

The Guide to Travelling in Higher-Risk Environments

Grant Rayner



A well-worn community wall in Damascus, Syria.
Photo taken in 2020 by the author.

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The Guide to Travelling in Higher-Risk Environments

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1. Travel
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5. Travel Planning
6. Adventure Travel
7. High-risk travel

The information in this book is intended to be generic and is not tailored to any one location. If you are travelling to a higher-risk location, seek professional advice in advance of your travel.

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[Pre-Trip Research Questionnaire](#)

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[Pre-Trip Administration Checklist](#)

[Vehicle Security Checklist](#)

For Aidan.

May you travel widely and always make your way back home safely, wherever that home is.

PREFACE

We humans are, by nature, highly inquisitive.

From the beginning of time, we've wondered what's over the next hill or across the sea. We've eschewed safety for the allure of discovery.

We're all, in our hearts, explorers.

Today, our desire to travel is a manifestation of this ingrained need to explore the world around us. We travel to engage in new experiences for ourselves or in search of new opportunities for our businesses.

Travelling exposes us to new sights and sounds, and to novel and unique situations. These experiences allow us to grow as individuals. They give us new knowledge and broaden our perspectives.

Travel can, in essence, make us better people.

Stepping out of your home routine into a new and unfamiliar environment is exhilarating and exciting. If you're travelling with friends, you'll develop great memories that you will share for a lifetime. If you're travelling alone, you'll learn to be more resourceful and more resilient. If you're travelling for business, you could be opening up new opportunities to take your business to new heights.

These aspects are amplified when you travel to locations that are a little farther off the beaten track. Places where road rules are more like loose guidelines. Places where public infrastructure isn't nearly as reliable as at home. And

places where the definition of a ‘cosy hotel room’ differs somewhat from what you’re used to.

Such places are on the fringe. They’re not only harder to reach, but there can be real risks involved with travelling to them. Travellers to these places may be exposed to risks from criminals, militants or terrorists. Perhaps there is an ongoing insurgency or armed conflict. Or perhaps the location is also susceptible to natural disasters or disease outbreaks.

For these reasons, you won’t see as many travellers in these places as you might in Barcelona, Cancun or Bali. But that’s the beauty of visiting dangerous places—it’s in these higher-risk locations where the real adventures and opportunities begin.

The focus of this guide is simple: to get you to these higher-risk locations and back again in one piece.

Who Is This Guide For?

I’ve written this guide for those of you who choose to travel off the beaten path to unfamiliar and potentially hostile environments.

Some of you will have to travel to higher-risk locations for your work. You may be a journalist covering anti-government protests in Myanmar, an investor looking for new acquisitions in Nigeria, a geologist working at a remote mining exploration site in western Pakistan or a security contractor advising a client in the highlands of Papua New Guinea.

You could also be an intrepid traveller seeking new experiences in hard-to-get-to and higher-risk locations, such as Afghanistan or Syria.

That said, as I've been writing this guide, I've tried to make it as inclusive as possible. The advice and recommendations contained within this guide will apply to a range of locations and a range of different travel styles. I want this guide to be useful for both business travellers and backpackers. For both the adventurous and the less adventurous. For travellers of all genders and orientations, and for both the old and the young (and the young at heart). It's also for people of any ethnicity, religion or belief.

I hope that no matter who you are or how you fit into the world, you'll find this guide useful and practical.

Ultimately, the principles and approaches described in this guide will be useful to you no matter where you travel. Depending on where you live in the world, some of the advice may even be useful in your neighbourhood!

Who Am I?

Like you, I'm a traveller.

I've always loved travel, and I cannot imagine not travelling. I'm also drawn to the fringe—I love the challenge inherent with being in strange and new places.

My working life started in the military, and since 2002 I've worked as a security and crisis management consultant. My work involves a lot of travel to a lot of interesting places. Over the years, I have travelled to over 45 countries, both for business and leisure. My business travel has been diverse, from conducting crisis management exercises in New York City boardrooms to adjusting fields of fire for machine gun positions protecting a remote field camp in Pakistan.

