

## Safe And Sound: Prepare for crisis situations to lessen your risk while traveling



Photo: Egyptian demonstrators | Mohamed Hanno, Dreamstime

For countless travelers, the pyramids of Egypt represent the trip of a lifetime. But those tourists who happened to be in Cairo in late January got more than they bargained for when the country convulsed into mass demonstrations against longtime strongman Hosni Mubarak. Tear gas and tanks, government ministries aflame, the chaotic airport filled with thousands of stranded passengers — it was like a nightmare episode of *When Vacations Attack*.

As events in Egypt unraveled, Global Rescue was already on the move. The crisis response firm's security team, comprised of former Navy SEALs and other special-ops veterans, ushered approximately 190 foreign nationals to central rally locations and then escorted them to Alexandria's international airport for evacuation to Amman, Jordan, aboard a chartered Boeing 737.

Unfortunately, such an "extraction" isn't an isolated travel event in an increasingly problematic world. Widespread political turmoil in the Middle East and devastating natural disasters such as the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan — not to mention a steady stream of medical-related emergencies suffered by adventurers in remote locales — have resulted in an increase in travel-related crises.

"I'm not sure there's ever been a quarter like this," said Daniel L. Richards, chief executive officer of Boston-based Global Rescue. "Certainly not in a decade. ... It really is unprecedented. It's kept us very busy."

However, there are a number of relatively simple steps that travelers can follow to mitigate risk while on an overseas vacation or business trip. Prior to departure, the first step is to research the status of your chosen destination.

"We call it 'situational awareness,'" said Bruce McIndoe, president of iJet, a global security firm based in Annapolis, Md. "Whether it's political unrest, upcoming elections or the anniversary of a bombing or a coup, you need to be sensitive to what might be going on."

"You also need to understand the context you're going into," he added, "so you can be properly prepared for any weather or medical concerns."

Sri Lanka is blessed with some of the world's loveliest beaches, but your holiday might be a total washout if you don't know the island is raked by two monsoons (May–August in the southern part of the country, December–March in the north). And beautiful Bali is beset by a rabies outbreak that claimed more than 100 lives by early 2011.

Various websites offer international travel information with these sorts of details. The U.S. Department of State compiles country-specific information for every nation; these entries include traffic safety and road conditions, aviation safety and "special circumstances." ("Security personnel may at times place foreign visitors under surveillance," warns the entry for the socialist Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. "Hotel rooms, telephones, and fax machines may be monitored and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched.")

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention devotes an entire section to "Travelers' Health," with coverage of more than 200 overseas destinations, a list of travel medicine clinics and constant updates on epidemics. Other well-regarded sources include the World Health Organization, which monitors disease outbreaks, and the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, which produces detailed travel advice by country.

Richards recommends signing up online for the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or STEP, which eliminates the cumbersome process of registering at your destination's U.S. Embassy or Consulate. STEP enrollees receive current information, typically by email, about countries they plan to visit as well as updated travel warnings. Evacuation alerts are even posted on Twitter. STEP registration also makes it easier for consular officers to determine your whereabouts and welfare in case of an emergency, such as the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

"If you're not registered, you're not necessarily known to be in that location," explained Richards. Consider using an experienced adventure travel company for trips to developing countries if you have a low tolerance for uncertain or chaotic conditions.

"If you're going to Iran and you're not totally confident you can do it on your own — or you want a more robust safety net — you might want to come to a company like us," said James Sano, president of Geographic Expeditions, a San Francisco company specializing in custom and small-group travel. "If you're going someplace like Hong Kong, the likelihood is you don't need that." Bear in mind that medical-related emergencies — usually the result of accident, illness or pre-existing conditions such as heart trouble — are the primary cause of overseas evacuations. Sano advises clients to check if their health insurance covers them while traveling overseas.

"These days, people are pushing the envelope in terms of age and activities," Sano observed. "Medicare policies don't afford any coverage overseas."

Numerous companies offer medical-evacuation insurance. It's important to determine if they repatriate clients to hospitals in the United States — the practice of Global Rescue — or transport them to the nearest available overseas medi-

cal facility. If treatment abroad is necessary, Sano suggests selecting a hospital approved by Joint Commission International, an accrediting body with rigorous standards.

