



Benin 2016 Crime & Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Disease Outbreak; Theft; Assault; Burglary; Rape/Sexual Violence; Fraud; Cyber; Religious Terrorism; Riots/Civil Unrest; Maritime; Floods; Earthquakes; Employee Health Safety; Counterfeiting; Drug Trafficking

Africa > Benin; Africa > Benin > Cotonou

5/23/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Post Crime Rating: Critical

Crime Threats

The full spectrum of criminal activity can be found in Cotonou. Official Americans, businesspersons, and visitors are victimized primarily by crimes of opportunity (pickpocketing, purse snatching, theft of valuables from vehicles, assaults, residential burglaries). In particular, low-level criminal activity occurs in crowded areas (Dantokpa Market in central Cotonou). Criminals take advantage of foreigners attempting to navigate through the crowded markets.

The Embassy is aware of several armed robberies in 2015, involving guns, knives, and/or machetes. Most of these attacks ended violently and occurred late at night or in the early

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morning hours. Locals report that the mornings are not safe until around 6:30 a.m. when the streets are occupied. The robberies were crimes of opportunity with the perpetrators seeking cash or valuables and targeting specific people. The typical modus operandi consists of 2-4 perpetrators, traveling on motorcycles/scooters, targeting victims walking alone in poorly illuminated areas. One or two perpetrators usually jump off of the motorcycle with a knife or machete and quickly rob the unsuspecting victim.

In recent months, criminals have also committed residential break-ins in areas where expatriates typically reside.

Sexual assaults do occur in Cotonou and are usually associated with alcohol-related incidents. Some victims have reported that perpetrators used date-rape drugs to assault the victims.

Cybersecurity Issues

Cyber crime is a real concern. The Embassy frequently receives reports from Americans residing in the U.S. who have become victims of online financial scams originating (or claiming to originate) in Benin. Scam artists have used the mail and Internet to email people in the U.S. claiming to need help and asking for money. These typically include Internet scams in which a con artist attempts to convince a victim to send money to the criminal. These fraudulent schemes can include lotteries, online dating services, inheritance notices, work permits/job offers, bank overpayments, or even make it appear that you are helping a friend in trouble. Please refer to the fraud warning on the Embassy's website: <http://cotonou.usembassy.gov/scam.html>.

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Other Areas of Concern

Many locals do not like having their pictures taken, and photographing certain religious objects/sites is not welcome. For more information, please review OSAC's Report "Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography."

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions deteriorate noticeably outside of Cotonou. Traffic conditions can be treacherous during the day and are unsafe at night. It is not unusual to see pedestrian traffic on all motorways at all hours of the day, and motorcyclists often do not use turn signals or headlights after dark. With the exception of the most popular restaurant areas (Haie Vive, Cocotier, Littoral neighborhoods), driving at night even in Cotonou is discouraged. Overall vehicle maintenance and upkeep of large trucks and buses are poor at best. Large trucks break down or overturn frequently due to poor maintenance and road conditions. Many road accidents result in death. Carjacking is a major problem in rural areas with armed bandits placing barricades in the roadway hoping to slow or halt vehicles.

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Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation is not recommended. The public transportation system is poor, even in major metropolitan areas. The most common form of transport are licensed motorcycle taxis, known as zemijahns, though many are unlicensed, and Embassy personnel are prohibited from utilizing them.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Cadjehoun Airport is an old two-terminal airport. The airport lacks many amenities and can get crowded. There have been instances of airport security trying to extort money from passengers. The main airlines to utilize the airport for flights to Europe are Air France, Air Brussels, and Turkish Airways. Each of these airlines conducts a secondary security search of passengers prior to boarding the plane. There are also many regional airlines with routes throughout Africa.

Terrorism Threat

Post Terrorism Rating: Low

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

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There are no known indigenous terrorist organizations, though with porous borders there are concerns about terrorists entering the country to fundraise, ship supplies, or create incidents.

Boko Haram affects two of Benin's neighbors, utilizing small assault tactics, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), and Suicide Vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIED) to target churches, government installations, educational institutions, and entertainment venues. Benin has agreed to join the multinational force to combat Boko Haram, leading to concerns of a backlash.

Recent events in Bamako (Mali) and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) have raised concerns locally about possible terrorist activities in Benin, though there have to date been no terrorist incidents in Benin.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

American citizens and Westerners are generally well-received. There is little anti-American sentiment, though there can be some harder feelings toward France, which colonized Benin.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

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Benin is one of the more stable democracies in West Africa. While political violence continues to be low, recent incidents have increased concerns regarding stability. Trade unions are increasingly politicized and have been the stimulus for recent confrontations with the government. This type of activity could escalate toward presidential elections in 2016.

