

School of smooth operators

EAGLE EYE Bob Arno knows street criminals so well, he travels the world showing tourists and security agencies how to spot them before they act

PHOTO COURTESY: BOB ARNO



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Bob Arno makes a living off petty crime. Well, almost. Having mastered the art of pickpocketing, Arno (69), an American, uses his skills to help corporates, tourists, police and security agencies.

Arno, who was in the city earlier this week, has been studying street crime for almost 22 years. In an e-mail interview with *Hindustan Times*, he said his primary income now comes from corporates and security agencies, to whom he makes presentations on street crime protection and credit card fraud.

"We teach people how to travel smart so they don't become victims. We also train police officers and security

WORKING THE STREET

Bob Arno's expertise in spotting street criminals – and replicating their tricks (above) – comes from his travels through 75 COUNTRIES.

He always keeps a wallet stuffed with newspaper in his pocket. It's been stolen 200 TIMES.

In Italy, a gang of criminals was so impressed by his tricks that they offered him \$1,000 a day to join them.

firms how to spot thieves, and the methods they use," Arno said.

His education in understanding street crime has come from travelling in 75 countries. His team travels about 250 days every year, and is most interested in pickpockets, muggers, identity thieves, credit card fraudsters and con artists.

"My pickpocket research is meant

to be from a traveller's perspective. I try to cover most of the favoured travel destinations of the world, and Mumbai is certainly one of them!" he said, describing an earlier trip to the city in 2000, when he studied pickpocketing on locals trains here. "I love the city," he said.

Once inside a train, he'll typically find the pickpocket before the pickpocket finds him. Inside his trouser pocket, he'll keep a wallet stuffed only with bits of newspaper.

"We'll walk around like tourists, and when it gets stolen, I ask for it back, or

We'll walk around like tourists, and when [the wallet] gets stolen, I ask for it back, or steal it back.

BOB ARNO, pickpocket consultant

steal it back, or steal something else from the thief, then ask for a trade – say, his cellphone for my wallet. Then they're interested in talking," he said, adding that his wallet has been stolen 200 times.

"He's a genius," said Ravi Gidde, senior inspector at the Azad Maidan police station, impressed with Arno's insight into how a pickpocket thinks and moves.

By now, Arno can spot the pickpocket in a crowd by analysing behaviour and body language — both are always different from that of locals and tourists, even though they try to look normal. "Sometimes, police introduce us to thieves in custody. In Mumbai, we got that assistance both in 2000, and earlier this week," he said.

Turns out, St Petersburg in Russia, has some of the smoothest, most sophisticated pickpocket gangs. "They operate like a Russian ballet. Pickpockets in Prague have developed some pretty good tricks, making them very successful. And Panama and South Africa have some of the most dangerous muggers in the world," he said.

He can connect so well with street criminals, they've even invited him to join them. "My wife and I were once offered a \$1,000-a-day job by a gang of thieves in Italy after I showed them some tricks," he said.

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PR=SMART