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10 of the Most Dangerous Cruise Ports in the World

► AVITAL ANDREWS

“A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.” We’ve all heard the quote. Inspiring though John Shedd’s sentiment may be, it’s not all true. Sometimes a ship in harbor isn’t safe, and neither are its passengers.

There are cruise ports around the world that should be known as places where there’s a much higher than average chance of being overpowered: stolen from, hurt, kidnapped, or killed.

“Do not assume that cruise lines would not dock at dangerous ports,” says Salvatore Grasso, a security consultant for Sicuro, a firm that analyzes intelligence to reduce risks for international companies and agencies, including Interpol. “Their priority is the bottom line and their liability is limited to warning passengers of possible risks. They are not accountable if you become a victim.”

So how can you determine which ports to avoid, or at least which to be more cautious in? Well, it’s complicated. As Grasso puts it, “It is very difficult to quantitatively define what constitutes ‘dangerous’ in the context of cruise ports, particularly in poorer countries, where crime statistics are seldom reliable as a dataset. What constitutes ‘dangerous’ in cruise ports, then, is largely dynamic—what violent or criminal acts are more pervasive at the time of your visit. There are many variables at play.”

So this list of 10 is not an official or scientific ranking. But it is based on hard fact, and on some data. It’s also based on up-to-the-minute input from travel-security experts, as well as government sources, especially the U.S. Department of State’s travel advisories, which, though they’re often pooh-poohed, are highly accurate.

This list doesn’t focus as much on pettier crimes that cause inconvenience—pickpocketing, purse-snatching, and so on, traumatizing as they may be—as it does on crimes that pose true danger, those that threaten loss of life or freedom.

It includes safety tips for each port that can help you prevent yourself from becoming a victim. As Aaron Laurich, a security-operations supervisor for Global Rescue, a travel risk and crisis management firm, puts it, “Passengers make ideal targets as they are unfamiliar with the area, are transient, stand out from the locals, and because of their perceived wealth.”

Elinore Boeke, a spokesperson for CLIA, the cruise industry trade association, assures potential passengers: “Cruise lines coordinate closely with national and international security and law-enforcement authorities around the globe to help ensure passenger security. In the event of any safety concerns, cruise ships have the flexibility to alter their itineraries as needed.” She adds, “Port facilities are strictly scrutinized,” and, “Providing for the safety and security of passengers and crew is the industry’s top priority.”

However, many experts, including Luke Bencie, the president of the global security consulting firm Security Management International (he’s also the author of *Among Enemies: Counter-Espionage for the Business Traveler*), remain skeptical. “If you are using mega cruise ships to see the world,” Bencie says, “you are probably setting yourself up for an increased risk of violent crime.”

Roatán, Honduras

The island of Roatán looks like a Caribbean paradise. It’s surrounded by crystalline waters that make for world-class beach and scuba experiences. It’s a deep shame, then, that its country, Honduras, has not been able to get its rate of violent crime under control. More than 40 American citizens have been murdered in Honduras since 2010. Since 2014, there have been taxi-cab rapes, Carnival cruise passengers held at gunpoint, and a Norwegian Cruise Line crew member shot and killed during a robbery. Most

famously, Nedenia Post Dye, an heiress to the General Foods fortune, was stabbed to death in her Roatán spa. According to the U.S. Department of State, “Honduras lacks sufficient resources to properly respond to, investigate, and prosecute cases. As a result, criminals operate with a high degree of impunity. Since 2010, Honduras has had one of the highest murder rates in the world.” The State Department acknowledges that Roatán has a lower crime rate than the mainland but adds this about the island: “Thefts, break-ins, assaults, rapes, and murders do occur, and rates are still high by international standards.”

How to stay safe in Roatán: Never travel alone and avoid isolated places, including beaches. Book tours directly through your cruise line. Don’t display cash or other valuables, including jewelry. Stay away from Coxen Hole after dark. Lock car doors and keep car windows up. And keep your travel plans private; according to the State Department, criminals in Honduras “may conduct crimes based on tips from sources at airport arrival areas.”

Mindanao, Philippines

The Sulu Sea is quickly becoming notorious. According to Laurich, “Terrorists and criminal organizations have begun to target tourists and foreigners for kidnapping” here. The State Department warns U.S. citizens to “avoid all nonessential travel to the Sulu Archipelago and through the southern Sulu Sea, and to exercise extreme caution when traveling to the island of Mindanao, due to continued terrorist threats, insurgent activities, and kidnappings.” Mindanao, an island which draws tourists who are interested in seeing lush scenery, stunning waterfalls, and emerald forests, has cities—including the port cities of Zamboanga and Dipolog—that also attract ISIS and related insurgent groups, who regularly kidnap foreigners and civilians for ransom. “Since January 2015, at least 15 separate kidnappings have been reported across Mindanao,” according to the State Department.

