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40 Travel Scams you can Recognize and Avoid

Distraction Scams

Distraction scams are the most popular and can be found anywhere in the world where tourists are found. The scam artists usually work in pairs. One scammer distracts you, while the second one picks your pocket or steals your jacket or wallet or purse or computer or camera. Distraction scams work because the victim is surprised, confused, disoriented and distracted. By the time they gather their thoughts, the scam is complete and the scammers are long gone.

1) Back up...a little bit more...a little bit more

You remember seeing this routine in comedy movies, where one person offers to take your photo and then tries to position you properly. He continues to instruct you to 'back up' until you fall into the water fountain or off a cliff. Does this really happen? Yup! In most cases the scammer has the tourist back up so that the tourist falls into a water fountain or stream. Then the scammer runs off with the camera and if they were clever enough to get you to put down your souvenir bags and your jacket or purse (containing your wallet) then he runs off with that too. You, on the other hand, are soaking wet and very upset.

2) What Not to Wear

You've seen the reality TV show—now get ready for real life. You are on a bus tour. The guide takes you to a beautiful piazza or plaza. You and your friends enjoy a cup of coffee or cappuccino as you marvel at the scenery. As soon as the guide asks everyone to board the bus, someone 'trips', and spills their coffee on YOU. Your outfit is ruined, the coffee was hot and wet, the guide is closing the bus doors—and you are just not thinking about your camera on the table or the jacket that you draped over the back of the seat. The scammer, in an effort to further distract you from your valuables, is offering to help clean you up and is apologizing profusely. In the meantime, his/her partner has walked away with the goods! What not to wear? Coffee—but this scam works very well with ketchup, mustard, oil, animal blood and just about any other liquid.

3) The Innocent Bundle of Rags

You may be at a famous landmark, such as Niagara Falls, or perhaps just standing on the street. You notice a woman nearby and she is cuddling what appears to be a baby. She is rocking it and cooing at it. What you don't know is that it is just a bundle of rags, and she is pretending that it is a baby, in order to convince you and the other tourists that it is a baby. All of a sudden she tosses the bundle—perhaps over Niagara Falls, perhaps in front of a car or streetcar. You are horrified when you see this. But that is the whole purpose of this scam. While you are distracted, scammer #2 is picking your pocket or already around the corner with your camera or purse.

4) The Cardboard Children of Rome

While not restricted to Rome, the cardboard children can be found in many places where tourists are wandering around, enjoying the sights. The pack of children, usually numbering from 6-8, each carry a piece of cardboard, about the size of a shirt cardboard in front of him/herself. They approach an individual or a couple, yelling for money or candy and they gather around, pressing the cardboard against the bodies of their 'victims'. Typically, the 'victims' yell at the kids to get away—and then the children run off in 6-8 different directions. The 'victims' then discover that all their valuables are gone—and no kids are in sight.

The purpose of the cardboard is to confuse the victim and once it is pressed against the body, it de-sensitized the person sufficiently, so that the children's little hands can't be detected as they go into the victims' pockets, jacket and purse. It is a very effective distraction.

5) The Store Bump

A tourist is shopping in an upscale store. Out of nowhere, a man bumps into the tourist—who loses her balance and bumps into another shopper. The man (Scam artist #1) quickly leaves the store. The Shopper (Scam artist #2) accuses the tourist of bumping into her and causing her to drop her parcel. The shopper rattles her parcel to indicate that there is broken glass inside—meaning that the tourist caused the damage—and now she wants the tourist to pay. This all happens very quickly. Chances are the tourist does not speak the local language. The shopper is yelling and making a scene. A crowd gathers. The tourist is scared, intimidated—but of course innocent of any wrongdoing. It was all a set-up.

The tourist has a few options. 1) Find someone in the crowd who speaks English and try to explain her case (but the man who started it all, has disappeared—so the tourist's case will be weak). 2) The tourist can pay money in order to get rid of the problem. 3) The tourist can call the Tourist Police and see if that helps the situation. 4) The tourist can call the manager at the hotel where she is staying, and see if he/she can offer any assistance. Some situations are not that easy to resolve.

6) The Car Bump

Similar to the store bump, in this case a driver spots your rental car—indicating that you are, most likely, a tourist. He maneuvers his vehicle in front of yours and then stops abruptly, causing you to hit the rear bumper of the car. As in the store bump, he yells and screams in order to scare you into paying him money. Chances are that his car was already dented, so it looks like you did cause some damage. If you don't pay up, the driver might start to develop neck and back pains in order to make his case seem more legitimate. You have the same options available to you as in the Store Bump Scam (see #5).

7) Perfume

You walk to the parking lot of a shopping mall with your purchases, in order to meet the tour bus. As you approach the bus, a smartly dressed woman approaches you and says that one of the stores is testing a new perfume (or man's cologne) and asks if you would like a sample. You agree and she sprays some on your wrist. You smell it and remark that it is nice—when all of a sudden the woman sprays it in your eyes—and it starts to burn. She runs off in one direction. Out of nowhere a man grabs your purchases and runs off in another direction. You are left standing there with burning eyes. (Of course the lesson is that if a store is going to test perfume, they would do it inside the store—not in a parking lot. If you don't want to get sprayed—then turn around and walk into the mall.)

8) Hey you dropped your wallet!

