

Protecting Yourself From Crime At Hotels

Awareness and Common Sense Go a Long Way When Traveling



Many hotels have security cameras in the lobby to monitor people coming and going, but that didn't stop this man from entering a hotel and allegedly committing a crime. (ABC News)

March 22, 2007 --- Three million Americans stay in hotels every night, and most of us believe they are perfectly safe.

Yet there are no data on how much crime happens in hotels --- the government doesn't keep track and the hotels themselves don't release that information.

That means it's up to guests to take steps to protect themselves.

Doug and Melissa Minney were checking out of an Orlando, Fla., motel when a gunman slipped through the door they had left propped open. They had been packing the car, and when they returned to their room they were confronted by the intruder.

"I turned around and had a gentleman pointing a gun at me," Doug said.

"I was scared. I didn't know what he was going to do," Melissa added.

The attacker stole their money, credit cards and cell phones.

Doug and Melissa escaped unharmed, but countless others are not so lucky.

Last week alone, an armed carjacking was reported in a Kansas City hotel parking lot, a teen was murdered at a Daytona Beach motel, and a salesman was robbed and stabbed at a Nevada hotel.

Wayne Cohen, a trial lawyer who deals with hotel crime, said 10,000 lawsuits were filed against the hotel industry last year.

"There are people at the front desk, there's commotion, there's activity, and you would think, 'Hey, I'm safe where I am,' and that is absolutely not the case," Cohen said.

Whether you're staying at a roadside motel or a large chain hotel, there are steps you can take to prevent criminals from taking advantage of you.

How to Stay Safe

Chad Callaghan, the head of Marriott Hotels security, said there are some do's and don'ts of checking in.

The first thing to consider, he said, are the differences between a motel and a hotel. Motels with doors that open onto the street are much less secure than hotels with interior rooms.

Many hotels also use security cameras to monitor activity in the lobby and hallways. As you check in, make sure that you don't leave your bags unattended.

Callaghan said the person who checks you in should not announce your room number where others might be able to hear it.

And what about that persistent urban myth that key cards contain your personal information?

"All we put on the key is the lock code, which tells the key which lock it will work in and also the amount of time that you're staying here," Callaghan said.

When you get to your room, be aware of your surroundings. Once you're inside, lock the deadbolt. If someone knocks on the door, use the viewport before opening it.

If someone at your door claims to be from the hotel, call down to the front desk to check.

And when you leave for the day, many security experts say it's a good idea to leave your TV or radio on to give any would-be burglars listening outside the impression that you're still in the room.

If you are the victim of a hotel crime, you should report it to the local police as well as the hotel.

You may need that police report to make an insurance claim, and filing a police report will help ensure that you are taken seriously.

Staying safe while traveling isn't rocket science but just a matter of remembering some basics, Callaghan said.

"I think that when you're packing for your trip, don't forget to pack your common sense --- it's as simple as that," he said.