

EDITOR'S CORNER

During the holiday season people travel a lot but there are many situations that occur unfavorable to innocent travelers. Here are a few tips for when you travel to unfamiliar countries or places. I have been in many situations when I needed to protect myself and my family members. I hope these tips are useful!

Safety in Food and Drinks

There are two types of foodborne diseases: Foodborne intoxications and foodborne infections.

Foodborne intoxications are cases in which people got sick by consuming food or water containing toxic chemicals such as cyanide, arsenic, mercury, etc. or microbial toxins such as staphylococcal enterotoxins, botulinum toxins, aflatoxin, etc. The symptoms usually are quick, in about 4 to 8 h for chemical toxins and staph toxins or longer for others. Chemical intoxication from *Staphylococcus* is not fatal, but may be fatal from chemicals and *C. botulinum* toxins.

Foodborne infections are cases in which people got sick by consuming food or water containing large numbers (usually in the thousands and millions) of infectious microorganisms such as *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, *Yersinia enterocolitica*, etc. The sickness will start usually in 12 to 24 h. Foodborne infection usually is not fatal but you feel so bad that you may wish you were dead!!

The safest way to eat in a foreign land is to cook your own food. There are plenty of food markets, grocery stores, corner food stores, seafood stands, etc. around. They are inexpensive and fun to visit and buy food. You can bring a heating unit or hot pot from home and use it as long as you have a good converter from 220V to 110 V in many countries. Make sure you clean your hands and food preparation areas with hot water and soap. All your utensils must be clean and sanitized before using to cut and to prepare food. Never cut or handle raw food and cooked food with the same knife or utensil. Always prepare your raw and cooked food separately. Cut fruits and vegetables first then cut seafood, beef, lamb, pork and chicken in that order because of the number of microorganisms in those foods are in increasing order and the severity of the existence of potential pathogens.

When you cook you need to cook your dishes to the correct temperature. As a rule, 160 degrees Fahrenheit will kill most food pathogens. If you do not have a thermometer, just use common sense to reach the cooking temperature by observing the steam coming out of the food. If you cannot handle the bowl with your hand because of the heat, the food is safe to eat. If you see steam coming out of your food and drinks, they are safe to consume. Do not trust luke warm dishes and cold dishes unless they are fermented foods, fried foods, dried foods, and freshly prepared foods within your sight!! Eat fruits with skins peeled by yourself or if you have seen someone peeling it for you. Do not eat any food that you smell an odor that you are not familiar with. Do not eat any strange creatures that you have never seen before,

especially sea creatures. You may have allergic reactions to these foods. When in doubt DO NOT EAT or DRINK any item presented to you. Your life and health are more important than your hosts' insistence.

When you eat in a restaurant and market places there are several items of concern listed below:

(1) Look around the place to see if it is clean. If you are not comfortable with the cleanliness of the place or the behavior of the workers handling table cloths, glasses, dishes, cups, utensils, and foods, leave the place and look for another one.

(2) Check the toilet. If the toilet is clean, the establishment is usually clean. In some countries you have to bring your own toilet paper. Do not "do your thing" and find out there is no toilet paper around!

(3) Never drink local water, no matter how clean it looks. Always drink water out of a newly opened bottle of water from a reputable company. Local people may tell you that their water from the tap is OK. Do not trust it. It may be OK for their intestinal microflora but it may not be OK for your microflora!! Also never accept ICE CUBES in your drinks because you never know what they are made from. *Salmonella* is known to be transmitted from an ice cube to people and cause foodborne diseases. For those of you over 21, drinking beer and wine is the safest way in foreign countries. Beside the pleasures from these beverages, they are safe to consume. Incidentally, a bottle of wine or beer, is as cheap as a bottle of water in many countries. Soft drinks are safe as long as you see the waiter open the bottle in front of you or you open it yourself.

(4) Food in clean restaurants usually is OK as long as you see steam for hot foods and hot drinks. Try to avoid buffet food where items have been in the pan for a long time and are luke warm. Refuse food when they come out with strange odors of any sort that displeases you. If you think something is wrong, most likely something is wrong. Hot spices, vinegar, soy sauce, etc. can kill about 90% of the microorganisms in the food you sprinkle it on. Use them generously. Garlic is great to suppress microorganisms and may chase some undesirable or maybe accidentally, desirable persons from your close proximity!

(5) Do not be persuaded to eat something you are not familiar with or not pleasing to your sight and smell. There is no reason why you have to eat raw eel dipped in dark soy sauce, or the snake head stuffed with cherries or a cooked sparrow with feet sticking out of the green broth. JUST SAY NO.