This is a simple scam that can happen to a tourist or a local. You leave a store when, a few seconds later, someone yells out to you “Excuse me, Ma’am (or Sir), you dropped your wallet”, and they hold up a dark coloured wallet to show you. You immediately search for your wallet. In some cases you might even hold up your wallet and say. “No thanks—it’s not mine—I have mine here”. The scam is to find out where you keep your wallet. Once you start to walk down the street, the first person (Scam artist #1) will call his friend on a cell phone to announce what you look like and where your wallet is kept and then you will be pick-pocketed!

9) Shoe shine

A young person asks you if you want your shoes shined. You say no. Then the person takes a big lump of shoe polish and dumps it on your shoes anyway. You are left standing in the street looking like a fool. So you tell the person to go ahead and shine your shoes. They do an ok job and then ask you for a ridiculous amount of money—like \$20.00. If you refuse, then some of their BIG friends come by to intimidate you into paying. An easy solution is to offer \$5.00 or maybe even \$10.00 to get out of this intimidating scenario. Sometimes it is best to pay some money in exchange for your safety.

10) Confetti money

You are leaving the cruise ship at one of the Ports-of-Call. Out of nowhere, someone pushes you from behind, but at the same time, reaching into your pocket to pull out your wallet or money. You fall to the ground, only to look up and see small pieces of green paper raining down on you, just like confetti. You think it is your money. The thief is running away. All he did was carry some cut-up green paper with him so that he could distract you after he robbed you. In fact, you were distracted long enough for him to escape.

Comments: Leave your valuables in the hotel safe. If you must take cash with you, then put a little in each pocket. Don’t take out your wallet in public and make sure your money clip or wallet is not obviously detectable in your clothing (or back pocket). Avoid external money belts—as they are walking advertisements that all your money and important documents are all in once convenient place. Consider a money belt that is worn *inside* your clothes and again, be very discreet when you remove anything from it.

11) The Old ‘Escalator’ Routine

How many times have you fumbled or tripped or simply dropped something while riding an escalator? Pretty natural, right? Well Scam Artists know that this is a natural occurrence and want to take advantage of your desire to help someone in need. Scam Artist #1 is in front of you on the Escalator. Scam Artist #2 is behind you. Scam Artist #1 drops some coins and then pretends to be upset and fretful over the coins that have fallen. You, being a nice person, decide to help. You lean down to help retrieve the coins, but as you are doing this, Scam Artist #2 picks your pocket or takes your valuables. You don’t notice a thing. As you get off the escalator, Scam Artist #1 thanks you profusely, while his/her partner has disappeared with the goods.

Variation: You are about to enter a crowded bus. Just as you start to step onto the bus, someone behind starts pushing you forward. You are concerned about grabbing onto something to collect your balance. As well, you are angry about being shoved forward. In the meantime, you have just been robbed by a pickpocket.

Comments: Like most travel scams, these two incidents could and do happen everywhere in the world, including your hometown. They work best in crowded areas where tourists are uncertain of the local custom and may be reluctant to yell at someone to stop pushing or to simply stand still while a stranger panics over some coins he/she has dropped on an escalator.

If your valuables have been protected, then you have little to worry about. If you are aware of the whereabouts of your money, safely stored in a money belt under your clothes or another safe place, then you don't have to worry about distraction scams and pickpockets

Taxi Scams

Note: Taxi Drivers are hard-working, honest individuals. But as in any profession, there are some 'bad apples' who ruin it for others. These taxi scams exist in just about every city in every country. This in no way implies that travellers should avoid taking taxis. Travellers should exercise caution when taking a taxi—just as they should exercise caution in anything they do at home or abroad.

12) The Circuitous Route

You hop into a taxi at the airport and after the very friendly driver asks where you are going, he explains that there is a major traffic or construction problem on the direct roadway or highway, leading to your destination. He will have to go out of the way but assures you that in the long run, you will save time because you will not be sitting in traffic. As you are most likely not familiar with the city and the roads, you agree. The driver then takes the most out-of-the-way route possible, and your taxi bill is much greater than you ever dreamed it could be.

Many drivers will do their homework before presenting you with the circuitous route plan. They will ask "Is this your first time in _____"? If you say Yes, then you could be a sitting duck for any tricks the driver wants to play. The advice is to say NO, and not provide any further explanation.

What to do? Before you hop in a taxi, ask at the traveller's information desk about road conditions between the airport and your destination. Then you can refuse the taxi driver's offer to take another route to your hotel. Also, most guide books—as well as internet sights—as well as trained travel counsellors—will be able to tell you the approximate taxi fare from the airport to your hotel. If you find the taxi fare is much greater, then take down the driver's information in case you choose to lodge a complaint later on.

13) My Brother Owns a Jewellery Store

This popular scenario involves the taxi driver telling you that he will take you to your hotel for free, if you would first allow him to take you to his brother's jewellery store. He explains that all you have to do is look—and if you don't want to buy anything, that is ok. If you agree to do this, then believe that you will not be able to leave that store without buying something expensive. The storeowner is a master of the hard sell and they may have a few muscled men stand at the door to dissuade you from leaving. Therefore if a taxi driver makes you this offer, say "NO" or get out and look for another taxi.

14) This is my Cousin

The taxi driver comes into the airport terminal, approaches you and offers his taxi service—which you agree to take. When you arrive at the taxi (usually parked far away from the other taxis) there is already someone sitting in the front seat. The driver explains that this is his cousin (or brother). Avoid this scene altogether. Turn around, head back to the terminal and ask the information desk for tips on how to recognize legal taxis. Just think—that if you get into a taxi with 2 people—then you are outnumbered, should they have anything nasty in mind.

