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FREQUENT FLIER

Always Mindful of Finding the Nearest Exit

Published: September 7, 2009

WHEN I travel, I am always planning for disaster. I'm not some guy who hates to fly. I actually love to fly. But I can't turn off the "what ifs" in my brain. I'm a former Secret Service agent and the training is ingrained. And now I own a security company.

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Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

Christopher Falkenberg, the president of Insite Security, is a former Secret Service agent.

Part of being an effective Secret Service agent was having what we liked to call "situational awareness." It's basically nothing more than looking around your location, sizing up the people around you, and then thinking of the many things that could go wrong, and what you would do if one of those things happened.

Now I do that on airplanes. I just can't help myself. I'm actually the guy who always pays attention to the preflight safety briefing. And I actually review the safety card, if only to look at the diagram of exits.

The single most important thing in this process is planning how I am going to get out if things go south during my flight. This is particularly true if I am traveling with my family. I actually visualize how we're going to get out of an emergency.

There are a few other things I do for safety. I never take off my shoes until we've reached cruising altitude, and I make sure they're on before descent. I encourage my wife to wear flats because it's hard to move quickly in heels, and being barefoot is worse.

And I always carry a few tools. One of my favorite items is a lithium cell flashlight. When I was a Secret Service agent, I found that a good flashlight is the single most useful tool on the planet. Aircraft evacuations happen so quickly that I don't know if I ever will need to use it — at least I hope I won't. But I always bring one with me.

Also in the category of things that I may not have time to

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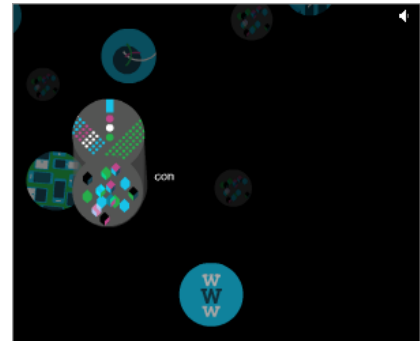
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A. Jamaica. I've been there many times for work and for pleasure, and it's a wonderful combination of colonial-type manners, with a real island vibe.

*Q. What's your secret airport vice?*

A. I don't know if it's a vice, but I'm the guy who won't move if I get a chance to stare at the planes taking off and landing. I'll hog the window view in a terminal, just because I'm like a little kid and still think it's incredibly cool.

use, but still carry anyway, is a smoke mask. The one I have is filled with aloe, which filters toxic chemicals out of smoke.

I've never had a problem with the [Transportation Security Administration](#). Flashlights like those I carry aren't on the list of prohibited items. And the smoke mask is in an airtight foil pouch. The density scanners don't pick it up because it isn't dense like explosives, and the X-ray machine can't see through it.

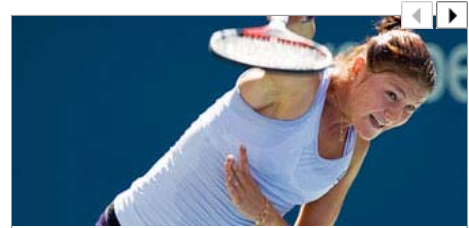
Because of my training, I also pay attention to other passengers. I am looking for two things. First, obviously, is to look for the maniac who is going to take over the plane. Hopefully, the T.S.A. already took care of him or her. But if not, there may be a few clues.

Second, I look for an inappropriate affect as people board the plane. By that I mean those nonverbal clues that you can sense, like someone being inappropriately anxious or stressed. And I don't mean the nervous flier. Although I sometimes give them a once over.

I also try to find those people who look like they are in the military or law enforcement. The haircuts are usually a dead giveaway. But so is the carry-on luggage. There are special duffels and other items that military and rescue personnel use, and I can always spot it. If something goes wrong, I can count on those folks to help out.

For all I know, maybe there's some man or woman on the plane who is checking me out. Maybe they're thinking, "Why is this guy looking at everybody so carefully?" Like I said, I can't help myself.

*By Christopher Falkenberg, as told to Joan Raymond. E-mail: joan.raymond@nytimes.com.*



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A version of this article appeared in print on September 8, 2009, on page B6 of the New York edition.

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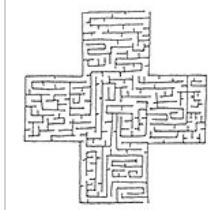
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