

Think you've been conned?

Succumbing to a scam can ruin a holiday; it can even have a negative impact on the local community. Be aware of potential scenarios to avoid falling prey to common ploys

WORDS JOHANNA READ



BE ALERT TO...

Distraction scams and "helpful" strangers

- A taxi driver in Vietnam drops your money, then claims you gave him a 10,000 dong, not the 100,000 dong bill now under his seat.
- While chatting with you, the cashier slips counterfeit bills into your change.
- A woman spills a drink on you, and while sopping up the stain she grabs your smartphone.

- A man steers you to a shop where he says "you'll get a great deal". Instead you pay inflated prices – perhaps for fake products – and he gets a cut.
- A woman warns you about pickpockets in the area. You part your wallet, reassured it's still there, unwittingly showing her partner in crime where you keep it.
- Your guide tells you the temple is closed and offers to take you on a cheap tuk-tuk tour. Instead, he drives you to his friend's shop.

- An agent tells you your hotel is overbooked, then takes you to a "sister" hotel, which turns out to be more expensive or not nearly as nice as the one you booked.

WHAT TO DO

- Use the GPS in Google Maps in a taxi or tuk-tuk so you know that you're going in the direction you want. You don't need a local SIM card or Wifi.
- Be firm and insist that your initial hotel reservation is honoured – your original room is likely available. If not, find your own alternative.

- If you're uncomfortable, simply walk away. Your tout may harangue you for a block or so. Ignore him, and he will soon turn to easier targets.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. You are more likely to pick a helpful citizen from a crowd than to choose someone with criminal intent.
- If your belongings have gone missing, you could complain to the tourist police. However, little recourse is available if there is no clear evidence of a scam or theft.

"POOR KID" SCAMS

What's hard is turning a blind eye to a child who appears to be in need. But if a child asks you to buy something from or for him or her, most likely you're both victims. Be wary when:

- A cute kid – sometimes with a "sibling" in his arms – asks you to buy milk for the baby.
- A child comes up to you and says, in remarkably good English, "I don't want money mister, I need book for school. It costs only three dollars".

The requests seem reasonable. You walk together to a shop, and make the purchase. The child beams thanks and you walk away feeling good. Here's often the reality: as soon as you're around the corner, the child returns to the store and sells the item back. The shopkeeper takes a cut, as does the cartel organising this scam all over town. The parents get just enough to encourage them to keep their child working instead of in school.

WHEN YOU THINK YOU'RE HELPING BUT YOU'RE NOT

- By buying things for or from kids – even giving gifts of candy or pencils – you are hurting their future. You're signalling that



tourists are a lucrative source of handouts, education is not necessary and that begging is okay. In short, you could be trapping them in the cycle of poverty.

- Do not engage with anyone soliciting donations, visits to and volunteers for orphanages and schools. Not all of these institutions have the kids' best interests at heart. Don't make children tourist attractions.

If you do volunteer, choose your project carefully and volunteer for at least a few weeks. But remember that you could be taking a job away from a local.

BEST WAYS TO REACH OUT

Use local resources. In Cambodia, ConCERT (concertcambodia.org) vets charities and advises the best ways to make your donation go furthest. Agencies like Friends-International (friends-international.org) match volunteers with the greatest needs. Your best bet is to donate through a registered charity in your home country, or give micro-loans through an organisation like Kiva (kiva.org).

Bottom line: if you avoid being scammed yourself, eventually the scam business will be unsustainable.



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