

The businessperson's guide to safe overseas travel

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How not to get fleeced, taken hostage or catch swine flu (and many other less glamorous health nasties) when you set out on your next business trip abroad.

Business travel can be wrought with perils, ranging from being kidnapped for ransom to having your prize Blackberry stolen from your hotel room or being robbed at gunpoint. And that's not to mention the multitude of bugs you can catch by brushing your teeth with tap water in a luxury hotel.

With the advent of free trade agreements and technological advances facilitating globalisation, Aussie businesspeople are taking to the international skies in ever increasing numbers. What's more, their destination is no longer restricted to commercial hubs, like Hong Kong and Tokyo, but also likely to take in cities in places like the Philippines, China and India.

Travel smarts

So how do you ensure your safe passage in a world where places previously deemed 'safe', like London, are no longer without risk ... be prepared.

Research your destination before you go, even if it's supposedly safe. Depending on your destination, travel precautions can range from staying in the right part of town to hiring a bodyguard. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT's) smart traveller website, www.smarttraveller.gov.au, issues travel advisories for every country as well as warning bulletins. You can even subscribe to receive email notification when the travel advice for your destination is updated.

DFAT's most recent advice is for Australians to avoid travelling to nine countries – Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Guinea, Iraq, Niger, Somalia and Sudan – and to reconsider travelling to 17 others including Indonesia, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Zimbabwe.

DFAT recommends that Australians travelling overseas for business or pleasure register their details on its smart traveller website, so they can be contacted in an emergency – be that a natural disaster, civil disturbance or family crisis. Last year, they assisted over 25,000 Australians in difficulty overseas.

Travel bugs

Swine flu (H1N1) and bird flu (H5N1) are still the hot topics in travel bugs for 2010. In January, over 120 countries and territories were listed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for swine flu. Australia had 37,636 swine flu reported cases including 191 associated deaths in 2009.

WHO also advises that bird is still very prevalent in the Asia Pacific region with Egypt, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Russian Federation and Bangladesh all impacted by recent outbreaks. Of course, there are many other prevalent bugs to be caught abroad, especially in exotic locales ... a good reason to visit your doctor several weeks before your departure for any necessary vaccinations/medications.

Your doctor can also advise about your risk of developing deep vein thrombosis and necessary precautions. Contaminated food or water remains a common source of infection, so do your homework and find out if the tap water is safe. When in doubt, drink bottled water, forgo ice in drinks and avoid raw foods.

Pack your insect repellent as mosquito borne diseases, like dengue fever, are present in many tropical areas, including modern cities like Kuala Lumpur and, needless to say, never leave home without adequate travel insurance, especially given the cost of a medical evacuation from somewhere like the US starts from around \$75,000.

Travel alerts

Unfortunately, terrorism remains an ongoing threat in many parts of the world and what's even more disconcerting is that Australians are being targeted by extremist groups. To reduce your chances of being

caught up in a terrorist attack, take heed of DFAT travel warnings and take steps to mitigate specific risks.

Be aware of where you are in relation to exits and if a disturbance occurs, head in the opposite direction. Wherever possible, avoid travel to disputed border areas and public gatherings in countries with intense political tension.

In places like Mexico, Colombia, the Phillipines, Iraq and Africa (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, southern Algeria, Nigeria, Kenya and Somalia), kidnapping is a growth industry, with insurgents and criminals routinely abducting Western executives for ransom.

When travelling to these areas, make yourself a hard target by:

- watch out for anyone shadowing you, on foot or by car
- wear clothes to blend in with the locals
- avoid flashy jewellery/watches
- keep to the inside of footpaths/facing oncoming traffic
- vary your routines/routes
- check the street before leaving your building
- avoid hotels in one-way or dead-end streets
- avoid festivals and sports events (car rallies or ultra marathons) or local festivals in Africa.

Seven tried-and-tested travel tips

1. Carry a second 'throw-down' wallet with a small amount of cash and expired credit cards to hand over to a mugger.
2. Leave a copy of your passport with someone at home; place another in your carry-on luggage.
3. In high-threat regions, use your personal credit card and give out your employer's address, without identifying the company.
4. Prearrange your transfers.
5. Check any medicines you pack are legal in your host country.
6. Never lose sight of your luggage and store valuables in the hotel safe.
7. If you are arrested, contact your local embassy/consulate for advice. Admit and agree to nothing before help arrives.