

WISH YOU SAFE TRAVELS!

THE PANDEMIC HAS TAKEN OVER OUR THOUGHTS, BUT THERE ARE MANY OTHER RISKS TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN TRAVELLING ABROAD — THIS **999** GUIDE COVERS MOST OF THEM AND AIMS TO MAKE YOU MORE VIGILANT

BY ORLANDO WILSON





These days, travelling safely means taking every precaution against COVID-19 and, preferably, undertaking a trip after getting vaccinated. However, in our preoccupation with the pandemic, we might lose sight of other risks when travelling. No matter how safe the city — such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which are amongst the safest in the world — there’s always a risk of walking into a nasty situation. Let’s bear in mind that no place can entirely be mishap-proof or crime-free, and that ensuring travel safety begins with ourselves.

A case that recently made headlines in the UAE was of a staff member in an apartment hotel entering a tenant-guest’s room and stealing money in various currencies, the amount totalling Dhs80,000. The occupant of the apartment was travelling for a few weeks, and the accused, in his role as assistant to the building’s head of security, could enter all apartments. He managed to digitally crack the victim’s safe open and steal all the cash. The victim got a rude shock when he got back from his trip and looked into the safe to take money out for rent.

In this case, the victim fell prey to crime not where he travelled but at the place that he left behind temporarily. This recalls the summer season house break-ins that

would be attempted across the Gulf when everyone travelled abroad during the school holidays, before the pandemic.

One of the most horrific overseas travel experiences that befell any citizen or resident of the UAE was the April 2014 hammer attack on three Emirati sisters, as they slept in their hotel room in a European city. They had left the door unlocked for another family member, but the person who slipped into the room in

the middle of the night was an armed drug addict. He stole a large amount of cash and valuables and also left one of the sisters with severe brain injuries.

These incidents of the past and the present reinforce the necessity of keeping one’s eyes and ears open and think everything through — something as basic as what to pack — when travelling; the novel coronavirus isn’t the only threat out there.

? QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR A TRIP

- Compile threat assessments on the country, cities, and locations to be visited — how risky are they?
- Will you need any inoculations against diseases or need to take preventative medication with you?
- Do you have trusted contacts at this location and how can they assist you?
- Will anyone meet you at the destination airport; if yes, do you know them? If not get a photo and arrange code words?
- Will your phones work at the destination; if not, where can you get a local mobile/ cell phone or SIM card?
- Are there payphones at the airport and do they take coins or credit cards?
- Will there be ATMs available, and can you use your bank cards?
- Will you be able to use credit cards?
- Will you have Internet access and is it secure, are there free hotspots?
- How will you be travelling around — public transport, on foot, or using a driver?
- If you are renting a car, make sure you know your routes, have a reliable break-down plan and spare tyre etc. in the vehicle.
- Put together contingency plans to cover any possible crisis, be it kidnapping or a serious car crash.
- Have several alternative planned routes by which to leave the country.

7 Essential Tips that'll come in handy for travellers

1

RULES AROUND COVID-19

The pandemic has changed the world drastically, especially as far as travel is concerned. One of the main problems for a traveller is that COVID-19 rules and restrictions vary from country to country; they can also change at a very short notice. Before travelling, you must check the COVID-19 rules of the country you are visiting.

PCR TESTS: To visit most countries, you will need to have taken a PCR test and tested negative within 72 or 48 hours before your arrival in that country — always verify the time requirements. Ensure that your personal details and passport number are listed on the document you receive; this is proof that you are the genuine traveller who is presenting the negative test report to the authorities. People have been turned away from their scheduled flights because their passport number was wrong on their test results. In some countries, it's fairly easy to get a PCR test done at pharmacies for around \$60 (Dhs220) and then the results are e-mailed to you within 6 hours or less. But, in some countries, appointments must be made for the tests and the printed results need to be collected from the testing site. A lot of international airports now have testing locations, with results provided within a few hours. Always check and confirm where you'll be tested for your return trip to the UAE. Even though you can get PCR tests on arrival at some destinations, you may not be able to take off from the departure city if the airline bars passengers who don't already have a negative test result.

