

ROSIE GARTHWAITE

HOW TO AVOID BEING KILLED IN A WAR ZONE!

THE ESSENTIAL
SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR DANGEROUS
PLACES

**'READ THIS BOOK. KEEP IT IN YOUR
BACKPACK - IT COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE!'**

PATRICK HENNESSEY

author of *The Junior Officers' Reading Club*

BLOOMSBURY

1/PLANNING, PREPARING AND ARRIVING

Never go in blind. Don't move until you know everything about where you are going. **Leith Mushtaq**, senior Al Jazeera cameraman

I WAS VERY UNPREPARED for my trip to Baghdad. For a start, I thought I was going for six weeks, but ended up staying for five and a half months. This was no holiday: there were things I should have sorted out before I left, but just didn't.

You need to take control of your own destiny. Don't go along for the ride. You need to have thought through all the risks before you go in, and made sure you have done everything possible to minimize them.

You need to keep your family or friends informed and get them involved in your preparations.

/BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME

Here is a list of stuff you need to think about before you go, but I'm sure others will offer useful suggestions too.

Prepare your grab bag (see page 41).

Begin your medical preparations – ideally about six weeks before you're due to leave. You need to find out if you should be taking any pills or having any vaccinations. Go to your local doctor or a reputable travel website to find out which ones.

Dr Carl Hallam, MSF volunteer and former British Royal Marine doctor, advises: 'Get yourself vaccinated for everything possible. Don't die from something you could have been saved from. I was shocked to find workers in Aceh in Sumatra who had not been vaccinated for rabies. I think that's crazy. One little prick in the arm can save your life.'

Pack at least a month's supply of any prescription medication required. Carry it in your hand luggage.

Pop into the dentist for a check-up if you are going to be away for more than a few months.

Get decent medical insurance, making sure you have cover for your destination country, and check if your activities there require any extra cover. Make a separate note of how to contact the insurers in case of an emergency. Put your insurance contacts along with your medical history somewhere you can easily find it.

Prepare a medical kit (see page 103), or check your old one for 'best before' dates.

What kind of contraception would you like to take? Even if you think you won't need it, take some for your friends. Condoms are valuable things in dangerous places (see page 104).

Find out your team's pre-existing ailments and allergies. If you are travelling with a team of people, you need to know where they keep their medicine and how to administer it if they can't do so themselves. Everyone should write down their medical history and everyone should know where that is kept.

Choose your next of kin, and remember that whoever you choose needs to be asked rather than told. You need to give them all your details: medical history, insurance details, bank account numbers, where your will is kept (if you have one), the password to get into your safe...anything they'd need to know if something goes wrong. It isn't morbid to do this. Next of kin are a first port of call in an emergency, such as your kidnapping or arrest, not just in the event of death. Don't leave them unprepared.

In my experience, tragedies happen at the worst times: your primary contact – news editor, producer, partner – must have immediate and 24-hour access to your next of kin and medical details.

/ON THE WAY IN

You are at your most vulnerable on the way into a country because you are unfamiliar with the procedures, the language and the culture. Here are some useful tips.

Know who is picking you up. Get their phone number and call them in advance for advice on what you need to do to smooth your way into the country. (I remember asking my boss whether my pick-up would bring my body armour, and getting pretty nervous when he shrugged and said, 'You'll find out when you get to the airport.' My next stop was Baghdad.) Take the initiative and make sure you know all the answers before you go.

Arrange a meeting place and, if necessary, a code word to identify that the right person is picking you up. Get their phone number and give them yours.

Take all essentials in your hand luggage – some clothes, a washbag, valuables and your grab bag (see page 41).

Find someone friendly enough to be your temporary translator so they can help you through any problems on the journey. The person who smiles at you when you struggle to buy a ticket will usually work.

/ON THE WAY OUT

Leaving a country is another vulnerable time because you tend to let your guard down. It might sound strange, but you need to know your way out before you go in.

Call people who are already there and discover your options. You need to find out the following things:

What are the emergency and medical evacuation procedures (often shortened to 'medevac')? Your embassy will know. Your travel agent will also know. And, if you have one, your employer should know. If they don't, then make sure they do before you go.

I've frequently found the embassy rather unhelpful and unreliable when it comes to planning for a possible evacuation. Both 'Medevac' and 'Emergency Evacuation' should be sorted out prior to deployment. It's always worth a call to the insurers to find out where the nearest airport would be if they had to come and get you. **Chris Cobb-Smith**, security expert

What are your alternative routes out if the road, railway, airport or sea route you arrived on is closed down? You need to be informed in order to make a decision if everything goes wrong.

/CARRYING CASH

On my first trip to Iraq with Al Jazeera I was asked to take a large amount of money with me because we needed to put a down-payment on our bureau. Suddenly I was a walking ATM for any criminal who managed to find out. It was a dangerous situation in which to be placed.

My friend Nick Toksvig, senior news editor for Al Jazeera English, recalls the perils of carrying huge wads of cash: 'The Iraq war of 1991 saw the old Iraqi currency

fall prey to hyperinflation. Suitcases of bills were required to pay even for small things. Paying local fixers was like taking part in some massive Las Vegas poker tournament. Be careful not to flash the money at any stage.'

Don't tell anyone in your destination country that you will be carrying large amounts of cash. If it slips out at the wrong time to the wrong person, you will become a target.

When it comes to your daily cash, carry just enough for the day and try to spread it around your body. Also carry a credit card for emergencies.

