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Business travellers can be a target for kidnappers. Jenny Southan gets a crash course in what to do if the worst happens

We are in a van driving through woodland when we hear an explosion to our right, then two gunshots in quick succession. Two armed men in balaclavas and camouflage appear, drag our driver out and beat him. When he stands, blood is pouring from his head. The sliding door to our vehicle is torn open and an AK-47 jabbed in our faces – the man gripping it screams at us to put our hands in the air. We get out slowly and kneel on the ground. I'm the last to have a bag put over my head. My heart is pounding and my breathing ragged.

I listen to what I am being told but can't see anything. We are ordered to stand and roughly pushed together to form a line, our hands on the shoulders of the person in front, then marched through the forest to a new location, where we have to kneel in the mud, keeping our hands in the air. My arms start to ache as I hear them interrogating the people I have been travelling with. "What's your name? What's your job? Why are you here?" I don't want to tell them I am a journalist but am also scared about what will happen if they find out I have lied.

The initial round of questioning done, our abductors run off to get the van. I think of lowering my hands to lift my hood but am not sure if they are watching. Will they shoot me? Suddenly our driver says this is our chance to escape, grabbing my arm with his bloodied hand. I pull the hood off and we run as fast as we can, diving for cover as shots ring out. I hit my knee on a tree root but get up and keep sprinting.

Hiding in a thicket to regain our breath, we soon see our abductors walking towards us smiling, their guns by their sides and faces revealed. The training exercise is over, but someone is missing. Tyler (not his real name) kept on running. "I guess that means he escaped," we laugh. What surprised me most was, even though we knew we weren't in any danger, it felt real.



KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Lloyds Figgins is an expert in international crisis management and author of *Looking for Lemons: a Travel Survival Guide*. A former police officer, he has served in the British Army and rowed the Atlantic – now he advises people working in oil and gas, mining, banking, government and aid on how to mitigate risk, particularly in hostile territories.

On a sunny spring day, I travelled to the Oxfordshire countryside to attend Figgins' Kidnap Awareness and Avoidance course for business travellers. A hard-hitting day of classroom-based sessions, it covered the various stages of kidnap – from the nature of a snatch, to hostage negotiation, how to survive in captivity and what to expect once you have been freed.

Conducting the first seminar was Sue Williams, who has worked as a hostage negotiator for 25 years, securing the release of hundreds of people around the world. Formerly head of the hostage unit at Scotland Yard, she is now an independent civilian negotiator, assisting high net-worth families and companies operating in kidnap hotspots.

What qualities do you need for the job? Williams said: "You need to be a good listener, non-judgmental and not a problem solver. You don't want to just run to fix something. My longest negotiation lasted three and a half years." Calm, humble and mentally strong, she described her role as "a privilege", adding: "You get such a buzz when you get someone home safe. But occasionally you get those lows when people don't make it." ▶

Another speaker was Blue Cole, a man with an obvious military background and time spent in the field, who now specialises in hostage avoidance and survival training, as well as debriefs. Beyond that, he didn't want to give too much away.

Do you know the difference between an abduction and a kidnapping? As soon as a ransom is demanded, it's a kidnapping. People can be taken in all sorts of ways – at roadblocks, in honey traps, at fake meetings, or on hijacked planes and boats. According to Control Risks, the countries you are most likely to be kidnapped in are Mexico, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Libya, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sudan and Lebanon.

Amazingly, 94-96 per cent of people who have been kidnapped are eventually freed. However, the price can be great, both in terms of the ransom paid and the emotional toll. "They are not the same people as before," Cole said.

As well as the corporate duty of care and complex insurance policies, legally, it can be murky. It's against the law to pay ransom to known terrorists cells, which means families can be left bankrupted.

Even in relatively safe countries, the average business traveller needs to be streetwise. We were told of criminal gangs that sent fake drivers to pick up passengers at airports and then held them until they had managed to empty their bank accounts. Use a password or ask for your driver's ID and licence plate in advance to avoid this kind of "express kidnapping".

Drinking in hotel bars can also make you vulnerable. "Men are the worst at giving away information. They think they're Brad Pitt as they are getting so much female attention," Cole said. "They will have their room key on the table, and start telling others the name of their company, how long they are in town for and details about their family."

After our nerve-wracking practical exercise in the woods, we returned for the "back brief", where we learnt why "passive acceptance" was the best approach if taken hostage. "Don't be totally submissive," Cole advised. "Be outwardly co-operative but in control of your actions." It is also important to try to develop rapport with your captors, to humanise yourself, remain positive, and keep as clean and fit as you can. "It's about returning with dignity," Cole said.

■ The one-day Kidnap Awareness and Avoidance course costs £600 per person.

Email info@lflglobalrisk.com to book. lflglobalrisk.com/courses/kidnap-awareness



RESQME CAR ESCAPE TOOL This small, cheap device is designed to cut through seatbelts and has a spring-loaded point that will shatter glass when pressed on the corner of a window. Clip it to your keychain for safekeeping. resqme.com

HAIR SNAP CLIP Break off the thin strip of metal in the middle, flatten it as much as possible and use as a shim to get out of handcuffs. Carefully insert it between the ratchets to separate them, push the claw in a little and then slide open.

KEVLAR CORD Will cut through almost anything. To escape from plastic cable ties bound around your wrists, tie one end to an eyelet in your shoe, loop between the cuffs, then tie to the other shoe. Pull taut and use a cycling motion with your feet to quickly saw through the plastic.

GAFFER/DUCT TAPE If your wrists are bound with gaffer tape in front of you, lift your hands above your head (keeping elbows together), and then slam them down and outwards either side of your hips, in one fluid, powerful motion. It will snap. This technique works for cable ties as well – just tighten them as much as possible first by pulling the ends with your teeth.