China 2017 Crime & Safety Report: Beijing

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Terrorism; Political Violence; Crime; Surveillance; Information Security; Economic Espionage

East Asia & Pacific > China; East Asia & Pacific > China > Beijing

5/10/2017

Overall Crime and Safety Situation
U.S. Embassy Beijing does not assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms appearing in this report. The ACS Unit cannot recommend a particular individual or establishment and assumes no responsibility for the quality of services provided.

THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED BEIJING AS BEING A LOW-THREAT LOCATION FOR CRIME DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS.

Please review OSAC’s China webpage for proprietary analytic reports, Consular Messages, and contact information.

Beijing, with a population of more than 20 million, is generally considered safe when compared to other urban areas of a similar size. The income disparity in Chinese society has been a source of social friction and has been identified as a root cause of much of the economic crime experienced in Beijing.

Petty crimes (pickpocketing, credit card fraud, financial scams) do occur with some regularity, often targeting Americans and other foreigners. Petty crime occurs on public transportation, in shopping areas, and at tourist sites. Thieves commonly target cell phones, cameras, and
other high value items. Men should place their wallets in front pockets, while women should
drape the shoulder straps of purses across their body, keeping them in view and under
positive control at all times. If you use a backpack, do not place items of worth inside. Hotel
safes should be used, but are not a failsafe method to safeguard your belongings. Travelers
are encouraged to make copies of their passport photo page and visa, as well as credit card
numbers (to include telephone contact information in the event the card is stolen); these
copies should be stored in their hotel or residence in the event the actual items are stolen. As
a general rule, lesser developed areas in major cities have a higher rate of crime.

Violent crimes, including workplace assaults, do occur and may garner significant media
attention, but these are not considered the norm. Violent crime affecting the expatriate
community most often occurs in the bars/clubs of Beijing’s nightlife districts. Cultural
miscommunication, xenophobia, and the consumption of alcohol all play a role, with certain
bars garnering a reputation for violence. Bar fights are common, and 2016 has seen an
increase in reports of violence against Westerners. Bouncers often play a role in the violence
and have been physically aggressive with patrons. Statistically, more crimes of opportunity
transpire during early morning hours; for example, individuals who frequent bars, nightclubs
and similar establishments are more likely to be involved in physical altercations after
midnight. Although the legal age for consuming alcohol is 18, most establishments do not
require identification. For more information, please review OSAC’s Report “Shaken: The
Don’ts of Alcohol Abroad.” Some bars are overcrowded and safety standards are not routinely
enforced. Prostitutes and drugs are known to be present in some clubs.

Criminals use various scams to defraud foreign victims.

One scam involves locals approaching tourists and asking to practice English, visit an art
house, or experience a traditional tea ceremony. After tourists partake in the services, they
are charged very high sums (up to U.S.$1,000), often with a group of threatening men
demanding payment.

Scam artists have also sent text messages and emails referring to fraudulent bills and/or
traffic tickets to trick people into paying money.
Other techniques involve criminals posing as police and levying fake criminal charges against their victims, and then extorting money from them.

Another scam involves prostitutes taking foreigners to a room, where they are assaulted and robbed by small-time organized criminals. In such instances, victims are forced to use their credit/debit cards to access cash. Such robberies usually begin in bars and clubs frequented by foreigners.

In a limited number of cases, foreigners have reported being sexually assaulted, having their luggage stolen, and/or being charged exorbitant fares after using black (unofficial) taxis. Luggage theft typically involves a taxi transporting individuals to or from the airport and the driver intentionally leaving the scene before the bags have been unloaded.

Cybersecurity Issues
China is known for the use of sophisticated cyber capabilities (spear phishing, targeting of mobile devices, social engineering/network manipulation). Viruses, malware, and other forms of malicious software are common.

Transportation-Safety Situation
Road Safety and Road Conditions
The physical road conditions in larger cities are good; in contrast, road conditions in rural areas are usually poor. Beijing adds 1,200 newly registered vehicles to the roads every day, causing already congested roads to come to a standstill during rush hour. Additionally, there are a great number of pedestrians and bikers that weave through traffic, creating a hazardous condition to drivers.

