

“Highly recommended!”

— Steven Pressfield, *New York Times* best-selling author

# SPOTTING DANGER for travelers

*Build situational awareness to keep safe while traveling*



**GARY QUESENBERRY**

FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL (RET.)

Foreword by Tony Blauer



## Praise for *Spotting Danger for Travelers* . . .

In his latest book *Spotting Danger for Travelers*, Gary Quesenberry draws on his nineteen years of experience as a federal air marshal to enlighten readers about the importance of situational awareness while traveling. Far from dry or clinical, Gary expertly weaves the technical aspects of situational awareness with personal stories and experiences to give the reader a deeper understanding of the critical role awareness plays in personal safety. The result is a comprehensive yet easy-to-read guide that covers everything from setting up home security before you leave to post-travel considerations once you return home. So whether you're planning a big family vacation, solo business trip, or a quick weekend getaway, I highly recommend reading this book.

—Steven Pressfield, *New York Times* best-selling author, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Gates of Fire*, *The War of Art*, among others

The term “Spotting Danger” is more relevant today than ever before in this increasingly dangerous world. Gary encapsulates why we need to be a lot more aware of our surroundings in simple and straightforward terms that everyone can understand and relate to.

—Rick Collins, founder and CEO of S.A.F.E. Inc.

Every environment is different, and what is normal in one place may be a warning sign in another. Unfamiliar environments have inherent risks, and understanding this can be the difference between a memorable trip or a tragic experience. *Spotting Danger for Travelers* is an important addition to the Spotting Danger series as it breaks down everything from preparation to pre-incident indicators in a sequence that is easy to follow and fun for an individual or for the whole family.

—Joseph Koury, US Army, Special Forces; federal agent, special agent in charge, Newark Field Office

Anyone who is a frequent traveler or is planning a domestic or international trip needs to read *Spotting Danger for Travelers*. Gary has taken the key fundamentals of international safety operations and applied them to a realistic and sensible approach. Like Gary's other books in this series, he has presented principles of safety and security that are easily remembered and applied to enhance anyone's safety. I've had the honor of meeting and working with Gary at the Federal Air Marshal Service and co-instructed many of the topics he covers specifically in this book. Gary is spot on as he describes his processes and taking situational awareness on the road. Having been in some questionable security situations with Gary, I can attest that the guidance Gary offers in this book works. I've been fortunate to be one of the founders of two

security companies that has worked with hundreds of churches across the United States. Many of the preparation and operational principles outlined in *Spotting Danger for Travelers* has been taught to church staff and volunteers serving on mission trips. The examples in this book brought back a lot of memories of my personal world travel but most important the reminder of the everchanging world and the need to be more vigilant then ever in our travels.

—Troy Szotkowski, founder and CEO of ACG  
Security Consultants and National Tactical Security

Gary Quesenberry does it AGAIN! In this exceptionally well-written book, Gary effectively leverages his decades of experience in the counterterrorism and protection realm to succinctly communicate essential awareness fundamentals for traveling safely. The fourth book in Gary's awareness series *Spotting Danger for Travelers* seamlessly complements his previous work. This book is timely, especially given ever-evolving global threats that many societies are currently experiencing from the effects of geopolitical tension. Gary brilliantly articulates what is often lacking in the awareness industry: practical application of situational awareness and what to do before and during travel. As a personal protection instructor, my clients constantly request additional enhanced domain awareness resources and training for their day-to-day operations. I now have a "go to" resource I trust and rely on! Not only for them, but for my family and loved ones as well. Gary's ability to effectively communicate and tackle complex topics is sorely lacking in the awareness training industry. We should all be thankful for his commitment to equip others for success and for releasing another epic book on awareness. *Spotting Danger for Travelers* is a must-read for every traveler!

—Maury Abreu, CEO and chief instructor at Omega  
Protective Concepts, former sergeant (United States  
Marine Corps), federal correction officer (Federal  
Bureau of Prisons), and supervisory federal air  
marshal (Department of Homeland Security)

I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with Gary for twenty years. I always knew that he was a true expert and professional when it came to firearms and counter-terrorism tactics and principles. His lifetime of serving and protecting our nation has been poured into the Spotting Danger book series. His latest book *Spotting Danger for Travelers* is another useful and insightful work where Gary shares his expertise in keeping you safe while traveling at home or abroad. There are few people with more understanding about the dangers in this world than Gary. So if he is sharing, I highly recommend you listen! It may just save your life or the life of someone you love.

—Matthew Cubbler, thirty-year LEO, former  
federal air marshal, author of *A Brother's Love: A  
Memoir*, host of Two Dates and a Dash podcast

Before your next vacation or business trip, read *Spotting Danger for travelers* by Gary Quesenberry. You are responsible for your own safety, and the most important thing you can do to keep yourself and your loved ones safe is to practice effective situational awareness. Quesenberry not only teaches you how to do this better, he also shares what you should be aware of while traveling and ways to better pay attention to your surroundings and your own behaviors. I really like that Quesenberry highlights things to be aware of that many people might never consider. But once you read this book and think about it, you will remember what it has to say on every future trip and be safer because of it. Practicing what Quesenberry teaches in this straightforward and practical guide will allow you to get out and travel, see more of the world, and enjoy life safely.

