



Georgia 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Financial Security; Drug Trafficking; Assault; Rape/Sexual Violence; Threats; Counterfeiting; Fraud; Other; Separatist violence; Religious Terrorism; Religious Violence; Earthquakes; Winter weather; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Hate Crimes; Kidnapping; Disease Outbreak

Europe > Georgia; Europe > Georgia > Tbilisi

2/15/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: High

Crime Threats

Crime continues to be a concern despite the establishment of a professional law enforcement presence and active enforcement. According to official statistics, there was a five percent decrease in criminal cases in 2015 compared to 2014. However, crimes involving domestic violence and financial crimes increased in 2015. Crimes involving hooliganism and psychotropic drug-related crimes decreased in 2015.

Crimes against U.S. citizens and other Westerners are reported. The number of crimes reported to the U.S. Embassy involving U.S. citizens increased in 2015 and included reports of aggravated assault, domestic violence, sexual assault, and robbery. There continue to be

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periodic reports of violence and intimidation against foreigners in bars, nightclubs, similar venues, and on the streets nearby.

There continue to be reports of nuisance street children who are known to beg from, hassle, and behave aggressively toward foreigners, with a seemingly increased level of aggression.

Organized crime in undisputed Georgia has been on the wane since the 2005 adoption of the "Anti-Thief-In-Law" legislation. As a result, most organized crime growth now transpires outside of Georgia.

Street gangs and drug dealers do continue to operate but do not specifically target foreigners.

Crimes including armed robberies and assaults involving firearms remained a concern in 2015. An emphasis on enforcement by law enforcement resulted in significant seizures throughout the year of illegally-possessed weapons, including handguns, rifles, hand grenades, and rocket propelled grenade launchers. The numbers of weapons seized reflects the overall number of weapons in circulation and the fact that Georgia is a post-conflict nation with large amounts of weapons remaining since the fall of the Soviet Union and two internal conflicts (Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

In 2015, over 175 bomb threats were reported to and investigated by authorities. The majority of these threats were made by school-aged children and were believed to be pranks.

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Fraudulent documents of varying quality are readily available for purchase. The government is working to arrest and prosecute document vendors; however, the penalties for these types of crimes are minimal. Therefore, fraudulent bank documents, employment records, and fake seals/stamps are common. Fraudulent civil documents are easily verified with government registry offices. Despite this, fraudulent civil documents are still encountered and should be verified.

Financial crimes in the form of credit card fraud against individuals and larger targeted attacks against banks and other financial institutions are not uncommon. Law enforcement agencies put substantial resources into combatting financial crimes in 2015 and made several significant arrests.

Other Areas of Concern

The Department of State strongly warns U.S. citizens against travel to the Russian-occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These regions are not under the control of the government, and tensions remain high between the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the Georgian government. Russian troops and border guards continue to occupy both regions. Entering the occupied regions without proper documentation can lead to arrest, imprisonment, and/or fines by Russian, Georgian, or de facto officials. U.S. Embassy personnel are restricted in travel to Abkhazia or South Ossetia, even in the case of emergencies involving U.S. citizens.

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Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Driving can be extremely hazardous. Local drivers pay little attention to speed limits and lane discipline and regularly encroach into oncoming traffic.

Despite a zero tolerance law in regards to drinking and driving, intoxicated drivers are a problem, especially in the evenings and on holidays. It is strongly advised that drivers maintain an acute level of situational awareness, drive defensively, and wear seatbelts at all times. Georgian law requires use of seat belts in the front seats.

There is little access to emergency medical services outside of the capital.

Travel between cities after sundown is not recommended due to insufficient lighting and poor road conditions. There is also a heightened vulnerability to crime during vehicle malfunctions or stops.

Public Transportation Conditions

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RSO advises caution in the use of the underground Metro, marshrutka mini-buses, and any other form of public transportation.

