



OSAC Country Security Report El Salvador

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This report is intended to supplement the U.S. Department of State El Salvador Travel Advisory and [El Salvador Country Information Page](#).

Embassy & Consulate Contact Information

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OSAC Country Chapter

San Salvador's country chapter was reactivated in 2021 and remains active.

Contact [OSAC's Americas team](#) with any questions.

El Salvador Travel Advisory

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses that travelers should exercise normal precautions when traveling to El Salvador.

Review OSAC's report, [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#).

Crime

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Salvador as being a **MEDIUM**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. The U.S. Department of State has not included a Crime "C" Indicator on the [Travel Advisory](#) for El Salvador.

The crime emergency line in El Salvador is **911**. Review the U.S. Department of State's Crime Victims Assistance [brochure](#).

Crime: General Threat

Following years of high levels of violent crime carried out by gangs, El Salvador enacted a state of exception (sometimes referred to as a state of emergency) beginning in March 2022, that has been continually renewed to the date of this report's publication. The state of exception has

resulted in a sharp decrease in violent crime, completely transforming the security environment in the country.

Review OSAC's Report: [El Salvador's Security Transformation](#) (2024).

Historically crime was driven by gangs, locally referred to as *maras*. The two primary gangs are the *Mara Salvatrucha*, or MS-13, and *Barrio 18*, or the 18th Street Gang. Since 2022, many high-ranking gang members from MS-13 and Barrio 18 have been arrested, with other gang members going into hiding or fleeing the country. The gangs' ability to coordinate and impose themselves on Salvadoran society has been largely eroded, with 88% of Salvadorans reporting they feel safe walking alone at night, according to a 2024 survey. Furthermore, the homicide rate has not exceeded 2.4 homicides per 100,000 residents since 2023, about on par with Canada, highlighting the impact of the state of exception.

Overall, visitors to El Salvador are most likely at risk of becoming victims of petty theft or property crimes (e.g. robbery, burglary, theft, or vehicle theft) than other kinds of crime. Many theft cases reported to the Embassy involve the loss of a U.S. passport during a surreptitious theft of bags, backpacks, or purses. While the statistics have indicated considerable declines in these types of crime since the state of exception, visitors should still be wary of risks when in public and while selecting potential accommodations. No information suggests that criminals specifically target U.S. citizens. Such crimes are likely crimes of opportunity or targeted due to perceived wealth.

When armed robberies do occur, weapons including guns or knives may be used. Thieves often work in pairs, utilizing motorcycles to quickly attack a victim and then escape. Be wary of isolated, scenic locations, including in tourist areas.

Burglaries have historically occurred during daylight hours in residential neighborhoods throughout San Salvador. Cameras, concertina wire, and grilles on all windows/doors generally dissuade would-be burglars. Residences without these features are more likely to be targets. The presence of armed security and the use of security features in homes have proven successful in preventing home invasion robberies. Armed private security guards are not uncommon.

Large chain or brand name hotels typically have security measures that meet international norms and most have private security on site. Take security measures when staying in hotels, including securing your valuables in the provided safe and develop a plan or emergency course of action should a crisis develop, such as a fire, natural disaster, or a demonstration outside your hotel. Be aware that it is likely that criminals are drawn to hotel areas due to the large number of foreign tourists whom they view as affluent and easy targets of opportunity.

El Salvador is not considered a major transit point for illegal narcotics, though maritime smuggling routes do exist in the eastern Pacific. The volume of drugs transiting the country is relatively small in comparison to regional neighbors. Salvadoran authorities actively police transit routes, which has kept El Salvador from becoming a major transit location. Historically,

El Salvador's gangs have not participated in major narcotics trafficking. Rather, they have primarily participated in retail, street-level drug sales. Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking illegal drugs are severe. Convicted offenders can expect lengthy jail sentences and fines. Notably, any items containing THC, even certain CBD products that are legal and widely available in the United States, are illegal in El Salvador

Crime: Areas of Concern

El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, with more than six million people, and generally low wages relative to the cost of living. These factors push families in lower economic strata into marginal housing zones. These zones can be as small as a few blocks, are located throughout urban areas (including in upscale neighborhoods), and may provide a point of origin and haven for criminals. Therefore, it is advised to exercise situational awareness and avoid these areas due to the increased risk of victimization.

