



Outsmarting Pickpockets and Thieves

By Rick Steves

Purse-snatching and pickpocketing are rampant in places where tourists gather.

Thieves target Americans — not because they're mean, but because they're smart. Americans have all the good stuff in their bags and wallets. Loaded down with valuables, jetlagged, and bumbling around in a strange new environment, we stick out like jeweled thumbs. If I were a European street thief, I'd specialize in Americans — my card would say "Yanks R Us."

If you're not constantly on guard, you'll have something stolen. One summer, four out of five of my traveling companions lost cameras in one way or another. (Don't look at me.) In more than 30 summers of travel, I've been mugged once (in a part of London where only fools and thieves tread); my various rental cars were broken into a total of six times (broken locks, shattered windows, lots of nonessential stuff taken); and one car was hot-wired (and abandoned a few blocks away after the thief found nothing to take). But not one of my hotel rooms has ever been rifled through, nor any of my money-belt-worthy valuables ever stolen.

Many tourists get indignant when ripped off. It's best to get over it. You're rich and thieves aren't. You let your guard down and they grab your camera. It ruins your day and you have to buy a new one, while they sell it for a week's wages on their scale. And the score's one to nothing. It's wise to keep a material loss in perspective. Remember, nearly all crimes suffered by tourists are nonviolent and avoidable. Be aware of the pitfalls of traveling, but relax and have fun. Limit your vulnerability rather than your travels.



Be Prepared

Make photocopies of [key documents](#) — your passport, [rail pass](#), car-rental voucher, itinerary, prescriptions (for eyewear and/or medicine), and more — to bring along. You could also bring a couple of extra passport pictures. If you have expensive electronics (camera, tablet, smartphone, etc.), consider getting [theft insurance](#). Take a picture of your pricey gear and store the picture at home, in case it'll help you settle an insurance claim. As you travel, back up your digital photos and other files frequently. Leave your fancy bling at home. Luxurious luggage lures thieves. The thief chooses the most impressive suitcase in the pile — never mine.

Avoiding Theft

If you exercise adequate discretion, stay aware of your belongings, and avoid putting yourself into risky situations (such as unlit, deserted areas at night), your travels should be about as dangerous as hometown grocery shopping. Don't travel fearfully — travel carefully.

Here's some advice given to me by a thief who won the lotto.

Wear a [money belt](#). A money belt is a small, zippered fabric pouch on an elastic strap that fastens around your waist, under your pants or skirt. I never travel without one — it's where I put anything I really, really don't want to lose.



Leave your valuables in your hotel room. Expensive gear, such as your laptop, is much safer in your room than with you in a day bag on the streets. While hotels often have safes in the room (or at the front desk), I've never bothered to use one, though many find them a source of great comfort. Theft happens, of course, but it's relatively rare — hoteliers are quick to squelch a pattern of theft. That said, don't tempt sticky-fingered staff by leaving a camera or tablet in plain view; tuck your enticing things well out of sight.

Establish a "don't lose it" discipline. Travelers are more likely to inadvertently lose their bags than to have them stolen. I've heard of people leaving passports under pillows, bags on the overhead rack on the bus, and cameras in the taxi. Always take a look behind you before leaving any place or form of transport. At hotels, stick to an unpacking routine, and don't put things in odd places in the room. Run through a mental checklist every time you pack up again: money belt, passport, phone, electronic gear, charging cords, toiletries, laundry, and so on. Before leaving a hotel room for good, conduct a quick overall search — under the bed, under the pillows and bedspread, behind the bathroom door, in a wall socket...

When you're out and about, never idly set down any small valuable item, such as a camera, ereader, wallet, or rail pass. Either hold it in your hand or keep it tucked away. At cafés, don't place your phone on the tabletop where it will be easy to snatch — leave it in your front pocket (then return it to a safer place before you leave). Make it a habit to be careful with your things; it'll become second nature.

Secure your bag. Thieves want to quickly and unobtrusively separate you from your valuables, so even a minor obstacle can be an effective deterrent. If you're sitting down to eat or rest, loop a strap of your daypack around your arm, leg, or chair leg. If you plan to sleep on a train (or at an airport, or anywhere in public), clip or fasten your pack or suitcase to the seat, luggage rack, or yourself. Even the slight inconvenience of undoing a clip deters most thieves. While I don't lock the zippers on my bag, most zippers are lockable, and even a twist-tie, paper clip, or key ring is helpful to keep your bag zipped up tight — the point isn't to make your bag impenetrable, but harder to get into than the next guy's.

Stay vigilant in crowds and steer clear of commotions. Go on instant alert anytime there's a commotion; it's likely a [smokescreen for theft](#). Imaginative artful-dodger thief teams create a disturbance — a fight, a messy spill, or a jostle or stumble — to distract their victims. Crowds anywhere, but especially on public transit and at flea markets, provide bad guys with plenty of targets, opportunities, and easy escape routes. Be on guard in train stations, especially upon arrival, when you may be overburdened by luggage and overwhelmed by a new location. Take turns watching the bags with your travel partner. Don't absentmindedly set down a bag while you wait in line; always be in physical contact with your stuff. If you check your luggage, keep the claim ticket or locker key in your money belt; thieves know just where to go if they snare one of these. On the train, be hyper-alert at stops, when thieves can dash on and off — with your bag. City buses that cover tourist sights (such as Rome's notorious #64) are happy hunting grounds. Be careful on packed buses or subways; to keep from being easy pickings, some travelers wear their day bag against their chest (looping a strap around one shoulder). Some thieves lurk near subway turnstiles; as you go through, a thief might come right behind you, pick your pocket and then run off, leaving you stuck behind the turnstile and unable to follow. By mentioning these scenarios, I don't want you to be paranoid...just prepared. If you keep alert, you'll keep your valuables, too.