Colombia 2017 Crime & Safety Report: Cartagena

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Terrorism; Political Violence; Oil & Energy; Natural Disasters; Improvised Explosive Device; Crime

Western Hemisphere > Colombia; Western Hemisphere > Colombia > Cartagena

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation
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THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED CARTAGENA AS BEING A MEDIUM-THREAT LOCATION FOR CRIME DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT INTERESTS.

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

Crime Threats

The perception of wealth is a primary reason criminals target Americans and other foreign nationals. Travelers should carry few items of value that display obvious signs of wealth. The most prevalent threat to Americans is street crime. The most common types of crime include, but are not limited to, muggings, assaults, cell phone theft, credit card fraud, and burglaries. Wallets and identification should be carried in a front pant pocket. In public, never leave

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personal items unattended or a purse/bag hanging on the back of a chair, where it easily can be stolen. At restaurants do not sit along the perimeter fence or wall of the outside dining area. Instead, try to find a seat in an area away from the street. Using a cell phone on the street makes you an easy target.

Criminals are quick to resort to violence and commonly use knives and firearms; it is not uncommon for a victim to be seriously injured or killed when resisting a robbery. If you are confronted by an armed assailant who intends to rob you and you are not in fear of your life or serious bodily harm, you should surrender your belongings.

Crime levels in the major tourist areas of Cartagena, including the historical center (El Centro, San Diego) and neighborhoods of Getsemani, Bocagrande, El Laguito, and Castillogrande, are considerably lower and are rarely violent, but petty theft, scams, and similar crimes remain common.

Criminals carry out a variety of street scams to rob people. For example, individuals may pose as police officers by presenting false police identification. They will ask to inspect a victim’s money to verify that it is not counterfeit. They will issue the victim an “official receipt” for their “counterfeit” money and instruct the victim to proceed to a police station to reclaim legitimate currency. When they submit this receipt to the police, they find out that their money was not counterfeit and that they were scammed. Gambling games on the street are also used by criminals to set up victims.

Thefts and assaults occur frequently on public buses. In rural areas, public and private buses have been attacked by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) terrorist groups and by organized crime elements (Bandas Criminales (BACRIM)). Buses are sometimes burned by terrorists, criminals, and demonstrators. However, such incidents decreased in 2016, with only three reports of incidents involving the FARC from August 24, 2016, through January 2017.
Taxi-related crimes commonly involve a cab hailed from the street by a lone passenger. After the passenger enters, the driver will stop, and armed robbers will enter the vehicle, sometimes taking the victim to ATMs over several hours to take out as much cash as possible.

In 2015, four private U.S. citizens were killed by criminal activity. In 2013, a DEA agent was killed during this type of robbery.

Vary your routine and be unpredictable in your movements. Be alert to possible surveillance. Note and avoid any individual who appears out of place along your routes.

One common, particularly dangerous method that criminals use to rob a victim is the use of drugs. The most common drug used has been scopolamine, which can render a victim impaired or unconscious for more than 24 hours and in large doses can cause brain damage and death. Unofficial estimates put the number of annual scopolamine incidents in Colombia at approximately 50,000. It is often administered by liquid or powder into foods and beverages. Many incidents occur in night clubs and bars where men perceived to be wealthy are targeted by young, attractive women. The U.S. Embassy recommends that U.S. citizens adhere to the following to minimize being victimized:

- Avoid going into bars or nightclubs alone
- Never leave food or drinks unattended
- Do not accept food or drinks from strangers
- Do not leave bars, restaurants, or nightclubs with strangers
For more information, please review OSAC’s Report “Shaken: The Don’ts of Alcohol Abroad.” Vehicle break-ins, thefts, and carjackings are a risk.

Extortion is a significant security concern. The FARC, ELN, and criminal groups extort all types of commercial entities. Violence, including bombings, may be used if extortion demands are not met.

Cybersecurity Issues

Contacts from the public and private sectors indicate that cyber threats remain a significant security concern in Colombia. Politically-motivated incidents have included a breach of President Juan Manuel Santos’ email account and the illegal monitoring of Colombia’s peace negotiations with the FARC, both revealed in February 2014.

Authorities report an increasing number of financially-motivated attacks, as Colombia extends access and Colombians increasingly depend on the Internet. In 2015, according to official records of Colombia’s cybercrime police unit, 64% of cases were categorized as financially-motivated attacks. Total cybercrime complaints increased 40% to 7,118 in 2015. 60% of affected users were citizens, 20% were financial sector companies, and 20% were companies from the telecommunications, transport, and industry sectors. According to an Intel security study, 15% of crime against companies is associated with cybercrime, generating losses of approximately U.S.$600 million. In order to further develop its institutional framework and capacity to address cyber threats, Colombia prepared an updated cybersecurity policy (CONPES 3701) in consultation with the OAS, the OECD, and other partners. This policy includes a national strategy and a set of priority goals to minimize risk levels.

