

## **What Female Travelers Need to Know**

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By Darlene Radloff

Ms. Radloff is chief of security training and education at the ASI Group in Houston.

A female flight attendant, traveling with two male pilots, arrived in Athens, Greece, for an overnight stay at a four star hotel. The three checked in at the same time, chatting with each other at the front desk and making dinner plans for later that evening. They exchanged room numbers and agreed to meet at 9 p.m. that evening in the lobby. The flight crew was unaware that many perpetrators hang around in hotel lobbies to gather information they can later use to commit crimes against the guests.

Shortly after the female flight attendant arrived in her room, which was at the end of a hallway and across from the staircase - not a good location for a female traveler - she heard a knock on her door. She asked who it was, and heard someone say, "Lady, the pilot told me to bring this package to your room. He said you needed it right away."

The flight attendant opened the door. Unfortunately, the person on the other side was not a delivery person working for the hotel, but an attacker who brutally raped her. Though she survived the incident physically, she was emotionally traumatized, suffering severe post traumatic stress that almost destroyed her life.

This case is just one example of how female travelers are targeted by attackers. The tragedy is that the incident could easily have been avoided with a little advance training. The flight attendant's response to the stranger should have been, "Leave it at the front desk and I will pick it up later." She could then have phoned her crew members to verify the story and determine whether there really was a package. She should also have requested a less remote room when she checked in.

Women have come a long way since the days when they were considered the weaker sex, but the reality is that women are physically more vulnerable than their male counterparts when they travel, and they face unique risks. Criminals, intruders, stalkers, kidnappers, and rapists worldwide profile women who are out and about and target the ones who appear unaware, unfamiliar with their surroundings, and unlikely to fight back.

All workers should be given travel security tips, but it is doubly important that female workers be well trained in travel security, made aware of the special risks they face, and taught how to minimize their exposure to them.

Companies, through their human resource or security personnel, can teach women what it takes to become a hardened target. (Much of the advice can be useful to male employees as well.)

### **Plan to be Safe**

Safe travel doesn't just happen by chance. As with everything else in business and in life, preparations play a big role in determining the outcome. The key to safe travel is for employees to think about security from the start and to do their homework. The company can help to ensure that these steps are taken.

The company should provide employees with country-specific travel briefs that lay out the country and city threat levels, identifying the type of security threats that have occurred in the past in those locations and noting whether the dates on which travel will occur hold any significance in the destination country that could affect threat conditions.

If the threat level warrants it, the company should arrange for the employee to have a driver and secure ground transportation meet her on arrival. The traveler's name should never be printed on a card and held up by the driver for anyone to see. Doing so gives criminals the opportunity to copy that card and pose as the driver, which can be the prelude to robbery, rape, kidnapping, and murder.

Instead, there should be a secure way for the driver to be identified by the traveling employee. For example, the traveler can get the driver's name and a picture of him in advance.

When possible, the company should put employees in touch with an in-country resident or business associate who can give an on-the-ground assessment of safety and security concerns before arrival. It may also be advisable for employees to register with the embassy or consulate's office in the destination country so that they can be contacted in an emergency, but because staff can be corrupt even in these institutions, about half of the companies I work with advise against contacting them. It's best to make the decision on a country-by-country and trip-by-trip basis.

In selecting lodging, travel planners should, of course, choose hotels with a reputation for safety and security. They should also look for hotels considered safest for women. For example, some hotels have a designated "women only" floor, which can reduce the likelihood of a male attacker lurking outside the door or following the woman to her room.

As a part of the planning process, the company, working with the employee, should address how various contingencies will be handled. If the flight arrives late, how will the employee contact the designated greeter or driver if that person is not around?

In the event of illness, an accident, a natural disaster, or other problems, the employee should know in advance where to turn for help. Ideally, there should be a company-provided hotline that can be called at any time for assistance. Knowing how to get aid when unexpected events occur greatly reduces the inherent risk of travel.

### **Hotel Safety and Security**

There are two aspects to hotel safety and security: what the hotel does, which can be determined in advance, as just discussed, and what travelers can do once there to reduce their exposure.

For example, employees should be trained to request a room that is between the second and seventh floors. Street level is no good because it provides easy access for a criminal; rooms above the seventh floor should be avoided because fire ladders may not be able to reach rooms located higher than that.

Female travelers should stipulate that rooms not be at the end of hallways where they will be more isolated and vulnerable; they should also request that the room not be directly across from any stairwell, because assailants hide in stairways, awaiting an opportunity to charge in behind as a person heads to the room.

Female travelers should accept the services of the bellman when available; this gives them an escort to the room. They should wait at the door while the bellman deposits the luggage and walks around the room turning on lights. When women checking in must enter the room unescorted, they should follow the 15-second rule: After looking right and left for anyone who may be lurking in the hall, insert the key in the door, open the door quickly, and lodge the suitcase against the open door. Then, within about 15 seconds, turn on all lights, looking behind the drapes and into other hiding places, such as the shower curtain, and place a quick kick under the bed to determine whether the bed sits on a pedestal (eliminating the possibility of someone hiding underneath). This secures the room.

Afterwards, the woman should quickly close and double lock the door, securing it with a door stop. Companies should consider providing female travelers (or men for that matter) with a “door jamb” that can be used for this purpose. It can be purchased at the local hardware store. Even if an intruder is capable of getting through the hotel’s locking system, they will not be able to breach the door jamb without breaking the door.

Creating this extra level of security is important because hotel locks are far from impregnable. It is easy for staff to make a copy of a room key or for someone to simply break the locking system. I have even known of situations in economically developing countries where one key fits every door.

