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## Women travelers share their tips and secrets for staying safe

Learn self-defense. Gather information. Ask for help and for what you want. Be slightly suspicious. Act confident. Fit in by not standing out. Stay sober. Scream when necessary. Trust your gut.

These are some of the ways, women travelers tell us, they ensure their safety when traveling, especially traveling alone.

If this partial list sounds a little paranoid and stern, it's meant to. Many of these women have gotten into scrapes on the road. Some have been threatened, molested or assaulted. It's not just because most are world travelers whose love of new places takes them to sometimes iffy destinations. One was attacked and savagely beaten in broad daylight two blocks from her home in a "nice neighborhood."

They don't necessarily avoid those countries or cities where there is crime or worse (which means anywhere), but they take steps to fend off trouble, creating "escape hatches," especially when traveling alone. Some of these women travel for business and some travel for pleasure, and all of them have been around the block enough times to know what can happen.

Here are their tips.

•**Be physically ready.** Katherine Harmon, senior director of category intelligence for WorldAware, a travel intelligence and risk assessment company, has long practiced martial arts; so have her daughters. Marybeth Bond, who lives in the Bay Area and is an author (her blog is [GutsyTraveler.com](http://GutsyTraveler.com)) and writer for National Geographic, has taken a self-defense class; so have her daughters.

"There is something about that that instills confidence," Harmon said. "The more you practice, the more confidence you get."

•**Act confident.** You may not feel confident, so call on your acting chops. Look your aggressor in the eye, Bond said. (Victims look down, security analysts told me in interviews for the April 21 On the Spot about travel safety.) Walk with purpose, Bond said, with your chin up.

•**Research cultural norms.** Catherine Watson, an author and travel writer from Minnesota, studies everyday life in her destination by reading and asking questions. “And then adhere to [the norms],” she said in an email. Flouting them isn’t brave; it may be sending an unintended message. “In some cultures, a young woman walking around on her own is signaling that her family doesn’t value her enough to protect her,” Watson said. Sometimes, having a guide will deflect that; check with tourism offices or with such organizations as ToursByLocals.com.

•**Don’t settle, especially when it’s a safety issue.** Ask for what you want and what you need in every endeavor. “Travel with a strong will,” Susan Spano, formerly a travel writer for the Los Angeles Times, said in an email from Vietnam, where she teaches English. “Don’t let them give you the worst table or room just because you’re a single female”—especially if it’s in a questionable location.

Here’s what Julie D. Taylor of West Hollywood does to prevent such situations: “I have often been given rooms at the end of a corridor, once even behind a fire door. I immediately request a different room, and now preempt such situations by requesting a room near the elevator.

“Until hotel personnel get additional training, it’s imperative for women to speak up for themselves. Hint: No proprietor wants to hear that a guest feels unsafe.”

And Ellie Shapiro of Los Angeles, who traveled for business and travels for pleasure, said in an email: “Book your first few nights’ accommodation to alleviate any fear you may have about arriving at a new, foreign place. Within a few days you’ll be acclimated and feel more comfortable, and the rest can be booked on the fly.”

Yomi Wrong of the Bay Area, who writes the All Systems Go column about mobility and travel for The Times, uses a wheelchair, so she asks for a ground-floor room. But she also requests a safety briefing, which a good idea no matter what floor you are on.

•**Don’t stand out.** Women should dress to be ignored when they travel. “You wouldn’t want to land in India with a suitcase filled with tank tops and shorts,” said

Shapiro, who has traveled extensively in the subcontinent. “Know what is appropriate so you will fit right in.”

Also, Bond noted, leave the bling at home. I would add leave even the fake bling at home, given that most thieves don’t travel with a jeweler’s loupe.

Heesun Kim, executive director of L.A.-based Korea Tourism Organization, makes it a habit to buy a local garment, she said. That way, she not only has a souvenir but also reflects the dress of her destination.

•**Scream.** “There is power in verbal strength,” Bond said. Once, in India, a man began speaking inappropriately to her. “I started to scream,” she said. “I told him, ‘Don’t you talk dirty to me!’ This was in a crowd and he stopped.”

•**Don’t signal that you are a stranger.** Michelle Rodriguez, founder of 360viewpr.com in Los Angeles, avoids looking at maps of any kind when she’s on the street. “I step into a coffee shop, a museum, store, restroom to look at my phone map,” she said in an email. “Looking at a map in public as a woman unfortunately is setting yourself up with an overly-friendly ‘Can I help you find where you are going’ you may not want.

•**Always carry enough local currency to get yourself out of a sticky situation,** said Jen Leo, a Southern California blogger (and onetime travel tech reporter for this section). Whether you need to grab a cab to escape an unsavory place or duck into a restaurant and find yourself with a meal you weren’t expecting, that cash can be your BFF. Just make sure you don’t flash it.

•**Look for allies.** A hotel concierge who knows the area may be one, Kim and Shapiro said.

They also may be other women. “If you’re — riding [local transport] at night in rural Honduras comes to mind — get near other women,” Watson said. “ ‘Go to the moms,’ a friend told her little girls. Offer to hold the babies, in waiting rooms or on buses. Anything like that ... makes you part of that temporary community. Plus it’s fun.”

•**Beware mind-altering substances.** You don’t want to get “roofied” — that is, drink a cocktail that’s been laced with rohypnol or other disabling pharmaceutical. For that reason, Melissa McGibbon, a travel writer and adventurer from Utah, buys her own

drinks and is judicious in consumption, she said in an email. Others have a friend watch their drink if nature calls. Some take their drinks with them. And control your intake.

•**Trust your instincts.** “If I get a gut feeling that something is off, I just leave the area/situation immediately,” McGibbon said. To avoid trouble, “Get in a taxi, cross the street, change seats, get off the bus or elevator, whatever.”

Travel is a permission slip to see the world — and to watch out for yourself in ways that may seem contrary to your personality and to accepted behaviors. But when it comes to your safety, the only unacceptable behavior is shying away from doing what you need to for fear of offending someone. As Bond said, “No nice girl!”

If you’re wrong, you can apologize later. If you’re right, you may have saved yourself.