

ADVENTURE ABROAD: TRIP TIPS FROM A TRAVELING OUTDOORSMAN

By Kevin Estela



Always be alert when traveling and especially near train tracks. Never get close enough for someone to push you.

A smirk and a head nod. That was the acknowledgement sent my way when the airport TSA agent put my luggage through the X-ray machine and the contents showed up on his display. He could have been recognizing me as just another 4th of July passenger but no; he recognized what I had in my bag

and let me know he knew what it was. You can't mistake reading the look on someone's face like that. The contents of my bag were important to the seminar I was about to teach and I would be lying if I were to say I wasn't nervous about flying with the variety and value of gear I had. The TSA agent waved me through and I was on my way.

BIO: Kevin Estela is the Founder and Head Instructor of Estela Wilderness Education. He conducts private and semi-private wilderness and urban/suburban survival courses, tests and evaluates knives and equipment for various companies, is a Mountain Khakis Professional Ambassador, and is a life-long outdoors enthusiast with additional pastimes in canoeing/kayaking, fishing and cooking. Kevin's work has taken him from Los Angeles, CA to the United Kingdom and many points in between. Kevin is ranked in both Sayoc Kali and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and is a shooting enthusiast. Kevin is formerly the Lead Instructor for the Wilderness Learning Center. When not teaching outdoor skills, he is a full-time High School History Teacher and a Track and Field Coach who lives in Connecticut. He can be reached at estelawildernesseducation@gmail.com and Estela Wilderness Education, LLC on Facebook.

The nervousness I had about flying with guns and knives along with gear of questionable legality (i.e. snares, yo-yo fishing reels, etc.) was not and is not a deterrent to my travel. I spent a total of two weeks in my own bed during the summer of 2012. I crisscrossed the country twice, traveled up and down the East Coast and made my way to the UK, by way of Iceland then Scotland afterwards, to teach bushcraft and survival skills. It was truly a summer of travel. My regular traveling habits and lessons I learned over the miles on the road and in the air are essential know-how for the tourist and traveler. Rather than making costly or dangerous mistakes on your own, let me share with you what I've learned to keep you safe while traveling.

1. Know Before You Go

Frommers, Lonely Planet, Rand McNally, there are too many resources not to do your research before your trip. Just as you would examine a map of an area for a camping trip stateside, you can look at street guides where your hotel is to find the nearest hospital, embassy or point of interest. Social media like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and others give you near live feed of where you're going to be better informed of events, transportation delays and important news. There are countless free resources to guide you. In addition to knowing about the geography and lay of the land, look up local laws and ordinances that may affect you. New York City has a strange interpretation of what a "gravity knife" is and Los Angeles allows carry of just about any folding knife. Stay on the right side of the law especially in foreign countries.

2. Keep an Itinerary

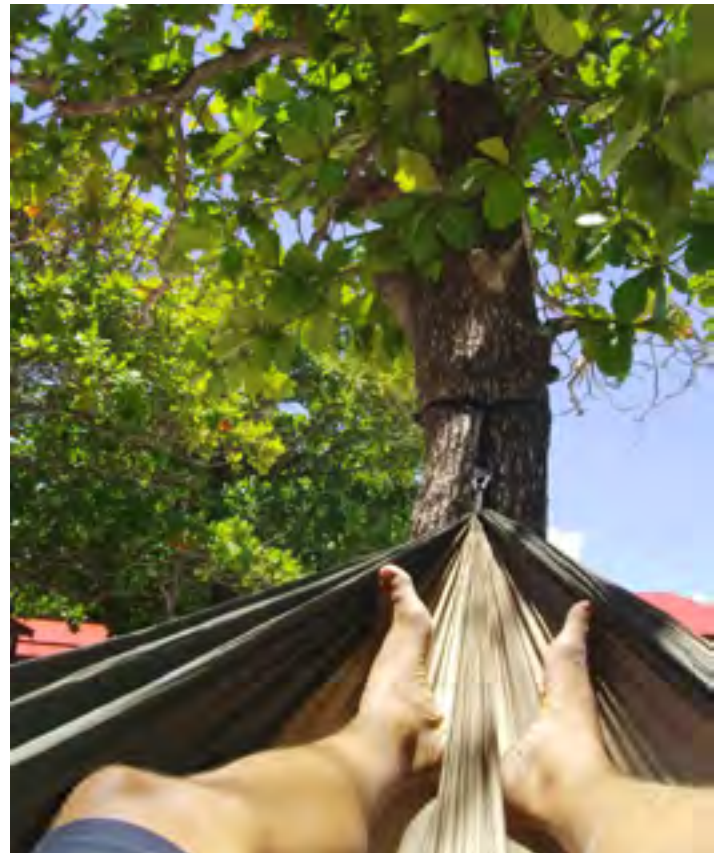
There is fun in "going with the flow" but there should be a general itinerary for where you should be at a given time. This plan is more for others than it is for you. Always let someone reliable know where you are and keep lines of communication open. Imagine if you miss a bus only to take a later one and your relatives find out the original bus was in an accident. How would they react without the knowledge from your regular updates? Update someone reliable with your location and travel plans. Keep a copy of your itinerary separate from your primary copy. Bags can be lost, stolen or abused by airlines. Remember, one is none, two is one, and three is in case your traveling partner needs a copy.

