



Mexico 2016 Crime & Safety Report: Matamoros

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Narcoterrorism; Stolen items; Theft; Kidnapping; Drug Trafficking; Murder; Rape/Sexual Violence; Extortion; Burglary; Financial Security; Fraud; Riots/Civil Unrest; Political Violence; Hurricanes; Floods; Bribery; Employee Health Safety

Western Hemisphere > Mexico; Western Hemisphere > Mexico > Matamoros

4/11/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Critical

Matamoros is located along the U.S.-Mexico border, sharing multiple international bridges with Brownsville, Texas, and is situated 50 miles from the Reynosa-McAllen border area. There were a significant number of gunfights and grenade attacks in Matamoros and other parts of the Consular District (Altamira, Mante, Ciudad Victoria, San Fernando, Valle Hermoso, Rio Bravo, Reynosa, Miguel Alemán). The random nature of violence, combined with the highest kidnapping rate in all of Mexico, which has the highest kidnapping rate in the world, exposes everyone to a high risk of being exposed to dangerous situations.

Crime Threats

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There are no safe areas in Matamoros due to gunfights, grenade attacks, and kidnappings, all of which can take place anytime, anywhere. Consequently, crime and violence related to the activities of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) are continuing concerns that directly affect the safety and security of U.S. government personnel. U.S. citizens entering/living within the Consular District remain under constant threat of abduction, robbery, or violent crime. The primary security threat in the region stems from the TCOs and the ongoing turf war between rival factions of the Gulf Cartel TCOs. Drug-related violence has remained high in 2015 in the Matamoros-Rio Bravo-Reynosa-Ciudad Victoria region. RSO statistics indicate an increase in the number of local nationals killed as a result of drug-related violence. The true number of drug-related deaths, however, is difficult to obtain due to underreporting. Additionally, visitors traveling to the border areas have been victims of armed robberies, sexual assaults, auto thefts, murder, and kidnappings. Street crime and thefts in urban areas are also common. Crime statistics of any type are suspect due to both the lack of a functional governmental tracking mechanism and underreporting by the general public. Additionally, separating victims from perpetrators is often problematic.

While U.S. citizens may not be specifically targeted, they have been victims. Much of the crime is indiscriminate with criminals generally selecting victims based on the appearance of vulnerability, prosperity, or inattentiveness. While U.S. citizens not involved in criminal activities may not be specifically targeted, innocent bystanders are at risk from the increased violence in the streets of border cities and nearby towns.

Violent crime (kidnappings, extortions, homicides, sexual assaults, robberies, residential break-ins) and non-violent crimes (financial scams, vehicle thefts, petty drug crimes) continue to be a serious concern for those living or transiting Tamaulipas. In the last year, firefights have taken place throughout the Consular District. These gun battles have occurred in broad daylight on public streets and other public venues. The situation in northeast Mexico remains fluid; the location and timing of future armed engagements cannot be predicted.

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Other Areas of Concern

The Department of State Travel Warning specifically urges U.S. citizens to defer unnecessary travel to the entire state of Tamaulipas.

Travelers should defer unnecessary travel on Mexican highways between Matamoros and Reynosa, Reynosa and Monterey and from Ciudad Victoria to the Texas border. Criminals have followed and harassed U.S. citizens traveling in their vehicles in these areas.

Official Americans living in Matamoros are under strict travel restrictions and a curfew from 2400-0600. These restrictions limit personal/work travel in a city plagued with daily violence on a level normally seen in war-torn countries. Even with these restrictions, shootouts between TCO members and government security forces occur frequently in areas where U.S. government employees are allowed to travel in Matamoros.

U.S. citizens are urged to be especially aware of safety and security concerns when visiting the border region and to exercise common-sense precautions such as visiting only legitimate business and tourist areas and attempting to travel only during daylight hours. All adult entertainment clubs and casinos in the Consular District are off limits to U.S. government personnel.

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Travel between Matamoros and other cities in the Consular District is primarily accomplished by entering into the U.S., traveling along the border and re-entering Mexico at the nearest port of entry. U.S. government personnel are prohibited from traveling overland into the interior of Mexico from the Texas border except those instances that have been deemed mission essential.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road safety is an area of particular concern, and in general roads and road conditions are below U.S. standards. The highways are generally well-maintained, but their isolation leaves travelers vulnerable to crime. All highway travelers should avoid travel at night, especially along highways connecting major cities. Use toll roads when possible, plan routes ahead of time, and notify family/friends of your itinerary. Travelers are advised to keep a cell phone on their person and to know how to reach friends and family in an emergency. Travelers should ensure they use road-worthy vehicles and maintain a full size spare tire in case of a flat.

