

## safe community



by David Thomas

features@algarveresident.com

David Thomas is a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police, consultant to INTERPOL and the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*. He has recently formed ISECA, the *Independent Security Agency* here in the Algarve, to help authorities and the community prevent crime. This is his second in a series of monthly articles about crime prevention.

# Putting tourism crime in the right perspective

There is no greater threat to the reputation of a tourist destination than reports of crime or accidents where the victim is a tourist.

A good example of this was the recent shark attacks in the Maldives which resulted in people cancelling their holidays to the area concerned.

More locally, crimes occurring in Albufeira were extensively reported on *Trip Advisor* with inevitable damage to the destination's reputation.

Furthermore media coverage of crimes against tourists often tends to be out of proportion to the actual risk, having a profound effect on public perception of safety at particular locations.

This is especially the case where crime is low and therefore any crime becomes more newsworthy.

Each year, we hear reports that there have been a number of crimes against tourists visiting the Algarve. But, in the general run of things, I ask two questions? How big a problem is it? And, whose problem is it?

Certainly from the victim's point of view it can be a disaster, ranging from inconvenience, loss of possessions, shock, an injury or even worse.

Apart from the victim, those suffering are also the tourism industry itself as well as local businesses due to a possible consequential downturn in visitors. This is borne out by remarks on social websites and in the media by victims stating that they will never return.

### Overview of tourism crime

It is a fact that "tourism crime" occurs to a greater or lesser degree in virtually every tourist destination in the world.

There are several common reasons for this.

- Firstly, if the victim is a foreigner, they are often seen by criminals as wealthy.
- Secondly, they are vulnerable as they are often not "street wise" and therefore do not always take sensible security precautions.
- Thirdly, foreign tourists are less likely to report crime unless a passport is stolen and, lastly, they are unlikely to be around to give evidence should the person subsequently be arrested.

Also, the general state of the economy in the area is a factor as is unemployment, availability of drugs, ease of cross border movement by criminals etc.

Clearly criminals know where tourists cluster, such as hotels, shopping malls, restaurants, tourist attractions and these are all potential

points of encounter for victims and offenders.

Tourists are often conspicuous by their dress and some place themselves at greater risk, for instance walking alone in dimly lit areas at night wearing expensive jewellery, walking alone drunk in the early hours of the morning or getting into confrontation with the locals in bars etc. There are also cases where tourists perpetrate the crime.

### The Algarve

One of ISECA's main aims is to provide an independent analysis on crime trends so that people are better informed on the actual situation. Recently, a person suggested to me that "perception is truth". Certainly a profound statement, but in the case of tourism crime, this is not necessarily true.

I guess for many readers there is a perception that the Algarve, and particularly Albufeira, is not a safe place to visit. I beg to differ.

Although overall crime in the Algarve has increased by some 28% in the last 10 years, it is a fact that in 2010 Albufeira recorded its lowest level of crime during the same period. Total crimes recorded were 4,593 compared with a peak of some 6,816 crimes in 2004.

In Albufeira, the percentage of crimes against the person, such as assaults, stood at 12% of all crimes which is just half the national average. This equates to 1.5 crimes against the person per day. What is noteworthy is that Albufeira was the tourist destination for some one million people in 2010, which is 30% higher than 2004 but crime is 32% lower. By definition, the risk of crime has therefore considerably decreased in the area.

Not all is rosy however. The most prolific crimes against tourists are pickpocketing, snatching, theft from vehicles and burglaries. Certainly there have been some high profile crimes this year including tragically a homicide and several attacks on tourists resulting in injury.

Although not statistically high, it is the severity of such crime that has sent shock waves through the local community. Also there have recently been several robberies at hotels in Lisbon, Setúbal and the Algarve involving the carrying of firearms.

An area to watch in the coming year is the pattern of violent crime i.e. serious assaults, robbery, kidnapping, snatching (using violence) etc. In the Algarve in 2010, this represented some 5% of all crime, lower than the national average of 5.9% and considerably lower than Lisbon's 10.1%.

I spent some 31 years policing one of the world's major tourist destinations, Hong

## Top Ten Tourist Crime Prevention Tips

- Do not carry large sums of cash, valuables, credit cards, passports and travel tickets together.
- Keep important documents such as passports in a safe place. Make photocopies.
- Do not carry wallets in back pockets. Handbags should be secured under the arm.
- When leaving your villa ensure doors and windows are closed and locked, alarm (if installed) activated and valuable items locked in the safe if there is one.
- Make use of hotel safe or room safe, if provided, for storage of valuables. Avoid setting the combination to your year of birth.
- Ensure valuables are not left in cars when parked and that other items are out of sight.
- In markets and shops do not place wallets and handbags on stalls and counters, and in restaurants handbags on the back of chairs.
- Beware of distraction crime, e.g. someone asks you for directions etc and whilst off guard someone else steals your handbag etc.
- Late at night be prudent, familiarise yourself with local surroundings and if walking alone avoid dimly lit and remote routes.
- After a late night drinking session, take a taxi (preferably accompanied) back to your villa or hotel.

Produced by  
ISECA – The Independent Security Agency  
[www.iseca.net](http://www.iseca.net)

As published in 

Kong, which has roughly double the number of tourists as Portugal.

On occasions, we faced similar challenges and these were overcome. I am convinced, through my dealings with the authorities here in the Algarve, that there is now a concerted effort being taken to address these issues within the parameters of available resources.

The *Safe Residence Programme* is now being rolled out throughout the Algarve including Albufeira. There is more police on the streets through the "Secure Summer Operation", there is closer engagement between the police and the community as well as a number of new inter agency initiatives being developed.

But there is more that needs to be done. Crime prevention is a collective responsibility and there is more to do in educating the community, including visitors. There are also opportunities to learn from overseas experiences.

Vitaly important also in promoting crime prevention is good communication between the authorities, the media and all communities both foreign and local. ISECA is working, and is pleased to work, with the authorities, media, villa management agencies and all groups in order to minimise the risk of crime and maximise the safety of both residents and visitors.

**I have included the Top Ten Tips for Tourist Crime Prevention which is based on advice from police and other authorities. Please read, cut out and keep handy. Have a safe and enjoyable holiday in the Algarve!**

*Note: Crime figures originate from the Direcção-Geral da Política de Justiça.*

- David Thomas can be contacted at 913 045 093 or by email at [info@iseca.net](mailto:info@iseca.net). More about ISECA is available on its website [www.iseca.net](http://www.iseca.net)