

The Record

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By Jill Schensul | FEBRUARY 10, 2011

Is it safe out there?

You never know when you might encounter danger.

One day, record numbers of travelers are jamming the Cairo museum, contemplating Cleo along the Nile and tanning on the beach in Sharm el Sheikh. Twelve hours later, they're rushing through streets filled with angry protesters, abandoning tour plans and vacations of a lifetime for a flight that will get them out of harm's way.

A lot of those fleeing travelers believed Egypt was a safe place to visit. Sure, there had been some bombings, some violence in the past. But all's been quiet on the Egyptian front for several years now.

Why else would so many people be visiting? Why would Egypt be an increasingly popular choice for families? Things happen. You can't always foresee situations that may be unsafe, even dangerous.

Then again, there are ways to manage your risk of unpleasant surprises. Take Egypt. Some say the recent violence couldn't have been predicted. But Christopher Falkenberg, a national security expert and former Secret Service agent, says that if you had been monitoring events in the country, you would have known Egypt was unstable and a risky place for a leisurely vacation.

Falkenberg's company, Insite Security, specializes in personal security for "high-net-worth individuals" as well as large national and multinational corporations. His company and others employ thousands of people and have sources on the ground, all over the world, updating them on dangerous or unhealthy situations.

Most average travelers couldn't afford that sort of security blanket. But we don't have to blithely wander off into the world, either. Information is available from a variety of sources on pretty much any destination you might want to visit. Information — or, in the spirit of this subject, let's call it "intelligence" — will give you the lay of the land at your destination, in terms of crime directed against tourists, violence, what specific neighborhoods or regions to avoid and what health risks you might encounter.

Some places are obviously more unsafe than others. Midst-of-war countries are no-brainers, along with those cities perennially making the Top 10 list of crime capitals of the world (Mexico's Ciudad Juarez topped the list this year). But crime statistics don't always reflect the average tourist's experience. And the average tourist experience may not be your experience, either. For instance, gum-free Singapore, one of the safest places in the world, is the only place I've ever had my wallet stolen.

Here are some of the steps you can take to reduce your risks:

Background info

- The U.S. State Department website publishes country-specific information for every nation in the world, fact sheets with info on entry requirements, crime and security conditions, areas of instability, road safety and other details relevant to travel. It also offers travel alerts and warnings. Warnings recommend that Americans defer travel to a country because of civil unrest, dangerous conditions or terrorist activity, or because the U.S. has no diplomatic relations with the country

and would have difficulty assisting Americans in an emergency. Alerts don't advise against travel altogether, but are used to draw attention to terrorist threats and other relatively short-term or transnational conditions that could pose "significant risks" to American travelers.

- By law, any official safety advice the government relays to its own employees must also be shared with the public. But "the government may have issues and concerns for its employees different from the issues travelers are concerned about," Falkenberg said. He added that State Department decisions include political /diplomatic considerations: A travel warning can undermine a country's tourism industry and revenue. Which is why you should also check the travel advice issued by other countries — specifically, Canada, the U.K. and Australia — to round out your picture of the situation.

- Talk to people at the destination's local embassy or consulate. Ask them what types of problems a tourist might encounter. While they won't contradict the official government line, they can offer actual examples of incidents, to help you decide whether you're up to the challenge, or how best to prepare for your trip.

- Read the local English-language paper for the destination. It's covering day-to-day events.

- Don't assume that because a tour operator is conducting tours in an area, it's safe to go there.

- Bring along key contact numbers and addresses in case of emergency: local police stations, the local U.S. embassy, the number for the State Department's Office of American Citizen Services and Crisis Management (888-407-4747; from overseas: 202-501-4444).

- Carry emergency numbers for anyone who's helped you book your trip: tour operator, travel agent, cruise line. If you've purchased trip insurance, make sure you have the 24-hour help hot line.

- Check the Centers for Disease Control site (cdc.gov/travel) for information on health issues and what vaccines or medicines, if any, you might need. The CDC also has information on environmental conditions that might affect your health — e.g., *high altitude or pollution*. The site also offers information on *safe food and water practices and insect-bite protection*. There's info on what type of *medical facilities and medications are available in the country, too*. Another source: *the World Health Organization (who.int/ith)*.

- Get in STEP. The State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program enables officials or your family to contact you while you're abroad, either because of a family emergency at home or because of a crisis in the place you're visiting. It's free and you can sign up online: travelregistration.state.gov. They promise not to broadcast your information.

- Some types of insurance also include (usually at a premium) travel alerts and intelligence. These aren't your usual trip-interruption and cancellation insurance providers, but companies like Global Rescue (globalrescue.com) and International SOS (internationalsos.com), which focus on emergency services such as medical evacuation.