

pickpocketing

IT'S THE MOST ARTFUL OF ALL CRIMINAL ACTS, BUT ARE
PEOPLE WHO PICK POCKETS THRIVING OR, LIKE THE VALUABLES
THEY TARGET, VANISHING INTO THIN AIR?

Writer Benjamin Law Illustrator Sergio Membrillas

HELLISH ANDEVEN FORCE SOME TRAVELLERS INTO WEARING THOSE SEXLESS, SKIN-COLOURED, OVER-THE-SKIN-BUT-UNDER-THE-CLOTHES SCROTAL TRAVEL POUCHES (A CRIME IN ITSELF).

EVER SINCE GOD HAD A CHAT WITH MOSES ON MOUNT SINAI AND ENGRAVED A STONE TABLET WITH THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT, WE'VE ALL KNOWN THAT STEALING IS A VERY BAD THING.

Still, most of us have indulged in some minor theft in our lives. As kids, we stole lollies off the chemist's counter. In our teen years, we stupidly dared each other to shoplift before being escorted out by security. As adults, we 'accidentally' stashed 25kg sacks of rice down by the wheels of a shopping trolley that then passed through the grocery shop's exit undetected. (Note: This situation is completely 'hypothetical' and you cannot prove anything, so shut up.)

Then there are the true professionals: the embezzlers and extortionists, the kidnappers and blackmailers. But the most artful of all the thieves are the grassroots kids on the street – good old-fashioned pickpockets. Asian countries might have a reputation for street urchins who steal your bags before gutting them like fish, but it's really the Europeans who have mastered the art, hosting nearly all the world's worst cities for pickpockets: Barcelona, Rome, Paris, Florence, Madrid, Athens, Amsterdam, Prague, Costa Brava, Lisbon, Tenerife and London. (In fairness, Hanoi and Buenos Aires: reportedly also horrible. There are also undying rumours of a secret pickpocketing school hidden in the dense jungles of Colombia.)

They make overseas holidays hellish and even force some travellers into wearing those sexless, skin-coloured, over-the-skin-but-under-the-clothes scrotal travel pouches (a crime in itself). But despite the horror of being the victim of a pickpocket, there is something admirable about pickpockets too. Unlike hit-and-run bag snatchers, pickpockets have to be crafty. It takes genuine skill to poach something right off someone's body without them even knowing. (Try it with a family member.) And it takes more skill and more teamwork than you first suspect.

Traditionally, some pickpockets work alone (a 'single'), but most work in packs or 'wire mobs'.

The leader of the operation is the 'steer' who decides which victim (the 'mark') is going to be targeted. A classic ruse takes place in a crowded place – bus stations, train stations and airport terminals are perfect – where someone will announce they have found a wallet with no ID, and would like to return it. Passengers instinctively check for their wallet, which tells the steer where the mark keeps their wallet or purse. Another member of the team – the 'stall', who is the most physically attractive – will bump into the mark. Then comes the 'cannon', who does the actual pickpocketing (called the 'dip'). The cannon then hands the purse to another team member, who immediately walks away from the crime scene.

Considering it takes that much coordination and performance, it makes sense that pickpocketing is also a celebrated stage act. In 2007, the late David Avadon wrote a book called *Cutting Up Touches: A Brief History of Pockets and the People Who Pick Them*, which detailed pickpocketing's rise as an underground art and entertainment. Throughout the 1900s, for example, a man named Borra became known as the King of Pickpockets and the Greatest Pickpocket of All Time. Born Borislav Miloj-kovic in Belgrade in 1921, Borra initially picked up his skills by watching for shoplifters and pickpockets at his father's store, before trying it out himself, practising like hell and becoming a star with his own touring show around Europe.

After Borra died in 1998, others took his place. Thomas Blacke is an American pickpocket artist who holds a suite of world records for things like fastest balloon-making (3.1 seconds) and fastest escape from handcuffs underwater (3.4 seconds). He's also an onstage pickpocket expert, renowned for his fast hands. "Pickpocketing on stage is a lot about psychology," Blacke says. "It's a lot about misdirection and reading your spectator, rolled into an art. A good pickpocket requires personality, the ability to quickly read subjects as to what you think you can get away with, and obviously what the other person has in their pockets."

However, being a pickpocket has gotten harder as time has gone on, both in the streets and on the stage. And weirdly, it has a lot to do with the general population wearing less clothes. "Now, a lot of people don't dress up," Blacke says. "When you go to a show, a lot of people don't wear suits and coats anymore. They wear a polo shirt and a pair of pants, or a simple dress. And that severely limits the amount of things you could take from someone. It makes it hard if people are not dressed up in suits and ties."

Still, that doesn't mean pickpocketing is heading towards extinction. You'll always be in demand if you know the ins and outs of pickpocketing, and not just as an entertainer either. There are legitimate consultancy jobs out there where pickpocket knowledge is a huge asset. In his time, Borra closely advised Scotland Yard and Interpol on how street theft worked. Blacke has worked as a consultant for a Canadian travel-wear company seeking to design clothes that are less susceptible to pickpocketing.

Blacke's advice for travellers is pretty simple: Be aware of your surroundings and know where your possessions are. Don't dress or act like a tourist, as you'll be more likely to be targeted as a potential 'mark'. (Tip: foreign travellers are usually looking up at their surroundings, whereas residents are always looking down.) Place your wallet in the front pocket, and jam it in place horizontally. Women should avoid large handbags and wear the strap across the chest like a satchel. Avoid situations like crowds where strangers will touch you constantly. Also, the less you retrieve things out of your wallet – coins, public transport cards – the better. Pickpockets don't just target anyone. They study where you place things.

But not all of this is malevolent. And maybe you'll come across a pickpocket like Borra, who just wants to entertain you. "Sigmund Freud said that there's a criminal down deep in every person," Borra once said. "Perhaps I, too, am a kleptomaniac, but I get a double satisfaction: when I take, I give back, and that makes me happy. When I can do that, I don't have to really steal." •