



Turkmenistan 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Burglary; Assault; Fraud; Bribery; Murder; Drug Trafficking; Earthquakes; Employee Health Safety; Surveillance; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Rape/Sexual Violence; Disease Outbreak

South Central Asia > Turkmenistan; South Central Asia > Turkmenistan > Ashgabat

4/6/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Medium

Crime Threats

The government does not publish crime statistics; therefore, the information herein is based on unofficial sources. In general, Ashgabat is safe for foreigners but has many of the same crimes found in any major city. The city's fourth, fifth and sixth districts, as well as Koshi, Hitrovka and Gazha, are known to have higher, but not high, rates of crime. (see maps in attached pdf report)

Crimes of opportunity against foreigners do occur. Petty thieves tend to operate on buses during rush hour and in crowded environments (bazaars). Well-dressed foreigners, especially those driving cars with commercially or diplomatically accredited license plates (yellow and

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blue respectively), are often targeted.

The threat of residential break-ins and burglaries is high, especially for local nationals, as they generally keep large amounts of cash at home. Thefts from vehicles and minor assault are thought to be similar to what is reported in other capital cities. The main crimes are fraud, bribery, and institutional corruption. Unofficial sources claim that the murder rate in Ashgabat is about one per week. Violent crimes are often linked to the trade and use of narcotics and tend to involve the local population.

Here is a 2015 year-in-review of substantiated criminal incidents:

Drug enforcement officers arrested two businessmen. A third one jumped to his death from the fifth floor of his apartment while police were trying to arrest him. The men were accused of selling cheap, poor quality cigarettes. A Customs Officer was also arrested because he facilitated the illegal import of the cigarettes and for taking bribes. Further, a State Standard Organization employee was also arrested because he provided certificates stating that the cigarettes were of good quality.

At the beginning of January, a car accident occurred at the intersection of Bekrava and Archabil Streets. One of the drivers died; two sustained injuries and were hospitalized.

In December, a burglary was reported in Micro-District # 3. The individuals entered an occupied residence and stole cash, electronic equipment, clothing, and jewelry totaling US\$7,000.

On December 25, in Balkanabad city, there was a residential gas leak that led to three deaths.

Police officers detained a man who was involved in the illegal purchasing/selling of U.S.

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dollars. Police officers confiscated US\$10,000, and the man was fined 6,000 Manat.

Alcohol-related incidents, bar fights, and drunk driving, are common. Prostitution, although in evidence at many hotels and restaurants, is illegal. In Ashgabat, many foreigners are reportedly solicited at the British Pub, the Grand Turkmen Hotel, disco clubs at the Ak Altyn Hotel and Kopetdag restaurant (the Just Club), and Zamem Club. However, this is not a complete list and solicitation can happen anywhere. Law enforcement entities are known to conduct prostitution raids at local establishments.

Instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan negatively impacts the security situation in Central Asia as a whole.

Cybersecurity Issues

Cyber security is not a large issue due to the lack of computer access for a large percentage of the population. The majority of the population that uses the Internet does so via cell phone. With limited opportunities for online shopping and only Ministries and a few large corporations having websites, Internet crime is not considered to be prevalent by Turkmen actors.

Other Areas of Concern

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Neighboring countries may unilaterally close borders with no advance warning.

Travel to many border zones requires host-nation approval. Border permission should be requested as far in advance as possible. Travelers are required to indicate the exact location of their stay including the border areas they would like to visit. The official travel request requires a copy of the visitor's passport and exact dates of the visit; the request should be sent to the State Migration Service of Turkmenistan. A fee is imposed for this process. If travelers have a valid visa to a neighboring country that requires travel through a border zone, border permissions are not required. Travelers who are just transiting the border area are not authorized to stay on the Turkmen border side.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Travel to, from, and within Turkmenistan by road remains difficult and unreliable. Local driving practices can be erratic and result in accidents and traffic jams. Local drivers rarely respect lane markings and will regularly drift through lanes without signaling. Vehicles will park indiscriminately on busy streets. Unofficial, unmarked taxis regularly pull over without warning to pick up/drop off passengers. Frequently, drivers attempt to make left or right turns from the middle lane. Headlights, if used, are generally not activated until after it has become completely dark. Many stoplights turn green simultaneously as the stoplights for opposing traffic turn red. Drivers should exercise caution before entering intersections to ensure cross traffic has stopped.

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The main roads in Ashgabat and other administrative centers are in good condition. Many of the main roads in Ashgabat are made from materials that ensure the road appears to be shiny and clean, which also appears to affect vehicle traction, resulting in sliding or being unable to stop quickly. Other roads are often poorly maintained.

The streets outside Ashgabat are uneven with large potholes. Slow moving trucks and agricultural vehicles, as well as livestock crossing roads, are frequent hazards. Erratic driving and car accidents are extremely common, especially at intersections and traffic circles. Since roads outside the city are not illuminated, driving at night is perilous and not recommended.

