



## PERSONAL SAFETY PART 2

### SAFETY & SECURITY TIPS

**DISCLAIMER:** *These tips are written from a non-professional viewpoint, as a woman who travels solo, and based on what has worked for me. Some are what other people have told me worked for them. Remember – everybody is different. You need to work out what will work for you.*

Safety and security on the road while travelling is much the same as safety and security while you're at home – be aware of your surroundings and use common sense. It is no more dangerous when you're away than it is when you're at home.

I am not going to pretend to be an expert on self-defence or personal security, and this resource won't give you any tips on how to defend yourself. Nor will I give you tips like don't walk alone at night. Why shouldn't you? Refusing to do things just because you are a woman and 'should' be scared is what stops us experiencing life to its fullest. If the streets are safe, go for it. The only reason I can see not to walk alone at night is because the streets aren't safe – for anybody.

If you think it will help, there are many self-defence courses for women around. But to be honest, men generally *are* bigger, they *are* stronger, and if they want to attack you they can. Learning self-defence, while it will give you some good strategies, won't necessarily stop an attack. But nor is being attacked your biggest risk.

This chapter will give you some tips that I've learned, and that others have said work for them, to improve your safety and security when travelling.

### **Learn to differentiate 'fear' from 'real risk'**

Are you afraid of something because you've been told you should be, or because it's something that could actually happen?

*"the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself" – Franklin D Roosevelt*

Fear of the unknown is perhaps our greatest fear – fear of not knowing what's out there, or not knowing what to do about it. We are afraid because we've been told to be afraid, that the world is a scary place. Sometimes it's difficult to articulate what it is we're afraid of, there's just this general fear of not being able to cope.

Whether it's a fear or a risk, it is still a valid concern. When you've been conditioned to be afraid of something it is very difficult to overcome that. And women *have* been conditioned to be afraid. We are always told not to antagonise people, not to walk alone, not to wear certain things, not to go to certain places, not to be loud. We're even told if we do become victims it must somehow have been our fault, we must have done something to cause it.

Is it any wonder we're afraid?

But knowing the difference between a fear because we've been told we should be afraid, and a real risk will help you to work out what strategies to put in place to overcome them. [Do a risk analysis.](#)

I'm more afraid of a snake getting into my swag than somebody sneaking up and attacking me in the middle of the night while I'm asleep. It's not to say the second won't happen, but the first is far more likely. So I take precautions to prevent it. I keep my swag zipped unless I'm getting into or out of it. I zip it up as soon as I get out of it in the morning, and pull the canvas up as well. And I make sure the zipper is fully closed. If there's no opening, nothing can get in. Still, I put something else in the swag at night to check for movement or lumps that shouldn't be there before I get in.

### **Trust your gut**

If you get into a situation that doesn't feel right, whether it's a camping spot, or talking with a group of people, or travelling on a certain road. Whatever it is – leave. Even if you don't know why you feel like that.

Often it's not until we've left a situation that we put our finger on what was wrong.

Even if nothing was wrong, the fact that you feel worried means you won't enjoy it. It's not worth staying if all you're going to do is worry.

### **Let somebody know where you are and where you are going**

Good communications is one of the most important things you can put in place.

This includes making sure you have the correct tools (mobile phone, uhf, satellite phone) that work in your circumstances, to communicating with people regularly about where you are and what you are doing. Check in regularly so that people know you are OK, and know when to sound the alarm if you aren't.

[Click here for more on how to set up a communications plan](#)

### **Lock things away – including yourself**

It should go without saying, but always lock valuables away out of sight when you're not around, and don't leave your car unlocked or the keys in the ignition.

If somebody is trying to break into your van at night what you want to do is keep them out, not get in a position where they're already inside and you have to fight them off.

Many women sleep in their cars because they can lock the doors and lock themselves in. Ditto caravans. Having some sort of security around you (locked door and windows) makes it more difficult for people to break in at night

An alarm that's triggered when somebody tries to open the door is a good idea. Something very loud, like an air horn. You can get gas operated air horns from hardware and outdoor shops that could be rigged up to your door, or use a standard door alarm. As long as it's loud enough to shock anybody trying to break in and make them think twice. It will also wake you up (and most of the rest of the campsite) and give you time to react.

You can get zipper locks for tents or swags. They won't stop anybody getting in if they really want to, but they will probably deter those just taking advantage of an opportunity, and give you some warning to react (see below).

Always remember if you are locked in anywhere you still need to be able to get out quickly in an emergency. If there is a key lock make sure the key is somewhere easily accessible. If you're in a tent with a zip lock keep a sharp knife handy to cut your way out if you need to.

### *Shock value*

I know it doesn't sound very comforting, but if somebody is determined to attack you, or break into your van, they will do it. Unless you are a martial arts/self defence expert, there really is very little you can do about it.

However, most people aren't like that. A lot of people, particularly teenagers, are just out to shock, to have fun, to frighten. To take advantage of a situation.

Turn the tables.

Locks and alarms are one line of defence. You can also react – loudly.

And here's where your newfound ability to say 'fuck' comes into its own.

Bang on the side of your van and yell at them. Yell loudly. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

DO NOT threaten them with a weapon. Carrying a weapon is illegal. It is also statistically more likely to be used against you than by you. And if they call your bluff you have no come back.