Along the way, I've been fortunate to have some amazing experiences. I've drunk camel milk laced with venous blood

in Somalia (it looks like strawberry milk, but doesn't taste like it), coordinated armed anti-piracy operations in the Malacca Straits and negotiated with warlords in the South Pacific. In 2021, I worked with an international NGO to exfiltrate at-risk groups from Afghanistan. Overall, I've been exposed to a diverse mix of experiences. Some entertaining, others downright terrifying.

A lot of my work has involved supporting travellers who have gotten themselves into trouble. I've managed all kinds of traveller-related incidents, from tracking down missing business people in Thailand to coordinating the recovery of stranded travellers in cut-off areas of Nepal after a major earthquake in 2015.

One of the most formative experiences was working with a small team responding to the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami. The team coordinated searches for missing persons, and I planned and led the evacuation of a family out of one of the hardest-hit areas of Aceh in Indonesia. Among my experiences, the tsunami highlights that—even as an experienced traveller—you can't plan for all eventualities.

Responding to these incidents and others has provided me with unique insights into the many ways people can get themselves into trouble while travelling.

When I'm not travelling for my own projects, I provide training workshops to prepare travellers for the types of situations they may encounter while abroad. This training can be diverse, ranging from how to respond to terrorist attacks on hotels to how to secure information when operating in more insular and autocratic countries. In this guide, I'll be sharing some of the same information that's included in these workshops.

After many years of travel and many interesting projects in unusual places, I've built up a lot of experience. I'm now at a point where I feel it's time to share some of this experience with a broader audience.

That said, I'm acutely aware that there's still a lot to learn. Indeed, the process of writing this book has reminded me how difficult it can be to establish guidelines for complex and dynamic situations.

Importance Of The Basics

There is no end to the advice or 'tips' that a writer could provide regarding travel safety and security. A quick search online will also find countless checklists with tips to avoid every type of problem you can think of. It's hard to distil this information, and it's harder still to contextualise it and apply it in practice. Something considered an essential practice in one country may be completely irrelevant (or even dangerous) in another.

The reality is that there's no way you'll be able to remember all these tips or checklists, particularly when confronted with a confusing and stressful situation.

But there are a few fundamental principles that, if applied, will have a major impact on your security and safety while travelling. You can apply these principles in almost all contexts. I'll work through these fundamental principles in Chapter 2 of this guide, then expand on them in later chapters by applying them to different situations. If you can apply these fundamentals in practice, chances are you'll be able to effectively manage risk and assure your safety and security in any location.

Individually, each piece of advice is simple. It's designed this way because it has to be simple to have any utility at all.

I'm hoping that many of the recommendations I'll share with you in this guide will be self-evident. As you read through the guide, you should be thinking to yourself 'that's obvious' or 'of course that's what I'd do'. That's great. Of course, it may not be so obvious when you're in a completely unfamiliar environment, carrying a bag in each hand, sweating buckets in 40-degree heat while a police officer is yelling at you for some unknown reason. Context matters.

I've dealt with dozens of traveller emergencies where even experienced travellers have forgotten the basics. Some were walking in isolated areas alone at night. Some stayed out in bars after their colleagues had returned to the hotel. Still others had allowed themselves to get angry with locals. Whatever the incident, when interviewed afterward, many of these travellers were the first to admit they should have known better. And one thing was almost always true: the incident was entirely preventable.

Like any learned skill, the hardest part is knowing when to apply it. I'll walk you through different scenarios; however, it's going to come down to practice—the more you travel and the more you consciously apply these principles and skills, the better you'll get.