15) Your Hotel is no good

You tell the driver the name of your hotel and he speeds off from the airport. After a few minutes he asks if you have stayed at that hotel before. If you say Yes—he will ask you when you stayed there—and then he will concoct a story of how it has changed for the worse since that time. If you say No, then he will explain that it is a bad hotel with a bad reputation. And of course, the driver knows of a better hotel in a great location, owned by his brother. The driver gets a commission for bringing people to the hotel. The advice is to keep saying "no thank you. Just

take me to the hotel that I have booked”. If the driver persists, suggest that you will get out of the taxi right there—so he has a choice to take you where you want to go or lose the fare.

16) Setting the Taxi Meter

You hail a taxi and speed off to your destination. After a few minutes, you notice that the Taxi Meter has already racked up \$10.00 in charges, when you have not even traveled one mile. You point this out to the driver, who pretends not to know what you are talking about. You point to the meter and all he says back to you is “Yes, Taxi Meter”! After several back and forth attempts to have the meter re-set to “0”, as it should have been when you entered the taxi, tell the driver to stop, and signal that you will get out right then and there. Chances are the driver’s understanding of English will improve and he will set the meter properly.

And a note on taxi meters. In many countries, drivers negotiate a fare with a client—before the client gets into the taxi. Meters are not used. Make sure you agree on the fare before getting into a taxi or you will get a big surprise when you arrive at the destination. It is ok to do some research. Ask at the hotel what you can expect to pay—or ask a few different drivers—to get an idea of the approximate cost. If the driver can write down the agreed-upon fare, then you have something to show him if, when you get to the destination, he changes his mind and wants a different fare.

17) Luggage in the Boot

Your luggage will not fit into the trunk (the boot) of the taxi, and while it **could** fit into the back seat, the driver insists on lowering the trunk hood and tying it down with a rope or string, for the drive from the airport to the hotel. Once he leaves the airport, the driver seems pre-occupied on his cell phone—but you don’t understand the language. Once in the city. The driver stops at a red light and out of nowhere, a man runs up to the car, snips the rope holding the hood down, and runs off with your luggage. The driver pretends to be outraged and he yells and screams but nothing comes of this. He offers to drive you to the police, but you are probably very upset and want to go to the hotel to see if they can provide any assistance in your own language. Was this a scam? Most likely yes. It all happened a bit too conveniently to be just a routine robbery. If your luggage does not fit in the taxi you can always look for a larger taxi. If the driver has to tie your luggage into the trunk or on the roof, make sure it is a good rope, tied securely. Also, taking a photo of the taxi with the luggage already tied down, usually discourages the driver from perpetrating any scams.

18) Crumpled Up change

The taxi driver sees that you are in a hurry, so he gets you to the airport as quickly as possible. He walks outside to take your luggage from the trunk—you pay him and he starts rummaging around for change. He will either delay so much that you will tell him to ‘keep the change’ or he will find some crumpled bills in his pocket and press them into your hand and advise you to ‘hurry to catch your flight—have a safe trip home’. You stuff the bills in your pocket and after you check-in for your flight—you unfold the bills, only to discover that the driver helped himself to an even larger tip than the one you thought you were giving him.

Airport Scams

Airports are generally associated with travellers, but they can also be hang-outs for scam artists. Watch out for some of these scams.

19) Got the time?

The kids need to go to the washroom so you agree that your spouse will take them and you will watch the luggage. You are surrounded on all sides by the suitcases—with you in the middle. Someone comes up to you and asks you for the time. You tell them. They walk away—and you notice that one of your suitcases is missing. This scenario took place in about 15 seconds. Scam artist #1 distracted you by asking for the time...Scam artist #2 made sure he/she was behind you and quickly grabbed a bag.

20) You watch my bags, I'll watch yours

You are in the airport lounge and one person strikes up a conversation with you. It is a nice way to pass the time. At some point in the conversation, the person says they need to use the washroom, so would you mind watching their bags for them. You agree. A few minutes later they return and tell you that they will watch your bags if you need to use the washroom. You take advantage of the offer. But when you return—there is no person and no luggage. This was a set-up to steal your luggage with the hope that there was something valuable inside. The lesson? Take your bags with you and don't trust someone you may have only known for 15 minutes.

21) Playing 'Hooky' in the airport

You decide to say goodbye to your loved ones before going through security. There is a bank of telephones nearby so you set your laptop bag by your feet and proceed to make the phone call. When you hang up, you bend down to pick up your laptop bag and it is gone! What happened—did it just walk away? Well almost. Someone did some pre-planning. They took a car antenna or a hanger and bent it so that one end resembled a hook. Then they waited for a traveller, with some 'interesting looking luggage' (such as a laptop bag) to use the phone. They were on the back side of the phone bank—you were on the front side. They hooked the antenna or hanger around the handle of your bag—very quietly and carefully—and then dragged your bag across the floor or rug to the other side of the phone bank—and then quickly walked away. People who saw this nearby assumed that this person was your friend and was playing a cute trick on you. The lesson? Don't just 'watch' your bag in an airport...tie it to you with a string or rope or kerchief—or literally stand on part of the bag—so that if anyone tries to 'hook' it away from you, you will notice!

22) Here's my passport!

Even when you finally get seated on the airplane, there is no guarantee that you left the scam artists and thieves behind. With new security regulations, often times you have to show your passport when you board the flight. For many people this means that they will carry their passport onto the plane and then put it away, once they are seated. This should always be done discreetly. Prying eyes may be watching where you put your passport and then, when you get up to use the washroom, someone may help themselves to your passport. Stolen Canadian passports still command a high price on the black market.

