

Vacation Awareness

July 2012



ON CYBER PATROL

"It's all about the network."



The sun is rising earlier, the weather has gotten warmer, and the kids are out of school. It must be summertime and time to hit the road and take some well deserved time off. This is the time many of us are leaving work behind to spend time with loved ones, and to visit the many historic sites both domestically and abroad. Most of us have a to-do list we follow before we go on vacation, we remember to stop the paper and mail delivery, turn off the lights, and grab the sun screen before we head out. Many of us try as best we can to forget all the happenings and responsibility of work on our vacation, we let our guard down in an attempt to have fun. We look forward to relaxing, sleeping in late, and the peace and quiet that comes with a vacation. Though, as we try to enjoy our vacation we must remember that those on the wrong side of the law are not on vacation, and will continue to take advantage whenever the opportunity arises. Criminals are hard at work when we are on vacation, because they know they have an excellent opportunity to strike while we've let our guard down. As vacationers we're often trying to get the full experience on vacation, we want to try restaurants and purchase things from street vendors as souvenirs to remember our trip by. However, all travelers should remember that not all merchants are reputable and some work with criminals by using credit card skimming devices. By the time the unknowing victim realizes what has happened; their identity has been stolen and their accounts may have been accessed or possibly depleted.

While vacationing, many people find it necessary to keep their family and friends updated on their status. This is most often accomplished via a social media website like Facebook, Myspace, and twitter. In their hurry to update those concerned about their vacations and upload pictures, many travelers jump on any available wireless connection in order to access the internet. What they forget to consider are that many of these "open" networks are not secure and possibly the person sharing this connection may have less than honest intentions. Many hotels offer "open" networks in the lobby and common areas to attract customers. Visitors must remain vigilant when using networks because many criminals sit in the lobbies surfing these networks trying to hack into unsuspecting guest's computers. Hotels are often havens for criminals looking to steal your identity because they have studied the habits of tourists and hotel procedures. Many vacationers leave MP3 players, tablets, and other PDA-like devices in their room when they go to the pool or out to eat. Maids regularly wear headphones while cleaning rooms and can't hear someone entering. How difficult would it be for a team of criminals to sneak into a room while the cleaning person is in the bathroom or vacuuming the floor? It takes only seconds to grab important documents like passports or itineraries and sneak out undetected. For the little time spent in a room grabbing these items or electronic equipment the payoff is huge. Many of us keep passwords, account numbers and personal information on smart phones and personal electronics. It is important not to leave any valuables unsecured in your hotel room. This not only applies to jewelry but also to hotel receipts, credit card statements and other travel documents.

Now we have covered some of the perils travelers may face while away from home, we should also remember the things we need to do before we leave. In addition to the items already mentioned, we must also think about mail, lights and other signs associated with an empty home. For example, we often get credit card offers in the mail soliciting us to sign up for new lines of credit. Criminals patrol neighborhoods in the summer watching for the key signs indicating that no one home, and a full mailbox is a key indicator. Before leaving for vacation you should ensure you make arrangements for someone you trust to secure your mail. A smart criminal can grab a few days worth of mail and find out enough information to steal your identity. Credit card and bank statements along with other personal information allow the identity thief enough information to gain access to your life. Lights that are left on, newspapers accumulating outside and uncollected trash cans are all key indicators of any empty house. A criminal could break in and gain access to personal information by using computers left on or PDAs containing sensitive information left in the open. You should ensure all of your computers and smart phones are password protected so even if they fall into the wrong hands they cannot be used to find out your personal information.

Enjoy your vacation!