



Security In Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights



Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

Travelers are usually well-versed with security precautions they should take in and around their own homes. Many frequent travelers are also familiar with those appropriate at their destinations, or are at least familiar with the resources they can use to bolster their understanding of the situation. But even the most seasoned travelers are often less aware of what the security environment may be while in transit. These secondary locations are not usually the focus of much attention during the travel-planning process, and can present far different situations than your home base or your destination. The level of risk varies from country to country and time to time, so some of the suggested options below may not fit your needs exactly. However, keeping these options in mind while traveling will likely put you near the top of the pile when compared with your fellow travelers.

Before You Go

If you plan to stay in one country any length of time while traveling, it is imperative to register through the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program](#) (STEP). STEP is a free service to allow U.S. citizens and nationals traveling and living abroad to enroll their trip with the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate. Registration makes it easier to receive important information from the Embassy about safety conditions in your destination country, helping you make informed decisions about your travel plans. It helps the U.S. Embassy contact you in an emergency, whether natural disaster, civil unrest, or family emergency. And it also helps your family and friends get in touch with you in an emergency.

Make sure you leave a copy of your itinerary, including flights and hotel accommodations, with a contact back home, especially if you plan to venture off the beaten path. You may also consider putting an emergency contact's name on your reservations in the off chance they may need to contact the airline or hotel on your behalf.

It is often safer to take an ATM card with you on your travels than to carry large amounts of cash to exchange. Small amounts of cash (preferably new and unmarked, if you're traveling to the developing world) may be beneficial, but ATMs generally are the safest way to get foreign funds abroad, and give the best rates as well. Ensure that you notify your bank of your dates and locations of travel so they can monitor any potential fraudulent activity on your ATM or credit cards, and notify your bank once you return and all transactions will have been completed.

Consider creating a separate email address to use while abroad. If not, definitely change your passwords once you return home, especially if you've been using public wi-fi (including at hotels and airports). Try not to log into personal financial tools while abroad.

At an Overseas Airport

Maintain a low profile, and avoid public areas as much as possible. Check in quickly and do not delay in the main terminal area. Do not discuss travel plans indiscriminately.



Survey surroundings, noting exits and safe areas. Stay away from unattended baggage. Verify baggage claim checks before and after your flight. Always maintain custody of your carry-on bag.

If an incident occurs, your safety may depend on your ability to remain calm and alert. During a terrorist attack or rescue operation, you do not want to be confused with the terrorists. Avoid sudden moves; hide behind something and drop to floor. Once out of the way, consider your telephone (along with your identification) your most important possession. Turn the ringer off, then check in quickly with loved ones via SMS text or social media. However, maintain awareness of what's going on around you.

On the Plane

Carry-on luggage should contain a supply of any regularly taken [prescription medicines](#) (in original containers labeled with the pharmacy name and prescribing physician), an extra pair of eyeglasses, passport, and carefully chosen personal documents (copies only!).

Dress inconspicuously to blend into the international environment. Consider wearing no jewelry.

On foreign carriers, avoid speaking English as much as possible. Do not discuss business or travel plans with fellow passengers, crew, or even traveling companions.

Memorize your passport number and issue/expiration dates so you do not have to reveal your passport when filling out landing cards. If you must remove your passport, do so as privately as possible.

On the Train

If you have a private compartment, keep the door locked and identify anyone wishing to gain access. Know the names of your porters and ask them to identify themselves whenever entering your compartment.

If you become suspicious of anyone, or someone bothers you, notify the conductor or other train personnel.

In some lesser-developed countries (and on some trains) it may be advisable to carry your own food and water. Check the CDC website to find out more about water potability, especially outside of large cities, and consult OSAC's report, "[I'm Drinking What in my Water?](#)"

A car located one or two back from the middle of the train may be the safest in case of collision or derailment, according to the National Association of Railroad Passengers. In general, aisle seats are safer than window seats, where a passenger is more likely to come in contact with broken glass or be thrown from the train. Safety experts also recommend choosing a rear-facing seat, as rear-facing riders are less likely to be thrown forward during a collision. If the train has a dining car, avoid spending too much time there, as rigid tables can become dangerous if the train suddenly breaks or hits something. Remember to take your belongings with you if you use the dining car or restroom.



Do not discard your train ticket until you complete your trip and have left the arrival area. In some countries, you will be required to show your ticket at the exit of the arrival station. If you do not have it, you may be required to purchase another one.