23) Filling out the forms

At some point during the flight—if you are traveling to another country—the flight attendant will distribute the arrival cards (landing card or immigration card or customs declaration). You should be very discreet when you fill in the information and when you take out your passport to complete the forms. Many travellers fill out the forms and then keep them in the seat compartment in front of them. In fact, they are leaving enough information for someone to either assume their identity or know where the traveller is staying in order to take advantage of them

later one. You usually have to list your full name and passport number and date of birth and married status, and the address where you are staying. Some forms even ask you to state the amount of money you have with you. Unless you want your seat mate to know all this information, safeguard these documents at all times. The term "shoulder-surfers" refers to people who strain their neck to look over your shoulder to obtain your personal information.

24) Take your bags for you, Sir?

You arrive at the airport and someone who looks like an airport luggage porter asks you if they can help with your bags. You turn your bags over to the person and tell him/her that you will meet him upstairs at the Airline check-in. When you get there, there is no porter—and no suitcases. Not a nice way to start your holiday. The scammer in this case was a thief who dressed to resemble a porter. While most porters have name tags or other official airport identification, you were in a hurry to get rid of the luggage so you just gave it to the first person who presented himself to you. It is always a good idea to accompany anyone carrying your bags. That way you are certain that they will get to the airline check-in counter with you.

Foreign Exchange Scams

25) Foreign Exchange Charges

You are in a strange city and you see lots of storefront establishments advertising "Foreign Exchange". The front window is adorned by an Exchange rate chart where the world currency rates are displayed in bold, red, neon letters. You plunk down your American Dollars, the clerk asks you to sign for the exchange, then you receive your Canadian currency. But, what's this, you didn't get as much as the chart in the window indicated. In fact, you have been "dinged" for an extra 10% on top of the exchange rate, You go back to the counter and bring this to the clerk's attention. He/She points to a sign indicating that an exchange commission or surcharge is deducted from the total amount. At this point you feel that you have been more than ripped off, so you say, "Forget it! Give me my money back and I'll go to the bank next door". The clerk points to your signature and then to a small note on the back of the receipt that says "Absolutely No Refunds". You are stuck. You've lost a lot of money and you only have yourself to blame.

If you choose to exchange at a storefront shop, rather than an official exchange bureau or bank, be very careful and ask about fees, commissions and surcharges before you hand over your money, and definitely before you sign anything. If you are unsure about which establishments are legitimate and which are not, then 1) consult a guide book on the country or city 2) ask at a tourist information booth 3) just go to a bank.

In a similar vein....Some merchants will accept a debit card and, as an extra bonus, they will allow you a cash advance from their cash register till. When in a foreign country, make absolute certain you know the exchange rate beforehand, or you could be at both a loss of words, and a loss of cash. Example? When the Canadian-American exchange rate was at a high of 42%, some merchants were advertising that they would offer a 25% exchange rate. That means they took the lower exchanged dollars to the bank, received the legitimate exchange rate, and pocketed 17% commission on every dollar. Hmmm!

Not a scam but a word of caution:

When travelling abroad, you should take the time to research exchange rates. You may find that your hotel will exchange money, but that the exchange rate is significantly higher than the official rate of exchange. In addition, the hotel may have a surcharge for their service. You could lose a lot of spending money on the transaction.

Sometimes, desperation sets in. It is after banking hours; you have run out of cash and the hotel is the only source. If this is the case, only exchange enough money to see you through, until you have a chance to go to the bank.

26) Prestidigitation on Tour

“Prestidigitation” = Noun: another name for sleight of hand, from the French, *preste*, meaning “nimble” and the Latin *digitus*, meaning “finger”. Used to refer to the quick fingered feats of magicians and illusionists. Also refers to the almost impossible-to-detect manipulation of currency by some legal and illegal money changers.

Scenario 1: You are in a foreign country. You pass over your currency at a money changing booth and the clerk counts it. Everything is fine. He then counts out the money he is giving to you. He looks satisfied and then counts it again so that you can clearly see the bills. You take the money, put it in a safe place and leave the booth. Later on you count it out and, presto, you are many bills short of the amount that you should have—and the amount that was counted out to you.

Scenario 2: You hand your money to the clerk, and he counts the exchanged local currency right in front of your eyes. The amount is incorrect. He counts it again and verifies that it is *not* the correct amount. He takes more bills out of a drawer and adds them to the bundle to make up the difference in the amount he owes you. Satisfied that you have been dealt with in an honest manner, you stash the bills and go about your business. Later on, you count the bills and, like magic, there are a number of bills missing.

What is the secret of the trick? Simple. The money changer was very deft at manipulating the bills, just like a card-shark can pull the Ace from the bottom of the deck. In Scenario #1, he counted the money in front of you but while you were watching the top bills, he was pocketing some of the bottom bills. In Scenario #2, the moneychanger was fully taking advantage of your unfamiliarity with foreign currency, as well as your gullibility at having additional bills added to the pile. All the time, the moneychanger was pocketing bills that were not in front of your eyes. He basically made you feel silly or embarrassed to count them again, after such an obvious show of how many bills you were getting.

In both cases, you cannot return to the moneychanger because once you have left the counter, you no longer have a case to dispute. He could accuse you of pocketing the money yourself, so any afterthoughts are useless.

