



Guest Travel Writer MML, St. Louis MO: We love to travel, but high prices, messy world economy, war, terrorism and other problems are constant concerns. The picture seems to be getting darker.

On foreign journeys, we face increasing hotel and restaurant prices, as well as angry faces of people whose resentment for the U.S deepens as their economies tank. When tourist business drops, workers get laid off. As jobs in the tourist industry get scarcer, there's a comparable rise in street crime. Recently, in one Paris upscale hotel's economy move, nearly 30 percent of staff was eliminated. Many are recent immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, and were making good family incomes. The adults had service jobs in resorts, hotels and restaurants.

With layoffs, income was suddenly taken away. Workers' teens and young adults now roam the streets, jobless and angry. Their desperation could lead to street crime against the easiest target: senior tourists.

In Las Vegas, Reno and Atlantic City, there's a similar situation. Many of the thousands of service workers there are immigrants. They got construction, casino, hotel and restaurant jobs during the booming 90s. Then, a typical family of two adults and three working teens could bring home good incomes.

They bought houses, believing they'd actually achieved the American dream. Then, when the tourist industry started to suffer, and the layoffs began, the dream fell apart. Las Vegas became the home foreclosure capital of the U.S., in some neighborhoods at 50 percent.

Empty houses, apartments and condos are targets for vandalism, some stripped of building materials by thieves. It's no coincidence that teenage street crime, including attacks on tourists, is a problem. People commit desperate acts to survive in a failing economy. It's important that senior travelers do everything possible to protect themselves.

Since we retired more than a decade ago, we've roamed frequently in the U.S., Mexico, Canada, Europe and Central and South America. While today's inflated prices are keeping us away from some destinations, we still try to make our pension money and fading investment nest egg stretch as far as possible.

For instance, a charming little bed and breakfast on the canal in Amsterdam cost us \$50 a night with a full breakfast in 2005. Last year we paid \$250, and breakfast would have been another \$15 each. The owner moaned about inflation and the decreasing value of the local money. We understand his plight, but won't stay there again until his prices drop to fit our already-stretched budget.

We've watched the changes in the tourist scene go from the relatively bucolic 2000s to the nervous, suspicious, dangerous 2010s. We now consider ourselves no longer wide-eyed, trusting not-so-ugly American tourists, but a Mr. and Mrs. Senior Searcher for avoiding danger.

Here are some of our well-weathered tips for keeping your money and your person less vulnerable while traveling:

Carry only a small amount of cash at any time. Leave most in the hotel front desk safe. Buy with universal travelers checks and credit cards (with \$1,000 limit, in case they're stolen). Don't walk the streets with a dangling handbag or wallet poking out of an outside pocket. Keep everything close, and be on the watch for pickpockets who use different methods to distract and then rob you.

In Rome recently, near the Vatican, friends were approached by a trio of well-dressed, cute little kids. When the two senior women tourists leaned down to admire them, two teens ran swiftly up from behind, cut the straps and took off with the handbags.

When returning to your hotel room late at night, if you feel insecure, ask for a security person to escort you to your room. My spouse, who rarely stays up beyond 11 pm at home, has a different schedule on our four-time-a-year visit to Las Vegas.

After spending hours gambling, she often returns to the hotel room at 3 or 4 am. Our rule is that she must call me to come down to the casino level and ride the elevator up to the room with her, or request a hotel employee to escort her.

If someone knocks on your hotel room door at any time of day or night and says he/she is a hotel employee, don't open the door. Wait until you can verify by calling the front desk. Robberies of vulnerable senior hotel guests are the result of this ruse.

When walking the night streets, stay in well-lighted areas where many people are present. Never start a conversation with a person who's too friendly and says he/she wants to help you find bargains, fun, drinks, food or other kinds of entertainment. Of course, don't go anywhere with that person, no matter how inviting the offer.

Never accept a ride in an unmarked taxi, nor if any other private driver offers you a lift. That's too often the way to find yourself helpless, robbed and bleeding in some alley. Of course, if you use your smartphone to hail Uber or other freelancers, be sure to check on the authenticity of the driver.

Eat and drink sensibly. Our stomachs can't accept many foods and liquids we consumed when

we were young. As a general rule, don't buy ready-to-eat food from street stalls and wagons. If you intend to dine out in a city where the food is not familiar, check with hotel staff, tour guide, internet or other source to find out where the cleanest restaurants are located.

Respect your body, especially if it has been around for many decades. Don't try to do everything on the first day of your trip. If you've just come off a ten-hour, red-eye flight with four stops, check in at your hotel and take at least a two- or three-hour nap.

Whether with your spouse or as part of a tour group, always practice the buddy system, like the one at the old swimmin' hole when you were a kid. Now with smartphones, it's easy to keep in electronic touch everywhere at all times. However, as senior tourists, it's safest when certain your buddy is within eyesight at all times.

When traveling with kids, all above suggestions go double for the little ones. The heartbreaking story of the little British girl who disappeared in Portugal several years ago and has never been found is a bitter lesson to all travelers. The horror of it should be enough for traveling parents, teens and older relatives to keep wide open eyes on the younger ones 24-7.

If you plan a vacation this season, it could cost you considerably more than last year. Maybe it won't if we traveling seniors decide to dig in our heels and declare, "Enough is enough! We're not going to pay those sucker prices!"

Whether a posh hotel, an overpriced café, a glitzy ocean cruise or fancy theater, just ignore the price quote and either walk away, or make a fair counter offer. If enough senior wanderers do that, maybe the prices will start dropping to where they belong. Anyhow, it's always worth a try.