



Guatemala 2011 Crime and Safety Report

Riots/Civil Unrest; Crime; Terrorism

Western Hemisphere > Guatemala

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Over the past several years, the violent crime rate in Guatemala has exhibited an unmistakable upward trend. The most pronounced example is the number of homicides, tallied at 5,960 in 2010 (according to official police statistics). The prosecution rate, however, has remained between 2 percent and 3 percent. The number of national police officers (PNC) has not increased to meet the growing threat. Guatemala's homicide rate in 2010 was about 41 per 100,000 persons. For comparison, the U.S. rate was about 5.4 per 100,000 persons. Despite the rising crime rate, there is no specific targeting of American citizens, and, in fact, tourists of all nationalities accounted for only 4 percent of all robberies in 2010.

The national police force is inexperienced, under-funded, and corrupt. The judicial system is weak, overworked, and inefficient. Criminals, sometimes armed with an impressive array of weapons, know there is little chance they will be caught and punished. The overall prosecution rate for Guatemala is around 3 percent. While the current administration has sought to make crime reduction a priority, the crime rate continues to climb. It should be noted that it is widely believed that many crimes go unreported due to a lack of confidence by the general public in the National Police.

In spite of regional initiatives to combat gangs, they continue to be a concern in Guatemala City and rural areas, though they have a far greater impact on Guatemalans than on foreigners. Gang members are often well armed. Emboldened armed robbers have attacked vehicles on main roads in broad daylight. Travel on rural roads increases the risk of a criminal roadblock or ambush. Widespread narcotics and alien smuggling activities can make remote areas especially dangerous. Though there is no evidence that Americans are targeted, criminals look for every opportunity to attack, so all travelers should remain vigilant.

As the economic situation in Guatemala declines and as remittances from the U.S. fall, the number of extortions has risen dramatically. Typically, prisoners call random numbers and

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threaten the caller with serious bodily injury or death if the extortion demand is not met. A recent study found that 90 percent of extortion calls originated in prisons, while another 5 percent stemmed from neighbors and/or family members, with the last 5 percent coming from gang members outside of prison. In most cases, changing the number and not responding to the threats will resolve the matter. However, cases involving gang members must be taken seriously as they will not hesitate to back up their threats with violence.

There has also been a marked increase in the number of kidnappings, including the kidnapping of dual nationals.

A particularly troubling trend is the use of motorcycles for armed robbery. Typically, two men on a motorcycle accost the driver of a car and demand the driver's cell phone. In May of 2009, a new law went into effect which was aimed at curbing this type of robbery. The law states that only the operator is allowed on the motorcycle. The law also says that the motorcycle license plate must be printed on a sticker which is stuck to the back of the motorcycle driver's helmet. This law was used effectively in Colombia in the late 1990's to stem this type of crime. However, criminals in Guatemala have adapted tactics to include two men on two or more motorcycles.

Theft, armed robbery, and carjacking are the most common problems encountered by American citizens who visit Guatemala. No area of the city is immune to daytime assaults, including the upscale shopping and tourist area of zone 10 in Guatemala City.

Some recent reports of highway robberies include accusations that police, or assailants dressed as police, have been involved. A few have included sexual assaults of victims. Home invasions by armed groups occur from time to time in upscale neighborhoods. Thieves gain access by enticing a resident to open the door for a delivery or rushing in when family or staff open the door.

There has been a marked increase in commercial vehicle robberies over the past several years. Particularly attractive to thieves are trucks carrying shipments of electronics or gasoline. While businesses themselves accounted for about 7 percent of all robberies in 2009, armored vehicle robberies only accounted for .0004 percent of total robberies, indicating that thieves look for the easiest possible target.

Pickpockets and purse-snatchers are prevalent in major cities and tourist sites, especially the central market and other parts of Zone 1 in Guatemala City. Those who offer no resistance when confronted by armed thieves are usually not hurt. Armed robberies to steal a cell phone have, on numerous occasions, turned violent. There have been several reported incidents over the past 12 months of bank patrons being robbed outside banks after withdrawing large

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sums of money, suggesting possible complicity of bank personnel on the inside. Carjackings and vehicle thefts continue to be a serious problem. Bank robberies, kidnappings, and gang-related crimes are of great concern and the rates of these crimes remain high.

Road Safety

U.S. citizens may encounter road conditions that differ significantly from those in the United States. According to a recent Pan American Health Organization report, Guatemala has the fourth highest traffic fatality rate for all Latin American countries.

