

ADVICE ON BEING “STREET SMART”

Cuenca and Quito are beautiful cities with warm, gracious people. Walking along the cobblestone streets, it's easy to forget just how far you are from home. Tourists in both cities are frequently targeted for crime because they tend to carry large sums of cash. Below are some tips on how to be more “street smart” to ensure that your stay in Ecuador is safe and happy. We generally don't have too many problems, but if you'll be aware of the things listed below, you'll be much less of a target for possible problems.

- Even if you don't feel like a tourist, you look like one. Americans can't help looking American. We're taller in stature, with lighter complexions and different clothing than native Ecuadorians. Remember that even after you've come to feel completely at home in Ecuador, you still look like a foreigner, and therefore, you're still a target for would-be criminals.
- You can't walk around in Ecuador clueless or naïve. You can't think nothing will happen to you—you are not invincible. You always need to be aware of your surroundings.
- Don't be afraid or scared or paranoid...but do be cautious.
- You need to watch what's going on around you. Don't make yourself an easy target by being oblivious to everything.
- Pay attention to who's behind you or even near you. If you think someone is following you, duck into a store. The easiest and most discreet way to watch your back is by pretending you're looking at something off to the side and glancing backwards out of the corner of your eye.
- Don't make eye contact with men, but don't walk with your head down. Keep your head up and look and watch where you're going and who's approaching you.
- Walk on the side of the street where traffic is coming toward you so you can watch it.
- If you're walking and a man who looks questionable, or two men or a group of boys or anything like that, is approaching you, casually cross to the other side of the street like you were planning on crossing there and walk on the opposite sidewalk to avoid passing by them. Don't be obvious, but do take precautions. Remove yourself from a potential problem area or happening. When you allow others to get close to you, whether by someone brushing past or being in heavy “traffic,” you have more of a chance of being grabbed/touched, pick-pocketed, getting your bag slashed and the contents stolen, etc.
- Constantly look around you, noticing who's around, who's watching, who's behind you, where you are, etc. Constantly listen for sounds.
- Pay attention to your instincts. If you have an uncomfortable feeling where you're at, leave! It's easy. If you feel like you shouldn't go somewhere...don't go!
- Keep your wits about you in crowded places. It's easy in the markets to get swept up in the shopping (What beautiful sweaters! What incredible prices!). Be aware that pickpockets gravitate toward markets because they're crowded and they attract tourists. It's best to avoid crowds, busy markets, stores, etc.
- Keep your purse, backpack, EVERYTHING in front of you. Do not wear your backpack on your back. Wear purses (or other things/bags) with straps and put the strap over your head and under one arm diagonally—don't wear it hanging/dangling off of your shoulder. Don't let your purse flap in the breeze. Hold it against your body in front of you.
- Remember that many things we might take for granted are highly sought-after in other parts of the world. Expensive sunglasses, designer purses, cameras, video cameras and the like can make you a target for crime. (You could spend more on a one of these items than an average

Ecuadorian might earn in two months.) If you're carrying your camera or video camera, be discreet when using it. Don't "advertise" that you have it and are using it, because those things are worth a lot of money to people in Ecuador, and they might see you as an incredibly easy target if you're not cautious and protective of it.