Former EU and UN staff member Mary O'Shea has some good ideas for things you can do in case of a mugging: 'I have been robbed twice in my life. Once in the Paris Métro and once in an airport in Cameroon. In Paris it was a clever knife slit along the bottom of my bag in a crowded carriage. Presumably another bag was positioned underneath to catch my things. In Cameroon it was a good old-fashioned setup – electricity cut, surrounded by men, etc. In terms of a confrontation, I would advise you to carry two wallets – one being a dummy wallet that can be handed over with a small amount of cash inside and some out-of-date cards.'

Keep around \$1000 plus a few hundred in local currency in your grab bag at all times.

Cheque books, backed by a cheque card, can be used in many countries.

Be especially cautious at ATMs and coming out of banks and money exchange places.

Carry some low-denomination notes for tipping. Dollars will work for the first day or two until you can get your money changed. Store this money separately from your main cash so you are not flashing it every time you open your wallet.

/EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Always carry a list of contact numbers (sometimes known as a 'call sheet'). It should include your hotel, your embassy, the local hospital, the airport, police, colleagues, local contacts, your next of kin and whoever it is you are calling into back at base,

wherever that may be. This information might be in your phone, but remember that you could lose your phone or it might be stolen.

/COMMUNICATION

Make sure you have a point person – someone back at base, be it a colleague from your company, a family member or friend, who will be responsible for noticing when you don't call in. But remember that you are responsible for making sure you can call. This means always taking your phone and charger, or a satellite phone if you are likely to be out of network coverage.

Give your point person some idea of your itinerary at all times and let them know if it changes.

Give your emergency numbers to your point person.

Ensure you have two working and charged methods of communication. It's a good idea to take your home mobile phone and a back-up (both with all numbers). I take my UK phone, a back-up UK phone, a cheap mobile for use with a local SIM card, and, when necessary, a satellite phone. If working with the media, ensure that the M4/BGAN can also be used as an alternative. Do make sure your SIM card has enough cash on it if it is pre-paid, and always carry a mobile phone charger: car chargers can be life-savers, as can wind-up phone chargers, or solar-powered ones that sit on top of your backpack. Also make sure everyone in your team is aware of how to work your communications system – whether it be a phone, e-mail, VHS two-way radio or a satellite mast – so that they can step in during emergencies.

The call-in should be a rigorous procedure – according to area or threat – every three or six hours. In the event that the call is not received, the procedure should be equally rigorous: no call for an hour – alert people that there may be a problem; no call for two hours – start emergency procedures. **Chris Cobb-Smith**

Choose communications equipment you understand. Simple is usually best because a phone that has a hundred gadgets will simply eat up the battery. It could also get you into trouble as people might assume it is something more exciting than

it is – some sort of new-fangled spy system or secret camera. It is less likely to get stolen if it's similar to what everyone else in the country has.

/YOUR PAPERWORK

Senior Al Jazeera cameraman Leith Mushtaq says it loud and clear: 'Get your papers in order and do not move until they are sorted.'

Your passport should be valid for at least six months and have at least three empty pages. Some countries are fussy about these things when it comes to giving out visas.

Check and double-check visa procedures and make sure you do it right. Getting it wrong can cause delay, cost money and get you into trouble.

If you have an Israeli stamp in your passport, you should get a second passport if possible. Many countries will not let you in with an Israeli stamp. If you are arrested or caught by kidnappers, it is the sort of thing that might get you into trouble, so it's not worth the risk. Ask Israeli border guards to stamp a separate piece of paper rather than your actual passport. Equally, if you are travelling to Israel, be careful about what stamps you have in your passport. Friends of mine with Iranian and Syrian stamps have had difficulties.

Use your least offensive passport, if you have more than one nationality, choosing the best one for your destination. Take the other passports with you, unless they might get you in trouble. In some countries a US or a UK passport could get you killed if found in your luggage, or they might be a 'Get out of Jail Free' card in the right hands. Take advice from the ground before you go in.

Get visas for neighbouring countries too if you think you might need to escape quickly.

Make multiple colour photocopies of your documents: passport, ID card (if you have one), driving licence (back and front), insurance papers, emergency numbers (including next of kin) and credit cards (back and front). Keep them in a separate place from the originals. Give copies to your team, your company and friends or family back home.

Pay your bills before you go so that you don't get stung with a late payment fee or, even worse, have your utilities cut off while you're away.

Check your credit cards will remain valid throughout your trip, and give your bank a call to let them know you will be travelling so that you don't get cut off for unusual purchases that look like fraud. They will put a note in the system.

Update your will or write one. I found it quite therapeutic, and others say they found it helped them to sleep better knowing it was written.

/LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Your most important investment when working in a foreign place is in local knowledge. Think about this ahead of time. Who will be your friend and fixer on the ground? Have you done as much groundwork as possible ahead of your visit for making those key connections?

Find a trustworthy and knowledgeable local who is able and willing to look after you – and do it quickly. To do this you must understand the cultural divisions of the place you are going to. Your fixer has to be from the right part of town if he is going to be able to help you – and in Baghdad, for example, that could change from day to day. We hired four translators – one Shia, two Sunni and one a Christian Kurd. Most of the time they got on, but when things went wrong or events by one side damaged another, we discovered they hated each other more than they hated us, and that was a comfortable position to be in. But you must be aware of the rivalries and jealousies involved in running a team of people who have never worked together before.

By the time I got to Basra I knew I wanted less tension among my colleagues, so I chose a man who came from a tribe with mixed religious affiliations – a tribe that always seemed to be in the middle. I didn't necessarily get everything I needed done as quickly without other key connections, but at least our two-man team didn't offend people.

Read up about the local culture and don't stop until you touch down back at home again. Leith Mushtaq says: 'Books about the area are a key piece of your kit. You could read something the night before that saves your life.'

