



Turkmenistan 2011 Crime and Safety Report

Riots/Civil Unrest; Crime; Terrorism

South Central Asia > Turkmenistan

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime

The Government of Turkmenistan publishes no crime statistics, but the current crime rating for Ashgabat, Turkmenistan is Medium. A high unemployment rate contributes to the number of incidents of street crime, including muggings. Alcohol related incidents, such as bar fights and drunk driving, are common.

Foreigners are rarely the targets of violent crime, although women in isolated surroundings may be at an increased risk for harassment or assault.

Crimes of opportunity against foreigners, who are often perceived as wealthy, do occur. Petty thieves tend to operate in crowded market situations, such as the Tolkuchka Bazaar which is frequented by tourists. However, in the center of Ashgabat, large numbers of police and other security personnel tend to deter petty crime. Nevertheless, visitors are reminded to be prudent in their own personal security.

There is a relatively high rate of home burglaries, probably due to the fact that local residents keep their cash at home, rather than using local banks. Home burglaries are not common for expatriates, but good residential security measures are recommended.

Violent crime does exist in Turkmenistan. Although not publicized or officially made known to the RSO office, crimes such as rape and murder occur in Turkmenistan, including Ashgabat. These crimes affect the local population more than they affect foreigners and expatriates, and they are often linked to domestic violence, the prolific drug trade, and/or prostitution.

The primary crime and safety concern for Americans is the inability of Turkmenistan's law enforcement entities to provide adequate and immediate assistance. The low salaries and inadequate training contribute to high corruption and a lack of professionalism.

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The lack of a free media and infrequent public outreach on the part of the government make it hard for the average citizen to get current and accurate information to make informed decisions regarding his or her safety.

Availability of Weapons

The weapon laws in Turkmenistan are very strict. Hunting rifles are the only weapons allowed to civilians. Law enforcement, military, and chiefs of investigative departments are the only population allowed handguns. For civilians who wish to own a hunting rifle, they must first apply for a license, which includes a psychiatric evaluation and a statement from a doctor verifying the applicant is not addicted to narcotics. Once the application is approved, the gun owner must register his/her weapon with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Rifle owners must comply with storage laws which include a weapon safe and storing the ammunition separately from the rifle. Approximately once every 6 months, gun owners' houses are inspected to ensure compliance with Turkmen laws.

Traffic and Pedestrian Safety

When driving in Turkmenistan, extra care should be taken to avoid hitting a pedestrian. Pedestrians often step into the street without looking or walk or stand in the middle of the road on unlit streets at night. Reflective clothing is rarely used. Drivers cannot assume that pedestrians see an oncoming vehicle or that they will yield to a vehicle. Pedestrians walking across a street or intersection should never assume the right of way and should use pedestrian underpasses when available. The local population utilizes the pedestrian underpasses sporadically, usually choosing instead to cross at any point on a road or major thoroughfare. Often, women with small children and babies in strollers, or young children on their own, will cross or walk down the middle of a street without first looking for traffic and during hours of heavy traffic.

Local drivers rarely respect lane markings and will often drift through lanes without signaling. Vehicles will park in the right, and occasionally in the left, lane on busy streets. Unmarked gypsy cabs regularly pull over without warning to pick up or drop off passengers. Most through traffic will straddle the center lane, drivers turning left will occupy the left lane, and drivers turning right will occupy the right lane, but will leave room for the gypsy cabs to stop. This causes many accidents and traffic jams due to sudden stops and moves into other lanes in order to avoid the gypsy cabs. Frequently, drivers attempt to make left or right hand turns from the middle lanes.

Headlights are not used until after it is completely dark outside, and sometimes not at all. Some stoplights on cross streets turn green before the through street's stoplight is red, so

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exercising extreme caution is advisable as drivers tend to start entering the intersection before cross traffic has stopped.