—Alain B. Burrese, J.D., martial artist, author of *Survive a Shooting, Hard-Won Wisdom from the School of Hard Knocks, How to Protect Yourself by Developing a Fighter's Mindset*, among others

I've been a travel advisor and have owned my business for the last fifteen years. I've had the opportunity to travel by land, air, and sea. There are some points about safety I often stress to my clients, but Gary Quesenberry's book has all the questions and answers when it comes to safe traveling in an easy-to-read format. He teaches that the scenery may change, but one thing that remains constant is the ability to identify potential problems before they become a danger to your safety. The concept I thought most important, one he reiterates throughout the book, is how to grasp the "mechanics of situational awareness." His anecdotes are a big help in getting a grip on this concept. They are short, concise, sometimes amusing, but always to the point. You can imagine yourself in the situations that he describes. And you will certainly ask the question, "What would I do in this situation?"

I will recommend this book to my clients so that they will become more aware of the mechanics of situational awareness.

—Mary House, travel advisor, franchise owner, Cruise Planners

Once again Gary Quesenberry provides actionable information to keep his readers safe. This book builds upon other insights from his *Spotting Danger* series to inform travelers of what a predator sees in a tourist or business traveler, how to spot anomalies in new or unfamiliar cultures and locations, and how to manage every aspect of a trip from planning to safely returning home. Gary has compiled many useful tips into a comprehensive resource that helps his readers travel with confidence. As someone who frequently zigzags the country to host firearms training classes and matches, I will definitely put Gary's travel strategies to use on my upcoming trips.

—Robyn Sandoval, executive director for A Girl & A Gun Women's Shooting League

**ALSO BY THE AUTHOR**

*Spotting Danger Before It Spots You*

*Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Kids*

*Spotting Danger Before It Spots Your Teens*

# SPOTTING DANGER FOR TRAVELERS

**Build Situational Awareness to  
Keep Safe while Traveling**

**GARY QUESENBERRY**  
*Federal Air Marshal (Ret.)*

YMAA Publication Center  
Wolfeboro, NH

**YMAA Publication Center, Inc.**  
PO Box 480  
Wolfeboro, New Hampshire 03894  
1-800-669-8892 • info@ymaa.com • www.ymaa.com

ISBN: 9781594399305 (print)  
ISBN: 9781594399312 (ebook)  
ISBN: 9781594399329 (hardcover)

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Managing Editor: Doran Hunter  
Cover design: Axie Breen  
This book typeset in Sabon and Midiet  
202200404

Photos by Shutterstock unless otherwise noted  
Charts and graphs by the author

### **Publisher's Cataloging in Publication**

Names: Quesenberry, Gary, author.  
Title: Spotting danger for travelers : build situational awareness to keep safe while traveling / Gary Quesenberry.  
Description: Wolfeboro, NH : YMAA Publication Center, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.  
Identifiers: ISBN: 9781594399305 (softcover) | 9781594399329 (hardcover) | 9781594399312 (ebook) | LCCN: 2022948944  
Subjects: LCSH: Travel--Safety measures. | Vacations--Safety measures. | Situational awareness. | Safety education. | Self-protective behavior. | Self-preservation. | Self-defense. | Crime prevention--Psychological aspects. | Victims of crimes--Psychology. | Violence--Prevention. | BISAC: TRAVEL / Special Interest / Family. | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Violence in Society. | SPORTS & RECREATION / Martial Arts / General. | TRAVEL / Reference. | TRAVEL / Special Interest / Business.

Classification: LCC: G156.5.S43 Q47 2023 | DDC: 363.1/08--dc23

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Some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals as well as the techniques and tactics employed by the Federal Air Marshal Service.

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The activities physical or otherwise, described in this manual may be too strenuous or dangerous for some people, and the reader(s) should consult a physician before engaging in them.

**Warning:** While self-defense is legal, fighting is illegal. If you don't know the difference you'll go to jail because you aren't defending yourself. You are fighting—or worse. Readers are encouraged to be aware of all appropriate local and national laws relating to self-defense, reasonable force, and the use of weaponry, and act in accordance with all applicable laws at all times. Understand that while legal definitions and interpretations are generally uniform, there are small—but very important—differences from state to state and even city to city. You need to know these differences. Neither the authors nor the publisher assumes any responsibility for the use or misuse of information contained in this book.

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When it comes to martial arts, self-defense, and related topics, no text, no matter how well written, can substitute for professional, hands-on instruction. **These materials should be used for academic study only.**

Printed in Canada



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“Got no time for spreading roots  
The time has come to be gone  
And though our health we drank a thousand times  
It’s time to ramble on.”

—Led Zeppelin

# Foreword

by Tony Blauer

“TRY NOT TO STICK OUT LIKE A TOURIST”—we’ve all heard that expression, but how exactly is it possible to be a tourist and not look like one? If you’re traveling, you’re by definition a tourist. You will be taking in the sights and navigating the culture of a place that is probably unfamiliar to you. How could you not stand out?

Before I share more thoughts on the importance of Gary’s book, let me tell you a little bit about my background just to give you some perspective. I’ve been studying violence, fear, and aggression for over forty years. Way back in the 80s, I realized that most self-defense methods are designed for *after* the fight has started. Think about it. How to block a punch. How to escape a choke. How to counter a headlock. How to perform a gun disarm. All of these techniques and most self-defense moves are deployed after the initial attack!

That intrigued me. Why wouldn’t people want to learn how to intercept an attack or, better yet, completely avoid the confrontation? And that’s how I began redesigning self-defense so it was behaviorally based and effective in the real world. I started by redefining the term

“self-defense” entirely. This is the old definition, according to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*:

*self-defense* / self-di-’fen(t)s / n. **1:** a plea of justification for the use of force or for homicide

**2:** the act of defending oneself, one’s property, or a close relative

Official definitions for self-defense don’t mention situational awareness, avoidance, or de-escalation, which together form the bedrock of Gary’s message. Here is the SPEAR System® definition:

*The decision to choose safety when danger is imminent.*

Simple, complete, holistic, and inclusive. It allows us to run away, and it also allows us to charge the threat. The scenario will always dictate which one.