/LOCAL TRANSPORT

You need to think about how you are going to get around the country (see page 63) and make sure it is sorted from the beginning. Don't jump into a taxi on the first day only to find out it's been waiting for someone like you to put their hand up and volunteer for a kidnapping.

Laura McNaught, a freelance film-maker and founder of Sami's College Fund for children in the developing world, told me about a narrow escape she'd had as a result of too little forethought: 'It was my first morning in Baghdad. We were getting a lift into the Green Zone with an old Iraqi dude driving a red sports car. He's chatting merrily with his foot flat down on the gas when I see a Checkpoint – No Entry sign flash past us. I'm about to scream "Stop!" when a series of No Stopping signs whip past the window. Our driver won't slow down, so in desperation I grab my hair, press pass in hand, and hold it as far out of the tiny back window as I can. We're greeted by a far from impressed US army officer chastising, "We were about to open fire there, ma'am, if I hadn't seen your hair..."

"What I learnt...when Plan A doesn't work out, an improvised Plan B involving a driver you don't know is not acceptable. A good driver can save your life; a bad driver can get you killed. Never trust men driving sports cars.'

On the other hand, if you are absolutely certain that taxis are a safe way to travel, save money by using them rather than hiring a car and a driver.

/LANGUAGE ESSENTIALS

Take a basic book of the local language – the one that most people speak. It needs to show how it is written, not just how it sounds to your ear. That way you can point to phrases or words in the book if local people don't understand what you are saying. You need to learn how to say your name, your job and where you come from. If you will need to lie because your identity isn't especially popular in that country, please practise and practise that lie. In Iraq I always said I was Swedish until I realized that many Iraqis had escaped to Sweden under Saddam and I didn't know my rollmops from my pickled herring. Be careful who you lie to. Get your name, address and next-of-kin phone number written down somewhere in the local language as soon as you get there. And finally, if you have a medical condition, learn its name in the local language and how to ask for a hospital or whatever you need in order to make it better.

Marc DuBois, executive director of MSF-UK, offers some useful advice about getting to grips with the local language: 'Try to learn a few words as this sets you apart from other strangers. But a word of caution: I was mimicking the language of those around me in one African village. Most of the people there during the day were women, so I was using all the feminine greetings. It didn't work too well as a 6-foot 3-inch guy.'

This next piece of advice, from Samantha Bolton, former world head of press and campaigns for MSF, has been repeated again and again by people, Muslims and Christians alike: 'In Islamic areas make sure you know the words of the call to prayer, or at least one other full key paragraph from the Koran. It saved the life of one MSF kidnap victim, a Serbian aid worker from Sarajevo, when she was in Chechnya. She was tied up and about to be shot when she suddenly remembered the call to prayer, which she had heard so many times in her childhood. The kidnapers started arguing about how it was a sign from God and decided not to shoot her. She was eventually released.'

/TEAMWORK

The team you find yourself working with might have been put together by a human resources department who have chosen people for their individual strengths and qualities. On the other hand, it might be made up of a band of brothers and cousins, chosen because someone wanted to keep the money in the family. Or it could have been scrambled together as you were going out the door. There is no guaranteed way of assembling the best team. But there is a lot of groundwork you can do to put your team in the best possible position for working together.

Try to make contact with the rest of your team before you travel. If you get into trouble during your first tentative steps in the country, it is best if they know your name and the sound of your voice rather than just a flight number. And similarly, you need to know their names and who is in charge rather than just an address.

Get to know your team. There will likely be a clash of cultures, not least in the way they work. Some cultures like to work late in the night, leaving time for a three-hour siesta in the afternoon. Others like to have everything wrapped up by 5 p.m. in time for an early dinner and bed. In intense situations there will always be personality clashes, so it is a good idea to have ironed out some of your differences before arriving.

Get the best team to ensure success. This might not always be as simple as choosing the best. You need to choose the most appropriate. One MSF volunteer told me: 'In Yemen we chose not to bring Americans into the team because there was a high level of anti-American feeling.' This person also gave me some other interesting information: 'For the Yemenis their names give away their tribal history, but we outsiders had no clue when we were moving into different territory. You need to know someone locally who can tell you about it. One translator we hired was half-Ethiopian, half-Yemeni. That made him very low-ranking in society. He was our translator in the women's section, and that was sensitive enough to create problems. It became extremely difficult and we reached a point where we were risking his life, so we had to evacuate him from the area.'

Create systems where everyone is responsible for everyone else in case the real or natural leader is not around to tell you what to do. Nick Toksvig illustrated the importance of this with the following story: 'At one night-time checkpoint four of us were ordered out of the vehicle at gunpoint while the car was searched. We were then told we could go. I was driving and just before setting off realized only three of us were in the car. The fourth was having a slash nearby. Count them out and count them in.'

Create equality in your team. Even if people are treated differently outside the team, within the team they should be served the same food and sleep in the same beds. Apart from anything else, griping and whining about the hideous situation you are all in will bring a team together. If someone is receiving better treatment than others, it causes problems. Another point Nick Toksvig makes is: 'Make sure everyone has a flak jacket. The whole team should have the same level of security or insecurity.'

A team that eats together stays together. One MSF volunteer told me: 'When I first got to Yemen we used to eat our breakfast separately from our national staff – us with bread and chocolate spread, and them with the local food. But I decided it would be better for the team if we ate together. Then we discovered they had some amazing food. Honey and meat and their own type of pancake. It was delicious. Now, wherever I am, I seek out Yemeni restaurants, I love the food so much.'