What should you have done? You should have counted the money in front of the moneychanger. It doesn't matter how many times he counted it in front of your eyes; it doesn't matter how long the line-up is behind you: it doesn't matter how many people groan and “tsk” and try to make you feel guilty for monopolizing time at the counter. It is your money—so count it out. Don't move to the side so that someone else can change their money while you count—do it right there in front of the moneychanger. If there is a problem, deal with it right then and there. If a dispute arises, call the manager. If a further dispute arises, ask the manager to summon the tourist police.

27) Foreign Currency Follies

When we talk about a self-imposed scam, we are referring to a situation where someone takes advantage of you, but at the same time, due to your own ignorance or lack of preparation, you fall an easy victim to their manipulative ways. Here are some examples of Self-imposed scams...

A traveller arrives in the city after a 10 hour flight. Tired and disoriented, the taxi arrives at the hotel. The taxi fare is 2.4 Dinars—approximately \$2.50 Canadian. The fare meter displays this in a confusing way, and seems to indicate 24.00 Dinar (\$25.00 Dollars). The traveller is confused and hands the driver 30 Dinars and receives 6 Dinars in change. The taxi driver beats a hasty

departure from the hotel as the traveller is contemplating what has just transpired. He has, in effect, just paid \$22.50 more than the actual fare.

A tourist wants to purchase some delicious tasting hot sauce served in most of the local restaurants. The man in the spice shop points to some crushed chili peppers (the kind you see in many Italian restaurants) and insists that this is what the restaurants serve. He further claims that while stores sell the “special” chilies for 25 Dinars for 100 grams, he can offer it to you for only 20 Dinars per 100 grams. (this is \$20.00 Canadian for roughly 35 cents worth of crushed chilies). The tourist is unsure of the value of the local currency and naïve about having to bargain for prices. He readily agrees to the discount.

The lesson here? Do your research. Purchase some currency at home so that you can begin to familiarize yourself with it. Or look up the currency in a guidebook—or even look for the many Internet sites that display the actual currency of a country.

Secondly, figure out a general rule to help you calculate the exchange rate in your home currency. Don't worry about every penny—just arrive at a simple formula e.g. (1 Dinar = 1 Dollar, or 1 Dinar= ½ dollar etc) so that you have an idea of what you are spending. Many people will bring a small calculator with them so that if their judgment is clouded, at least they will have an accurate calculation to bring them back to reality.

Don't become a victim of your own lack of research. Avoid scamming yourself!

General Scams

28) The Phony Manager Routine

You check into your hotel room, only to receive a phone call several minutes later. The caller identifies himself as the Front Desk Manager and tells you that your credit card was rejected and that if you can read out the number, he will process it for you. He also apologizes for any inconvenience. You give him the number. Several weeks later when you receive your credit card statement, you notice that there are a lot of charges that you did not make. What happened? A scam artist followed you discreetly to your room. Once inside, he went downstairs to use the house phone to dial your room number. He pretended to be the Manager in order to get your credit card information and then went on a spending spree. The lesson? If someone in a hotel calls to ask for any personal information (which they very rarely do), either go down to the front desk or request that the manager come to your room with proper identification to get the information. Don't just give it to a voice on the phone.

29) Buying your Free Ticket

Many cities have tourist attractions that are absolutely free to visit. But some travellers don't do their homework so they don't know this. For instance, in Washington DC, you can visit the Washington Monument for free, but you have to obtain a ticket first. Some scam artists take advantage of this and pre-print their own tickets. They convince you that not only can you buy your ticket from them at a discount (!) but that they will make sure you get a spot at the front of the line. Those who have been to the Washington Monument know that there is no priority 'front of the line'. You line up and wait your turn to visit just like everyone else. Tell your travel counsellor about the sights you wish to visit when you travel and he/she will give you proper advice on how to go about visiting, and any rules or details you should know. This information is also available in guide books and on the internet

30) The Key to a good Scam

Scam artists sometimes disguise themselves as “Good Samaritans”. You are in a train station or bus station or an airport. You have lots of parcels and luggage and you have several hours before your departure time. You decide to use a locker to store your goods. As you are struggling to keep everything in view, a kindly person offers to open the locker for you and help you with your goods. He/she ensures that everything fits in properly, closes the door, gives you the key, bids you a fond farewell and disappears. “What a great city”, you say to yourself, “and such friendly people too”. Three hours later you hear the departure announcement. 1) You go to the locker but the key doesn’t fit or 2) The locker is open and empty, or 3) The locker is locked and you don’t know that it has been emptied.

What happened here? The kindly stranger who helped you switched the key as soon as he locked the locker door. You did not notice this. When you check the locker number with the key number, you notice that the key has a different number—or no number—but you discover this just as you need to retrieve your valuables. And where are your valuables? Probably long gone. While you were whiling away time—with your valuables securely stowed in the locker, the scam artist returned and took possession of your goods. In some cases, he locked the locker so that you would spend time having it opened, only to discover that it was empty—and of course this gives the scam artist even more time to flee the area.

The lesson: Stay in control of your valuables. Don’t allow others, no matter how kindly they appear, to be in contact with anything that is important to your safety and security. Thank them and tell them you will manage by yourself. If they become persistent, then walk away. If you really need help, ask one of the official staff—a “red cap” or “bell boy”—to help you. This is how they earn their living. Still, you be the one who takes the locker key. Keep the key in your hand until you are out of viewing range of other people in the terminal or station. You don’t want them to know where you have hidden it.