Road Conditions/Travel

Streets in central and southern Ashgabat are in generally good condition. Some streets, however, are poorly lit, and even good roads sometimes develop large potholes or sinkholes. Some highways leading out of Ashgabat have been newly widened and paved, but other roads are in poor condition. They are often narrow, with little or no shoulder, and the asphalt may be riddled with ruts and bumps. Slow moving trucks and agricultural vehicles, as well as livestock (including camels) can be hazardous, especially at night since roads outside of the city are not lit. For this reason, driving outside of cities at night is not recommended.

Erratic driving and car accidents are common. Road travel outside of Ashgabat should be undertaken only in daylight hours and on routes known to the traveler or a reliable escort.

The government will not register vehicles with darkly tinted windows.

Travel to, from, and within Turkmenistan remains difficult and unreliable. Neighboring countries may unilaterally close borders, and there may be no advance warning and/or conflicting information.

Stability/Internal Security

Instability in Afghanistan negatively impacts the fluid security situation in Central Asia.

Turkmenistan is a transshipment route for narcotics traffickers attempting to smuggle Afghan opium and heroin to Russia and Europe. Given its shared border with Afghanistan, money laundering in Turkmenistan involves proceeds from illegal narcotics trafficking, derived primarily from internal criminal activity.

Political Violence

The government allows no political dissent or organized opposition. Therefore, demonstrations and/or large unauthorized crowds are exceedingly rare, if not non-existent, in Turkmenistan.

Terrorism

Terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement are active in Central Asia, have expressed anti-U.S. sentiments and have conducted attacks against foreign interests elsewhere in Central Asia. However, as of now, there have been no incidents tied to these groups in Turkmenistan. Terrorists do not distinguish between official and civilian targets. Due to increased security at official U.S. facilities worldwide, terrorists tend to seek softer civilian targets such as residences, clubs, restaurants, places of worship, hotels, schools,

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events, and resorts. Travelers to the country should carefully weigh Turkmenistan's proximity to regions of past and current instability.

Transnational terrorist groups have not conducted attacks against American targets in Turkmenistan thus far.

Post Specific Concerns

Earthquakes

Turkmenistan is located in an active seismic zone and is subject to an occasional strong earthquake. In December 2000, an earthquake centered between Ashgabat and the Caspian Sea resulted in numerous injuries and deaths, and a great deal of damage to buildings and residences. In 1948, the city of Ashgabat was almost completely destroyed by a large earthquake which resulted in tens of thousands of deaths.

Prostitution

Prostitutes frequent nightclubs, casinos, and hotel bars in Turkmenistan. Prostitution is illegal, and foreign men seen in the company of suspected prostitutes have been subject to police harassment and detention. A ruse has been utilized to exact bribes from foreign businessmen, or anyone presumed to have money, where police state the law makes it illegal for two unmarried people of the opposite sex to occupy the same hotel room. In order to "resolve" the situation, a payment must be made.

Although not reported by host country officials, unconfirmed reports of a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, exists in Turkmenistan.

Public Transportation

Public buses in Ashgabat are cheap but often overcrowded and not always safe. Many locals use unmarked or "gypsy" cabs, however, this means of transportation is not recommended, especially for those who do not speak the local language, are unfamiliar with the city, or are traveling alone. Understand that these types of cabs are completely unregulated. If a decision to use a gypsy cab is made, establish the price for service prior to entering the vehicle.

The advisable means of private transportation in Turkmenistan are marked, Yellow Cabs which are usually located at the airport and near major hotels (these registered cabs make up only approximately 1 percent of the taxi population). Yellow Cabs are the only registered taxis and are discernable by their bright yellow color, green Turkmen license plates (which denote official or government vehicles), and light affixed to their roof. The Yellow Cabs have meters, however, most of the time they are not utilized, so agreeing on a price prior to using one is

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advisable. Taxis can also be called by phone at 32-97-74 or 75; these offer a flat rate for transport within the city.

Additional Information

Turkmenistan law enforcement, security, and government officials are sensitive to photographs, so common sense should be used when taking pictures. Avoid taking photos of official buildings, sites, and personnel.

The Soviet-era infrastructure is not well maintained in Turkmenistan, and, as a result, electricity and tele-communication problems are common.