But let me ask you this: wouldn’t you avoid violence altogether if given the choice? And that’s why all of Gary’s books are so important. Each book teaches you how to mentally prepare and avoid conflict and confrontations. I won’t try to impress you by using the term “reticular activating system” (RAS) in a sentence, but I will tell you that analyzing scenarios and mentally reviewing options and contingencies will dramatically improve your reaction time. That alone is reason enough to follow the guidelines in *Spotting Danger for Travelers*.

If you think about possible scenarios in advance and formulate plans to avoid and manage conflict, you will not only enhance your survivability, you are also much more likely to enjoy your trip because you’ll be able to relax more knowing you’re prepared. And that is exactly what Gary’s books, especially this one, will help you to do.

Some of the content seems obvious when you read it, and you may think, “Ah, this is common sense!” But I assure you it’s not. That’s why this book is so important. Here’s a real-world example. I’m a

personal defense expert who travels all over the world. I'm experienced in both sides of the toolbox, from situational awareness to extreme close-quarter tactics. Several years ago, I was in Dallas to work on a show with retired Navy SEAL Dom Raso. When I finally arrived after a few flight delays, I was starving and needed a good steak. I searched restaurants in the area on my smartphone, found what looked like a good one, and started to walk toward the location. After about ten minutes, I realized I was looking down at my phone as I walked and then looking up to make sure I was going in the right direction. It was getting dark and my surroundings were unfamiliar. And I was beginning to realize that the nice area near the hotel had given way to a not-so-nice area.

At that moment, I realized I looked like a tourist. Worse, I had compromised my situational awareness because I was holding my phone, making me look lost and unsure of where I was going. On top of that, my senses in general and my peripheral vision in particular were compromised by having so much of my attention focused on my device. My head movement and the glow from the little screen told any opportunistic criminal I was the tourist Gary warns us not to be.

This sudden realization made me pause and tune in to my senses. I listened, then looked. Everything felt fine (remember, listening to your intuition is a huge part of personal safety). So I stepped off the sidewalk, away from the dark bushes, and headed into the road where the streetlights provided illumination, allowing me to see more and scan my surroundings. I was safe. I took one more quick look at the directions on the map, memorized the next part of the walk, then put it in my pocket so my hands (and attention) were free, changed my pace, and got the hell out of that neighborhood.

I shared this story because I wanted to remind you that SMEs (subject matter experts) are human too. Had I read Gary's book, I'd have spoken to the front desk, asked for information about the area, and then taken an Uber since it was getting dark. That would have been a

much safer approach than traveling on foot through a sketchy area while distracted like a typical tourist.

This book will help you stack the odds overwhelmingly in favor of your safety, especially if you actually do the exercises too. And while you will hopefully never need to activate Plan B, you'll improve your reaction time if worse ever does come to worst.

So have fun as a tourist. Just make sure to read Gary's book and learn not to stick out like one.

Tony Blauer  
Founder, SPEAR System®  
Blauer Training Systems



# Introduction

I WORKED AS A FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL for close to nineteen years. Although I can't disclose details about our missions or the flights I covered, I can say that over the course of my domestic and international deployments, I logged a total of 2.4 million aviation miles. Despite the hardships we endured and the unforeseen changes to come, I still take great pride in the work we did. I jokingly told people that I was in the air more than most birds, but that was the job, and I loved it.

In the early months of 2020, news outlets started reporting on a new virus called COVID-19 and how it could possibly impact air travel. No big deal, right? I had flown through viral outbreaks before: West Nile, SARS, H1N1, and Zika, to name a few. Like most Americans, I assumed we'd get the standard safety warnings, news bulletins, and constant reminders to wash our hands. But this time, things went a little further than that. On March 10th, 2020, I stepped off a flight from Amsterdam, Netherlands. The next day, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a highly contagious and deadly global pandemic. International travel came to a halt, and citizens

around the world were urged to stay indoors. Because I had just come from a city where COVID-19 cases were on the rise, I was removed from the flight schedule and placed in quarantine for fourteen days. “Fine, I’ll sit at home for a couple of weeks and catch up on some yard work while this whole thing blows over.” Although I didn’t know it at the time, I had just taken my last international flight as a federal air marshal. By October of that same year, I had retired from service and moved back to my hometown in Virginia. There, I waited along with the rest of the world for COVID to run its course.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), there was a 72-percent drop in international arrivals worldwide between January and October of 2020.<sup>1</sup> That number represents 900 million fewer international travelers than the year before and a loss of over 935 billion dollars in revenue from tourism. Those numbers have had a devastating effect on the global economy. On an individual level, many people found it hard to cope with the feelings of isolation and hopelessness created by mandated stay-at-home orders. According to a December 2020 survey by the US Census Bureau, medical professionals started to see a global “surge” in reported cases of anxiety and depression. Forty-two percent of people in the United States reported symptoms of depressive disorders in that month alone, a 31-percent increase over the previous year. On top of that, the closing of businesses deemed to be nonessential created significant financial hardship for families all over the world.

In all of the chaos created by COVID-19, the vast majority of people simply kept their heads down and did whatever they could to get through this pandemic with minimal impact on their health and well-being. It’s been a long and difficult road since the onset of the pandemic, but the good news is that things are finally starting to turn around. As I write these words, the majority of COVID restrictions

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1. UNWTO “Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 Outbreak on International Travel,” <https://www.unwto.org/impact-assessment-of-the-covid-19-outbreak-on-international-tourism>.

have been lifted, and things are starting to get back to normal. Businesses have reopened, children have returned to school, and thank God, travel is now back on the table. Whether it's for a business trip, a long weekend, or a full-blown family vacation, we're all feeling the need to break away from our pandemic-mandated constraints and strike out in search of a little adventure. It's been a very long wait, but it's time to lace up those traveling shoes and hit the road again. Vacations, weekend getaways, and even business trips can offer experiences that are exciting, educational, and sometimes even awe-inspiring, but they can also be dangerous. It's not my intention to put a damper on your post-pandemic excitement, but leaving home to travel through unfamiliar territory does come with some level of risk, and you need to be prepared for that.

