The Global Corporate Warrior: Staying Safe While You Travel

Headlines today scream of violence and grave threats against international travelers: foreigners kidnapped in Colombia and Mexico; Americans brutally assaulted in Guatemala; Americans assassinated in Pakistan; tourists slaughtered in Egypt; indiscriminate bombings in Sri Lanka; political instability in Indonesia; saber-rattling in the Korean peninsula and the Persian Gulf; regular carjackings in South Africa; and skyrocketing taxi-cab robbery in Mexico City. Recent incidents once again beg the question: How safe is it to travel these days?

Crime and terrorism have always posed a risk for international business travelers. However, armed with good information—and a bit of prudence—a business traveler should be able to avoid the most dire threats. Realistically, the careful business traveler is unlikely to be a victim of a terrorist attack. Common street crime and food poisoning are more common hazards.

It’s true that terrorism continues to plague certain parts of the world, particularly throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. Acts of violence centered around political goals have become increasingly indiscriminate—and designed for maximum death toll. Nevertheless, both government and private statistics suggest that overall risk has not appreciably increased in recent years.

According to U.S. State Department figures, from 1989 to 1996 the number of international terrorist attacks has averaged around 400 per year, with only a modest variance. About a quarter of these incidents involve attacks against Americans, also a relatively steady statistic each year.

While there is always the remote risk of becoming a victim of terrorism by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, business travelers can reduce this risk by avoiding countries in the
midst of armed conflict. Business travelers to countries such as Israel and Sri Lanka, where the risk of a terrorist attack is present, can take proactive measures by avoiding public transportation or crowded markets, two favorite terrorist targets.

Recently, kidnapping has become the focus of a great deal of attention, especially in Latin America and the Philippines. In reality, among the estimated 9,500 kidnappings for ransom each year, only about 200 involve foreigners, according to statistics maintained by The Kroll-O’Gara Company. This figure has also not appreciably changed in the past five years.

It should also be noted that expatriates are at greater risk for kidnapping than the occasional business traveler. Be aware that kidnappers typically target individuals they believe will command handsome ransoms, and this generally requires premeditation and surveillance. Some advice on how to avoid kidnapping: Maintain awareness of your surroundings, watch out for surveillance, vary your routine, and keep a low profile (that Hawaiian shirt and Rolex watch should stay at home).

Of course, if you are unwise enough to travel by car in rural Colombia, you could very well run into a guerrilla roadblock, set up to nab potential ransom victims, including foreigners. For expatriates in especially high-risk countries, additional training, security precautions at both home and office, and even some executive protection should be considered.

Ordinary “crimes of opportunity” are what the average business traveler should be concerned with. Everything from laptop theft at airports to pickpocketing and armed robbery are very real threats faced by tourists and business travelers alike. Criminals in almost any large International metropolis, including North America, will target a well-dressed, wealthy-looking individual. In developing nations and emerging markets, a foreigner can stick out like a sore thumb and quickly become an easy mark for local denizens.

In addition, the emergence of powerful new markets around the world and the growth of business travel make local crime something of a “growth industry.” Many developing countries have high crime rates that are fueled by inadequate, ineffective, or even corrupt law enforcement. These environments also tend to be less politically stable.

With companies of all sizes now commonly sending employees to pursue opportunities around the world, the question most commonly asked is, what can we do to protect them?

Understand the risks. Here’s a good rule of thumb: “Know before you go.” Many criminal scams can be avoided simply by knowing what they are. In Mexico City, for example, pinto taxis in cahoots with criminals will engage in “quickie kidnaps,” forcing unwitting travelers to fork over valuables and cash, as well as a day or two’s cash limit from their credit cards, at gun- or knife-point. After a harrowing day the criminals dump their victims, often pistol-whipped, but alive, in an inconvenient part of the city. I know from my own experience that knowing ahead of time the most reliable kind of taxi to take in a given destination reduces a great deal of stress.

Get informed by checking the U.S. State Department advisories (http://travel.state.gov/travelwarnings.htm). Read guidebooks like Frommer and Fodor. Private companies like Kroll-O’Gara offer continuously updated travel advisories via the Internet or fax-back for a modest fee (www.krollassociates.com). Most large companies have a corporate security director who should have access to this type of information. Another valuable source is your own colleagues or business partners in-country. Knowing what to avoid is half the battle.

Take precautions. Keep a low profile. Try to dress conservatively for the destination in question. In Lima, Peru, for example, wearing glasses is considered a sign of wealth by locals and could make you a mark. Do not advertise your company with logos and business cards on your luggage. Stay out of unfamiliar areas without a local guide. Do not advertise your presence or itinerary.

In high-risk destinations, have your colleagues or business partners meet you at the airport and guide you through the city. A good hotel will arrange transportation for you, which is usually preferable to taking local taxis or public transportation. Stay in internationally recognized hotels. In some cases, extra precautions may be necessary, such as arranging for an executive protection escort with an inconspicuous armored vehicle. For the expatriate manager based in a developing nation, special services such as security training and protective driving can be arranged. This is important for not only the manager, but also for his or her entire family. Corporate security departments may be able to arrange these services for executives.

Protect your health. Be sure you are vaccinated for any potential local health threats. Hepatitis A and cholera pose a risk in many parts of the world. Visitors to tropical areas may require a typhoid vaccination and should take precautions against malaria. Yellow fever, tuberculosis, and meningitis are also
threats in certain areas, especially for long-term travelers and expatriates based in developing nations. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov/travel/travelmap.html) and other sources provide information on travel health risks in specific destinations.

Be careful what you eat and drink. In developing countries, be sure to eat only thoroughly cooked food, and stick to fruits and vegetables that can be peeled or at least washed in purified water. Drink bottled water. Carry a basic medical kit for minor emergencies. It should include at least aspirin or acetaminophen for pain and fever; antibiotics, rehydration salts, insect repellent, syringes in case of the need for injection and an antihistamine.

Consider obtaining travel health insurance coverage which can be purchased through travel agents and insurance agents. Check with your company's risk manager to determine your travel health and evacuation insurance coverage. This type of insurance is relatively inexpensive and can help with medical emergencies, including medical assistance anywhere in the world, and can be a real lifesaver. Companies like American International Underwriters (http://aiu.aig.com/aiai/aiu80.html) and others offer a comprehensive program that includes the insurance as well as "assistance" help lines that can be reached 24 hours a day in case of a problem.

Know whom to call if you have a problem. Be sure to leave your itinerary with your office and family; jot down embassy and consulate numbers. If your company has an "assistance" program, be sure to take the number. Corporate security departments often have arrangements with crisis response companies that can be reached 24 hours a day in the event of a kidnapping, extortion, or other serious threat. Fast, professional response can sometimes mean the difference between life and death.

In spite of recent market turmoil in Asia, political instability, and anti-American sentiment in parts of the world, the increasingly competitive global economy will continue to drive businesses of all sizes in pursuit of opportunities. Indeed, there is more business travel today than ever before, and market studies point toward continued growth in international travel. But business travelers can remain safe, simply by being armed with accurate and updated travel security information about their destinations, taking basic precautions, and using common sense.

—Christopher T. Marquet is senior managing director of The Kroll-O'Gara Company, the world's leading risk mitigation company. A free list of travel safety tips, "Health, Safety, & Security Tips for Travelers," can be obtained at www.krollassociates.com/safetytips.html.