San Salvador Guidance: The immediate areas around Plaza Libertad, to include the San Salvador Metropolitan Cathedral, El Rosario Church, the National Palace, and Hula Hula Market are gathering places for many visitors and Salvadoran citizens who enjoy the lack of crime in the area due to active patrolling by the police and security forces. Traffic in the Centro Histórico can be very congested.

National Parks: Armed robberies of climbers and hikers in El Salvador's national parks have occurred in the past. Most visitors engage the services of a local guide certified by the national or local tourist authority when hiking in back-country areas and within the national parks.

Border Regions: If operating near border areas, it is advised to exercise increased caution. Border areas see higher levels of activity related to the trafficking of drugs or persons, resulting in an increased risk of crime and violence. Generally, there is a lower presence of security officials in many border areas in El Salvador. If operating near a border or planning to cross a land border, do so with ample time to reach your destination before dark. Only use official crossings and avoid displays of wealth, to include jewelry, expensive electronics, and excessive cash.

Review OSAC's reports, [All That You Should Leave Behind](#), [Hotels: The Inns and Outs](#), [Considerations for Hotel Security](#), [Taking Credit](#), and [Our Two Cents: Petty Crime Basics and How to Minimize the Risk](#).

Kidnapping Threat

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Kidnapping "K" Indicator on the Travel Advisory for El Salvador.

The Embassy has no recent reports of kidnapping attempts against the international community writ large, and organized crime generally seeks to avoid the response such a kidnapping would engender. There were no reported kidnappings of U.S. citizens in 2023, 2024, or 2025.

Express kidnappings, where criminals force a victim to withdraw the maximum amount of funds from their banks at ATMs, may occur. Victims may be targeted due to perceived wealth. It is advised to only use ATMs at well-established banks, during the day, and in lower-crime areas, if possible.

Terrorism

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Salvador as being a **LOW**-threat location for terrorism directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. The U.S. Department of State has not included a Terrorism “T” Indicator on the Travel Advisory for El Salvador.

The Government of El Salvador considers gangs and some organized criminal groups to be domestic terrorists. Through 2025, the U.S. Department of State has designated several Latin American transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). This has included the Central American street gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, which have historically had a stronghold in El Salvador prior to being largely dismantled during the state of exception.

In relation to the FTO designations, U.S. organizations should be aware of criminal penalties associated with providing material support to FTOs. The primary criminal statutes OSAC members need to be aware of regarding FTOs include 18 U.S.C. § 2339 A-D. These statutes define material support such as (tangible or intangible) property, monetary instruments, lodging, training, advice, equipment, transportation, and other goods or services. This can include paying extortion demands to criminal groups designated as FTOs. Compliance departments should ensure that an organization does not knowingly, or unknowingly, provide material support to any FTO or FTO-affiliated entity.

Political Violence and Civil Unrest

The U.S. Department of State has assessed San Salvador as being a **LOW**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. The U.S. Department of State has not included a Civil Unrest “U” Indicator on the Travel Advisory for El Salvador.

Civil unrest can develop quickly without prior notice, often interrupting logistics and services. Avoid demonstration activity, as even those planned to remain peaceful have the potential to turn violent.

Elections/Political Stability

Previous election seasons in El Salvador have been accompanied by heated political rhetoric and occasional violence between individuals or groups of opposing parties. However, political demonstrations are typically peaceful and controlled by authorities.

The most recent elections were held in February and March of 2024, with the general election for president, vice president, and the legislative assembly in February; and local mayors and municipal councils voted on in March. The elections were uneventful, with no reported violence. The popular, incumbent President Nayib Bukele and his *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas) party won in a landslide – further solidifying a supermajority in the legislature and holding the presidency. Favorable judges to the party also sit on the Supreme Court. Bukele was granted the ability to run for a second consecutive presidential term by the courts, despite the Constitution prohibiting it.

Following constitutional amendments in 2025, presidential terms were extended from five to six years, with the next election moved to 2027.

Protests & Demonstrations

Most demonstrations concentrate in/around city centers or public buildings and other public areas. In San Salvador, demonstrations commonly occur near the National Assembly, Presidential House, City Hall, Judicial District, Cuscatlán Park, and Plaza Salvador del Mundo. Although usually non-violent, these public displays sometimes create security problems and impede traffic.

