

Personal Security While Traveling in the U.S.



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Dear World Travelers of America (WTA)[®] Member:

Traveling in the United States, whether for pleasure or business, can be both exciting and intimidating. There are several things to keep in mind when planning an enjoyable, safe, and productive trip. One important consideration on your checklist should be your personal security.

The first step in determining your security is to answer the question, "What is the threat to me, my companions and our belongings?" Answering this question may not be as complicated as you imagine, although some guidance based on experience is helpful. Posing the question about the threat, identifying its components, and suggesting precautions and remedies to reduce the risk is the subject of this pamphlet.

While there is a reasonable expectation that an airline, an airport, or a hotel will provide some measure of security for the traveler, the person most concerned for your well-being and safety needs to be you. The more you learn about security and protecting yourself, your companions, and your belongings, the more likely you are to avoid any threat to your safety. So, while this pamphlet provides you valuable information, be sure to seek out as much additional information as you can to ensure that your travels in the U.S. are safe and enjoyable.

Travel Safely!



*Working to Make Travel Safer,
More Affordable, and Hassle-Free!*

What is the Threat?

During a journey by air, rail, or road to a destination where you will be staying in a hotel, you are probably least at risk when you are in the hotel. You are most vulnerable to those who target travelers when in a public airport, train station, stopped on a roadway, or transferring luggage from a luggage carousel to transportation at curbside. Be on your guard when you are in these places.

Luggage

The consensus of seasoned travelers is that you should travel light, using only carry-on luggage if possible when you travel by air. If you need to check your luggage on a flight, the threat to your belongings is increased. Wheeled luggage that fits under an airplane seat or in the overhead compartment assures you that you will have the maximum space and not risk misdirected or lost luggage on an airline flight. Note that most airlines limit your carry on baggage to two pieces. Check with your airline.

While passing through security, you should bear a few things in mind. If possible, never send your purse, or any other luggage that contains valuables through the security scanner first or last. If you send your valuables through first and then are delayed passing through the metal detector, someone could take your belongings from the x-ray area; if you send your valuables through last, someone could remove your belongings from the x-ray conveyor belt. To this end, wait until the person ahead of you has cleared the metal detector before placing your belongings on the belt. This way, you will be assured of no delays (unless you are stopped) in collecting your belongings.

Computer technology and identification tagging has significantly improved the likelihood of travelers retrieving their luggage after an airline flight. The scruples of those hired to handle luggage and the conscientious matching of luggage tags to luggage stubs on arrival, however, have not shown this same improvement. Accordingly, don't include valuables in your checked luggage. Make sure that all checked luggage is locked—preferably with a combination lock. And use hard shell luggage rather than soft luggage which can easily be slit open at a seam. Standard precautions still apply: use a luggage tag with your initial and name (e.g. S. Smith), and the address and phone number where you can be reached during the trip (perhaps your corporate street address and your office number, unless someone is going to be home in your absence so that a call there about your lost luggage will be answered). Also, place identification inside the luggage.

Always retain your luggage check stub if presenting a claim for lost luggage. Let the claims office write down the details of the claim. Your stub is the only evidence that your luggage was checked.

Airports, Train Stations, and Public Areas

Once you've gotten your luggage safely on and off the airplane, you need to be aware of other threats to you and your belongings. A weary traveler disembarking from a plane or train faces confusion and distractions in unfamiliar surroundings. If you have to make a telephone call, you are likely to put your suitcase on the ground behind you and face the telephone while you make your call. At the baggage carousel you are likely to set down your briefcase or suitcase and look up at the flight information display. It is at these vulnerable points that a thief may try to take your luggage, or perhaps create a distraction by asking you a question while an accomplice steals your bag.

Keep in mind that thieves often work in pairs, so while the one in front of you asks you a question or hands you something, a partner behind you can be grabbing your suitcase, riffling your purse, or reaching into your pocket. On an escalator, a talker bumping into you from behind and a runner grabbing your luggage in front is a well-known "distraction-grab-theft" tactic.