Travelers on the highways between Tamaulipas and the U.S. have frequently been targeted for kidnapping and robbery. Travelers have also been caught in TCO roadblocks, and incidents of gunfire between criminals and Mexican law enforcement are normal. Several commercial companies have also reported being harassed or encountering checkpoints along rural highways along the border. There have been numerous carjackings and kidnappings along these major highways.

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Continued concerns regarding road safety along the border have prompted the U.S. Embassy/Consulates to impose certain restrictions on U.S. government employees transiting the area. Since July 2010, Embassy/Consulate employees and their families have not been permitted to travel by vehicle to/from any Post in Mexico.

Theft of the vehicle car sound systems is a common crime. The installation of a car alarm is strongly recommended as precaution to deter vehicle thefts and thefts of interior contents. Store items in your trunk and keep your vehicle interior free of anything that would entice a thief to break into the car. Avoid leaving your vehicle on the street. Park inside a residential compound, in a parking lot with an attendant, or at least within view of the location you are visiting. When parking at a shopping facility, be sure to park as close as possible to the store entrance but away from dumpsters, bushes, or large vehicles. Be sure to lock your doors, close windows, and hide shopping bags and gifts in the trunk, out of sight.

Public Transportation Conditions

U.S. government personnel are prohibited from utilizing all forms of public transportation.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

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Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

There are no significant regional terrorism threats. However, the presence of the TCOs and the movement of large sums of money through the area has had a decaying influence on civil institutions with corruption of police and rule of law officials being the most serious concern. There is no evidence of transnational terrorists residing/transiting the region. However, the nature of the border and the ready access to both human smugglers and counterfeit documents continue to make this area a potential transit point for international terrorists.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

American interests in the Consular District are generally not targets of political violence. Corruption stemming from narco-trafficking remains and has affected service levels delivered by some state and local governments. Political violence against local Mexican politicians is common in the Consular District. Mexican politicians are frequently approached/coerced into cooperating with TCOs, possibly affecting U.S. interests in the region.

Post Political Violence Rating: High

Civil Unrest

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Some small, peaceful demonstrations have taken place in/around Matamoros in 2015, including areas directly in front of the ports of entry (Veterans Bridge, Gateway Bridge, etc.). There is always the potential that a protest may turn violent. Visitors are advised to avoid protest areas and to resist making remarks that could lead to a confrontation.

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Matamoros is located approximately 30 miles from the Gulf Coast. Hurricanes are common during June-November. Heavy rains can lead to localized flooding. Heavy rains also frequently lead to widespread power outages, but these are normally remedied within hours. Officials sometimes remove manhole covers to speed the evacuation of standing water. These areas are often not adequately marked and can lead to road hazards. Travelers moving during these storms are advised to watch for poles with plastic garbage bags tied to them, as these are often the only warnings to motorists that a manhole cover has been removed.

Kidnapping Threat

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Express kidnappings are a common type of abduction and are based on the withdrawal limit placed on ATM cards industry-wide. The victim is generally held for 24-48 hours and is forced to withdraw funds from a series of ATMs. Official Americans have not suffered this type of crime recently, but, anecdotally, most Mexican employees of the Consulate either have been victimized themselves or personally know a victim.

Although no reliable statistics exist, individuals associated with the maquiladora (factory)/business industry in Matamoros/Reynosa continued to experience both express kidnappings and kidnappings for ransom at an alarming rate.

The term "express kidnapping" is also applied to the kidnapping of random victims held for brief periods where small ransoms are demanded. A typical express kidnapping may last for several hours and be settled for the peso-equivalent of a few thousand dollars.

Another tactic is the telephonic/virtual kidnapping. Although the calls vary in style, the methodology is similar: the call includes a crying/pleading voice immediately after the call is answered but before the "kidnapper" gets on the phone. In this manner, they hope to confuse the victim and get them to give away important information; for example, if the crying voice sounds like your child in any way, and you call out that child's name, the caller then knows the name of a child who could be a kidnap victim and will use this knowledge against you. The voice of the "victim" will usually be crying/hysterical. This makes it difficult to identify and increases the likelihood that you will believe it is your loved one. Criminals will try to use fear, tact, and timing against victims. For example, they plan their calls when it will be difficult to contact the purported kidnap victim immediately (when the child is en route to/from school). All calls demand money for the release of the loved one and stipulate no police involvement. Often times, the callers will give statements to suggest surveillance: "we saw you at the school with your camioneta (SUV)." While vague, these statements imply the callers have been watching your family. The callers use fear against you to reinforce the threat of the

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kidnapping. Know the details of your family's travel and location (where are they supposed to be, who are they supposed to be with), and you know how to reach (land-line and cell phone numbers) your family members.

