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Hotel Safety: Staying Safe in Your Home Away from Home

Diplomatic Security's Office of Intelligence and Threat Analysis (ITA) prepared the following report on hotel safety in May 2004:

State Department employees are often required to travel on temporary duty (TDY) to various locations around the globe. In doing so, they open themselves up to the risk of becoming victims of crime. Westerners are targeted in and around hotels in some locations because of their apparent relative wealth in comparison to the local residents.

According to the ITA crime database, more than three out of every four crimes against TDY official Americans in and around hotels were conducted for reasons of financial gain by the perpetrator. These crimes primarily include pickpocketing, burglary, robbery, fraud, and theft. The remaining - and less frequent - cases involved harassment, assault, and sexual assault.

Booking the Hotel

Whether traveling for business or for pleasure, the following tips are a start when considering personal security awareness while at a hotel. Though the tips are not necessarily exhaustive in each area, they provide for a set of practices that travelers can undertake in order to make each trip a safe one.

- If you are traveling overseas, check the [Consular Information Sheet](#) on the State Department's website. This often identifies crime and safety information that may be pertinent to your trip.
- It is a good idea to know a little about your destination and its crime rate. Is your hotel in a good area of town? Does the hotel provide well-lit interior hallways, parking structures, and grounds? Are hotel personnel trained in guest security, and are they available for escorts to rooms and other areas when requested?
- Hotel rooms should be equipped with a solid core wood or metal door, a dead bolt lock, peephole, telephone (that allows outside dialing), fire sprinklers, and smoke detectors. Additionally, ask about secure locks on the windows and adjoining doors.
- If possible, select a hotel with modern electronic guest room locks. The majority of these locks automatically change the lock combination with every new guest, so there is little chance of someone having a duplicate key to your room.
- Choose a hotel where security is good and transportation is readily available. Remember, the cost of the hotel room is not always the best predictor of how safe the room or hotel grounds will be.

Arriving at the Hotel

- Cruise the parking lot before picking a space. Even if a hotel seems safe, it may border an unsafe or questionable neighborhood. Check to make sure no one is hiding between or inside the parked cars. Park in a well-lit area near the entrance to the hotel and away from trucks, vans, dumpsters, or woods.
- Remove any valuables from your car - or at least put them out of sight - and lock your car.
- If you are uncomfortable with using a parking lot, use the hotel's valet parking or ask to be escorted to and from the parking facility.
- If arriving in a taxi or bus, stay with your luggage until it is brought into the hotel lobby.

Checking In

- Try to arrange your travel plans so that you check-in during daylight hours.
- Stay particularly alert upon arrival and departure. Do not let your guard down once you arrive at the hotel. Criminals target arriving and departing guests who generally have cash and valuables with them.
- When registering, sign only your last name and first initial, and consider using your business address and phone number. Don't use titles or degrees, such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr. or esq. before or after your name. Avoiding these titles makes it harder to determine gender, marital status, or the profession of the occupant, which could avoid potential targeting by perpetrators.
- When checking into a hotel, a desk clerk should never say your room number out loud, nor should you. Other guests in the lobby do not need to know your room number. Instead, have the clerk write the room number on the key packet and show you on a map where the room is located. Keep the map for future reference - it will identify where emergency exits are located.
- Instruct the desk clerk not to give out your name and room number, and ask them to call you if someone inquires about you.
- Request a room on the "inside" of the hotel, between floors three and six (if possible). Avoid rooms above the sixth floor - as that is usually the maximum height that fire department ladders can reach. The ground floor and second floor make it easy for perpetrators to penetrate from the ground. Being on the "inside" is preferable to rooms facing the parking lot or other more public areas. Don't be afraid to ask for another room if you feel you may have been put in one that is unsafe (i.e. at the end of a hall or on a ground level).
- Observe how hotel room keys are controlled. If it is checkout time and a pile of metal room keys are lying around the desk, this should raise a red flag, as anyone can take a key lying on the desk. This is not a big concern if the hotel is using electronic key cards, but it is if the hotel uses metal keys - particularly if the room number is embossed on them.
- Don't leave your credit card lying on the check-in counter while you complete your registration. Immediately secure it.
- If you are wary of the environment, ask a bellman or desk clerk to escort you to your room.

Getting to Your Room

- Upon initial entry, inspect your room. Be sure to check the operation of locks on the entry door, the windows, the in-room safe, the doors connecting to adjacent guest rooms, and sliding glass doors to make sure they work. If they don't, report it to the front desk immediately and ask to be moved to another room.
- It is a good idea to pull on all windows and glass doors to test if they are secure. Beware of balconies where someone can climb from one to another and enter through an open window or sliding door. If you cannot secure all the windows and doors, ask for another room or find another hotel.
- When you enter your hotel room, make sure the door closes securely on its own. Try this a few times to be sure that the door-catch latches without any effort.
- If your room has a safe, make sure it is securely bolted down and the bolts are not visible on the outside. If the bolts are exposed and are not welded, do not use the safe. If the safe isn't securely bolted down, all you are doing is saving a thief the trouble of searching your room for valuables and providing them with a convenient carrying package for your valuables.
- Look for information in your room about fire safety and read it to become familiar with the nearest fire exit/stairway. Does the door open easily? Are the exit signs illuminated? Note the number of doors away from the emergency exit, and the location of the fire extinguisher and fire pull box. Look out the window and note your surroundings for reference, and the height of your window from the ground.

