Is it safe to travel again? Not exactly, experts say

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People wait in the TSA line at Philadelphia International Airport on Oct. 5. Travel is still fraught with danger, and you could quickly find yourself in trouble, writes Travel Troubleshooter Christopher Elliott. (Tyger Williams / The Philadelphia Inquirer via Tribune News Service)

By Christopher Elliott

Special to The Seattle Times

Travel Troubleshooter

The frenetic summer travel season is a fading memory. The pandemic lockdowns and masking requirements are history. So is it finally — *finally* — safe to get out there and travel?

Maybe, maybe not. Experts say travel is still fraught with danger, and you could quickly find yourself in trouble.

There are still threats, including an uptick in COVID cases and several geopolitical dust-ups. But the biggest threat is — well, *you*.

"The mistake travelers make is believing the biggest security risk is some external force," says Adam Bardwell, a former U.S. Army Green Beret and a security operations supervisor at Global Rescue. "In reality, the biggest security risk travelers face is their poor planning, lack of knowledge about the location and ignoring indications of danger."

You don't have to look far for recent examples. Just last month, a British tourist died after trying to climb the Stairway to Heaven in Dachstein, Austria. It's a 131-foot ladder suspended in midair over a deep gorge. I grew up near Austria's Alps, and if there's one thing I know about those mountains, it's that you can't be too careful.

Earlier this summer, another British man (I'm sure that's a coincidence) died after trying to drink every cocktail on the menu at his hotel's pool bar in Jamaica. The resort serves beverages with names like the Club Stinger and Kamikaze, which should have been enough warning.

I'm not bringing up these incidents to embarrass anyone, only to say that you can enjoy the thrill of climbing the Alps or chilling with a cold one by the pool without dying. It just takes a little planning and some common-sense precautions.

Is it safe to travel now?

Probably, but there's a giant asterisk next to that answer.

A quick scan of the State Department travel advisories suggests that the usual suspects for international travel are relatively safe. Popular countries for American visitors, such as England, France and Italy, are all good to go, according to the government. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're safe for you.

John Gobbels, chief operating officer of air medical transport and travel security program at Medjet, says hot spots can sometimes flare up faster than the government can keep track of them.

"Growing political tension between China and Taiwan, and the Ukraine-Russia conflict potentially expanding, definitely has people traveling to Asia and Eastern Europe this fall on edge," he says. "The riots in France, protests across Central and South America, earthquakes, fires, hurricanes and Christmas market tragedies past don't help traveler confidence either."

Even if you avoid all those places, travel is still risky, he says. You could go someplace perfectly safe, only to get sick. That's more of a problem now than it was this summer, says Gobbels.

"We're already seeing our usual fall bump in calls from members hospitalized with respiratory issues," he says, "and this will only increase the rest of 2023 and early 2024."

What if you're traveling domestically? The State Department doesn't rate U.S. travel safety, but Canada and the U.K. do. You can visit Canada's travel advisory site to find out how dangerous traveling in the States is (and it *is*). The U.K. advice is deeply troubling: "Terrorists are very likely to try to carry out attacks in the USA."

Oh, my.

What kind of precautions should you take before you travel?

This is no time to let down your guard, experts say.

"It's a good idea to dial up your usual safety precautions when traveling," says Christina Tunnah, general manager of marketing and brands at World Nomads.

Here's a short list:

- Research your destination carefully. Plan your itinerary to avoid any dangerous places and activities.

- Make sure all your routine and travel vaccinations are up to date, especially if you're traveling abroad.

- Buy adequate travel insurance and a medical evacuation membership such as Medjet or Global Rescue.

- Have a plan B in case something goes wrong. Carry a list of emergency contacts and discuss the game plan with your travel companions in the event something goes wrong.

Of all these, the most overlooked may be careful planning. Consider what happened to Daniela Shields, whose daughter Alli was an exchange student in Hong Kong in 2019. When she bought a Global Rescue membership for Alli, she had no way of knowing that her daughter would be caught in the violent protests. But when the demonstrations started, Alli knew where to turn. Global Rescue quickly arranged for Alli to fly back home and out of harm's way.

"No one plans on security issues when they travel," says Shields, an endodontist from Paducah, Ky. "When it happens, you need to know how to get help."

How to stay safe when you travel

I love reading other travel stories that claim they can keep you safe when you travel with a few easy tips. What nonsense!

Travel will *always* be dangerous, to a certain extent. Even the safest places can be problematic. Tourists die or disappear in countries with sterling reputations.

But there are things you can do to mitigate the risk. Narendra Khatri, principal of Insubuy, says he's seen more travelers asking for extra safety features on their policies, including telehealth and lost passport assistance.

"We're also seeing more interest in stand-alone kidnap and ransom insurance, particularly for high net-worth individuals," he says. "Many customers who feel they are at risk or traveling to a part of the world where abductions are possible can get a little extra peace of mind with this coverage."

That's sound advice. Double-check your travel insurance policy to make sure it covers everything that could go wrong.

But most important, don't be the problem. You can travel more safely by planning for trouble. Don't assume that travel is safe just because the summer crowds have thinned and the lockdowns are a distant memory.

Because travel is not completely safe, and it never will be. Take it from me, someone who is on the road 365 days a year.

"Remember," says Angela Borden, a product strategist of Seven Corners, "anything can happen when you're traveling."

Elliott's strategies for staying safer

Focus on your health

Fall is a time to double down on your health — and especially this fall. "It's essential to consider the heightened risks associated with the colds and the flu," says Rajeev Shrivastava, CEO of VisitorsCoverage, an insurance marketplace. COVID cases and hospitalizations are also rising, so consider taking common-sense precautions such as getting vaccinated, masking up on the plane and packing hand sanitizer.

Stay connected

One of the biggest mistakes travelers make is turning off their cellphone's wireless plan when they're abroad to save a buck, says Katie Crowe, a spokesperson for travel insurer Battleface. "Making sure you're connected is critical for safety," she says. The workaround? A better connection. Battleface recently teamed up with eSIM company Celitech to allow customers to buy and install an eSIM within their mobile devices through a QR code activation.

Know who to call when you run into trouble

Few travelers plan for the worst, even after years of the pandemic. "Who is going to help you at 2:30 in the morning when something goes wrong?" asks John Rose, chief risk and security officer at ALTOUR. It can be your travel adviser, travel insurance company or medical membership. (And while we're at it, you should sign up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program if you're leaving the country. That way, if something goes wrong, the nearest embassy or consulate can help you get home.)

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer for Elliott Advocacy. Email him at chris@elliott.org or get help with any consumer problem by contacting him at elliott.org/help.