31) Water-based Scams

When the rain clouds appear, some scam artists start to shower unsuspecting travellers with all sorts of tricks to confound, confuse, and ultimately, to separate them from their valuable possessions. Here are a few.

The Big Splash: The scam artist positions himself by a large puddle. You drive by in your rental car and unintentionally splash the person, who then chases you to the stop sign a few meters away. In loud and stressful tones, the scammer points to his ruined clothing and demands payment on the spot. The traveller usually pays to get out of the situation.

The Reverse Big Splash: The Scam artist is driving and picks out a large puddle to splash a tourist carrying some parcels. Once the tourist is drenched, the driver stops the car and runs out, full of apologies and regret. In his "sincere" attempt to help the tourist dry off, the scam artist usually pockets a wallet here, a camera there, and even some parcels, if the tourist is not paying attention, or very distraught at being soaked.

The Hotel Umbrella: Many hotels provide complimentary umbrellas to their guests on rainy days. To prevent loss and theft, the hotel has their name emblazoned on the umbrella. When a tourist uses this umbrella, they are a walking advertisement that they are, in fact, a tourist, and therefore a target. Bring a foldable no-name umbrella with you as part of your travel baggage. Don't give scam artists an advantage.

Umbrella Deflation: Distraction scams work. You are walking along the street in the rain, under your umbrella. A woman runs up to you, grabs the umbrella handle and clicks the button that

causes the umbrella to fold up. But it folds up around your head! Momentarily distracted, the scam artist grabs what she can and runs away.

32) The Milk Scam

Not every scam is malicious in nature. Some are done so gently and friendly that, in the end, you don't feel so bad for having been involved in it at all.

You are in a foreign country, visiting an historic attraction, when a young man approaches. In my case, he said he was 11 years old and told me his name was Dewa. He struck up a rapport, asking me which country I came from and then asking if he could be my tour guide. To prove that he 'knew his stuff', he started to rhyme off the dates and names of all the temples in the area. I checked my guide book, and Dewa was correct in every instance. I asked how much money he wanted to be a tour guide and he gave a figure—equivalent to about \$2.00 Canadian. So I agreed and we had a nice 30 minute tour of the area. At the end, I thanked him and was ready to give him some money and a small tip, but he said that he did not want the money because "the older boys" would steal it from him. Instead, he asked if I could buy a box of powdered milk for him to bring home to his family. I thought this was a very touching idea—so I agreed. We went to a local grocery store and Dewa pointed to a box of milk—and then asked if I could buy him 2 boxes. Again, in the spirit of doing something nice, I agreed. The cost was a bit high—close to \$12.00 for the two boxes. Dewa quickly thanked me and ran off.

In speaking with some other travellers later in the day, we discovered that the "Milk" routine had been used on all of us. What happens is that the store owner is in partnership with the young tour guide. The guide's job is to get the tourist to pay for the milk. Later on, the guide brings the milk back and the store owner gives him \$1.00-\$2.00 for it. The store owner makes money, the tour guide makes money, the tourist (assuming he does not find out how the scam works) feels good. So in the long run, no one really gets hurt.

33) Street games

Gambling scams are particularly suited to travellers who feel that they are in a foreign country and thus they are superior in intellect and can beat the odds and impress the locals. WRONG
Or, they feel they could use some "easy" money and it looks so simple to win. WRONG
Or, they feel that their years of going on Atlantic City and Las Vegas junkets have prepared them for anything they might encounter and besides, this is just a silly street game and everyone is laughing and having a good time. WRONG
Or, they are certain that in the game where you have to guess under which of the three cups a small ball or pea is located, that they absolutely know under which cup that pea is located because they have been right every time so far. WRONG
Or, they feel that because they are on vacation, they can throw caution to the wind. WRONG again!

Street gambling can include any number of games at which you will lose. Dice (craps), 3-Card Monty (under which cup is the pea located), animal races (mice, rats, crickets, turtles), animal fights (cock fights, dogfights), cards, darts, chess, checkers and more. Oh, don't worry, you will win once or twice and you may even win a large amount of money—before the compliments appear and the bet is exponentially increased. Then you will lose (assuming you haven't been pick-pocketed while your attention is on the game), and you'll lose big because you won't have money left to pay your debt. You're in a foreign country where you may not speak the language and all of a sudden, the crowd around you is not smiling and laughing.

If you do get mixed up in a gambling scam, pay your debt and get out of there fast. You have willingly entered into a dangerous situation. In some countries it is against the law and severe punishments prevail. If you bring out your wallet to pay your debt, people in the crowd will see how much money you have—or see how many credit cards you own. They may follow you to

your hotel; they may compromise your safety and the further enjoyment of your holiday. In other words, avoid the whole scenario. It is simply not worth it.

34) Toes on the bus

Taking a local bus in a foreign destination can be an exciting experience. You get to see the world as the locals see it. It may be a bit crowded or bumpy. You may get some surprises, as I did, when on a local bus in Mombassa, a chicken decided to nest on my feet during the trip into town. Chances are you will be the only foreigner on the bus...a situation that some travellers relish. At the same time, some locals may see you as a target. But you are clever and you watch your possessions very carefully.

The man next to you tells you that you look uncomfortable with your small backpack on your knees and he suggests you put it under the seat. He advises that you keep it between your feet as a precaution. This seems to make sense so you do exactly that. When you arrive at your stop, you grab your bag, jump off the bus, go to retrieve your camera and it is gone! In fact, the new jacket you bought for the trip is gone too. How could this theft have taken place?

