How To Sneak Around

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Abstract

Urban adventure changes the way you see your urban environment. The structured, asphalt-and-concrete, developed world will become your wilderness playground. Knowing how to sneak around successfully is an essential skill to urban exploration.

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How To Sneak Around

One, two, three. I count the steel rungs as I climb below street level. I lower the grate over my head back in place. Four, five, six. My boots squish down on the muddy, leafy floor. I look around. Tunnels disappear in the murky distance in two directions. I am standing 15 feet below the university. My heart is racing double-time. I am equipped with my trusty flashlight and waterproof boots. Two minutes ago, I stood looking down through the bars of an unlocked grating covering a hole that descended into the depths. I asked myself: Well, why the hell not?



This is all about the fine art of getting into and out o places you don't belong. Why? For some of us, just the thril of peeking behind the scenes of life is enough. Add to that the challenge of evading the law and pushing personal and societal boundaries. Toss in the opportunity to indulge a childish urge to run around like Indiana Jones. And it's too much to resist.

Sneaking around can be more than cheap thrills. It's a useful skill for journalists, photographers, street artists, activists, survivalists, travelers, urban commandos, trespassers, and adventurers.

Here's how to do it.



Becoming Invisible

Michael leads me into the basement of the MAC, past all the practice rooms, through the property department, past the sunken orchestra pit, up some stairs. We pass several people and we steam by them without looking back. They don't give us a second glance. Across the empty stage and through the sets waiting in the wings, we enter a tiny old crimson lined elevator. The elevator indicator keeps going up, up, up, six, seven, eight floors. "Wait until you see this," Michael says. The elevator dings and stops at 10. Michael pulls open the door and out we step into...

Nothing. Darkness. Slowly my eyes adjust. There is light coming from below. I look down. We are 100 feet above the stage! I can look down and make out the network of catwalks above the stage. Hundreds of ropes and cables descend from pulleys into the distant depths. I get that funny feeling that makes me think if I get too close to the edge, I may throw myself over. I am dizzy from the height. Michael is smiling.

Look and act like you belong. You must fit in. If you are playing an inspector, you must act like

one. Look around as you go, maybe nodding, maybe looking at a clipboard. If you are an office worker, you must walk looking straight ahead, drone-like to that business meeting elsewhere. You must walk like you belong there. You must *think* like you belong there.

Keep moving. As long as you are moving, people assume you know where you are going. The moment you stop, you invite people to ask the dreaded question, "Can I help you?" As you walk through a lobby, steam right past the security desk with a nod. If you reach a dead-end or locked door, act like you *meant* to reach a dead end-turn around a keep moving. Only when you aren't observed can you take the time to regroup or plan.

Take advantage of people's hesitation to question strangers. If you keep moving, you are out of their sight by the time they make a decision, saving them from deciding at all. Out of sight, out of mind.

Avoid unnecessary eye-contact.. Eye-to-eye contact, especially with security people invites questions. If you look at people, flash them a quick, confident smile as you pass.

Don't act sketchy. Stealth is good only if you know you won't get caught. If you are found slinking around, it will be a lot harder to pass off the story that you were just looking for the bathroom. If you're seen checking locked doors, hiding, running, or looking around nervously will make you look suspicious as hell. If you have to be a suspicious character, make sure you are not being observed doing it.

Wearing a Disguise

We were wandering around Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom where we weren't invited.

While two employees stood around doing their thing, we looked at the forbidden secrets of Tomorrowland, gesticulating, pointing, and nodding in an inspectorial sort of way. We were dressed as nerdy techs and we fit right in as we walked with confidence around the back lot of Disneyland.

Use a subtle disguise. When was the last time you questioned the intentions of the delivery man, or the Federal Express woman? Did you ever wonder whether someone wearing a hard hat and an orange vest was *supposed* to be putting cones in the road? A disguise can be remarkably effective. When you put on a uniform, you don a mantle of respectability and responsibility. People *expect* someone with a hard-hat and a clipboard to casually brush past the receptionist to perform an "inspection."

Take a look at how simple most uniforms are. Put on a dark brown shirt and pants and grab a package with the right address on it and you become the UPS person. Put on a hard-hat and some rugged clothing and you become a construction worker. Put on a suit and you become a business person beyond reproach or question.

Blend in. The best disguise is the one that simply blends in. In an office building, a suit and tie is the perfect uniform of conformity. At a formal function, a tuxedo is your ticket.

Dress up. Dress one step more formal than others, and you will move with impunity. Everyone will assume you are another step up the organizational ladder. No one is willing to risk embarrassment to ask aloud what you are doing there. Look important and everyone will assume you are.

Getting Caught

The sun was just setting in Sante Fe as we reached the yards marked with the blue Santa Fe cross and signs reading, "Santa Fe Property-No Trespassing-Violators will be prosecuted." The Santa Fe yard looked much more secure than the Southern Pacific yards we'd been in. Barbed wire topped chain link all the way around.

We walked in one of the main gates and down a road to the yard. We were joking about what we'd say if we were stopped. We looked so obvious with our giant packs, boots, rugged, bulky

clothes. We were sure we'd get arrested or at least thrown out of the yard. "We're, uh, looking to get across the yard. To, uh, Washington Street," Philip said when we were questioned by the first car that drove by. The helpful worker gave us directions to the nearest exit and drove away.

