

COSMOPOLITAN

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AT GUNPOINT ON A
GIRLY HOLIDAY**

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KIDNAPPED AT GUNPOINT FOR OUR PIN NUMBERS

Felicity Rees (far left) and Louise Henderson, both 26 and from South Wales, were enjoying a trip of a lifetime when they became the victims of a chilling new crime...



Best friends Felicity Rees and Louise Henderson clinked glasses, toasting each other and the dream holiday that had just begun. They'd saved for months to go to Argentina and so far nothing had disappointed them. The weather was hot and the capital, Buenos Aires, was buzzing. "We were having a blast," says Felicity.

"We wanted to see as much of the city as possible," adds Louise. "So when we saw this great hostel in a different area, we checked it out in our guidebooks and with the British Embassy, then decided to stay there."

"As we headed to our new room early that evening, I felt really uneasy," says Felicity. "We were on the fifth floor (the building's top floor) and right at the end of the corridor. Downstairs had been busy but our floor seemed empty, apart from two local men who were standing in a room at the other end of the hallway. There was something in the way they were hanging around in a deserted corridor that gave me the creeps."

The girls were so tired that they lay on their beds fully clothed and listened to

music. "About half an hour later, we were about to have showers and go out when the room was plunged into darkness," recalls Louise. "I walked over to fiddle with the light switch, then suddenly there was a huge crash as the door was forced open."

That was the moment the girls' dream holiday came to an end. "The door flew into me and I was knocked to the ground," says Louise. "The two men we'd seen earlier charged in. One was aged around 40, with a scarred face and an aggressive manner; the other was nearer 30. I saw that both had guns and the older one also had a knife."

"I was still lying on my bed," says Felicity. "It was dark and everything happened very quickly but I could hear Louise shouting, 'Oh my God, what do you want?' I screamed as loudly as I could and, before I knew it, one of the men had jumped on top of me on the bed and hit me hard in the face with the gun. He hit me several times until I stopped crying – I knew he'd knock me unconscious if I didn't. My face started bleeding from a cut under my left eye but I was so shocked >

and scared that I didn't even notice. We were both petrified and thinking the same thing – were they going to rape and kill us?

"I spoke Spanish," Felicity continues, "and tried to ask what they wanted. I just hoped they'd take what they were after and go. But that's when they taped us up and threatened us. The younger one was apologising for injuring me and said he didn't want to hurt us. He was saying, 'I'm sorry, I have a daughter' but the older man didn't seem bothered at all."

"They tied up our hands with tape and gagged us. After about 10 minutes, the lights came back on. We lay on our beds, helpless, as they rifled through our stuff, taking money and credit cards," says Felicity.

"I could see blood dripping down Felicity's face," says Louise, "and I wanted to comfort her but we couldn't even move."

"They hadn't taped up our legs," explains Felicity, "and as we were on the bed, I was sure they were going to rape us. I thought there was no way they'd allow us to see their faces and then let us go."

"The men made sure they'd got everything – they even slashed open our suitcases to check we weren't hiding money. They went through our bags," says Louise, "taking cameras, mobile phones and chargers, perfume, makeup, anything that had a designer label and even our flip-flops."

"Then they made us tell them our PIN numbers," Louise continues, "and demanded, in Spanish, how much cash they could withdraw on each. It

was difficult to remember but there was no way we'd give the wrong numbers because the men were clear that if the PINs didn't work, they'd come back and kill us. Then the meaner of the two men ran off with our cards to take our money.

"The other stayed, nervously pacing around the room, taking things from our suitcases and apologising for hurting us," says Louise. "His accomplice called after half an hour to say he had the money. That was the moment I thought we were going to die. He put our passports on our pillows and I thought, 'Oh my God, he's going to blow our brains out.' Instead, he left the room."

"When we realised they'd definitely gone, we burst out laughing from shock," recalls

SAFETY FIRST

David Hill, adviser at security company Red24, gives *Cosmo* his tips to staying safe on holiday

- Research your destination before you go there, especially statistics for street robberies and express kidnappings.
- Be vigilant at airports and train stations.
- Pre-book taxis or wait at a rank. Never accept a ride from someone who approaches you.
- Dress down and hide all your valuables.
- Trust your instincts. If you think something isn't quite right, walk away.
- If you're a victim of crime, remain calm and compliant – don't argue.

Louise. "The men hadn't tied up our fingers, so we sat back to back and ripped off each other's tape. After we'd untied ourselves, we went to the window and shouted 'Police! Police!' in Spanish. A lady who lived in a flat opposite heard us and a man from the hostel bar downstairs also came up to help. He was visibly shaken by the sight of Felicity, who had two black eyes, a swollen nose and a face covered in dried blood."

When the girls went downstairs, three and a half hours after their ordeal had begun, they started to think someone inside the hostel might have set up the whole thing. "We had no proof but we suspected the receptionist may have been involved. She

wouldn't let us use the hostel phone to ring the British Embassy, refused to call an ambulance and didn't seem surprised about what had happened," says Louise. "She said she hadn't noticed

the two men walking out with large bags full of our stuff when there was only one way in and out of the hostel."

The police took the girls to the station to give evidence. "We were met by a man from the British Embassy who was very helpful," says Felicity. "But the police weren't. No one spoke English, nor could they understand our Spanish. They didn't seem bothered about trying to find who had done this to us."

"I called my mum in tears, told her what had happened and asked if she could wire

Being aware of your personal safety means you can relax and enjoy your holiday



us some money. When she contacted her bank, HSBC, they told her I was eligible for security protection from a company called Red24 because she had a premium bank account" Red24 specialises in rescuing people from dangerous situations and

getting them home to the UK. Luckily, one of their security specialists, Michael, was already in Argentina. He accompanied the girls to hospital for X-rays and gave them cash to replace what had been taken. He even stayed in an adjoining hotel room to make the girls feel safer.

But the attack had left them badly shaken, especially Felicity, who left Argentina two days after it happened. "I couldn't open one of my eyes, was covered in cuts and bruises and had no possessions. I just wanted to go home, so Michael arranged my flight and made sure I got on the plane."

Louise felt differently: "I had two broken toes from where they'd been trampled on when the men burst in but I really wanted to stay. I met up with a friend who was also travelling and decided to finish my holiday. I thought that if I went home I'd always be afraid and I wanted to conquer that fear. However, when I got back to London, three weeks later the realisation of what we'd been through really kicked in. I was very upset and I felt really vulnerable."

"We discovered this crime even has a name – 'express kidnapping' – and it happens all over the world, even in the UK," says Felicity. "It's where a victim is held for a few terrifying hours while their possessions and money are stolen."

"They never caught our attackers," says Louise, "and the experience has affected the way I live my life. I won't take a taxi home on my own now, for example, and I'll be more careful of where my room is when I stay in a hotel. But Felicity and I are going on holiday to Cuba later this year – I don't want to be a victim and attacks like this can only turn you into one if you choose to let them." ●

“I don't want to be a victim,” says Louise, “and attacks like this can only turn you into one if you let them”