Since private ownership of vehicles was not allowed until the last decade, most drivers are inexperienced and traffic laws are routinely ignored. According to China’s official English-language newspaper, China Daily, nearly 50% of accidents in Beijing are caused by drivers who have less than four years of driving experience; the newspaper also reported that traffic accidents were the leading cause of death to individuals under 45 years old.
Traffic signals are absent at key locations, and road closures are poorly or not marked at all. Yielding to oncoming traffic/pedestrians or using turn signals are virtually unheard of. Busy roads often lack shoulders, forcing drivers to contend with many bicycles in driving lanes. Where there are shoulders, cars generally use them as another travel lane, especially on crowded highways. It is common to see drivers back up on the highway to get to an exit they
missed, stop on the side of the highway to drop off passengers and slowly turn back into high-speed travel lanes, or veer horizontally across several lanes of traffic to get to an off ramp. Individuals driving under the influence of alcohol are also fairly common. Policing is done remotely by video camera, mainly through the use of speed traps. All drivers must possess a Chinese driver’s license; international/U.S. licenses are not valid. The RSO continues to respond to dozens of traffic accidents involving American diplomats on an annual basis; most are minor and are resolved on the scene. In many cases, bicyclists strike a static/moving vehicle. In traffic accidents, the foreigner is often ruled at fault, regardless of the actual cause of the accident. Individuals involved in traffic accidents are encouraged not to argue with the other party involved, regardless of who is responsible, and to defuse situations in a safe, expeditious manner. Traffic patterns and driving habits make crossing the street in Beijing a danger, as pedestrians do not have the right-of-way, even when walking with the light. A limited number of crosswalks, poorly maintained sidewalks, and bike lanes that are not respected by motor vehicle drivers make all forms of non-vehicle transportation very risky.

Public Transportation Conditions
As one of the world’s most populous cities, all forms of public transportation in Beijing are crowded but can become dangerously so during peak times (the morning and evening commutes). Few Embassy personnel take public buses, as they are often overfilled to dangerous levels, have poor temperature controls, and do not provide route information in English. While the subway system is fairly extensive in the city center, many of the lines that serve the Embassy community in the city are among the most crowded. Families with small children cannot safely take the subway during even moderately busy periods. As a result of the break neck expansion of high-speed rail lines within the country, train safety remains a concern. Trains and train stations are extremely overcrowded during holiday travel periods; in 2014, 266 million travelers rode the country’s rail system during the Lunar New Year, surpassing the Hajj Pilgrimage as the world’s largest annual population movement. In recent years, train stations have been the target of several terrorist incidents in western and southwestern China that has resulted in a tense environment at stations across the country. Inter-city train trips can be quite long due to the large distances between most major cities. Individuals are encouraged to use official taxis (two-tone sedans in Beijing) that employ meters. If a driver refuses to use a meter, exit the vehicle and use another taxi. Beijing taxi fares are artificially suppressed, making taxis reasonably priced but difficult to hail; supply often falls far short of demand, especially during peak times. Taxis routinely refuse to stop for
foreigners, particularly those of African descent. Stories abound of foreigners who have been stranded for long periods because they could not get a taxi or the taxi driver demanded a huge surcharge. Taxi drivers often refuse to take fares that require them to leave the center of the city, making it very difficult for the large percentage of U.S. Embassy families who live in the suburbs to rely on taxis. Taxis rarely have working seatbelts.

Most drivers understand no English and are not well-versed in local destinations, so the probability of getting lost is high unless the passenger knows the exact destination and can explain it in Chinese. Visitors are advised to ask their hotels for taxi cards written in English and Mandarin that include the name/address of the hotel and other points of interest. The Embassy continues to receive reports of foreigners taking rickshaws or pedi-cabs at tourist sites in Beijing and being driven through hutongs (walled neighborhoods) where they are shaken down for money and eventually released unharmed. These incidents have taken place at tourist sites, such as Tiananmen Square and Houhai Park.

