



## RISKY BUSINESS

Planning a meeting abroad? The best way to mitigate risk is to manage it. —BY MATT ALDERTON

Just before 9:30 p.m. local time on Nov. 13, 2015, a trio of suicide bombers approached France's national sports stadium, the Stade de France in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis, and detonated homemade explosives. Along with mass hysteria inside the stadium, where a soccer game was underway between France and Germany, the explosions commenced an orchestra of terror across the City of Light.

As news broke, the world seemed to stand still. Across the English Channel, however, The Black Tomato Agency was as far from “still” as one can get. Instead, the London-based incentive travel and rewards agency was scurrying, acting quickly to secure a client's group of 90 people attending a three-night incentive and annual conference in Paris.

“When we first heard the news, the attacks were in the north of the city, away

from the group who were at a restaurant in Opéra. Hosts and all guests were informed immediately and individually of the situation, reassured that we were closely monitoring the events locally and in the U.K., and advised to stay in the restaurant. Those who had left already were contacted immediately with the same message and to be vigilant,” recounts Head of Marketing and Communications Micky Robinson. “As

the situation escalated we created a plan to return guests to the hotel in small groups to avoid drawing attention to a larger group. All guests were safely returned and a roll call was completed. It was then around 11:30 p.m. and the gravity of the situation continued to escalate, with news coverage and social media increasing the panic amongst guests and, of course, their relatives at home. At this point we decided evacuation from Paris the following morning was our Plan A.”

Once attendees were safely in their rooms, the agency used a mass text-message system to update them on the situation to avoid



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assembling as a group in public areas.

“Whilst the onsite team concentrated on the group, the U.K. team concentrated on securing rearranged tickets back to London on the Eurostar. With a team of staff waiting for the group in London to arrange their onward travel, we ensured that everyone was kept calm through a constant flow of information and efficient rescheduling of their travel arrangements,” Robinson continues. “All 90 extremely relieved passengers returned to London by Eurostar the following day.”

Even though the rest of the trip was cancelled, and several venues denied the group a refund, the agency’s quick action left the client feeling at once satisfied and secure.

“From the feedback we received we believe that the reason they were so happy with the way we handled the crisis was communication and decisive action,” Robinson says. “We made a decision quickly to take the group back, which meant we were able to secure all 90 seats on the Eurostar. We feel that if we had left this decision even by a couple of hours we would have not been able to return home that day.”

Indeed, the story could have ended much differently. That it didn’t serves as a cautionary tale to meeting and incentive professionals planning events abroad: Risk can’t be avoided; with planning and preparation, however, it can always be managed.

## A WORLD OF RISK

Demand for international programs is

increasing, according to Susan Adams, senior director of engagement at Dittman Incentive Marketing, an incentive travel and rewards company based in New Brunswick, New Jersey. “The [group] travel market, generally, is very strong,” she says. “This means that there is more funding available, allowing program planners to look

as well as unused inventory, promotional items, lost deposits, appearance fees for talent—all those kinds of things,” he continues. “There’s also your brand and reputation. If you have a large-scale event with a lot of visibility and publicity, and it doesn’t go well or is canceled, you could be negatively impacted. In the case of incentive trips and

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across a wider array of destinations with more expensive air or ground costs. In the case of channel programs, this also means that competition for mind-share is driving organizations to look for more exciting and desirable locations for reward trips. This often means putting international destinations in the mix.”

Echoes former meeting planner Tyra Hilliard, Ph.D., J.D., CMP, a lawyer and speaker who specializes in group-travel contracts, safety, and security, “Everybody’s looking for the next great thing. We get to be a little jaded as meeting professionals, certainly, but also as attendees. We’ve been there, done that ... so we’re always looking for new and different destinations, and so are our people.”

Unfortunately, “new and different” often is synonymous with “risky and unpredictable,” as the farther groups travel from home the more likely it is that something can go wrong.

“A lot can happen when you’re living in what I like to call a ‘VUCA’ world: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous,” explains Jim Hutton, chief security officer at travel risk management provider On Call International.

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Being ill-prepared for such impact can have dire consequences, according to Hutton. “You could have cancellation penalties, for example, which can be significant,

rewards, there also can be an impact on your workforce if trips are curtailed, canceled, or poorly executed because of a lack of oversight around safety and security.”