The taxi cab industry is poorly regulated, and foreigners are often charged rates higher than local residents. It is advised to negotiate a fare before using a local taxi. The majority of taxis are operated by private individuals who use their private vehicles as unofficial cabs as a source of income. Since these taxis are not regulated, it is advised to use an official taxi cab company. Several established taxi cab companies exist with English-speaking dispatchers. Established taxi cabs use fare meters, have permanent painted exteriors (listing their phone number and cab company name), and use dispatchers. Many of the major hotels in Tbilisi and Batumi offer their own private cab services or can refer guests to a trusted service provider. Passengers should instruct taxi drivers to slow down if they do not feel comfortable with the operating speed.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The primary airport is Tbilisi International Airport. This is a modern facility through which more than 1.5 million visitors passed in 2015. The airport services several international airlines with most flights going to Europe and Asia.

There are two other international airports: one in Batumi and one in Kutaisi.

Terrorism Threat

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Post Terrorism Rating: High

Local, Regional and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Many of Georgia's neighboring states -- Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia's North Caucasus Republics -- have seen some measure of terrorist-related activity in recent years. While Georgia has made great strides with respect to border control and integrity, its geographic location makes it a natural transit area for individuals from these regions. Foreign fighters from Georgia or those who transited Georgia have joined Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other terrorist groups in Syria over the past year. One of most prominent battlefield commanders for ISIL, Omar al-Shishani (aka Tarkhan Batirashvili) is a Georgian citizen. He is listed among the U.S. Department of State Rewards for Justice most wanted.

In 2015, Georgia enacted a Law on Combating Terrorism, a substantive updating and expansion of its counter-terrorism legislation. Georgian law enforcement has actively enforced this new law, which has led to the arrest of several ISIL-affiliated suspects, including an alleged Georgia-based ISIL recruiter.

The U.S. Embassy enjoys an excellent, cooperative relationship with the government, through which it stays abreast of any issues of terrorist concern.

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Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

In August 2008, an exchange of gunfire/artillery between Georgian and separatist forces in South Ossetia escalated into a full-blown war between Georgia and Russia. Russian forces systematically attacked Georgian military targets and occupied key locations, most notably Gori. Russian military actions virtually severed movement and access between eastern and western Georgia. Russian forces pulled most of their forces back into the separatist-controlled territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the areas in/contiguous to these regions have seen periodic shootings, kidnappings, remotely-detonated car bombings, booby-traps, and other acts of violence. These acts have primarily targeted Georgian police or other officials, but civilians and international observers/diplomats have also been targeted. Russian forces are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including the Akhagori region of South Ossetia (which was occupied only in 2008 and was not previously part of the conflict zone) and the Kodori Gorge area of Abkhazia, which was controlled by the Georgian government before the 2008 war. Russian forces withdrew from Perevi, near the administrative boundary line with South Ossetia, in November 2010.

There is no known threat of political violence directed specifically against U.S. citizens.

Post Political Violence Rating: High

Civil Unrest

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In spring/summer 2009, public dissatisfaction with the administration spurred several months of demonstrations, street closures, and minor street violence in Tbilisi. This activity was not directed at U.S. citizens, businesses, or governmental concerns and, aside from creating logistical difficulties for businesses operating in the area, had no demonstrable effect on the safety and security of U.S. citizens in Tbilisi.

In 2011, an opposition protest against the Saakashvili government moved in front of the Parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue to disrupt the Independence Day parade on May 26. When the group's permit to assemble expired at midnight, the protest was ordered to move and was offered an alternate location as to not interrupt the parade. The protestors refused, and police dispersed the protestors. Excessive use of force by some police injured dozens of protestors. A motorcade of opposition politicians fleeing the dispersal struck and killed one police officer and one protestor.

U.S. citizens are encouraged to avoid areas of demonstrations and to exercise caution in the vicinity of large public gatherings when possible, as even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Though rare, violence or threatening behavior motivated by religious or ethnic differences does occur. In September 2014, in Kobuleti in the Adjara region, Orthodox Christians nailed a pig's head to the door of a residence in which the local Muslim community was planning to open a madrasa. The Prime Minister spoke out against this incident and stated religious prejudices will not be tolerated. Civil society leaders also condemned the act.

