

Why you should travel on spring break this year

Christopher Elliott, *Special for USA TODAY 8:18 a.m. EDT*
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to **Scott Hume, director of security operations for medical evacuation company Global Rescue**. Simply looking like a tourist can make you a victim, no matter where you are. "Do not look lost or refer frequently to a map in plain view," he advises. "Walk as if you know where you are headed, even if you do not know." You know — just as you do back home.

But we're not staying home. This spring break, we're headed to places like Mexico, which is expected to become "slightly more insecure" thanks to economic volatility, ineffective policing and drug turf wars, according to Ed Clark, senior security consultant at iJet International, a security consulting firm. Historically violent parts of the country, including the Golden Triangle region, Guerrero, Sinaloa, northern Veracruz and border areas, will continue to be dangerous, and inflation and falling oil revenues will likely reduce state and

This spring break, stay home.

That's the advice the experts are offering this March, and with good reason: Between the Zika virus, drug wars, and the usual indignities of travel, that's the kind of advice every nervous mother in America will second.

But this spring break, here's a little contrarian advice: Go anyway. (Sorry, Mom!)

I'm not one of those travel prophets who preaches a message of transformation through tourism, although I know plenty of them. Instead, my argument is practical. Despite all the dangers of infection and injury, this spring break is no more hazardous than any other.

Besides, after this winter, you could use a little sunshine. So go.

Take Zika, for example, the infectious disease du jour. I've been getting a lot of emails from nervous newlyweds, asking if it's safe to head south at this time of year. Answer: Zika is almost everywhere this spring break, including popular Caribbean islands like Jamaica, St. Martin and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as Mexico. We've even had cases in the States.

There's no vaccine to prevent or medicine to treat Zika, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The only way to avoid Zika is to avoid mosquitoes.

The Zika hysteria reminds me of bird flu, swine flu and Ebola — infectious diseases that affected virtually no readers of this column, but sure got them worked into a frenzy.

A far bigger health concern, say security experts, is something voluntarily imbibed: alcohol. Spencer Coursen, a security consultant, points out that 1,825 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 die each year from alcohol-related unintentional injuries. "Reflexes, judgment and reaction times are all dulled with alcohol," he says.

So, let's just get the geography myth out of the way. Why steer clear of a Zika-ravaged part of the world if you're going to get drunk and take a dive off your hotel balcony?

Too many margaritas can cloud your judgment. And for reasons that are not entirely clear, spring breakers frequently leave their common sense at home as well. That can lead to serious problems, according

federal security budgets, which could result in higher rates of street crime, such as petty theft and robbery.

When I reviewed the State Department's novel-length page on Mexico, it looked an awful lot like it did this time last year (which turned out to be relatively uneventful) when I wrote the same story. All of which makes me predict that unless you're planning a day trip to see a drug lord, you'll be fine.

Perhaps the best advice is to plan your spring break trip as you would any other trip. Don't get plastered. Don't look like a tourist. Take all the precautions you normally would.

And don't forget the insurance, says Daphne Hendsbee, a spokeswoman for the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers. You may be covered under your existing medical policy, but you might not. Find out before you leave. "Each policy has different levels of medical protection, allowances, exclusions and limitations," she says.

So this spring break, don't let Zika and security scares keep you home. Instead, pack some bug repellent, refrain from overindulging and enjoy yourself out there!

How to stay safe this spring break

- **Tell someone where you're going.** Leave copies of your itinerary and license or passport with a trusted friend or family member before you leave.
- **Avoid carrying a purse or a wallet.** If you do, wrap your wallet in a rubber band, which creates friction and makes it harder to pickpocket. Or better yet, leave it somewhere safe and just bring what you need.
- **Drink responsibly.** Go for the little bottles instead of the mixed drinks. They're harder to tamper with. If possible, stay away from the booze altogether, especially if you're underage. (Your mother told me to say that.)