3. Clean out Your Luggage Completely Before Packing

I always empty out my luggage even if I know there is nothing in it. I do this to prevent accidentally transporting something illegal on an airplane or from state



Improvised hotel room security measures. Coffee cup on door handle and rubber door stop.



Lightweight hammocks are great to carry traveling. Set one up in paradise and you'll never travel without one again.

to state or country. If you are a shooter, make sure you don't have any spare ammunition or gun parts in your bag. Traveling to or through certain countries with contraband can ruin your trip. Check to make sure you haven't accidentally tucked a blade or leftover prescription meds in your luggage. Get in this habit when you jump from hotel to hotel too. You never know who has access to your room when you aren't in it. Clean out your luggage to separate dirty from clean clothes too. Pack a small plastic bag to keep your dirty clothes in. It will make sorting clothes for the laundry easier once you get home.

4. Pack Accordingly

Pack according to needs. If you anticipate needing something as soon as you land, it should be at the top of your suitcase where you can access it quickly. Wear your heaviest boots on the plane or train, there is no sense in lugging them on your back. In case your luggage is lost, make sure you have extra sets of socks, undergarments, and toiletries in your carry on. Also, pack electronics in your carry-on bag instead of your checked luggage. Ever see a baggage handler climb over a pile of luggage to grab a stuck bag? Pack fragile items in your carry on. If you are carrying fragile items in your bag, make sure to invest in a quality hard-sided box like a Pelican or Otter Box. Make sure to lock the box and keep the key on you. Don't put the key in your bag. If the TSA needs to see inside your locked box, they can X-ray it. Bring a reusable water bottle with you to avoid paying exorbitant amounts of money for bottled water inside the airport. Just make sure to empty the bottle before going through the X-Ray machines or else you will be pulled out of line, forced to drink it or pour it out only slowing your time through security.

5. Keep a Low Profile

Avoid wearing T-shirts with political or religious messages that mark you. If you travel with military style clothing or gear, you may find yourself stopped or ques-



A lighter and a Swiss Army Knife are constant travel companions. Both are tools and are generally viewed by most people as common and non-threatening.



Firearms can be transported on planes if all laws and regulations are followed. Always secure your gear and retain the key once cleared. A good hard case is worth the investment.

tioned. My good friend Ian was stopped on his way to take a survival course with me when I was an Instructor at the Wilderness Learning Center. Ian, a trauma surgeon, was stopped at the Canadian border and was questioned by officers repeatedly why he had "a lot of military looking equipment." He didn't have a rifle or any ammunition, merely a backpack with MOLLE straps in the back of his truck. That didn't stop them from questioning him and asking him to lift up his shirt to prove he didn't have a pistol or knife on him.

Avoid wearing clothes identifying you as far from home. Also, don't expose expensive jewelry on your person or flash a bulging wallet. Get in the habit of carrying singles in multiple pockets and reach for those instead. If you



Some merchants encourage bargaining. Pay full price or make the process a game.

insist on carrying a wallet, wrap a few rubber bands around it and shove it in your pocket. The bands tug on your pocket and make it harder to remove. This is an absolute necessity in pickpocket country. My father makes it a habit to carry multiple wallets and he spreads out his cash. If one wallet is lost, he has a backup. He even has a dummy wallet with singles in it to use in case he has to hand over his wallet in a hold up.

6. Be Extra Cautious as Soon as You Land

What most people want to do, as soon as the train pulls into the station or the plane to the terminal, is get to their destination. This is the prime time to take advantage of a traveler. Check your luggage in a secure place before leaving the airport. You don't want to be at the hotel an hour away to first discover your equipment is missing from inside your bag. If you know you are traveling your last leg of your trip to your destination by taxi, print out the

route you wish to travel from an online map source like Expedia or Yahoo Maps. Ask what the rate is ahead of time and don't be afraid to walk away if the offer is too high. Remember, if there is no other option, you won't be called cheap for skipping out on tipping your driver if you know he/she is gouging the price.

7. Talk to Locals and Blend In

Talk to locals for information about your destination during your stay. Locals know where the fish are, what trails are currently under renovation and therefore closed, what beaches to avoid if you don't like peddlers and so on. Of course, don't advertise you're a tourist to everyone. No stranger needs to know how many people are in your group, where you're staying and what type of mark you are. When I travel, I try to do as the natives do. Blending in is important but be aware of places considered "locals only." Some beaches, bars and hangouts truly are meant for locals



Step off the beaten path, take local advice and eat well! Here is a market in the Caribbean that served the freshest seafood cooked over a 55 gallon drum grill.