If you have a pre-existing medical condition, consider packing a flash drive containing your pertinent health history. A hard-copy printout may be preferable if your itinerary includes remote locations without computer access. Prescription medications should be carried in their original containers. Bring an extra supply and avoid refills from Third World pharmacies; in regions such as East Africa or Southeast Asia, many drugs can be counterfeit. Dr. Bradley A. Connor, a gastroenterologist and former president of the International Society of Travel Medicine, recommends assembling a small first-aid kit containing over-the-counter medications such as aspirin and anti-diarrheal pills and prescription antibiotics like Cipro.

While it never hurts to have a handy first-aid kit, Richards believes reliable communication is the most critical accessory. A cellphone can be invaluable; a GPS-enabled satellite phone is more preferable if heading into the backcountry, miles from the nearest cellular tower.

Richards related the case of a hunter dropped off by bush plane in southwestern Alaska's remote Aleutian Range. Despite the time of year (February), the man was alone and woefully ill-equipped, with just a lightweight tent and non-waterproof clothing. High winds soon shredded his tent while a wintry mix of rain, snow and sleet soaked him to the bone. Fortunately, the outdoorsman did bring one useful piece of gear — a satellite phone — and called in his condition and coordinates, which allowed Global Rescue to dispatch a lifesaving helicopter.

A satellite phone will also function in the event that a natural disaster such as the Japanese earthquake and tsunami destroys communication infrastructure or telephone service is disrupted by the government, which occurred during the Egypt protests. A cellphone is also one piece of the "go kit" that iJet's McIndoe always carries, along with survival essentials like a battery-operated radio, water-purification tablets and a multitool knife.

He and Richards also urge travelers to have an "action plan" for worst-case scenarios. "You're not taken totally by surprise," said Richards. "When something terrible happens, you know you have options. It's not all new. ... If you have a plan, the likelihood of panicking is certainly lower."

Once your trip is underway, try not to attract unnecessary attention, these security experts advise. "Do not get off the plane advertising that you are an American," said Richards. "You want to keep a low profile. You don't want to be in a black stretch Mercedes limo if you can avoid it."

While the probability of being a terrorism target is "very miniscule," said McIndoe, a much more real concern is becoming a victim of crime. But the security recommendations are largely the same: "Don't create a verbal or visual spectacle that will draw attention to you."

Although Western-branded hotels have been the target of several high-profile terror attacks, the reality is that, statistically, they are safer than local accommodations.

"Global hotel chains spend more money on fire prevention, safety and security," McIndoe stated. For added peace of mind, he recommends rooms away from main thoroughfares or train tracks; travelers should also avoid ground-floor rooms (easier access for thieves) or quarters above the seventh floor (the typical limit of fire department ladder trucks).

If events do hit the proverbial fan, don't panic. Communicate your status and location — including your GPS coordinates, if possible — to an outside contact. Assess where you are relative to the threat, such as a large demonstration, and transfer to a "safe haven" hotel that puts some distance between you and the problem. If you're already removed from the danger, it's usually best to "shelter in place" and monitor TV broadcasts, the Internet or radio until you can determine it's safe to move.

"Staying put is normally safer than venturing out and trying to make your way to the airport," McIndoe said. "You may run into angry people or a roadblock, be held up for ransom, be kidnapped — or worse."

And put to rest any dreams of helicopters filled with U.S. Marines and medics scrambling to your assistance. "That's not the case," said Richards. "As we've seen in Haiti and Mumbai and Japan, it takes days or weeks for the government to bring resources to bear to help people. Oftentimes that's not fast enough."

In the case of medical emergencies or legal problems, the State Department can provide lists of recommended doctors or attorneys, said John Echard, a Bureau of Consular Affairs spokesperson. But those large-scale evacuations (nearly 17,000 American citizens and family members from earthquake-ravaged Haiti, for example) aren't a free ride.

"Typically when we do send in an evacuation charter flight for U.S. citizens, they do have to repay the government," said Echard. The fee is comparable to the cost of a pre-event commercial flight.

Private outfits such as iJet or Global Rescue have the ability to respond more quickly and by any transport means necessary. When Hezbollah paramilitary forces in Lebanon clashed with the Israeli army in 2006, iJet rented private vehicles to evacuate its clients through the mountains to Jordan.

"Commercial means were not available, so we had to improvise," said McIndoe. "No camels or horses — yet."

Global Rescue, however, has gone with the quadruped option on foul-weather operations in the Andes and Himalayas.

**"We've used everything from chartered 737s to mules and yaks," said Richards. "Yaks will go whether it's snowing or not."**