

7 tips for traveling safely overseas

Bryce Sanders

August 4, 2017

If you are planning a summer or fall vacation, you might be worried about increased terrorism around the globe. Is it safe to travel now?

You've heard the rationale before. Terrorists want to disrupt our everyday lives. If they keep you home at a staycation in your back yard instead of traveling to Europe or a major U.S. city, they've won a victory.

What's the risk?

Can you quantify the risk? Sure. Plenty of people have run the numbers. The *Washington Post* observed you run about the same chances of crushed by unstable furniture as you are being killed by terrorists.

The website lifeinsurancequotes.com, which offers statistics from various federal agencies and nonprofits, reports that your chances of being killed in a shark attack are 1 out of 11.5 million; the chances of being killed in a terrorist attack are 1 in 20 million.

You want more? NBC News cited a Cato Institute report showing the chances of an American being killed in an immigrant-initiated terrorist strike at 1 out of 3.64 million.

Surveillance

Years ago, New York City was not considered a safe place. Visitors to the city were reluctant to ride the subways because they were worried about being mugged. This even included daytime, when the trains were crowded.

I used to explain: "See all these people? They are called witnesses."

Today we have surveillance. You watch *NCIS LA*. You used to watch *Person of Interest*. You are used to people saying: "Get the street-cam footage." However, the best security is what we don't see.

London is an exception. They are proud of their surveillance. In 2013, the *Daily Telegraph* reported Britain has one surveillance camera per 11 people in the country. It's been estimated they have 6 million CCTV cameras.

It's been said the average Briton is caught on camera 70 times a day. If you are traveling to London, the number rises to 300 times per day.

A leader in new entertainment concepts, in 2015 they developed the TV series "Hunted" to show how fugitives can be tracked. The U.S. version aired in January 2017.

Surveillance is how the UK has been able to roll up terrorist networks, although unfortunately it usually happens after an attack.

Common sense precautions

A simple way to help yourself hopefully avoid accidents and injury when traveling abroad is to stay alert. Start with the obvious. In Australia, India, the UK, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Singapore and many Caribbean islands, people drive on the left. Even if you aren't driving, you need to look *three* times before crossing the street. Good news: In London, "Look Left" is painted on the pavement. Bad news: For years, they've had electric milk delivery trucks that make no sound.

Here are seven additional things to consider:

1. Don't dress like a tourist

My wife and I were in Barcelona sipping a Starbucks coffee while watching the three-card monte teams setup and play on Las Ramblas, the big pedestrian street.

You could tell the tourists from the cruise ships. Some ambled slowly, in a daze, wearing ship ID tags on lanyards along with large cameras. Some wore shorts three sizes too large. They must have been catnip to pickpockets.

2. Don't follow people off the street

Someone offers you a cheap watch or a designer handbag. "Just follow me down this side street," the person says. This is never a good idea.

It's completely out of character, but you need to look straight ahead and ignore them. If you insist on speaking, "No, thank you" is sufficient.

3. Don't walk down dark streets, especially at night

You wouldn't do this at home. Why is it a viable alternative in a strange city? You might be tempted to take a shortcut. Muggings happen in big cities everywhere.

4. Don't exchange money with strangers

Today, you can get local currency from ATMs no problem. Obviously you wouldn't buy local currency on the black market. You might get hit with other clever scams like cab driver who gives you change of your large bill with smaller bills (so far, so good) that turn out to be counterfeit.

Always have small bills on hand. The hotel can make change for you.

5. Buy medical insurance before you travel

Your health insurance policy back home very well might not fully cover you when abroad. However, it's pretty inexpensive to buy a health insurance policy that covers you while traveling outside the country. Contact your credit card company.

6. Get insurance coverage if you are driving abroad

Here's another instance where coverage stops at the border. Your credit card company should be able to sell you a short-term policy that covers you when driving outside the United States.

(Earlier we looked at risks due to terrorism. Your risk of an auto accident is far greater. Based on 2014 numbers from the National Center for Health Statistics, your chances of death in a motor vehicle accident in a given year is 1 out of 9,008.)

7. Gambling with strangers is never a good idea

Years ago, one of the cruise lines we traveled included a warning in the ship's newsletter. "Passengers are cautioned not to play cards for high stakes with other passengers aboard the vessel."

This even rules out informal games of backgammon in a bar where people say: "Let's make it interesting." You can easily get into trouble.

If you want to travel, you should. However, it makes sense to take precautions and understand risk.