If it's a group of young people on the rampage ask yourself "What would I do if they were my children?" Then do it. Yell at them, tell them to stop, tell them to behave. You are far more likely to get a "sorry ma'am" than to have them attack you. Unless they are violent, in which case lock yourself in somewhere.

Once at my local beach a group of young people were throwing rocks at an uninhabited building, breaking windows or having rocks bounce back onto the footpath. People, including men, crossed the street to avoid them. Not being a shrinking violet I put on my best mum voice and yelled "Oi, you lot. Stop that." They dropped their rocks, looked sheepish, muttered to themselves and got into their cars and left. Most young people are still afraid of their mothers.

### *A place for everything and everything in its place*

Particularly car keys.

If you do need to leave somewhere quickly, you need to be able to grab your car keys quickly. Have a place where you always put them, and make sure you always put them there. It might be one place during the day and another at night while you're asleep, as long as it's the same places each time. If you keep doing this it becomes second nature, and you can grab them quickly in an emergency.

The same is true for everything else in your setup. If you always put things in the same place you can see quickly if you have forgotten something or if something is missing. Your pack up becomes quicker and simpler because you know exactly where everything goes and it all fits in the same place all the time.

### ***If you break down or get lost somewhere remote, DO NOT LEAVE YOUR VEHICLE***

I cannot stress this one strongly enough. **DO NOT LEAVE YOUR VEHICLE.** People die leaving their vehicle and trying to walk to get help.

When search parties go out looking for people who are lost the first thing they usually find is the vehicle. A car/van is much easier to spot than an individual walking through the landscape. You have water, food and shelter in the vehicle. It is by far the safest place for you.

Unless you have gone way off track, the odds are that somebody will come past within a few days. Call emergency services if you need to, but sit it out where you are. Always make sure you have enough water to last you for up to a week if you do get lost.

This is where good communications tools – such as a satellite phone – show their worth.

### ***Sort the good from the bad (tips)***

Safety tips are everywhere. It seems like every time I get online there's another safety tip for women.

The problem with these tips is that not only do they reinforce that there is a lot out there for us to be afraid of, they're also often not very good safety tips. Sometimes they're even dangerous.

The one that springs to my mind was one that came up repeatedly on every facebook group I was a member of. Friends of mine sent it to me as a good tip for my travels. This is the one about changing your voicemail message if you're lost/in trouble and your phone battery is running low.

It was ubiquitous. The problem was that not only was it *not* a good tip, it was more likely to get you into trouble than to save your life. Even emergency/rescue services were putting out posts asking people not to do this.

For those who haven't yet seen it, it was that if you get into trouble and don't have much battery life, change the voicemail on your mobile phone to say where you are and what you're doing.

If you haven't seen the main reasons not to change your voicemail message:

- If you are in trouble, need help and have mobile service, your first call should be to emergency services. Listen and do what they tell you.
- Do not waste battery life by trying to change your voicemail message. You need to maintain as much battery as you can in case emergency services need to call you. Close any apps that are open
- Send out a group text message if you want to contact other people. Texting uses far less battery life than changing a voice message. Make the text very clear and let them know exactly what you want them to do

There are other reasons, but these ones are enough.

Even if something sounds good and logical, question everything in it before deciding that it is something you would do. Including these tips 😊

**Tip: Men are just as afraid as you are (but they don't let it stop them)**

Just about everybody is afraid of young people, particularly young men in groups. They're loud, they take up space, they do stupid things. And men are just as afraid of them as you are.

*There was a group of teenagers harassing campers in the middle of the night. They were yelling and banging on the walls of vans. It was really frightening. But none of the other campers even turned on a light.*

This is a true story from a solo woman traveller. While the situation might have been worse if she was camping on her own it shows that you can't necessarily rely on other people if something is happening. She also says

*When they came back I was ready. I banged on the walls of my van as they approached and screamed like a banshee. They took off*

The reality is that most men are perfectly ordinary. They're not dangerous to you but nor are they protectors. They are just as afraid as you are.

And men are far more likely to be victims of violent crime than women. But nobody tells them not to travel.

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### Some dos and don'ts

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DO trust your gut. If something doesn't feel right take note. Chances are you've noticed something unconsciously that is worrying you. Even if there's absolutely nothing wrong, the fact that you are worried means you won't enjoy yourself. Move on.

DO Lock valuables away out of sight and lock your vehicle when you're not around. A lot of theft is opportunistic – if they see things left unattended they are more likely to try to steal them. DON'T leave your keys in your vehicle for the same reason.

DO set up a communications plan with somebody at home to let them know where you are. And stick to that plan. If you are going to be out of mobile range for a while, let them know, and let them know when to start worrying or call out emergency services.

DO work out those things that *are* more likely to happen and put in place strategies to manage them, and DON'T worry about those things that aren't.

DO be organised. Know where everything goes and make sure you put it there.

DO NOT travel with a weapon. Not only is it illegal, it is statistically more likely to be used against you than against your attacker. Even something like wasp spray is probably not a good idea. How many times have you picked up a spray can and sprayed it in the wrong direction? Even when it's daylight and you're not panicked. Now imagine if you did that with somebody about to attack you.

DO NOT let fear stop you. Use your fear to push yourself to try new things.

DO NOT leave your vehicle and try to walk to safety. Sit it out until somebody comes to rescue you.