



Bolivia 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Surveillance; Theft; Fraud; Kidnapping; Financial Security; Carjacking; Burglary; Assault; Drug Trafficking; Winter weather; Landslides and mudslides; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Floods; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement

Western Hemisphere > Bolivia; Western Hemisphere > Bolivia > La Paz

4/26/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Medium

Crime Threats

Tourists observing reasonable precautions can generally walk the streets in most areas of major cities without becoming a victim of crime; however, violent crimes can affect U.S. citizens and unwary tourists. Even Santa Cruz, by far the most criminally active city in Bolivia, enjoys a level of security comparable to larger U.S. cities.

The general crime rate in Bolivia is at/above the U.S. national average. Crimes include: fraud, confidence scams, kidnappings, pickpocketing, etc. Street crime is common in the major cities, particularly in markets and commercial districts. Pickpocketing, purse snatching, slashing pocketbooks/pants pockets, and theft of jewelry/cell phones are routinely reported by

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tourists and visitors. This modus operandi has also been very successful at the airports in La Paz and Santa Cruz. Thieves typically operate in groups of two or more. Usually, one or two members of the group will create a distraction, and others surreptitiously rob the victim.

Increasing numbers of U.S. citizens have fallen victim to fraud related to their credit/debit cards. "Skimming," the theft of credit card information during an otherwise legitimate transaction, is likely to occur in restaurants or bars where the waiter takes the victim's card out of the owner's view.

Thefts from vehicles are a significant, pervasive problem. Unattended vehicles are broken into, and the computer modules, spare tires, stereos, headrests, and other valuables are often stolen. Such crimes are not exclusive to business and shopping districts; they occur in residential areas as well. Carjacking and vehicle theft remain the most common crimes in Santa Cruz.

U.S. citizen residents have been victimized by residential burglary. Thefts of unsecured bicycles, gardening tools, pets, and lawn furniture are fairly common. Furthermore, thefts from inside the home by household staff, workmen, and other visitors are not uncommon.

Violent crimes (assaults, robberies) against foreigners are statistically low, but they do occur.

Cybersecurity Issues

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Cyber crime is not a major concern. Use of computers by the local population is low, and the level of sophistication with computers is also low.

Other Areas of Concern

There are no restricted travel areas/zones in Bolivia. However, due to occasional civil unrest and the popularity of roadblocks by protesting segments of the population and the destructive power of the rainy season on unimproved roads, travelers are advised to check on the road conditions and status before departing on overland trips. U.S. citizens visiting the Chapare and Yungas regions should monitor local news and media before traveling, particularly when transiting areas where coca leaf eradication efforts are ongoing.

Stay particularly alert for crime in La Paz near the San Francisco church, black market, markets on Sagarnaga Street and Sopocachi Street, and municipal bus stations/terminals. Likewise, due to increased pickpocketing and mugging after dark, travelers are advised not to walk through the area known as the "Prado" after dark.

Santa Cruz suffers from drug-related criminal activity, and travelers should maintain increased situational awareness.

Transportation-Safety Situation

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Road Safety and Road Conditions

Outside the major cities, road conditions are hazardous. Many roads are not paved, and the remainder are topped with gravel/dirt. Unpaved roads can be quite hazardous during the rainy season (December-March), when rock slides and road/bridge washouts are common. Many winding stretches are insufficiently lighted mountainous areas, without guard rails, traffic signs, or designated traffic lanes. The mountainous areas pose even greater challenges, with weather conditions varying from blizzards to heavy rain storms and narrow, unpaved roads that are frequently blocked by rock/mud slides.

The North Yungas road (from La Paz toward Coroico and Caranavi) has earned the dubious designation of "The World's Most Dangerous Road" and has become a hub for thrill-seeking mountain cyclists. Press report weekly about accidents along the road, usually involving buses and multiple fatalities. A better alternative, "Carretera Cotapata – Santa Barbara," better known as "Carretera nueva a Coroico" should be used. Many of the roads north of La Paz that pass through Guanay, Mapiri, Consata, Apolo, and Sorata are extremely dangerous due to landslides and narrow roadways traversing sheer cliffs. Compounding this, these roads are lightly traveled, and motorists involved in accidents or encountering mechanical problems often find themselves miles from the nearest village with little hope of assistance from infrequently passing motorists. In addition, fast moving streams and rivers cross many roads in Beni province. Rivers, many with no bridges, frequently cross the road between La Paz and San Borja. Some of these crossings have barges that are propelled by a pull rope and pulley system. Travel along less-utilized routes is dangerous due to poor roads, reckless drivers, and poorly-maintained buses/trucks.

