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Practical Traveler

# A Lesson of Mumbai: Have a Safety Plan

By [MICHELLE HIGGINS](#)

THE deadly attacks in [Mumbai](#), which targeted areas favored by tourists, including two of the city's most luxurious hotels — the Taj Mahal Palace and Tower and the Oberoi — have raised concerns about the safety of guests at even the best accommodations.

“While terrorist attacks are not new to [India](#), the Nov. 26 Mumbai terrorist attacks in part targeted American citizens and other Westerners for the first time and tragically demonstrate that even in five-star luxury hotels, security is not equipped to deter such attacks,” the State Department said in a Dec. 4 Travel Alert that urges Americans to exercise caution in India.

The violence, which ended with at least 170 deaths, came two months after a truck bomb devastated the Marriott in Islamabad, [Pakistan](#), and 10 months after a suicide bombing attack on the luxury Serena Hotel in [Kabul](#), [Afghanistan](#).

As embassies in conflict zones become better fortified against terrorists, “hotels have become second embassies,” said Rohan Gunaratna, author of “Inside Al Qaeda” and the head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in [Singapore](#). “If hotels understand the threat and put robust security measures in place, this current wave of terrorist propensity to attack hotels can be deflected.”

Security experts and federal agencies offer unsurprising advice about safety measures you can take when traveling to areas where you may be at risk: be vigilant, avoid crowds, keep a low profile. But much of it comes down to using common sense.

“People always say to me, ‘I’m about to leave on a trip, what’s the best way to protect myself?’ ” said Brian Jenkins, a terrorism expert and senior adviser to the RAND Corporation, the [California](#) research center. “I say drive very carefully on the way to the airport.”

The likelihood of a hotel guest's being killed in a terrorist attack is about one in a million, said Mr. Jenkins, who conducted a study of hotel attacks that covered 1968 through mid-2005. By comparison, he

said, the average American has about a one in 8,000 chance of dying in an auto accident.

The compelling survival stories of travelers who were caught up in the three-day siege on Mumbai show there was no pattern to what ultimately saved them. Some barricaded themselves in their rooms while others took cover in hotel conference areas or simply fled.

Lynne and Ken Shaw of [Wales](#) told the BBC that they hid under a table while the attackers stormed the Taj Mahal Palace. In the interview, Mrs. Shaw said that “little decisions that night — just timing — saved our lives.”

At one point, when they were being led out of hiding, gunfire broke out in the corridor. “My life was saved because as I was running I stumbled, and I think that really saved me, as I fell back into the room,” said Mrs. Shaw.

Technology came into play in some rescues. Michael Beagelman, chief executive of Concierge International Agents, which provides 24-hour travel services for Altour, a luxury travel company, was able to exchange [text messages](#) with a British client at the Taj on her honeymoon. Mr. Beagelman was able to provide her name and that of her husband to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and tell them where the clients were. Indian soldiers eventually helped them get out.

In light of the attacks, the Association of Corporate Travel Executives is recommending that travelers going to areas where their safety might be compromised put together a kit with four essential items — a flashlight with an LED bulb for illumination or to signal for help; a hand-held water purifier in case the water isn’t potable; a portable radio; and a cellphone or a Blackberry with international service.

“Events in Mumbai indicated a sophisticated attack on two levels, both cultural and commercial,” said Susan Gurley, the association’s executive director. “Attacking and seizing a hotel reflects a new level of desperation and savagery.”

She added, “This presents new challenges and new solutions for travelers who want to be prepared.”

Ms. Gurley said [business travel](#) managers plan to re-evaluate their hotel contracts with an emphasis on guest security. New contracts are expected to require hotels, among other things, to train their staffs to evacuate the building efficiently; to provide detailed floor charts to security officials, the police and firefighters; and to have a surveillance system and secondary methods of communication like a public address system to inform guests of issues.

Some hotels already have such safety measures. Marriott, for example, implemented a crisis management plan 15 years ago and has analysts who assess security conditions daily. If a threat exists at a hotel, it is prescribed a color-coded alert, which signals specific security countermeasures.

Alan Orlob, vice president of corporate security for Marriott, also periodically meets with other hotel security executives to share information. “We understand that if there’s a threat, it’s a threat to the industry, not a particular hotel,” Mr. Orlob said.

But a cautious guest could “ask for a room above the second and below the seventh floors,” said Ralph Witherspoon, a security consultant from [Cleveland](#). “Criminals and terrorists can easily access most ground-floor rooms, and most fire department ladders won’t reach above the seventh floor.”

Travelers can also look for the nearest exits. “Count the doors between your room and the nearest exit,” recommends the State Department. “This could be a lifesaver if you have to crawl through a smoke-filled corridor.”

For information on conditions abroad that may affect safety, travelers can consult the State Department reports at [www.travel.state.gov](http://www.travel.state.gov). Registering your travel plans at the department’s Web site may make it easier to contact you in case of an emergency.

Security experts suggest loading into your cellphone emergency numbers like those for the local [United States](#) embassy, your tour operator or your hotel, and letting at least two people at work or at home know where you are going.

While every situation is different, said Damon Brenner, a senior manager of global services at Control Risks, a consulting company, “if you do the little things,” like knowing where the nearest fire exits to your room are, “it will help mitigate the potential risk of being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

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