

TRAVEL TALK BY CHASE BINDER WATCH OUT FOR THIEVES

Imagine it. You've just landed in Costa Rica for a week of lolling around on beaches, ogling volcanoes and zip-lining through tropical rainforest. The San Jose airport arrival process is typical of Central American and Caribbean countries—a bit cumbersome and lengthy. But you have your luggage and your rental SUV seems perfect for the 4-5 hour drive to your resort on the Pacific coast. Happy and excited to experience the much-touted Costa Rica, you hit the road. It's midday, sunny and bright.

Then, right outside of San Jose, you stop at a McDonald's to grab a cup of coffee and everything changes. While you're inside—a mere three minutes—the window on the driver's side of your SUV is smashed. Thieves take your carry-ons. Your cellphones, cameras, iPads, iPods and Go-Pros are in the wind. Worst of all, your passports are gone.

Disaster!

This happened to friends just last month—I'll call them Sandy and Jack. They are fairly well-traveled, not at all cavalier about being in a foreign country and organized enough to have copies of their passport photo/info pages.

In fact, they did almost everything right—but it still didn't go well. The McDonald's they pulled into looked spanking-new with a nice paved parking lot, a very visible security guard and less obvious (but still present) security cameras. Sandy took her hand bag with money and credit cards in with her. Jack had his wallet with him. They weren't getting food or sitting down—just literally grabbing coffee “to go”.

How could this happen? Sandy found out later (*much* later), that events like this (and worse) are



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happening in Costa Rica with alarming frequency. It goes like so: you're targeted right at the airport. Perhaps exiting with your luggage. Perhaps at the car rental pick-up. Thieves follow you, thinking you'll stop at a familiar spot (what's more familiar than a McDonald's?) and they can do a quick smash-and-grab.

What about the security cameras, you ask? In this instance, disabled. What about the security guard? He “didn't catch” anything specific about the thieves' car—just that “he thought it was black.” Hmm. To me, that speaks of coordinated thievery. Unprovable, perhaps, but well-planned nonetheless.

Sandy and Jack spent hours with the police. The police didn't speak English. Neither Sandy nor Jack are fluent in Spanish. But they got forms filled out and learned something even more unsettling. According to the police, they were “lucky” to have the thieves catch up with them at the McDonald's. If they hadn't stopped, and had continued the long drive, the thieves might well have followed them and created an “accident”—bumping

their SUV and robbing them in a remote area. It could have been much worse.

Sandy's first thought was to return to the US immediately. Forget the vacation and go home. Not so easy. She quickly found that she couldn't get on a plane home without a new passport—meaning a trip to the US Embassy. But it was a Saturday, a common arrival day, and the US Embassy is only open weekdays—and in this case Monday was a Costa Rican holiday, so her first shot at getting new passports would be Tuesday.

Sandy and Jack, after spending more hours struggling with their local travel agent, getting a replacement SUV and overnighting at a less-than-resort-like motel near the San Jose police station, went on their way to the Pacific Coast resort.

Tuesday, they woke at 3 AM for the drive back to San Jose and the US embassy, only to find a 3 ½ hour line of people snaking out the door and onto the sidewalk. All waiting to replace stolen passports. Compounding the problem, the embassy only provides passport replacement services between the hours of 8 and 11 each morning. Sandy and Jack made it into the embassy, up to the desk where the forms were distributed and had started filling them out when the clock struck 11. Sorry, they were told. You have to leave and come back tomorrow. They returned the next day, finished the process, and then had to wait another two days for the passports to be issued.

Ultimately, Sandy and Jack did have a couple of good days in Costa Rica and did make it home safely, albeit without many of electronics they had bought to record their adventure. I asked Sandy what was the worst part of the experience and she replied immediately, “Oh, it wasn't

what we lost. Not at all. It was the way we felt. We didn't feel safe.”

When Sandy landed in the US and gave her temporary passport to the US Customs agent, he said “Oh you've been to Costa Rica. I guarantee you before the rest of the plane empties I'll have another 10 temporary passports.”

I have one word—sad. Bud and I have been to Costa Rica twice, both wonderful experiences. Would we go now? Perhaps not.

If Trouble Finds You

- Pack color copies of your passport photo pages in several places in your luggage. Always keep the originals on your person or in your room safe.
- Practice situational awareness. One person in your party should be assigned to watch over possessions, especially in airports and on the road.
- Paying a security guard \$5 to watch your car while you're in a restaurant may seem unnecessary and annoying...but if it saves your things, it's a good investment.
- If your things are stolen, call the police, file formal reports and keep copies—even if they are in a foreign language.
- Always make note of your destination's US Embassy contact info before you leave.
- Keep receipts of credit card purchases made for the trip—Sandy did so, and her credit card reimbursed her for all her stolen possessions.

ROTARY CAR SHOW GROWS AGAIN

The Bow Rotary Car Show held on May 14th was a huge success and continues to grow every year. The Car Show committee reported that 158 cars registered for the show and that there were in excess of 850 people in attendance for this year's show. For a list of winners and sponsors, please visit www.bowrotarycarshow.com and click on “2016 Winners & Sponsors”. A big thank you to all of the car owners and spectators who attended this year's show.



People's Choice Award Winner, Don Wood of Quaker Hill, CT with his 1933 Plymouth PD Sedan. Photo by Eric Anderson



Best in Show Award Winner, Don Nicolls of Pelham, NH with his 1955 Chevy Belair 2 door. Photo by Eric Anderson