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The general disregard for traffic laws makes driving particularly dangerous. Pedestrians, with a general inattentiveness to traffic, pose a hazard to drivers. Accidents involving pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorcycle/moped drivers are common in both urban and rural areas. Added dangers are the lack of formal training for most drivers, lack of lights on vehicles at night, and drunk/overly tired drivers, including commercial bus drivers.

Most roads are rarely patrolled by police and have many isolated stretches between villages. Consequently, traffic accidents and vehicle breakdowns are particularly hazardous.

To avoid carjacking or theft from your vehicle while you are stopped at intersections, keep your doors locked and windows rolled up. Theft of the vehicle's operating computer and sound system is a common crime. The installation of a car alarm is strongly recommended. Also, if you purchase a car radio, look for a model that can be removed and locked in the trunk. Keep your vehicle sterile, storing anything that would entice a thief out of plain view. 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 of your visit. If this is not possible, leave your car at home and take a taxi.

Prior to road travel, ensure that your vehicle is in good operating condition, paying particular attention to the engine, tires, brakes, head/tail lights, spare tire/jack, horn, and oil/gas/brake/coolant fluid levels. The following items are recommended for extended road trips: Cellular telephone with charger; An extra spare tire; Portable gas can of gasoline with funnel; Potable water and non-perishable food items; First Aid kit; Camping gear (sleeping bag, blanket, stove, etc); Fire extinguisher; and an Emergency tool kit with flashlight with additional batteries, battery operated radio, extra fan belt/drive belt, extra fuses/spark plugs/light bulbs, duplicate ignition key, screwdrivers (regular and Phillips head), socket wrench set, pliers, wire, electrical tape, jumper cables, compressed air tire inflator, flares/reflectors, and collapsible shovel. Head/tail lights are held in place by easily accessible

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screws. Install grilles around the lights or tap out the heads of these screws. If your spare tire is mounted on the outside of the vehicle, secure it in place with chain/padlock or similar device. Or, remove the spare tire and reinstall it only for extended trips outside the city. Replace one lug nut on each wheel with a specially keyed bolt that locks or can only be removed with a special attachment to the tire iron. Emblems should be secured with rivets.

Public Transportation Conditions

Intra-departmental public transportation is poor, except along the more frequently traveled routes where roads have been upgraded and maintained (iLa Paz-Cochabamba, Cochabamba-Santa Cruz, and La Paz-Oruro). Bus service along these routes is generally safe, although accidents occur periodically, often with fatalities. Urban bus transportation is considered risky for foreigners, with frequent incidents of theft and robbery reported.

Other Travel Conditions

Protestors often block city streets and highways, and public transportation tends to be disrupted during protests.

Terrorism Threat

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Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

While the government has a tenuous relationship with the U.S., most Bolivians regard Americans and Westerners in a positive manner and are friendly to foreigners.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Post Political Violence Rating: Medium

Civil Unrest

Student, labor union, and indigenous protests against government policies are a regular feature of political life. While disruptive, especially to transportation, violence is usually limited and localized. Protestors occasionally burn tires, throw Molotov cocktails, engage in destruction of property, and detonate dynamite during demonstrations, but fatalities have been rare. Some communities have used protests and strikes to obtain promises of increased government spending on social benefits and infrastructure. Demonstrations, road blocks, protests, and other forms of civil unrest are common, especially in La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba. Some common areas for civil disturbances in La Paz:

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The Prado area

Student plaza

Main highway toll booth area in El Alto

Plaza San Francisco

Plaza Murillo

Bridge of the Americas

Plaza Bolivia (across from the Radisson Hotel)

Plaza Garita de Lima

Sopocachi (road blockages)

Obrajes (road blockages, marches)

Actions have been non-violent and directed against the government. U.S. citizens are normally only affected indirectly by having to contend with traffic disturbances and transportation stoppages. It is against the law for foreigners to engage in political activity. Below are some few examples of protests in 2014-15:

In 2014, several thousand coca growers protested at the U.S. Embassy to express their outlooks on the coca plant. These protests resulted in the closure of the U.S. Embassy for one day.

