

Traffic crashes a concern for U.S. travelers abroad

By KEN THOMAS, The Associated Press
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WASHINGTON -

Driving down a sharp descent in the Tibetan mountains, Mian Chin knew she was in trouble when the brakes failed on her tour bus and she heard the driver declare in Mandarin Chinese, "We are going to die."

The white tour bus, with 25 people onboard last August, was picking up speed as it headed down the hillside, barreling toward a 90-degree turn in the road more than a quarter-mile away.

"I thought, 'Are we going to die like that?'" said Chin, 52, an atmospheric scientist who lives in suburban Washington.

But in a dramatic twist of fate, a herd of yaks happened to be crossing the road at the time. The bus slammed into more than a dozen of the oxen, slowing the vehicle down, before it collided with a retention wall. No one was seriously injured and Chin was treated for minor cuts and bruises.

Months later, Chin considers herself incredibly lucky. But new data being released this week highlights the perils of traffic safety for U.S. travelers abroad. Traffic crashes are the most common cause of non-natural deaths for American tourists, according to State Department data, more prominent than homicides, acts of terrorism or natural disasters.

Traffic crashes accounted for 741 deaths of U.S. citizens traveling overseas from 2004-2006, or about one-third of the 2,364 deaths, according to a report by the Make Roads Safe Campaign, a group dedicated to reducing global traffic deaths and injuries.

The group said the figures could be underreported because some families may not report the deaths to the State Department or some travelers may return for medical treatment and die in the United States. The report was being issued Wednesday as part of the first United Nations Global Road Safety Week.

Automobile use has expanded rapidly in many parts of the world where transportation was once confined to bicycle use. China, for example, is now the second-largest vehicle market in the world and passenger car sales grew 37 percent there last year.

Traffic safety experts say many American travelers overlook the pitfalls of road safety during their vacations and need to arrive at their destinations with more than just a packed suitcase, travel papers and vaccinations.

They should know about a country's road conditions, look into a travel company's safety record, avoid traveling at night and follow safety standards such as buckling up and not drinking and driving.

"Travelers indeed worry about malaria - all the diseases they can contract. They worry about terrorism, they worry about hooliganism, they worry about people taking their things," said Rochelle Sobel, president off the Association for Safe International Road Travel. "And they don't worry about the single greatest cause of death."

Sobel started her organization after her 25-year-old son, Aron, was killed in a bus crash in Turkey just two weeks before his medical school graduation. Her organization provides detailed reports on road conditions, dangerous highways and driver behavior for more than 150 countries.

Young adults can be particularly vulnerable. The World Health Organization reported last week that nearly 400,000 young people under 25 are killed in traffic crashes annually and car crashes are the leading cause of death worldwide for people between 10 and 24.

At Michigan State University, which sent more than 2,700 students to 54 countries through its study abroad program last year, students receive information on road safety and are told to avoid late-night travel in countries with poor safety records or mountainous terrain. But convincing students of the potential risks months before they travel can be a challenge.

"They have a sense that they're kind've invincible and also, a lot of the safety measures that are in place here are simply taken for granted," said Julie Friend, a travel security analyst in the university's study abroad office.

For tour groups, ensuring safety for travelers is helped by having strong relationships with drivers throughout the world. Mongol Global Tour Co. of Cypress, Calif., which conducts tours throughout the Pacific and Latin America, only hires drivers with the proper licensing and an in-depth knowledge of local regulations and customs, said Susie Oquist, who directs sales to the Mongol's South Pacific destinations.

Dr. Bella Dinh-Zarr, the Make Roads Safe campaign's North American director and a co-author of the report, said the explosion of automobile sales in many developing countries and poor road conditions could endanger not only U.S. travelers but contribute to a larger epidemic of increased road fatalities worldwide.

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