



Preventing  
& Dealing With

**THEFT**

While Traveling

The Ultimate Guide

THE  
QUEST FOR AWESOME

## Navigation

*You can use the links below to help you navigate to specific sections of the guide. Once you're in a particular section you can click the heading to bring you back to the navigation menu.*

### THE STORY

[Lessons Learned](#)

### PREPARATION

[Get Property Insurance On Your Expensive Items](#)

[Make Digital And Hard Copies Of All Information You'd Need In Case Of Theft](#)

[Use A Fake Wallet](#)

[Install Tracking Software](#)

[Make Systematic Backups](#)

[Make It Ugly](#)

[Educate Yourself](#)

[Blend In With The Locals](#)

[Be Aware Of Common Scams](#)

[Have A Safe Word](#)

### IN THE MOMENT

[Keep Important Stuff Close](#)

[Keep It Old School](#)

[Be Aware](#)

[Give It Up](#)

### AFTER THE DUST HAS SETTLED

[If Your Passport Was Stolen While Abroad \(US Citizens\)](#)

### MOVING FORWARD

## The Story

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in Budapest and I came back from a quick dinner, opened a bottle of wine and went to go check if I had any messages as I had left my phone to charge.

The phone wasn't there.

I was the only person booked in the 8 person dorm room when I left, so my initial thinking was a hostel employee had moved it, so I went to ask. They knew nothing.

I went back to inspect the room again, it was then I found my computer and camera also gone.

Adrenaline started pumping and I was frantic. I went back to the front desk and inquired if they had seen anyone go into the room.

Yes, they had just booked a guy who was staying for the night. He had left right as I came back from dinner, but the front desk employee informed me he had said he would be coming right back.

He never did.

In the ensuing days, I found out after stealing my stuff he made his way to a hostel a few blocks away. He checked in with a different name, ID and clothing before cutting the locks off the lockers of the girls he was sharing a room with (they were also out to dinner) and making off with their iPads, computers, credit cards, and passports.

He was a professional thief making a living by cruising from hostel to hostel, robbing guests.

## Lessons Learned

As I replayed the entire scenario in my head over and over and over again, there were a few things I did right, a few things I did wrong and some major lessons learned.

First, one of my weekly tasks was to upload all of my photos to my external hard drive as a backup in case something like this happened. However, I started getting complacent, comfortable and lazy and started straying from my system. Keeping to your defined system can be a drag sometimes, but I'll never make the mistake again.

Second, there's no 100% way to make sure your stuff doesn't get stolen, if someone is committed to stealing something you own, there's not much you can do to stop it.

So don't let the thought of it happening ruin your trip, or prevent you from going all together.

You can't be paranoid someone is lurking around every corner to take what's yours; it's no way to travel or live your life in general and you wind up not having much fun. My piece of advice is to trust, but verify and always listen to your gut.

## Preventing & Dealing With Theft While Traveling – The Ultimate Guide

I traveled for a year to 23 different countries and only had this one awful experience, compared to the plethora of amazing experiences, it was totally worth it.

So, if there's no sure-fire way to prevent it, then what can YOU do as a traveler to not only minimize the chance of it happening, but also make sure if it does, you're prepared?

How can you make sure it's just a hiccup, instead having it ruin your entire trip?

As you can imagine, I thought on the subject plenty after my experience and I have come up with the following guide to help you **adequately prepare** yourself, **actively prevent** being targeted, and **how to deal with a theft** if it does happen to you during your travels.

## Preparation

### Get Property Insurance On Your Expensive Items

Some travelers will get insurance, some like to forego it, save the money and use it on their travels. It's a personal choice, but the way I look at insurance is this: if the worst of the worst happens, how financially fucked would you be?

If the answer is: royally, I buy insurance.

If the answer is: kinda, then I explore it more, see how much it would cost and maybe buy insurance or maybe not. *This is where property insurance falls for me.*

If the answer is: not at all, then I wouldn't worry about insurance.