WEARING MASKS: The mask rules can be confusing; in some locations, they're enforced and in some locations, they're ignored. These days, people should always carry a mask with them and wear them when required or asked to. There are mandatory fines in some countries for not wearing a mask, so research the rules before you arrive and take a supply of good quality masks with you.

QUARANTINE: There are quarantine rules in place in some countries that can include self-isolating at the address you'll be staying at or being held at an allocated hotel for 10 to 14 days at

your expense. Where self-isolation is required, there can be very large fines for those found to

have broken their quarantine. Where the traveller is held at a hotel pre-designated by the authorities, there's the double disadvantage of paying a huge amount of money and not always getting the corresponding quality of room and services and security. All things considered, it's best to avoid countries that enforce the hotel quarantine rule.

CURFEWS: During COVID-19 lockdowns in many countries, curfews were put in place. In Greece, for example, during the lockdown, people were prohibited from being outside between 9 pm and 5 am. They could go outside between 5 am and 9 pm by sending an SMS to a government number, stating their reason for going out. By now, restrictions have been relaxed in most of Europe, the UK and the US, but still check to ensure that you know all the rules and are ready to comply.

TESTING POSITIVE: You need to take into consideration what you're going to do if you or a family member tests positive for COVID-19 during your return trip to the UAE, as you'll not be allowed to board your return flight. In most countries, a self-quarantine will be required for the person who has tested positive along with the others they've been in contact with. Ensure that you have the funds to cover the extra food, accommodation and transport costs for the quarantine period required, should you unfortunately test positive when overseas. If you do test positive, it's advisable to take another test, in case the first one was inaccurate.





2 PREP WELL FOR ENTRY POINT

Compile a threat assessment of any area, city, or country that you're visiting, be it for business or pleasure. These days, with the Internet, it's easy to find crime rates and reports on nearly all countries and areas within them. With Google Earth and the like, you can get high-quality aerial photos and street views on most places, which can be used to check out hotels, locations of city landmarks, and select routes. Websites such as Numbeo, based on crowdsourced information, will give you an idea of the general safety levels of major cities — incidentally, Abu Dhabi has been named the safest in the world for several years in a row.

The thing about safe cities is that they're safe because law enforcement is comprehensive. The last thing you want, then, is to be caught on the wrong side of the law, even when it's totally unintentional. The first point of contact with the authorities in any foreign country is at your destination airport. This is where you must eliminate all risks of the trip going wrong.

Before embarking on your travel, check that all your passports and

required visas are in order, as even slight discrepancies can lead to long delays when passing through immigration and customs. Make sure you are not taking food items and/or medicines that are prohibited in that country. Most countries' immigration and customs websites list items that are prohibited.

For medicines that you must carry, unless they're the very common, over-the-counter variety, bring a doctor's prescription to show that you actually need the meds. Also, carry the pills in their original properly labelled bottles, not in unlabelled containers.

Go through the details of an overseas medical insurance policy before buying, and check that it has all the features and the sum assured that you might need in the intended destination(s). In these very uncertain times, travel insurance that covers the cost of air ambulance is ideal.

3 MANAGE TELECOMMUNICATION

When you arrive in a foreign country, you'll want to be able to communicate with your family and associates. Nearly all airports these days have Wi-Fi services for travellers; in most places it's free, and in some others, there's a usage fee or a limited time of free service. However, public hotspots are not 100 per cent secure,



so do not use them for checking banking or financial information.

Next, depending on the length and purpose of your trip, you may need your mobile phone to work when you leave the airport. You have the option of using your original telecom service provider's international roaming feature, which can be very expensive; or you can buy a local SIM card that includes both voice call minutes and some amount of mobile data. Without this tool of 24x7 communication in your pocket, you may feel lost and not very confident in a strange city. A working phone enables you to call for help in an emergency, contact the hotel, and so on.