The long and short of it is...you were set up by two scam artists. The one next to you had the task of convincing you to put the bag on the floor of the bus and then to distract you by chatting with you. The second scam artist sat in the seat directly behind you. She kicked off her sandals, and then, using her toes, she undid the zipper of your backpack, and went searching inside, with a fine-tuned facility, and discovered your camera and your jacket. She removed these items, zipped up the bag and you had no clue what was going on. Any little movements you did feel, you assumed were all due to the natural jostling and bumpiness of the bus ride.

Don't allow a total stranger to dictate how you should best protect your valuable possessions. Adopt your own code of travel common sense and stick to it. When someone wants to put their best foot forward, make sure it isn't for the purpose of stealing your possessions.

35) Tie One on when you travel

In some cultures, it is important to receive a religious blessing prior to departing on a trip. In these cultures, a simple string, or strings, tied around the wrist--or on each wrist--indicates that the person has received a blessing of good luck, safe health and safe return from loved ones.

Travellers, who don't do their research into the culture of other countries, think it is fun to have a string on their wrist and this will make them blend in more with the locals. Local scam artists know this and will take full advantage.

The scenario: A local young girl approaches a tourist couple in a popular city square. She asks if the woman would like a string for good luck. The woman agrees and asks the price. The girl tells her there is no charge--it is a local custom. The girl ties a bright red string around one wrist and then proceeds to tie the other wrist too--saying that she will cut the string between the wrists as soon as she is finished. The girl finishes, the woman's wrists are tied up--the child grabs the woman's purse or camera and darts off in the crowd. The husband stands by--wondering whether to chase the thief and leave his wife tied up. Decisions....decisions...

36) Picture this!

1) A couple is standing by a famous attraction. As you approach they ask if you would take their photo for them. They hand you two cameras (sometimes three) which makes it very difficult for you to hold on to your own camera or travel bag or rucksack--so you put it down briefly. You then start focussing to take the couple's photo, when all of a sudden a 3rd person dashes out of nowhere, grabs your bag and disappears into the crowd. The couple pretends to be horrified. Before you run after your bag, you must first disentangle yourself from the two or three cameras

around your neck. This gives their partner--the runaway thief-- a few more precious seconds to make his getaway.

Comments? a) Be in control of your possessions at all times. b) If you are the victim of a robbery, it is not recommended that you try to chase down the thief c) Your travel common sense should tell you not to have a lot of valuables with you in the first place--they should be in the hotel safe.

37) Are Scammers dogging your travels?

A man with a beautiful dog is hanging out in a tourist area. Inevitably, a couple approaches and asks to pet the dog. The dog is friendly, and the owner explains that it is an expensive purebred animal. The man then looks at his watch and asks if the tourists would mind watching the dog for 10 minutes while he runs around the corner to see if he can find his lost wallet. The couple agrees.

A few minutes later, a woman approaches. She admires the dog and identifies it as an expensive pure bred--and even asks if it is for sale. The tourists explain that it is not their pet, but the stranger persists and offers the equivalent of \$500.00 US in the local currency. The tourists repeat that it is not their dog to sell. The stranger gives them her business card--just in case--and walks away.

A few minutes later, the dejected -looking owner of the dog returns and says that his wallet must be lost for good. He says that he had to pay off a gambling debt and now he will be in big trouble. He asks the tourists if they would consider purchasing the dog. They decide that they can take advantage of the situation by paying for the dog and then selling it at a higher price to the woman who gave them her business card.

They settle on a price of \$200.00 US. But we all know the outcome. The man walks away with \$200.00. The dog was stolen in the first place so the man did not lose anything. The woman with the business card was the man's partner. When the tourists phone the woman, they discover that the number is out-of-order. They are stuck with a mutt that they can't even take into the hotel with them--and they are out \$200.00.

Don't invite scams by thinking that YOU can take advantage of someone else's bad situation. You are dealing with professional scam artists. Your mistake will hound you for the rest of your vacation.

38) The Disappearing Card Trick

This is a clever scam that can be carried out by one person, or a few, or a crowd. You are confronted by one or two people, who want to walk with you to befriend you, or practice their English or sell you something. They tend to be very "touchy-feely" which tends to de-sensitize you somewhat, as to what they might really be up to. Once you finally go your separate ways, you check for your wallet--and it is there--so you think that maybe these people were legitimately nice and friendly locals who simply wanted to chat to the tourist.

The trouble is that they DID take your wallet, they took out your Gold Credit Card or some money, but then they put it back in your pocket or purse. Impossible you say? But it is true. You did not suspect a thing, they had lots of time to "get away" with the crime, and by the time you discovered your missing card, the culprits have had time to charge some nice purchases to your account.

Comment: Secure your valuables in a place where they will not be accessible to prying eyes and prying hands. Don't entrust them to a waist pouch or a knapsack or a purse or a back pocket. Secure them in a hidden place where it is difficult to find. Carry some loose cash with you so

that every time you want to buy something, you don't have to dig into your hiding place to find money.

39) Why did they only steal my Drivers License?

"Whew! All my money and credit cards were intact when the policeman returned my wallet. All that the crooks stole was my driver's license—and I can get another when I go home in two weeks. Besides, the crooks are not going to fly to Toronto just to rob my house."

Here is the scenario that follows...

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith, I have a collect call from Franistan. Will you accept the charges?"

"Of course" (thinking it must be their son John—who is travelling in that country).