How to stay safe in Mindanao: It might be best to leave this part of the world alone until it figures out how to oust extremists. But should you find yourself here, heed Laurich’s advice: “Avoid the use of small boats through this area. Travel in groups with reputable tour companies. Plan shore excursions very carefully, and maintain a level of situational awareness at all times.”

Jakarta, Indonesia

Zoom in on the International Maritime Bureau’s grim (but fascinating) live piracy map, and you’ll see that the waters around Jakarta are a hotbed of piracy. The Strait of Malacca is one of the world’s worst places for maritime crime, so you probably don’t want to be in a boat there. “Pirate attacks in Indonesia are typically attacks aimed at thefts against the vessels,” according to the State Department. On January 14, 2016, coordinated terrorist attacks hit central Jakarta—suicide bombers hit a Starbucks and a shopping mall, aiming specifically at foreign nationals and police officers—four people, aside from the attackers, died. As for pettier crimes in Jakarta, the theft rate is high.

How to stay safe in Jakarta: Based on information from the State Department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security, tourists in Jakarta—especially women—should avoid taking “disreputable and freelance taxis,” because drivers have been known to rob passengers at gunpoint. Stay vigilant in crowded places, where pickpocketing is likely, and avoid buses and trains when possible. **Don’t ever leave a beverage unattended—“drugging a victim’s drink is common practice,” Laurich says.** Stay out of Block M in South Jakarta, as well as the Ancol Port area and its drug-riddled nightclubs. And be aware that crime increases leading up to the Muslim month of Ramadan, which usually falls in June.

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Bangladesh's bustling capital is a river city where travelers come to take in temples, museums, parks and distinctive architecture. On July 1, 2016, terrorists attacked a cafe in Dhaka's embassy district, taking hostages, then killing 23 people—mostly tourists, including a UC Berkeley sophomore and two Emory students. It's the latest in what the State Department calls "a series of increasingly sophisticated violent attacks" in Dhaka since late 2015, which typically involve ISIS and Al-Qaida targeting foreign nationals. The siege prompted the U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh to predict that there may be more terrorist attacks to come. The State Department's freshly updated travel advisory "warns U.S. citizens to consider carefully whether you need to travel to Bangladesh . . . The U.S. government assesses that the terrorist threat is real and credible." In addition, as Ian Urbina wrote in his excellent New York Times series, "The Outlaw Ocean," "Armed gangs run protection rackets requiring ship captains to pay for safe passage in the Bay of Bengal near Bangladesh." His reporting uncovered that assaults have been happening in and near those waters for 20 years, with more than 700 fishermen killed in 2013 alone. When the Bangladeshi government tries to intervene during hostage-at-sea situations, the gangs engage in shootouts with the country's Coast Guard. There haven't been reports of these gangs attacking cruise ships, but that doesn't mean they can't or won't.

How to stay safe in Dhaka: The U.S. government instructs its officials and their family members not to "visit public establishments or places in Bangladesh; travel on foot, motorcycle, bicycle, rickshaw, or other uncovered means on public thoroughfares and sidewalks in Bangladesh; or attend large gatherings in Bangladesh." Other Americans should follow suit, "take stringent security measures, remain vigilant, and be alert to local security developments."

Tunis, Tunisia

Tunis, a fascinating city at Africa's northern tip, sits on the Mediterranean Sea across from Italy. It's rich with ruins, art, and Grecian seaside neighborhoods. Unfortunately, it hasn't been easy on visitors lately. In March 2015, the MSC Splendida and the Costa Fascinosa were in port, and passengers disembarked for an excursion to the Bardo National Museum. When they were getting off the bus, terrorists opened fire, killing 22 and injuring more than 40. Three months later, in June, a gunman who was specifically targeting tourists opened fire on a crowded beach about 90 miles south of Tunis, killing 39. In November, terrorists attacked security forces in downtown Tunis. The State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security puts Tunisia's terrorism rating at "critical," and reports that "a significant rate of violent crimes (homicides, sexual assaults, personal robberies, residential break-ins) and nonviolent crimes (financial scams, vehicle thefts, petty drug offenses) exist in Tunis."