4 BEWARE OF FOREX SCAM

Wherever you go outside the UAE, you'll need something more than dirhams. For convenience, change all your travel money into US dollars before you leave the UAE, as you're assured of a fixed dollar-to-dirham rate here. American dollars are easy to change into any other currency anywhere in the world or are accepted in some regions of the world even without changing. You can avoid the risk of losing cash by taking out a forex card that can be reloaded with several major currencies again and again and used as a debit card when overseas.

When abroad, go only to proper money-changer offices to get your local currency, as forex scams abound all over the world. The most common forex scam is someone accosting you in the street and offering "a good rate", quoting a number too good to be true, a rate that no real exchange office can offer. If you fall for it, what you'll hand over is genuine money; what you'll

receive in exchange is fake money.

More straightforward criminals simply hang around currency exchange offices and snatch the cash that many travellers happen to be counting unmindfully as they step out of the office. Any obvious money bulge in your jacket or shirt pocket will also draw a pickpocket's attention.

Even in the UAE, criminals have attacked money exchangers to rob the cash. In October 2020, Ajman Police arrested a gang of five that stole more than Dhs3.28 million from a car that was being used to transfer money by the staff of a well-known money exchange without adhering to security precautions.



5 TAKE CARE IN TAXIS

When travelling, you must plan your trip in detail from start to finish. For example, when planning the ride from the airport to your hotel, make sure that you use a reputable taxi company, such as one that's recommended or supplied by the hotel. Then, when being picked up, make sure to verify it's the real taxi sent by the hotel.

Think about it: would you let close family members or friends get into a car with a stranger in the city where you live now? So, why would you let it happen in a foreign country while they're carrying bags full of valuables?

In many countries, the taxi business is unregulated and often includes some criminal elements — taxi fares are a source of hard cash, and if someone can drive, they're considered qualified to be taxi drivers. That could mean ending up with anyone from a friendly, chatty driver to an aggressive, even violent driver if you aren't familiar with the city. In some parts of the world, driving licences can be bought or copied, meaning your taxi driver may not even be an actual trained driver.

The taxi business is also a good corporate front for organised criminal groups, as it is a cash business and can be used for laundering money.

Many tourists have found themselves left by the roadside, in the middle of nowhere, watching their luggage, passport, and

valuables being driven off into the night. The lucky ones just get robbed and not raped, assaulted, or murdered.

So, have a pre-arranged car to transport you from the airport to your hotel; most quality hotels can arrange this for you. Otherwise, at busy times, taxi queues can be chaotic, and there's also the problem of taxi drivers not knowing your hotel's location and over-charging you. If you have mobile data, use the GPS on your smartphone to find the right route to the hotel, and check the Maps app to see if the taxi is following that route.

Where there's good public transport, such as an Airport Express train or a metro line to take you from the airport to the city centre — such a service exists in London, Barcelona, Oslo, Delhi, Singapore, and many other world cities — look up the line map well before commencing your trip, so that you know which train stop is closest to your hotel and whether the train line is connected to the city's metro network



6 CHECK OUT THE HOTEL



Always find out enough about the hotel that you'll be staying at. These days, a simple web search can pull up customer reviews; always check the reviews posted on several different hotel booking websites. Have some security plans for your stay at the hotel — ensure everyone knows where the nearest fire exits are; always put valuables in the room safe when you are out; and

never let strangers come into your rooms. If an unannounced member of the hotel staff wants to enter your room, call the hotel reception to confirm their identity.

If your hotel has been booked for you by your company, still research the place and, if you find potential issues, get them to change it. Security in most hotels is very weak and it's not hard for non-guests to go up to any hotel floor, though a few hotels now require the lift to be activated by the use of the electronic room key.

Most travellers expect and believe that their hotels are quite secure, but they should stay alert, and not open their doors to anyone who has knocked, without first putting the safety

catch in place — if the door has one. No one should have the chance to push the door open and barge in, while you're trying to figure out who they are. Remove the safety catch only when you're satisfied that the person standing outside the door is really a hotel staff member and has a good reason for knocking on the door.