In the year prior to COVID-19, we saw a significant increase in crimes targeting tourists; those included street scams, robberies, kidnappings, and even murder, but the commission of those crimes dropped dramatically during the lockdown period. It's safe to say that even criminals decided to take those stay-at-home orders seriously. Although the more violent crimes against vacationers are less common, there has always been a need to exercise sound judgment and good situational awareness, even when you're supposed to be relaxing. That's especially important now that families are starting to vacation again. As domestic and international destinations begin to loosen their travel restrictions, there's the potential that crimes targeting tourists will rebound to at least their previous levels, if not higher. For that reason, it's imperative that we reassess our individual levels of security and beef up our situational awareness before we start planning our next big getaway.

In my first book, *Spotting Danger Before It Spots You, Build Situational Awareness to Stay Safe*, I covered the basic concepts of situational awareness and how your body language can signal weakness to predatory criminals. You learned that by simply lifting your head up and looking around you change the way you are perceived by others

and can significantly increase your levels of awareness and safety. Those same concepts apply even when you're on vacation. Regardless of your location, criminals tend to stick to specific patterns of behavior; we call those patterns "pre-incident indicators." The ability to accurately predict the actions of others based on the early recognition of those indicators can help you avoid violent situations before they have a chance to manifest. It is crucial to know how predators choose their victims and to be able to establish behavioral baselines, identify baseline anomalies, and harden your personal defenses, but to make such knowledge and skills part of your routine, especially while traveling, takes practice and willpower.

In this fourth book in the Spotting Danger series I break travel safety down into three phases:

1. The first phase, PRE-DEPARTURE, covers preparations such as researching your destination, home security, and establishing a support system while you're away. Relaxing and minimizing distractions on vacation will be a lot easier if you're confident in the fact that everything is safe and secure back home.
2. The second phase, TRAVEL, will cover travel safety on the road and in the air. The scenery may constantly be changing, but keeping your guard up, even while in transit, is a crucial element of personal safety.
3. Finally, phase three, ARRIVAL, will cover the things that need to happen once you've made it to your destination. Knowing what to look out for when you're on the ground, how to react when things go wrong, and how to maintain communications with your family and friends are critical security considerations and can mean the difference between a fun-filled adventure and a traumatic experience.

Before we begin, I think it's important to look at some facts and statistics that tie into the motivating factors behind the commission of crime. The four elements that most often motivate criminal actions are

money, territory, ego, and emotion. Although each of these factors can come into play during a vacation, money tops the list when it comes to targeting tourists. According to the US Travel Association, domestic and international vacationers spend nearly 1.1 trillion dollars annually in the US alone. The average American couple will spend \$581 on a single domestic weekend trip. In comparison, international travelers will spend up to \$3,500 during a twelve-day vacation.<sup>2</sup> Those numbers exclude travel costs such as fuel and airfare and increase significantly depending on the number of family members you have with you. That's a lot of money, and any time there's that much cash involved, you can guarantee there will be someone nearby looking to take advantage of an unsuspecting tourist.

Aside from the money factor, territory can also play a significant role in the targeting of tourists. That's why planning and area familiarization are so essential when it comes to maintaining your safety. During my career as a federal air marshal, one of my favorite things to do was to lace up my shoes and head out on a long walk through a new city. Europe, especially, is filled with museums, mountains, beaches, massive cathedrals, and castles; I wanted to see it all. While traveling, I quickly learned that my safety depended upon more than just my wits and training; it was imperative that I thoroughly familiarize myself with my surroundings to avoid ending up in areas where my presence may be unwelcome. There are hundreds of resources for travelers that can help with this part of your trip planning. We'll go into more detail about this later, and I've included a "travel resources" section in the appendix to help you with your research.

After money and territory, there's ego and emotion. These two factors are ever present regardless of where you may find yourself. On vacation, both can be amplified and become liabilities to your safety, especially when you mix alcohol into the equation. I can't even begin to list the number of fights I've seen erupt between locals and tourists

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2. [https://www.ustravel.org/system/files/media\\_root/document/Research\\_Fact-Sheet\\_US-Travel-and-Tourism-Overview.pdf](https://www.ustravel.org/system/files/media_root/document/Research_Fact-Sheet_US-Travel-and-Tourism-Overview.pdf).

just because of ego and emotion. A good friend and coworker of mine had his leg completely shattered during a fight that broke out over a World Cup soccer match. He was on a mission with his team overseas, and they decided to grab a bite to eat at a local pub where the match was being aired. Soccer fans from all over the world had made their way to the pub, and it was so crowded my friend had to take up a position on the patio just outside the entrance. During the match, words were exchanged between some English and South American soccer fans, egos were bruised, and emotions got out of control. My friend wasn't directly involved in the fight. He was positioned just outside the entrance with his back to the door. His thought was, "I'd rather see who was coming in as opposed to who was leaving." When the fight spilled outside, he was taken by surprise. He was able to fight off the first person who rushed him from the door but the crowd that quickly followed crushed him against the patio railing. Luckily, his teammates were able to pull him to safety. They were also familiar enough with the area to get him out of harm's way and seek proper medical attention. Now, nineteen years later, my friend still walks with a slight limp, but things could have been much worse. All because some people in a crowd couldn't control their egos or emotions.

