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Be Careful of That Guy at the Corner

Getting off the beaten path is a reward. But for female travelers, it means extra dangers.

It was the rainy season in Patzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico. Overcast sky and mild temperatures. Meira Sondov-Gold was in her usual outfit — a sweatshirt with black knee-length skirt and tennis shoes — rushing through the outdoor market with her mom nearby. There were so many things going on around her, but Sondov-Gold didn't have time to linger. Lunch break was over; she needed to get back to her language class.

Then she heard the whistle; two normal-looking guys at the fruit stalls were catcalling her. They came in rapid succession: “Hey, baby,” “You're pretty” and “Come here sexy.” Sondov-Gold knew how to act in this situation. Her decision was nothing more than common sense. “I just ignored them. I didn't want to acknowledge them,” she says.

Sadly, this situation is becoming more and more common in the travel scene, as a growing number of women, regardless of age and marital status, are traveling abroad by themselves or with their girlfriends. Marybeth Bond, an international women's travel guru, reveals staggering statistics: there's been 230 percent increase in the number of women-only travel companies in the past six years. Women are “fueling an explosive growth in the travel industry.” But they face dangers men usually don't, from inappropriate catcalls to much more lurid and dangerous situations. And although a few whistles could be harmless, women shouldn't be at ease — because *anything* can happen. And they need to know how to protect themselves.

Surprisingly, though, the best way to keep yourself safe doesn't involve memorizing a bunch of Jet Lee's moves. It's mental. It's all about awareness and knowing your surroundings. That's the principle that Angie Tarighi, the CEO and founder of Women's Self-Defense Institute, believes in. Tarighi herself holds two black belts: one in Kempo Karate, and one in Combat Hapkido. She's also a certified instructor in Rape Aggression Defense (RAD) and International Police Defensive Tactics. But she doesn't think force is always the answer to safety.

“The truth is 90 percent of self-defense is cultivating awareness training while only 10 percent is physical,” Tarighi says.

Which makes a lot of sense. Criminals don't jump out of the bush and attack you; they walk right up to you. It's just that you don't see them coming. Your mind is preoccupied with something else — checking out the sites, staring at a map, looking for a street sign. In other words, you're *not* paying attention to your surroundings; that allows criminals to attack. And it takes only a second of distraction for you to be harmed.

“Crime happens so quickly that you don’t have time to contemplate your next move,” Tarighi says.

Once it happens, nobody can tell you exactly how to survive the situation. You’re the one to decide, using your own instinct. “Whether or not to hand over your wallet, jewelry, etc., is a personal decision based upon the factors at play at the time of robbery,” she says. “I wish I could give you a simple response to every encounter, but the reality is it doesn’t work that way.”

So, self-defense is mainly about not making yourself a target, which incorporates the understanding of how crimes happen. “What is important to understand is what factors must come together for the execution of a crime to be viable,” Tarighi says. She devotes a whole page on her website (www.self-defense-mind-body-spirit.com) trying to explain that crime has its pattern—a triangle involving a criminal’s desire, a target and an opportunity. You can’t control the criminal’s desire, but by being more attentive of what’s going on in the environment, you’re lowering a chance an offender can take to attack. “Once you understand these factors, it is much easier to be prepared, to respond decisively, and to limit the perception of being a viable target,” Tarighi says.

And it’s not that complex, even when you travel off the beaten path. Just remember this simple rule: tourists equal loads of money. So, do *not* act like one. Other suggestions by Tarighi: be aware of the laws and local customs. Don’t wear a lot of jewelry. Don’t flash cash. Keep enough cash for the day in your front pocket — none in your back pockets. And keep the money, along with your other important documents, in a bag that can be worn under your clothing.

“For purses, smaller is better,” she says. “Get used to stashing additional cash *elsewhere* on your body - bra, socks, money belt, et cetera.” Yes, it all sounds like common sense, but most people don’t think the little things very often.

Like some American girls who went to the same language school as Sondov-Gold. They wore low-cut shirts with short skirts while roaming Patzcuaro. Sondov-Gold called it “inappropriate,” knowing that some Mexicans have very different perceptions toward American women. “They think women just want to have sex, and are easy to get into bed,” she says. Having a standout feature like blonde hair, in addition to wearing revealing clothes, made the girls a prime target of sexual harassment.

Then you have to think smart, and be aware of your surroundings. Tarighi suggests maintaining eye contact, so you don’t look like you’re drifting off to another world. And “never give too much information about your travel plans to anyone” especially when they look interested about you travelling by yourself. “Respond that you are meeting up with your boyfriend, cousin, uncle, dad, et cetera. Thereby indicating that you would be missed sooner rather than later,” Tarighi says. The truth is, not everyone you meet while traveling is trustworthy — not even a person from your country. So don’t loosen up your precaution standard. You’d be surprised to learn that, during their trips, many women ignore preventative measures they would take at home and stride into dangerous parts of town. If you get there by

mistake, it's fine. Just don't take out a map in the middle of an alley. Instead, find a café or a fast-food restaurant you could safely sit down and figure out your whereabouts.

Knowing the language would be even better. You don't have to speak fluently to be safe, but learning some crucial words like "help me," "stop" and "leave me alone" will give you a better chance for survival when something actually happens. Also, making friends with the hotel staff and bringing an international cell phone with you are good ways to insure that, in dangerous situations, you have ways to contact the police and your embassy. The hotel staff could give you instructions regarding the legal process in the country as well.

If you maintain your awareness during your trip, there's no reason why you wouldn't be safe. No matter how much criminals want to attack you, they just won't have that chance. You *aren't* giving them a chance. "By following basic safety and awareness guidelines, you should significantly reduce your need for physical intervention," says Tarighi.

And although Sondov-Gold knows she'd be catcalled again in Patzcuaro, she doesn't hesitate to go back—next time by herself. Of course, she recognizes the dangers; it's safer to be with someone else. "I won't have anyone to protect me," she says. But she isn't scared. "You have to have common sense, and you have to think logically, not just be oblivious of your surrounding. If you're cautious and you're careful, you'll be fine."