FBI statistics for 2015 for kidnappings place Tamaulipas as the region with the highest rates and risk in Mexico. The Government's federal statistics rate Tamaulipas as number one in total kidnappings, a record held for two years in a row. Amnesty International reports that 5,705 people have been reported missing since 2010 in Tamaulipas, and many of these people are victims of kidnappings or narco-related violence. These figures lead every state in Mexico. In the rare event that a victim was released after being kidnapped, they reported to the Consulate that they were beaten, tortured, and threatened while held. In January 2015, authorities announced plans to search for possible mass graves in Reynosa.

Drug-related Crimes

Mexico is well-known for its illegal drug trade and the violence and corruption the industry fosters. Mexico is the primary route/conduit for illegal drugs into the U.S. Matamoros and the surrounding areas have been the scene of many violent, uncontrolled incidents in which innocent bystanders have been injured/killed. Security forces and police have not been effective in eliminating the threat from such incidents in the cities along the U.S. Mexican border.

Gun battles may occur at any time, as rival TCO gunmen engage in hit-and-run attacks, and as military and federal police encounter TCO gunmen while on patrol. In an effort to prevent the military from responding to criminal activity, TCOs have set up roadblocks or "narco-blockades" in various parts of Matamoros and Reynosa. At these blockades, armed

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gunmen have carjacked unsuspecting drivers (usually buses) and used their vehicles to block-off roads. Since the escalation in TCO violence began, the government has significantly increased the number of troops and federal police in this region in an effort to quell the violence. These numbers constantly change due to the security environment. Soldiers and federal police frequently conduct patrols throughout the city.

Police Response

The local, state, and federal governments are organized similar to their U.S. counterparts, but law enforcement capabilities within these jurisdictions vary greatly. Police corruption and police involvement in criminal activity is common in Mexico. Consequently, citizens are often indifferent to police authority, adding to the sense of lawlessness. The general perception is that the majority of crime victims do not report crimes due to fear of reprisals by the police, the belief that police are corrupt, or the feeling that nothing would come from such reports. Generally, police receive low wages, are vulnerable to corruption, and receive less training than their U.S. counterparts. Police enjoy little respect from the general population. Reporting crime can be a bureaucratic, time consuming process and is widely perceived to be of limited effectiveness except for the most serious of crimes or where a police report is required for insurance purposes. Should a police report be required for an insurance claim, a nominal fee will be charged.

The local police force in Matamoros was disbanded due to widespread corruption issues. In the interim, federal forces and the military are patrolling the city's streets. A state police force, newly renamed "Policia Estatal Acretable or Fuerza Tamaulipas," began deploying to Matamoros in late 2014 although there are still concerns with corruption among this force and the lack of vetted officers being hired.

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How To Handle Incidents Of Police Detention Or Harassment

Travelers may contact the Consular Section at the U.S. Consulate for assistance in dealing with the police. U.S. citizens are advised to cooperate with the police if stopped or questioned. Travelers should not be expected to pay an officer directly for any traffic violations but should be prepared to report to the nearest Mexican Traffic Police office to pay the fine.

American citizens who are detained or harassed by government forces may seek assistance at the Consulate. A Consular Duty Officer is available 24-hours a day by phone. It is particularly important to identify which agency was involved. A description of the vehicles and uniforms is helpful. Being able to accurately describe what occurred, the time, date, location, and which agency was involved will greatly enhance the Consulate's ability to reach a satisfactory result from the complaint.

Crime Victim Assistance

If involved in a traffic accident or victimized by crime, one may be required to accompany the investigating officer to the local police station to file a complaint or respond to questions.

The police emergency telephone number is 066, though response time varies.

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Medical Emergencies

The health system is not directly comparable to U.S. health care standards. Travelers can also contact private ambulance services who do charge a fee. Life Ambulance Service: 011-52-868-812-3049.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

The RSO does not endorse or recommend any service providers over another; here is the contact information for local hospitals and clinics:

CMI Hospital

Calle Sexta y Avenida Longoria #9

Matamoros, Mexico

Telephone - 811-0000

CEMQ Hospital

Calle Primera y Gonzalez y Morelos 1105

Matamoros, Mexico

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Telephone - 813-4303/813-4653/813-4191

The Red Cross (Cruz Roja) can be reached at 065. This medical service may not be reliable.