Airport police report that a robbery is common when travelers leave their luggage (perhaps under the care of strangers) while they make a phone call, get a cup of coffee, or go to the washroom. If travelers take their luggage or purse into the washroom and leave them in a visible, accessible position in the stall while the door is closed, a thief can grab and run before it is possible to react.

In order to minimize the risk, be aware of those around you. Carry luggage and a purse with a shoulder strap, keep luggage with you and out of reach of a thief, even in a washroom, and use a lock or trunk strap with a lock so that a suitcase or purse can not be opened without a key or combination. If you have a companion traveler, guard one another's luggage or store it in a locker while you go to the washroom or make a telephone call.

While making a phone call, keep your luggage in front of you, protected by your legs - perhaps put your foot through the carrying strap and look out and away from the phone when you are speaking. Be aware that someone engaging you in conversation at the phone may be part of a distraction that puts your belongings at risk. Also, while at the phone look around to see who is in a position to observe you (perhaps with a video camera or small telescopic lens on a camera) as you enter your telephone calling or credit card number on a phone pad; it may be a caller on either side of you. Shield their view with your shoulder or head when you enter the numbers or run your card through the reader. Memorizing your telephone calling or credit card number, or using a tone dialer, available at Radio Shack or similar type stores, or your cell phone may make it more difficult for observers to get the number.

Your belongings may be at risk on an airplane or on a train. If you plan to sleep during your trip, a purse or carry-on bag containing valuables should be under your legs or held close to you in an unopenable position; such luggage is vulnerable in an overhead luggage rack or bin or under the seat in front of you. In some heavily trafficked airports, robberies have been tied to conversations between stranger/seat mates on a flight. Be guarded in your comments to strangers in any public environment.

By the same token, do not wear valuables - a diamond ring, jewelry, a valuable watch - in a public place. It is unwise even to use fake jewelry that looks real. Such attractions make you a clear target for a thief who is looking for items with a ready secondary market.

Taxicabs

In many major urban centers, taxis have become a risk for the unwary traveler. Most problems involve baggage theft, but there have also been assaults and robberies. Problems may arise when you put your carry-on bag in the seat of the cab and then return to an airport carry-cart to fetch the rest of your luggage. Make sure no one has access to your carry-on bag while you are outside the cab. Check to see that all your luggage stays on board if another customer fare gets out first.

Motor Travel and Rental Car Security

Planning security for automobile use during your travels should begin with the question, "What is the threat?"

According to the National Insurance Crime Bureau, both car theft and assaults to drivers and their passengers are growing rapidly. A car is stolen every 20 seconds in America, and over 200,000 assaults, robberies, and rapes were committed in parking lots, garages, streets, and highways in recent years. In many instances of theft, the first line of defense was overlooked - the cars were not locked and keys were left in them. Whether parking your car, entering or leaving your car, or driving your car, be aware of your surroundings and practice basic, common sense security.

Whether you drive your own car or rent one, schedule your arrivals and departures during daylight hours, especially in an unfamiliar town. Get advance directions with marked maps. If renting, your rental car agent is a useful resource.

If you get lost in a place which is off the main roads, proceed to a gas station or fast food store where the lighting is good and you can ask directions in relative safety. Always drive with your doors locked. At stop lights try to be in the left lane, away from the curb, and leave room (a car length or more) so that you can see the rear

tires of the car ahead of you and you can maneuver if someone approaches you on the street. Think where you could move to if an assailant were to approach your car—even if you have to go through a red light or drive over the curb. Have your car in gear and ready to move instantly in response to any perceived danger.

Be aware of the “bump-and-stop” tactic where a potential assault is initiated by someone bumping your car from the rear. Don't stop, but proceed to a well-lit, public site (preferably where a police officer is present) to assess the damage or discuss insurance. If you have a cell phone, call the local or state police for assistance. A criminal is not likely to follow you to a public place.

