

Safe Passage for Women

In retrospect, it was foolish. I really should have known better. But I was groggy after a red-eye flight and not thinking clearly, if at all. Wearing a shiny gold necklace to the crowded city bus terminal in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, was just plain dumb.

The chain (a good luck charm from my mother) sparkled like a disco ball against my bare throat as a mob of bus drivers surrounded me, clamoring for business. Suddenly the herd parted. I was pushed backward by a silent figure swishing past. Seconds later, my collarbone was stinging. Then I saw a lone man sprinting away—good luck charm in hand.

If I had read *Safety and Security for Women Who Travel* before my trip, I might have avoided this burn. The newest addition to the *Travelers' Tales*

Guides has a warning that seems to be written expressly for eligible female targets like me: "Your arrival in a foreign place can be an important transition time. Close your eyes; breathe deeply; your life is about to change, as it always does on a journey."

Travelers are never immune to potential hazards, but there's simply no getting around the fact that women can face a few more of them. A little planning and some savvy can save you plenty of hassles—or worse. *Safety and Security for Women* offers tips and practical quotes from female travelers versed in the rules of the road—everything from the benefits of using an ATM card abroad to the dangers of drinking alone in a Muslim country.

Coauthor Sheila Swan, a veteran voyager whose 30-plus years of globetrotting provide much of the illustrative grist for the book, shares advice on how to avert those unpleasant incidents that can occur when you're out of your

element—getting lost, harassed, dealing with difficult officials.

"Although there is no real replacement for common sense, instincts and intuition, they can be buttressed by some specific knowledge," says Swan. "It's not paranoia to be informed and aware."

A safe trip starts with preparation, and that includes taking such tiny precautions as tearing your name and address off magazines you bring from home and carrying a photo of your husband (or an ersatz husband) to reduce attention from

strange men. You're also advised to put a hotel business card into your pocket and purse when you reach your accommodation to prevent you from forgetting where you're staying.

This last piece of wisdom could have saved me an ulcer in Hanoi, where I wandered the colonial district for hours after sunset trying to find my hotel, cashless, spooked and feeling like I'd be auctioning off my passport and credit card to the lowest bidder at any moment. Finally, a sympathetic cyclo driver offered to pedal me around until I recognized my hotel. If you get lost, I now know, don't look the part.

According to Lee Lapin, a safety professional whose advice appears in the book, predators scrutinize "your walk, your attitude, the way you carry yourself." So even if you're feeling wimpy, stand firm, walk with intention, look like you're not afraid to hurl rocks.

And relax. The road is safer than not, particularly if you abide by sensible rules of conduct—dressing appropriately for your context, avoiding deserted metro cars and dark trails, trusting your intuition. The book's advice is streaked with this sort of pragmatism for all women travelers.

"One of the luxurious realities for American and other Western women is that we grow up in a society where it really is remarkably safe," says Swan. "So when we travel, we have the potential to not have our guards up."

The point is, venture with just the right amount of attitude, instinct and information—and your good luck charm should travel safely back with you on the return trip.

—VICKY GOMELSKY



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