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Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Georgia is situated in an earthquake zone. Since 1800, more than 350 earthquakes of 6.0 or less (Richter Scale) have occurred. The biggest earthquakes took place in 1918 and 1920; they were believed to be 8.0-9.0. The most recent significant seismic activity was a minor tremor on September 17, 2013, in the Republic of Dagestan. The U.S. Geological Survey reported that the quake measured a 5.3, and its epicenter was 21 kilometers (13.05 miles) north of Gvareli, Georgia.

The weather in the mountains can change quickly, even in the summer months, with low overnight temperatures and unexpected snowstorms. There have been reports of hikers getting lost in the mountains and in snowy/stormy weather, and there have been fatal accidents.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Laws have been implemented to ensure that new buildings are built to seismic standards. Still, many existing buildings were built during the Soviet era to lower or inadequate

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anti-seismic standards.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Foreigners should safeguard sensitive information. Pirated software, music, and films are widely available on the black market.

Personnel-Background Concerns

In May 2013, an International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia Rally was held in Tbilisi. The human rights activists holding the rally were met by thousands of counter-protestors, and the rally quickly turned violent leading to multiple injuries and arrests.

Drug-related Crimes

Georgia is a transit point and an end-user destination for various illicit drugs. In 2007, the government adopted a national Anti-Drug Strategy, increased penalties for drug offenses, and adopted anti-drug legislation. The government is continuing efforts to increase border security with the support of the U.S. government, the EU, and international donors. In 2014, Georgia put special emphasis on countering narcotics trafficking through Georgia and created a special police division to combat international narcotics trafficking. In 2014, authorities

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interdicted what is reportedly the world's largest land-based heroin seizure (estimated at over two metric tons).

Kidnapping Threat

The threat of kidnapping to U.S. citizens exists. In recent years, instances of kidnappings have been significantly reduced with no recent reported instances of bridal/parental abductions involving U.S. citizens.

Police Response

Although there has been much progress in the government's efforts to reform the police organizations and improve overall professionalism, work remains to effectively deter criminal activity and conduct effective post-incident investigations. In general terms, police are attentive and responsive to requests/calls for assistance from foreigners, U.S. citizens in particular. However, much of their effectiveness is based on resources, or lack thereof, and the level of training among officers varies. Police response in Tbilisi can range from several minutes to more than one hour. Police response outside of Tbilisi can be considerably longer.

Emergency services will respond to the best of their ability, but terrain, weather conditions, and limited resources could severely impact response times.

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Georgia's customs authorities enforce regulations concerning the temporary import/export of items such as alcohol, tobacco, jewelry, religious materials, art or artifacts, antiquities, and business equipment.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

U.S. citizens who have been detained or harassed by the police should contact the U.S. Embassy's American Citizen Services unit in the Consular Section at:

Embassy Main & Emergency Number: (995) (32) 227-70-00

American Citizen Services: (995) (32) 227-77-24

Crime Victim Assistance

The Consular Section has information available to assist victims of crime seeking assistance from local police, medical attention, finding a local attorney, contacting family or relatives in the U.S., and contacting airlines regarding travel arrangements.

You may contact the police through the general emergency phone number: 112.

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Police/Security Agencies

The most visible police presence is that of the Patrol Police who patrol in marked vehicles throughout the country and who increase their visibility by patrolling with lights on. In addition to the Patrol Police, the Protection Police are visible throughout Tbilisi and the larger cities near government buildings and crowded tourist areas.

Medical Emergencies

Western-standard medical care is limited, but healthcare continues to improve. There is a shortage of medical supplies and capabilities outside Tbilisi and Batumi. Elderly travelers and those with pre-existing health problems may be at risk due to inadequate medical facilities. Doctors and hospitals often expect immediate cash payment before rendering medical services.

Traveling with your prescription medication is recommended; however, only personal medicines with a doctor's statement can be imported without the permission of the Georgian Drug Agency section of the Ministry of Health. Many medicines that are legal in the U.S. may be considered controlled/illegal in Georgia. A recent increase in enforcement (and related detentions) of U.S. citizens related to the possession and importation of controlled substances has been noted. For more information, please review OSAC's report "Traveling with Medication."