Female travelers may also want to pack a pair of men’s pants, and possibly a man’s tie or shaving kit. These can be strewn around the room to give housekeepers and others who enter the room the impression that a man is around.

These items will also help when ordering room service - a situation that exposes female travelers to a degree of risk because they are letting a stranger - usually male - into the room. Here’s how a woman can make room service less risky: With the “male” items evident, she should turn on the shower when the delivery person knocks at the door. She should have a pen in hand and a spot cleared for the waiter to place the food.

As she opens the door, the woman should motion for the waiter to step in, and while standing against the open door (which offers an escape path if a threat arises), she can motion for the waiter to set down the food, then for him to return and step outside, at which point she can sign the bill, tip heartily, and say goodbye, closing and locking the door behind him. The door stop can be put back in place, and the shower turned off.

### **ABCs of the Road**

In addition to assessing the destination-country risk, planning for contingencies, and using the described techniques for risk reduction at the hotel, there are some general practices that every traveler should be taught. Let’s call them the ABCs of being safe on the road, even though we’ll add a (d) and (e).

**Avoid attention.** Travelers should stay as anonymous as possible in a crowd. This is especially important for women, who should avoid calling attention to the fact that they are traveling alone.

Be aware and alert. Travelers should always notice their surroundings, being on the lookout for signs of danger, such as the feeling that someone is following them. Security training for travelers should teach them to respect their sixth sense: If your inner voice tells you something is wrong, it probably is.

**Cultivate unpredictability.** Travelers should not follow patterns that can be learned and exploited by an attacker. Unpredictability can also be a defense (as will be illustrated in the example ahead).

**Don’t take risks.** This is common sense, but travelers often get complacent and fall into behavior that exposes them to risky situations.

I will use my own behavior as a case in point. Several years ago, I attended a conference, and when it ended, it was about 8 p.m. Though it was dark and there were few people out, I foolishly decided to walk the few blocks toward my hotel.

I had become complacent and was not following the ABCs of the road. First, walking alone at night was risky. Second, I did not remain anonymous, because I had left my conference speaker's badge on. This was a red flag that I was an outsider unfamiliar with my surroundings.

Fortunately, I did follow the second principle - I was aware and alert, and suddenly, I knew that I was being followed. I also realized that the potential attacker was quickly catching up to me.

There were no stores or lighted building into which I could escape. In this case, the third principle, unpredictability, was my only defense. I turned abruptly and began walking towards him, flailing my arms, screaming obscenities, and staring directly into his eyes like a mad woman. He stopped and fled.

My behavior at the time was instinctual, but I learned later that a female who feigns insanity has a very good chance of scaring off a predator. I've never forgotten that lesson and have taught it over and over again to other females.

**Even the playing field.** This is the fifth piece of advice to remember, it means that the female traveler should be prepared to defend herself.

While it's advisable to avoid direct confrontations whenever possible, women may want to learn some defensive maneuvers and carry a nonlethal weapon, such as mace or pepper spray, with them for extreme situations where no escape alternative exists. Today, you can carry a stun gun that looks exactly like a cell phone. I carry one that looks like a flashlight and is in fact a working flashlight until you engage the bottom of the handle - then it becomes a stun gun.

### **Cultural Considerations**

American women think nothing of traveling alone, riding in the front seat with a taxi driver, or accidentally brushing against a male on a crowded bus or subway. When they travel abroad, however, they must adapt to the culture of the country they are visiting.

Legal and cultural dos and don'ts for women vary widely from region to region. In some countries women may not drive on public roads or dine in public places alone. In some places, women should not exchange handshakes with men, and it is important that they avoid accidental body contact with males.

Even where the behaviors constitute practices, rather than legal prohibitions, violations of these mores can lead to dire consequences, such as eliciting rape. For example, in some cultures, if a woman sits in the front seat with a driver, the driver may assume that the woman wishes to have sex with him.

Women can't make blanket assumptions about such behavior, however. They must learn about the practices in each specific culture beforehand. Consider that in contrast to the earlier example, a woman traveling to Venezuela will be invited to sit with the driver when the taxi is full; in that country, the front seat is given to the female out of respect.

Female travelers will find many publications that offer advice about cultural practices in different countries. One of the most popular guidebooks on country culture for international travel is: Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands.

Just as a country has its own customs and culture, it has its own set of scams. Checking the latest crime reports will help the traveler to be on guard against such attacks and cons. But it is also important to remain alert to anything that could be a trap, whether it fits the attack profile for a given area or not.

Consider the experience of one of my clients. She was on business travel in another country. It was during the day and in an area that was not considered high risk. She had rented a car and was driving to a meeting when she had to stop at a red light. All of a sudden, there was a pounding on the driver's side window. She looked up to see a young woman.

The woman had a towel that appeared to be covered in blood wrapped around her arm. She was screaming, "Let me in, let me in - take me to the hospital."

Fortunately, my client did not take the bait. First, she had been avoiding risk by making sure that her windows were up and her doors were locked. Otherwise, the woman might simply have entered the car. Secondly, the client recognized the potential risk in letting in a stranger, so she held up her phone and said she would call the police for help.

The female cursed at my client, dropped the towel, yelled at an accomplice who had been lurking nearby, and the two of them ran off.

I have heard many similar stories from clients over the years. Each reinforces what I already know: Travel carries special risks - and women face even more vulnerability. But with the proper training, everyone can reduce their risk, freeing them to focus in a relaxed manner on their business goals.