

Safety tips for solo travelers

Whether flying, driving or ensconced in a hotel room, vigilance is key for solo travelers.

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I love traveling solo and exploring destinations to the beat of my own drummer. But being a one-person band has its drawbacks where safety is concerned.

And for the person traveling alone, man or woman, safety should be a top concern — not so much that it keeps you from having a good time but enough to keep you on your toes. Here are some areas to think about.

Airports and airlines

The challenges for the solo traveler begin in earnest at the airport. Just clearing security presents some issues because keeping an eye on your stuff and on your boarding pass and on your shoes, your belt, your jacket, your laptop and on and on may be almost impossible.

Before sending your valuables (wallet, purse or laptop) through the scanner, make sure the person in front of you has cleared security and that the scanner belt is moving so you can greet your valuables on the other side. Place valuables inside your bag, not loose in the bin or a bowl, said Suzanne Treviño, a Transportation Security Administration spokesperson. If TSA wants to take you through secondary screening, ask that your property be moved over with you or kept in clear view.

Buy a lock for your carry-on bag, especially if you put your valuables in the carry-on before you go through security. "Thieves know your most valuable possessions are in your carry-on," says George Hobic, founder of AirfareWatchdog.com, a travel blog for airfare deals.

If you don't have a lock, at least position your bag upside down in the overhead compartment so it can't be easily pilfered if you fall asleep on your flight.

If you're flying business or first class and the flight attendant offers to hang up your jacket, be sure you remove your valuables. Last month, a 47-year-old Air France flight attendant was arrested for allegedly stealing thousands of dollars in cash, traveler's checks, credit cards and jewelry from business-class passengers as they dozed on international flights.

Hotels

Travelers shouldn't make it obvious they're alone, and women must be extra vigilant to avoid imparting too much information.

When you make your reservation, Kevin Coffey, a detective and a travel security expert who founded CorporateTravelSafety.com, suggests using your first initial and last name for additional anonymity.

Hotel front-desk clerks have become savvier in recent years and take steps to keep your room number confidential, but if they aren't cautious enough, ask for another room. "It's always best to ask him or her to write it down on a piece of paper and keep the paper concealed," says Anne Banas, executive editor of SmarterTravel.com, an online consumer resource for travel news, deals and expert advice.

If you're in a room with an adjoining door, make sure that door is locked. "We assume it's locked, but there's no guarantee that it is," says Sam Shank of Dealbase, a website for hotel deals. "I've actually had someone sneak in on me once at a nice hotel in Houston," Shank says, noting that the intruder ran when confronted. But now, Shank says, "I cannot sleep unless I check this lock."

When leaving your hotel room, make sure you pull the door closed; if the self-closing door is out of alignment, it may look closed when it's not.

If someone claiming to be a hotel employee knocks at your door, look through the peephole and ask to see ID. If there's no peephole, call the front desk to verify the employee's identity, especially if you're not expecting room service or fresh towels.

If you need a cab, ask the hotel to call one for you. Input that number in your cellphone for future excursions.

If you want to go running or jogging, do so during daylight hours and check with the front desk or concierge about the safest places to exercise. "Stay on routes where there are people and cars," Coffey says. "Consider carrying your cellphone in a wrist safe or armband."

Driving

Solo travelers should preview each day's travel route and choose what appear to be safe spots along the way, such as 24-hour gas stations, convenience stores and police and fire stations. (If you arrive and feel uncomfortable, listen to your inner creep-o-meter and leave.) If you have car trouble and someone stops to help, stay in the car, and ask the other person to summon help. If you see a stranded motorist, don't stop. Instead, notify the police.

Pickpockets

Coffey, an expert on pickpocket prevention, says solo travelers can be special targets of these thieves because they don't have that second set of eyes. If you're tempted to be lax, just remember what a hassle it is to replace stolen credit cards and passports.

You can't really know for certain who is a thief, Coffey says. Pickpockets are young and old, men and women. Overseas, some women pickpockets carry babies to look innocent. Many work in teams, so be careful with groups of young teens, especially girls that surround you.

Beware of anyone who approaches you and asks questions, no matter how innocent. Pickpockets use conversation to help lower your guard so another thief can steal a bag or slide a hand in your purse.

Carry your money in a neck or money belt. Consider carrying a backpack, purse or travel bag whose zippers can be secured. Coffey recommends bags that have cables in the straps to thwart thieves who carry razors to slice through the straps.

"Women should never hang their purses over the back of a chair or leave them on the floor in restaurants," he says. Some travel security purses feature detachable purse straps so they can be secured to the back of your chair, preventing snatch-and-run thefts, Coffey says.

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