

A guide to 10 common travel scams - and how to avoid them

Earlier this spring, I watched a young, solemn man dressed like a Buddhist monk approach a tourist on the National Mall. He showed him a petition to build a temple and slid a bracelet made of prayer beads onto his wrist. The visitor was pulling money out of his wallet when I intervened and told him the truth: He had fallen for a scam.

When we are on our own turf, the scam artists are as obvious as that so-called Nigerian prince offering you a cut of his inheritance. But on foreign territory, we are more susceptible to deceptions. Maybe we are unfamiliar with the local customs and don't want to offend, or perhaps our jet lag has dulled our Spidey senses.

"This is a universal, global problem, especially in cities where you have crowds and people let their guard down," said Michelle Bernier-Toth, the State Department's managing director for Overseas Citizen Services. "People don't report it to the police or to us because they feel foolish and embarrassed."

Bernier-Toth, who has lived in Africa and the Middle East, can empathise with scam victims. She has been one herself - twice. In Johannesburg, she was withdrawing funds from an ATM when a man asked if she needed help. In a flash, he palmed her card, slipping past her friend who was posted as her lookout. The second time, she was in cab in Istanbul when the driver handed her out-of-circulation currency as change.

"I was schnookered," she said. "These scams are age-old."

To be sure, swindles occur all over the world, to every type of traveller. To reduce your chances of falling prey to unscrupulous types, Bernier-Toth offers this advice: "Be polite, but wary; trust, but verify, and just say 'No, thank you.'" Also, check the State Department's country information for alerts specific to your destination. For instance, for travel to India, the department warns, "Major airports, train stations, popular restaurants, and tourist sites are often used by scam artists looking to prey on visitors, often by creating a distraction."

To help you spot the hoaxes, we assembled 10 of the most common ploys around the world and offer tips on how to protect yourself from them. We also contacted the State Department and Global Rescue, a company that assists imperiled travellers, for a sampling of destinations where these scams frequently occur. Note that these swindles are on the milder side of the criminal spectrum, with the perpetrators essentially trying to steal or squeeze money out of you. They do not typically involve violence, though they can leave a dark bruise on your vacation - and your ego.

Corrupt cabbies

The scam: The cabdriver (or tuk-tuk driver) claims the meter is broken and quotes an outrageously inflated price . . . The cabbie informs you that your destination - a hotel, temple, museum, teahouse - is

overbooked or closed and takes you to his friend's lodging or attraction. He charges you a higher fare, plus earns a kickback . . . The driver takes a convoluted route, jacking up the rate.

How to avoid it: Never hail a cab from the street. Ask a reputable establishment to call you a cab, or hire a licensed taxi through an official outpost. Know the general cost of the ride - ask the hotel concierge or consult an online fare calculator - and confirm that the metre works. Know the address and hours of operation of your destination. If the driver attempts to take you elsewhere, firmly repeat your desired location or terminate the ride. Use Google Maps to keep the driver honest and on course. To avoid cabbies entirely, use a ride-hailing service such as Uber or Lyft.

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Bonus: No money changes hands, eliminating additional scams. Activate the Follow My Ride (Uber) or Share My Ride (Lyft) tool, so friends can track your whereabouts.

Sample destinations: Egypt, Turkey, Mexico, Thailand, India, Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, Serbia

Fake accidents

The scam: A passerby squirts you with a liquid, condiment or fake bird dropping. While you inspect the splotch, an accomplice pickpockets you. The squirter might also try to clean the spot, another diversionary tactic. Other distract-the-tourist ploys include an elderly person falling, a woman tossing a baby or cat at you, or someone dropping a wallet and accusing you of pocketing the contents after you pick it up. In a similar vein, someone on a scooter or in a car intentionally crashes into your vehicle and tries to resolve the incident by demanding cash.

How to avoid it: Secure all of your valuables before heading out for the day. For instance, stash wallets in slash-resistant bags that lock or in hidden pouches - any strategy that will thwart sticky fingers. Ignore your good Samaritan impulses and do not retrieve any valuable objects, including people, from the ground. In the vehicular accident scenario, wait for the police to arrive, assuming you can trust law enforcement. If you are in a country with corrupt cops, contact the the Australian Embassy for help.

Sample destinations: Rome, Istanbul, India, Paris, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Egypt, Chile, Ghana

'Free' gifts

The scam: A man in Buddhist monk attire ties a bracelet around your wrist. A stranger presents you with a sprig of rosemary. A woman offers you flowers or henna. A "disabled" person hands you a pack of tissues. Think a thank-you will suffice? Nope. The so-called gift-giver wants money, and if you don't pony up after accepting the item, the individual will cause a scene. In another tried-and-true scam, a person finds a gold ring on the ground and asks whether it is yours. You say no, but the person gives it to you anyway and then badgers you for money.