Of course, it’s not just your budget or brand that’s at stake. In extreme cases, it’s also lives. “Risk management is—and should be—a high priority for every organization across many areas of operations, from quality control to procurement. But any risk to the safety and security of employees is rightly the top priority,” Adams says. “Meetings and incentives bring together a large number of employees, which has inherent risk often out of anyone’s direct control. From hurricanes to illness to international incidents, there are many possible challenges, and planners must think through the most likely to mitigate risk. It’s the right thing to do for the company, but also for the many individuals affected by the choices that are made by the planner or program owner.”

## DESTINATION DECISIONS

Choosing a safe destination is the first step toward managing the risks associated with international meetings and incentives.

“Meeting professionals first and foremost need to make sure they’re selecting a good destination that’s safe and secure based on their profile as a company or an organization,” says Shauna Whitehead, senior director of operations at CWT Meetings & Events, the meetings and events division of travel management company Carlson Wagonlit Travel. “For example, are your attendees regular travelers, like salespeople,



## 6 CRISIS-RESPONSE TIPS FOR PLANNERS

During the Paris terror attacks in November 2015, London-based incentive travel and rewards company The Black Tomato Agency learned firsthand what successful crisis response looks like. Here are six things they learned that can help meeting and incentive planners ensure their group's safety in the event of an emergency abroad:

- Ensure you have a 24-hour at-home team to handle logistical/re-booking/supplier communication, allowing the onsite team to focus on attendees.
- Stay calm and keep guests informed. Ensuring that guests learn about the emergency from you and not social media is key in making sure they know you are in charge of the situation.
- Make sure attendees are in the safest place. This may mean staying put. If you have to move guests, stay in small groups.
- Begin investigating next steps—including plans A, B, and C—as soon as possible in case the situation changes quickly.
- Keep communications lines open with all attendees at all times.
- Discuss a PR plan with the client and advise guests to limit social media to essential updates only.

or are they traveling overseas for the first time? That may influence the type of destination we recommend.”

To determine the risk profile of an international destination, consider the following types of risk:

- **Weather risks:** Where you meet might have different risks depending on when you meet, according to Whitehead, who says meetings and incentives planned in snowy destinations during winter or tropical destinations during monsoon or

hurricane season require extra planning.

- **Security risks:** Crime, political upheaval, social unrest, and disease outbreaks all are bad news for meetings and incentives, according to Scott Eames, global sales director for destination management company (DMC) AlliedPRA, who suggests consulting the U.S. State Department for information on travel alerts and warnings in a given destination.
- **Infrastructure risks:** Destinations without sufficient airlift, transportation networks, and reliable utilities—including Internet and cellular connectivity—represent a greater risk, as the impact of an emergency is likely to be larger and the chance of successful evacuation smaller, according to Whitehead, who says meeting and incentive planners also should consider factors that might place undue stress on existing infrastructure, such as major construction projects, national holidays or cultural events that might cause traffic, energy consumption, resource demands, etc., to swell.
- **Supplier risks:** Similar to infrastructure, planners should consider whether critical suppliers—printers, for example, caterers, or motor carriers—exist in needed quantities, and whether those suppliers are trustworthy, reliable, and financially stable, Whitehead and Hutton agree. Likewise, consider customs regulations and charges if you'll be importing supplies, gifts, or giveaways from suppliers at home, Hilliard adds.
- **People risks:** Meeting and incentive planners should consider who's attending, speaking, and exhibiting at their event from a cultural perspective, according to Hutton, who says the presence of certain individuals in certain places might invite trouble, depending on the predominant political, cultural, or religious values in the destination.
- **Economic risks:** Don't forget to consider currency fluctuations, exchange rates,

taxes, and general economic stability, according to Hilliard; although they might not threaten your meeting directly, she says, they represent a significant risk to your meeting's budget.

Whether you're considering a destination that's well trafficked, like London or Paris, or a one that's off the beaten path, like Tanzania or Iceland, a site inspection is a must. "Site inspections are a given," Whitehead says. "If we're going to a destination where there might be some sort of risk, a site inspection is an absolute must so you can assess the situation on the ground and plan ahead to for any mitigation measures that might be necessary."

Whatever risks one uncovers in an international meeting destination, overcoming them is infinitely easier with the assistance of a trusted DMC, according to Cori Dossett, CEM, CMP, president of Conferences Designed, a Dallas-based meeting planning company.