Post Political Violence Rating: Low

Civil Unrest

Public dissension over economic and social conditions and local politics do occur. The government recognizes freedom of assembly and association and authorizes public demonstrations. Demonstrations typically begin/end in front of government facilities in Cotonou. While most demonstrations are non-violent, the risk of violence and clashes with police may occur. It is recommended that official Americans, businesspersons, visitors, and other bystanders avoid all public demonstrations.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

There has been no reporting of religious or ethnic violence, despite the diversity of ethnicities and religions present. However, there are concerns of inter-communal violence related to land and grazing issues between nomadic herding people and subsistence farmers.

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Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Ocean currents can be deadly, and locals drown regularly.

Floods are common during the rainy season (mid-March-June). Significant flooding can occur in northern Benin, affecting transit between Niger and Benin. Due to lack of infrastructure and drainage capabilities, severe rain storms quickly overwhelm roadways and villages, making major routes impassable and can affect transportation within Cotonou.

While earthquakes are rare, one occurred in June 2010 off the coast of Benin. The earthquake was felt in Cotonou but caused no physical damage. Americans should have a shelter-in-place plan.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns

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Most working conditions are unsafe due to poor structural integrity, electrical problems, and imprecise oversight; one example was an explosion at a chemical plant in January 2013 in Porto Novo, resulting in deaths and several injuries.

Utility outages are a common occurrence.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

Economic espionage is rare, though counterfeit goods, to include counterfeit and fraudulent medicines, are a problem in local markets.

Privacy Concerns

Americans should do their best to keep their personal information private.

Drug-related Crimes

While illegal drugs are present, organized crime and the associated armed violence is not as prevalent as in other countries.

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Police Response

Police responsiveness to reported crimes is limited due to lack of equipment and training. The police response and investigative capabilities are severely limited.

Weapons are common. Machetes are regularly carried as a common utility tool, and guns (both manufactured and home-made) are available.

Americans should be aware of the nearest police/gendarme station to their location.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment:

There are no known incidents of Americans being harassed or unfairly detained by the police, but American citizens are advised to contact the U.S. Embassy (Tel: (229) 21-300650)) to report any incidents of police detention or harassment. The Regional Security Office maintains a strong working relationship with law enforcement authorities and is often immediately contacted following any known incident involving an American citizen. The prisons are poorly operated, unsafe, and overcrowded.

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Crime Victim Assistance

If a foreigner is the victim of a crime, s/he should go in person to the nearest police station. Since French is the official language of Benin, it is advisable to have a French speaker on hand to report a crime. Americans are advised to contact the US Embassy's American Citizens Section for assistance.

Emergency Police: 117

Fire Department/Ambulance: 118

Police/Security Agencies

While the National Police have primary jurisdiction in most major cities, the National Gendarmerie patrols most of the rural areas and government facilities. The different police units fall under the Director of the National Police (within the Ministry of the Interior) including: immigration, financial crimes, judicial crimes, cyber crimes, SWAT/reaction teams, and drug units.

Medical Emergencies

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Health care is well below Western standards. Most hospitals and medical facilities do not have the supplies/necessary drugs for treatment of major illnesses/injuries. Travelers are advised to bring appropriate sufficient amounts of medication, as many prescription medications are not available. Medicines should only be purchased from reputable pharmacies. For more information, please refer to OSAC's Report, "Traveling with Medications." Most facilities require cash payment for service.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

Medical Facilities

Polyclinique Les Cocotiers B.P. 1227 Cadjehoun intersection across from Cadjehoun post office number: 30-14-31, 30-14-20 Dr. Assani.

Clinique d'Akpakpa (Boni) PK 2 on the road to Porto-Novo on the right: 33-14-37, 33-06-40. Contact Dr. Agboton (speaks English). The clinic is generally used for x-rays.

The following doctors can be consulted in their offices and make house calls:

Dr. Dominique Atchade: 30-10-70. He speaks English. Office is located at the National University Hospital (CNHU).

Dr. Anne Brunet Apithy: 31-35-26 (office). She speaks English. Office is located in "La Residence" neighborhood.

Dr. A.M. Caudron-Tidjani: 31-56-34. Office is located in the "SCOA-Gbeto" neighborhood.

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Available Air Ambulance Services

SkyLink Aviation, Inc.

Website: www.skylinkaviation.com

Recommended Insurance Posture

Serious illnesses/injuries often require travelers to be medically evacuated where adequate medical attention is available. Such “medevac” services are very expensive and are generally available only to travelers who either have travel insurance that covers medevac services or who are able to pay for the service in advance; it may range from US\$40,000-\$200,000.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Travelers should avoid swimming in any lakes, rivers, or still bodies of water, as most bodies of water have been found to contain parasites. Schistosomiasis is caused by a parasitic worm that is spread by fresh water snails. The larval stage of the worm can burrow through your skin when in contact with contaminated fresh water. Avoid wading, swimming, bathing, or washing in, or drinking from bodies of fresh water such as canals, lakes, rivers, streams, or springs.