Safety of public transportation: Poor

Urban road conditions/maintenance: Fair

Rural road conditions/maintenance: Fair

Availability of roadside/ambulance assistance: Fair

Assessment: Fair

Driving in Guatemala demands one's full attention, requiring that safe drivers drive defensively to avoid dangerous situations. Driving at night outside of cities should always be avoided. Due to an almost complete lack of law enforcement, traffic rules are generally ignored. For example, many drivers do not use their turn signals to alert other drivers. Instead a common custom is for a driver or passenger to stick a hand out the window and wave to indicate that they will be taking an unspecified action. Speed limits, lane markings, and stop signs are frequently ignored. Winding and/or steep mountain roads, poorly designed surfaces, randomly placed speed bumps, unmarked hazards, and buses that are poorly operated and maintained present additional risks to motorists.

A roadside assistance force, PROVIAL, patrols most of the country's major highways and can be contacted at (502)2419-2121.

Valid U.S. drivers' licenses are accepted for the first 30 days of a visit; however, international driving permits are accepted for longer stays. Guatemala's road safety authorities are the Department of Transit and the Joint Operations Center of the National Police. For Guatemalans, common public transportation is by bus, which serves every town in the country. However, criminal activity and frequent accidents make these recycled U.S. school buses (commonly referred to in many travel guidebooks as "chicken buses") somewhat dangerous and should be avoided. U.S. Mission employees are prohibited from using these buses. Modern inter-city buses offer some security from highway violence, but armed attacks against them show that all buses are vulnerable.

Most city streets are lit, but secondary and rural roads have little to no illumination. The Inter-American highway and the road from Guatemala City to the Atlantic Ocean can be

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dangerous due to heavy traffic, including large tractor-trailers. Roadside assistance services are very limited. Police patrol the major roadways, and these patrols have been increased due to highway robberies. For roadside assistance, travelers may call the police by dialing 120 or the fire department by dialing 122 or 123. Cellular telephone service covers most areas frequented by tourists.

Drivers use the right-hand side of the road in Guatemala, and speed limits are posted depending on the condition of the road. Speed limits are different in rural and urban areas. Turning right on red is not permitted unless otherwise posted, and drivers must yield when entering a traffic circle. Seat belts must be worn, but there are no laws regarding the use of child safety seats. It is against the law for drivers to operate cellular phones while driving. People found driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs are arrested and may serve jail time. In an accident resulting in injury or death, every driver involved is taken into custody until a judge determines responsibility in a re-enactment of the accident.

For additional information about road travel in Guatemala, see the U.S. Embassy homepage at

<http://guatemala.usembassy.gov/>. For additional general information about road safety, including links to foreign government sites, see the Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs home page at <http://travel.state.gov/>. For specific information concerning Guatemalan driving permits, vehicle inspection, road tax, and mandatory insurance, contact the Guatemalan national tourist organization offices via the Internet at <http://www.visitguatemala.net/>.

Those contemplating a visit to Guatemala for business or pleasure should read the Consular Information Sheet, or other relevant notices, found at <http://www.state.gov/>, before traveling. The Embassy home page, <http://guatemala.usembassy.gov/>, lists reported crimes against U.S. citizens and other foreigners.

Political Violence

Large demonstrations occasionally occur throughout Guatemala, often with little or no notice, and they can cause serious traffic disruptions. Although most demonstrations are peaceful, they can turn violent, and travelers should avoid areas where demonstrations are taking place. The use of roadblocks and/or blocking of public facilities, including the international airport, may delay or prevent tourists from reaching their destination.

This past year saw a large number of strikes by bus drivers who feel the government has done little to prevent what they see as an epidemic of robbery. The bus drivers point to their dwindling profit margins due to the extortion fees they pay to local gangs.

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In the past several years, Guatemalan citizens' frustration with crime has led to violent incidents of vigilantism, including stoning, lynching, and burning, especially in isolated rural areas. There were 33 reported lynchings in 2010, mostly in the departments of Guatemala, Huehuetenango, and Solola.

The fear of foreigners stealing children is pervasive among rural indigenous people; visitors need to avoid taking pictures of or paying undue attention to local children. It is wise to avoid any public gathering of agitated citizens; persons attempting to intervene have themselves been attacked by mobs.

