

DOES IT HAVE HIGH WALLS? HOW MANY ENTRY POINTS? IS IT OF TARGET VALUE? IS IT NEAR GOOD ESCAPE ROUTES?

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SAFE HAVENS AND ROUTING

BY: KENT O'DONNELL

Whenever I travel OCONUS (Outside the Continental United States), I do considerable research assessing safe havens.

What makes it a safe haven? A safe haven may be defined best by a good friend who teaches critical incident management with me. It is a location that facilitates good decision making, it is safe from gun fire, warm and dry, and you should be able to have a cup of coffee and use the restroom. I like to consider an all hazard approach when planning, not just for terrorist attacks or civil unrest, but also consideration of infrastructure failure, weather emergencies, religious events, elections and other local national incidents.

In general terms, a safe haven should have some tactical advantages: high walls (too high to climb easily), CCTV, a friendly (to us) guard force (that may be armed or unarmed), access and egress control (two points of egress are preferable.) There should be safe vehicle parking, phones, electricity from power grid and generator. It is beneficial if it has little or no target value so it is unlikely to be the focus

of an attack and not near likely areas of civil unrest and general crime. A safe haven should be along routes that will benefit me if we choose to exit the country, not a location that takes me farther away from national exit points (airports, seaports, borders.) It is sometimes even possible to pre-stage some gear at a safe haven. When selecting safe havens before I am in country, I trust but verify. I have to trust the information provided by in-country persons, and upon my arrival, I invest the time to inspect to the quality of security.

Due to injury or illness it may be necessary to seek treatment at a local hospital or clinic.



A PEACEFUL DAY CAN TURN INTO A RIOT.
WHERE DO YOU GO TO HOLE UP?

Unlike the U.S. where you would choose a level one trauma center for injuries and sudden illnesses, most developing nation hospitals provide general services. Clinics are usually



WHAT'S SAFE? WHAT'S SECURE?

above: U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv. right: Hotel in Paris.



enhanced doctor's offices; you may be able to get care up to stitches and treatment for non-critical fractures. (The femur, spine and skull being critical.) The local hospital is usually the destination for injured persons from both sides of a conflict and generally not a safe haven at all. A solid self-treatment plan for common medical issues is paramount. I always travel with over-the-counter diarrhea meds, Rx Diphenoxylate / atropine 2.5 mg tablets, for serious diarrhea, Ciprofloxacin 500mg tablets for a variety of infections, and Benadryl for allergic reactions. A good first aid kit is one of the must-pack items.

Local national police and security guards often do not have sufficient training and may not be impartial in a conflict or committed to defending foreigners. It has been seen time and time again where local national security abandons their post and foreign business compounds have been overrun. Some LN police will often fear personal attacks on their families if they get involved in conflict and seem to not be around during conflict or choose not to engage. On the other extreme, the LN police may over-engage and turn a small event into a major incident with days of retaliation. Approaching them when they are anxious can be dangerous.

A standard choice safe haven in most preplanning is the U.S. Embassy (it is worth noting that the embassies of nations friendly to the U.S. have often harbored Americans in emergencies too.) I was in Liberia during the "Arab Spring." The Benghazi attack was occurring and we were charged with evacuating two executives. We had a safe haven hotel on

the edge of Monrovia and observed sizable crowds, but no violence. We considered a move to the U.S. embassy and did an advance on the route, which also took us by the company headquarters (another safe haven.) In this case, moving through the crowd would have been a high risk move. Our hotel on the edge of town was actually closer to the international airport and sheltering in place was our choice.

The first safe haven I choose will be the hotel we will be staying at. I like to stay near the company office so we can minimize road moves. Some issues specific to work travel and hotel choice are: is the company the focus of any domestic issues, labor disputes or other protest? Staying where most of the in-transit staff is staying can be good, as you will be with others from the same company or client, or you may want your space for professional reasons and that site may have a higher likelihood of being known to potential bad guys.

Some hotels have casinos that are open late hours and often there will be small concerts at the bars. This may not only keep you up at night, but may also jeopardize the integrity of your team and your vehicle safety plan. Just as in the U.S., places such as this have increased security incidents. You should avoid them in the U.S. and abroad when planning for safety.

Generally, the work or office site should be a safe haven, a secured facility that you would be able to access in the event of some incident. Upon my arrival at the hotel and office I always inspect to ensure that security information I was told is accurate. A friendly con-

versation is usually sufficient to identify any major deficiencies.

My general emergency plan is if there is an incident at the hotel we will move to the work site, and vice versa. This is not always possible. I was on a task in Libya where the work site was a full four hours driving time from the airport. We had a hotel with all the requirements for a good safe haven approximately thirty minutes driving time from the airport. Due to the unrest in this nation we always conducted two-vehicle moves to and from the airport because of the lack of good safe havens. On the route to the site we selected several other safe havens. Upon my arrival, the travel management plan included using local national police stations as safe havens. In this nation, the police were being targeted more often than expats, so we discontinued using them for safe havens. Along the route to the work site there were several businesses that the company made large and or multiple purchases from. These businesses had complexes that were excellent safe havens. After just a few phone calls they were on board with us using them to harbor our personnel.

When I travel for leisure, less formal-if any-preplanning or correspondence is conducted with the possible safe havens. I choose my hotel and the sites and activities we want to see, then I will choose safe havens using the same guidelines as for business travel. If you are less familiar with routes and locations, then seeking a safe haven in an emergency will be difficult.