Also, lock the door properly before going to sleep by using the bolt that almost every hotel door has. This cancels the risk of anyone misusing a digital key card to open the door from outside.

A lot of hotels have no dedicated security personnel and give the "security" job title to the concierge staff; this keeps insurance costs down, as the hotel can show on paper that it has security personnel.

Don't become too relaxed when checking into a five-star hotel or when checking out, as luggage theft is common when guests are distracted. Thieves lying in wait know what valuables five-star guests usually keep in their suitcases — jewellery, computers, cameras, designer clothes etc. During check-in and check-out, don't lose sight of your bags.

Even after you're settled in your room, there might be some trouble. If you suspect prostitution or some other shady activity being carried out at the hotel, and if you feel uneasy about it, trust your instinct and move to another establishment.

When travelling to a city that's seeing some kind of political unrest, try to find a hotel away from where the protesters are. Often enough, such large public gatherings start with a carnival atmosphere but quickly turn into very hostile situations.

7 KEEP CRIMINALS AT BAY

In general, the types of criminals most people will encounter are from the lower echelon of the criminal world, such as muggers, car thieves, burglars, and other petty criminals.

For a quick lesson in being street-wise, think from the perspective of the mugger. When choosing their victims, these criminals would generally ask themselves three questions: does the target have valuables on them worth taking; will the target put up a fight; and can the mugger escape easily after committing the crime?

The criminal has just done a basic threat assessment. If you know what they're looking for in their targets, you can avoid becoming a victim.

On an overseas trip, it makes sense not to advertise the fact that you're a foreigner. Try to blend in, and don't make the common mistake of wearing very expensive jewellery or clothing. Look online for some photos of street scenes from the location you'll be visiting and see how people dress there.

Another way to signal that you're a foreigner — and a potential target — is the language you speak in the street. If you're walking down a street with a dodgy environment during late evening or night, and if you don't speak the local language, then try not

to speak at all. At the same time, walk in a confident manner — like you know where you're going, even if you're lost — until the shady stretch is behind you. Criminals always look for people who are soft targets, because they don't want a confrontation, thus drawing attention to themselves, which is bad for their criminal business. To discourage them, never look and act like a victim.

Also, make sure that the restaurants, clubs, and bars you go to are reputable. Criminals will often pay waiters or bar staff to tip them off when a suitable target is noticed at their venue — the foreigner with the Rolex, designer clothes, and wallet full of cash and credit cards. When the target leaves the venue, they can be robbed in the street or lured into a criminal's taxi.

Knowledge, it is said, is power. Therefore, arm yourself with as much advanced knowledge as possible, and become an empowered traveller.



ESSENTIAL TIPS FROM SECURITY SPECIALISTS

Andrew Chatzkelowitz and Cedric Tortevoix MSyl specialise in security and personal protection. They tell **999** why staying alert and paying attention to detail helps on a trip.

“ Planning and understanding the environment is essential when travelling everywhere these days, whether it's a day trip to the shopping mall or on an African Safari. If you pay attention to the small details and avoid the small problems, then they'll not turn into big problems. Even with the COVID-19 pandemic, travel is still possible and, for many of us, essential for business. We just have to consider a few extra things and have a solid contingency plan in place for any unforeseen problems or travel delays



ANDREW CHATZKELOWITZ
Security specialist

“ Travellers have to be very careful that they are not robbed or, say, have their credit card details stolen. If some people see the opportunity to walk away with a designer handbag that alone is worth a few thousand euros, [and] which will [also] have cash, credit cards, mobile phones, etc. inside, then many will take the risk. Basic security awareness and not trusting strangers can save travellers a lot of problems



CEDRIC TORTEVOIX MSYL
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ABOUT THE WRITER: Orlando Wilson has worked in the security industry internationally for over 28 years. He is the chief consultant for Risks Inc. and based in Miami but spends much of his time travelling and providing a wide range of kidnapping prevention and tactical training services to private and government clients.