Be upfront about pay. In my experience, transparency is the best way forward when it comes to money. If everyone knows what everyone else is getting and they choose to stay in the job, they cannot complain. It is a good idea to set aside some

cash to use later as tips for the lower-paid workers in the team. It should be a surprise, not expected. Make that prize-giving transparent too and everyone will strive for that one goal.

Nick Toksvig discovered the hard way that paying team members should not be delegated: 'I was paying our translator in Kabul \$150 per day, 50 of which was meant to go to the driver. In the end I found out that the translator was giving the driver only 10 bucks a day, and this was the guy driving us to some dodgy areas. Pay each person separately or they might get pissed off.'

Make sure everyone understands the point of your trip and agrees with the chosen method of getting there. When lives are in danger it is not fair to impose rules on people. Everyone needs to be in agreement. On the other hand, if someone is stubbornly refusing to toe the line, the team needs to make clear that it will not be tolerated.

Clearly define roles within a team so there is no clash of responsibility. When lives are at stake it is sometimes difficult to delegate, but it must happen or people will not be fully invested in the task and will begin to feel sidelined.

Sherine Tadoros was one of the only international reporters inside Gaza during the war between Hamas and Israel in 2009. She was there for several months, just her and dozens of boys in a building stuck in the heart of the conflict. In the build-up, then during and after the war, they all witnessed more horror than I can ever imagine. She says one of the hardest things was learning to allow individuals their own response to a situation they were experiencing as a team. She drew a comparison with a near-tragedy from her childhood:

'When I was 15 years old, my baby cousin fell in the swimming pool and started drowning. My aunt froze, my mother screamed, my dad jumped into the pool. At a moment of extreme stress everyone has different ways of reacting and coping. You need to recognize that each of your colleagues is coping in their own way and respect their mechanism for dealing with stress, even if you don't think it's healthy or it's not what you are doing.'

'During the Gaza war I had a lot of men around me; most were incredibly robotic, seeming almost unaffected by what was going on, or in some kind of bubble. I was the opposite. I felt every day of that war and the suffering around me, and I didn't hide my fear or distress. A lot of the time my colleagues would walk out of the room when I was emotional. I felt they were being unsympathetic and unkind. What I realized later was that I was disturbing their coping mechanism. Just as I needed to cry and feel to stay sane, they needed *not* to cry or feel at that moment.'

'There is no right way to cope. In the end we are there to do a job, to perform, and you must do whatever you need to do in order to do your job. Respect that and don't take things personally.'

/EXIT PLAN

Understanding that everyone responds in different ways is important when it comes to planning for the worst.

Make an exit plan. Talk through the exit plan with your team as thoroughly and as early as possible. Everyone needs to know how they are going to exit the hotel or area where you are meeting, and should know each other's numbers, as well as those for the emergency people. Do you have a reliable driver who will pick up the phone at any time of night? Does everyone have his number? Does everyone know where everyone else is staying so they can go and find them if they are not responding to a phone call?

Don't assume that everyone understands the situation as well as you do. Make things crystal clear to those around you. Remember, everyone on the team has a responsibility to make sure the rest know what is going on.

Don't assume you always have the best ideas. Be prepared to listen and learn.

Check and double-check that everyone knows the risks and exactly what to do in a disaster because you might not be there to shout instructions.

Zeina Khodr, an Al Jazeera English correspondent, talked to me about looking after the weakest link: 'You need to have thought and talked about the worst eventualities. I was in Kandahar during the election in Afghanistan in 2009. We were well staffed. We had two local guys, but also two guys from our head office to help work the satellite. They had never been anywhere dangerous before and nobody briefed them about what to expect. They were terrified that the Taliban were going to take over the town. They would hear mortars and they would panic. We sat down with them and I explained what was going to go on. We talked through the worst-case scenarios – from suicide bombing, mortars landing and car bombs to major armed assault and take-over. Everyone in the team should know what's going on. That was the first time

I realized that we didn't have an exit plan. I had started to take it for granted that everyone knew what was going on. So we worked out a plan.

'I come from Lebanon. I grew up in a civil war. We don't think of insurance, we don't think of exit plans. We used to film fighting in the morning and go clubbing in the evening. It is only recently I have realized that we need to ensure the safety of the whole team – to look after the weakest link. You should have an exit plan before it happens: this is damned important.'

When thinking about your exit plan the place you decide to stay is key.

/WHERE TO STAY

I arrived at our house in Baghdad late one afternoon after a 16-hour drive from Amman. I had been told it was in a leafy Christian suburb, away from the hectic dangers of the capital's centre. We parked up. I was very excited about being able to pee after so many hours on the road. A white van drove slowly past on my right. On my left a man started running and the van sped up. Inside I could see men in black masks. Shots rang out, the man stopped running and fell to the ground. The van sped away and we ran to see the body of what we were told was the local booze shop owner. It was my first dead body, my first picture on my new camera. A man murdered in broad daylight on my quiet suburban street. We were, in fact, not very far from what became Sadr City – the heartland of the Shia militia run by a man most of the press were calling the 'renegade cleric', Moqtada al Sadr. The Mehdi army were our neighbours.

But we stayed in our chosen house, preferring to be amongst people who would protect us and our reputation as a 'paper of the people' than be sitting targets in a hotel. That was our decision and we made it work.

Choosing the right place to stay is the key to being able to sleep at night, eat well during the day, and open a window without fear of being burgled. It should be researched and thought about properly before you arrive, and constantly checked thereafter.

Check the location of the building and find out what key official buildings are nearby. Does the threat of their being targeted outweigh the usefulness of their proximity?