One of the most important things you need to understand from the outset is this: while there's potentially a lot that can go wrong, **you're never entirely helpless**. There are a lot of actions you can take to keep yourself safe, and none of them are particularly complex. Staying safe in higher-risk environments demands diligence and planning. It will also demand you apply some discipline when you're in the country. If something untoward does happen, it also demands you to apply common sense so that you can see yourself to safety.

Avoiding > Solving

One thing that you'll notice while reading through this guide is that I focus a lot on how to avoid problems in the first place.

Once you get into a difficult situation, it's hard in that moment to decide the best course of action to get yourself out of it. It's also hard to execute a specific course of action in a way that doesn't result in the situation getting even worse. In some situations, the only options available to you will appear to be bad options. The art of decision-making in critical situations is to be able to determine which option is the 'least bad' option and then execute that option.

It's not practical to list all the possible situations you may face as a traveller, and then explain all the possible ways to get yourself out of those situations. There are too many situationally dependent variables. In my mind, such an approach would do more harm than good.

As an example of how you can avoid known risks, later in this guide, I'll walk you through how to respond to a terrorist attack on your hotel. Even in that scenario, there are a host of variables relating to where you are when the attack starts, where the terrorists are, what their objectives are, what weapons or explosives they have, and what the security response is likely to be. Rather than trying to assess all of those things—in the middle of a terrorist attack—wouldn't it have been better to select accommodation that's secure and less likely to be on any group's radar? I'll explain how to do that before I tell you what your options are if your hotel is attacked.

In summary, when you're travelling to higher-risk locations, your mindset must focus on being proactive.

Avoid problems before they occur.

Everyone Is Lucky (Until They're Not)

I've travelled to many dangerous locations, and I've yet to experience a serious problem (okay, except for that one time in Tokyo).

Was I well prepared? Or was I just lucky?

The reality is that it's an indeterminable mix of good luck and good planning.

You may have travelled to higher-risk locations without incident as well. Don't let that make you complacent.

Business travellers are at most risk of complacency. Many organisations routinely send their employees to higher-risk locations. But the reality for most business travellers is that they're well insulated from any risks. They're picked up at the airport in a limousine and chauffeured to their five-star hotel. They will rarely, if ever, get out onto the streets. As such, their actual risk exposure is minimal. Given they're travelling on business, that's actually a sensible approach. However, the overall experience can be misleading and people can come away from such trips learning the wrong lessons.

Even if you're well prepared and experienced, the fact is that you can never control all the variables. As a result, if you don't apply sound principles while travelling it's not too difficult to get yourself into serious trouble.

Every incident has victims who never thought they'd be in that situation. The more you travel, the higher the probability of an incident occurring that impacts you directly. It would be a mistake to think nothing could happen to you while travelling. Of course, you can hope nothing happens, but hope doesn't replace diligent planning and disciplined action.

Positive thinking isn't proactive preparation.

Instil Confidence, Not Fear

I'm going to spend a lot of time in this guide focusing on the things that could go wrong during your travels. For some of you, this may make you wonder whether travel to higher-risk locations is worth the effort.

As you read, however, remember that my aim is not to frighten you or deter you from travelling. In fact, I want to do the opposite: I want to arm you with the knowledge you need to be able to travel more widely and immerse yourself more deeply than you have before.

I want to instil confidence, not fear.

I also want you to be fully empowered to take care of yourself. As you'll learn, in many situations there is no one that can come to your rescue. In that critical moment, you are your own best resource.

So, after reading this guide, you should not only be more aware of the risks but also be more aware of what you can do to proactively avoid or manage them.

Get Going

I would encourage everyone who reads this guide to develop a wanderlust—you'll be better for it. I also encourage you to be more adventurous with your travels and to push your boundaries.

At the same time, I want you to be safe and to come back in one piece. After all, if you don't come back, how will people hear about that time you drank whiskey infused with snake's blood in the company of a hill tribe?!

Enjoy reading, and if you're reading this on a flight right now, I wish you a happy and safe trip!



A room with a view in Baalbek, Lebanon. 2020.