In 2014, the U.S. Embassy received several hundred protestors against Israeli actions in

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Palestine.

In 2014, taxi driver unions blocked roads throughout La Paz with large rocks. These protests resulted in the closure of the U.S. Embassy for one day.

In 2014, the U.S. Embassy received several small protests regarding the Cuban 5 prisoners.

In 2015, multiple Bolivian Miners Unions (approximately 1,500 people) protested in the El Centro area near the Embassy.

Multiple smaller demonstrations occur on a weekly basis, often closing down roadways and plazas in/around La Paz.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Earthquakes are a concern. Data gathered by the San Calixto Observatory in La Paz shows there have been 13 reported incidents of seismic activity since January 1994; the last significant earthquake was in November 2011 when a 6.7 earthquake hit San Ignacio de Moxos.

Travelers should be aware that low lying areas in Beni, Pando, Tarija, Potosi, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba experience annual flooding, especially during the rainy season (December-March).

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In light of these environmental conditions, it is important that travelers and residents maintain an emergency supply of food/water and establish an emergency plan with their family members or fellow travelers.

Privacy Concerns

There are very strict privacy laws that govern the release of personal information; however, widespread corruption and poor record keeping present vulnerabilities to privacy.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

There is an abundance of pirated merchandise readily available from street vendors.

Drug-related Crimes

Bolivia is a producer of coca leaf, and a source/transit country for cocaine, which is shipped to markets in Latin America and Europe. The major agricultural areas of the coca leaf are the Chapare and Yungas regions. Government coca eradication efforts can result in violent reactions by cocaleros. U.S. citizens are encouraged to contact the Consular Section of the

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U.S. Embassy prior to traveling to the Chapare and Yungas regions. Although there is a concern about the growing presence of representatives from Colombian, Brazilian, and other narco-trafficking groups, Bolivia has not experienced the narco-violence seen in other countries.

Police Response

The police have limited resources, particularly outside major cities. In many cases, officers assigned to smaller villages/towns do not have a vehicle to respond to traffic accidents or criminal activity. Even when resources are available, response is extremely slow. U.S. citizens may contact the Consular section at the U.S. Embassy for assistance in dealing with the police.

While traveling in Bolivia, you are subject to Bolivian laws. Penalties for possession of illegal drugs are very strict, and offenders receive lengthy prison sentences if convicted. Those accused of drug offenses are often imprisoned two years or more before being tried and sentenced. Prison conditions are extremely primitive by U.S. standards.

U.S. citizens are advised to cooperate with the police if stopped or questioned.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

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If you are arrested, under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and customary international law, you may request that the authorities alert the U.S. Embassy or Consulate. Outside of major cities, awareness of international protocols is uneven. The U.S. government has no authority to intervene in Bolivian legal matters.

If you feel that you are a victim of police corruption, bribery, or harassment, contact American Citizen Services at the U.S. Embassy for assistance (U.S. citizens in Santa Cruz or Cochabamba should contact the Consular Agents in those cities). The Consular Sections and Consular Agents maintain a list of attorneys in their respective areas.

Crime Victim Assistance

The police emergency telephone number is 110, but response time can be lengthy.

If involved in a traffic accident or victimized by crime, you may be required to accompany the investigating officer to the police station to file a complaint or respond to questions. If a police report is required for an insurance claim, a nominal fee will be charged.

Police/Security Agencies

The police are divided into two major branches:

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the Fuerza Especial de Lucha Contra el Narcotráfico (FELCN), which focuses on narco-trafficking and related crimes, and

the Fuerza Especial de Lucha Contra el Crimen (FELCC), which focuses on crimes not associated with narco-trafficking (kidnapping, robbery, etc.).