Call ahead to the hotel or ask the rental agent about any problem areas and route yourself around them, especially after nightfall. If you arrive at an airport after dark you may wish to take a taxicab or use a hotel shuttle service and rent a vehicle after you are downtown.

When you arrive at your hotel, drop off your luggage at the desk first, then park your car in a well-lit area, preferably within sight of the hotel entrance. While it is inadvisable to leave any luggage of value in your car, whatever is left should be placed in the trunk *beforehand* so that no one observing you will see what you are doing.

When you arrive and get out of your car, you should check to see that no one is following you, pulling into the lot when you do and parking nearby - perhaps between your car and the hotel entrance. After dropping off her luggage, a woman alone at night might ask at the desk for valet parking or for an escort to and from the parking area.

It is always smart to be observant before approaching and unlocking your car or parking and getting out. If there are unexplained loiterers or people sitting in a nearby car, don't approach your car. If you are already in your car, don't get out, but drive to a safe place such as the hotel entrance.

Sometimes travelers who make an emergency stop on the open road are victimized by passers-by who offer assistance. Without a cellular phone or Citizens Band (CB) radio, you are particularly vulnerable when you get out to change a tire, walk down the road, or accept a lift to make a call. A standard practice is to tie a white handkerchief to your antenna and then wait in your car with the doors locked and windows closed against uninvited entry. When someone approaches, you should open your window only wide enough to ask that the police or auto club be called. It is advisable to say that someone else had stopped to help earlier but that no one had arrived yet, indicating that help might be arriving any minute. Someone truly interested in helping a stranded traveler on a lonely stretch is as likely to be as cautious as you are, fearing a

decoy or a trap. Your only opportunity to ask for help may be through a slightly lowered window.

Your automobile safety kit should include a small flashlight with a headband to leave your hands free (available from Recreational Equipment, Inc., 800-426-4840 or www.rei.com), an emergency blanket for preserving your body heat in the cold (available from Magellan's, 800-926-4943 or www.magellans.com, or L.L. Bean, 800-341-4341 or www.llbean.com), and a reflective "CALL POLICE" sign for your rear window (available from Citizens Against Crime, 800-466-1010 or www.trainingexperience.com. Mention your WTA membership when ordering any product from Citizens Against Crime and receive a 10% discount!)

Security professionals disagree on whether your safety kit should include a pepper/tear gas spray cartridge. When used properly, such a device can deter an attack and incapacitate an assailant without causing permanent harm. However, it can escalate violence, and give the bearer a false sense of security. If it is used, it should be part of an overall plan of self-defense including some instruction to make its use effective. Self-defense instruction is usually available from the community relations officer of major city police departments or for a fee from Citizens Against Crime, 800-466-1010.

A cellular phone enhances your security in your car immeasurably. It gives you the power to communicate with the outside world in the event of trouble or to call 911 in an emergency. Although a cellular phone can be a costly form of communication, it can be a life saver.

All deterrents to car theft work in two ways: by lowering the incidence of crime, and by shifting a criminal's attention to some other target. The Club[®], for example, locks to your steering wheel when your car is parked, immobilizing the steering wheel. Other anti-theft devices are available as well. However, keep in mind that many of the anti-theft devices available are not always fool-proof, so be aware of your surroundings and try to only park your car in a safe area. The Club and other similar anti-theft devices are available at many auto parts stores.

Hotel Security

There are two criteria for selecting a secure hotel: electronic locks and good key control. Unfortunately, there is no way to find out about these features without calling the hotel directly. In terms of threat analysis, the number one security issue is controlling who has access to a guest's hotel room. While a hotel can install electronic locks and establish a rigorous protocol for key control, it's still a public place and is susceptible to criminals. Unfortunately, it's the guests themselves who don't exercise

caution by failing to lock their doors when they go for ice at the end of the hall or open their doors to an uninvited intruder.