The highway infrastructure is extremely poor. Some highways leading out of Ashgabat have been widened and paved, but most are narrow with little/no shoulder. The Ashgabat-Dashoguz road is not maintained past 35 miles from Ashgabat and has numerous potholes, no traffic lines, lights, signs, and etc.

Traffic police are posted at stationary positions, checkpoints, and along major roads in the center of Ashgabat. Traffic police are seen at almost every intersection; they use a white and black striped stick when signaling drivers to stop for questioning.

When driving, extra care should be taken to avoid hitting pedestrians. Pedestrians routinely step into the street without looking. They also tend to walk/stand in the middle of the road on dark streets at night, and reflective clothing is rarely used. Drivers should not assume pedestrians are able to see or will yield to an oncoming vehicle. Pedestrians should never assume the right-of-way and should use pedestrian underpasses when available. The local

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population rarely utilizes them, usually choosing to cross at unmarked points between intersections.

Western visitors have reported being presumed guilty in car accidents with locals because of the perception that foreigners have money.

When in a vehicle, doors should be locked; valuables should not be left in open view.

Public Transportation Conditions

Public buses in Ashgabat are inexpensive but overcrowded during peak times.

Many locals use unmarked taxis, referred to as “gypsy” cabs. Almost any driver will offer pedestrians a ride for a fee. Although the use of unlicensed cabs is not recommended—especially by those who do not speak the local language, are unfamiliar with the city, or are traveling alone—it is best to establish the price for service prior to entering the vehicle and make travel in groups of at least two people if unofficial cabs are used. The average cost of an unlicensed cab—to anywhere in the city—is five Manat.

Yellow Cabs and Berkarar Cabs are the only registered taxis in Ashgabat and the recommended mode of public transportation; they are usually located at the airport, near major hotels, and at the Berkarar shopping center. Yellow Cabs are discernable by their bright

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yellow color, green Turkmen license plates, and a light affixed to the roof. Berkarar Cabs are white with green lettering on the door and green Turkmen license plates. Even though both cabs have meters, most taxi drivers do not use them; passengers are encouraged to agree on a price prior to using their services. Yellow Cabs can be reached at 32-97-74. The average response time is 20 minutes.

Trains, although slow, are generally safe and reliable.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Turkmen Airlines has a good safety record and works closely with Boeing on aircraft maintenance and professional training for airlines staff. The airline owns approximately 30 Boeing aircraft. Turkmen airports do not support Instrument Flight Rules, which can lead to flight cancellations or delays, particularly due to fog during the winter.

Other Travel Conditions

Cellular reception is poor throughout the country; this a significant concern for individuals traveling outside the six major cities. The following images depicts coverage by the two carriers, MTS and Altyn Asyr, available within Turkmenistan (see maps in attached pdf report).

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Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Medium

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

There was no known or reported civil unrest in Turkmenistan in 2015, although there were sporadic reports of public demonstrations.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

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Turkmenistan is located in an active seismic zone. In December 2000, an earthquake centered between Ashgabat and the Caspian Sea resulted in numerous injuries/deaths and severe damage to buildings and residences. In 1948, Ashgabat was nearly destroyed by an earthquake. Visitors should have multiple evacuation plans to implement in the event of a natural disaster.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

Turkmenistan does not have the equivalent of an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) with provisions in place to regulate industrial safety. As such, safety precautions should be taken when operating in/around industrial complexes and/or construction sites.

High winds have caused marble slab veneers on buildings to detach and fall to the ground. Serious bodily injury/death could result if struck by falling marble slabs or by fragments. Visitors should practice good situational awareness.

Privacy Concerns

Foreigners should utilize good operational security practices by safeguarding sensitive information with the assumption that all conversations are being monitored. Pirated software, music, and films were widely available on the black market, and Turkmenistan is a watch-list country for intellectual property protection. Visitors should avoid potentially compromising

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situations and discussing sensitive information.

Personnel-Background Concerns

Women in isolated surroundings may be at an increased risk for harassment and/or assault.

Per Article 5 of the Turkmen Citizenship Law, Turkmenistan does not recognize multiple citizenships of its citizens. Dual Turkmen-U.S. citizens are likely to have a difficult time returning to the U.S. after visiting Turkmenistan, and it might be necessary for them to renounce Turkmen citizenship in order to be allowed to depart. The renunciation process can take six months or longer. Dual Turkmen-U.S. citizens are strongly urged to contact the Consular Section at the U.S. Embassy in Ashgabat if they are considering visiting Turkmenistan. For more information on dual citizenship and renunciation of Turkmen citizenship, please visit the State Migration Service of Turkmenistan, Citizenship Office.

