

You Have to be Tough to be Stupid

It's raining again today.

The rain matches my mood of yesterday afternoon after being reminded that the Gods of Travel are intolerant of blatantly ignoring their rules of survival.

My dad is going on a grand tour of Europe, his first big international trip, so I've been sending him travel tip emails for a couple of months. As I was writing the "carry only a dummy wallet, only one card in a hidden pocket and a little cash in a different hidden pocket" advice a few weeks ago, I was thinking about how long it had been since I had followed that advice. I knew then it was only a matter of time.

Yesterday, while crowded up against a rail in the Forbidden City to get a shot of the interior and imperial throne of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, I got all of the cash picked from my billfold. The amazing thing was, my billfold was still there.

My strobe was dying, so I wiggled my way out from the rail, like a salmon swimming upstream, and walked over to change batteries in my strobe. As I bent down, my wallet flopped out of my pants pocket onto my camera backpack. Without my feeling a thing, the pickpocket had extracted my billfold from a pocket that had a closed velcro flap over a closed zipper that I have to use two hands to get the billfold into and out of. They had extracted the cash from inside two separate pockets of the billfold, either without fully removing the billfold, or by pulling the billfold out, extracting the cash and sticking the billfold halfway back in.

The bad news is we had just visited the ATM to stock up on local currency before going to the Forbidden City, so we lost about \$300 in local currency, plus the ~\$60 worth of Japanese Yen I still had in there. The good news is that all of my credit cards were still there. Either I had turned away just in time or they had put the billfold back so they couldn't get caught with anything that was identifiable (prison here is no joke). Additional good news is that I had split my cash between my money belt and billfold (the ATMs only dispense 100 Yuan notes, so the bundles are pretty thick, exchange rate is 8.23Y = \$1 USD). Also, Steph was carrying her ATM cash, and she was OK.

My own rules, honed over more than twenty years of travel to dodgy places, that I ignored or broke include:

- Never carry your real billfold around a city or tourist area, only a dummy loaded with about \$40 in cash and possibly a fake or out of date card
- Never visit an ATM for a load of cash and go anywhere but back to the hotel to put it in the safe or deposit box
- Never carry more than one credit card outside the hotel and keep it in a hidden pocket, preferably zippered
- Never carry more than a couple hundred dollars worth of cash and if you've got that much, keep it in different pockets and spread it out between multiple people.
- Never stop being aware of who is touching you, especially in crowded tourist areas.

My alarms were going off before we left the hotel yesterday; I just didn't feel good about the city and the day. The bells started clanging and flags waving as soon as I pulled my camera out. I was getting serious looks from people who had business on their minds. I was on full alert, with my head on a swivel, and was super-aware of keeping my camera strap on or wrapped around my wrist. Unfortunately, the camera just acted as a flashing beacon to highlight my stupidity, with my big lump of a billfold obvious in my front thigh pants pocket.

In the end, we were reminded of our own rules of travel, and we didn't lose any of our credit cards, passports, international driver's licenses, or inoculation cards, any of which would have been a huge hassle to replace.

It cost us about \$370 to be reminded that you have to be tough to be stupid.