

## • Is It Safe to Travel to Europe Now?

In the wake of the State Department's European travel alert, we asked a travel expert how to travel safely on the continent.

by PATRICK ROGERS | MAR 25, 2016



Understandably, anybody with plans to travel to Europe in the near future is probably thinking twice about hopping on a plane right about now, especially after the State Department issued a travel alert for the continent earlier this week. “U.S. citizens should exercise vigilance when in public places or using mass transportation,” according to the March 22 advisory, which also advised keeping your wits about you at festivals, religious gatherings, and sporting events.

Obviously, an utterly carefree spring fling by Eurail pass is out of the question at this point. The Brussels airport remains closed, and authorities report that extremists involved in the recent attacks may still be at large; meanwhile, the investigation has widened to France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Time to cancel a trip to northern Europe? What if your plans take you to the U.K., Spain or another country in the region? We talked to Leslie Overton, managing director of luxury tour operator Absolute Travel, how to make your travels as safe as possible during tense times in Europe.

**Check your travel insurance.** If you have travel insurance, which you should, says Overton, an airport that is closed usually is grounds for coverage, says Overton. Some insurance plans have clauses about terrorism, so it will depend on the policy. Even if you're not covered by insurance, airlines, hotels, and even restaurants will probably do their best to be accommodating. “Nobody wants to harm their own tourism industry in the future. The airlines are going to be as proactive as possible in terms of rerouting you, getting you another ticket. Airlines are not great at saying, ‘Here’s a full refund.’ But usually they’ll give you a voucher or let you rebook.”

**Wait, you bought travel insurance, didn’t you?** “Insurance is very important,” emphasizes Overton. It will cover you if something happens and you need to get to safety and get home. Overton works frequently with [Global Rescue](#), which provides security and risk management for travelers. They do security briefings, monitor the situation, and will evacuate you if you need help. It’s a pricy option, though.

**Register your trip.** The State Department has a website where you can do this. You’ll receive their updates and alerts if the security situation changes in any of the destinations you’re going to. That also

means the State Department knows where you are going to be if there’s an emergency situation on the ground, they will know how to reach out to you.

**Make sure your phone works abroad.** Overton uses T-Mobile, which operates in more than 100 countries. “It’s as easy as just turning your phone back on when you land,” says Overton. If you have another carrier and are a little more cost-conscious, you may want to buy a local SIM card when you arrive. That will change your phone number for the period that card is in your phone, so make sure to immediately let everybody know your new number.

**Make sure your loved ones know your plans.** Always leave behind a copy of your itinerary, let people know if your plans change, and leave behind either a hard copy or a scan of your passport. If your passport is lost or stolen, it’s a lot easier issue a new one if you have a copy of the original. And it will also make it a lot easier if there’s an emergency situation for your relatives to say to the authorities, here’s your documentation.”

**Be vigilant, not terrified.** “The State Department did not tell people not to travel, it was advice to take caution when you’re traveling,” says Overton. It’s something most regular travelers are already doing, she notes: “It’s pretty much a fancified version of ‘if you see something, say something.’” If your immediate plans includes Brussels, you might consider changing them. “The situation is evolving, the airport is still closed. And like in Nepal after the earthquake, you don’t necessarily want to jump in right away if they’re still handling a crisis. They need to use their resources to assist their own people. However, for the rest of Europe, I would say that if you want to travel there, you should feel as safe as you would anywhere else.”

**Follow your gut.** Travel—at least for vacation—should be about enjoyment and exploration, so if you’re uncomfortable, then it might not be worth it. “If you’re going to be nervous in that setting and it’s going to ruin the experience, then don’t do it.” On the other hand, if you’re a soccer fan and you’re in Europe to see a match, or in Italy to see the churches, that’s going to be the highlight of your trip. “It’s hard to tell people to stay away from that,” says Overton. “Just be sure to keep your eyes and ears open.”