As a measure of both convenience and security, call the hotel directly before you begin your trip to confirm your reservations, to arrange for such special needs as wheelchair access, or to help with large amounts of luggage. You can also ask about cab fare and shuttle services from the airport, and directions to the hotel. If noise at night is a concern, you might want to request a room away from an ice dispenser, vending machine area, and elevator.

Standard Safety Practices for a Hotel Guest

When you first enter your hotel room, leave the door open and check to see that no one is in the bathroom or under the bed. If family or associates are with you, have them stay in the doorway while you check the room.

When you are in your room, lock the door, attach the chain, and use the peep hole to identify any person who knocks at your door.

Do not open your door for unexpected callers, and phone the front desk to verify that someone claiming to be making an unexpected service call is on the hotel staff.

If you order food to be delivered from outside the hotel, the most secure procedure is to accept and pay for the delivery in the lobby. If you instruct the front desk to permit outside delivery to your room, the delivery person will know your name and room number and after the delivery is made, whether you are alone or with others. It is unwise for any traveler, especially a woman, to share that knowledge with an outsider.

Be careful about what leftovers you place outside your door. If there is a single drinking cup with lipstick markings and the remnants from a single meal, passer-bys can make judgments about the vulnerability of the room's occupant.

When you are sleeping, be sure to use your deadbolt and chain locks and assure that no access to your room is possible through a window. You may also wish to carry with you one of a number of intruder alarms that also double as smoke detectors.

Do not leave valuables in your room when you are absent. Use the hotel safe. Professional thieves and hotel staff have seen every hiding place for valuables that you can imagine, including hollowed-out books and dummy shaving containers.

When you are not in your room, leave every indication to a passerby that your room is occupied. Your light should be left on, the television should be audible, and except at the hours when you want cleaning staff to clean your room, put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on your door knob.

If you leave your room to use a swimming pool or fitness room, be careful about where you keep your key or key card. Do not leave it visible among your belongings at poolside. Ideally, leave it at the front desk and retrieve it when you return to your room.

Smoke and Fire

In a low-rise hotel, ease of access and exit by several routes provides assurance of escape in the event of fire. Even so, one of the first measures you should take is to count the number of doorways from your hotel room to the stairwell, so that in the dark of night, in the midst of smoke, you can count the doors and crawl to that stairwell door to escape. Put your key or key card and glasses beside your bed so that in an emergency you can find them quickly. If you leave your room in such an emergency, take your key card - you might have to retreat and re-enter your hotel room.

In a high rise building, escape from fire and smoke may be more complicated. Again, memorize the number of doorways to the fire-escape stairwell, and walk down the stairwell so you will know if there are any unexpected traffic patterns at a mezzanine floor or arriving at the ground floor. This pattern should also be memorized in case all is dark and smoky and there are others around you in a panic.

Most hotels have bedside instructions about what to do in case of fire - read them. They may save your life. Here again, an intruder alarm that doubles as a smoke detector, often with an emergency flashlight, is invaluable.

If you see smoke or fire in the hotel, call 911 first to get the fire department, then call the front desk.

Currency Security

The best strategy to follow is to carry as little cash as possible. Credit cards are the most convenient substitute for cash since they are readily accepted across the U.S. and can be replaced if lost or stolen. Specifically, use your WTA Visa® credit card. It's designed especially for travelers, carries a very competitive interest rate with no annual fee. Also, if you are in quick need of cash, you can use the cash advance feature on your credit card (note that this feature does carry a fee, usually a percentage of the cash amount with a minimum fee.) If you do not already carry the WTA Visa card, you can apply by calling 800-FIRSTUSA.

It is best to only carry one or two of your credit cards, and leave the others at home in a safe place. Be sure to make a list of your card numbers and keep it separate from the cards so that you can easily and quickly access it if your cards are lost or stolen. Include on this list the names and phone numbers of those to contact in case the cards are lost or stolen.