I don't tell these stories to strike fear into the hearts of travelers; I tell them to help raise awareness. Although most vacationers can travel freely without ever falling victim to crime, there is always the potential for danger, especially in a post-pandemic world. I started writing the Spotting Danger series so everyone can develop a solid foundation of situational awareness and give themselves the advantage of being able to preemptively spot danger, quickly implement escape plans, and take control of their own safety. I know from experience that following the techniques I've outlined in this book can give you that advantage. So read on, and do so with the knowledge that what you learn here will help to keep you safe, regardless of where your travels may take you.







# PHASE ONE—Pre-Departure

“Before anything else, preparation is the key to success.”

—ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL



# 1

## Planning Your Trip

SO, YOU'VE DECIDED to go on vacation. Good for you! Everyone needs to get away from time to time and take a much-needed break from the doldrums of their everyday routine. Let's face it, work can be a drag, and getting away on vacation is a great way to recharge your batteries and refocus on the things that are most important: family, friends, fun. It sounds good, right? Of course it does, but when you're planning a successful getaway, you have to think about more than just the fun stuff; you also have to consider your personal safety and the safety of those you're traveling with. This is where situational awareness comes into play.

I define situational awareness as the ability to identify and process environmental cues for the purpose of accurately predicting the actions of others. It's not an overly complicated process, and you don't have to be a soldier, police officer, or federal air marshal to master it. In fact, you really only need four things:

1. An understanding of various environments
2. The ability to differentiate between normal and abnormal behaviors within those environments

3. An understanding of how variations in those behaviors could possibly impact your safety
4. The ability to develop plans for avoidance or escape based on what you see

Sounds easy, right? Well, it is, but it takes focus and practice to make it a natural part of your daily routine. If you think about it, you're more than likely doing these things already; for example, you're driving down the street and coming to a four-way intersection. Another car is approaching from your left. It looks as if the driver is distracted by someone in the backseat and isn't slowing down. Based on what you observe in that situation, you can pretty accurately predict the outcome. The driver will likely miss the stop sign and blow through the intersection, so you remain in place and patiently wait for them to pass. That's it. You just used situational awareness as a means of ensuring your own safety. In most cases, it's that simple, but things tend to get a little more complicated when it comes to predatory violence, especially when you find yourself in unfamiliar surroundings. We're going to get into those differences later on, but for now, let's discuss why the early detection of potential security risks is so important.

Practicing situational awareness dramatically increases your chances of spotting dangerous situations before they happen and sharpens your ability to predict the actions of others. Ideally, this process of identifying and analyzing risks takes place well before you decide to leave the house. When you're preparing for a trip away, the first step in identifying potential problems begins in the planning phase. Proper planning requires more than just picking a vacation spot and packing a bag. It requires some in-depth research and preparation if you want to make sure your getaway is both safe and enjoyable. We can break this planning stage down into three primary segments:

# 3

## Home Security and Support

NOW THAT YOU'VE COMPLETED the threat assessment, you have a much better idea of what issues may arise during your travels and what risks you could face at your final destination. If you're anything like me, simply walking out the front door and kicking off a worry-free vacation isn't quite that easy. I sometimes have problems backing out of the driveway without worrying about what's happening inside the house. Did I leave the coffeepot on? Was the back door locked? Did I remember to set the alarm? Questions like this can nag at us to the point of exhaustion and cause us to lose focus on the fact that we're supposed to be enjoying ourselves. That's why establishing a reliable support system back home is so important. It's an essential element of your planning phase if you really want to forget about things for a while and just unwind.

Let's start with the basics. The first thing you'll need to establish is a primary point of contact at home. Whether it's a family member, a close personal friend, or a trusted neighbor, this person will be the one responsible for keeping an eye on things while you're away. Although it's a good idea to have one person as a primary contact, you can recruit as much help as you feel you'll need to keep things running

smoothly. This network of family, friends, and neighbors will be crucial to the enjoyment of your vacation, so choose wisely.

According to an FBI crime statistics report from 2017, there were approximately three burglaries every minute in the United States. That adds up to about 3,757 burglaries a day. Over 70 percent of those burglaries take place when no one is at home, between the hours of 6:00 am and 6:00 pm. Burglary rates are also shown to be much higher during the summer months when families are away on vacation. Given these statistics, it's safe to assume that you are much less likely to be burglarized if everyone thinks you're still at home. Your support system will play a critical role in this area. Regardless of whether you're home or not, the people you recruit to help out while you're away can assist in keeping your house look occupied and active, making it much less attractive to potential burglars.

In 2015 the Allen, Texas, police department arrested Michael Shayne Durden, a notorious burglar who had committed approximately eighty robberies in Allen and the surrounding areas. Facing up to thirty years in prison for his crimes, Durden agreed to an interview with the Allen PD spokesperson, Sgt. Jon Felty, to discuss his methods. The interview aimed to help other homeowners avoid becoming targets of burglary. The resulting video, "Inside the Mind of a Thief—Burglar Confessions," can be found on YouTube and gives us an incredible look into the mindset of a career criminal.<sup>4</sup> It also gives us insight into what things work and don't work when it comes to protecting our homes.

When Durden wasn't robbing homes, he was a paid personal trainer. His preferred method for casing a neighborhood was to lace up his running shoes and jog through affluent subdivisions looking for the perfect target. When asked what kept him away from specific communities, Durden quickly responded, "Nosey neighbors . . . There's been so many times I've gone and cased a neighborhood and stayed away from that neighborhood because it was obvious to me that there were

4. "Inside the Mind of a Thief—Burglar Confessions," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtwD-c9hn58>.