Review OSAC's report, [Surviving a Protest](#).

Anti-U.S./Anti-Western Sentiment

In general, El Salvador's population holds pro-U.S. views. There has been some public criticism of the Salvadoran state of exception by U.S. and other Western human rights advocates which has resulted in public counterstatements by El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele. The verbal and media sparring has not resulted in any additional security concerns for U.S. citizens or the international community.

Law Enforcement

For public safety emergencies, dial **911**. Operators generally only speak Spanish. U.S. victims of crime should contact the police and the [U.S. Embassy](#).

National Civil Police (PNC): The PNC is the only national police service. Each major city, municipality, or town has a PNC delegation. The PNC also has several specialized units that investigate gang related crimes, civil disturbances, VIP protection, and other special operations units. The PNC sits under the Ministry of Justice and Public Safety.

Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES): The FAES are responsible for defending national sovereignty and ensuring territorial integrity but also have considerable domestic security responsibilities. El Salvador's constitution allows the president to use the FAES "in exceptional circumstances" to maintain internal peace and public security. In 2019, President Bukele signed a decree authorizing military involvement in police duties to combat rising gang violence,

organized crime, and narcotics trafficking, as well as assisting with border security. Since the decree, a considerable portion of the Army has been deployed in support of the PNC, including in support of the state of exception.

Tourist Police (POLITUR): The tourist police force is a subdivision of the PNC and provides security around touristic sites and assistance to tourists.

Police Response

Police generally treat arrested or otherwise detained foreigners well. U.S. citizen residents/travelers should insist on speaking to U.S. Embassy representatives upon arrest or detention. Except in some very rural locations, police are generally aware of a U.S. citizen detainee's right to contact the Embassy. Embassy assistance is limited to ensuring U.S. citizens are not mistreated, contacting family/friends, protesting breaches of due process, and providing a list of local attorneys.

Local law allows the police to detain individuals for up to 72 hours for administrative processing. This is a common practice for most automobile accidents resulting in personal injury, apprehensions for DUI, and for criminal acts, including accusations.

Judicial procedures are not always clear or easily understood. Significant delays during the investigation and legal process are common.

The state of exception has limited freedom of association, making it easier for police to arrest and detain people (including allowing for detention for up to 15 days without access to an attorney or explanation of charges), and gives the police and attorney general the right to intercept communications without a warrant. Mass trials of gang members have also occurred under the state of exception. While rare, foreign nationals have been arrested under suspicion of gang activity during the state of exception.

Transportation Security

Road Safety

A significant percentage of vehicles are in disrepair, underpowered, beyond their service life, or otherwise do not meet U.S. road safety standards. Passing on blind corners and over hills is common. Driving while intoxicated is common and is a major contributing factor to traffic accident fatalities. In 2024 the PNC began to enforce zero tolerance for driving while intoxicated. Random checkpoints on roadways enforce this law, including the odor of alcohol on the driver's breath. Due to lax enforcement of traffic laws, drivers must drive defensively.

Road conditions vary throughout the country. Most major highways are among the best in Central America. Road conditions in urban areas are generally fair, while those in rural areas are poor. Likewise, road lighting in urban areas is generally fair, but generally non-existent on roads and highways outside urban areas. In urban and rural areas alike, stray animals, unwary

pedestrians and bicyclists, and numerous large potholes (or missing manhole covers) make driving particularly dangerous and hazardous at night.

Engage in travel outside of cities and at border crossings during daylight hours. Refrain from driving outside the capital after dark, for personal security and traffic safety reasons.

Review OSAC's reports, [Road Safety Abroad](#), [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#), and [Evasive Driving Techniques](#); and read the U.S. Department of State's [webpage on driving and road safety abroad](#).

Public Transportation Safety

Bus Services: Local public buses are often in poor mechanical condition. Prior to the state of exception, public buses were common targets for robbery and extortion. Security on such buses has improved. That being said, it would not be recommended to take public buses after dark, and if riding during daylight hours, exercise increased situational awareness and be mindful of your belongings. Regional "first class" or "executive" commercial bus travel is generally safe.

