

EUROPE

Presence of security forces can reassure or frighten tourists

By **Jamie Biesiada** / November 22, 2015



Security forces at the Louvre last week. Photo Credit: Michelle Baran

Last week was a horrible seven days for European tourism. In addition to constant reports about the Nov. 13 terrorist attacks that left 129 dead in Paris, American TV audiences were inundated with images of security forces in France, Belgium, Germany and Italy either laying siege to suspected terrorist hideaways or patrolling tourist areas with heavy armaments.

As a result, industry veterans and other experts were predicting that Paris, in particular, would continue to see reduced leisure tourism, although business travel would likely be back to normal by the beginning of 2016.

“That response hasn’t really diminished on behalf of the French government,” said iJET regional analyst Ashley Scarfo. “There’s still a massive military ... presence in place across the country. They’re very aware of people entering and exiting on all modes of transportation.”

That increased security, said Jim Hutton, chief security officer with On Call International, will create “significant delays” for travelers “due to enhanced border controls, more searches, longer lines, all those sort of day-to-day things that will impact leisure travelers.”

Moreover, those delays will not be limited to France, Scarfo said, since similar measures are in place in Belgium and other European countries.

While increased security equates to more delays, Colin Clarke, a political scientist at the Rand Corporation, said the visible military and law enforcement presence will “psychologically attempt to reassure people.” Clarke also said there will be a lot going on behind the scenes, including an increased number of plainclothes officers on the streets, as well as tightened security on major transportation, like the Paris Metro.

A heavy military security presence cuts both ways psychologically. While it can make potential visitors nervous about potential dangers, Stephen Barth, founder of Hospitalitylawyer.com, said it also reassures them that a destination is safe.

“I think a lot of people are of the opinion that Paris probably is now one of the safest places you could travel because the incident already occurred, and because of the awareness, hyper-awareness, that law enforcement is going to have there,” Barth said.

That sentiment was echoed by customers insured by Allianz Global Assistance and Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection. While both companies had clients in Paris at the time of the attacks, the companies said that none expressed a desire to change their plans and come home. In fact, Allianz Director of Communications Dan Durazo, said that his sister-in-law, who had been in Paris since before the attacks occurred, was reporting “that everybody is still going out there and doing what they want to do.”

Allianz has had about 50 clients with upcoming trips voice their intention to cancel their travel, but that has not been the case with Berkshire Hathaway Travel Protection’s clients, said president Dean Sivley, who reported that no clients had called about trip cancellations.

“I don’t necessarily expect people to cancel, because I think the French authorities have been very forthright in terms of things that they’re doing and actions they’ve taken,” Sivley said.

Even so, experts are predicting a slowdown in leisure travel to Paris. Many said that in addition to the most recent attacks, the Charlie Hebdo killings that occurred in January were still fresh enough in travelers’ minds to give them pause.

Paris-based hotelier AccorHotels, which has more than 200 properties in the Paris area ranging from the Pullman luxury brand to the Ibis economy brand, last week was bracing for a drop in room demand. As of Nov. 19, guests who had booked at the company’s hotels in

Paris or Ile-de-France between Nov. 13 and Dec. 24 were given the choice of postponing their stay for as long as six months or cancelling without any penalty. Accor also ran a crawl across the top of its website providing an 800 number for guests changing plans.

“At this stage, it is too early to have an overview of the situation, though we can expect a bigger impact than right after the attacks that occurred last January,” AccorHotels spokeswoman Delphine Dumonceau said, alluding to the Charlie Hebdo killings.

Dan Richards, Global Rescue founder and CEO, said the tourism slowdown could extend to other major European cities.

“I think what you’ll find in the short term is there probably is going to be a bit of a chilling effect on tourism to some of these countries,” Richards said. “The reality is, and I think most people understand this, the likelihood that you’re caught in one of these attacks is very, very low.”

Whatever the odds, the possibility of an attack is on tourists’ minds.

Clarke said, “I think if you’ve got some expendable income, and you’re looking to take a trip, you’re more likely to go somewhere where there haven’t been any incidents at all,” like Ireland or Spain.

Scarfo warned that tourists base their choice of destinations on where they believe they will enjoy themselves most, “and part of that is wondering if they’ll be safe and secure both during the travel to and from that location, as well as while they’re in the city or in the country. So the more people fear the location, the more they’re going to try to stay away from it.”

Still, Paris being Paris, no one expected the dip in leisure travel would last long. Murielle Blanchard, an agent with Black Pearl Luxury Services who specializes in travel to France, said she did not have many clients traveling to France in the upcoming weeks or around Christmas.

Blanchard, who originally hails from France, had one family cancel a scheduled visit to Paris this week because they have two young children. All of her other clients, most of whom are booked to visit France in the spring, have said they still plan to go.

“As far as people traveling anywhere in the world, they know very well that it’s happening in Paris today and it can be anywhere else tomorrow,” Blanchard said. “So they know that there’s two attitudes: You can stay home and never travel again if you’re really worried about any act of terrorism, or you can move on with your life, which is really the message we want to send.”

In a survey by the Business Travel Coalition, 20% of respondents said they were somewhat or very likely to cancel travel to France for some period of time. Companies are weighing whether the trips are essential or nonessential, according to Greeley Koch, executive director of the Association of Corporate Travel Executives.

“Business travelers are resilient,” he said, and will likely postpone nonessential travel during the holidays but resume trips to France as usual come January. Koch said essential business trips will likely still take place, albeit with careful planning.

“Paris is still the business hub of France,” Scarfo said. “There’s no getting around that. I mean, companies aren’t going to relocate their offices elsewhere in the country just to sort of obtain a sense of increased security.”

Travelers should take precautions

Though experts are predicting a drop in travel to France following the Nov. 13 attacks — and although ISIS has threatened similar action in multiple destinations — most still believe that travel to Paris and other major European cities is safe.

Colin Clarke, a political scientist with the Rand Corporation, said he believed this type of attack on civilians in a public place will become more common in tourist destinations. “One, it’s tactically effective for these groups,” he said. “They get to kill large numbers of people. But two, it’s highly symbolic.”

Murielle Blanchard, an agent with Black Pearl Luxury Services who is herself heading to Paris this week, said she would advise clients to avoid large public events. “This is new to all of us, and it’s very frightening because you never know where it’s going to happen,” she said. “But I think if you’re worried about that, then the key is not to attend any large gathering.”

Jim Hutton, chief security officer with On Call International, said travelers should have a plan in place for how to communicate with their party in case of a crisis.

Like Blanchard, Greeley Koch, executive director of the Association of Corporate Travel Executives, is headed to Paris soon along with a stop in London. He agreed that preparation is key. “I think barring anything else happening, I feel comfortable taking those trips just because I’ll make sure that I have proper transportation lined up,” he said. “I know what I need to do to get in and get out of my meetings.”

Stephen Barth, Hospitalitylawyer.com’s founder, said he considered the aspect of safety from a father’s point of view and asked himself what he would do if his daughter were to ask to travel to Paris. He said that while he would allow it, “I do think we would take some steps beforehand,” including registering with the State Department, establishing alternative communication methods and knowing where U.S. embassies are.

Clarke said it is important to note that law enforcement officers and military units are well trained, especially in France. “The French security services are known to be among the most elite in the world,” he said. “There’s only so much you can do in a democracy if you’re going to live the way that Westerners want to live.”

— **Jamie Biesiada**