Drug-related Crimes

Turkmenistan is a major transshipment route for narcotic traffickers attempting to smuggle mostly opiates originating in Afghanistan to Turkish, Russian and European markets, either directly or through Iran. It is not, however, a major producer or source country for illegal drugs or precursor chemicals. Most drug seizures occur along Turkmenistan's rugged, remote 744-kilometer border with Afghanistan and its 992-kilometer frontier with Iran. Money laundering in Turkmenistan involves proceeds from the illegal drug trade.

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Counter-narcotic efforts continue to be a government priority. Although reliable statistics remain difficult to secure, internal narcotics sales have reportedly dropped since the government stopped the practice of granting pardons to prisoners convicted of drug-related crimes. Drug-related crime is high in some parts of Turkmenistan but considered to be average in Ashgabat. The city's fourth, fifth and sixth districts, as well as Koshi, Hitrovka and Gazha experience the highest volume.

In March 2012, a law related to the treatment of persons suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction, or dependence on psychoactive substances was enacted. The law reduced mandatory treatment programs for addicts from two years to six months, signaling a tacit acknowledgement by the government that drug addiction is a disease and not simply a criminal act.

Kidnapping Threat

Rates of kidnapping are believed to be low, although they do occur.

Police Response

Generally, a heavy police presence in most major Turkmen cities deters petty crime. Police and military troops line the street and act as a deterrent to would-be criminals; they are also

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expected to report on incidents that pose a potential risk to national security. However, local police often appear unable to respond to or intervene in ongoing events, raising safety concerns. The capabilities of Turkmen law enforcement agencies do not meet Western standards. Many security officials speak only Turkmen, which makes it difficult for many foreigners to communicate. Response times are often inadequate. Most investigations are slow; additionally, the standards and processes are different than those seen in the U.S. criminal justice system.

Laws are ambiguous—to ordinary citizens and police alike—and are randomly enforced.

The ban against smoking in public places is only sporadically enforced. There are several reports of individuals being harassed for smoking on publically visible balconies connected to their apartments.

Police are also known to irregularly enforce regulations limiting tinted windows on vehicles.

However, laws governing weapons are very strict. A limited number of security personnel are authorized to carry handguns. Civilians are authorized to carry hunting shotguns, but they must apply for a license. The licensing process includes a psychiatric evaluation and a doctor's statement confirming that the applicant is not addicted to narcotics. Once the application is approved, the owner must register the weapon with the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Gun owners must store weapons in a safe, separate from the ammunition. Approximately every six months, homes of gun owners are inspected to ensure compliance. Gun crimes are extremely rare.

Satellite phones and other forms of communication are illegal to possess.

Turkmen security officials are extremely sensitive to being photographed and to any photography of official buildings and monuments. Visitors should avoid taking photos of official buildings, sites, and personnel. Visitors have also been harassed and/or solicited for bribes by law enforcement officials after taking pictures of statues and non-government buildings; at a

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minimum, security officials will require photos to be deleted. For more information, please review OSAC's Report "Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography."

Turkmenistan ranks very poorly on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Security personnel are poorly paid and equipped, which has resulted in widespread corruption. Substandard salaries and training opportunities contribute to corrupt practices and a lack of professionalism. Security personnel have been known to solicit bribes in the course of their official duties to supplement their income. Traffic police are widely believed to be corrupt, and they often stop cars simply to ask drivers for 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." Police usually ask for payments, travelers have reported settling for 50 Manat or less.

Passports are required for many transactions and random document inspections by local police. Travelers are advised to carry their identity documents with them and to cooperate with police authorities if stopped for questioning. Visitors should have a second copy of their passport photo and visa pages kept in a separate location. It is not unusual for police to stop and question pedestrians and drivers at any time. An unofficial curfew begins at 2300 hours.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

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 practice is not always followed. U.S. citizens who are arrested or detained should ask to contact the U.S. Embassy immediately at 865-692-688 or 94-00-45 and ask for

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the duty officer. Please contact the U.S. Embassy duty officer if you are harassed or detained by the police.

Crime Victim Assistance

In the event of an emergency, dial 02 to contact police. American citizens should also contact the U.S. Embassy at 865 692 688 or 94-00-45. Individuals who become the victim of a crime are encouraged to contact the Embassy Duty Officer and to call or go to the nearest police precinct to file a report.

Police/Security Agencies

In August 2012, the State Counter Narcotics Service of Turkmenistan (SCNS) was renamed the State Service of Turkmenistan for the Protection and Security of a Healthy Society.

Medical Emergencies

The quality of medical care in Turkmenistan is significantly below Western standards. Medical care is inadequate due to insufficient training even with access to modern equipment and facilities. Elderly travelers and those with pre-existing health problems should be aware that medical care is very difficult to access. It is recommended that all travelers bring an adequate

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supply of prescription and non-prescription medications. For more information, please refer to OSAC's Report, "Traveling with Medications."