Turkmenistan's national currency is the Manat, which is convertible. The exchange rate is 2.843 Manat to the U.S. dollar. Please note that U.S. bills printed prior to 1996, or in bad condition, folded, wrinkled, or torn, regardless of age, are not accepted.

ATMs only work with a local bank account; cash advances tend to be available from the approximately three foreign banks located in Ashgabat.

Turkmenistan Customs authorities may subject all items that are imported into or exported from Turkmenistan to a high level of scrutiny. The export of antiques or cultural valuables, such as carpets, requires special permission and certification.

Police Response

In the event of an emergency, dial "02" to contact police. American citizens should also contact the U.S. Embassy, located at 9 Pushkin Street, at 865 692 688 or 35-00-45 (after hours, listen to the instructions in the recorded message).

Turkmenistan law enforcement agencies lack training, resources, and funding necessary to meet western standards. With these limitations, deterrence and response times are often inadequate. Citizens who are victims of crimes must either call or go to the nearest police precinct to file a report. If the crime is investigated, it may take a long period of time and the standards, process, and capability may be different, more bureaucratic, and inconsistent than Americans may expect.

In addition, police and security forces tend to be poorly paid and equipped, which has resulted in widespread corruption. Officials solicit bribes in the course of their official duties to supplement their low incomes. The quality of police service may vary significantly, and it is almost always necessary to speak Russian or Turkmen in order to converse with local authorities.

Traffic Police

Traffic police are posted at stationary positions, checkpoints, and along major roads in the center of Ashgabat. They are known for paying little if any attention to traffic safety issues,

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but rather for randomly pulling over cars and exacting bribes. In Ashgabat, expensive cars and those with government license plates routinely speed past police, sometimes through stoplights, while other cars are flagged down for "document checks."

Many Westerners from embassies or international organizations have reported being first presumed guilty in car accidents with locals because of the perception that foreigners have money.

Police Checks

Passports are required for many transactions and situations such as hotel check-in and document inspections by local police, therefore, travelers are advised to have their identity documents and copies of their passport and visa with them at all times and to cooperate with police authorities if stopped for questioning. It is advisable to have a second copy of your passport's photo and visa pages kept in a separate location such as your hotel room. It is not unusual for police to stop and question pedestrians and drivers at any time, and in particular, after 11 p.m., when the unofficial curfew starts.

Detention

In accordance with the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and certain bilateral agreements, local authorities must contact the U.S. Embassy anytime a U.S. citizen is arrested. This is not always done in practice; therefore, U.S. citizens who are arrested or detained should ask to contact the U.S. Embassy immediately.

Medical Emergencies

In the event of a medical emergency, it is recommended that travelers contact the Central (Turkish) Hospital – 45-03-03, where emergency services are available. However, the standard of care is far below Western levels. In Ashgabat, Turkmen or Russian speakers can dial "03" for an ambulance. American citizens with medical emergencies should also contact the Consular Section, American Citizen Services - 35-00-45 (24 hours) for the most updated medical contact information.

The quality of Turkmenistan's medical infrastructure is significantly below Western standards, with severe shortages of basic medical supplies. Medical care is inadequate due to insufficient training and poor equipment and facilities. Elderly travelers and those with pre-existing health problems may be at particular risk.

Food sanitation is sometimes a problem in both markets and restaurants; therefore, travelers should refrain from eating unpeeled fruits, uncooked vegetables, and any items which may have been left sitting out for extended periods of time. Travelers should also avoid drinking tap water and utilize bottled water for brushing teeth.

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Significant disease outbreaks are possible due to population shifts and a decline in some immunization coverage among the general population. Throughout Central Asia, rates of infection of various forms of hepatitis and tuberculosis (including drug-resistant strains) are on the rise.

HIV is a growing health threat in Turkmenistan.

All travelers should bring an adequate supply of prescription and non-prescription medications such as Imodium, Pepto-Bismol, etc.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Residents and travelers should exercise the same good common sense, good judgment, and caution in their activities as they would in any major U.S. city. Be aware of your surroundings, and do not travel alone into unknown areas. If unsure about a situation, ask the U.S.