# 5

## Equipment Check

**AFTER THE INTEL BRIEFING**, equipment checks are a vital part of your travel preparations. Nothing is more annoying than getting to your hotel room, unpacking, and realizing that you forgot your phone charger, or getting home from a trip and realizing you left your favorite jacket hanging in the hotel room closet. Although these issues aren't exactly life-threatening, they can be incredibly frustrating. Forgetting to pack your toothbrush may seem like a minor annoyance, but if you're anything like me, it can distract you to the point that you lose focus on the more important things, like properly securing your room. (More on that later.) The good news is that these inconveniences can be avoided by staying organized and planning ahead. I've found that the best way to keep things in order is to make a list. I always break my packing lists down into several main categories, such as:

- Clothing
- Travel documents
- Medications
- Toiletries
- Travel tech (cellphones, laptops, headphones, chargers)
- Miscellaneous

Then I fill those in with specific items as I pack. What ends up in the suitcase will always depend on the length and purpose of the trip. I'm sure everyone reading this has at some point packed a bag, and everyone has their own system, so I'm not going to focus on details, but I will point out that equipment checks should happen at several specific points during your trip.

1. Before leaving the house
2. Before getting off an airplane
3. Before leaving your room, if you're headed out to explore
4. Before checking out of your hotel room and returning home
5. Any time you take things out of your bag
6. Once you return home

Be sure to make a list for each bag you pack. If you're flying, you may have a checked bag as well as a carry-on. Place a list in with each individual bag so you know exactly what should be in it. It's also a good idea to make a copy of each list and keep it with your travel documents. Those copies will come in handy if a bag is ever lost or stolen.





# 7

## Getting “Switched On” —The Basics of Situational Awareness

NOW LET'S GET BACK to the basics of personal safety. Believe it or not, in the vast majority of cases, when someone intends to do you harm, they will inadvertently telegraph their intentions through something known as pre-incident indicators. These pre-incident indicators are sometimes subtle, sometimes overt, but consistently observable if you know what to look for. I liken this process to boxing. If you've ever seen a professional fight, you've witnessed this scenario before. One boxer will pin the other against the ropes and unleash a flurry of punches—jabs, crosses, hooks, and uppercuts—all seemingly knock-out punches, but not one of them lands on their intended target. The other boxer casually slips and dodges every punch. Then he maneuvers himself back to the center of the ring unscathed, ready for the counterattack. When you view this process in real-time, it looks almost superhuman, but the hard-to-hit boxer doesn't possess any special powers; he's simply looking for his opponent to telegraph their intentions so he can avoid the punches. If he's studied his opponent closely enough, he'll know that his right shoulder dips just before throwing a

hook or that he drops his hip as he's setting up for the uppercut. These small movements are the pre-incident indicators, and knowing how to interpret them is what wins fights. By studying these actions and learning what they mean, boxers give themselves an advantage and can effectively counter an attack before it's ever launched. That's not a superpower; it's just good situational awareness.

This same concept is what you're about to learn. Before leaving home, you need to understand who your opponent is and how they work. You will learn what pre-incident indicators predatorial criminals tend to adhere to and what those indicators mean. This, in turn, will better prepare you to identify potential problems and avoid violent attacks before they ever have a chance to materialize.

When I worked as a federal air marshal, this process of tuning in to your environment and looking for pre-incident indicators was known as being "switched on." Being switched on was critical to our success because the most dangerous enemies are those who have become comfortable with violence. The more practiced the attack, the smoother they become, and the less likely it will be that their victims ever see it coming. That's why situational awareness is so important. Without it, those pre-incident indicators become much harder to spot. Victims are caught off guard, and when everything is said and done, you'll often hear them say things like, "He came out of nowhere," or, "I never saw it coming." I don't want that to be you!

This phase of the book will cover the basics of situational awareness and give you the tools you need to correctly identify those actions that are precursors to violence. More importantly, this section will teach you ways to interact with your environment that make you much less appealing to predatory criminals. A few of the things we'll cover here are:

- How your body language signals either vulnerability or strength
- How to read your environment and what to do with the information you're collecting

# 9

## On-site Security

NOW THAT YOU'VE ARRIVED safely, it's time to start thinking about securing your position. Much like the preparations you made at home, once you arrive at your destination, it's essential to establish a secure base of operations so you can enjoy your vacation without spending too much time worrying over the technical aspects of your personal safety. This all starts as soon as you step foot into your lodgings. Once your base is set, you can begin building rings of security that extend beyond your immediate surroundings and into the public spaces you plan to spend time in. We'll eventually get much deeper into all of that, but for now, let's just stick with securing your new accommodations.

Your base of operations is where the rest of your on-site security plans will be set and implemented, so it needs to be a place you feel comfortable. From it you can allow yourself to relax from time to time and recharge for your next excursion. Air marshals spend countless hours in the confines of a hotel. Not every country we traveled to was friendly, so going out and exploring wasn't always an option, but the need for security was ever present. Over the years, the process of

checking into and securing my personal space became second nature. This routine, once perfected, becomes an essential element of personal safety and, when paired with situational awareness, allows you to enjoy yourself without being overly worried about outside threats.

Before we get into the details of securing your hotel room, there are



a few things that you want to consider well before you ever accept your room key. They will serve to put you in the safest possible position once you start to settle into your new environment.

