

Travel Scams You Should Watch Out For

(Courtesy of Bradley O'Neill | Writer for The Discoverer)

Free 'Friendship' Bracelets

As backpackers, travelers, vacationers, or whatever you want to call it, we are all prime targets for scammers around the world. Speak to any of your friends and family and it's likely they'll be able to recount a personal or secondhand story of being caught off guard while away from home. While it's hard to predict when and where we might be taken advantage of, fortunately, there's a lot of knowledge about common scams. So here's a few to remember for your next trip.

This is a classic throughout big European cities, especially around the major attractions, and often targets female travelers. A happy looking stranger will approach you and attempt to tie a 'free' bracelet around your wrist. Once attached, the person will then demand a payment for said bracelet and be more than happy to make a fuss if you say no. A variation of this is a magic trick that results in the bracelet appearing on your wrist or fingers in seconds. Avoid this by walking past anyone that you deem to be suspect and keep your hands in your pockets if they try to follow you. More often than not they'll move on to their next victim.

Found a Ring Scam

Here's another old favorite of well-trained scammers. Out of the blue a person will appear by your side and point to a ring (could also be another item of jewelry) on the floor. They'll then pick it up and try to convince you that it's yours and subsequently ask for a reward. Alternatively, the perpetrator might try talking you into believing that the item is of great value but be willing to sell it at a discounted price.

As with the bracelet scam, keep your head down and walk on if you suspect something isn't right.

Motorbike/Jetski Rental Damage

Ever visited a beach destination where it seems like every traveler and their dog is having a blast on scooters and jet skis? Then you'll probably be aware that it's normal to leave your passport as a deposit. This is all well and good until you return your vehicle only to be told that you've caused serious damage to it. It then becomes a "my word against yours" situation and, if you refuse to foot the bill, you could end up being escorted to the nearest ATM machine.

Make sure you give the vehicle a thorough check before you accept it and register even the most minor of scratches.

Over-Friendly and Flirtatious Strangers

Male travelers are particularly sought after for this trick. You land in a new country and unexpectedly receive non-stop attention in a bar or nightclub. After a fun evening and racking up a hefty bar tab, your new drinking partner is suddenly nowhere to be seen. Now you are left to pay the bill; that is if you haven't already been robbed of your cash. Making friends in a foreign country is one thing but remember to keep your wits about you when opening your tab or wallet to strangers.

Shoe Shine Scam

If you are in Istanbul, then pay special attention to this scenario. A shoeshiner walks past you and drops a brush. Being the polite tourist that you are, you pick it up and return it. To show their gratitude, the shoeshiner will start to clean your shoes. This may seem like a nice gesture, but chances are high that they will then demand payment. Refusal could mean being surrounded by the city's entire shoeshine community. Save yourself the trouble by ignoring the brush. Or wear flip-flops.

Taxi Scams

Dishonest taxi drivers pull out all the stops. One is to be told that the meter is broken the moment you leave an airport or bus/terminal and then be quoted an astronomical price. Another is your driver getting lost on purpose in order for the meter to keep ticking for a few extra miles. Extreme cases might see a driver speed off with your luggage still inside the car. A South American favorite is to be informed that you have paid with fake bills. When you ask for the money back the driver will give a different bill (the actually fake one); you say sorry, hand over a new one and end up paying double.

Try to negotiate a fare before embarking on long journeys. Order a taxi by phone/internet or take one from official ranks, where possible. Glimpse at the serial number of your bill before handing it over, and count out the money aloud as you hand over the bills. It might seem like a lot to remember, but you'd rather be prepared than caught unawares.

The Bird Poop Scam

Also affectionately called the sh** on the shoe scam, this is another common trick to watch out for in busy tourist areas. As always seems to be the case, a jovial bystander will let you know that you have some bird poop/ketchup/mud on your shoe/sock/leg and offer you a tissue to clean it with. As you both bend to inspect the mess, a crafty hand will try and pluck any valuable items from your pocket/bag.

Even if you do have some mess on you, politely decline the offer of help and wait until you find a restroom or place to sit down alone.

The Closed and/or Overbooked Hotel

Taxi driver strikes again here. While driving to your accommodation, the driver will do their best to convince you that it no longer exists or is full to capacity. If you take their word then they'll whisk you off to another place, which is likely to be more expensive and owned by one of their friends/accomplices. After you check in, the cabbie will depart with a nice commission.

Contact your hotel prior to arrival to confirm your booking and to find out if they offer a pick-up service. And think to yourself, how would a taxi driver know if a specific hotel is overbooked or not?

The Tumbling Woman

Oh, that poor lady that takes a calamitous fall on the pavement in front of you. You, and other passersby, stop to help, a large crowd has formed and your pockets get emptied. Before you know it, the crowd has dispersed, including the one that took a tumble. You'll need your wits about you with this one because it is hard to tell if the fall is genuine or not. If you stop to help then be aware of others that arrive. Or, make sure your items are secure so you can help the fallen person without fear or a trap.

Tuk-Tuk Shop Scam

Tuk-tuks are one of the most fun ways to get around busy cities, especially in Southeast Asian countries. However, be wary of drivers that offer sightseeing day tours. You'll visit temples and landmarks but you'll probably also be dropped off at a tailor or a jewelry shop. What follows is a few uncomfortable minutes listening to the shop owner offering their bespoke services. Despite the time lost at the shops, unless you buy something it's unlikely that you'll lose out financially with this one and you will eventually get to see the sights as promised. Judge the driver's rate; if it's really cheap then chances are high you'll book a few store visits during throughout the day.