

# Personal Safety Advice for Travelers Abroad

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Although many travelers are concerned about their personal safety when traveling abroad, it is an often neglected area in travel medicine. Personal safety is one of the most important areas for travel health advisers to cover when giving advice to travelers going to virtually any country. Individual responsibility is paramount, as fewer people are going on programmed package tours.<sup>1</sup> Travelers should also be advised about important safety nets, such as health and travel insurance, and finding medical assistance abroad.

Half of general practitioners (GPs) in a New Zealand study reported giving safety advice to travelers,<sup>2</sup> but GPs who saw a greater proportion of travelers were more likely to give safety advice.<sup>2</sup> Seventy percent of travel health advisers in travel clinics usually advised travelers about personal safety.<sup>3</sup> A recent study of inflight magazines in Australia revealed a paucity of advice concerning personal safety of travelers.<sup>4</sup>

## Should I Go?

Travelers should be advised to avoid trouble spots, including those experiencing war, major internal strife, or major disasters. Information concerning these types of events is usually promulgated by foreign affairs departments, and may be available on the Internet, and through various computerized travel health databases. Travelers, who find themselves caught up in any strife, should be advised to seek advice from, and register with, their local embassy or diplomatic mission. Most diplomatic missions make contingency plans for evacuation of foreign nation-

als, but this should not be taken for granted by travelers. Where terrorism is endemic, travelers should be advised to keep a low profile if it is absolutely necessary to go, especially if they have diplomatic or official status, such as government officials and members of the armed forces.

## Is Traveling Abroad Really Unsafe?

Deaths of travelers abroad have been used as an objective measure of the consequences of a breakdown in personal safety and health. A recent Australian study found that this risk of dying abroad was probably similar to that at home.<sup>5</sup> Interpreting these findings was difficult however, since comparisons are being made between different populations. The causes of travelers' deaths were probably the most interesting aspect for travel health advisers, with the author concluding that advice concerning accidents and injury avoidance was probably more practical than overemphasizing protection against infectious diseases.<sup>5</sup>

The Australian study showed that the crude mortality rate for short term travelers and work party members abroad was only about 10 per 100,000 per month or about 0.1% annually.<sup>5</sup> About 35% of deaths abroad were the result of ischemic heart disease, with natural causes overall accounting for some 50% of deaths.<sup>5</sup> The most common preventable cause of death amongst travelers was accidents. Trauma accounted for 25% of deaths of Australians abroad.<sup>5</sup> Injuries were the reported cause of 18% of all deaths, with the major group being motor vehicle accidents, accounting for 7% of all deaths, which appeared to be over-represented in developing countries.<sup>5</sup> A similar pattern of mortality was observed in American and Swiss travelers abroad.<sup>6</sup> Deaths of Australian tourists overseas have also resulted from air crashes, drowning, boating accidents, skiing accidents, bombs and electrocution.<sup>5</sup> Homicides, suicides, and executions combined, accounted for about 8% of all deaths.<sup>5</sup> Most fatal accidents in American and Swiss travelers were traffic or swimming accidents.<sup>6</sup> Infectious disease was reported as the cause of death in only 2.4% of Australians traveling abroad.<sup>5</sup>

The most dangerous destinations for Australian tourists were Europe, and Central and South America, with Southeast Asia accounting for its fair share of deaths.<sup>5</sup> New Zealand and northeast Asian countries were amongst the safest countries to visit.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, accident fatality rates in men from the USA were higher in developing countries than developed countries, or at home.<sup>7</sup>

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### **How Can I Overcome My Fear of Flying?**

It is easy for travelers to be discouraged from traveling because of concern for personal safety, especially on aircraft, although it is probably amongst the safest modes of modern transportation. Some people choose not to travel because of this. Some people have genuine phobias of flying and this topic has been reviewed elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Some airlines have special programs to assist intending travelers with fear of flying, which they estimate to be as high as 20%.<sup>9</sup> Some airlines also have developed video packages for travelers who have a fear of flying.<sup>10</sup>

### **Should My Child Go?**

The most important point that parents and guardians have to decide is whether or not the risk of the journey to the child's health justifies the benefits to the child, or to the family. Children and young adults are generally more liable to become ill while traveling than older adults in terms of travel-related illness attack rates.<sup>11</sup> Admission rates to hospital are also higher in young children.<sup>11</sup> Traveling with children is discussed elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> For some destinations, where the child cannot be protected, there may be increased risks. However, for many parents, leaving their children behind is not an option.