How to stay safe in Tunis: The U.S. government advises against travel to certain parts of Tunisia, while the British government advises "against all but essential travel" to any of the country. If you find yourself in Tunis, though, here's the State Department's guidance: "Avoid political gatherings, rallies, large crowds and demonstrations; be alert to the possibility of kidnapping; report suspicious activity to the local police; and carry a copy of your passport and a cell phone or other means of communication." To dissuade pickpockets, purse-snatchers, and other thieves, act alert and confident, dress modestly, and keep valuables hidden on your person. **Avoid ATMs—Laurich says they "allow criminals to identify a target for immediate or later robberies"**—and be extra cautious in high-traffic tourist areas like the Tunis Medina. "If you are confronted by an assailant displaying a lethal weapon or threatening violence" in Tunisia, a U.S. government report recommends, "attempt to de-escalate the situation by immediately turning over your valuables without comment." The report also includes that old classic: "Travel in groups, especially in remote areas during nighttime hours."

Margarita Island, Venezuela

Two words: Drug. Cartels. As Grasso puts it, "locations known to be source, transit, or destination points for drug trafficking, including Venezuela, should trigger warning bells." As a nation, Venezuela holds the dubious distinction of having the world's highest crime rate. Venezuela's government is also relatively complicit in the nation's high rate of human trafficking. On Margarita Island, a gorgeous little dot in the Caribbean Sea, a passenger on the Carnival-owned Aida Luna was killed during an armed robbery at a tourist shop in 2014. A half-hour flight east of Margarita Island, Caracas is the world's current murder capital, and many other Venezuelan cities are in the top 20. Plus, "incidents of piracy and robbery at sea have occurred off the coast of Venezuela," according to the State Department. "In recent years, a U.S. citizen on a private vessel was severely beaten by robbers who boarded the vessel, and another U.S. citizen sailor was attacked with a machete." In another document, the State Department flat-out says: "Anchoring offshore is not considered safe. Marinas, including those in Puerto la Cruz and Margarita Island (Porlamar), provide only minimal security, and U.S. citizens should exercise a heightened level of caution in Venezuelan waters. Our government's official Venezuela travel advisory warns that "violent crime—including murder, armed robbery, kidnapping, and carjacking—is endemic throughout the country." Bencie adds: "There's a reason why cruises are so cheap to Latin America. These struggling economies mean that police protection is minimized, unemployment and inflation are high, and criminals are likely to be more aggressive." Last year, the Los Angeles Times reported, that though Latin America accounts for 8.5% of the world's population, it accounts for 27% of the world's murders, most of which are by gunshot.

How to stay safe on Margarita Island: Stay very alert. "Armed robberies take place throughout the country, including in areas generally presumed safe and frequented by tourists. Street crime can occur anywhere and at any time of the day or night," according to the U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs. Keep a low profile, carry little to no cash, and don't display any form of wealth. Steer clear of gatherings and political demonstrations, and avoid taxis, buses, and ATMs. Do not fly in to start a cruise in Venezuela: "Travel to and from Maiquetía International Airport near Caracas is particularly dangerous," the Bureau continues, so much so that U.S. government personnel always travel by armored vehicle. Resist the urge to check out Avila National Park, or to partake in outdoor activities, unless you're traveling in a group of at least five people. Perhaps above all, do not get arrested. Though Venezuela signed the Vienna Convention, its government "sometimes fails to notify the U.S. Embassy when U.S. citizens are arrested, and/or delays or denies consular access to arrestees." (As Laurich reminds us, "Penalties for illicit drug use in most countries are usually much more severe outside of the U.S.")

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Sorry, IOC, it has to be said. Rio is dangerous. The fact that it was the original breeding ground for the recent Zika virus outbreak hardly needs rehashing—the CDC has even issued a special travel notice for those traveling to the Olympics. But even if you're not of reproductive age, Rio's not necessarily somewhere you want to be if you value your health and safety. Its beaches teem with "shocking levels" of "super bacteria", plus other forms of pollution, thanks to the lovely fact that Brazil, as a nation, dumps raw sewage into the ocean. And that's not to speak of the crime. "In Brazil, the likelihood of catching a criminal who robs a tourist is usually less than 20 percent," says Bencie. "Plus, with all the problems currently facing that country, your purse being snatched or necklace ripped from your throat is not a high priority." In Rio specifically, thieves run rampant on beaches and the crime level is categorized as "very high" and getting worse.

