Agonizing Loss in South Africa

Posted on Mar 22 in Travel Tips by Dave Print A⁻ A⁺

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It was all going so well. Six adventurous weeks in Africa with lots of unique stories to tell, including rescuing a drowning child, witnessing an angry man pull a gun on seven policeman (didn't end so well for the man) and experiencing riots that had taken over a major highway – however there was no loss – unless you count loss of appetite resulting from going out in stormy seas on the Mozambique coastline to look for dolphins.

I was well read up on the fact that South Africa has some of the highest crime rates in the world. I had visited a number of high crime capital cities in many of my past travels without incident. I consider myself primed and ready to meet theft in the eye should it appear while I'm on the road.

That all changed after a flight back to Jo'burg from Livingstone Zambia. I confidently strode into the International wing of the OR Tambo Airport and breezed through customs. It is always refreshing to enter a country where one does not have to fill out paperwork, such as in South Africa. I was in a good mood.

Having experienced the high priced "budget" hotels that try to rope you in at this airport from a previous trip here, and armed with the knowledge that Shoestring Backpackers had a hostel close to the airport I made a beeline for the pay phones. I ignored those who wanted to "help" me with my hotel stay" and I set my net book down next to the phone. Quickly I dialed the number – got a busy tone and then decided to go change some money.

I walked away – "got to get that money exchanged", was my mindset. I quickly realized I wasn't carrying something…my netbook. Oh no – I raced back to the phone to grab it and it had already disappeared. "All my data from the past 6 weeks gone in an instant" – but then I realized I had backed up some of my data but then thought about all the data gone. Sickened to the max. I asked around – nothing.

There's lots of rigmarole to go through when you lose something valuable at an airport. First I ran to the Lost and Found office – I was excited when they said three laptops had been found within the last ten minutes. Wow, that is a lot of loss. The heart quickly sank when my description matched none of them. Then it was over to the police station – where I was quickly informed that it was "against the law to leave luggage unattended"- hmm was I about to be fined, arrested, bribed, something worse?

Finally another policeman was called over and he took a report – there was a language barrier so somehow the laptop ended up being listed as having a value of $4000. The next step was to go see the security cameras.

I walked through the guts of this giant airport and found myself behind a number of key entry and locked doors staring at a bunch of computer monitors. One guy took me through all the different angles and times

– I saw myself walking with my net book case and then without it. In an airport filled with hundreds of security cameras for some reason they had no camera pointed at the phone booths. Ouch!

No matter how seasoned a traveler you think you are – there are always moments of lapses combined with predators waiting in the wings – especially in busy public venues such as airports.

The morale of this story is do not carry your laptop separately, or fasten it to your clothes and or signup for an online monitoring service that will show exactly where the computer is once it gets online. Live and learn!

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