Locks and Other Security Tips While in Your Room

- Do not open the door for anyone you are not expecting. If available, use the peephole. Ask any room service person to slide the receipt under your door before you open it.
- If someone knocks on your door claiming to be hotel staff, deliverymen, or workmen, call the desk and verify the identity of the person, and determine if the person is there for a legitimate reason.
- Always use the deadbolt lock in addition to the regular door locks while in the room. Be aware that employees -- housekeeping, maintenance, etc. -- have keys that access all rooms, but not necessarily the deadbolts.

- If your door has a security chain, twist it a couple times to take up the slack before latching it.
- Always keep your room's doors and windows locked, and keep the curtains closed.
- Never prop your hotel room door open. Rather, when you are inside your room, use a rubber door wedge behind the closed and locked door. Most hotels do not provide these, so you might want to pack one before your trip.
- Consider taking along a flashlight on your trip. Place the flashlight next to your bed in case the electricity goes out.
- Do not use your name when answering the phone, and report any strange calls to your room. Screen your calls, as a call placed to your room might be a probe to see if the room is occupied.
- Do not put anything in the trash that can identify you. Throw it away elsewhere. If the hotel has a business center, it may have a shredder.
- Place your room key in the same location every time you return to your room so you do not misplace it. A good location is next to your bed. This will also assure you will know where it is in case of an emergency.

During Your Stay

- Don't reveal your room number (or floor, for that matter) or speak of your travel plans in a crowded area where you could be overheard.
- Don't display your guest room key in public. Some hotels still put room numbers on keys and if someone grabs your key, they'll know where your room is located.
- If you sense that you are being followed or if a stranger is wandering the halls when you plan to enter your room, make your way to busy public areas instead (preferably the lobby) and notify hotel staff of the incident.
- Avoid stairwells, as they are an easy place for individuals to hide, and from which to escape quickly after an attack.
- While in an elevator that is accompanied by others, it is wise to board last and be the last person to select your floor button. If someone around or in an elevator makes you uncomfortable, get off (if you are in a public area of the hotel), or push a button that will take you to a public area of the hotel, such as the lobby or rooftop restaurant.
- Do not flash cash - especially when you visit the hotel's cashier, bar, or front desk. This is a favorite observation post for pickpockets.
- If you lose your key, ask for a new room or have the lock or electronic key card changed.

Going Out

- Don't leave a maid service tag on your door. Doing so announces to everyone that the room is empty. Instead, ask the maid to make up your room while you are at breakfast. Then hang up the "Do Not Disturb" sign for the rest of the day, regardless if you are in or out of your room, to give the impression that the room is occupied.
- When leaving for a period of time, leave a few lights on and the TV with the volume up to give the appearance that the room is occupied.
- Obtain two business cards or matchbooks with the hotel name and address on them. Place one in your wallet and keep the other in a separate place on your person. If you later depart the hotel, you will at least have the address and phone number of the hotel. This is important if you are in a location where you don't speak the language, as you can show a taxi driver the matchbook, and he will know where to take you.
- Don't leave valuables in your room unless they are secured in a safe. Do not use "traveler locks" on dresser drawers, as they show the thief where your valuables are. Store jewelry, cash, and important documents in in-room safes or safety deposit boxes at the front desk.
- Have two credit cards from competing companies with you during your stay. If one is lost or stolen, you will have a back up. Keep these two cards in separate places, i.e. your primary card in your wallet, and the other in a different pocket.
- Take only a minimum of cash, ID/passport, and only enough travelers' checks for each outing. Do not put all your valuables in one pocket, but keep the most important valuables in the tightest pockets.
- Do not turn in your hotel key when you go out for the day. If you have an envelope for a keycard, make sure it does not have the room number or hotel name written on it.

- If you return to your hotel after dark, use the front doors. Other entrances to the hotel are usually not as well-lit. Also, many hotels have a night security person on duty who is generally in the lobby area.
- If you plan on meeting with a stranger, do it in a busy place outside your hotel.

Upon Check-out

- Check your room carefully to be sure you have all of your belongings, particularly your money, travelers' checks, credit cards, and keys (including your hotel keys/card). Check to be sure you did not leave anything with your name, home address, and/or telephone number to avoid future unwanted contacts. Also, do not leave copies of itineraries, reservations, or anything else that could let someone know where you are from or where you are headed to next.
- Departing guests from a hotel make a good target for criminals because they are unlikely to take the time to fill out reports and debrief hotel staff, and likely have a travel engagement, such as an upcoming flight time. Be as alert to your surroundings when departing as you were when arriving.

Above all, always trust your instincts!

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