critical event. Following are some general response strategies:

- Remain calm and alert.

- Try first to defuse the situation. Culturally appropriate greetings or humor may reduce tensions.
- If an assailant demands property, give it up.
- You can create a timely diversion by tossing your wallet, watch, etc. to the ground in the opposite direction you choose to flee.
- Against overwhelming odds (weapons, multiple assailants) try reasoning, cajoling, begging, any psychological ploy.
- Carefully note details of the environment around you (license plate #, distinguishing features, accents, clothing, etc.).
- If you feel your life is endangered and you decide to physically resist, commit to the decision with every fiber of your being. Turn fear into fury.
- Seek support for post-traumatic stress (even if you exhibit no symptoms).

## 7. Highjacking/Kidnapping

As an American/Western you may be targeted for kidnapping. Those who perpetrate these crimes are either promoting a political agenda and/or seeking to gain a financial or political dividend. Travelers are highly advised to be aware whether there is a history or risk (known threats, targeting) of kidnappings in places they intend to travel and take necessary precautions. Because hostage situations vary greatly, the following considerations should be applied based on one's best judgment at the time:

- The US government policy not to pay ransom to kidnappers is firm.
- The greatest risk of physical harm exists at the point of capture and during a rescue attempt or upon release.
- Remain calm and alert, exert control on emotions and behavior.
- Be passively cooperative, but maintain your dignity.
- Assume an inconspicuous posture, avoid direct eye contact with captors.
- Avoid resistance, belligerence or threatening movements.
- Make reasonable, low-key requests for personal comforts (bathroom breaks, a blanket, exercise, books to read, etc.)
- If questioned, keep answers short. Volunteer nothing.
- As a captive situation draws out, try to establish some rapport with your captors.
- Avoid discussing contentious issues (politics, religion, ethnicity, etc.)
- Establish a daily regimen to maintain yourself physically and mentally.
- Eat what your captors provide. Consume little food and drink. Avoid alcohol.
- Keep a positive, hopeful attitude.
- Attempt to escape only after weighing the risks and when you are certain to succeed.

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