If you decide to get property insurance, most companies will want serial numbers, receipts, and descriptions ahead of time. If not, do it anyway.

### Make Digital And Hard Copies Of All Information You'd Need In Case Of Theft

Both digital and hard formats make the information easier to access depending on what happened to you, so I highly recommend making both.

Here is a list of what you want in this "Theft File":

- Copy of passport
- Copy of driver's license
- Phone numbers for the credit cards you're carrying to make canceling them easier
- Descriptions, serial numbers and receipts of your gear
- Extra passport photos ([US Requirements](#))

Email the digital copy to yourself and a close friend or family member. Laminate the hard copy and keep it in your backpack.

### Use A Fake Wallet

While traveling I wore a money belt underneath my pants. In the money belt I kept the bulk of my cash, credit cards, passport and immunization records.

Then I carried a fake wallet and kept it in my pants. I filled it with old hotel room keycards, business cards I've collected over the years and \$25 in 1 dollar bills.

The fake wallet served two purposes:

1. If I ever got mugged the plan would be to throw it to the mugger, cash flying everywhere while I ran away. If I ever got pickpocketed, I wouldn't lose much.
2. It allowed me to not have to access my money belt in public. Every morning I'd take out enough money for the day and put it in the fake wallet, which allowed me easy access to cash instead of having to get into the money belt in public.

### [Install Tracking Software](#)

Use services like Prey ([www.preyproject.com](http://www.preyproject.com)) or Find My iPhone ([www.apple.com/icloud/find-my-iphone.html](http://www.apple.com/icloud/find-my-iphone.html))

Prey is an anti-theft tracking software for your laptop, phone and tablet letting you remotely locate, lock, wipe and recover it if ever stolen, or simply missing. You do this by logging into a web platform where you can also trigger actions like sounding an alarm or show an onscreen message to let the thief know you're after them.

Find My iPhone is similar but only works for Apple devices.

The problem with these services is they need to be connected to the internet in order to locate your devices and interact with them. When you're in a foreign country this can be a problem.

This is what happened to me. I had these services installed on my devices but since I was in Hungary with no cellphone reception, I depended on the thief to connect to the internet before wiping them. This, unfortunately, never happened.

Another step you can take with your computer is to add a BIOS password and disable booting from removable devices on your PC, so the thief will be forced to boot into the previous installation and thus, not be able to format your hard disk easily.

If you have a Mac, there's a firmware password utility on your Tiger/Leopard OSX installation DVD (look for it in Applications/Utilities). On newer OS X versions you'll find the utility by booting from the recovery partition.

### [Make Systematic Backups](#)

After my stuff was stolen, the most upsetting thing was losing 3 months' worth of memories through my photos and videos. Those are the things I'll never get back and what caused the most grief when I think about the experience.

It's important to come up with a system and stay dedicated to it.

Some of the problems you'll encounter while traveling are: a large amount of photos/videos and slow (or no) internet, which makes backing up to the cloud difficult. But, cloud backup is still a good option depending on where and how long you'll be traveling.

My system was to back up my files to an external hard drive I kept separate from my computer. It worked out because the thief didn't take my whole backpack, but if he had, I would have been one sad panda.

My problem was I didn't stay vigilant with the system and so I hadn't backed everything up in a while when the theft occurred. It was a hard way to learn, but I'll never make the mistake again.

Another option is to travel with a bunch of memory cards and send them home through the mail when you fill them up.

### [Make It Ugly](#)

Brand new and shiny items will attract a thieves attention so one tactic is to make your stuff look broken and unappealing by covering it in stickers or duct tape.

### [Educate Yourself](#)

#### [Blend In With The Locals](#)

A great way to not be targeted is to look and act as the locals do. What types of clothing do they wear? Do you see people wearing shorts or sandals? Are the locals wearing mostly dark colors? How do they carry themselves out in public?

