

Stay Safe this Summer

 Carrie-Marie Bratley

Summer in the Algarve is well under way and the region's popular holiday resorts are bustling with tourists seeking relaxation and fun in the beautiful weather the country has to offer. And while vacationers should by all means kick back, unwind and recharge, a few simple pointers on keeping self and property safe could make a big difference to any holiday. Here David Thomas, founder of Safe Communities Algarve, offers fundamental advice on staying safe this summer.

"Visitors from overseas and from other parts of the country come to the Algarve to enjoy all it has to offer; great food, long sandy beaches, markets, the night life and of course the weather", but, David Thomas warns: "A few are here for another reason and that is to commit crime. They do this by selecting victims who may present an easy target, are not 'street wise' and if visiting just for a few days may not report this to police."

Mr. Thomas, a former Assistant Commissioner of the Hong Kong Police and consultant to INTERPOL and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, says that, as in any tourist resort in any country, there is always an element of

crime and the Algarve is not immune to this, albeit much lower than many other tourist areas overseas.

"Most of the crime that does take place is petty crime committed by opportunists, generally drug addicts who need money to purchase drugs and in some areas, to a lesser degree, juvenile gangs", he explains, stressing: "Occasionally a more violent crime takes place that becomes well-reported in the media if a foreigner is the victim."

According to Mr. Thomas, who liaises closely with Portugal's GNR police force, crime in the Algarve has experienced a sharp decrease in recent years. "For instance overall crime fell by -5.6% in 2011 compared

to the previous year, with violent crime decreasing by -4.7%. From Jan to April 2012 crime further decreased by -5% across the region compared to the same period last year.

"The most dramatic crime reductions have been seen in Albufeira, a major destination for overseas tourists, where in 2011 crime fell by a considerable -39% since 2004 despite a considerable increase in tourism, and decreased -9.2% compared with 2010 with a continuing decreasing trend this year. Vilamoura has also experienced considerable reductions in crime", he reveals.

So, following several denunciations made directly to **The Portugal News** regarding incidents of pick-pocketing, cars

being broken into in broad daylight and late-night attacks, how can we all help continue this downward trend and stay safe?

Mr. Thomas reiterates: "Criminals try and blend into the crowd and look out for opportunities. Reducing such opportunities therefore reduces the risk of becoming a victim of crime."

Here he gives a few tips on how to avoid the most common types of crime.

CARPARKS

In Portugal in 2011 around 15% of all crime involved theft of items from vehicles or theft of vehicles. Unsupervised car parks particularly those belong to supermarkets, in the main tourist areas and adjacent to beaches can attract criminals as they presume that there are goods worth taking in the vehicles concerned. Overseas registered cars and hire cars that display company logos are at higher risk.

Clearly it is wise when parking your car, to avoid blocking other vehicles, as you may return to find the vehicle

scratched. Always remove items of value from the car, and place other items in the boot. Ensure that Sat Navs including the fixing brackets are removed. In transferring items from the car into the boot make sure this is not observed by others. When leaving the car ensure windows are closed and doors locked. The key fobs on some hire cars contain the car registration number so it is important to keep these safe.

DISTRACTION CRIME

This is a popular type of crime in many countries, where criminals (usually comprising two or more persons) carefully select victims who are usually alone. It takes many forms but the overall 'modus operandi' is simply to distract you and whilst distracted someone takes your belongings. The following are three examples which have occurred in the Algarve:

- The criminal(s) slashes or deflates your car tyre, and when you return waits until you have unlocked your car. One of the gang then offers you assistance whilst the other

steals from the car whilst your attention is drawn to fixing the tyre.

- You return to your car, unlock it and are about to drive away when you notice that someone, in this case a criminal, has placed a leaflet on the rear windscreen under the wiper. Whilst you get out of the car to remove the leaflet the criminal quickly gets into your car either driving it away or stealing your handbag or other item from the seat.

- At a car park or roadside you park/stop your car. As you get out you are approached by someone who asks for instance directions to somewhere. Whilst you are explaining this another gang member enters the unlocked car and steals something.

The art of distraction crime is to create circumstances that appear normal; the art of preventing it is to be aware that this can happen and take precautions to protect your property.

STREET CRIME

Although crime in general, as mentioned, is decreasing there has been an upward trend in the snatching of valuable items,

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