Taxis and Rideshares: Privately owned cabs are unregulated. Use only taxis you can call via telephone or that you find at reputable hotels. Rideshares operate in San Salvador and generally have a good safety record. If you use a rideshare, ensure the driver of the vehicle is the individual registered in the application prior to embarking and consider sharing your ride status with a friend.

Aviation Concerns

The main international hub for air travel is the El Salvador International Airport – Saint Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdamez (SAL). It is a joint-use civilian and military airport, located about 40km southeast of San Salvador. The highway connecting the airport to the capital is well maintained and modern.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has assessed the government's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) as compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) aviation safety standards for oversight of El Salvador's air carrier operations.

Review OSAC's Report, [Security in Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Maritime Security

There are not significant maritime security issues facing El Salvador that impact the private sector.

Travelers with Special Considerations

For [specific traveler concerns](#) in El Salvador, review the local laws and circumstances on the Department of State's Country Information Page.

- [Women Travelers](#)
- [LGB Travelers](#)
- [Travelers with Disabilities](#)
- [Student Travelers](#)
- [Faith-Based Travelers](#)

Rule of Law, Arbitrary Detention, Official Harassment, Corruption, & Transparency

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Risk of Wrongful Detention “D” Indicator on the Travel Advisory for El Salvador.

Corruption can be a challenge in El Salvador. While El Salvador has laws, regulations, and penalties to combat corruption, their effectiveness is, at times, questionable. Soliciting, offering, or accepting a bribe is a criminal act in El Salvador. Executive-branch employees are subject to a code of ethics, including administrative enforcement mechanisms. Under the Bukele administration, polling shows public confidence in government institutions has significantly increased and the public believes there is less corruption in government institutions. Businesses have also commented that the once-common practice of government officials demanding bribes to perform government services has stopped almost entirely. The Attorney General's Office aggressively prosecutes credible allegations of corruption at the national, legislative, and municipal level and credible allegations of police and prosecutorial corruption.

The law provides criminal penalties for conviction of corruption by officials. In 2023, Bukele declared a “war on corruption,” carrying out several charges against various politicians – including a mayor and two former presidents. In 2025 El Salvador passed anticorruption legislation to hold government employees more accountable and to meet international standards to combat corruption.

The constitution prohibited arbitrary arrests, and the law provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The state of exception, itself a legal mechanism, suspended the right to legal defense, as well as the requirement that persons be informed of the reason of their arrest at the time of their detention, and increased the number of days an individual could be held in detention before being formally charged. The government did not always observe the requirements of the law and constitution. Under the state of exception there have been hundreds of complaints of arbitrary detention by Salvadoran citizens. Several human rights organizations asserted that many detainees who

remained in pretrial detention were arrested arbitrarily without evidence of gang affiliation and only for having tattoos or living in a gang-controlled area.

Health Concerns

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Health “H” Indicator on the Travel Advisory for El Salvador. Review the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) country-specific [Travel Health Notices](#) for current health issues that impact traveler health, like disease outbreaks, special events or gatherings, and natural disasters. For health emergencies, dial **132**.

Medical care is limited. Emergency services, even in San Salvador, are very basic. Emergency services are more readily available in San Salvador than in outlying areas, but city facilities would be overwhelmed quickly in the event of a mass-casualty incident. Public hospitals are very crowded. Their resources are typically very limited, and they do not see patients quickly that are not assessed to have an obvious life-threatening emergency. There are few private hospitals, and the standards of these hospitals are less than those of the United States.

Pharmacies are plentiful, but not all medicines found in the U.S. are available. Medicines often have a different brand name and are frequently more expensive than in the U.S.

There are five private ambulance services in San Salvador to respond to medical emergencies, with varying fleets of vehicles. Ambulance services vary in price, availability, and response time. Heavy traffic conditions often negatively impacts response time in San Salvador. It is often quicker for people to transport themselves by private vehicle.

Private hospitals and physicians expect up-front payment (by cash or, for hospitals, credit card). No hospitals or medical offices will bill U.S. insurance companies. Check with insurance providers to ensure you have adequate medical insurance valid for El Salvador, including coverage for medical evacuation (medevac).