Child safety carriers, capsules, or infant car seats used for children should be taken with the parents or guardians when traveling for use in motor vehicles, and where necessary, and where possible, in-flight. On aircraft, infants and very young children often fly for free, but usually no seat is allocated in which to use a safety carrier or capsule. A seat may become available where the flight is not full. Some airlines have however started to install special child seats, especially on long-haul flights. Where a safety carrier, capsule, or infant car seat is intended to be used on a flight, a booking may need to be made for a seat. It is important that the child is restrained at all times, when not moving about the cabin. Moving around the cabin should be kept to a minimum and children should not sleep on the floor or in the aisles.

During take off, landing, or during turbulence, very young children should be properly restrained. Standard airline seat belts are unsuitable for very young children as the child can slip underneath or out of them. This can result in severe injury, if the plane decelerates appreciably, given that planes travel at much higher speeds than motor vehicles. Planes can also experience unexpected vertical sheering, which can also result in injury to children or adults.

Special children's restraining seatbelts, which anchor onto the parent's or guardian's seatbelt, are available and should be requested. It is important that the child is not placed inside a standard seatbelt with an adult, as the weight and the momentum of the adult during any deceleration or turbulence may crush the child.<sup>13</sup> Children are best held securely in the arms of a parent or guardian where no other option is available. During severe turbulence, or an emergency landing, the infants should be cocooned as the parent or guardian bends over in the crash position.<sup>13</sup>

### **How Can I Protect Myself?**

Travelers should avoid traveling alone, but at the same time travelers should be advised to be careful of becoming involved with those travelers who are engaged in any type of illegal activities. If the traveler is spending considerable time in a country or area, particularly one which is off the beaten track or experiencing instability, travelers should be advised to inform their family and embassy or diplomatic mission of their arrival and itinerary, in the event of any problems. Travelers should be advised to stay in contact with friends and family at home and let them know their location and that they are well. Travelers should also be advised to consider hiring or taking with them a mobile phone, if possible. Group tours should be suggested to travelers going to remote areas. Travelers to remote areas should be advised to ensure that they take an adequate supply of water and food with them, as well as appropriate clothing, particularly if it is cold. Weather conditions should be checked before departure. Travelers should also be advised to remember to also take appropriate health precautions and personal protective measures, where indicated in relevant national and international travel health guidelines,<sup>14</sup> such as antimalarial medications, vaccinations, care with food and water ingestion, and a travel first aid kit, including insect repellent, if necessary, as well as to take a good supply of regular medications. It is important that travelers are advised to carry essential medications with them on the plane, in case they are needed in flight for an exacerbation of their medical condition, rather than securing all medications in the hold. This becomes particularly important in unforeseen circumstances such as unexpected re-routing or stopovers/transits, or even hijacking.

Personal security is also an issue in many popular tourist areas, and the risk of theft may be significant. A number of hotels and tourism agencies advise travelers about personal safety and travelers should heed this advice. A range of travelers' protective devices are available, but travelers should be advised that they should check with local authorities or diplomatic missions to see if they

### Case Study 1 "Hit" in Nairobi, Kenya, Africa\*

"Four of us (3 male, 1 female nursing officer), were walking back to the hotel after dinner and a drink in the early evening. About 100 m from the hotel, about 7 or 8 men with knives converged on us. They hit 2 of us and threatened the female nursing officer with a knife, demanding money and valuables. I only lost the equivalent of about \$10 in cash, as I had left everything else at the hotel. The others lost cameras, jewelry, credit cards, ID, etc., and the male nursing officer had his shoes taken. I was the only one with much injury to show for it. I had a cut lower lip, and had my upper right central incisor knocked out (which required extensive dental work). We went to the hotel and reported the incident to the management, who then took us to the police station. The police were particularly unhelpful, but we did find out that several other groups had been robbed in more or less the same place in the preceding 30 minutes. A woman in one of these groups had been raped."

\*Case notes kindly provided by Major Craig Schramm, Royal Australian Army Medical Corps.

are legal. Weapons, such as guns and knives, should not be carried at any time.

### How Can I Avoid Being Mugged?

A mugging is an assault, sometimes violent, and usually by surprise, and with intent to rob, usually in a public place. Muggings can happen to virtually anyone, anywhere. Westerners traveling in developing countries are considered rich, despite the realities of the travelers' financial status. Even tattered "Nike's" can be a prize for muggers (Case Study 1). Wearing expensive jewelry or watches is sometimes asking for trouble. It is important to advise travelers to avoid looking too much like a tourist and to wear understated dress. It is also important that travelers do not under dress, as this may impact on cultural expectations. Maps and travel guides should be kept out of sight and directions sought before embarking on a journey. It is important that travelers should stay in reputable accommodation in safe areas, and use offi-

### Case Study 2 Wrong Taxi, Don Muang Airport, Bangkok, Thailand<sup>15</sup>

"Bangkok, 6 June 1999—Australians have been warned against taking unlicensed taxis from Bangkok's international airport after allegations that Thai authorities concealed an investigation into the murder of at least six foreigners during the past 10 months. All were apparently lured into unlicensed taxis on arrival in Bangkok, usually at Terminal 2, taken to isolated areas on the outskirts of the city, robbed and murdered."

cial taxi services at airports and train and bus stations (Case Study 2).

