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Safely unreliable

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WHAT I remember most of Buenos Aires, apart from beautiful waitresses and Mario Kempes lookalikes, were the boulevards. You'd never see more intimidating ones, not even in Paris where the word came from.

One particular boulevard near the hotel we were staying was as wide as a football field, or so it seemed. You'd put your life at greater risk crossing the street than if you had spent a night in one of the city's dark, back alleys.

Not that I ventured into any dark alley when I was in the city covering the visit by former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad some years ago.

Since an experience in a New York back alley several years earlier, I have kept to brightly-lit streets, hallways and highways as much as possible whenever I'm in a foreign city.

I have long concluded that not many cities in this world are as safe as Kuala Lumpur. Despite the increase in the crime rate of late, especially involving snatch thieves who prey on tourists, KL is still relatively safer than many other cities in the region and beyond.

Even so, you'd advise tourists to stay away from some junkies-infested back lanes as much for their own safety as for our desire to make sure that they leave with good memories of our capital.

Tokyo, despite what you've read about the Yakuza and the fear of subways sparked by a blind spiritual guru's abuse of the Sarin, has always been a safe city for me. The smell of petrol on the streets, however, is disconcerting, especially in winter.

Seoul, I thought, was also clean, safe and pleasant. I felt more weary when in Hong Kong although that could have been due to watching too many Chinese triad movies since the time Bruce Lee was alive and kicking.

Bandar Seri Begawan is one of the cities I'd consider safer than safe KL any time of the day. A small capital. I walked leisurely for two hours during an afternoon and more or less covered the place. The people were not as friendly as Malaysians or Singaporeans but they speak the same language. The cabbies were very talkative; more often than not they were from Johor Baru or Penang, foreign workers in Brunei saving as much money as they could for the people back home.

I couldn't remember there being any dark, back lane in the Brunei capital.

Back in 1988 when I first visited New York to cover the United Nations general assembly, I was well aware of the Big Apple's reputation. The crime rate then was phenomenal and despite efforts in recent years to rid the city of these elements, New Yorkers continue to live with the stigma of their city's notoriety.

I followed the usual advice given to visitors: keep away from dark alleys, skip Harlem, don't be provocative. But there was a Malaysian journalist based in New York then who took me out one evening for a walk, through small roads and back lanes. We had just reached the end of an alley when a hulk of a man in black parka and boots emerged, demanding a dollar. I have heard stories of men wiping your front windscreen at a Harlem traffic light for a dollar or a smashed windscreen, but this was ridiculous.

My New York-based friend hushed me up before I thought of doing anything stupid, fished a note out of his pocket, and we were safely on our way. I protested and told him we could take the guy on. Probably, he said, but

what made me so sure he was alone?

I was in London for a year where I frequently took the risk of hurrying through some back alleys but never after dark. But remember the incident where a comely couple - a Malaysian tycoon and his South African wife - were mugged in London some years back? The wife had a million-dollar piece of jewellery on her, it seemed, which made that probably the biggest mugging haul of all time.

There were other smaller cities which gave me the creeps. In Dakar, for example, I was accosted virtually all the time, from the moment the Immigration officer demanded that I parted with my Discman to the time I tried to do some shopping at the stalls.

In Harare, we were told to avoid certain areas, and in Cardiff, too, I discovered after three months there that there were pubs more dangerous than some urban slums. In Johannesburg, I did the thing the hotel advised me to and that was not to take a stroll as if you were in the park because there was wildlife in the city as well. But it was in quiet and serene Geneva, the first city I visited as a journalist, that I discovered the colour of your skin could still get you into trouble.

And Geneva, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit recently, is right up there in the top 10 of its list of cities which are the safest and have the least corruption, the best infrastructure, and the greatest health amenities, among other things.

New York is ranked well ahead of KL. So was Buenos Aires, London, Pretoria, Hong Kong and Paris.

Johannesburg, the EIU says, is only slightly worse than KL, along with Lima, Istanbul, Kuwait and Tashkent.

Bandar Seri Begawan was right down there, one of the cities supposedly the hardest to live in, the most corrupt, and very unsafe.

We've heard of unreliable US and British intelligence after the invasion of Iraq but the EIU has got to be kidding with its hardship ratings.