India is far from the only place where this happens, of course, and in some places the hotel industry itself has taken over the task of squeezing the last possible dollar/dirham/taka out of visitors by whatever unscrupulous (if legal) means necessary. A classic measure designed for such purposes is the system prevalent in Thailand, for instance, of "guiding" or "encouraging" tourists to visit particular craft emporiums or shopping areas; another such tactic is to insist that when travelling during peak festival periods, such as Christmas, guests must automatically pay to participate in celebrations organised by the hotel e.g. Christmas dinner, New Year's parties etc, whether it is one to attend or not.

Of course this is preferable to being ambushed by tuk-tuk drivers who will insist on making unscheduled stops at places that supposedly offer you "the best price" for things you don't want! In many of these places you can also end up in trouble if they manage to distract you long enough to get an imprint of your credit card (should you be fortunate enough to possess one). And there are occasions on which even if you are not actually robbed, you may end up feeling as if you have been well and truly mauled as a result of your shopping expedition.

The worst experience I have had in this regard was during an otherwise wonderful trip to Egypt, where the market sellers were so aggressive that they would follow you for long distances while screaming at high volumes. Some tourism official had come up with the ingenious system, at one location, of drawing a line in front of the booths which stall-holders were not allowed to cross in their pursuit of customers. Needless to say, it was the only place where I actually managed to buy something!

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Aside from such well-documented dangers that travellers face (particularly in destinations that lend themselves to becoming tourist traps), there are always the unexpected challenges that tend to pop up when you least expect them. A family friend of ours who was travelling through Saudi Arabia on his way to London experienced one of these firsthand, with fairly disastrous consequences. Uncle AG was a Pakistani national and a respected journalist based in the UK. While he was waiting to check in for the London flight at his transit destination of Riyadh, he was dismayed to see the young Saudi airline staffer suddenly decide to take an unscheduled and unexplained break. With less than an hour left to take off, he tried to reason with the young man, assuring him that he had a confirmed ticket for that flight. To his horror, the Saudi man took his ticket and ripped it in half, before telling him, "Well, now you don't!"

My parents and I, on the other hand, knew that we had something to be nervous about while visiting Russia in the late 80s. The family friends we were going to see were based at the Bangladesh Embassy in Moscow and had begged us to bring some videos for them, even as they warned us that the Russians didn't approve of people bringing in western material. In our case, the "contraband" consisted of some fairly harmless Hollywood films, but my father (being a particularly law-abiding individual) began sweating profusely as we stood in the customs queue having our luggage ransacked.

By contrast, I was interested to note that my mother seemed cool as a cucumber, standing next to the trolley and yawning with apparent boredom. I envied Ma her air of serenity. We made it through the search unscathed, and only after questioning her about her calmness was I surprised to hear that she had been very nervous indeed! It was a few years later that I found out that some people apparently require extra oxygen when they are nervous, and instead of gasping for it - as most normal people would they yawn instead...

Less prepared for what they would encounter were the mother and grandmother of a Japanese colleague of mine who visited Bangladesh some years ago. These two polite and charming elderly ladies were very excited about their trip, and not in the least deterred that Akiko could not accompany them on their wanderings (because she had to work most days). On one occasion, when I heard that she had sent them off to the old capital, Sonargaon, I had to confess to some misgivings as to how they would manage an outing in such a public place by themselves (particularly given the well-known and uncontrollable curiousity many of us Bangladeshis suffer from in the course of such *phoren* encounters).

I need not have worried. Despite being surrounded by a crowd of about 70-100 people while they ate their packed lunches, both ladies returned looking radiant "It was just like being a movie-star!" Akiko's grandmother said happily. If only we could meet all our travel challenges with such grace and aplomb...