How to stay safe in Rio de Janeiro: Well, don't go in the ocean. Use anything you can to ward off mosquitoes—DEET, protective clothing, air conditioning, the whole deal. Don't stand next to standing water. Practice safe sex, or abstain (yes, Zika is mosquito-borne but it's also sexually transmitted). Make sure your vaccines are up to date before you go. And pack a travel health kit. (The CDC's full advice sheet is here.) To sidestep crime, the State Department advises, "Pay close attention to your surroundings and the behavior of those nearby. There have been reports of thieves and rapists slipping incapacitating drugs into drinks at bars, hotel rooms, and street parties. While crime occurs throughout the year, it is more frequent during Carnival and the weeks prior." If robbed, the advice continues, don't resist or fight—just hand over your stuff. Avoid Rio's favelas, and know that there have been carjackings and shootings on the Linha Vermelha, the expressway that links the airport and the city's tourist-heavy Southern Zone.

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Though its beaches are lovely, Port Harcourt is deadly. It's best for travelers to steer entirely clear of the Gulf of Guinea, which the International Crisis Group calls "one of the most dangerous maritime areas in the world," as well as the Niger Delta, which ICG has called the "epicentre of maritime crime." Port Harcourt has also seen its share of pirate attacks, and a bloody, oil-fueled conflict has been going on in this region since the 1990s—a new extremist group, called the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) emerged in March 2016. Add them to a list of other terror-wreaking groups that operate here, including Boko Haram, which has perpetuated dozens of ruthless attacks in northern Nigeria, including kidnapping thousands of women and children. The State Department reports that Boko Haram has a thing for "targeting foreign expatriates, tourists, and government leaders."

How to stay safe in Port Harcourt: Many Western governments, including ours, the U.K.'s, and Canada's, vehemently advise against traveling to Nigeria. Should you find yourself there, though (despite their government's warning, some 117,000 British nationals visit Nigeria every year), avoid crowded places, be extremely vigilant, and keep others informed of your travel plans.

Izmit, Turkey

These days, cruises don't go to Syria or Iraq. But they do go to Izmit. Which makes it the closest place to the ISIS wars that extremists can get by cruise ship—an opportunity of which they're definitely taking advantage, especially since cruise ports are more lax about security than airports. Izmit is 65 miles from Istanbul, a city which, Laurich says, "is reeling from a recent spate of high-profile terrorist attacks"—including one on June 28, 2016, during which 45 travelers were killed at the Ataturk international airport. Aside from having earned itself a spot as a prime destination for terrorists on cruises, it's also worth noting that Izmit is in an active earthquake zone and doesn't build anywhere close to U.S. seismic standards—a 1999 quake that lasted just 37 seconds and registered a 7.4 on the Richter scale killed more than 17,000 people and injured almost 44,000.

How to stay safe in Izmit: When docking in Turkey, Laurich says, "Avoid public transportation and don't linger near police or government infrastructure. Pack lightly while on shore excursion and, most importantly, wear comfortable shoes. When the need to move quickly comes, you do not want to be wearing flip-flops."

Aden, Yemen

1. Aden, Yemen. The Gulf of Aden, which has floated cruises operated by Costa and Silversea (the itineraries were marketed as Suez Canal and Red Sea tours) is one of the world's worst places for piracy. "The waters off the coast of Somalia are dangerous enough that cruise ships turn off their GPS broadcasts and exterior lights when sailing that area," says Tynan, who doesn't use a last name, and who founded Cruisesheet.com. Somali pirates are not at all above attacking cruise ships (most cruises don't dock at Mogadishu) but even if they were, you wouldn't want to visit violent Aden, which has been the recent target of terror attacks—on July 6, 2016, a suicide bombing killed 10 near Aden's airport. Yemen is currently at war and has been since 2015, as the government battles Houthi rebels, al-Qaida, and ISIS. According to the State Department's "Worldwide Caution" sheet, "In Yemen, the security situation has deteriorated greatly since 2014, necessitating the suspension of operations of the U.S. Embassy in February 2015," adding that al-Qaida and ISIS "remain threats to U.S. citizens."

How to stay safe in Aden: If you're scheduled on a cruise that stops in Aden, the U.S. government strongly recommends that you "defer" it. "The level of instability and ongoing threats, including the threat of kidnapping, in Yemen is severe," the warning goes on. The U.K. tells its citizens: "The British government can't provide any form of assisted departure to British nationals in Yemen. There are no evacuation procedures in place." For those who still choose to go, the British government does provide advice: "Regularly reassess your security arrangements and carefully plan your movements . . . Avoid all road travel outside the main cities at night. Take care to avoid minefields left over from civil wars and landmines used in the current conflict. Travelling off well-used tracks without an experienced guide could be extremely dangerous."