Find contact information for available medical services and available air ambulance services on the [U.S. Embassy website](#). The U.S. Department of State strongly recommends purchasing international health insurance before traveling internationally. Review the U.S. Department of State’s [webpage](#) on health insurance overseas.

See OSAC’s [Guide to U.S. Government-Assisted Evacuations](#); review OSAC’s reports, [The Healthy Way](#), [Shaken: The Don’ts of Alcohol Abroad](#), [Health 101: How to Prepare for Travel](#), and [Fire Safety Abroad](#); and visit the U.S. Department of State’s webpage on [Your Health Abroad](#) for more information.

Vaccinations

All routinely recommended immunizations for the U.S. should be up to date. Measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus, pertussis, and chickenpox are much more common than in the U.S., especially among children. Additionally, all travelers should have hepatitis A and typhoid immunizations.

Those who may have sexual contact, receive tattoos, or require medical treatment in El Salvador should receive the hepatitis B vaccine. If arriving from a country with risk for Yellow Fever virus, then Yellow Fever vaccine may be required. Tuberculosis is an increasingly serious health concern in El Salvador.

Review the CDC [Travelers' Health](#) site for country-specific vaccine recommendations.

Issues Traveling with Medications

Carry an adequate supply of any required medication in its original, clearly labeled container. A copy of the prescription from the prescribing doctor will be helpful if immigration or customs authorities question you about your medications. Medications that are prescription-only in the U.S. are often available over the counter from numerous pharmacies in El Salvador.

Review OSAC's report, [Traveling with Medication](#).

Water Quality

Most Salvadorans and travelers use bottled water for drinking, while tap water may generally be used without issue for non-drinking purposes.

Review OSAC's report, [I'm Drinking What in My Water?](#)

Natural Disasters

The U.S. Department of State has not included a Natural Disaster "N" Indicator on the Travel Advisory for El Salvador.

Earthquakes and Volcanic Activity: El Salvador has 21 active volcanoes and regular seismic activity for which visitors should consider. Information about earthquakes and other natural disasters can be found on the Government of El Salvador's Environmental Ministry's website. This activity can trigger mud slides and rockslides that lead to loss of life, destroyed property, and damaged roadways. Response capacity, including search and rescue, is rudimentary – particularly in remote areas.

Hurricanes and the Rainy Season: The rainy season in El Salvador normally begins in May and runs to November. During this period heavy tropical rains as well as hurricanes can damage overland travel routes and reduce the ability for essential and emergency services to reach all parts of the country in an efficient manner. Some roadways or bridges can be rendered temporarily impassable or damaged by heavy rains and consequent landslides. Visitors should stay up to date on weather information during this season as tropical depressions can strengthen quickly into hurricanes. Review OSAC's report, [Earthquake Preparedness Toolkit](#).

Drought and Wildfires: El Salvador is located in what is known as the Dry Corridor of Central America and is prone to long periods of drought. Drought can increase conditions for wildfires that may occur during the dry season which runs from November to April.

Cybersecurity

The U.S. Embassy has no information on specific cybersecurity concerns endemic to El Salvador. Standard worldwide cybersecurity precautions continue to apply.

The government's decision to make Bitcoin legal tender in El Salvador could potentially increase the vulnerability of the financial system to instances of cybercrime.

Review OSAC's reports, [Cybersecurity Basics](#), [Best Practices for Maximizing Security on Public Wi-Fi](#), [Traveling Abroad with Mobile Devices](#), and [Guide for Overseas Satellite Phone Usage](#).

Counterintelligence Issues

The Embassy has no information on counterintelligence issues affecting the private sector community in El Salvador. Standard personal self-security awareness and privacy measures continue to apply worldwide.

Import/Export Restrictions

The importation of certain high-caliber firearms is prohibited. Arms for personal defense or hunting may be imported but are strictly controlled by the police and Ministry of Defense. There are no known restrictions for the import and use of satellite phones.

Some narcotics may be imported solely for medical use with the permission of the National Directorate of Medicines (DNM), which controls the sale of these substances to the public. A list of controlled substances by the DNM can be found on their [website](#).

A country-specific listing of items/goods prohibited from being exported to the country or that are otherwise restricted is available from the U.S. International Trade Agency [website](#).

Additional resources and reports can be found in the [OSAC Traveler Toolkit](#).