

TRAVELING WITH AWARENESS

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Photo by Aaron Loomis

When the thrill of international solo adventure overrides the incessant warnings from your amygdala – the brain's fear center – it's crucial to balance mindfulness of potential dangers with preparation for the adventure ahead. But what does that actually look like? Where does one begin? A quick web search will either bombard you with all the tips and tricks that nefarious predators already know or leave you questioning the sanity of your life choices. Asking friends and family often only reinforces that growing apprehension. Fear not! I'm here to help you find your strength, sharpen your awareness, and reignite the wanderlust fueled by the prospect of your next adventure!

As a female fly fishing guide and international trip host as well as recreational traveler, I'm my best in chaos and novel experiences. I love meeting new people, seeing new

places, and immersing myself in different cultures and perspectives. Having grown up humbly in Minnesota, the life I live now is nothing short of a miracle – one I'm grateful for every day. There's something about the impact that travel (and fishing) has on my brain that is unmatched by anything else I've done. The need for exploration and the thrill of the unknown have led to some insane adventures while also teaching me invaluable lessons about the world, myself, and how to trust my instincts.

As much as I can plan (and hope things go accordingly), the misadventures have often fed a part of my soul that, until my late 20s, I hadn't realized was starving. Now, in my 40s, I can confidently say that, through much trial and error, I've learned how to travel in ways that enrich my life while avoiding less desirable (to put it mildly) experiences. And I'm here to share a bit of this knowledge with you!

What does "traveling with awareness" look like? When I think of it, I often recall one of my more memorable clients, an American woman I guided from Santiago to Valparaíso, Chile. Picture her clutching an anti-theft bag tightly to her chest, as if *Her Precious* might escape if she loosened her grip for even a second. Her eyes darted, scanning for danger; her anxiety was palpable. Was she traveling with awareness? Sure. But she was also broadcasting her fear, and thereby drawing the very attention she hoped to avoid.

While it's important to stay vigilant – "keep your head on a swivel" as former special ops spy and author Dan Schilling once told me – it's also crucial to avoid signaling fear. In the same conversation, he pointed out a hard truth: women, especially solo women, are immediately identifiable as targets. Knowing this fact isn't meant to incite fear but rather to empower because awareness is your best tool.

Schilling explains situational awareness in a digestible way: the more unfamiliar the place and the less safe you feel, the more frequently you need to check in with your surroundings and, most importantly, your gut. Assess external factors – the location, the language, the time of day, the people around you, and the transportation you're about to use. Then contrast these with your internal feelings; if something gives you pause, listen to that instinct and reassess accordingly even if you can't immediately identify the cause.

When and how you travel impacts your level of risk. Moving through populated areas during daylight hours, having clear directions, and providing regular updates to trusted friends and family drastically reduce vulnerability and allow you to move with confidence. In contrast to my aforementioned client, traveling with a purpose helps reduce your target profile: head high, shoulders back, making self-assured eye contact, and keeping belongings secure without drawing attention.

If you arrive in a new location under uncertain circumstances, gather your gear and find a safe spot to regroup. Quick pro tip: when traveling solo, ensure that everything fits on your person or can be transported without extra assistance. This prevents you from placing belongings outside a bathroom stall (for instance) and allows easier, more purposeful movement. Additionally, most travel toiletries come in carry-on sizes (reducing the need for larger, checked items), and anything else can usually be purchased upon arrival. When this isn't possible, consider shipping some amount of your belongings via a courier service.

Once settled, assess your resources. Is your phone fully charged? Carry at least one fully charged battery backup and a charging cord. Always pay for the international plan, especially when traveling solo; sharing your location and being able to ring for help is a monumental asset! Check in

with yourself: when did you last eat? Sleep? Drink water? Neglecting these basic physical needs impairs decision-making abilities and increases the likelihood of illogical fear cycles, heightened emotional states, and careless mistakes.

Next, check your surroundings. Are you in a reasonably safe location? Should you call a taxi or wait until daylight? Inform your contacts back home about your arrival, current plan, and your next check-in time. This provides peace of mind for them and accountability for you. If you ever feel uneasy, trust your gut and check in more frequently.

Spread out your cash. If exchanging currency, only exchange what you'll need; avoid airport exchanges, which have high fees and attract attention. Keep a large bill folded tightly against your skin in an inconspicuous location, rotate its spot daily, and distribute the rest on your person and throughout your belongings. Purchase prepaid universal debit cards (instead of using personal bank cards, thereby limiting potential losses) in reasonable increments to last the whole trip (hopefully!), then place them in various spots – but never with cash or other cards. Sewing secret pockets into inner liners and clothing is a great way to secure these items!

One last piece of advice: build yourself a safety network. Befriend the front desk staff, check in at tourist centers, and chat with locals in coffee shops. When you build rapport, you gain invaluable insights on what to look out for and what to avoid. Not only does this add another layer of security, it also enriches your experience – you might even make some lifelong friends!

Unfortunately, even the best-laid plans can go sideways. Having emergency systems in place can be a lifesaver. I always set up an "Oh Shit" folder online which can be accessed by trusted individuals back home. This cloud-based folder contains copies of my passport, Global Entry ID, debit cards (front and back), and emergency contact info for myself and anyone I may be traveling with.

A few lightweight security tools can add layers of protection. A rubber doorstop is excellent for securing hotel or hostel doors that open into the room. A small bell or noise-making device on doorknobs or windows can alert you to unwanted entry. Keeping an expired ID and one of the prepaid debit cards with minimal funds in your "daily" wallet can serve as a decoy in case of theft, keeping your actual documents and cards secure elsewhere.

Traveling alone is exhilarating and empowering, and it often comes with unique challenges. By balancing awareness with confidence, maintaining situational awareness, and trusting your intuition, you can embrace the adventure ahead while reducing the threats to your safety. And remember, ladies, no experience is worth compromising your well-being. Listen to your gut, stay prepared, and enjoy the ride! 🐦✈️