Available Air Ambulance Services

Air ambulance services, recommended for severe injuries or illnesses best treated in the U.S, include: AEA International, (800) 752-4195.

Recommended Insurance Posture

Health insurance is also an important consideration. Travelers should ensure that they have adequate health coverage while in Mexico.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Food and potable water standards are different than those of the U.S. One should take normal tourist precautions with regard to drinking water, eating fresh fruits, vegetables, and salads.

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

OSAC Country Council Information

Mexico City supports an active OSAC Country Council, with a large number of member companies. OSAC events are expected in the Matamoros area in 2015. For information on OSAC and future Matamoros OSAC events, contact RSO Brian J. Hess at 011-52-868-812-4402, ex. 2060. For more information regarding the Mexico Country Council, contact the Regional Security Office at U.S. Embassy Mexico City. To reach OSAC's Western Hemisphere team, please email OSACWHA@state.gov.

U.S. Consulate Location and Contact Information

Consulate Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Consulate Matamoros

Calle Primera 2002

Matamoros, Mexico

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Consulate Contact Numbers

Telephone - 812-4402

Mexico country code: 52

Matamoros area code: 868

Regional Security Office Hours: 0800-1700 M-F

RSO Duty Officer can be contacted 24/7 by calling the Consulate Switchboard Operator

Website: <http://matamoros.usconsulate.gov/>

Nearby Posts

Embassy Mexico City: <http://mexico.usembassy.gov/>

Consulate Ciudad Juarez: <http://ciudadjuarez.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Guadalajara: <http://guadalajara.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Hermosillo: <http://hermosillo.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Merida: <http://merida.usconsulate.gov/>

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Consulate Monterrey: <http://monterrey.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Nogales: <http://nogales.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Nuevo Laredo: <http://nuevolaredo.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Puerto Vallarta: http://guadalajara.usconsulate.gov/puerto_vallarta.html

Consulate Tijuana: <http://tijuana.usconsulate.gov/>

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

This region remains a critical threat environment for crime. The dangerous and unpredictable nature of violence and crime in Matamoros argues for extreme caution on the part of any traveler into the city. If travel cannot be deferred, travelers should exercise extreme caution when visiting. Should travel to this region be necessary, visitors are urged to remain alert and exercise extreme caution during their stay. Travelers should carry a working cell phone at all times and should know where to go in case of an emergency. Travelers should leave valuables and irreplaceable items at home. All visitors are encouraged to make use of hotel safes when available, avoid wearing obviously expensive jewelry or designer clothing, and carry only the cash or credit cards that will be needed for each outing.

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Travelers should stick to well-known, well-populated routes and should avoid traveling at night. Be alert to your surroundings, even when in areas generally considered safe. Be aware of popular scams and robbery tactics used to distract your attention. Travelers should trust their instincts and be prepared to depart any establishment where they feel at risk.

Minimize valuables and do not carry large sums of money while in crowded, urban areas. Avoid wearing jewelry and carry a clutch purse or a neck purse instead of a shoulder bag. Carry a wallet in the front trouser/jacket pocket. Never leave shopping bags or merchandise unattended. Maintain a low profile: do not advertise the fact that you are American. Dress casually, keep valuables out of sight, and do not draw attention to yourself with your actions.

When hiring domestic help, vet them to the greatest extent possible. Ensure that they are trained not to volunteer information to strangers or to allow access of workers without prior authorization.

Vary your routine: Be unpredictable in your movements; vary your routes from home to the office, schools, or other locations as well as your departure/arrival times. Be alert to possible surveillance. Note any individual who appears out of place along your routes. Avoid sitting outside at restaurants. Instead, try to find a seat in an area not clearly visible from the street.

U.S. citizens should be cautious when using ATMs in Mexico. Cloning/counterfeiting of debit/credit cards occurs, and travelers are advised to check their account activity online at least weekly to detect fraudulent charges early. Visitors are also advised to avoid using bank machines in dark, isolated areas. It is recommended that visitors on day trips use ATMs or exchange currency in the U.S. prior to crossing into Mexico.

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The Consulate advises U.S. citizens to give security convoys a wide berth, as the TCOs have been known to engage them without regard to civilian casualties. Travelers are advised to remain cautious and to identify potential “safe havens” if violence breaks out in their area. Maintaining communication with travelers to this area is critical in case of an emergency.

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