Travelers should be advised to carry just what they need, and to avoid carrying large amounts of cash and jewelry, which should be kept in a safety deposit box or hotel safe where possible. Hotel and hostel room keys should also be left with reception, and travelers should avoid carrying these with them. Bum bags are not recommended as they are highly visible, and are potential "one stop shopping centers" for muggers. It is preferable to keep passport and valuables in a neck wallet, breathable polycotton pouches capable of holding valuables out of sight under the traveler's shirt. Alternately, a hidden money belt may be useful. Travelers should be advised to keep copies of important documents and card numbers separately, and also with friends/family at home, in case of theft or loss.

### How Do I Avoid Having My Drink Being "Spiked"?

Criminals have been known to befriend, drug, and rob travelers on trains and buses, or even in hotels (Case Study 3). This is a worldwide problem. Travelers should be advised to never accept food and drinks from strangers. It is also important that travelers avoid inviting new-found friends to their hotel room. Travelers should not open hotel doors to unannounced strangers or hotel staff, without checking with reception first.

### What If I Am Mugged?

Travelers should be advised to avoid resisting if mugged, since it is better to give up your wallet rather than your life. If travelers are injured following a mugging, they should be advised to seek medical attention as well as reporting the mugging to the relevant authorities. Receipts for medical treatment, and copies of police reports should be kept for travel insurance claims. Where necessary, travelers should seek advice from their travel insurance and assistance company as soon as practicable. Travelers, or their relatives or friends, should also advise their Embassy, Consulate, High Commission or foreign affairs department of serious incidents. Travel health

### Case Study 3 Drugged and Robbed in Malawi, Africa<sup>16</sup>

"I boarded a bus for an overnight trip from Mzuzue to Blantyne. The man sitting next to me offered me a drink (cola from an unsealed bottle). Some 8 hours later, I was woken by the bus driver in a place called Balaka. Then I discovered all my US dollars were missing. I was left with my passport, credit cards, and some local currency. When I tried to contact friends using reverse charge calls, I found that many phones don't have this facility."

advisers should also note that departments of foreign affairs often have advice available for victims of sexual assault, such as a brochure compiled by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia.<sup>17</sup>

### Is It Safe To Drive?

Driving or riding through many foreign countries can be a rewarding experience, when simple precautions are taken. It is important that travelers are advised to heed road rules, avoid speeding, and be cautious of the local driving culture. It is important that travelers are advised to take extreme care whilst driving abroad and be particularly aware of changed traffic conditions, whether a driver or a pedestrian, as vehicles may drive on the opposite side of the road. The most common preventable causes of death amongst travelers are accidents and injuries.<sup>5,6</sup> Injury prevention strategies for travelers, which can be communicated by travel health advisers, have been well described elsewhere by Hargarten.<sup>18</sup>

Hire cars can be particularly vulnerable to attack and car-jackings, particularly those which have distinguishing features in terms of color, advertising, and specialized license plates. Travelers should be advised to hire vehicles from reputable rental car companies and to carefully examine the vehicle to ensure it appears roadworthy. Hire vehicles, which are security rated, including central and/or computerized locking, engine immobilizers, reinforced safety glass (armor glass), mobile phone, and vehicle identification and/or tracking, are preferred. Although a foreign driver's license may be accepted by rental car agencies, an international driver's license should be obtained before departure, which may assist when dealing with local authorities.

Travelers should be advised to get directions before setting off, or be shown how to use satellite navigation devices installed in their vehicles, and travel only on major routes, unless traveling with reliable guides. Driving alone and driving at night should be avoided in unfamiliar countries. Whilst traveling, travelers should be advised to keep all doors locked with windows wound up, especially when stopped at traffic lights. Extra care needs to be taken with all luggage, and valuables should

be placed out of sight, especially while the vehicle is unattended (Case Study 4).

