As a native Philadelphian, my first memory of Philadelphia’s subway system was of my father rushing me off to my first ballet recital at the Merriam Theater while people gawked at my tiny, 4-year-old frame clad in a big, white-and-pink tulle costume. Nowadays, I think that the only way an outfit like mine could attract such attention would be if it was donned by a 6-foot, 300-pound man. The subway trains contain a collection of the most eclectic sort: College students merge with the homeless, who merge with the business people, who merge with the common criminal. In my travels, I have crossed paths with all of the above—and lived to tell about it. Here are 10 tips so you can avoid danger and enjoy the ride.

1. Don’t travel in fear
   Traveling in fear is the worst mistake a commuter could make. It can leave you jittery and overly alert so that you call attention to yourself, which is not a wise thing to do on the subway unless you’re selling something or having an emergency. Extreme occurrences and random acts of violence and other illegal manipulation on the subway are rare. There are also some loud, crazy people who want nothing from you and will not participate in illegal behavior—but they are simply a distraction or in-ride entertainment.

2. Don’t draw attention to yourself
   Acting in a completely uninhibited way could invite some unwanted attention—you should not get too comfortable in your seat. Counting money, taking pictures and rifling through your purse or backpack, then taking a nap while listening to your iPod at its maximum volume is not wise. No matter how long your ride is, do not make yourself at home. Not only could this lead to missing your stop, you could also miss any important announcements from the conductor or, worse yet, be susceptible to crooks and other less-savory individuals. Have your money and possessions in order before you go underground and do everything you possibly can to stay awake.

3. Always have your fare ready
   Another thing that you may want to consider before you even stand on the subway platform is your fare. Having $2 (or $2.75, depending on whether you need a transfer slip for an adjoining route), a token, or trans-pass ready as you go through the turnstile could be the difference between making the train or waiting around for 15 minutes.

4. Know where you’re going before you begin your commute
   SEPTA’s website, septa.org, is extremely resourceful. The “Plan My Trip” feature will supply multiple routes and how long it should take to get there. The site also has the schedule for every single mode of transportation SEPTA offers. If this is a last-minute trip, however, there are maps available inside the train and on the platform and waiting areas. Don’t be afraid to ask a friendly face for directions, but be sure to check with another person—not everyone knows where they’re going.

Story by Serena Sams
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5. Avoid carrying expensive-looking items
This may not be the best way to ensure your safety during the ride, but when a person snatches a purse or bag, there’s a good chance that they don’t know what’s in it. If you keep those expensive items and money on your person, there’s a decreased chance that you’ll lose anything absolutely devastating in the unfortunate event that someone takes your bag.

6. Avoid wearing nice clothing
While this may be advisable in the case that you may find the only available seat in a crowded subway car to be littered with sunflower seed shells or even worse, an unidentifiable substance, it shouldn’t warrant any uncharacteristic dressing for your travels. There is one exception to this rule: women’s club wear. The subway is not the place to showcase a neckline that plunges down to your navel, or the world’s shortest skirt. An oversized sweatshirt or sweater that can be easily stashed in a bag or in a coat check can remedy this situation.

7. Always travel in groups
This may not always be possible in the hectic life of a college student. Try asking your best friend to wake up at 7 in the morning to accompany you to your internship in Center City—then who’s going to be with her on the ride back? Also, riding with some of your more naïve or insane friends could result in a less enjoyable commute. Their reactions to surroundings could affect you just because you are with them. On SEPTA, you are most definitely the company you keep. Try to adhere to this rule while traveling during the evening hours.

8. Travel as early as possible
This can be applied for commutes at all hours of the day. Trains can always be delayed for countless reasons. Traveling during off-peak hours, when service is mind-numbingly slower, can leave you open to the most rowdy crowd or at least a harrowing, almost-empty train. If you can help it, try to get on a train before 10 p.m. Riding the Night Owl, which can take the form of either train or bus, is a personal choice which takes longer than the normal commute up the Broad Street line. If you’re uncomfortable with after-hours public transportation, splurge on a cab.

9. Always trust your instincts
While the subway and its platforms are a confined space, there is usually a little room to move, as well as seating or standing options. If there’s a rider in one car that you find irksome or dangerous, wait for the train to stop at its next location and walk quickly to the next car. Never use the doors to cross between cars when the train is moving—you or your items could fall onto the tracks and get crushed by the train.

10. Don’t travel while under the influence of any mind-altering substances
If a cab or designated driver is not an option, be sure to sober up as much as possible before taking the subway. A person who appears to be intoxicated is a very easy target for unwanted advances and other crimes. Not only does it impair your ability to defend yourself, but it can also leave you unable to identify the criminal and make you appear unreliable as a witness to an illegal activity.

If you’re planning on using public transportation it’s best to leave the fancy jewelry at home and ride when you’re well rested.