

28) HOLIDAYS ABROAD - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

Most of our family live in Connecticut and Massachusetts, and on one holiday we were accompanied by my mother-in-law, who had formerly lived there for many years. I happened to be reading the stateside equivalent of The Groat and my attention was drawn to an article from the Police Department who were fundraising for local charities. It transpired that if one phoned them up and pledged \$50 then they would “arrest” anyone you wished and place them in a lockup in the courthouse where they would be issued with a telephone and told to raise as much as they could in “bail” money before release. I looked contemplatively at MIL, who was happily stirring a cauldron, and in due course a cruiser with two State Troopers aboard turned up and MIL was busted on a charge of overbearing conduct towards yours truly and given a very fetching smock to wear, covered in arrows. She was then carted off in cuffs. Yes, I am aware that many men are now reading this with envy so please continue to the end. There is more.

Soon it will be holiday season and I know that I have talked about this before, but perhaps it would be worth taking a slightly different approach by going over the basic ways to protect ourselves when having the annual break from the 9-5 (or 7 to 7 in my case).

So let's start with the destination. We tend nowadays to head for all kinds of “exotic” locations and there are consequent risks both in relation to health and to personal safety. The first port of call should always be GOV.UK Foreign Travel Advice where you can check each and every country for safety and security and – most importantly – health advice. It is all too easy to assume that everywhere is sanitised these days, but that is not the case. As an example here is HMG's advice about visiting Argentina – they mention that there is a risk of Zika virus transmission, Dengue Fever outbreaks have been reported in the northern provinces and vaccination against Yellow Fever is recommended. Bag-snatching and distraction thefts are also common (more about these later) and – as Jeremy Clarkson discovered whilst driving the infamous Porsche with the purely coincidental but slightly unfortunate registration number through the country – there are some political sensibilities which one would do well to bear in mind. On the other hand the advice about visiting Spain simply points out that, in common with many countries, including the UK, there is the usual general need to be vigilant as regards terrorism threats and to watch out for pickpockets and thieves, particularly in airport areas. It also stresses that the Spanish Police and authorities are taking a firm line on anti-social behaviour so one should be able to enjoy oneself without too much annoyance from the usual suspects. Another popular destination is Turkey and HMG point out that huge numbers of people visit every year without incident, but strongly advise against going near the Syrian

border. This is excellent advice as mortar rounds do tend to have a disconcerting habit of disrupting your day. There is also a high threat of terrorism. The point to bear in mind of course is that the terrorism threat in the UK is classed as “Severe” and the risk of street crime is notable in our own cities, and yet we all get on with it – and if we travel abroad then we just need to be aware and take sensible steps.

So, destination picked and off we go. It is always wise to listen carefully to the safety briefings on the plane and to count the number of rows of seats backs to the nearest exit. That 1% extra chance can make all the difference if things go wrong and the person who sat pointedly reading the paper may have a problem. And when you land remember the airport is a high risk area – thieves know that you are concentrating on getting your bags, finding your way out and trying to keep excited children together and that gives them the chance to target your pockets and handbag, so be aware and look aware – they will see this and move to an easier victim.

Now you are safely in your hotel or other accommodation you can relax – but get to know the fire exits and know how to contact reception and make sure you have your passports, money and valuables safely stowed – some hotels have minisafes and these are handy, but always have two photocopies of your passport and a list of emergency contact numbers for your bank, card provider, and insurance company safely put away separately so that if the worst happens you have details of everything to hand.

We have all met the timeshare touts, assorted con merchants and generally annoying pests who infest the popular tourist destinations and the best advice is this. Do not allow our tendency for being polite to override your own interests. Did you wake up in the morning thinking “I will sign up to a hugely expensive timeshare contract today” or “I think I will allow a complete chancer to stop me in the street and waste my holiday time trying to flog snake oil to me”? No, you didn’t. What I do is just keep walking and ignore them completely and if one slithers in front of me, I divert as if they do not exist. They get the message. Just do not get involved in verbals – they are not worth it and, if you must speak, a polite but firm “No thank you” without breaking step should be it. I mentioned earlier on about distraction thefts. These are very common indeed and countless people get caught out every year. There are many variations, but they are all basically the same – someone distracts you whilst they or their accomplice thieves. A common one is when someone “accidentally” spills something on your clothes – often at an ATM – and apologises profusely while cleaning up. Your wallet / purse / passport will be gone moments later. Another nasty one is “the little old lady falling over”. Said septuagenarian lands in a heap and being a kindly soul you rush to help. By the time she is upright and duly grateful you are minus your valuables. And watch ATM machines like a hawk, Check them for

signs of interference, watch your back – I find wife ideal for this purpose – and shield the keypad. And if a stranger approaches you after you have withdrawn your money then they are a crook – even if wearing a nun’s habit. Only ever carry enough cash for your daily needs and if you are a couple then split the money between you. Finally, be very careful about someone in “police uniform” wishing to see your ID / Wallet – this is another of the latest cons.

And, once again, always make sure you have your EHIC (European Health Insurance Card) and that you have proper Travel Insurance (and have declared everything to them including a pimple on the nose) and then you can enjoy your holiday safely and happily.

And MIL? Well, we promised to collect her about midday, but forgot and went for lunch instead. When we finally got to the Courthouse the County Sheriff, the Police Chief and the Judge all had the look of hunted and desperate men – apparently she had used the full MIL nuclear option on them – and my offer to slip them another \$50 to hang on to her was not well received. Happily though when the story was somehow picked up by the Editor of The Northern Times she achieved much notoriety among all the other little old ladies of Golspie and dined out on the story for ages so I was forgiven”.