

U.S. State Department Issues Chilling Holiday Travel Alert: How to Stay Safe in an Age of Terror

Robert McGarvey | Dec 23, 2014



NEW YORK (MainStreet) — The December 19 travel alert issued by the U.S. State Dept. is enough to make you want to stay home this holiday season.

“U.S. citizens should be extra cautious, maintain a very high level of vigilance, and take appropriate steps to enhance their personal security,” it read.

The warning went on: “An analysis of past attacks and threat reporting strongly suggests a focus by terrorists not only on the targeting of U.S. government facilities but also on hotels, shopping areas, places of worship, and schools, among other targets, during or coinciding with this holiday period. U.S. citizens abroad should be mindful that terrorist groups and those inspired by them can pose unpredictable threats in public venues. U.S. citizens should remain alert to local conditions and for signs of danger.”

The jumping off point for the State alert was last week’s hostage taking in a downtown Sydney, Australia chocolate shop by an Islamic extremist named Man Haron Monis who - despite his claims - appears to have had no connections to established terror organizations. Two hostages died, as did Monis.

The question State is raising is blunt: what can you do to keep yourself from being a victim in a similar incident? And know that it is hard to imagine a more benign place to have a cup of coffee and a truffle than the Lindt Martin Place chocolate shop in Sydney. It’s not a hangout for the one-percenters - whom you might think likely targets of some terrorists - but neither is it edgy or vulnerable to dangers.

The suggestion State is making is still more frightening. Just being American may be reason enough to be a target of many terrorist groups, and, State is suggesting, hotels, shopping centers, churches and synagogues and schools may be in the crosshairs. How scary is that?

Know, too, that the U.S. State Dept. moves with highly deliberate speed when it comes to issuing travel alerts and warnings. Impetuous is isn’t. There are a handful of current warnings and they are for predictable places such as Syria, Sudan, El Salvador, Venezuela, and similar places where violence and illegality are at epidemic scale. A warning, issued just before the holiday travel season, that vaguely appears to apply to just about everybody, everywhere is atypical for State.

Something is up: we don’t know what, and what you do want to do is be very sure - especially in your travels over the holiday season - that you are taking every precaution. Nobody is saying to cancel your plans and pull the covers over your head. That is not necessary. Not if you follow a short list of smart travel precautions.

Observe your surroundings, advised Dr. Robert Quigley, senior vice president of medical assistance for International SOS, a travel security company. He elaborated: “Many travelers let their guard down when touring a new country.” Stay alert. Criminals and terrorists are. You may be on holiday. They aren’t. Don’t forget it.

Stay away from known trouble. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Europa Hotel in Belfast won fame as “the world’s most bombed hotel.” It suffered several dozen attacks. This reporter was often in Belfast in that period, never stayed at the Europa, although it was by far the finest in town. It just is not smart to go where danger hangs out, and, with the Internet, that is not hard to identify.

While you are at that, to the extent possible, stay well clear of established tourist spots. They make tempting targets for terrorists looking to make a name for themselves.

Dress down, and do not wear a lot of obviously American gear, said Lou Altman, CEO of GlobaFone, a satellite communications company. He added: “While the New York Yankees may be the most recognized sports team in the world, wearing a Yankees hat or shirt means that it is a good bet you are American and thus a great target.” Face it: in many places today Americans just are not liked. There is no good reason to flaunt it.

Know where to call for help, advised Dan Richards, CEO of crisis response firm **Global Rescue**. 911 works throughout the U.S., not in other countries. Find out appropriate emergency numbers in advance and program them into memory. You probably won’t need it, but if you do, you will be thankful you followed this advice.

While you are at it, enroll in State’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program aka STEP. Doing that gets you the latest security updates and also makes it easier for U.S. embassies and consulates to contact you in an emergency.

Last advice: “Trust your gut. If something feels wrong walk away,” advised security expert Spencer Coursen. Don’t think twice. Safety first is the road to take today.