- Research your location. Carefully choose the area that your hotel will be in. Hotels near police stations—or, if traveling internationally, near the embassy building—are always preferable. You can also do a quick internet search to assess the crime rates in various parts of the cities you'll be staying in.
- Research your hotel. Try to stick to well-established hotels with good security and stay with major hotel chains such as Sheraton, Hilton, and Marriott. Most major hotel chains have existing relationships with local cab services, restaurant chains, and

## Area Familiarization

**MOST OF THE WORK** concerning area familiarization can be handled during your threat assessment. Using the State Department website, the CIA World Fact Book, and other sources of OSINT is a great way to learn about the regions you'll be visiting and collect any relevant information pertinent to your safety, but that's just the beginning. The real work starts as soon as your feet hit the ground at your destination. It's crucial that you be familiar with the area you're visiting. After checking in to your hotel and setting your base of operations, area familiarization is the next important step in establishing proper on-site security. You've already taken note of the basic layout of the lobby, your assigned floor, and your room. Now it's time to expand your reconnaissance to the area just outside your hotel. Here are a few tips to help you out:

1. Once you're back in the lobby, it's also a good idea to locate the concierge service desk as well as ATMs, public phones, and the business office. Concierge services are very helpful because they can assist in familiarizing you with the local area. They usually have city maps on hand and can provide you with reliable transportation to and from the hotel if needed.

2. If you're outside the country, be sure to find the distance and direction of the US embassy. You'll need proof of your citizenship to get in, so make sure you always carry copies of your passport and other identification. It's also a good idea to digitize these documents and place them on a secure flash drive that you can keep with you at all times.
3. Learn the locations of local hospitals, pharmacies, firehouses, and police stations.
4. Ask the concierge about any local areas that should be avoided or areas where tourists may not be welcome.



Once that's all completed, it's time to get out and start your grand adventure, but there are still a few things that you need to be aware of so you can move freely in your new environment without drawing unnecessary attention to yourself or your group.

# 13

## Blending In

**BLENDING INTO YOUR ENVIRONMENT** and not sticking out like a sore thumb is a lot harder than it sounds, especially when you're traveling through foreign countries. In most cases, people naturally try to set themselves apart and stand out in a crowd. Our need to be noticed pushes us forward and helps us do things like land a job, make friends, and find a mate. Given that we're all so unique and different, how do we go about toning ourselves down so that we aren't so easily noticed?

Federal air marshals have perfected the art of blending in and going relatively unnoticed as they pass through the world's busiest cities and airports. A lot of the lessons we learned about blending in, we learned the hard way. During our initial training, there wasn't a lot of guidance on how to dress or act so we didn't draw attention to ourselves. Most of what we learned back then was through trial and error. One important lesson I learned was that 98 percent of the people you come into contact with are so absorbed in their own issues that they seldom have the time or inclination to pay any attention to you, so going unnoticed is easy when it comes to the general public. The thing you need to be most concerned about is not drawing the attention of the

other 2 percent: the predators who have made a science of sizing you up and determining whether or not you should be their next victim.

Back in chapter seven, I mentioned how sociologists Betty Grayson and Morris Stein conducted a study in 1981 that cast new light on how criminals chose their victims. Grayson and Stein believed that potential victims were possibly signaling their vulnerability to attackers through their gestures, posture, and movements. The researchers set up video cameras on a busy intersection in New York City and recorded people walking by between 10 am and noon for three consecutive days. The tape was later shown to inmates who were incarcerated for violent offenses such as armed robbery, rape, and murder. The inmates were instructed to rate the people in the videos on a scale of one to ten, one being an easy target and ten being someone they would altogether avoid. The pedestrians that rated between a one and three were designated as easy or “soft” targets. The pedestrians rated between seven and ten were selected as hard targets and should not be approached. It’s no secret that criminals prefer soft targets, but what I find most interesting about the study is that the criminals entirely ignored those pedestrians rated between four and six. When asked to relate what they remembered about the group in the middle of the scale, the inmates couldn’t remember a thing about them. When it comes to blending in and not drawing attention to yourself, that middle range is where you want to be. In the federal air marshal service, this is known as being the “gray man.”

There are a lot of misconceptions about what it means to blend in with your surroundings. Blending in is not hiding. It doesn’t involve sitting in the dark corners of a room with your face hidden behind a newspaper. Blending in requires you to be familiar with your surroundings and use what you know about your environment to mimic the look and mannerisms of the people surrounding you. There are three primary aspects of blending in that you need to be familiar with if you’re trying to vanish into the background.



## Contingency Planning

CONTINGENCY PLANNING is nothing more than anticipating the possible problems you may encounter during your vacation and devising plans to minimize the impact of those problems. Some problems are simple: Is the ticket line at the tilt-a-whirl too long? Let's go have an early lunch and check back in an hour when things have died down. Other problems may be more complex. You're in a crowded area and become separated from your family. What plan do you have in place to reunite safely? The range of issues you may encounter while traveling is endless, so don't drive yourself crazy with this. Remain flexible on the most minor problems and focus your attention on the contingencies that could directly affect the safety and security of the people you're traveling with. Issues like medical emergencies, separation, and unforeseen problems at home are the ones that could have a devastating impact on your travel plans, so we're going to focus on those for now. The long line at the tilt-a-whirl will work itself out.

Making a contingency plan consists of five steps:

1. Identify the security risks at each stage of your travel. Remember to keep your focus on those things that impact safety.

2. Prioritize risks based on severity and likelihood. The chances of becoming separated in a crowd are much more likely than the chances of a terror attack, so start planning for the most likely incidents first.
3. Develop plans that allow you to address those risks while minimizing their impact on your trip. Keep your plans simple.
4. Brief the other members of your party on all emergency plans. If you're traveling with young children, be sure to keep them informed, but not to the point of making them afraid.
5. In the event of an emergency, monitor the effectiveness of your plan and create new ones as the need arises. As the old saying goes, plans are nothing more than a point from which to deviate when things go wrong. Be flexible in your planning, and keep in mind that even the best-laid plans will need to change if you find them ineffective.

