

Vacations are something to which we all look forward, whether for fun, relaxation, sight-seeing, or a little of all three. However, being a victim of crime while you're gone, or coming home to find that criminals have taken advantage of your absence, can undo all the good that your vacation did—and then some.

Whether you're going to Rome or Reseda, for a month or for a weekend, here are a few simple tips to help keep you and your home from becoming a target while you're gone.

Pre-Trip

- Install good, sturdy locks on all windows and doors in your house, including the garage door and the door between your house and your garage. Make sure to lock them securely before you leave.
- Purchase and install timers for your house lights, both interior and exterior. Set your inside lights to turn on and off at different times, in a logical pattern (don't have your bedroom light turn off before the living room light, for example). Also put a radio or television on a timer.
- If you have valuables visible through the windows (televisions, for example), consider moving them to places where they can't be seen from outside.
- Tightly close the drapes and blinds. If you only have sheer, see-through curtains, consider purchasing and installing heavy, opaque curtains so that burglars can't see what you have inside.
- Engrave all of your valuables with your driver's license state and number (for example, "CA A0123456"), and post signs or stickers in conspicuous places that you participate in Operation ID. Also write down the serial numbers, makes, and models of any items that have them (televisions, appliances, laptops, etc.), and keep the list in a safe place.
- The biggest tip-off to a family on vacation is

when the house looks like no one's home. Find a trusted neighbor who will agree to pick up your mail and newspapers, remove any flyers from your door or porch, and maintain your lawn and plants while you're gone. Give this person a key so that they can check periodically to make sure no one's gotten in. Make sure that they have your trip plans and an emergency contact number if something does happen.

- NEVER leave a key under the mat, in a planter, under a rock, on a door ledge, etc. Burglars know ALL the hiding spots.

During Your Trip

- Use traveler's checks instead of carrying around large amounts of cash, and never display any cash you do have openly.
- Keep a record of your traveler's check numbers, credit card numbers, and the phone numbers to call each company in a safe place, in case your wallet or purse gets lost or stolen.
- Dress the way the locals dress! While this isn't so much of a concern here in the U.S., it can make a *huge* difference when travelling abroad. Clothing customs vary from region to region, and crooks can often spot a tourist simply by the clothes worn.
- Also be careful about what you display—don't wear expensive jewelry or fancy clothes (unless of course the occasion merits it, such as a fancy party or an elegant restaurant). Keep your camera in your bag when you're not using it, and keep your bag close to your body while out and about.
- Don't leave maps and travel guides visible in your car; put them in the glove compartment.
- If you ever suspect that you're being followed, go to the nearest business and call the police or sheriff's department.
- Follow common sense parking rules: don't leave valuables visible in your car—take them with

you or hide them in the trunk *before* you start driving; park only in well-lit, busy areas; always lock your car after entering or leaving it, even if only for a moment, and keep your windows rolled up when you're not in the car; check your backseat before you get in the car to make sure no one's hiding in it.

- Consider wearing a money belt or under-the-shirt pouch to keep your money/traveler's checks, credit cards, and ID close to you and out-of-sight.
- Be aware of your surroundings at all times. Never advertise your travel plans to strangers, including routes you plan on taking or how much money your trip or hotel is going to cost.

Sight-Seeing

- Ask the front desk at your hotel/motel for directions to attractions that you'd like to visit.
- If you get lost, go into an open business and ask for directions; don't ask people you see on the street. Stopping and staring at street signs or addresses may tip-off a crook that you're a tourist.
- Select tour guides carefully, and go on group tours whenever possible (the larger the group the better).
- Ask the desk at your hotel/motel or stop in at the local police or sheriff's station to find out if there are any areas of town that you should avoid.
- If older children go off separately, make sure they understand the importance of keeping track of the time and returning on time. Consider having

them carry a cell phone so they can check in or call for help, and teach them to keep it close to them at all times.

Hotel & Motel Security

- Don't leave valuables in your room. Take them with you or put them in the hotel/motel safe. This includes jewelry, cash, credit cards, keys, etc.
- Unpack your luggage into the room's dresser or wardrobe, and arrange your belongings so you'll know if anything is missing. Report any items you discover missing to management and the police.
- Always lock your door when you leave the room. When in your room, use *all* the locks. Consider purchasing a portable door lock to add another level of security; most of these will prevent even someone with a key from getting in.
- Even if you're expecting a visitor, such as a relative or room service, ALWAYS look through the peephole and ask who's knocking before opening the door, even with a door chain. Never open the door unless you're certain the person on the other side has a legitimate reason to enter your room—if in doubt, contact the front desk to ask.
- Lock your suitcases, even empty ones, to prevent them from being used to carry out your belongings.
- Know the most direct routes to and from your room and elevators, where the fire exits or fire escapes are, where the phone in your room is, and the locations of any public or common-use phones in the lobby or other areas you might visit.