One of my favorite ways to relax is to people-watch, especially when it's an unfamiliar culture. However, it has the added benefit of teaching you local customs you might not be aware of, which you can then use to not stick out as much.

### [Be Aware Of Common Scams](#)

There are so many different scams thieves use to take advantage of tourists it's impossible to know about them all but as you hear/read about them you'll start to notice a pattern. Let's take a look at some common scams to be aware of:

- You're walking around in the evening, when all of a sudden 2 girls approach you and they strike up a conversation. They're complimenting you and asking you about your trip. After a bit of conversation they invite you to go have a drink at one of their favorite bars. You decide, why not? They seem nice and travel has really put you in the "be open for new experiences" vibe.

You have a great time with the girls at the bar having drinks and as the night starts to wind down you're excited to see what happens next. The girls excuse themselves to go to the bathroom and a few minutes later a large and intimidating man brings you the check. You look down and see it's 20 times what it should cost.

You begin to make a fuss but the intimidating man isn't having it. You don't even have the amount of money, so the guy roughly drags you to the nearest ATM and forces you to withdraw the money before letting you go. You never see the girls again.

- You have the day to kill so you break out your nice camera and decide you'll go explore the city. As you're engrossed in taking photos you feel something land on your leg. You look down and see a bird just took a nice dump on your pants.

All of a sudden a tissue is being offered; wow, how nice, they are even cleaning it up for you as their friend also walks up to laugh at the situation. A few seconds later and your

pants are good as new, you thank the man and continue on to finish taking photos. It's then you realize your wallet is gone.

- You're walking along and you see a mother approaching with her baby in her arms, as you get closer she suddenly trips and as she screams she hurls her baby towards you; you're surprised but you manage to catch the child.

The people around see and rush up to congratulate you on being a hero and pat you on the back. You're so overwhelmed you don't realize the child feels a bit light and isn't even moving. You definitely don't notice the hands patting you on the back are also going through your backpack and taking anything they can.

So what do they have in common?

Something happens and it doesn't seem quite right. Two girls making an effort to directly approach you and start a conversation, you get crapped on by a bird and someone is immediately there with a tissue, and throwing a baby, who throws a baby?

All of the scenarios are distracting, which makes it difficult to process and it drowns out your gut feeling telling you something isn't right. Oftentimes you will be getting touched a lot in multiple places, which confuses your brain from noticing the hand in your pocket.

If it seems too good to be true, it probably is and if someone starts touching you, protect your wallet. I got in the habit of swinging my arms while I walked in a way that brushed against my wallet so I could easily check it was there.

### [Have A Safe word](#)

Hopefully you'll never have to use this but it's smart to set up a safe word with a family member before you leave.

There might come a time where an accident of some sort happens and you need to get money sent from home, there also may come a time where you get put in a situation where someone is forcing you to call/email home to get money.

A safe word is a great way to alert your family member something is wrong, without the assailant knowing.

You want something easily worked into conversation without sounding forced or out of place. A good example would be to refer to a pet or a loved one that has passed away. Set it up before you leave and make sure you keep it to yourself.

It all seems like a lot of work and forethought, and it is, and it will take dedication to stick to the systems you outline for yourself.

However, as I look back on my experience and what happened to me, any amount of work would be worth preventing the awful feeling I had when I realized what I lost.

### In The Moment

While you're in the moment getting amongst it, there are a few tips you can use to make yourself less of a target and blend in better with the local crowd.

#### Keep Important Stuff Close

No matter what happens to you, if you have cash and your passport, you can get back home.

If you lose both of those you'll still be ok, it's just going to be a lot more difficult. So make an extra effort to keep those items safe.

- I always wore my money belt under my pants and never brought it out in public.
- I slept with my money belt under my pillow every night.
- If I was going in the water and couldn't keep it on me I would hide it in a separate location from the rest of my stuff.
- When I was in public areas I'd make sure to keep my wallet in my front pocket and switch over my backpack and carry it on my chest.