This process can apply to just about any situation, but for the purpose of this book, we're going to take a look at four different emergencies that would require some contingency planning and walk through a few solutions for each. We'll start with the most common: the medical emergency.

### 15.1 Medical Emergencies

From minor scrapes and bruises to broken bones and stab wounds, medical emergencies are a significant concern for anyone traveling through unfamiliar territory. The key to effectively addressing these issues is preparation. In most cases, you can minimize the impact of unforeseen medical problems by preparing for them in advance of your trip. Before you leave home, you should always:

- During the planning phase of your trip, be sure to identify local hospitals and drug stores near where you'll be staying.
- Contact your health insurance provider to see what type of coverage you have in the area you'll be staying. If your coverage is

## Heading Home

SO HERE WE ARE, at the end of what was hopefully a safe, relaxing, and enjoyable trip. It's hard to come to grips with the fact that your vacation is over, and very soon you'll have to settle back into the routine of day-to-day life back at home. At this point, your mind starts looking ahead to the tasks that need to be completed once you return, the backlog of unanswered emails, yard work, missed meetings, and encroaching deadlines. As your adventure draws to a close, it's easy to get sidetracked by the mental to-do list you're creating in your head, but now's not the time to lose focus. You're still far away from home and possibly have a long journey ahead of you. For that reason, the need for safety and security is just as important now as it was when you left home.

Back in 2001, Progressive Insurance conducted the first survey to research where most traffic accidents happen. Findings revealed that 52 percent of accidents happened within five minutes of the motorist's homes and 77 percent happened within fifteen miles. Although this study was conducted over two decades ago, newer research continues to support the original claim. This study raises the

question: why do so many accidents occur close to home as opposed to far away? The answer is simple. Familiarity. Motorists can become so familiar with their commute that they “zone out” or go into “auto-pilot” while driving, which can cause all kinds of problems and lead to some pretty serious consequences. This same thing can happen to vacationers returning home from a trip. Once the bags are packed and you start looking forward to sleeping in your own bed, it’s easy to become focus locked on that end goal and neglect the things that are most important in the moment, like security. Here are a few things I do to avoid focus lock and maintain my situational awareness on the way home.

1. Call your point of contact back home before you leave to ensure that everything on that end is running smoothly. That’ll help to put your mind at ease and allow you to put more focus on the return trip.
2. Conduct one last equipment check before you leave your lodgings. Finding out that you left your laptop in the hotel after you’ve made it to the airport will only cause problems and draw your attention away from your surroundings.
3. Allow yourself plenty of time to get to where you need to be. Rushing unnecessarily increases the chances of leaving things behind and adds to the stress of traveling.
4. If you’re traveling with a group, call one last meeting to ensure everyone is prepped and ready to go. Reemphasize the need to remain vigilant on the return trip and remind everyone of the need to be situationally aware.

These four simple steps can go a long way in alleviating some of those last-minute distractions and help to keep you focused on getting home safely.

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## About the Author

**GARY QUESENBERRY** was born in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. His love of the outdoors and patriotic spirit led him to enlist in the United States Army where he served as an artilleryman during Operation Desert Storm. Gary later became a career federal air marshal where he devoted his life to studying violence and predatory behavior. Now Gary has retired from federal service and serves as the CEO of



Photo by Mary McIlvaine

Quesenberry Personal Defense Training LLC. There he's developed numerous basic and advanced level training courses focused on mental toughness, and defensive tactics. He has an extensive background in domestic and foreign counterterror training and has worked in both the private and corporate sectors to help educate others on the importance of situational awareness and personal safety. He once again resides in his hometown in Carroll County, Virginia.

## Spotting danger before it happens is a skill that can be developed and may even save your life.

**“Spotting Danger is more relevant today than ever before in our increasingly dangerous world.”**

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**“Gary provides all the questions and answers for safe traveling. Recommended!”**

—Mary House, travel advisor, Cruise Planners

So, you’ve decided to travel. Good for you! When planning a getaway, it’s critical that you consider your personal safety and the safety of those you’re traveling with.

American vacationers and travelers spend nearly 1.1 trillion dollars annually. With that much cash involved you can bet there will be someone nearby looking to take advantage of you.

### When traveling, you must acknowledge and prepare for this potential danger.

Gary Quesenberry will teach you how to develop a solid foundation of situational awareness when traveling:

- Preemptively spot danger
- Quickly implement escape plans
- Take control of your own safety while traveling

Criminals tend to stick to specific patterns of behavior. Gary will teach you lifesaving travel skills including:

- How predators choose their victims
- How to establish behavioral baselines
- The process for identifying baseline anomalies
- How to harden your personal defenses

By implementing what you learn here, you and your family can travel confidently and secure in the knowledge that **you can spot danger before it has the chance to spot you.**



**Gary Quesenberry**, father of three, is a US Army veteran, a retired Federal Air Marshal, and CEO of Quesenberry Personal Defense Training LLC. Gary has devoted his life to studying violence and predatory behavior. He is a featured expert on *iCrime with Elizabeth Vargas*, and has been featured on the History Channel’s hit series *Top Shot—Season 3* and *Top Shot All-Stars*. Gary has an extensive background in domestic and foreign counter-terror training and has worked tirelessly educating others on the importance of situational awareness and personal safety. Gary resides in Carroll County, Virginia.

Author photo: Mary McIlvaine  
Cover photo: Shine Nucha/Shutterstock  
Cover design: Axie Breen



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