Post-specific Concerns

In addition to a serious crime problem throughout the country, Guatemala is a geologically active country. Visitors should be aware of the possibility of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, and the need for contingency measures. Occasional eruptions by nearby volcanoes, Fuego and Pacaya, have forced evacuations of nearby villages and briefly closed Guatemala City's international airport. Pacaya erupted in May of 2010, covering Guatemala City with heavy ash and disrupting air traffic for several days.

Both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Guatemala are vulnerable to hurricanes and tropical storms from June through November. Mudslides and flooding during the May to November rainy season often kill dozens of people and close roads. In 2010, Tropical Storm Agatha killed at least 80 people and left many more homeless in Guatemala from flooding and landslides. Agatha also severely impacted the country's infrastructure, wiping out villages, roads, and bridges throughout the country. For specific information regarding current conditions, go to the website of Guatemala's national weather and geographical authority at <http://www.insivumeh.gob.gt/>.

General information about natural disaster preparedness is available via the Internet from the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) at <http://www.fema.gov/>.

Police Response

The PNC lacks sufficient personnel to accomplish their mission. In addition, the PNC suffers from a lack of logistical supplies, such as vehicles, fuel, ammunition, etc., with little improvement since last year. However, what the PNC lacks most is manpower. To provide some perspective, the number of sworn law enforcement personnel in the U.S. is about 245 per 100,000 persons; in Guatemala, this number is 143 per 100,000 persons. The PNC lack training in many areas and some PNC members have been involved in criminal activities. There have also been several recent incidents where individuals dressed in police uniforms have been implicated in robberies.

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The current administration is actively pursuing police involvement in illegal activities and has taken administrative or legal action against an increasing number of officers. Crime scene control in major investigations is considered to be generally poor, which leads to destruction of evidence and contamination of the scene.

There is a severe shortage of trained investigators. Investigators frequently take taxis or buses to conduct their interviews. Police response to calls for help can be spotty. The local police 911 equivalent is 110. The Guatemalan government has made a conscientious effort to improve the number of police, including tourist police in high tourist areas, such as Antigua, Tikal, Chichicastenango, and the Lake Atitlan region. If you are detained by the police, please contact the Embassy's Duty Officer via the 24 hour emergency number - (502) 2331 2354.

Medical Emergencies

A full range of modern medical care is available in Guatemala City, but medical care outside the city is limited. There are some aerial medevac services available in country; however, these services are extremely expensive and frequently require payment before the service is rendered. Guatemala's public hospitals have experienced serious shortages of basic medicines and equipment. Care in private hospitals is generally adequate for most common illnesses and injuries. Serious medical problems requiring hospitalization and/or medical evacuation to the United States can be costly. Doctors and hospitals often expect immediate cash payment for health services, although practically all private hospitals accept major U.S. credit cards.

U.S. medical insurance is not always valid outside the United States. U.S. Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States. Uninsured travelers who require medical care overseas may face extreme difficulties. Please check with your own insurance company to confirm whether your policy applies overseas, including provisions for medical evacuation. Please ascertain whether your insurance company will make payments directly to the overseas hospital or doctor or whether you will be reimbursed later for expenses that you incur. Some insurance policies also include coverage for psychiatric treatment and for disposition of remains in the event of death.

Useful information on medical emergencies abroad, including overseas insurance programs, is provided in the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs brochure, "Medical Information for Americans Traveling Abroad," available via the Bureau of Consular Affairs home page or auto fax: (202) 647-3000. Information on vaccinations and other health precautions may be obtained from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's hotline for international travelers at 1-877-fyi-trip (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1- 888-cdc-faxx

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(1-888-232-3299); or via the Internet at <http://www.cdc.gov/>. A list of English-speaking doctors in Guatemala City is available on the Embassy's website.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Recommended routes and travel to popular tourist sites:

Visitors to Antigua have had few problems when using the main route from Guatemala City. Travelers using alternate routes out of Antigua have reported some armed assaults in recent years. The tourist destination of Lake Atitlan is best reached only via the Pan-American Highway (CA-1) (passing through Los Encuentros) and Solola. Winding, hilly secondary roads near the lake have an increased risk of violent attacks due to sparseness of traffic and patrols. Visitors to the Mayan ruins at Tikal are advised to fly to nearby Flores and then travel by bus or tour van to the site. Overland travel in the rest of Peten department, even on main roads, presents safety concerns.

