

Brenda Elwell writes a popular monthly Single Parent Travel Newsletter available on e-mail through her Web site, www.SingleParentTravel.net. Her new book entitled, "The Single Parent Travel Handbook," is now available and may be ordered through her Web site. A veteran of over thirty years in the travel industry, she has traveled to over 60 countries and 45 states, half of them with her two kids in tow. Brenda may be reached via e-mail at Brenda@SingleParentTravel.net.

SINGLE PARENT TRAVEL SAFETY - "FLIPPING THE TRIANGLE" **by Brenda Elwell, CTC**

When a single adult takes a child on vacation, one of the primary concerns is safety - safety for oneself and safety for one's child. This concern is particularly acute for a single parent Mom with young children. As a woman traveling alone with one or two kids, there is a tendency to feel extra vulnerable, especially in an unfamiliar or foreign locale. This needn't be the case if you follow a few simple procedures that will make your family look more confident and knowledgeable and less like potential victims.

- Keep your cash, passport and credit cards in a safe place, preferably spread about your body. For women this means discarding the purse in favor of a fanny pack or money pouch or pinning some emergency cash to the inside of your bra. For men it means keeping extra cash in a money belt rather than the back pocket wallet. Once your child is old enough to carry a backpack, stash some traveler's checks in his or her name in the backpack. (Good for emergencies).
- Always keep copies of passports, credit card emergency numbers, and traveler's check numbers in a safe place other than on your person.
- Walk with confidence. Know where you are going and how to get there before you leave your hotel room. If you have to stop to consult a map, get off the street corner and do it inside a store or away from the crowd. (Locals often assumed we were residents because of the way we walked. Even tourists came up to ask us directions).
- When traveling in third world countries do not wear any expensive jewelry. You are inviting theft. Everyone in your family, including your children, should wear only cheap plastic watches and sunglasses.
- Don't openly display your expensive camera in a crowded area. Keep it in a backpack or camera bag.
- Trust your instincts. If you feel an area to be unsafe, leave it or duck into a restaurant and have someone call you a cab.
- Learn the local customs and dress codes in advance. You may look like a tourist but at least you won't look like a dumb tourist.
- Before you go out at night, ask where it is safe to walk. Keep in mind areas that are very safe in the daytime may not be so after dark.
- When traveling in a rental car, keep your windows up and doors locked when stopping for traffic lights in the city, especially if you are traveling in a jeep. Jeeps are

great targets for quick snatch thefts. (I had my sunglasses ripped off my face in San Jose, Costa Rica while waiting in a jeep for the traffic light to change and yes, the windows were down).

- Have a plan if you get separated in a crowd and make sure all your children know the name of your hotel or are carrying the hotel name with them.

When my kids were twelve and five, we took our first single parent trip to Europe. It was impractical to hold them both by the hand in a crowded area, especially walking down city streets, so we devised a method of walking together that we dubbed "The Triangle." My daughter and I would walk close together, side by side, with my son tucked in front of us, leaving all of us hands free. This method worked beautifully as we traveled for years throughout the cities of Europe, the Orient, and Central and South America. None of us felt confined and I could always keep an eye on my young rambunctious son.

In the summer of 1995 we planned our first single parent family trip to the Middle East traveling to Syria and Egypt. We were going to visit Damascus and Palmyra on our own and then join my daughter's college friend, Karim, in his hometown of Aleppo, Syria. Upon arrival in Damascus our first order of business was to purchase our pre-reserved air tickets from Aleppo to Cairo, something we were unable to do in the United States. I knew that Syria was a cash society but I was unprepared for the fact that Syrian Airlines would not take my credit card as payment for the air tickets. Not only that, payment had to be in Syrian Pounds, not traveler's checks or U.S. dollars. We were forced to go to a bank about four blocks away to exchange our money. (ATMs are non-existent in Syria).

Banking in Syria is done outdoors. The bank teller sits behind a caged window and you, the customer, stand outside, completely exposed, to complete your transaction. Unable to find a bathroom, my daughter and I stepped aside to surreptitiously unpin some cash from our bras while my son shielded us from passers-by. We then approached the bank teller, cash in hand. In the Arab world, people do not form neat straight lines when they await service. They noisily crowd around the focal point, each demanding attention. It is part of their culture. Jet lagged and nervous, my daughter turned to all the men crowding around us and yelled "Back off!" The teller, seeing our distress, reinforced our command in Arabic and we had a few moments of peace to complete our money exchange. As we turned away from the teller with nearly \$800 in cash nervously clutched to our bosoms, we prepared to resume our triangle position to walk back to the office of Syrian Air. As I looked at my eighteen-year-old son, it suddenly dawned on me that my little boy had become a six-foot-tall, lean, mean, muscle machine.

It was time to flip the triangle.

Turning to Greg, I hastily whispered to him. "From here on in, you walk behind Monique and me. You keep watch for our backs and if anyone approaches us, stare them down, and if they still keep coming, shove them away and ask questions later. I am not about to lose all this money."

We successfully purchased our Syrian Air tickets and after a wonderful stay in Damascus and Palmyra we met up with our friend Karim in Aleppo and told him our banking story. He laughed so hard the tears rolled down his face. He patiently explained that Syria is such a theft-free society we could have dropped all our money on the street and people would have stopped in their tracks to scoop it up and return it to us.

Author's note:

In a recent article in "National Geographic Traveler," Control Risks Group, a London-based consulting firm, listed fourteen large cities throughout the world as having an insignificant or low security risk. Damascus, Syria was one of them.