What kind of security is there at night? Outside lighting is a minimum, CCTV is good, but guards and a checkpoint are even better.

Who else is staying in the building? There are no hard and fast rules about who the ideal occupants are. If there is no one at breakfast and lots of shady-looking businessmen making deals at night, you probably want to avoid it. If it is a well-known hang-out for one side or another during a war, and therefore a potential target, you should probably avoid it. Strange as it sounds, I was once told that any hotel where prostitutes feel safe to hang out is often a safe one...for women at least.

Where are the nearest police station and hospital? You need to know how to get to both these places, so find out where they are and drive the route. Being close to a police station is almost always a good idea – unless the police are part of the problem.

Ask about the local area. Find out if it is known for being safe. If it isn't, find out what the locals do to avoid trouble. It might mean not travelling at night or knowing which streets to avoid on your morning jog.

Check room security. The locks on the doors and windows need to be secure.

Avoid having a room on the ground floor – it is the most easily burgled. And avoid any rooms with balconies that can be reached from the ground.

Never let anyone know where your room is. If you're staying in a hotel, meet visitors in the lobby. Tell the desk that you are staying in a different room – the one where your security man is staying.

Choose a room for its proximity to an emergency exit. How close is the fire escape? Check the route for padlocks and work out a way to avoid them.

For the sake of your sanity there are several things you can do to improve your day-to-day life...

Nick Toksvig says, 'It's a good idea to hire extra rooms for offices and equipment. Otherwise some poor person's room will become the de facto office till the wee hours of the morning, everyone smoking and drinking.'

Mary O'Shea and I originally met on a sweaty floor mat under a tent near Timbuktu, both of us doubled over with food poisoning, but that's another story. She now works as an election observer, moving hotel every two months all year round. When choosing a room, she recommends: 'Never higher than the third floor. Soviet-

manufactured fire engines in developing countries do not reach higher than this. Never ever stay in a room with bars on the window (tricky in south Asia). Avoid any room with windows facing onto the street or the hotel entrance. I was once advised never to get into a lift with anyone else. This is nearly impossible, however. Ideally, stay on the outskirts of a town so that you are not trapped if there are street protests.'

My personal phobia in hotel rooms is cockroaches. I once found five on my bed in a shockingly bad hotel in southern Nepal. The whole town was on an electricity blackout, and as I crunched across the floor in flip-flops, my head-torch flicked down from my crawling bed to the shiny, wriggling black carpet around my feet. I hadn't slept for a couple of days, so I took two sarongs from my bag, swept the roaches off my pillow and made myself a stripy head-to-toe shroud to keep 'em out till morning. Next time my grumpy correspondent recommended a hotel, I pretended I couldn't hear him. Sarongs are a key piece of kit.

In her years spent filming dodgy and dangerous diseases in the outback of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Filipino slums and all sorts of other glamorous locations, Laura McNaught has picked up some key things to avoid. 'Make sure you get a room that is away from the entrance, the restaurant, the bar, the pool, the barking dogs, the Chinese take-away, the nightclub next door... Alternatively, bring earplugs.'

Other great tips from Laura include: 'Bring a T-shirt that can double up as a second, protective pillowcase. Bring a silk sleeping bag and never sleep naked, no matter how hot it is.' She also notes: 'A mini bottle of Cif goes further than alcohol handwash when you're cleaning the doorknobs, light switches and phone.' It's wise to do this if you're in an area where sickness is spreading as the cleaners rarely remember to do it.

My colleague and friend Jane Dutton is a genius of security tricks designed to thwart thieving fingers. Brought up in Johannesburg and weaned as CNN's 'Hotspots' girl, parachuting into 35 countries a year, she can spot potential hazards a mile off. She has even persuaded me to travel with a suitcase that padlocks shut these days. When it comes to hotel rooms these are her tips:

'Before you leave the room always check that your windows are locked, and double-lock the door on the way out. If there is no safe, hide valuable or important things around the room in the least obvious places. Put them in your shoes, in your pants, in your dirty washing. Zip and lock your bag with your stuff still inside to act as a temporary safe.'

In some places you will have little choice about where you can stay. Even if you are not in a war zone, it can still feel like one if there is a high enough crime rate. In those cases, you must take every precaution to make your house secure. Change

your locks and take advice from neighbours. Don't use the first security firm that knocks on your door.

Nick Toksvig points out that there are many times when it is a good idea to have a different 'safe house' to return to in case something goes wrong. 'Covering the volcano eruption on the island of Montserrat, I rented two houses, with the second closer to the "safe" zone. It meant we could move our operation quickly if things got out of control close to the mountain. Another time, during Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006, we had local hotel accommodation, but also a safe house down by the harbour in case things got heavy and the Israelis invaded.'

I always carry a simple little wooden wedge. Just slide it under the door as an additional lock: the harder the door is forced, the more it jams. And remember, your 'Do Not Disturb' sign is a simple deterrent. I'd much rather a grubby room than some cleaner snooping around my belongings.

Chris Cobb-Smith

/SAFE ROOM

I first met Chris Cobb-Smith in a favourite London pub with the mad but fantastic BBC reporter John Sweeney. We were investigating the deaths of six British 'Red Caps' (military policemen) during a riot in southern Iraq. I was ex-army and so was Chris, an artilleryman from the 29 Commando regiment. After working in Kosovo as a weapons inspector, he founded Chiron Resources, which provides specialist security support to news and documentary teams reporting from war zones. We have been bumping into each other on various jobs ever since. Name a conflict or disaster and you will find Chris was a visitor.

