

Traveling Safety Tips

from the Let's Go travel series

Exploring and Traveling

- To avoid unwanted attention, try to blend in as much as possible. Respecting local customs (in many cases, dressing more conservatively than you would at home) may placate would-be hecklers. Familiarize yourself with your surroundings before setting out, and carry yourself with confidence: you will appear less vulnerable if you walk with purpose rather than wandering aimlessly. Check maps in shops and restaurants rather than on the street. If you are traveling alone, be sure someone at home knows your itinerary, and never admit that you're by yourself. Instead, feel free to lie and explain that you're meeting a friend, spouse, or in-law across the street. When walking at night, stick to busy, well-lit streets, avoid dark alleyways, and stay in groups. Keep in mind that in many cultures, harassers will not bother married or engaged women; if you're not married, consider wearing a cheap or fake wedding ring. If you ever feel uncomfortable, leave the area as quickly and directly as you can.
- There is no sure-fire way to avoid all the threatening situations you might encounter while traveling, but a good self-defense course will give you concrete ways to react to unwanted advances. Consider enrolling in a model-mugging course before you depart.
- Avoid night transportation, as roads are less visible and buses and trains are more crime-ridden by night. If you are using a car, learn local driving signals and wear a seatbelt. Study route maps before you hit the road, and if you plan on spending a lot of time driving, consider bringing spare parts. If your car breaks down, wait for the police to assist you. For long drives in desolate areas, invest in a cellular phone and a roadside assistance program. Park your vehicle in a garage or well-traveled area, and use a steering wheel locking device in larger cities. Sleeping in your car is one of the most dangerous (and often illegal) ways to get your rest.

Possessions and Valuables

- Never leave your belongings unattended; crime occurs in even the most demure-looking hostel or hotel. Bring your own padlock for hostel lockers, and don't ever store valuables in a locker. Be particularly careful on buses and trains; horror stories abound about determined thieves who wait for travelers to fall asleep. Carry your backpack in front of you where you can see it. When traveling with others, sleep in alternate shifts. When alone, use good judgment in selecting a train compartment: never stay in an empty one, and use a lock to secure your pack to the luggage rack. Try to

sleep on top bunks with your luggage stored above you (if not in bed with you), and keep important documents and other valuables on your person.

- There are a few steps you can take to minimize the financial risk associated with traveling. First, bring as little with you as possible. Second, buy a few combination padlocks to secure your belongings in either your pack or a hostel or train station locker. Third, carry as little cash as possible. Keep your traveler's checks and ATM/credit cards in a money belt—not a "fanny pack"—along with your passport and ID cards. Fourth, keep a small cash reserve separate from your primary stash. This should be about US\$50 (US\$ or Euros are best) sewn into or stored in the depths of your pack, along with your traveler's check numbers and important photocopies. Photocopies of all important documents (i.e., passport, credit cards, plane tickets, identification, and any other crucial information) will prove an invaluable resource if any of these is lost or stolen.
- In large cities con artists often work in groups and may involve children. Beware of certain classics: sob stories that require money, rolls of bills "found" on the street, mustard spilled (or saliva spit) onto your shoulder to distract you while your bag is snatched. Never let your passport and your bags out of your sight. Beware of pickpockets in city crowds, especially on public transportation. Also, be alert in public telephone booths: If you must say your calling card number, do so very quietly; if you punch it in, make sure no one can look over your shoulder.
- If you will be traveling with electronic devices, such as a laptop computer or a PDA, check whether your homeowner's insurance covers loss, theft, or damage when you travel. If not, you might consider purchasing a low-cost separate insurance policy.