Smaller units exist, with jurisdictions in more specialized areas, such as the traffic police, or local commands responsible for community policing duties, but major crimes come under investigation by one of the two major branches.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care in large cities is adequate for most purposes but of varying quality. Medical facilities, even in La Paz, are not adequate to handle serious medical conditions.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

LA PAZ

Clinica del Sur, 3539 Avenida Hernando Siles, Obrajes. Tel: (591) (2) 278-4001, 278-4002, 278-4003

Arco Iris German Hospital, Av. 15 Abril, Barrio Grafico, Villa Fatima; Tel: (591) (2) 221-6021

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SANTA CRUZ

Clinica Folianini, Avenida Irala 468; Tel: (591) (3)336-2211, 335-3075

COCHABAMBA

Centro Medico Belga, Calle Antezana 0455 (between Calles Venezuela and Paccieri); Tel: (591) (4) 422-9407, 423-1403, 425-0928

Recommended Insurance Posture

The Department of State strongly urges U.S. citizens to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm that their policy applies overseas and that it will cover emergency expenses (medical evacuation). U.S. medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the U.S. unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Further, U.S. Medicare/Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the U.S. However, many travel agents and private companies offer insurance plans that will cover health care expenses incurred overseas. 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 at www.travel.state.gov.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

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For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/bolivia.htm>. CDC International Traveler's hotline (U.S.): (800) 232-4636

OSAC Country Council Information

There is not an active Country Council in Bolivia.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Embassy

2780 Avenida Arce

La Paz

Embassy Contact Numbers

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Switchboard (including after-hours calls): (591) (2) 216-8000

Regional Security Office: (591) (2) 216-8300; e-mail: LAPAZRSO@state.gov

Consular email: consularlapaz@state.gov

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

Embassy Guidance

U.S. citizens are encouraged to register their travel with the Department of State through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) at <https://step.state.gov>. U.S. citizens with questions or concerns about their travel or who need assistance can contact American Citizens Services.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Scams

In a typical street scam, a thief poses as a police officer (tourist police, immigration official) instructing the victim to accompany him to the police station using a nearby taxi. This ruse can

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result in injury and the loss of all personal effects. Visitors should demand that the U.S. Embassy be contacted and not enter the cab or tell the police officer to request a marked police vehicle to take them to the nearest police station.

Situational Awareness Best Practices

To lower your risk of personal robbery or other non-violent crimes, leave valuables in a safe place or do not travel with them. Maintain a low profile and dress casually, keeping valuables out of sight, and do not draw attention to yourself. Never carry more than you are willing to lose and never carry anything you consider priceless or irreplaceable. Make use of hotel safes when available, avoid wearing obviously expensive jewelry/designer clothing, and carry only the cash or credit cards (disperse them on your person) that you will need on each outing. Carry a wallet in the front trouser pocket or front jacket pocket with a zipper. Carry a clutch purse or a neck purse instead of a shoulder bag.

Only change money at banks/hotels, as street exchanges can lead to fraud/robbery. Pay for items in cash when possible and use credit cards at larger establishments (hotels). To avoid skimming, take the credit/debit card to the register yourself and never let the card out of your sight. Also, be sure to monitor your bank account or credit card statement frequently.

Travel in groups when possible, avoid hailing taxis off the street or using unofficial taxis, and exercise caution in the early morning hours.

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Be alert to possible surveillance. Note any individual who appears out of place along your routes. Avoid sitting outside at restaurants; try to find a seat in an area not clearly visible from the street. Stay alert to pickpockets when in crowds and when taking public transportation, and be conscious of distractions created to target you. Never leave shopping bags or merchandise unattended. Increase your awareness of your belongings when in congested areas (airports, bus stations). Keep a copy of passport and credit card information and the telephone numbers to report a lost or stolen credit card. In the event of a robbery, the Embassy urges travelers to comply with the demands of the aggressors while attempting to observe identifying characteristics of the perpetrators. No item is worth risking serious injury or death.

Any unsecured items should be brought indoors during the evening.

Vetting domestic help to the greatest extent possible and monitoring visitors inside the house are necessary precautions. Ensure domestic employees are trained not to volunteer information to strangers or to allow access of workers without prior authorization.

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