He says that in addition to having a safe house, a 'safe room' should be prepared in advance – somewhere to go when evacuation is impossible:

'Offices, bureaux and accommodation in high-risk areas should have a safe room – a secured area that could be used as a last resort for sanctuary in the event of an attack or attempted abduction. The aim of a safe room is to provide a hardened sanctuary that will at least buy additional time until help arrives, and may even act as a deterrent to an aggressor.'

'Ideally, the safe room should not have any outside walls, be of substantial construction and have a solid and securable door. If the room does have windows, external or internal, they should be armoured. The room should also have power

and, ideally, be equipped with a panic button connected to the agency responsible for responding to an emergency. A safe room can be specially constructed, or created by enhancing a bathroom or possibly the space under the stairs.

'It is essential that there is a reliable quick-response force capable of responding to any emergency calls for assistance. Whoever that security agency is – police, army or private contractor – it should conduct a thorough survey of the facility and be shown the exact location of the safe room so their procedures can be comprehensively planned.'

Chris says the room must contain the following:

- At least two methods of communication – a telephone of some sort (landline, mobile or satellite) and walkie-talkies or two-way VHS radio if possible. Note that satellite phones and some radios will not work inside, so antennas will need to be 'remoted' to the outside to maintain a strong signal.
- A good supply of water.
- Non-perishable food (tins, dried fruit, etc.).
- Medical pack.
- Radio – for news, information and entertainment.
- Sleeping bags and blankets.
- Fire-fighting equipment.
- Personal protective equipment: body armour, helmets, eye-protection and gas masks.
- Reading material.
- Torches and spare batteries.
- Bucket and tissues in case you are there longer than expected, or someone gets caught short.

/THE LAW OF THE LAND

Never go in blind. Don't move until you know everything about where you are going. **Leith Mustaq**

Getting to know your destination starts with understanding the culture, but then you have to learn the laws of the country. And finally, there's international law.

You probably break laws every day where you are right now. I do. I have stuffed my pockets full of bacon on flights back to Doha on more than one occasion. I drive

far too fast, and badly. And I drink when I shouldn't. Not proud, not clever.

These are rules I reckon I can get away with most of the time in a place where the rules are relatively stable. In a less forgiving place – one where the rules are changing all the time, or where there are none at all – breaking those rules could get you chucked in jail for some time, or even executed.

If there are any rules at all in a war zone, they are often made up on the spot. Wherever you are going, one of the most important things you need to do in preparation for arrival is to get a basic grasp of any awkward laws. Something as simple as failing to carry your correct ID card around can be an excuse for authorities to slam you in jail just to keep you 'out of trouble' for a while.

Tom Hudson has done many an extra hour's stag (watch) for me while I slept my watch out in the frozen woods during army training. We were in the same troop at Sandhurst, and he shared his sleeping bag with me when mine was wet. He used to work as a lawyer for Linklaters, and is now the legal counsel for a Middle East security company that provides services in Iraq, Afghanistan and other 'hostile' environments. He offers the following expert advice.

/HOW TO AVOID BREAKING THE LAW IN A WAR ZONE

War zones, by definition, can seem entirely lawless, so describing the legal position might seem hypothetical at best. However, there is a complex matrix of laws that might apply to any war zone. Understanding these is a surprisingly difficult but key step.

The 'law of war' is considered a part of public international law. It's a broad body of law concerning everything from acceptable justifications to engage in war (*ius ad bellum*) to the limits of acceptable wartime conduct (*ius in bello*). Humanitarian law plays its part. And, as 'modern' warfare evolves, the convergence and overlap with criminal law and civil law becomes more apparent.

Given the varied nature of people's roles, territories and actions, the information here will not be a comprehensive guide as to what one can and can't do. But it should get you asking the right sort of questions and give some pointers as to what law might apply to you.

Military personnel

If you are in the military, you will be well aware of military law. Taking the position of British soldiers as an example, the Military Criminal Justice System is seen as an essential part of the British Army, both at home and abroad. The Adjutant General

has said that 'it often serves where there is no law or where UK standards of law and justice are not applied. Self-regulation is therefore a prerequisite for military operations.'

The overview provided by the Armed Forces Bill Team serves as a useful summary of the legal position for the British military in war zones: 'UK courts cannot generally try offences which are committed outside the UK. The Service system of law ensures that, as far as possible, Service personnel are dealt with by a familiar system if they commit an offence when serving overseas. They can expect a consistent and fair hearing wherever they find themselves. Without such a system, they would be dealt with under the law of the country in which they are serving or escape justice altogether. At a practical level this means that they are dealt with in a language they understand. They are also dealt with fairly by a system judged to be fully compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).'

A soldier will have to be cognisant of his position under military law in addition to his position under civilian law.

In September 2009, Steven Green, accused of raping and murdering an Iraqi girl, became the first former soldier to be prosecuted in the United States for crimes committed overseas. Had he been sentenced to execution, he would have been the first American soldier ever tried for war crimes in a civilian court to receive that sentence, but he was given life imprisonment instead.

Government contractors

Aside from the military, much public attention has focused on armed private security contractors. The legal treatment of the Blackwater contractors who were accused of killing 17 Iraqis in Baghdad's Nisour Square in September 2007 caused an international media storm.

According to a December 2009 report to Congress, the US Department of Defense (DoD) workforce in Iraq and Afghanistan comprises roughly comparable numbers of contractors (218,000) and uniformed personnel (195,000). But it is estimated that less than 10 per cent are security contractors, and the rest are doing just ordinary jobs, working as electricians, engineers, canteen staff and suchlike.

Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, controversially signed Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17, which stated that 'Contractors shall not be subject to Iraqi laws or regulations in matters relating to the terms and conditions of their Contracts.' It provided effective 'immunity' for contractors in the eyes of the Iraqis for them to do what they wanted.