How to avoid it: Never accept unsolicited gifts. In fact, don't even look at the item, or you could suddenly find yourself with a friendship bracelet wrapped around your wrist. Return the item and walk away.

Sample destinations: Thailand, Myanmar, Nepal, Paris, Cairo, Rome, Kuala Lumpur, Barcelona

Damaged goods

The scam: You rent a motorbike, car or water scooter and are accused of damaging the vehicle. The rental firm demands money for the repairs. Be aware that the damage could be real, though you were not to blame. An employee might have trailed you and bashed up the rental when you were out of eyeshot.

How to avoid it: Rent through a reputable company. Take photos of the vehicle before you leave the premises and keep an eye on your rental at all times. If the disagreement escalates, contact the police or embassy.

Sample destinations: Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Greece, Bahamas, Italy, Mexico

Counterfeit currency

The scam: The currency exchange booth gives you counterfeit money or obsolete notes . . . A cabdriver, restaurant or retailer claims you paid with fake money, switching your real notes for fake ones. Or you receive (not-so-) funny money as change.

How to avoid it: Familiarise yourself with the currency and exchange money only through legitimate sources, such as banks and hotels. Always check the amount of currency against the receipt, in case the employee swiped a few bills. Pay with smaller denominations and never rush the transaction: Count out the money as you pay and double-check the change. To avoid exchanging money altogether, use prepaid currency cards or ATMs. For the latter, inspect the machine for skimmers (devices that steal your password) and post a friend as a security guard during the withdrawal.

Sample destinations: Colombia, Vietnam, China, Turkey, Egypt, Argentina

Suspicious invitations and petitions

The scam: A local wants to practice English or needs help writing a letter in English. The individual takes you to a store, where an employee pressures you to buy something . . . A stranger invites you to a teahouse, restaurant or bar. At the end of the meal or drink, the waiter delivers an exorbitant bill and insists that you pay it . . . A disabled person or a charity worker asks you to sign a petition and donate money to a cause; an accomplice might lift your wallet during the interaction . . . A fake tour operator offers you an excursion or safari that never materialises.

How to avoid it: Never accept invitations from strangers, provide translation services or engage with individuals carrying a clipboard. Only take tours with certified operators.

Sample destinations: China, Thailand, Turkey, Spain, Malaysia, India, Tanzania

Deceptive information

The scam: A driver motions for you to pull over, claiming you have a problem with your car. You abide and are robbed . . . A cabdriver or pedestrian directs you to a train or bus ticket office that sells bogus tickets. Their friend runs the fake booth and splits the profit . . . Someone posing as a hotel employee calls your room and says the front desk has an issue with your credit card and needs your numbers again . . . An impostor pretending to be an undercover police officer issues you a fine for a bogus minor offense.

How to avoid it: Don't pull over unless you hear a noise or see an emergency light pop on. If you must stop, find a commercial area busy with cars and people. Know the exact location of the ticket office, and don't let anyone tell you differently. Ask to see the officer's credentials and know the local laws.

Sample destinations: India, Sicily, Costa Rica, Mexico, South Africa, Mexico, Colombia, Britain

The shell game

The scam: A game maestro plays hide-and-seek with three cups and a ball. Players bet on the round object's location. Associates acting as tourists guess correctly, or the leader of the scam allows a few real people to win. Eventually, the scammer will remove the ball or pay the winners with counterfeit money. Pickpockets also roam the crowd.

How to avoid it: Don't stop to watch, much less play.

Sample destinations: Paris, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Vienna, Tehran, Milan

Item switcheroo and knockoffs

The scam: A vendor shows you a high-end item, such as a leather purse or wallet, and you agree on a reasonable price. After paying, the seller substitutes the item for a knockoff. Another possibility: The product was a fake from the get-go . . . An antique with a rich history was actually made yesterday. Or a precious gem turns out to be worthless.

How to avoid it: Do not buy high-fashion accessories or antiques from street vendors or shady-looking shops. Only purchase goods from reputable dealers and stores that can provide documents of authenticity.

Sample destinations: China, Italy, Turkey, Paris

The not-so-helpful stranger

The scam: A stranger approaches a couple or family and volunteers to snap a group photo. You hand over your camera or smartphone, and the stranger runs off with it . . . A local asks if you need help with the ATM and palms your bank card or pickpockets you while you are responding.

How to avoid it: Never trust a stranger with your camera or phone. Use a selfie stick if you must. Ask friends or family members to stand guard while you are using an ATM and don't let anyone approach while you are in the middle of a transaction.

Sample destinations: Vatican City, Paris, Rome, Budapest, Prague, Johannesburg, Philippines, Nicaragua