Aviation/Airport Conditions
Air travel out of Beijing, both domestic and international, remains quite expensive, as prices and competition are regulated by the government. Moreover, flight delays are the norm, making travel planning particularly difficult and often too unpredictable for weekend trips. Flights delays may result from sudden military closures and are not announced or explained to passengers. Beijing International Airport had frequent delays 2016, often making rail a preferred and more dependable mode of transportation.

Terrorism Threat
THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED BEIJING AS BEING A LOW-THREAT LOCATION FOR TERRORIST ACTIVITY DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT INTERESTS.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns
China’s domestic counterterrorism efforts remain primarily focused against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, the East Turkestan Islamic Party, ETIP), a Pakistan-based terrorist group that seeks independence for the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of northwest China. In public statements, Chinese government officials have singled out the “Three Evils” of extremism, separatism, and terrorism in Xinjiang as the main terrorist threat to the nation and characterized Uighur discontent as terrorist activity. Human rights organizations maintain that China uses counterterrorism as a pretext to suppress Uighurs, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group comprising a large percentage of the population in XUAR.
The lack of transparency and information provided about alleged terrorist incidents in China greatly complicates efforts to verify details of those and other violent acts. In many of the domestic incidents labeled as terrorism, China alleges that ETIM influenced or directed the violence through its online propaganda. China prevents foreign journalists and international observers from independently verifying official media accounts, which are often the only source of reporting on violent incidents. Foreign and non-state media access to information about 2016 incidents were heavily restricted and often limited to official accounts that were not timely and typically lacked detailed information.

In 2014, there were at least three terrorist incidents: two in Urumqi (XUAR) and one in Kunming (Yunnan province) that resulted in more than 30 deaths and more than 100 injuries. Two of the attacks took place at train stations (one using explosives, one using large knives) and one targeted a police station (with the perpetrator using an improvised explosive device). There were four terrorist incidents in 2013: three in the far west and one in Beijing. ETIM claimed responsibility for the Beijing attack, in which a vehicle careened into an ornamental bridge at Tiananmen Square and exploded. The incident resulted in the death of two tourists and the vehicle’s three occupants and injured nearly 40 others. It was the largest security incident in central Beijing in the last decade.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

There have been isolated incidents in China in which private Chinese citizens, not associated with a political or terrorist organization, have used indiscriminate violence for unknown or unclear motives.

In 2016, outside a Beijing church, a Jamaican woman was attacked by a Chinese national with a meat cleaver after being asked if she spoke Chinese. The Jamaican woman suffered severe cuts on her face and hands.

In 2015, a Chinese national approached a couple at a shopping mall in Sanlitun. The attacker murdered the woman, who was a Chinese national, and attacked her French husband with a samurai sword. The husband suffered severe cuts on his body but survived.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence
THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED BEIJING AS BEING A LOW-THREAT LOCATION FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT INTERESTS.

Civil Unrest
The government remains focused on maintaining social stability and preventing civil unrest over economic and social grievances. The largest, most violent incidents have taken place in ethnic minority areas, such as Tibet and XUAR, where grievances over human rights abuses and discriminatory policies have resulted in spontaneous outbursts of violence targeting the government and Han Chinese interests.

Post-specific Concerns
Natural disasters are not uncommon in China.

    In May 2008, a 7.9 earthquake struck Sichuan province, killing more than 69,000 people and leaving nearly five million homeless.

    Severe snowstorms have brought parts of the country to a virtual standstill. Snow removal is typically slow and is accomplished by employing thousands of laborers armed with shovels and brooms; even smaller-scale storms often lead to multiple traffic accidents.

    China’s southern coast is subject to heavy rainfall, flooding, and monsoons. In 2010, southern China experienced massive mudslides, resulting in significant property damage.

Critical Infrastructure Concerns
Worker safety and quality assurance are lacking in China, and accidents continue to plague China’s heavy industries. Commercial transportation accidents involving motorized transportation are relatively common due to poor driver training, overloaded buses, and a lack of safety checks.