Food sanitation is an issue at markets and restaurants. Travelers are encouraged to avoid eating unpeeled fruits, uncooked vegetables, and any items that may have been left sitting outside for extended periods. Tap water is not considered potable and should not be used for drinking, ice cubes, or brushing teeth. For more information, please refer to OSAC's Report, "I'm Drinking What in My Water?." Bottled water and other drinks purchased in cans or bottles are generally safe for consumption.

In Ashgabat, Turkmen or Russian speakers can dial "03" for an ambulance.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

In the event of a medical emergency, it is recommended that travelers use the Central (Turkish) Hospital, Tel: 45-03-03. The standard of care is far below Western levels. American citizens with medical emergencies are encouraged to contact the U.S. Embassy duty officer at 94-00-45.

Available Air Ambulance Services

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Air ambulance services are available, but the response times vary. Two companies have responded to Turkmenistan:

Europ Assistance—offices located around the world. The 24/7 numbers are: Toll free: 877-710-4082; U.S. 240-330-1523.

International Air Ambulance (SOS)—Turkmenistan falls under the UAE regional office in Dubai: +971 460 18 777.

These organizations will guide callers through the process. A consent form requiring the patient's insurance information is required. Contact with the insurance company will be made prior to scheduling transport.

Recommended Insurance Posture

It is recommended that all travelers purchase medical evacuation insurance.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

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. Unconfirmed reports indicate a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, in Turkmenistan. For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: <http://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/countries/turkmenistan/>.

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OSAC Country Council Information

Ashgabat has an active OSAC Country Council chapter. One of the co-Chairmen positions is vacant as of January 2015; the second co-chairman is U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer (RSO), Brett Oestreich (oestreichbl@state.gov; 993-12-94-00-45). To reach OSAC's South and Central Asia team, please email OSACSCA@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

9 Pushkin Street

Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Hours of Operation: Mon-Fri, 0900-1800

Embassy Contact Numbers

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Embassy Operator: 993-12-94-00-45 (94-00-45 from within Turkmenistan)

For emergencies, travelers should contact the Regional Security Office, Consular Section, Duty Officer or Medical Office at U.S. Embassy Ashgabat 24 hours/day. Afterhours, call +993-65-69-26-88 (865-69-26-88 from a cellular phone within Turkmenistan).

Embassy Fax: 993-12-94-26-14

RSO: 993-65-69-26-84

ACS (after Hours): 993-65-69-26-88

Marine Post One: 993-65-03-25-42

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

Embassy Guidance

For additional security information, read the Turkmenistan Country Specific Information, current Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts for nearby countries (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Afghanistan), especially if a traveler's itinerary will take them 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 on how to contact each U.S. Embassy directly is available on the internet at the Consular Affairs home page at <http://www.travel.state.gov>. For the latest security information, U.S. Citizens traveling abroad should regularly monitor the same web address, where current Worldwide Caution, Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts can be found. The overseas Citizen Services call center can be reached at 1-888-407-4747 and is able to answer general inquiries on safety and security overseas from 0800 to 2000 Eastern Standard Time, Monday through Friday (except

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on U.S. federal holidays). Callers unable to dial toll-free may obtain information and assistance during these hours by calling 317-472-2328.

Travelers should double check their visas in order to ensure they are valid through the length of their stay and are also advised to enroll in the Smart Traveler program prior to arriving. This allows the Department of State to offer better assistance in the event of an emergency. Any visitor staying longer than three days must register with the State Migration Service. For additional information, consult the U.S. Embassy website or email the consular section at ConsularAshgabat@state.gov

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

The Embassy advises visitors to remain vigilant and to maintain a low profile. Residents and travelers should employ the same common sense practices in Turkmenistan as they would in any major U.S. city. Travelers should practice good situational awareness and avoid traveling alone to unknown areas. Added care should also be taken along the Turkmen/Afghan border. If in doubt, visitors should inquire at the U.S. Embassy or with their hotel staff for advice/information. Visitors are recommended to travel in pairs or groups and always inform a third party of their whereabouts.

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Even though Turkmenistan is a cash-only economy, some hotels accept credit cards. Hotel guests should request carbon copies made of the credit card and verify charges made to their account in order to detect unauthorized use.

Even though burglaries against the expatriate community are rare, good residential security measures are recommended. Whether staying in a hotel, apartment, or guest house, visitors should always ensure their valuables are secure. Safety deposit boxes or room safes should be used for storing valuables. Door/window locks should be checked to make sure they work. Visitors should also practice using all emergency exits. Unknown individuals should never be invited into residences or hotel rooms. When outside the hotel, visitors should keep cash/valuables in secure pockets and avoid displaying them in a public setting.

At nightclubs, drinks should never be left unattended; moreover, drinks should never be accepted from unknown people.

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