In late 2008 a new law was approved by the Iraqi government, and Bush's announcement of it was made more famous by a displeased Iraqi journalist throwing

a shoe at him. It was agreed that 'Iraq shall have the primary right to exercise jurisdiction over United States contractors and United States contractor employees', so US contractors working for US forces would be subject to Iraqi criminal law. If US forces committed 'major premeditated felonies' while off duty and off base, they would be subject to the still undecided procedures laid out by a joint US-Iraq committee. However, the agreement is not totally clear and the immunity question is still being talked about.

Contractors are also subject to international laws, such as the Geneva Convention. This refers to 'supply contractors', which could include defence and private military contractors. Provided they have a valid identity card issued by the armed forces that they accompany, they are entitled to be treated as prisoners of war if captured. If they are found to be mercenaries, they are unlawful combatants and lose the right to prisoner of war status. This means that US contractors to the coalition forces in Iraq are subject to three levels of law – international, US and Iraqi.

Other commercial companies

There are many difficult aspects to operating a commercial company in a war zone. Among those that foreign nationals working for them should be aware of are the international anti-corruption measures, which will still be applicable to them. Perhaps the best known, thanks to rigorous enforcement and hefty fines, is the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), but there are also measures laid down by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UN conventions. The UK Bribery Act (in effect since April 2010) is an interesting development as the UK has been relatively poor at investigating and prosecuting corruption offences in the past. This new law is wider in scope than the piecemeal ones it replaced, and it has extra-territorial reach.

Some of the red flags one should look out for as an employee working for commercial companies are requests for cash payments, requests for payments to third parties or offshore, requests for hospitality for government officials, or in fact any request if you are in a country with a reputation for corruption. The penalties can be quite substantial. Under the new British Act, for example, individuals guilty of one of the principal offences are liable on conviction to imprisonment for up to 10 years, or a fine, or both. If a deal 'smells wrong', it probably is, so it's best to seek legal advice.

Journalists

In areas of conflict journalists are considered civilians under Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, provided they do not do anything or behave in any way that

might compromise this status, such as directly helping a war, bearing arms or spying. Every journalist should ensure that they are not put in a compromising situation in relation to any of these things. A deliberate attack on a journalist that causes death or serious physical injury is a major breach of this Protocol and deemed a war crime.

Journalists should also note in what capacity they are travelling to a country in terms of Employment Law. Are they considered an employee or are they freelancing? Some media corporations have been criticized for preferring freelancers in order to save money or abdicate themselves of legal responsibility.

Medics

The First Geneva Convention of 1864 established that a distinctive emblem should be worn by medical personnel on the field of battle as an indication of their humanitarian mission and their neutral status. This is still the case today, and whether you're wearing the Red Cross or the Red Crescent, make sure it's visible to afford yourself this protection.

And a final thought from Tom... 'Before travelling to any hostile environment, spare some thought for your legal position there and what laws apply. Remember, though, that the "rule of law" is often the very thing being fought for, so don't expect it always to be upheld.'

/WHEN TO LEAVE

James Brandon, a journalist who was kidnapped in Iraq in 2004, offers the following advice: 'Deciding when to leave a war zone is as important as deciding when to arrive. Many people are killed or kidnapped because they stay too long. Typically, people arrive in war zones feeling wary, suspicious and paranoid. In many cases, however, they become more relaxed the longer they are there. Danger becomes so omnipresent that people sometimes become fatalistic ("Everybody dies one day" is a typical refrain you hear in war zones). For example, a person new to a war zone might estimate the chances of being killed while doing such-and-such activity and decide that if the odds of getting killed are more than 1-1000, they won't do it. But after a few months they might say that a 1-50 chance of being killed on a particular mission is "do-able". A few more months, however, and a 50:50 chance of being killed starts to look like playable odds. That's when it's time to leave.'

It might seem strange to plan your exit before you arrive, but for the sake of friends, family and your own sanity, it is a very good idea.

/GRAB BAG

Also known as a 'sac d'evac' or 'crash bag', this is the bag you will grab when the bombs are raining down and you head to a bomb shelter. It is the *only* thing you will have with you if you are evacuated in a rush. It is the one bag you will put in a safe or a friend's hotel room if you think someone uninvited might be coming into yours when you pop out for dinner later.

Nick Toksvig recalls how important this bag can be: 'During the Russia-Georgia conflict, a car with four Sky News people was stopped by armed men. They were forced out and the car was stolen. Inside was their luggage and camera equipment. One guy had got out with his shoulder bag still around his shoulders. It contained money, passport and water. It got them out of there.'

A grab bag is not optional. Everybody needs one. It can be as small as a burn bag, but it had better be bloody good. The stuff you put in there can save your life.

YOUR GRAB BAG MUST INCLUDE...

- / Passport(s) / Credit cards
- / Means of communication, fully charged and ready to go, plus charger. There are now some great solar-powered phones on the market. / Water for a day
- / Emergency contact list / Medical kit, including all your prescription medicines
- / Pocket knife - make sure you take it out of your hand luggage at airports or security will take it off you. I have lost about 10 this way. / Food - some dried food, such as granola bars and raisins, and some tinned food, in tins that don't need a tin opener
- / Airline tickets / Matches and/or a lighter - buy these at your destination, and discard before boarding any planes.
- / Cash - \$1000 plus several hundred dollars-worth of local money
- / Torch - I find head-torches the most useful for day-to-day use

You should check your grab bag every evening before you go to bed. You should put chargers and passports straight back into their assigned pocket the moment you have used them. You might also decide to put a packet or two of cigarettes in there, or a book; you'll have your own priorities.

