

April 17, 2007

The Biggest Little-Noticed Hazard

By TANYA MOHN

On his travels to almost 100 countries, Barry Goldsmith, a creator of tours for General Tours, says he has worried about risks like terrorism, crime and infectious disease. But one trumps all the others.

“It’s traffic accidents,” Mr. Goldsmith said.

Road accidents are “the largest cause of nonnatural death among U.S. citizens overseas,” said Betsy L. Anderson, a senior consular official at the State Department.

Bella Dinh-Zarr, the North American director of Make Roads Safe, a nonprofit organization that promotes global road safety, said that road crashes were “the most unrecognized and one of the biggest threats” to [business travelers](#). It is a growing public health problem as more people travel to developing nations, she said. Preventive measures like vaccines, careful eating and drinking bottled water are common, but similar tactics for road safety are usually ignored.

Mr. Goldsmith credits his good road safety record to a few simple steps: becoming familiar with rental cars by driving around the lot; checking that seat belts are functioning and that a car is equipped with air bags; and making sure that the brakes, lights and windshield wipers work, “especially in monsoon India.” He plans his route ahead of time, gets the latest maps and knows the metric system.

He was once stopped by a policeman on a French highway for going too slowly, a potentially dangerous mistake. He said he was thinking in miles, not kilometers.

Road crashes are a worldwide problem, and are expected to rise. “Each year 1.2 million people die in road accidents, and 20 to 50 million are injured and survive, often with disabilities for the rest of their lives,” said Dr. Etienne Krug, the director of the department of injuries and violence prevention at the [World Health Organization](#). The figures are believed to be underreported.

Ninety percent of the fatalities are in low- to middle-income countries, Dr. Krug said, in large part because more vehicles are on the road, vehicles and roads are poorly maintained and regulation,

enforcement and driver's education are weak. Travelers from outside a country are particularly vulnerable because they lack familiarity with roads, local laws and customs.

Next week, the [United Nations](#) will observe its first Global Road Safety Week.

William Halliday, director of global security at the [Marsh & McLennan Companies](#), said road safety had traditionally been overlooked. "People take it for granted because they are familiar with driving and taking taxis," he said. "But things are radically different, country to country. It's important not to make assumptions."

Mr. Halliday said the company began using Road Travel Reports several years ago. The reports, produced by the Association for Safe International Road Travel, detail road conditions, dangerous highways to avoid, driver behavior and police enforcement for more than 120 countries.

Rochelle Sobel, founder of the nonprofit organization that produces the reports, said, "It is important to not only know the laws, but the road culture before you go." She started the association, based in Potomac, Md., after her son Aron died in a bus crash in Turkey where he was working in a local hospital, two weeks before he was to graduate from medical school.

"A stop sign is meaningless, or speed limits are meaningless in some countries," Ms. Sobel said. "If you assume it is safe for people to cross certain streets in some areas of Egypt and Kenya, you are making a potentially fatal mistake."

Ms. Sobel and others advise against driving at night. They also note that headlights are often turned off to save batteries — a false economy since the battery would not drain with the engine running properly — in many countries, particularly in rural areas.

Lack of enforcement and bribery are common in many countries.

"People don't pay much attention to the rules," said Mitchell Silk, a partner in the New York office of Allen & Overy, an international legal practice. For more than 20 years, he worked off and on in China, where road accident fatalities are among the highest in the world. Mr. Silk recalled one instance when a driver taking him to the airport was speeding. They were pulled over by the police, and the driver, Mr. Silk recounted, said, "Look, I'm a retired army officer and my boss is the provincial power bureau chief." The driver was not ticketed.

Mr. Goldsmith, the tour creator, said he had forgotten his license on a business trip to Myanmar several years ago, but the hotel staff helped him rent a car anyway. "Twenty bucks cleared it up," he said.

Some driving problems are imported.

“Americans are among the most polite drivers in the world,” but it gets them in trouble, said Eddie Wren, who spent 14 years as a police officer in Britain, mostly serving as a traffic patrol officer, before coming to the United States. Mr. Wren is the co-founder and president of Advanced Drivers of America, a company that teaches safe driving, and he works with many corporations.

Americans are reluctant to use horns, but horns can be effective in reducing crashes, Mr. Wren said.

Americans also typically turn at red lights, which many countries do not allow, and they maneuver poorly in traffic circles, which are common overseas, Mr. Wren said.

The State Department has a road safety page (http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/safety/safety_1179.html) that includes links to consular information sheets for specific countries, advice on contacting foreign embassies and consulates for driving requirements, how to get an international driving permit, and the importance of checking insurance coverage before departure. In general, American auto insurance does not extend abroad.

Paula Rivera, a spokeswoman for the [Hertz](#) Corporation, said Americans commonly assumed “that their credit card covers their insurance, which often isn’t the case.”

Medical and emergency evacuation insurance are frequently overlooked. “In some countries, injured victims never reach a hospital,” said David A. Sleet, a behavioral scientist at the injury center of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

But no matter how many preventive measures individuals take, global road safety will require greater efforts, experts say.

“Safety costs money,” said Mary Pat McKay, an emergency physician at the [George Washington University Medical Center](#). In many countries with a high rate of traffic collisions, she said, issues like H.I.V. and malaria compete for scarce funds.

“If you want people to stop at a red light,” she said, “you have to have a red light.”