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Medical services in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are extremely limited. Hospitals do not accept credit cards or medical insurance, have little to no infectious disease control, and lack medicine. There are no commercial airports in either region, making air ambulance evacuations for medical emergencies impossible.

For all general emergencies, call 112.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

For medical care, the Embassy health unit advises U.S. Embassy employees to consider:

MediClub

22a Tashkenti St, Saburtalo

(995) (32) 225-1991

Emergency Department Duty Phone: (995) 599 581991

General Physician Dr. George Lolashvili

Medical Center Cito, 40 Paliashvili Str, Vake

(995) (32) 229-0671

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Available Air Ambulance Services

Insurance providers offer 24/7 air ambulance service and emergency medical assistance if deemed required by local medical professionals.

Recommended Insurance Posture

It is highly recommended for both short- and long-term travelers to purchase overseas medical insurance and medical evacuation insurance. Two overseas medical insurers used by U.S. citizens are: International SOS, www.internationalsos.com (1-215-942-8000), and MEDEX Assist, www.medexassist.com (1-800-732-5309).

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

It is strongly recommended that travelers who visit for at least two weeks get the Hepatitis A vaccine and the pre-exposure rabies vaccine series. Tuberculosis is an increasingly serious health concern. Travelers are also encouraged to bring medicine to treat diarrhea, which regularly afflicts newcomers. Travelers should take care that food is cooked thoroughly to reduce the risk of food-borne illness.

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There are eight known poisonous snake species that are more likely to be encountered between March-October. Anti-venom is available for some species in a small number of facilities. Treat all snakes as poisonous.

For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/georgia?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-sing-le-001.

OSAC Country Council Information

Georgia's OSAC Country Council was formed in September 2009. The point of contact is U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer James Hine, who can be reached at (995) (32) 227-70-00 or via email at TbilisiOSAC@state.gov. To reach OSAC's Europe team, please email OSACEUR@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

11 George Balanchine Street, Didi Dighomi, Tbilisi 0131

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U.S. Embassy hours of operation are Monday-Friday 9:00am-6:00pm

Consular Services hours of operation are Monday-Friday 8:30am-5:30pm, excluding holidays.

Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy Main & Emergency Number: (995) (32) 227-70-00 {24/7}

American Citizen Services: (995) (32) 227-77-24

Website: <http://georgia.usembassy.gov/>

Embassy Guidance

All travelers to Georgia should enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at <https://step.state.gov/step/>. For the latest security information, U.S. citizens traveling abroad should regularly monitor the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs' website, which contains current the Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts as well as the Worldwide Caution. The Department of State urges U.S. citizens to take responsibility for their own personal security while traveling overseas. For general information about appropriate measures travelers can take to protect themselves in an overseas environment, see the Department of State's extensive tips and advice on traveling safely abroad.

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Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

U.S. citizens are urged to review their personal security precautions, increase their levels of awareness, register with the consular section, and as appropriate, take increased security measures. They should vary routes/times, especially when traveling from residences to work locations. They should maintain a low profile by not carrying large amounts of cash or displaying jewelry. Additionally, U.S. citizens should be aware of their surroundings, travel in pairs/groups, and stay on main streets where possible. It is also recommended to travel only in the daylight hours and provide travel itinerary and contact information to friends or colleagues.

It is best to ignore and avoid street children since engaging them can further fuel their aggressiveness.

Visitors are reminded to use caution and common sense when engaging in adventure sports. Visitors who intend to hike in the mountains or climb in the numerous rock climbing areas should always seek local guides' expert advice. Visitors should provide route and contact details to someone not travelling in a group, maintain adequate cell phone battery charge, and be familiar with landmarks and accommodations in the area before heading out on trips. Visitors should never participate in these sports alone and should always carry some form of

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identification. When hiking, rappelling, or climbing, visitors should carry a first aid kit, identification, and know the location of the nearest rescue center and weather conditions.

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