Car Rentals

Ideally, choose a conservative model car with locking trunk, hood, and gas cap; power brakes and steering; seat belts; quick accelerating engine; heavy duty bumpers; and smooth interior locks. It is best if your rental car is not identifiable as such: avoid cars with stickers or license plate holders with a rental company's name or logo, and those with out-of-state or foreign registration. In a hot climate, choose air conditioning. Keep the gas tank at least half full.

Before getting into the car, examine it for strange objects or wires inside, around, or underneath it. If found, do not touch; clear the area and call police.

When driving, lock the doors, keep windows rolled up. Neither you nor a passenger should have an arm hanging out of a window, especially not if you are wearing a watch or jewelry, and you are in stop-and-go traffic. Also, do not display a purse, hand-bag or briefcase on a seat in the car – if they can't be kept out of view, lock them in the trunk, even while driving.

Avoid being boxed in by other cars. Vary routes. Check for suspicious individuals before getting out of their car.

Lock the car when unattended. Never let anyone place a package inside or enter the car unless you are present.

For more information, see OSAC's reports on [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#) and [Evasive Driving Techniques](#).

Aboard Public Transportation

Stay on your guard against pickpockets and petty thieves while in a bus/train terminal or at a taxi stop. Avoid carrying a wallet in your back pocket or an easily accessible coat pocket. Carry a purse/handbag that you may firmly grip or secure to your body. Consider using a backpack with hidden zippers or openings that can only be used when removing the bag. Beware of people jostling you at busy stations.

Take only [licensed taxis](#) or ride-share services familiar to you. Generally those found in front of terminals and the better hotels are the safest. You may pay a bit more, but the companies are more likely to be reputable and normally the drivers have been screened. Be sure the photo on displayed license is of the driver. Have the address of your destination written out in local language and carry it with you. Get a map and learn the route to your destination; note if taxi driver takes you a different or longer way. Ensure the taximeter is running or agree to an acceptable fare prior to leaving your destination.



Try not to travel alone in a taxi, never allow a driver to pick up additional passengers en route, and never get out in deserted areas. If the door doesn't lock, sit near the middle of the seat so you will thwart thieves who might open the door or smash a window to grab a purse, briefcase, or wallet.

On subways, choose a middle car but never an empty car. On buses, sit in an aisle seat near the driver. Stand back from the curb while waiting for a bus.

Try to patronize only busy, well-lighted stations.

Be aware of restrictions particular to your destination. Some metro systems abroad are known for their safe operations and efficient service; others have safety or security issues (such as poor policing, poor maintenance, or threat of natural disaster) so pressing that official U.S. government travelers are restricted from using them. This information will usually be indicated on the [OSAC Crime & Safety Report](#) for your destination.

Hotel Security

Accommodations differ considerably around the world. Safety features required in Western hotels, such as sprinkler systems, fire stairwells, and emergency lighting, often are either lacking or inoperable elsewhere. The following measures will enable you to better plan for unforeseen contingencies in hotels.

When making reservations, consider the neighborhood in addition to price and accommodation level. Don't let a good deal sway you into staying in a location that makes you uncomfortable with your security.

Female or LGBT travelers should consider accommodations that may be friendlier to their populations, especially when traveling solo. Consider using a door-blocking device when you are inside your room.

Consider whether the front desk is staffed 24 hours a day, or if you will be left on your own overnight in case of emergency. Also consider what sort of security staffing the hotel has; it may differ between day and night. Some locations may require parking lot attendants or gated entry; don't stay at the only hotel in the neighborhood missing one or all of these features.

Try to avoid staying on the ground floor, where it may be easier for criminals to break in through a window.

Ensure any doors leading from your room to a connecting room are locked.

Stay alert in your hotel. Put the "do not disturb" sign on your door to give the impression that the room is occupied. Call the maid when you are ready for the room to be cleaned, rather than leaving a sign for one to be called. Consider leaving a light or TV on when you are out of the room.

Carry the room key with you instead of leaving it at front desk.

Do not use your name when answering the phone.



Use your hotel safe for anything you don't want stolen, but don't leave anything irreplaceable in the room—including in the safe—when you leave. If you would rather not carry irreplaceable items with you, consider leaving them at home.

Do not accept packages or open the door to workmen without verification from the front desk.

Know where you are going when you leave the hotel. Don't stand outside the hotel looking at a map.

Never resist armed robbery; it could lead to violence. Always carry a throwaway wallet containing some cash and unimportant cards to appease muggers who may resort to violence at finding no reward for their efforts.

For other issues involving hotel security, please consider OSAC's publication on [Fire Safety Abroad](#) and our [Hotel Security and Safety Assessment Form](#).