
Americans on the Move: Forewarned is Forearmed

By

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Whether travelling on the government's business, or simply for pleasure, many of us frequently find ourselves as guests in hotels, both in the United States and abroad. In light of the fact that terrorist threats seem to be once again on the increase, the American away from home could prove a lucrative target. Additionally, we sometimes assume, incorrectly, that the hotel offers the same degree of security and safety as the home. In an effort to provide a safer environment, the following thoughts on staying in hotels are offered. Basically, the hotel stay can be considered in three distinct parts: pre-arrival, arrival, and the stay itself. Some thoughts are provided on each phase.

PRE-ARRIVAL

Although it may not always be possible, try not to make a reservation in advance. Your name on a reservation slip only keys others to your expected presence. In addition, if travelling abroad, an American name could single you out for special attention. If a reservation is required, use only a last name and initial; avoid rank, title, etc. If additional information is required, provide something generic, such as an office symbol.

Insure that those responsible for your security (if applicable) or those with whom you are to meet are aware of your travel plans and selection of hotel. If for some reason you must change your plans or alter your arrival and departure times, let someone know. Armed with this information actions can be taken immediately if you fail to arrive.

Be conscious when using a credit card. A good deal of credit card fraud occurs in the world, and your credit card number may fall victim to this crime. Rather than providing a credit card imprint for your lodging, consider carrying travellers cheques and paying for your stay in cash.

ARRIVAL

First, you should select a room between the 2nd and 9th floors of the hotel (providing room selection is an option). The ground floor provides access to virtually anyone and cannot be considered secure. In the United States, the ladders on fire-fighting equipment normally extend only to 9 floors. Above that level you climb or jump. In many foreign countries, hotels are not as tall, nor is there the availability of fire-fighting equipment that we enjoy here. Select a hotel and room appropriate to your surroundings.

Be aware that the building codes in place in the United States do not exist in many parts of the world. Structural support, quality of materials, etc., may be vastly different. The building may be subject to severe structural damage or collapse during the slightest tremor. Again, consider where you are going before you select a place to stay.

Upon actual arrival at the hotel you will probably be exhausted, so check in, go to your room and relax for a few minutes. Once you have gathered your strength and your wits, go back down to the hotel entrance and take a fresh look at your surroundings.

After viewing the hotel entrance and lobby, find the stairwell and *walk* up the stairs to your floor. This walk will insure that the stairwell is not blocked, doors are not locked, and that you

have an escape route in the event of a fire. If the hotel burns, the elevators will probably be inoperative. Also check for fire protection equipment, such as fire extinguishers, ropes, alarms, etc.

When you reach your floor, walk to your room, counting doorways and other openings as you go. If the hotel were to catch fire, the likelihood is that there would be a loss of lighting and the hallways may be filled with smoke forcing you to crawl to safety. A lack of knowledge of the location of the stairs or other exits could cost you your life.

Having returned to your room, take a good look around. Are the windows locked or otherwise sealed? Can they be opened? If not, is there something in the room (chair, table, etc.) that could be used to break the window? Assuming that the window could be opened or smashed out, would this provide you an escape route, i.e. a ledge or fire escape, or are you faced with a sheer drop. If the window escape route is impractical, then you are forced to use the doorway and the hall.

Consider packing a small, portable smoke alarm in your suitcase. The cost is minimal, and the reward can be your life. It can easily be stuck to the ceiling or set on a table in your room, and can provide you that necessary few seconds of extra warning to allow you to escape. Also, consider bringing along a small flashlight on your travels. In a fire, electrical power may be lost and you will be plunged into darkness and smoke. That small bit of light may easily make the difference.

By now you are probably ready for a shower. Go ahead. If there is a bathtub in your room, fill it with water after you clean up. In the event of fire, you will have an available source of water in your room. You can soak yourself in it before leaving the room, you can soak towels in it to make a mask to facilitate breathing in the smoke-filled environment, or as a last resort you can climb into the tub and await rescue.

THE STAY

Get into the habit of always leaving your important items (passport, money, credit cards, identification) in the same place wherever you stay. It may be the bedside table, the top of the TV, or some other place, as long as you are consistent. Consider placing all of your important items in a plastic bag or pouch next to the bed. In the event you have to jump up and run, everything you need is immediately at hand.

If the smoke alarm goes off and you must grab and run, check the door before opening it. If the door is hot, do not open it. Remember, check the door *with the backs of your hands*. Even with the backs of your hands burned you can still hold on to objects which could facilitate your escape, such as a ladder, rope, etc. You cannot grab anything with your palms burned.

Assuming that the door is not hot, the hallway is not filled with flames, and you have made the decision to leave the room--*make sure you have your key with you*. You may not be able to escape through the hallways and may need to return to your room. Don't let yourself get trapped in a hallway without a key to let yourself back into the room. Consider placing your keys in the pouch containing your other important items.

Hopefully, you will never find yourself in a situation where you will have to escape from a burning building. But forewarned is forearmed. A few simple precautions and a little bit of planning and common sense may mean the difference between life and death. When the smoke alarm buzzes in the middle of the night, it will be too late. You will already be committed to the choices, or lack of choices, that you have made.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major John R. Morrisette, USA, has been a faculty member at DISAM since August 1985, specializing in security assistance financial topics. He holds an MS in Systems Management (1982) from the University of Southern California, and a BS in Accounting (1975) from the University of South Carolina. Major Morrisette has been reassigned to the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Logistics, HQ, U.S. Army Europe, as a Logistics Planning Officer, and will report to his new duty assignment in June, 1989.