Another good alternative to carrying cash is to use traveler's checks as they, too, are commonly accepted in the U.S., and you can get your money back if they are lost or stolen. American Express, Citibank, Bank of America, and VISA are some of the leading issuers. If you're in the U.S. and planning a trip, a local financial institution or the American Automobile Association (AAA) can provide you with the checks you'll need. (If you're not a member of AAA, there will be a fee for the checks and AAA typically requires cash as payment.) If you are not already in the U.S., ask your own financial institution for advice on how to get them.

It is best to divide up your traveler's checks so that you carry only what you need. Keep the rest in a safe place. Be sure to make a list of your traveler's checks numbers and keep it separate from the checks.

If your checks are lost or stolen, the easiest and least complicated way to replace them is to call the emergency number of the issuer to report the loss. Then take the list of numbers of lost checks to the local office of the issuer during business hours to have them replaced. Losses and thefts, however, are rarely so uncomplicated and may well involve loss of your credit cards, driver's license, passport, and cash along with your traveler's checks—all on a weekend. You may have to call the emergency numbers to arrange replacement of the cards and traveler's checks. Non-citizens may also need to contact their country's embassy.

All of the major issuers of traveler's checks have 24-hour emergency response lines, with the capacity to respond in any language, and can arrange delivery of replacement checks or cash through special arrangements with banks, local hotels, car rental agencies, or by courier in out-of-the-way places.

It's a good idea to use a security wallet or a hidden flip-away wallet to protect your credit cards, driver's license, traveler's checks, passport, and cash.

Women Travelers

Because they tend to be perceived as easier targets by thieves and would-be assailants, women need to exercise a higher standard of care. One director of security cited examples of problems for women travelers. One woman propped her hotel door open while she went to a vending machine down the hall; she returned to find a stranger leaning over the bed of her companion. A man carrying an ice bucket followed two women down the hall as if he were going to his own room; as they opened their door, he pushed them inside the room and assaulted and robbed them. Four women had rented three adjoining rooms with internal access between the rooms, using the center room for stowing luggage and purses; in the morning, they found their purses had been stolen. They had failed to deadbolt and chain the middle room door.

One of the best pieces of advice for women travelers is to always be aware of their surroundings and those around them. Whether walking through an airport terminal or down the street, always keep looking around and stay alert. If something or someone doesn't seem "right," walk away and avoid what could develop into a precarious situation.

Women can also make themselves more or less conspicuous. Avoid wearing flamboyant jewelry. Conversely, a wedding ring can discourage unwanted attention.

A number of other suggestions for women travelers are in previous sections of this pamphlet. In particular, revisit *Motor Travel and Rental Car Security* (pages 4-6) and *Hotel Security* (pages 6-8).

Numerous books are also available which deal with the issue of women's security. Two of the best are, *What Every Woman Needs to Know About Sexual Assault*, (Citizens Against Crime, 800-466-1010), and *Street Sense for Women* by Louis Mizell.

Final Comments

Most travelers will take trips for pleasure or business without incident. But remember, by being aware of the risks of travel, what can happen, by analyzing "What is the threat?" and preparing for it, you're enhancing the likelihood that you, too, will have a safe and trouble-free trip.

Safe and fun travel to you!

This information is provided by Peter V. Savage, author of *The Safe Travel Book* (available at 888-499-7277.) Savage has over 20 years experience as an international security consultant. His articles appear regularly in *Bottom Line: Personal*, and he has written for *Travel Executive*, *The Business Traveler*, *Travel One*, and various other travel and security publications. He has appeared on both the *Oprah Winfrey* and *Geraldo* shows, and regularly appears on CNN when travel security is affected. Savage is currently active as a security counselor and principal in Passport Health, Inc., a travel medicine clinic with offices across the country and its headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland.

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