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Benin may also have meningitis outbreaks.

Diarrheal illness is very common among travelers even in large cities and luxury accommodations. Travelers can diminish diarrhea risk through scrupulous washing of hands and use of hand sanitizers, especially before food preparation and eating. The greatest risk of traveler's diarrhea is from contaminated food. Eat only food that is cooked and served hot; avoid food that has been sitting on a buffet. Eat raw fruits and vegetables only if you have washed them in clean water or peeled them. Drink only beverages from factory-sealed containers, and avoid ice (because it may have been made from unclean water). For more information, please refer to OSAC's Report, "I'm Drinking What in My Water?." Talk to your doctor about short course antibiotics and loperamide to take with you in case of diarrhea.

Even in urban areas, dogs may have rabies, and bites/scratches from dogs, bats, or other mammals should be immediately cleaned with soap and water and medical evaluation sought to determine if additional rabies immunization is warranted.

Travelers are advised to update their shot records prior to travel and be prepared to be screened for possible Ebola exposure at major points of entry. All routine U.S. immunizations (measles, mumps, rubella, chicken pox, Hepatitis A, and tetanus) should also be up to date prior to arrival, all of which are more common in Benin than in the U.S. For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/benin?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-double-001.

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OSAC Country Council Information

The U.S. Embassy in Benin has an active OSAC Country Council. Please contact the Regional Security Officer for additional information about membership and events. To reach OSAC's Africa team, please email OSACAF@state.gov.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

U.S. Embassy Cotonou, Rue Caporal Anani 01 BP 2012, Cotonou Benin

Hours: ACS emergencies 24/7; standard ACS Tue, 10:30-12:30 and Thurs, 2:00-4:00.

Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy Operator: (229) 21-300650

Fax: (229) 21-30-66-82

Regional Security Officer: (229) 21-300650 ext 4218/4259

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Medical Unit: (229) 21-300650 ext 4249

Consular Affairs: (229) 21-300650 ext 4209

Political/Economic Section: (229) 21-300650 ext 4205/4206

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

Embassy Guidance

If you are going to reside in or visit Benin, please take the time to tell our Embassy about your presence in-country. If you enroll, we can keep you up to date with important safety and security announcements. It will also help your friends and family get in touch with you in an emergency. To enroll your stay or visit, click the STEP (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) button at <http://travel.state.gov>. Consular information is available at: http://www.travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1113.html.

Travelers should check with their sponsoring organization to ensure they have the correct documentation in place or risk penalties (detention, fines, deportation).

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

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Situational Awareness Best Practices

Be aware of your surroundings. Travelers are strongly advised to review their personal safety and security posture, to remain vigilant, and to be cautious when frequenting prominent public places/landmarks. Avoid areas such as dark alleyways and overgrown brush where assailants can easily conceal themselves. Avoid walking around alone after dark. Walking outside at night or alone on the beaches is not recommended, and additional caution is advised on poorly illuminated streets to include the Haie Vive residential neighborhood at night. Try to walk in groups. Beware of street children. Vary your travel times/routes. Travelers should maintain a high level of vigilance when in public, especially when walking. Keep valuables out of sight.

Change direction or depart the area if you notice suspicious people, groups, or activity.

Refrain from carrying credit cards, large sums of cash, or valuables that you are unwilling to give up in a robbery. Leave valuables in a hotel safe or other secure place. Avoid carrying handbags. Keep wallets and other valuables where they will be less susceptible to pickpockets. Always carry a copy of your passport. If you are threatened with violence over money/belongings, RSO recommends complying with demands and attempting to end the confrontation as quickly as possible.

Female travelers should be cautious if traveling alone.

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Foreign currency should be exchanged in banks, hotels, and other legally authorized outlets, and proper receipts should be obtained for the transactions. Credit cards are not accepted at most hotels, restaurants, shops, or other local facilities, and credit card fraud is common.

Do not buy counterfeit or pirated goods.

Carry your cell phone at all times. Inform others of where you are going, if possible. Make sure to have the Consular Affairs and Post One phone numbers programmed into your phone. If you notice suspicious vehicles following you, take note of vehicle descriptions and license plate numbers.

Only give your keys to a trusted person. Keep your doors and vehicle locked even when you are at home. Identify a secure lockable area away from windows where you can shelter-in-place in case of an intruder. Alarms, guards, and dogs are outstanding deterrents to criminals.

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