Personal Safety

(1) Always walk, talk, sit, act with confidence as if you are a local. You do not have to be big and strong to be safe. You need to have strong personal character and an air of control to present a sense of defense surrounding you.

(2) Never visit “red light” districts in foreign countries. They are truly dangerous. Never go to bars or establishments that have unpleasant crowds and activities especially when alcoholic drinks and drugs are involved. As the saying goes “do not trouble trouble unless trouble troubles you.” Run when you sense danger. Do not fight unless you have to and think that you can win. Give up your money and your belongings in a serious situation. Your life is far more valuable than those possessions. Luckily such encounters do not happen to most tourists.

(3) Beware of Pick-Pockets (PP). This is really a serious problem for tourists. PP will not really physically harm you. They just want your money and your belongings. Do not judge a country by the PP you encounter. Most of them came from another land to steal and rob tourists. They are well trained and work in groups. You must learn to spot them and protect yourself and your belongings from them. Try to walk as a group with your friends. Never have a map in hand and ask for directions at the street corner. That is a sure sign that you are an inexperienced tourist and will be a target for the pickpocket. As a rule CHAIN and TIE all your most important belongings (passport, plane tickets and money) on your body inside your clothes and coats. If you have a handbag make sure they have zippers and lock your zippers! Good PP can quickly open your zippers and remove items from inside. Never have a backpack with zippers at the back. PP are very good at opening zippers of backpacks of tourists when they are looking at the beautiful Picasso paintings.

Some of the tricks of PP and some protective advice are presented below. This advice is not to be taken literally, but as suggestions and precautions.

(A) CLOSING IN AND PICK. PP will move very close to you in a crowded place and stick his/her hand into your pockets, purse, bags, etc. and quickly take your things away.

DEFENSE: Avoid crowded places and as soon as you sense someone is pressing against you anywhere, make a sudden 180 degree turn and stare at the PP. At that moment the PP will either remove his/her hand from your belongings or turn away to look for another victim.

(B) SWARMING IN AND PICK. PP will come as a group of three or four children and surround you with flowers, newspapers, clothes as if they are selling things to you. A couple of them will block your sight and the others will pick your pockets. They may even push you around if you do not move fast.

DEFENSE: When you see a group of children or people moving toward you without any reasons, walk away quickly or even run to the main street to avoid them. When they literally swarm you, swing your arms and legs and yell at them. They will go away and curse you as they leave.

(C) BLOCKING AND PICK. This is a great move by the PP. As you open a door of a restaurant, enter the subway train door, walking up a stairway, entering a door of the elevator, etc. one PP will suddenly stop in front of you or bend down in front

of you to pick up something. Since you cannot move, the second PP will open your bag to pick your things or put his/her hand into your pockets to steal your stuff. The third PP will receive your stolen things and go away. By the time you struggle to move ahead of the first PP your things are long gone.

DEFENSE: As soon as you notice someone is blocking you in front make a 180-degree turn with swinging arms and kicking feet and that will get the second and third PP alarmed and they will run away.

(D) DISTRACTING AND PICK. A beautiful girl or handsome man will come by to ask you a question or offer you flowers or cigarettes while the PP will pick your pocket and take your bag from the floor.

DEFENSE: Watch out for good-looking strangers coming your way. They are coming toward you, not for your good looks or great American accent, they are coming for something more mundane!

(E) SELF CREATED SITUATIONS. Sometimes tourists make things easy for PP such as putting bags on the floor and walking away to the restroom, turning around to make a telephone call, looking at show windows, having a money bag in plain view, accidentally pulling out a lot of money from the pocketbook to count it or paying a bill and letting PP see them, etc.

DEFENSE: Just have common sense and assume everybody in a strange place may be a PP. Always look around you and behind you as you walk to spot strangers following.

(F) FREE ADVISE AND GIFTS. In some popular tourist spots you may find someone very friendly who comes by to say "Can I show you around this lovely place?" You may think that the person is a real nice local with nothing to do but to spend some time with you on a great afternoon. **WRONG.** A few minutes later he/she will say "By the way, this tour is \$200.00." If you refuse, you will suddenly see a few of his/her friends walking toward you. By then you better give up some money and run! Sometimes someone nice will give you a flower or a bag. Very soon he/she will tell you the item is worth \$50.00.

DEFENSE: There is no free advise and gifts in tourist places. Be aware of anything free being offered. They are NOT free.

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