Embassy or your hotel staff for advice and information.

Maintaining a heightened sense of awareness and careful protection of valuables can greatly reduce the chances of becoming a victim while visiting the many bazaars and other crowded locations.

Turkmenistan is a cash-only economy. Credit cards are accepted at only a few hotels and Traveler's Checks not at all. If you are able to use your credit card, use extreme caution and ensure that the clerk does not keep a copy of the impression made from your credit card or write down the card number separately. You should request that any carbons made of the credit card impression be given to you. Verify all charges made to your credit card in order to detect any unauthorized use of your accounts.

Avoid leaving drinks unattended and never accept drinks from unknown persons, especially in nightclubs. Avoid inviting unknown persons into your residence or hotel room. Keep wallets, cash, valuables, etc. in the most secure (inner) pocket available and avoid flaunting or displaying large sums of cash or jewelry in public. If staying in a hotel, use safety deposit boxes or room safes for storing valuables and make use of the locks with which the hotel room door is equipped.

The U.S. Embassy advises U.S. citizens to vary their routines and maintain a low profile. Worldwide, criminal groups and terrorists do not distinguish between official and civilian targets.

The overall security situation in Ashgabat is currently calm. However, the Embassy advises U.S. citizens in Turkmenistan to remain alert and vigilant. In Ashgabat, during daylight hours, all city locations are generally safe; however, the limited number of facilities catering to Westerners could present a heightened risk. Criminal elements tend to be more active at

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night. The Embassy recommends that Americans travel in pairs or larger groups, and to inform someone of your whereabouts.

Whether staying in a hotel, apartment, or guest house, always ensure your valuables are secure and that you have practiced using all emergency exits in the building where you are staying. When in a vehicle, always keep doors locked and windows up. Do not leave any items, such as packages, purses, and/or electronic devices in open view inside the vehicle. Victims of crimes or those subject to police harassment/detention should report the incident as soon as possible to the U.S. Embassy Consular Section.

Embassy Contact Information

For additional security information, read the Consular Information Sheets and current Travel Warnings and Public Announcements for nearby countries, including Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, especially if your itinerary will take you through these countries. The U.S. Embassy in each of these countries, except Iran, can provide up to date information about local crime and safety issues. Information about how to contact each U.S. Embassy directly is available on the Internet at the Consular Affairs home page, accessed from: <http://www.travel.state.gov>. For the latest security information, U.S. Citizens traveling abroad should regularly monitor the same web address, where the current Worldwide Caution/Public Announcements can be found.

The overseas Citizen Services call center at 1-888-407-4747 can answer general inquiries on safety and security overseas. The number is available from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Monday through Friday (except U.S. federal holidays). Callers unable to use toll-free numbers may obtain information and assistance during these hours by calling 1-317-472-2328.

Travelers may contact the U.S. Embassy in Ashgabat 24 hours a day at 993-12-35-00-45 (35-00-45 from within Turkmenistan) or 865 962 688. The Regional Security Officer, Consular Officer, Embassy Duty Officer, Embassy Medical Officer, and other section chiefs can be contacted through these numbers.

Travelers are advised to check their visas in order to ensure they are valid through the length of their stay and are also advised to register at the U.S. Embassy Consular section upon arrival in Turkmenistan (or prior to arrival at Consularashgabat@state.gov). Any visitor staying longer than 3 days must register with the State Migration Service.

Americans living in or traveling to Turkmenistan are encouraged to participate in STEP, the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, which allows you to enter information about your trip

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abroad so that the Department of State can better assist you in an emergency. Visit: <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/> for more information.

The U.S. Embassy is located at:

9 Pushkin Street

Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Phone Numbers:

Embassy: 993-12-35-00-45

Fax: 992-12-39-26-14

Appointments can be made through the Consular Office for all private American citizens, or through your Embassy control officer for official Americans, for issues while in country.

OSAC Country Council

This post is in the process of developing a Country Council.

Point of contact for this and all security issues is Regional Security Officer Victoria Anzaldua.

She can be reached at anzalduavm@state.gov.

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