    In August 2015, a series of explosions at a container storage station at the Port of Tianjin resulted in the death of over 100 people and hundreds of injuries. Fires caused by the initial explosions continued to burn uncontrolled throughout the weekend, repeatedly causing secondary explosions. Chinese state media reported that the initial blast was attributed to a warehouse owned by a firm that specialized in handling hazardous materials.
Economic Concerns

The distribution of counterfeit Chinese currency is a common risk. Unsuspecting Americans are passed fraudulent notes at restaurants, stores, ATMs and taxi cabs. Large numbers of 100 RMB and 50 RMB counterfeit notes circulate, while even fake 10 RMB and 20 RMB denominations have been introduced. A common tactic is seen in taxis is: a passenger pays with a 100 RMB note, a driver switches the note with a counterfeit bill and then returns it, saying it is counterfeit, and then the driver demands a genuine note. This may be repeated until individuals have lost several hundred RMB worth of genuine currency. For more information, see the OSAC Report “Common China Scams.”

Counterfeit products are readily available, but it is illegal to import them into the U.S. U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials have the authority to seize suspect goods and impose fines on travelers caught attempting to enter the U.S. with counterfeit items.

Privacy Concerns

All visitors should be aware that they have no expectation of privacy in public or private locations. All means of communication, including telephones, mobile phones, faxes, emails, and text messages, are likely monitored.

There are regular reports of the human and technical monitoring of U.S. private businessmen and visiting U.S. citizens. Activities and conversations in hotel rooms (including meeting rooms), offices, cars, and taxis, may be monitored onsite or remotely. Overt placement of microphones and video cameras are common in Chinese taxis. All personal possessions in hotel rooms, residences, and offices may be accessed at any time without the occupants’ consent/knowledge. Elevators and public areas of housing compounds are also under continuous surveillance. Business travelers should be particularly mindful that trade secrets, negotiating positions, and other business sensitive information may be taken and shared with competitors, counterparts, and/or Chinese regulatory/legal entities.

The areas around U.S. and other foreign diplomatic facilities and residences are under overt physical and video surveillance; dozens of security personnel are posted outside of facilities and around residences, while video cameras are visible throughout the diplomatic offices and residential neighborhoods of Beijing. Embassy employees are warned not to discuss sensitive information in their homes, vehicles, or offices. Post strongly encourages
members of the private sector to take similar precautions to safeguard sensitive personal, and/or proprietary information. In 2016, U.S. Embassy employees reported an increase in the tampering of locks on the front door of their residences, either suggesting forced entry or resulting in door locks that no longer operated as intended.

The Chinese government has publicly declared that it regularly monitors private email and Internet browsing through cooperation with the limited number of Internet service providers (ISPs) and wireless providers in China. Wireless access to the Internet in major metropolitan areas is becoming more and more common, and, as a result, Chinese authorities can more easily access official and personal computers. U.S. Embassy employees have reported seeing unknown computers and devices accessing to their home networks; these intrusions likely required advanced computer knowledge and network password hacking to enable such a connection. Many popular services and websites (Google, Twitter, Facebook) are blocked. WeChat and other alternative Chinese applications are nearly ubiquitous; however, they have built-in features that allow the Chinese government to monitor and censor messages, access the device’s address book and photos, track the user’s location, and activate the microphone or camera. Bloggers are subject to particular scrutiny in China and may have their content blocked depending on the profile, following, and content of their posts.

Drug-related Crimes
The Chinese government is concerned about domestic drug use and enforcement efforts are widespread; however, illicit drugs are available in Beijing.

Police Response
The police and security service presence throughout the city serves as a deterrent to most serious crimes. Police response for foreign victims of crime depends upon the type of infraction, where it transpired, and the social status of the victim (private citizen, diplomat, VIP, foreigner). However, local police cooperation with the RSO remains scant and requests for assistance from the RSO are often not met. Urban forces in Beijing and other first-tier cities are well trained and equipped because authorities spend millions of dollars on security-related infrastructure. Investigative training and forensic equipment is improving but remains substandard compared to that of developed countries. Local police are semi-effective at deterring crime; most responses to alarms and emergency calls are sufficiently prompt if the police are informed that the victim is a Westerner or person of importance. In many cases, local police authorities will serve as a mediator between the victim and criminal to agree upon financial compensation – sometimes in lieu of jail time.

