

Watch your back

Students offer safety tips for spring break travel

By Amanda Trimble
THE BATTALION

Kathleen Strait's study abroad trip to Spain began with a bad experience.

Strait, a junior English major, had just arrived in Madrid and called her dad to let him know everything was OK. Four hours later she called him back because her wallet was stolen on the subway.

"Spain had just won a big soccer match and the whole city was insane," Strait said. "Inside the subway, there was a lot of celebrating and people jumping up and down. There were people pressed against me, but I didn't think anything of it because it was so crowded."

Strait said after she got on the train, her purse felt lighter and she noticed her wallet was gone. She said she was lucky because she had just exchanged some cash and put it in her pocket, but the thief had stolen all of her credit cards.

"I used to let my purse hang behind me," Strait said. "After that, when I was in crowds I would hold onto it."

Spring break and summer vacation take students everywhere from the Texas coastline to overseas. Regardless of how far students travel, safety precautions should be practiced, especially in areas frequented by tourists.

A pamphlet issued by the U.S. Department of State contains several tips for students traveling abroad. According to the pamphlet, students should leave copies of their itinerary with friends and family, never leave luggage unattended in public areas and avoid drugs and alcohol while in foreign countries.

The state department travel Website, travel.state.gov, offers Consular Information sheets for every country. These contain valuable information such as warnings about high crime areas and phone numbers for U.S. Consulates and the U.S. Embassy, which are helpful in case students encounter trouble with local law enforcement.

Students traveling to Mexico are subject to the same precautions as those going overseas. Judith Moore, a sophomore elementary education major at Blinn College, has spent many spring breaks in her hometown of Padre Island. Moore said it is popular to cross the border into Mexico during spring break since the legal drinking age there is 18.

"Be careful when you cross the border because when you get drunk over there, you're dealing with the Mexican officials and they're more strict," Moore said. "You're not in the U.S. anymore."

Moore said U.S. officials will be checking visitors to Mexico as they come into the U.S. during spring break. If a minor is publicly

intoxicated, he or she can be taken to jail.

Using caution when consuming alcohol is an important tip to remember, however students can encounter difficulties by simply being unaware of their surroundings. This is especially true in Europe, where pick-pocketing is common.

Becky Couch, a senior international studies major, traveled to Spain two years ago. Although she did not have anything stolen, she said other members of her group would bump into someone and feel them trying to pick their pockets.

"If you're not paying attention, it's so easy for them to pick-pocket you," Couch said. "Plus you're a target because you're dressed like an American."

Couch suggested putting a small lock on a backpack while walking around the city because they are easy to open in crowds. She also recommends learning some of the local language. Couch said during her trip, her group was walking home from a bar when a group of drunken men started following close behind them and catcalling.

"We kept walking faster and they kept following us," Couch said. "Finally one of the girls turned around and said in Spanish, 'Go away!' Then they stopped and left us alone."

Angela Carmena, a senior marketing major at Texas Christian University, studied in London last spring. She had a similar experience while walking home with a friend one night. Carmena said she noticed a group of guys following too close behind them and pulled her friend toward her and away from them.

"All of a sudden, her lipstick fell out of her purse," Carmena said. "The guys behind us had gotten her purse unzipped and were going to steal her wallet. I had stopped them when I pulled her over."

Pick-pocketing attempts do not happen just at night. Carmena said there is a street in Barcelona, Las Ramblas, which is famous for its street performers and thieves.

"I had to be really careful there," Carmena said. "With the street performers, someone usually works with them. So while the audience is mesmerized with the show, their cohort is pick-pocketing people."

Sarah Cray, a senior agricultural science major, went to Vietnam last year and said children can be pick-pockets, too.

"We were there for New Year's, and they had a big celebration," Cray said. "In the crowd, we would feel the little kids' hands in our pockets."

"If you're not paying attention, it's so easy for them to pick-pocket you. Plus you're a target because you're dressed like an American."

— Becky Couch
Senior International
Studies Major

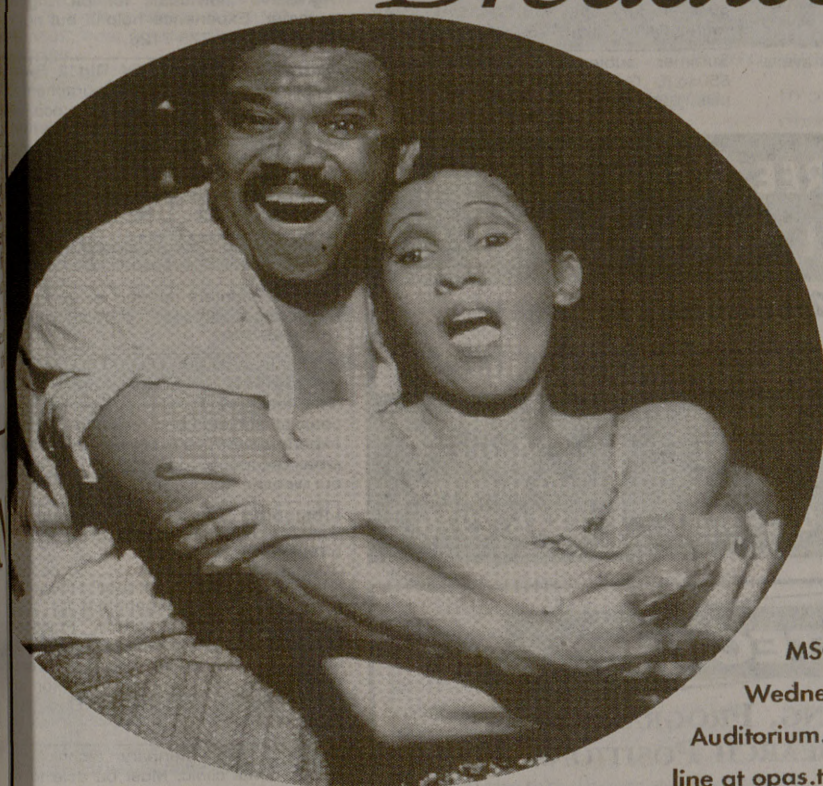


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