- Never carry your actual passport around with you unless you absolutely have to have it, and if you do, make sure you have it very secure. Always carry a copy.
- Don't carry your wallet...there's no need to carry your driver's license, debit card, credit card, excess money around with you unless you want to lose it or have it get stolen.
- Don't pull out wads of cash from your purse or pocket. Be discreet and hide it against your body. Plan and prepare how much money you'll need before you even leave the house. Don't put it all in one place. Carry your money in your front pockets because of how deep they are and because you're less likely to be pick-pocketed from your front pockets. Put a certain amount in one front pocket that you're planning on spending at one market (so you're not going through all your money in front of everyone), put a certain amount in your other front pocket that you're planning on spending at a different store and, if necessary, put the remaining amount in your purse in a zippered compartment (that is held in front of your body).
- Be very careful and watchful when withdrawing money from an ATM. Just the fact that you're at an ATM clues someone in to the high probability that you now have a lot of money that can be stolen. The best thing you can do (assuming you've already chosen an ATM in a safe and secure location) is to get into a taxi (that hasn't seen you just get money from the ATM) right after withdrawing your money, because doing so immediately removes you from anyone who possibly had negative intentions towards you.
- You're likely to encounter many beggars, some of whom can be pretty persistent. You'll have to decide what to do in those cases. Some volunteers give to every beggar; others save their money to give to organized groups that help the poor; some only give when they feel impressed to do so. Whatever you do, here's some advice you should consider:
 - If you're overly generous to beggars in a place you and other volunteers will be returning to often, the number of beggars who know you and wait for you will increase, as will their persistence.
 - Some beggars beg who are actually be able to find a job, but they find it easier to beg.
 - Some beggars beg because if they don't they or their children won't eat.
 - Some very aggressive beggars are not beggars at all but thieves trying to pressure you into giving them money, or worse trying to find out how much money you have and where it is. This doesn't happen often, but if it does you need to know what to do. If someone comes up to you and asks or demands money and they do it in a threatening way, be very careful. If you don't give them money they may become more aggressive, and they may have a weapon. For this type of situation you should always try to have \$5 that you can quickly and easily give them without showing them where the rest of your money is or how much you have. If you feel this may be happening, quickly give them the money, then you and whoever else you are with need to leave the area as quickly and as safely as you can. If such a situation gets worse and they demand all your money, your camera and credit cards, give it to them, it's not worth risking your safety to resist.

- You should always avoid letting anyone on the street see how much money you have and where it is. That includes street vendors, beggars or taxi drivers or those watching street vendors, beggars or taxi drivers.
- Never ride in an unmarked taxi.
- Never, ever get into a car with a stranger.
- Write the OSSO address and phone number down on a card and keep it with you at all times.
- Never leave the house without enough money for a cab home. If you find yourself in need of a taxi ride home for safety reasons and have no money, take a taxi anyway and when you get to the OSSO house have someone else help you pay.
- When walking anywhere take varied routes, always staying on well-traveled streets. Walk in groups.
- Stay alert. Take notice of your surroundings. Learn the street names, and take special notice of the stores and restaurants you pass as you walk.
- Don't look like a victim. Carry yourself tall. Be alert when you walk.
- If you need to ask directions, ask a uniformed policeman, a merchant or a woman.
- Avoid flirtation of any type. Ecuador has a macho culture. That's not to say that Ecuadorians are bad people, or that all Ecuadorian men are dangerous—just that Ecuadorian society gives men more authority than you're used to. What you might consider to be an innocent comment or action (making eye contact, smiling at someone, talking to someone, allowing someone to buy you a soda, letting someone walk you home, etc.) might be perceived as an invitation for sexual contact. Good Ecuadorian girls don't do this, nor should you.
- Tactics of pick-pockets/thieves: if you're walking and get spit on or have something spilled/squirted on you, grab your bag/purse/backpack and get away; don't stop to wipe off the spit or look around. This is one of the tactics of distracting people in order to steal their stuff, whether by grabbing your bag and running or by "lifting" anything in your back pockets, etc. If you wear your backpack on your back or allow your purse/bag to dangle, plan on it getting slashed open and your contents being removed.

There have been a number of incidences of theft among the 2,000+ volunteers we've had in Ecuador, but it isn't common. Of those incidences mentioned, most, if not all, were because the volunteer didn't follow the rules or our guidelines and suggestions.

The most common of all incidences reported (though it's by no means an everyday occurrence or even a once a week thing) is being grabbed or touched inappropriately. Most of these incidences would have been avoided had the volunteers been following the advice given here. Another word of advice...do not wear suggestive clothing—this means tight shirts and pants, shirts that show skin around your waist, low-cut shirts, low-hanging pants, etc. If you do, it encourages attention from the men and it also reinforces their opinion that Americans are easy and have loose morals. They'll think that you're "that" type of girl.

OSSO has strict rules because your safety is our first priority and concern, however, you need to take personal responsibility for your own safety and not just assume that you'll be safe and there won't be any problems. If you act accordingly (by practicing the above precautions), a lot of "incidents" will be avoided simply because you won't put yourself in a situation where you shouldn't be, and you'll be able to completely prevent someone from grabbing/touching you if

you don't let them get near you. Be suspicious, cautious, careful...but don't be paranoid or afraid.

If something does happen to you, report it to the Project Directors immediately.