



## Travel after the attacks: What to know if you decide to go

Christopher Elliott, Special for USA TODAY 8:50 a.m. EDT March 28, 2016

Following a fresh wave of terrorist bombings in Turkey and Belgium that seemed to target visitors, travelers like Dianne Bush want to know how to save their vacations.

She'd booked an apartment in Istanbul from April 4 to 11 through Airbnb, knowing the risks. But the latest incident, a March 19 suicide bombing that killed two Americans, hit too close to home.

"The bomb went off in the main tourist shopping area," she says. "That's a place I would surely visit."

Bush doesn't scare easily. She's a police officer from Cranbourne East, Australia. But her Airbnb host insisted that her reservation is only partially refundable, despite the company's claim that it offers full refunds for political unrest.

All across the world, travelers are asking similar questions, particularly in light of last week's airport bombings in Brussels. Should we stay or go? If we go, how do we keep safe? Should we take any additional precautions on the road?

Nick Shapiro, an Airbnb spokesman, said the company was "heartbroken" about the recent terrorist bombings. In Brussels, the company took immediate action that allowed Airbnb hosts to offer their place for free to those in urgent need of somewhere to stay. Airbnb does, indeed, offer an exception to its refund rules for cases like this, and when I asked about Bush's case, it agreed to review her case. "She will get a full refund," said Shapiro.

Other travel companies loosened their refund and change policies in the wake of the bombings, but were wary of saying too much publicly, for fear of opening a floodgate of refund requests. In other words, there are many other guests like Bush who are quietly canceling their vacations and receiving a refund.

Others are undecided. Traci Fox, a college professor from Philadelphia, has plans to visit a friend in Brussels this spring, but doesn't know if she should go. "I believe in not living in fear but being smart, but my traveling companion is panicking," she says. "It's a hard choice."

In the short term, visitors to a destination hit by terrorism should review their travel plans and consider deferring non-essential travel, says Jim Hutton, chief security officer for On Call International, a travel risk management company in Salem, N.H. "There are now tremendous amounts of logistical issues, including longer lines at airports, more thorough baggage screening and handling and a likely shortage of hotel accommodations in Europe," he adds.

If you're planning a summer trip to Europe, you can take steps to ensure your safety and security. "There are several things travelers can do to stay safe," says Roy Berger, president of MedjetAssist, a Birmingham, Ala., company that provides air medical transport.

Berger recommends signing up for the U.S. Department of State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), a free service that allows travelers to receive real-time, detailed updates of country-specific warnings and alerts, which helps travelers avoid problem countries and areas and are essential for international travel, he says.

Pay attention to any warnings, advises Christie Alderman, a vice president at Chubb Personal Risk Services. "The State Department issues travel warnings and travel alerts that outline concerns within a country," she says. For example, just last week, the government issued a travel alert for Europe. "The warnings and alerts outline specific concerns and provide helpful guidance on ways travelers can protect themselves," she says.

Even if you get the all-clear, and no further attacks happen between now and your European vacation, you still have to be careful.

"Plan for the worst," advises Anthony Roman, a counter-terrorism expert based in Lynbrook, N.Y.

Among the required precautions: Make an emergency plan (see below). Memorize all of your hotel emergency exits and be prepared to find them with limited to no visibility. Register with your embassy and keep the numbers of the nearest embassies and consulates with you. And hope you never have to use them.

Bottom line: If you have a trip coming up soon, you can probably postpone without losing a lot of money. Your airline, hotel or car rental company is likely to be more understanding than you expect. But if you're traveling later this year, take all the necessary steps to protect yourself, and in the words of my colleague Ed Hewitt, "go anyway."

### **How to prepare for your trip to Europe**

- **Make a plan.** Know what you'll do in the event of an attack, say experts. In addition to notifying the State Department, let a friend or relative know where you'll be. "It's important to stay in touch with friends and family to ensure they know whereabouts and how to reach you in the event of an emergency," says John Renderio, vice president of global security and intelligence at International SOS, a global travel security company.
- **Pack what's important.** Carry your emergency contact information, money, credit cards, signed passport and emergency information in your carry-on luggage and keep it with you at all times, advises MedJet's Berger. "Make sure to have at least two weeks of daily medications with you," he says.
- **Avoid targets and practice the art of blending.** That's the advice of Michael Brein, a Seattle psychologist who specializes in travel. Wear muted colors. Don't stand out and make yourself an easy target. And avoid large gatherings of people. "My simplest advice is to avoid big crowds at busy times of days as well as major, public soft targets," he says. Those include large public events and festivals where a terrorist could cause havoc.

*Christopher Elliott is a consumer advocate and editor at large for National Geographic Traveler. Contact him at [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org) or visit [elliott.org](http://elliott.org).*