

How to Travel Safer in an Age of Zika and Terrorism

Here's what you need to know about traveling to three hot spots: Istanbul, Mexico City, and Brazil.

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Between terrorism threats and Zika scares –not to mention the occasional political upheaval—you may be tempted to cancel all your summer travel plans abroad and safely hide out on Hilton Head. But there's no need.

"We tell clients all the time that they should not live in fear—as long as they take the proper precautions, they will be safe pretty much anywhere," says Daniel Richards, chief executive officer of Global Rescue, a travel risk and crisis management firm. Here's what you need to know about three hot destinations.

ISTANBUL

Last year, Istanbul was the fifth most visited city in the world, outpacing even New York, with reports predicting that within four years it would overtake Paris to become the second most popular city in Europe. But after a series of bombings in tourist areas (the most recent one, last March, killed four people on the busy shopping street İstiklal Avenue), enthusiasm for the once-dubbed "Queen of Cities" has dimmed. Still, security experts remain optimistic that Istanbul is still fairly safe: "While there's definitely an elevated threat in Turkey, both because of its proximity to the Middle East and the fact that there are several different active terrorist elements, the overall risk is still low compared to other general risks such as being in a car accident or contracting a serious disease," Richards says.

Many luxury hotels, though, mindful of guest fears, are not only offering rates 15-20% lower than in typical tourist seasons, but have also instituted additional security measures. The Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah, for example, checks everyone entering the building with hand detectors, requires guests to insert their keys into elevators, and will not allow anyone into the property who has a backpack. "We also communicate with police daily, so if we hear of any concerns we inform guests immediately to avoid certain areas," says general manager Pinar Kartal Timer. Museums and stadiums are usually among the safest places, she notes, since police are everywhere and security precautions are airtight. If you're skittish about visiting some of the big tourist areas—such as Sultanahmet square or the Blue Mosque—Timer recommends hiring a private guide, which is around 175 euros a day, or \$200. "They'll know the least crowded times to go, which reduces chances of anything suspicious happening when you're there," she says. And while the state department has issued a travel advisory recommending you avoid travel to southeastern Turkey, areas along the country's western Turquoise Coast, such as Bodrum, are only a 50-minute flight away and are still tranquil.

Verdict: Go

MEXICO CITY

It was recently named the number one place to visit in 2016 by the New York Times, but Zika fears are leading many people to shun the so-called city of palaces. "Clients are staying away from areas like Costa Rica, Mexico, and Jamaica because they feel that the risk of infection is too high," says Eric Grayson, owner of luxury travel agency Discover 7. But the good news is you can keep it on your bucket list after all. "It's at a very high elevation, so mosquitoes won't

venture up there," points out Amesh Adalja, MD an infectious disease specialist at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. The CDC also says anything above 6,500 feet (and Mexico City is at almost 7,400) is safe. Even more reassuring is the fact that resorts like the Four Seasons Mexico City told T&C that they have not had any guests or employees develop the Zika virus, and that bookings have remained relatively unaffected.

Keep in mind that while areas like Mexico City are generally considered now safe for everyone (including pregnant women) you do expose yourself to risk if you venture down to lower lying areas. But for most people, that's fine. "If you're not pregnant or planning on trying to conceive within the next six months, travel to Zika-affected areas is generally considered safe," says Richards. If you are in a Zika infested area, your best defense is judicious use of mosquito repellent that contains either DEET or the more natural ingredient Picaridin—that means reapplying every couple hours to all exposed areas, since it can evaporate with sweating. While it may be difficult to follow the CDC advice to wear long sleeves to protect yourself against mosquitoes in 90-plus degree heat, you can buy clothing pre-treated with bug repellent from stores like L.L. Bean.

Verdict: Go

BRAZIL

The Summer Olympics are a few months away, and only half the tickets have been sold. The Brazilian Hotel Association maintains there haven't been any cancellations, adding that Rio's hotels are almost completely booked. But despite that news, travel experts say it's a good idea to temporarily take this country off of your bucket list, given its struggles with political upheaval, Zika, a struggling economy, and pollution. (In fact, Brazil was recently dubbed the murder capital of the world, with more cities than any other nation plagued by violent crime.) "This may be one of the most sparsely attended summer Olympics in history," says Richards. The CDC has also already issued an advisory recommending pregnant women strongly consider not going on the trip. One of the biggest threats may not come from mosquitoes or terrorists, notes Richards, but petty crime: "I think the likelihood that foreigners will get caught up in criminal events is decent," he warns. For clients who want to travel to South America, Grayson has been advocating for Peru and Argentina, which not only have more robust economies and lower crime rates, but are still according to the CDC Zika free.

Verdict: Pass