"Mrs. Smith, this is Sergeant Rojo of the police. Your son John was involved in an incident last night and cannot pay the \$1000.00 damage. I was going to keep him locked up but he asked me to call you for the money. I will let him go if you are able to wire me the money today or put it on a credit card."

What do you do now? You are thousands of miles away. You try to ask questions but the person calling you is giving you pretty scanty information as to what the "incident" was or where John is now. You don't know what to think.

If this happens to you, you probably will want some time to think it over, and therefore you will want to get as much information from the caller as possible. You will then want to call the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ottawa. They will get involved in trying to ascertain whether the story is true, where the traveller is located and how to resolve the situation. Panic and payment by you is not the best solution, even if the story is true.

One idea is to establish a code word with the person travelling. Let us say the code word is their middle name, or the name of a pet. If you hear that word, at least you know that your loved one has given this information. If not, you might be suspicious. Also, insist that the traveller call or fax or e-mail if any personal documentation is stolen or lost—so at least you are informed. Also the traveller should leave some sort of itinerary of their travels, so that you are aware of where they should be, according to their initial plans.

Variations: Quite often when you involve yourself in activities, you are required to fill in certain information. Perhaps it is your home address and phone number, maybe they ask for your next of kin or emergency contact. This could be a sincere procedure on behalf of the travel supplier before you embark on a boat trip or a scuba diving class or a ski lesson or a gondola ride! But this may be all the information the scam artist requires to begin the dastardly deed of scamming your family, half a world away.

40) Give me all your personal information and I will give you nothing!

"You've just won a" Does this sound familiar? Has it happened to you?

Some people think they can get "something" for "nothing". Despite television and radio news of people "being taken"; despite the newspaper articles of people losing a fortune, it seems that when some people are presented with the "Congratulations you've just won..." routine, they turn into gullible, credit card-wielding innocents.

Think of it this way. Suppose you were walking down the street and a total stranger asked you for your name, your address, your phone number and your salary bracket. Would you tell him/her? (If you answered "Yes" then nothing in this article will be of help to you.)

Well, why is it any different when someone you don't know asks you over the phone for this information? Or, to bring it closer to home, this is what happens when you fill out a ballot at a consumer travel show that seems to promise great travel prizes. In almost 100% of the cases, the ballot contains no information about who is sponsoring the Draw to win the prizes. The ballots simply have lines on them asking for your personal information—which you then deposit in the ballot box. Now someone knows a lot about **you**—including, of course, your contact information—and you have no idea to whom you have given this personal information.

As far as travel suppliers go—you might want to ask why they would not want to plaster their name all over the contest booth and the ballot—in order to get the publicity. The answer is that many of these blank ballots originate with companies selling condos, time-shares and other products that have nothing to do with travel. Inevitably, you will get mail and phone calls and perhaps even emails from a whole group of companies who have purchased your information, all pestering you to send money for this, that and the other.

Let's analyze some key words you may hear in the context of marketing scams where consumers think they can do nothing and win big.

1) Many ads use words such as "easy", for example "easy to use", "easy to fill out" and how many TV commercials use the line "just three easy payments of ...".

By saying "just", they are patronizing you to imply that it involves one simple procedure, and by saying "easy", they are implying that even YOU have the intelligence to fill out the ballot or make the payments. Not very kind of them, but it works and many people are lured into thinking that they should immediately fill in the form or call to arrange payments (at least until they add it up or get the first of many invoices for payment). Moreover, the "easy" message is manipulative as it is meant to cajole the "victim" into a sense of fun and convenience. The message is "Do nothing and win big" or "do little, pay little, and receive this great product or service". Not very believable to some, but very credible to others.

2) Many times when you think you are filling out a ballot for a draw for a fabulous vacation, the ballot actually uses the words "Vacation Request Form". However, no vacations are listed, no vacation choices are requested **from** you, and therefore there is "nothing" for you to request. Secondly, even if you were paying money for a ballot with the hope of winning a vacation, this form is not **"for"** a vacation but simply to **"request"** a vacation. Strange way to go on a dream trip, isn't it?

3) Sometimes, 'Free' vacations ask you for money. Huh? If the vacation is "Free", why do you need to pay? Some call this a "registration" or "administration" fee. Many would call this a quick way to get your money. Some ask for your credit card so that you don't have to be inconvenienced (in the spirit of an "easy deposit payment") Many would just call this "a quick grab". You may or many never see this 'free' vacation materialize.

Consumers need to look at where they are sending their money for this "free" vacation? In many cases, you're sending it to a Post Office Box. Do you have the name of someone at the company? No. Do you have a proper street address? No. Just a very impersonal and near impossible to trace, box number.

As usual, the information required to "register" for a "free vacation" includes your name and address although the company is not giving you theirs; your phone number, although the company is not giving you theirs, and your age and salary range, all of which is totally irrelevant to the booking. They want it because if your salary bracket is not large enough, you will not qualify for the free vacation. If you are female, the company may ask if you are married (which is

none of their business) and that you must involve your spouse in any decisions made (which is rude and insulting).

The lesson through all this is to be very sceptical. Resist the temptation to earn something "free" when you have done nothing toward qualifying for that "free" offer. If you are very set on following through with this offer, at least solicit the advice of a few friends or travel professionals. Call the Better Business Bureau in the Province or State in which the company claims to reside. (Will you spend \$5.00 to check out the company or will you just give them your credit card, which is tantamount to handing them a blank cheque? Many people would rather just do the latter than invest the \$5.00!)

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Consult the National Directory of Certified Travel Professionals for a CTC or CTM nearest to you.

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