Overland travelers should arrive at border posts (only the border posts on main routes are recommended) by early afternoon to ensure enough time to clear formalities and arrive in a major town before dark. Visitors should also avoid travel along Carretera El Salvador east of kilometer 13 (Colegio Maya) between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. due to the increased chance of carjacking and armed robbery. Recently, there have been a series of violent highway robberies along National Route 4 between Antigua and Escuintla and along Route 4 on the south side and west shores of Lake Atitlan between San Lucas Toliman and Chacala and Route 11 on the east shore between San Lucas Toliman and CA-1. Due to these incidents, it is highly advisable to avoid using Routes 4 and 11. It is also highly recommended to avoid Route 14 between Parramos (north of Antigua) and Escuintla.

General security tips:

As a general rule, resisting armed assailants will provoke a violent response. Limit the number of credit cards and other high-value items you bring with you. Make copies of the data page in your U.S. passport to facilitate its replacement if lost or stolen. Check in with the American Citizen Services section of the Embassy when you arrive and just before you leave. Make sure friends or family know your itinerary, and check in with them regularly. You may also want to register online through the State Department's registration system at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/>

Driving security tips:

Make sure to lock your doors, leave your windows rolled up, and leave at least half a car length of space between you and the car in front of you to maneuver if something happens. If you have to pull over on the highway, you should do it in a well-lit area with high visibility or a

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public place (preferably within view of a police officer). Do not travel after dark outside of Guatemala City. It is highly recommended to caravan with at least two cars when traveling outside of Guatemala City. Avoid gatherings of agitated people. Confer with trusted local staff or associates or mass media, before venturing out on trips within the country.

It is also highly recommended that if individuals are driving, that they use a car with slightly tinted windows and not talk on their cell phones. There have been numerous incidents where thieves on motorcycles accost drivers using their cell phones that were plainly visible through non-tinted windows.

Those individuals going as part of tour groups should also inquire if the tour operator uses an unmarked vehicle or one that says "Turista" (a clearly marked tourist vehicle). Due to the increasing number of robberies involving clearly-marked tourist vehicles, it would be advisable to use an unmarked vehicle.

Walking/shopping security tips:

Be conscious of your surroundings and watch for suspicious activity. Carry your money in a front pocket or put it in a zippered or buttoned back pocket. Do not display money, jewelry, a cell phone, or other perceived valuables. Never leave a backpack or fanny pack unattended. A common scam is to cause a distraction in a restaurant. Patrons who are distracted and have left valuables on the table or on the back of the chair have had their belongings stolen, often without leaving their seats. Other scams include enticing a person out of a public place ("can you move your car, please") and then robbing them, or setting up your vehicle to have a flat tire, and then offering "assistance", leading to theft or robbery. Use only well-lit ATMs located with their host banks or those in reputable hotels. ATM theft and skimming scams have recently been on the rise.

Visitors should also be wary of using a laptop in a public place, such as a cafe or in wireless zones throughout the country. Thieves will observe their victim and rob them once they have departed the establishment. There also have been incidents of persons robbed because they were using a laptop case/backpack (without the computer)

Hotel security tips:

Never give out your key. Do not tell strangers what hotel in which you are staying. Make sure that you lock your valuables in the hotel safety deposit box and watch for suspicious activity as you enter the hotel and your room. Lastly, make sure you lock the door and do not open it for unknown people. U.S. citizens can refer to the Department of State's pamphlet, "A Safe Trip Abroad" for ways to have a safer journey. This publication and others, such as Tips for Travelers to Central and South America, are available from the Superintendent of Documents,

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U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; via the Internet at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/>; or via the Bureau of Consular Affairs home page at <http://travel.state.gov/>.

Further Information

U.S. citizens living in or visiting Guatemala are encouraged to register at the consular section of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City and obtain updated information on travel and security in Guatemala. The Consular section is open for citizen services, including registration, from 7:30 a.m. until noon and from 1:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. on Monday-Thursday; and 7:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. on Fridays, excluding U.S. and Guatemalan holidays. The second and last Fridays of each month, American Citizen Services is open only for emergency services. The U.S. Embassy is located at Avenida La Reforma 7-01, zone 10; telephone (502) 2326-4000 during business hours (8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) or (502) 2331-2354 for emergencies during non-business hours; fax (502) 2326-4674.

OSAC Country Council

The Country Council meets monthly at the American Chamber of Commerce's local office. On May 27-28, 2010, the Council hosted its 4th Annual Regional Security Conference, in Antigua Guatemala. Information on the Council can be found at the following sites:

<http://guatemalacity.osac.gov/> or

<http://www.amchamguate.com/index.php?showPage=736>. Please e-mail the Council at comites@amchamguate.com or call at 502-2417-0800.

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