Those driving through wildlife reserves should seek advice from their travel agent, and foreign affairs officials, concerning safety in the reserves they intend driving through. An increase in armed conflicts, especially in northeastern and central Africa, has made military automatic and semi-automatic weapons easily available in many African countries for use in robberies and attacks. Travelers have also encountered life-threatening situations from both wild mammals, although, fortunately, attacks on tourists by wild mammals, at least in South Africa, appear to be an uncommon cause of injury and death,<sup>20</sup> and armed bandits in wildlife reserves (Case Study 5). Travelers should be advised to remain in their vehicles whilst driving through wildlife reserves, and to seek the assistance of a qualified guide if they wish to explore on foot.<sup>20</sup> Travel warnings about the risk of robberies in game reserves should be sought through consular offices.

Many travelers will also ride push bikes or motor bikes abroad. It is important that travelers take safety helmets and safety wear with them if they intend to ride motorcycles and push bikes, as many countries do not legally require these be worn or provided.

### Can I Take My Pain Killers?

Some prescription drugs may be illegal overseas, and travelers should be advised to carry a doctor's letter or prescription for their medications, and keep a copy of this letter on the patient's file. Travelers should keep copies of prescriptions at home. Pharmacists may also keep copies of prescriptions. Possession of prohibited drugs in Australia may lead to heavy fines or even imprisonment. It is a difficult subject to raise with travelers, but penalties for drug trafficking, or even possession of significant quantities of illicit drugs, can lead to imprisonment, and even the death penalty in some countries. In one UK study, only 2% of GPs would raise this topic with travelers.<sup>22</sup> Travelers should be advised to ensure that they pack and lock their own bags and keep them in their possession at all times. Bags should be chosen that can be easily secured. Travelers should also be advised not to carry packages for anyone without seeing the contents. Traveling professional athletes, who are the subject of random

#### Case Study 4 A Conspicuous Target, Paris, France<sup>19</sup>

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"It was Sunday in broad daylight. I had just picked up our rented Peugeot car and was filling it with petrol at a service station near Charles de Gaulle Airport when our luggage was grabbed out of the back of the car. My friend tried to stop the theft by throwing himself into the BMW getaway car, but he fell to the ground and suffered painful injuries. The police investigation concluded that the thieves' car had stolen number plates. We did not get our luggage back."

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#### Case Study 5 Ambushed, Masai Mara Game Reserve, Kenya, Africa<sup>21</sup>

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"Kenya, 22-23 May 1999. Armed bandits using semi-automatic weapons ambushed six foreign tourists traveling by road to Kenya's famous Masai Mara game reserve. Three of the tourists were from South Australia and all lost cameras, money and watches."

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drug tests, should be especially cautious of accepting and taking medication of any type without consulting their team doctor. Medical advice should otherwise be sought from a qualified source, clearly stating that they are professional athletes. Travelers should be advised to check with the Embassy, Consulate, or High Commission of the country to which they intend to travel to confirm that the medications they wish to carry are permitted. Some countries frown on medications as basic as low dose codeine. As well as a letter from the treating doctor, the medications should be kept in their original packaging, and have the dispensing pharmacy's label attached. Some countries require information to be forwarded before travel. Some countries, such as the UK, have Internet sites that can be checked for restrictions.<sup>23</sup>

### Do I Need Travel Insurance?

"If you can't afford travel insurance, you can't afford to travel."<sup>24</sup> All travelers need travel insurance. Travelers should be advised about health and travel insurance and finding medical assistance abroad, which has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> It is important that travelers understand that travel insurance companies usually provide some important services, as well as health and travel insurance. These include 24 hour emergency telephone advice lines, emergency supplies of medications, and aeromedical evacuation, or evacuation in the event of civil unrest.

Travelers should be advised to avoid traveling with acute or subacute medical or dental problems, which could flare up while abroad. Preexisting illnesses may require additional coverage. All preexisting illnesses should be fully documented, preferably in a doctor's letter, and also by means of emergency documentation, such as medical alert bracelets, and/or wallet card outlining allergies, medications, major illnesses, as well as documenting the person's blood group. Some travel and health insurance companies will also record medical information in case of emergency. Travelers should be made aware that some activities abroad may not be covered by their travel insurance policy. Travelers should consider very carefully undertaking these activities, which are considered sufficiently dangerous not to be covered.

### Is There Anything Else I Should Know?

Those who may be seeking work abroad should be vigilant for scams. In particular, travelers should be made aware that the slave trade, including the sex slave trade, still exists in some countries. Even some women from western countries have found themselves virtually cap-

tured by their employers, who have taken their passports. Travelers going to work abroad should be advised not to surrender their passports to anyone, except authorized authorities. Further information relevant to travelers' safety may be available on the Internet.<sup>26,27</sup>

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Roman ruins in Brescia, Italy. Submitted by Charles D. Ericsson, MD.