

Dirty dozen: top 12 travel scams and cons



Travellers beware ... tourists lose billions each year to scams and con artists.

Axis Travel in Adelaide, wishes to alert you on how Travellers lose billions each year to a series of scams, cons and tricks - the majority of which occur in foreign destinations when people are at their most vulnerable. Here are 12 to look out for:

The journey:

Tyres and fliers You are driving along the motorway when a driver draws alongside you, pointing to one of your tyres and gesturing to you to pull over. You stop on the hard shoulder and the other driver kindly pulls over to help. While you inspect the tyre, he lifts all your valuables from the front seat. A new version on this is when you return to your parked car and get in, only to see a flier stuck under the rear window wiper obscuring your view. So you jump out to remove it, thieves nip in and drive off in the car - more than likely taking your bag/shopping with it.

Tip: If you fear you have a flat tyre, try to continue until the next service station. If you do have to remove the flier, ensure your valuables are hidden. In both cases, always keep the car locked.

Metal detector You place your laptop on the airport security scanner while waiting for a couple of people to pass through the metal detector. The first passes, but the second person triggers the alarm and laboriously takes out coins, jewellery and mobile phone from his pockets. By the time you go through, the first person has long gone, as has your laptop. Most prevalent in countries where you can go in and out of the departure area, such as the United States.

Tip: Never put your belongings on the conveyer belt unless the metal detector is clear.

Currency cons Unscrupulous cashiers in banks or bureaux de change adopt suspect counting methods when handing over money to foreigners. With irregular pauses they miss out numbers in the countback in the hope that the tourist is not concentrating or does not understand. Another scam is to give someone the wrong currency when exchanging money for example, Czech koruna (50 to 1) instead of Polish zloty (six to 1) - or confuse them with one zero too few (think Turkish lira). More often than not, the tourist will fail to notice.

Tip: Find out about the currency and exchange rate before leaving (www.xe.com), pay attention to those zeros and insist on counting back your money in front of the cashier.

Hire or liar It's the end of your holiday, you are in a rush to catch your flights, so you hurriedly hand back the keys to the hire car representative who gives you a nod and sends you on your way. Only when you arrive back home do you find your credit card has been charged for damage you never inflicted. This is increasingly prevalent in Europe.

Tip: Make sure you mark any damage before you hire the car and ensure you get a signature for the "all clear", a copy of the paperwork before departing.

By day: Travelling light Crowded streets, malls, markets and railway stations are the obvious spots. While moving through the crowds you bump into a passer-by: you apologise and move on. It is only later that you notice you are travelling light - your keys, wallet or phone has gone.

Tip: Make sure your bag is zipped up. Never leave your wallet in a back pocket. Take what you need in a money belt and leave the rest in your hotel safe

Compensation claim Someone will bump into you in a crowded place, drop a pair of spectacles or a precious ornament (always previously broken), feign horror and claim to the world and his wife that you have to pay up for the damage. In some African countries, this scam extends to pedestrians bumping into your car and then writhing around on the ground while a hostile crowd asks for compensation.

Tip: Ask to resolve the situation at a police station or hotel reception the crook is more likely to give up the ruse.

Mess take You are admiring the sights when you feel the unmistakable splat of bird droppings on your shoulder or perhaps you have something spilt on you by a clumsy passer-by. As you stop to examine the damage, an amiable local helps you clean off the mess, while cleaning out your wallet.

Tip: You could chain your wallet to your belt, but a money belt is the safest option.

Unfair cop A man approaches you to ask for directions or to offer you a currency exchange or even drugs. Then two men appear, flashing badges and claiming to be police. They demand to see your passport and check your wallet for "counterfeit money". When you hand them over the men either disappear into the crowd or one distracts you while the other relieves you of your cash. If you have been duped into changing money they may confiscate it, claiming that it is "counterfeit".

Tip: If approached by police, insist on checking their photographic identification and accompanying them to the police station before handing anything over.

Snooze and lose You are waiting for a train, plane or bus, with your bags by your side, and a passer-by "accidentally" drops a wallet, money or keys from his pocket. Being honest, you grab them and run after him to return it. Your bags, meanwhile, are long gone.

Tip: If you are alone, err on the side of caution, even if this means appearing rude.

By night:

Unlicensed taxis It is late, you have had a few drinks and it is a long walk home there are no licensed taxis at the rank and a man is offers you a lift. The fare seems reasonable but you could pay a much heavier price. The consequences can range from simple muggings to murder.

Tip: Never, however tempting, get in an unlicensed taxi in a foreign city that you don't know well, particularly if you are alone.

Bitter pill While enjoying a few drinks in a bar, you nip to the lavatory and return to finish your drink or perhaps you have just accepted a drink from a friendly stranger. Either way, that will be the last thing you remember: your drink has been spiked. Hours later you wake up to find your wallet has gone, or far worse.

Tip: Never leave your drink unguarded or accept a drink from a stranger unless you see it served by the barman.

Unwelcome reception You're settling down for an early night when your hotel room phone rings. It's the receptionist apologising for the late hour but asking you to verify your credit-card details. You read them out and drift back to sleep. The caller, of course, was not the receptionist and your credit card is taking a pounding. A variation on this is someone approaching you in what appears to be hotel uniform, saying that he needs to make a photocopy of your passport for hotel records. You hand it over and he disappears.

Tip: Only give out your card number or passport in person at reception, never over the phone.