Most of the world is covered in water. The author has taken this packable rod and reel combo with him over thousands of miles of travel.

only and they can be quite territorial. Finally, just because the locals eat it, doesn't always mean you should. If you're traveling to an area with questionable water, make sure to avoid ice in your drinks, peel fruit and drink only bottled water. The locals may have immunities you don't.

8. Look for Objects of Opportunity

While teaching overseas recently, I thought how underprepared I was to protect myself if disaster struck, emergency took place, or civil unrest broke out. How

many objects in a hardware store can be pressed into service as a survival aide or a defensive tool? While walking to your hotel room from the lobby, do you pass anything that can be grabbed on the way out for shelter? Look around you at what can be used in an emergency of any sort. Situational awareness is not only a wilderness skill but an urban skill. Also consider others are looking at those same items in the same way. Be aware what can be used on you and what objects will disappear first if everyone needs it.

9. Learn to Hide Items of Value in Plain Sight

Depending where you are, thievery may be common. Snatch and grab thefts happen when unsuspecting tourists leave their valuables out in the open. Even in my hotel rooms, I don't leave anything of real value out for anyone to find ... or do I? I want you to use your imagination of how you can hide items in a hotel room. Most would guess under the mattress or in the room's safe. What about hiding items in everyday items most people would not think to look in? Zip lock bags can keep paper dry in liquid. Who would hide something of value in a food container? Underneath a potted plant in the room? Behind an access panel? It sounds like paranoia at first but when you are thousands of miles from home, it only takes a few minutes to hide. Just make sure you remember where you put your gear so you don't spend all your time looking for it when you need it.

If you end up on the beach or near a swimming hole, consider how long it would take to run back to where you dropped your stuff. Take turns swimming or cooling off while someone else watches your stuff. If this isn't possible, always face your gear when in the water and know where it is. If this isn't possible, think about covering your smaller more valuable items under a towel under the sand in a plastic bag. Remember where you bury your belongings.

10. The Night Stand

When you hear a bump in the night, will you know where the light switch in the room is? Chances are you won't. I always travel with a Surefire light as it is generally unassuming (Backup model in silver finish) yet throws an impressive beam. This is always near my identification and spare currency on my night stand. I also have various defensive weapons with me and they're appropriately placed as well. My cell phone is left charging (if there is service) and a good pair of closed toe shoes (no sandals) are always near the foot of the bed in case I have to leave in the middle of the night. On that note, never disregard a fire alarm. Before retiring for the night, I always chock the door with an inexpensive yet very practical and hard to defeat rubber door stop. If there is a bump in the night, I want to make it hard for the bump to bump me in the head before I'm prepared to bump it first.

11. Travel Hygiene

"Restaurant employees must wash hands before returning to work" You don't believe they all do right? How many people travel through bus stations, in taxis, on planes and in public without maintaining proper hygiene? Think about all those door knobs, water fountain handles, hotel room remote controls, and other common surfaces? Germs and bacteria are everywhere. Don't forget to travel with a small bottle of hand sanitizer and some wet wipes. Make sure however much you carry fits inside the standard 1 quart TSA clear bag. Also, take into account you may be stuck in an airport without a shower for a long time. Baby wipes will keep you feeling like a human and less of a savage. When you feel clean, you'll likely sleep better. On the topic of sleep, bring a travel pillow or use a stuff sack packed with a jacket or shirt. Sleeping on that will be more comfortable than having your head rattle inside a vehicle. My personal favorite travel item is my poncho liner from Kifaru called the Woobie. Once you try it, you'll know why.

12. The Weakest Link

When traveling with a group you must be concerned with their level of awareness, preparedness, and willingness to act. Children cannot travel as far and fast as an adult and female traveling companions are confronted



Protect your personal items. Rubber bands on wallets, TSA approved locks and cable ties help prevent theft. Carry backup identification and cash elsewhere on your person.

with attention from every angle. The elderly must be given more time to rest and people with health conditions may require regular attention. When you're traveling alone, these considerations aren't present. You need to remember in a group your ability to care for yourself and others is affected by those around you. This may result in you selecting traveling companions based on ability.

Hiking your local trails may be comforting and relaxing but exploring a new trail in another state or country can deliver the adventure you crave. Venture outside of your comfort zone and more than likely you'll be glad you did. Think about how you can budget your funds to afford a trip to somewhere new. You don't need to travel far from home but leave your usual stomping grounds. By boat, car, plane or train, you can see parts of the world and grow from the experience. Just make sure to learn from the lessons of those who have been there and done that and you will find traveling to be quite rewarding in everlasting memories.