Crime Victim Assistance

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.
If you or someone you know becomes the victim of a crime abroad, you should contact the local police and the U.S. Embassy/Consulate. The emergency line 110; however, very few English speakers staff this hotline. Victims may also contact American Citizen Services (ACS) at the Embassy/Consulate for assistance. ACS officers can provide information about local medical facilities, provide contact information for local attorneys, notify family members, and explain how to transfer funds to China.

If your passport is stolen, you must not only apply for a new passport at the U.S. Embassy/Consulate but also a new visa. To receive a new visa, Chinese officials require that you file a police report about your stolen passport at the police station nearest to where the theft occurred. You may also be directed to file a report at the local Entry/Exit Bureau. File the theft report right away with the police.

**Medical Emergencies**

Medical care continues to improve in many urban areas. In Beijing, some medical facilities provide acceptable Western-style medical care. Some conditions that once led to a medical evacuation can now be safely treated in-country. It is recommended that U.S. citizens use Western medical centers whenever possible or, when necessary, seek out the VIP section (gao gan bing fang) of the hospital where there are more likely to be Western-trained physicians and more modern medical equipment.

Municipal and private ambulance services remain substandard. Response time is typically very slow, and transport to the nearest hospital can take a considerable amount of time due to congested traffic conditions. Most ambulances are poorly equipped, staffed by individuals without English skills, and lack EMT training comparable to that found in the U.S.

**Contact Information for Available Medical Services**

Raffles Hospital maintains a 24-hour alarm center for visitors, and representatives can advise on the availability of care in most urban areas. Collect calls are accepted at the following: Beijing: (86 10) 6462 9000; Hong Kong (852) 2528 9900; U.S. (215) 942-8226.

**Available Air Ambulance Services**

International SOS is the main Western air ambulance provider along China's east coast. MEDEX also provides regional air ambulance services.
Insurance Guidance
Medical evacuation by air is expensive: $60,000 - $100,000 per flight depending upon the patient's condition and final destination. Visitors are strongly encouraged to purchase medical evacuation insurance prior to traveling to China.
Payment of hospital and other expenses is the patient's responsibility. Before you go abroad, learn what medical services your health insurance will cover overseas. If your health insurance policy provides coverage outside the U.S., carry your insurance policy identity card as proof of such insurance and a claim form. Although many health insurance companies will pay "customary and reasonable" hospital costs abroad, very few will pay for your medical evacuation back to the U.S.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance
Air quality can be an issue (air quality ratings for Beijing and other U.S. Mission China posts can be found at the Air Quality Index website).
The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for China.

OSAC Country Council Information
Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai all have active OSAC Councils. The initial point of contact for each Council is the Regional Security Officer at each Embassy or Consulate. Please contact OSAC's East Asia and the Pacific team with any questions.

U.S. Consulate Location and Contact Information
Embassy Address and Hours of Operation
U.S. Embassy Beijing
No. 55 An Jia Lou Lu, Chaoyang District, Beijing, 100600
Hours: Mon-Fri 0800-1700 (except U.S. and Chinese holidays)
Embassy Contact Numbers
Telephone: (86 10) 8531 4000 (24-hours)
Post One: (86 10) 8531 4444
Medical Unit: (86 10) 8531 4777
Consular Affairs: (86 10) 8531-3000
Email: BeijingACS@state.gov
Website: https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/
Nearby Posts
Consulate Chengdu: https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/embassy-consulates/chengdu/
Consulate General Guangzhou:
https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/embassy-consulates/guangzhou/
Consulate General Shanghai:
https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/embassy-consulates/shanghai/
Consulate General Shenyang:
https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/embassy-consulates/shenyang/
Consulate Wuhan: https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/embassy-consulates/wuhan/
Additional Resources
China Country Information Sheet