ROUTES

It is advisable to have multiple routes to use, especially if you will be traveling to the same location many times. An alternate route needs to be given the same planning considerations as your primary route. If possible I like to do an advance of all routes. Sometimes you are in a situation where you are limited to one or two routes. If this is the case, you should consider significant departure time changes. Avoid being predictable.

Google maps is great in the U.S. and can be used in most nations now. It is frustrating and dangerous to be driving behind someone reading a phone map in the U. S. In a foreign country, poorly marked roads (maybe not marked at all) and during a critical incident, hoping the cell towers still function and driving via Google maps is not a great plan. Set yourself up for success and go old school. Pay a few dollars and buy a book about the nation you are visiting or at least buy a paper map upon arrival. Then pick geographical landmarks to help identify major routes and safe havens. Pick something that can be seen from a long way away that is not easy to destroy and can be identified at night.

EXIT PLANS

As in Liberia, we chose a hotel on the outside of Monrovia rather than others in downtown that are closer to the embassy. This worked well for us. Other considerations for your exit include in-extremis departure. In Liberia, for a time, we were on the eastern border and our exit would have been to move to Guinea. This required a visa. In extremis, we could move to the border and claim force majeure. We would be stopped at the border and have to do some negotiations which would have caused significant delays and cost, versus having obtained a visa for the small fee prior to actually needing it. In other words, a good insurance policy. As a note, even untrue rumors of a pending company exit have ignited incidents where local nationals have raided mining camps and stolen tools and equipment. A true company withdrawal is a tactical event and should be treated as such. Regular expat evacuation drills will lessen the suspicion of the locals that a given company is pulling out.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Ryan loves to scuba dive and explore foreign lands; he has selected Honduras for his next trip. His research shows that it is currently not an election year and there has not been any

significant domestic civil unrest and no terror incidents for a long time. He is flying in to San Pedro Sula and then driving to Tela, staying at the Telamar all-inclusive resort. His safe haven and route plan is as follows:

From the airport, I will exit and go south on CA13 (a divided highway), after a short distance I will cross over a river, Rio Chamelecon. If I need to stay near the airport, there is an Inn near the Rio and 7 Calle, the main road in the city. I will cross Canal de Alivio Maya as my next land mark.

I will cross Rio Ulua next. Continuing on, there will be several gas stations and Hotel La Cascada on the north side of the road. This would make a good safe stop when traveling in either direction. As I enter Tela I will have a hospital road on the right and the airport road on the ocean side or east. I will go east toward the ocean. The hotel is on the ocean side, just east of the Tela Airport. The next land marks will be Rio Mezapa and the Church, Vigen de Fatima. I will stay on route CA13. Ejecutivos Apart Hotel is near Colonia Vencia and is higher and in-land from any ocean weather events.

Even if I am not planning to drive myself, it is beneficial for everyone with me to know the route. It is useful to visualize it in reverse also, and do the same for possible alternates. What other modes of travel are there? (train, bus, cab, bicycle, etc.) Having checkpoints or times to report to someone you trust can dramatically improve your safety. If you go missing along your route after departing the airport and before making it to your hotel, your friends have a much narrower search than if you simply got on a plane and are only noticed missing when you aren't on your return flight. Think how you can capture the benefits of a pilot's flight plan.

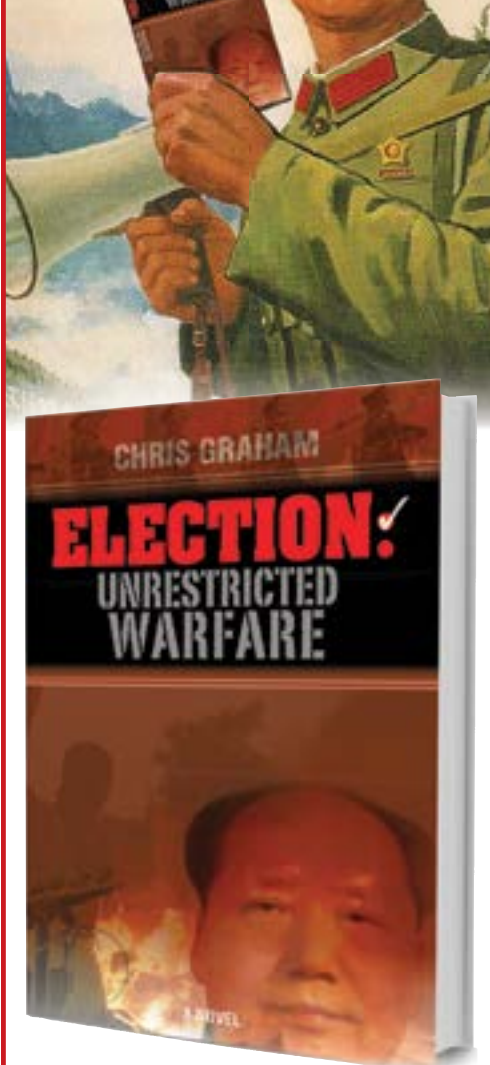
A little bit of preparation and forethought can make you much safer when you travel. These planning skills can be practiced at home both to exercise your abilities and to examine your local environment from a different perspective than you are used to. ✓

BIO

Kent O'Donnell is a former Recon Marine and a retired police sergeant. He spent most of his career on his department's SWAT team. Kent has done risk and security audits and training throughout west Africa, South America and Europe and provided weapons and tactics training around the world. Kent worked on a U.S. government project in Libya for six months and currently serves www.360worldwidesecurity.com.

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