"If you're overseas, one of the most valuable contacts you have is the relationship you set up before you leave with the local DMC because they know the contacts you're going to need for whatever happens," she says.

Echoes Whitehead, "We leverage our network of DMCs a lot outside the U.S. to help us pull programs together. We rely heavily on their knowledge and expertise because they truly are the experts on the ground."

Planners also should look for the presence of a local convention and visitors bureau

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and a U.S. embassy. “Look for a place with a really strong tourism bureau or convention and visitors bureau that can help you identify who you need to talk to if you’ve got people with disabilities, where the nearest hospitals are, where you can get emergency dental care, how to coordinate if you need to get your people out of country—things like that,” Hilliard says. “Knowing that you’re going to a destination that has a U.S. embassy is important so you know you’ve got on-the-ground support should the worst happen.”

#### INTELLIGENT INSURANCE

Insurance is critical wherever your meeting or incentive is taking place. It's especially important, however, when you're meeting abroad, according to Hilliard. “Meeting professionals still need their commercial general liability insurance—same as they need in the U.S.—but they need to talk to their insurance company to find out what kind of coverage they’re going to have in another country, if they need additional riders, etc.,” she says. “Because your coverage may be different; certain things may not be covered, or the coverage may not be as high, in another country.”

Megan Freedman, executive director of the U.S. Travel Insurance Association (UStiA) agrees. “UStiA members suggest meeting planners work with their company’s internal risk/travel managers—someone

already engaged with an assistance company—to provide risk intelligence on destinations in consideration for the event,” she says. “Meeting planners can also work with a broker and/or insurer to ensure that the policy covers the unique needs of group meetings and addresses risks associated with the need to cancel the event, under which conditions, who is covered, who receives assistance, and in what scenarios, as well as addresses risk associated with the various contracts required to execute an event, liability, and statutory compliance.”

Contracts and insurance work in tandem, so it's important to get them right, as planners can leverage the latter to fill any gaps in protection left by the former. “One of the things we help our clients with is force majeure clauses in their hotel contracts,” Eames says. “That’s always really important.”

Planners should advise attendees to have insurance, too, according to Hilliard, who says travel insurance may cover things such as health care, medical evacuation, and travel interruption (e.g., cancelled flights), depending on the policy. “As a risk advisor, I would certainly say travel insurance is something attendees need to think about, especially if they have health conditions,” she explains, adding that attendees also should consider purchasing travel assistance services, which will not only reimburse travelers for mishaps abroad, but also help them navigate and resolve the situation in case of an emergency. Planners likewise can consider corporate travel assistance for their entire group.

#### FINAL STOP: CONTINGENCIES

Good risk management requires identifying not only risks, but also contingencies, according to Whitehead. “Have a plan, and then have a plan B and a plan C,” she says. “Plan the contingency up front based on what could happen .... Even if it’s as simple as finding out during the pre-con with your hotel where the closest hospital is and what the emergency contact numbers are in that



country, knowing up front what to do will allow you to excel in any sort of emergency situation,” she says.

Whatever your contingencies are, write them down. “Documentation is really important, and so is making sure that documentation is accessible across your group,” Whitehead continues.

A common risk plan, known in project management circles as a “risk register,” includes a description of the risk, a rating (e.g., low, medium, or high) of its probability and impact, and a description of the planned mitigation action, as well as a timeframe for the mitigation action and an action “owner” so everyone knows who’s responsible for executing it if the risk comes to fruition.

“You need to have an emergency response plan ... so that if something happens you’re prepared to deal with it,” Hilliard says.

The best plans establish resources both onsite and at home. “One of the most important things [planners] can do is to identify an at-home team who can assist in case of emergency,” Adams says. “If savvy colleagues and business partners are standing by to re-book guests, send out communications, and coordinate the response, it will make a tremendous difference. The on-site planner is one person, coping with challenges in the center of the emergency situation. They will need on-site and off-site backup.”

In addition to a risk register, planners should have a communications plan. “You should be able to know and track where your people are at all times, and you should know how to communicate and connect with them in real time,” Whitehead says. “That’s where having a meeting app can be really useful, because communication is key.”

If something does happen, so is temperament. “Stay cool, calm, and collected. Nobody needs a planner in crisis,” Whitehead concludes. “If you’ve documented your risks, you know what to do; it’s all there in front of you.” ■

