



Even a well-travelled tourist can fall victim to crime. Don't make the same mistake...

# Travel Alert

**W**hear that Costa Rica is dangerous," my friend warned as I prepared to head west after nearly four years in Asia, India and the Middle East.

"Nah," I protested in defence of this small, peaceful nation with no military presence and an enviable 93 per cent literacy rate. "It's a major tourist destination full of expats."

But truth be told, this eco-tourism paradise that attracts more than one million visitors annually is experiencing an alarming rise in crime, and, as my friend prophesied, it can indeed be a dangerous place. I learnt that first-hand on my second day there, when I was robbed at a small bus station in Limon (on the Caribbean coast) with two travelling companions nearby. Gone like the wind were my passport, credit and ATM cards, cash, camera and,

most tragic for this freelance journalist, my laptop containing writing and photographs documenting years' worth of global wanderings. It happened quickly, and despite a station full of witnesses, no one saw a thing, including the people who were guarding my day pack. Within two hours, the thieves had greedily exploited the illicit credit card, spending over \$2,000 (JD1,500) at shops in Cartago and San José before their last attempt was foiled.

"They can be identified," I insisted to the investigator taking my report in San José, Costa Rica's capital.

"There are procedures, and we can't begin the investigation until Monday," recited the listless public servant.

"But it'll be too late by then!" I cried.

"Well, that's our policy," she yawned and told me to call the

Limon office in two days.

When I did, I spoke to an officer named Tony at least five times. But when I called again a few days later, I was told that Tony did not exist. Was he a phantom? Did I imagine conversing with a man who promised to prowl Limon's black market in search of my laptop? Did I further imagine possessing three copies of the police report, replete with case number and contact information, proffered by the English-speaking investigator in San José, one Monge Palma Rafael Angel, after our hour-long meeting?

Even the representatives at my country's embassy in San José proved to be, shall we say, lethargic as repeated requests for counsel with the security advisor went unheeded and a promised 15-minute wait for the passport ballooned into a

three-hour ordeal for myself and four other Americans whose documents had also been stolen in recent days.

As a fairly diligent, resourceful person (and perhaps incited by my journalistic instincts and years of watching bad cop shows), I embarked on my own investigation, focusing on La Cueva, San José's hotbed of second hand and reportedly stolen goods.

"*Muy peligroso* (very dangerous)," I was told, as I headed there alone to inquire about laptops. I found a few, a Mac Powerbook and one or two others, but no Averatec. Then one guy asked what I was looking for, and I opted to answer honestly.

"My laptop," I declared. Seemingly sympathetic, he promised to sniff around the street-level underground enclave, but a month later, I am still a computer-less crime victim no closer to retribution than I was the day the keystone cops in Limon stood idly by in a bus station where, shockingly, no one saw a thing. Now I must accept that the past is gone, my work is history and the slate has been irrevocably cleaned. I choose to view this as a symbolic new beginning; a rebirth, so to speak. When one door closes, another one opens. That sort of thing.

Although I'm an experienced world traveller, I still fall prey to the invisible hazards of life on the road. No one is immune to these potential threats, but this should not deter us from partaking in this most enriching and rewarding pursuit, for travelling beyond the comfort zone of home can be a mind-expanding, and sometimes life-altering, experience.

Obviously, some countries

are more crime-ridden than others, and some are more hazardous to female travellers. But generally, wherever there are tourists, there are thieves and scams. Since foreigners are assumed to be "rich" (after all, we can afford to take a vacation!), we therefore provide fair targets for the underprivileged and desperate in developing world nations where the polarity between wealth and poverty is most glaring. And unfortunately, it is a reality that women are more vulnerable to crime and unwanted attention than our male counterparts, with sexual harassment, physical assault, inappropriate comments, crude propositions, groping and even rape all being potential risks. But

no need to be paranoid; just aware. And prepared.

There are some basic rules to help keep you safe and crime-retardant while getting the most out of your travel experience. For specific information or warnings about your intended destination, talk to other travellers, refer to a guidebook and trail the Internet, where numerous websites addressing safety and health issues for all travellers (including those with special needs) provide a wealth of information. In addition, up-to-date travel advisories are posted on the US Department of State's website. Below are some safety tips to help ensure a fabulous vacation. Pack these along with your sunscreen!

- Before you travel, research your intended destination to determine potential risks.
- Carry travel insurance to cover potential losses.
- Photocopy important documents and separate them from originals. When taking day trips, leave your passport, airline tickets and other valuables in a locked safe at your hotel.
- Carry traveller's cheques instead of large amounts of cash.
- Separate credit and ATM cards, cash and other valuables in your luggage.
- Carry cash hidden in a money belt worn beneath clothing, or, since many thieves are now hip to money belts, sew a hidden pocket in your bra where you can hide cash.
- Carry a dummy wallet with a little cash to hand over in the event of a mugging.
- If mugged, do not resist.
- Carry a purse under your arm, and never put down bags unattended. If you must leave a bag, make sure your travelling companion knows he or she should keep an eye on it.

- Let your hotel or embassy know where you're going if you plan to venture off the beaten track.
- Don't wander alone down empty city streets or in isolated areas, particularly at night.
- Don't be obvious when consulting a map, and try to know beforehand where you're headed. Looking like a lost tourist is a calling card for thieves.
- If travelling on overnight trains or buses, lock your luggage and affix it to your seat or a nearby pole with a chain and lock.
- Don't draw unnecessary attention to yourself. Dress conservatively and with respect for the culture.
- Leave flashy or expensive jewellery at home.
- Don't share your travel plans with strangers.
- Use ATM machines during the day if possible, when others are around.
- Don't accept gifts or packages from strangers.
- Don't accept drinks or food from strangers.
- Be especially alert in crowded areas such as trains, bus stations and markets and during street celebrations.