Getting caught doesn't need to spoil the fun.



Have a good story that varies as little from the truth as possible. Or tell the whole truth if that works better -- for instance, you're just curious to see what was in here. Make up your story before you go in so you won't be doing that implausible stammering and stuttering when you get nailed.

Maintain plausible deniability. A good story should be believable but unverifiable. For instance, saying you are a friend of the owner may put you in a very uncomfortable position when the security

guard calls your bluff. On the other hand, if you claim you are a freelancer and were told over the phone that it was okay to enter the building, your story is difficult to disprove. This story may not give you *carte blanche*, but you may only be ushered off the premises rather than arrested. If plausible deniability worked for the Reagan crowd during Iran-Contra and for *everyone* during the Dubya administration, it may work for you.

Play dumb. Don't be afraid to plead stupid. "I'm lost," is probably the most effective plea. Few people are going to have you arrested for just wandering into a situation in which you don't belong. Most good folk will simply help you out, point you to where you've told them you need to go, and send you on your way.

Again, it is important to maintain plausible deniability through it all. "What? You need one of them security cards to get into the air traffic control tower? I met a guy who said to go up and they'd show me around." It's better to be dead wrong than cold busted.

If caught, play the outsider. Any halfway intelligent security person you meet will know almost immediately that you don't belong. You can explain it away by freely admitting to being an outsider. You are supposed to be meeting a friend. You are looking for the personnel office. You don't know where the hell you are. You are looking for a nonexistent office, company, or person.

Use your credentials. If you got it, flaunt it. If you are a member of the press, a doctor, a lawyer, an inspector, a card carrying member of the ACLU, or some other kind of important person, flash those credentials when you get nabbed. It just might get you out of a jam. "I'm a photographer on assignment. Here's my press card."

Ask questions first. If you can see you are going to get questioned, beat them to the punch. Before they can question you, question *them.* Ask them how to get to room 247, or how to get to the

front office, or how to get to the bathroom. You want to be more gutsy and more obvious than they expect to clear you of any suspicion. Make it seem like you're *grateful* that they've shown up to help you. "Oh, God," you say, "how *do* you get to the computer center? I was supposed to meet someone for a tour 10 minutes ago!" Don't give people a chance to set their mental wheels in motion about you. Start charming them before they start forming hypotheses about why you are there.

Don't talk too much and don't give too many details. Let people drag your story out of you. Give just enough detail to communicate what you are doing there and what you want. People have very little patience and will hear only the first few seconds of what you say anyway. You don't want to prattle off your entire story to the first person who questions you. Don't appear over-eager and anxious.

Let people do nothing. Take advantage of people's desire to do as little as possible. Provide them a convenient explanation for your presence, before they have to come up with one themselves. Offer to do all the work for them if you get stopped. "They should be expecting me! Who do I talk to about this? " Then simply step out to make the call and disappear.

Putting It Into Practice

Start small. Practice makes perfect. Try sneaking into a movie at the CinePlex 2000 before you take on the Pentagon. Start where the consequences of getting caught are insignificant.

Do some research. Know how likely it is you'll be stopped and questioned. Is security higher than average at this organization? Is it so small or tight-knit that *any* outsider is likely to be questioned? In a small company, a person found wandering about would get the familiar query, "Can I help you?" In a large company, not everybody knows each other and important visitors are more frequent. So, if a trespasser was wearing a nice suit, she'd be untouchable.

Rent a movie and watch the pros. Check out the way the Mission Impossible team smoothly

gets into and out of touchy situations. Watch Artemis Gordon don disguises in Wild Wild West. When James Bond isn't shooting his way out of difficult situations, he is stealthing around. You can take a reverse lesson from Maxwell Smart, who demonstrates how *not* to lie: "Would you believe...I'm the plumber?"

Take It To the Top

We have everything we think we need, which isn't much. It isn't like we are going to do it on the outside. We're going to do it on the inside. All the way. We were going all the way with Susan. And she is going to show us how.

We meet her at her office at 5 p.m. to climb the tallest building in town. Philip darts around with an imaginary gun drawn, making like a '70s cop drama. The Mission Impossible tune plays in my head. Susan presses the button for the top floor, but it won't take. We've missed our window of opportunity. She darts downstairs.



In a few moments, she bursts out of the elevator, motioning us to follow. She used her connections, bluffing one of the security guys. She flicks the button for the top floor, and we hurtle upward.

We head through an unmarked door and up a ladder. We snake up another ladder and through a door that reads "Fan Room, Authorized Personnel Only." We emerge in a fluorescent lit room filled with huge metal ventilation ducts and humming bright pink, orange, and green machinery.

We clamber up another ladder and out a trap door. What I see takes my breath away. We're at the top of the pyramid. We're the highest people in the city on the tip of the tallest building in town.

A Postscript

In the US, in the post-Sept 11th universe, people are much more suspicious, more questioning,

and more likely to arrest first and ask questions later. People felt that terrorists used the general sense of trust in the US against its citizens, and they are unwilling to play the fool again too soon.

For you, that means you need to exercise a little common sense, a little more caution, and be perhaps quicker to admit that you are just some dumbshit looking for thrills. As always, don't run from authority (unless you are sure you can escape), don't make things worse, play respectful, have your ID, and be ready and willing to bear the consequence of your mischief. Other than those heavy words, have a blast!

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