#### Keep It Old School

When you're out in public (especially high tourist areas), resist the urge to pull out your electronics to entertain yourself or get directions.

As soon as you bring out anything expensive, you've let the people within eyesight know. Most thieves don't steal at random, they see something of value and go after it.

Instead of using your phone for directions, grab a paper map from the hostel or write down the directions you need on a piece of paper or notepad before heading out.

Instead of using your iPad or Kindle to play games/read, use a paper book or entertain yourself in other ways like people-watching.

#### Be Aware

- **Be a tourist** – It's ok to be a tourist and do tourist things. But, when you put on the fanny-pack, bust out the lonely planet guide book and sling the camera around your neck for a day on the town just be aware of how obviously touristy you look and be extra vigilant.
- **Be careful traveling in a pair** – In my opinion, traveling in a pair is the most dangerous. You're in a small non-threatening group and usually talking to one another. This not only means you're distracted, but when you're in a foreign country anyone in earshot can hear your accent and easily tell you're not a local.

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As a solo traveler you most likely won't be talking and you'll be more aware of your surroundings. When you're in a large group you come off as more threatening and there are many more eyes to notice a stranger doing something sketchy.

- **Spot the thieves first** – Most thieves work in groups so look for people watching you (or others) intently and people who are making an effort to stay in a close proximity to you.
- **Notice touching** – when I was in crowded areas I got in the habit of protecting valuables and rechecking anytime I was touched.

### [Give It Up](#)

If you ever do get mugged, give them what they want and don't linger.

**Your life is worth more than the amazing pictures, the expensive camera and the money.**

## After The Dust Has Settled

The adrenaline is going to be pumping. You need to focus and breathe and follow these steps:

1. **Get to a phone** and call the local Police and get a police report filled out as soon as possible. Use someone from the hostel/hotel/wherever you're staying to help you speak the local language if there's a language barrier. You should have access to all of your serial numbers, so make sure they all get into the police report (it will make filing an insurance claim much easier).
2. **Write down every detail** you can about the incident while you're waiting for police to arrive.
  - Where were you were
  - The date and time
  - What did the thief look like (if you saw them),
  - What happened
  - What was taken (with serial numbers and descriptions)
  - Sign and date it with the time
3. **Cancel credit cards** if they were stolen
4. **Change passwords**
5. **Contact Insurance Company** if you have insurance to start a claim
6. **Figure out if what was stolen** was something you needed and then work on a way to replace it or keep traveling without it

## If your passport was stolen while abroad (for US citizens)

1. Contact the nearest US Embassy or Consulate and report it stolen as soon as possible to prevent identity theft. Use the US Embassy Locator: <http://www.usembassy.gov/>
2. Gather as much of the following before going in to make replacement go quickly
  - A passport photo ([passport photo requirements](#))
  - Identification (driver's license, expired passport, etc.)
  - Evidence of US citizenship (birth certificate, photocopy of stolen passport)
  - Travel itinerary
  - Police Report (not required but helps)
  - [DS-11 Application for Passport](#) (may be completed at time of application)
  - [DS-64 Statement regarding a lost or stolen passport](#) (may be completed at time of application)
3. [Full FAQ for lost or stolen passports abroad](#)

## Moving Forward

Ideally you'll never have to find out if the techniques in this guide are helpful.

However, if you ever do have to deal with theft, my goal in writing this is to adequately prepare you to make the experience as painless as possible as you process it all and move forward with your travels.

You should never let the idea of getting your stuff stolen (or other negatives) paralyze you from doing what you want to do in this life.

All you can do is prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Remember, whatever happens to you, it can always be worse. So look for the positive in an otherwise negative experience. Thank the people around you help you with language barriers and family/friends back home who will do everything they can to help you.

You will get through it, and you will be better for it.

Live Gratefully,

Dave