I went into Baghdad with a backpack full of ugly baggy clothes, a book about Iraq by Dilip Hiro, a lot of tampons, a very good Berlitz Arabic phrasebook, a head-torch, a corkscrew/bottle opener (I never travel anywhere without a corkscrew) and a couple of hundred dollars. They all came in useful at one time or another. Having been in the army, I am pretty good at packing a lot into a small space.

I thought I was well prepared, but if I had thought for a bit longer, there was so much more I could have done to help my journey. It is better to carry more than less if you can. The most experienced people in war zones tend to come with a household of stuff and then dump it all in an emergency. Of course, the amount you take also depends on your mode of transport. The not-so-funny stories I have heard about people getting killed on the way to buy a razor, or getting pregnant because all the local condoms were out of date should be a lesson to all.

Note: Whether you are a girl or a boy, there are some quick lessons to learn about underwear under fire. You need to be able to get up and go straight from your bed to the fire escape if necessary. Leave your posh pants at home. Stefanie Dekker, an Al Jazeera English producer, remembers: 'I was in Kurdistan and in most of the hotels guys do the laundry. I put all my pretty G-strings in the laundry and came back to my room to see them lined up, drying on my windowsill. Then two guys arrived at my door, one of them from the laundry, big grins on their faces: "Anything else you need, madam?" It felt very awkward. Now I travel with only big pants.'

Optional extras

On top of the essentials there are some other bits and bobs I always take along on any trip to make life a little easier:

- Baby wipes – several different brands so that no particular smell becomes associated with a bad time. If that happens, it will limit your choices next time.
- Couple of sarongs – as quick-dry towels, emergency headscarves, skirts (manly ones too, as per David Beckham), dresses, cover-ups, pillows, curtains, extra blankets, useful medical equipment for bandaging and tying on splints, and a crucial layer between you and dirty, smelly hotel sheets when you need one.
- Hot-water bottle – can be your best friend in a cold climate. Boil up your water, wait 30 seconds, then pour it into the hot-water bottle. When you wake up in the

morning you have water that is safe to drink and at body temperature rather than freezing cold.

- Space blanket – useful to stay warm, and the orange-gold side can be used as a signal (that colour doesn't occur naturally in the wilderness). Plus, they fold to the size of a hankie.

And, depending on where you are travelling, some other useful things that can be difficult to find in a hurry should also go in your bag:

- Tin opener
- Duct tape
- String
- Bin bags
- Puritabs/water sterilizing tablets
- Toilet paper
- Vaseline or the cure-all Australian remedy Lucas' Pawpaw Treatment
- Tweezers
- Eyedrops
- Soap
- Candles
- Washing liquid
- Sewing needles (of different sizes) and thread

Tips from the top

There are plenty of other optional extras, not so much for your grab bag, but equally important for remaining safe and sane.

'Good pair of sunglasses.' **Shelley Thakral**, senior producer, BBC World
 'Books – lots of them. Also cigars and good whisky.' **John Simpson**, world affairs editor, BBC News

'iPod – being able to take photos of family and music on my travels has changed my life.' **Jon Snow**, chief news presenter, Channel 4

'Booze – great for winding down after a day of human suffering and hopelessness. Also Vegemite – it makes anything taste better.' **Laura Tyson**, former media officer, Department for International Development

'Plenty of aspirin and painkillers.' **Subina Shrestha**, journalist and film-maker

'Remaining professional-looking can be a struggle when there is little water to wash with for weeks on end. I usually take dry shampoo with me. It is a powder spray, which absorbs all the dirt and gives your hairdo a little extra oomph. It's like a shower in a can!' **Stefanie Dekker**, Al Jazeera English producer

'Cheque book. This works a treat with the *hawala* system [an informal money-lending system based on honour and found mainly in the Arab world]. Go to a money-changer and write a cheque – just the sterling amount and a signature are required; the payee and date are left blank – and you are given the equivalent in US dollars. The system works across south Asia and much of the Arabic world.'
Ian Mackinnon, freelance journalist

'Penicillin, two passports and a means of communication.' **James Brabazon**, journalist and documentary film-maker

'Sat nav and maps, but leave the sat nav behind if you are off to somewhere sensitive. Small generator that produces 220 volts of electricity. Gifts to win people over: chocolate is great for kids, while small solar-powered panels to charge mobiles are cheap and priceless to adults. Camelbak-style water container. Torches with plenty of batteries for when the electricity is down.'

Leith Mushtaq, senior Al Jazeera cameraman

'Condoms, peanuts, water-bottle, torch, long- and short-sleeved shirts, anti-mosquito repellent, a small bottle of gin or vodka that will not get spotted in a Muslim country where booze is forbidden. Vodka in an IV bag is the best!'

Monique Nagelkerke, MSF head of mission

'Good book and a head-torch to read it by. Sleeping mat and a sleeping bag as it can get very cold at night.' **Tim Albone**, journalist

'Music on my iPhone, shortwave radio, snakebite kit (in the wilds of Southeast Asia), and a US army escape kit (in Vietnam).' **Jon Swain**, journalist and author

'Army tourniquet, clean needle, antiseptic, water purification tablets and portable chess set.' **Sebastian Junger**, journalist and author

2/AVOIDING MISUNDERSTANDING

There is no such thing as an enemy. You are independent in a war zone; you should be able to deal with everyone and everything. Understand that the people outside are just men and women. How are they thinking? What part of them can you understand? In the end they are all human. You need to find the kernel of humanity. **Leith Mushtaq**