Other Areas of Concern
Americans serving at the U.S. Embassy/Consulates and their families must obtain permission to travel throughout much of Colombia. They are required to fly to most major cities. All Americans are urged to follow these precautions.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Traffic in Cartagena is congested, and road conditions are often poor, contributing to traffic accidents and creating opportunities for criminals to rob vehicles. In rural areas, roads can be substandard and dangerous (no emergency lanes, poor lighting), and landslides frequently close roads. Accident response in rural areas is slow.

In Cartagena, the Colombian National Police (CNP) has a presence on major roads, including at well-marked, fixed checkpoints. The government deploys extra security to facilitate road travel during holidays. Outside of these periods and in rural areas, terrorists and criminals can make road travel dangerous. In areas where the government does not have a strong presence, terrorist and criminal groups have set up roadblocks to rob and kidnap travelers.

Traffic laws, including speed limits, are often not obeyed/enforced, creating chaotic and dangerous conditions. The penalties for drunk driving are severe and very expensive. Police deploy sobriety checkpoints, especially in urban areas, and can require sobriety tests during traffic stops. Texting and driving is illegal. Seat belts are mandatory for front-seat passengers in a private vehicle. Car seats are not mandatory for children, but a child under 10 may not ride in the front seat.

Criminals, sometime masquerading as vendors, may reach into cars at intersections to steal items and may tear off car parts (side mirrors, antennas, windshield wipers).
possibility of being caught in a traffic jam, gasoline tanks should always be kept above half full. Car keys should be separated from house keys. Vehicles should be parked in designated parking lots and garages with valuables out of sight. If you self-drive, you are required to have local insurance. For more information on self-driving, please review OSAC’s Report “Driving Overseas: Best Practices.”

In case of a vehicle accident, Colombian law requires that the vehicles remain in place and all parties remain at the scene until the police arrive and complete their preliminary investigation. Traffic accidents can be staged by criminals and may attract a crowd that could turn hostile. Drivers who feel threatened and leave the scene should immediately contact their insurance company and the police. In an accident involving an injury, the police will require a sobriety or blood-alcohol test, and the driver may be taken to the police station.

Embassy official Americans and their families are not permitted to travel by road outside of urban areas at night. Travel at night is also dangerous due to the potential for accidents along mountain roads and violence from criminal groups.

Public Transportation Conditions

Taxis are available, but passengers need to exercise caution. Do not flag down taxis on the street or accept rides from strangers. Taxis should be called via phone/web app or taken from a taxi stand. Airports, hotels, and some restaurants/shopping centers have taxi stands or will call taxis for customers. When a taxi is called by phone/app, the passenger will be given the number of the taxi and a two digit code, usually the last two digits of the passenger’s phone, to give the driver. Smart phone applications (EasyTaxi, Tappsi) are popular and provide the passenger with information to verify the taxi that is sent.
Major accidents involving inter-city buses are common, sometimes resulting in death and serious injury. Embassy official Americans and their families may not use inter- or intra-city bus transportation.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The Federal Aviation Authority’s International Aviation Safety Assessment (IASA) program rates Colombia as Category 1, meets International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards, as of August 15, 2016.

Rafael Nuñez International Airport (CTG) is located in the center of Crespo, a neighborhood in northern Cartagena approximately 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) northeast of the tourist district and approximately 6 miles (10 kilometers) northwest of the city center, serving various passenger and cargo airlines.

Terrorism Threat

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

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Colombia has endured a decades-long conflict, pitting the government against two leftist terrorist organizations, the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), and organized crime groups (BACRIMs), which evolved from demobilized right-wing paramilitary organizations. The FARC, ELN, and BACRIM are well-organized criminal enterprises that
regularly carry out kidnappings, extortion, assassinations, bombings, and other terrorist activities. Throughout the conflict, over 225,000 Colombians lost their lives, and six million have been forcibly displaced.

In 2016, Colombia experienced overall decreased terrorist activity due in large part to a unilateral cease fire declared by the FARC. The Colombian government announced peace negotiations with the FARC in August 2012 in Oslo, reached an agreement on a final accord August 24, 2016, and signed it on November 12, 2016. The accord was submitted to the Colombian Congress, which approved it November 30, paving the way for accord implementation. At the beginning of 2017, the FARC was moving to pre-concentration zones to begin the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process.

The government continues exploratory talks with the ELN, although formal peace negotiations had not started by the end of 2016. U.S.-Colombian counterterrorism cooperation remained strong. In terms of military pressure, the Colombian government continued military operations against FARC insurgents, although it gradually reduced military actions over the course of 2016, including certain periods when it suspended aerial bombardments against FARC targets. The FARC’s self-declared unilateral ceasefire that started on July 20 became a bilateral ceasefire and permanent with the signing of the peace accord. Meanwhile, the military has intensified strikes against the ELN, especially in response to violent ELN attacks in December 2016 and February 2017. The military and police have also intensified operations against major organized crime groups around the country.

**Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence**

*THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED CARTAGENA AS BEING A MEDIUM-THREAT LOCATION FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT INTERESTS.*

**Civil Unrest**

In 2016, there were numerous demonstrations throughout the country with most occurring in Bogotá. Universities have active, leftist student organizations that frequently stage protests, sometimes with an anti-American message. Protests center on social and economic reforms
and are usually led by unions or student groups. Protestors will often march on major roads, disrupting traffic. These protests can turn violent, and protestors may use Molotov cocktails and homemade improvised explosive devices (papas explosivas (pamphlet bombs)) against the police. The police often respond with tear gas. Specific to Cartagena in 2016, demonstrations were typically peaceful and directed at the local government to address public concerns with major utilities, transit systems, and wages. Demonstrators often block traffic on major roads to gain attention, but usually the police clear the roads within hours.

Religious/Ethnic Violence

Ethnic minorities have been disproportionately affected by the armed conflict.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Natural disasters include earthquakes and volcanic activity. Many parts of Colombia are suffering from severe drought conditions, and large scale fires are common. In other areas, heavy rainfall causes landslides that block roads, damage infrastructure, and can leave travelers stranded for more than 24 hours. In Cartagena, the rainy season brings heavy flooding along the coastal city streets, with ocean and rain water creating deep pools that eventually drain hours after the rain stops. Drainage systems are poorly maintained and result in traffic congestion and vehicle engine damage due to driving through the flooded roads.

Emergency preparation includes setting aside emergency supplies and having a plan for what to do during/after a disaster. Planning should take into account that help may not be available for over 72 hours.

Critical Infrastructure

The Colombian government continues to advance its ambitious Fourth Generation (4G) program, a U.S.$17 billion effort to modernize the country’s outdated primary road infrastructure. The aging network means that travel between large cities can take up to three days. The FARC and the ELN have attacked oil pipelines, power stations, and roads with explosives.

Economic Concerns

Colombia’s institutional Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) framework was established in April 2010, creating the National Intellectual Property Administrative System. While the government of Colombia has made progress on IPR in recent years, key challenges remain. Persistently
high levels of contraband and piracy and shortcomings in enforcement and market access continue to plague efforts. The National Customs and Tax Directorate (DIAN) estimates the annual amount of counterfeit and pirated imports at U.S.$200 million and illegal trade at U.S.$7 billion. Internet access has been growing steadily, and with it internet-based piracy. The Business Software Alliance reported in 2014 that annual software piracy losses reached U.S.$400 million and noted that 52% of software installed and commercialized in Colombia in 2013 was illegal. On enforcement, in 2014, more than 2,800 formal complaints were reported to the National Police, but only 94 (3%) ended in convictions. Cases where merchandise is valued under U.S.$12,000, which is the majority, cannot be prosecuted. According to the Superintendency of Industry and Commerce (SIC), trade secret theft is a minor problem, and charges are typically mentioned tangentially and are accompanied by other unfair competition charges (deception, confusion, clientele diversion, intentional disruption of normal operations). Only one case has been tried, in 2011, involving trade secret theft. 

Personal Identity Concerns

Colombia’s anti-discrimination law specifically prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, or social status. The Attorney General’s Office and NGOs report some attacks, including homicides, in which prejudice regarding race, sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity was a factor.

Drug-related Crimes

Approximately 75% of the U.S. citizen prisoners in Colombia are incarcerated for narcotics-related offenses. U.S. citizens should not agree to carry packages for anyone without knowing the person well and being certain of the contents of the package.

Kidnapping Threat

Although Colombian government efforts have dramatically reduced the number of kidnappings over the last 10 years, the threat of kidnapping remains a concern. Between 2002 and 2016, official statistics report that the number of kidnappings dropped more than 90%. Kidnappings can be spontaneous, and criminals/insurgents have kidnapped persons at roadblocks on the outskirts of major cities. Foreigners are potential targets for kidnappers due to their perceived wealth. Americans may also be targeted because of their potential political significance for terrorist groups. However, most kidnappings now fall into the category of express or paseo millonario, in which victims are robbed of their belongings and taken to ATMs until they can no longer withdraw cash. Victims are often abducted after hailing taxis on the street. Express kidnappings may last up to 48 hours.

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The police and army have effective anti-kidnapping/anti-extortion units (GAULA) around the country. Anyone who has been the victim of kidnapping/extortion, or knows of a victim, should immediately call 165.

**Police Response**

The Colombian National Police (CNP) is a professional organization recognized around the world for its success. However, the force is often overworked and occasionally lacks resources to deter crime. Response to alarms or emergency calls to disrupt burglaries or crimes in progress can be 15+ minutes. Police patrol on foot and in vehicles and are posted at Centros de Atencion Inmediata (CAI), which are police substations manned by several officers. Police and military personnel are also posted at important facilities and along major routes. The Embassy’s American Citizen Services (ACS) section has documented some poor responses by CNP to crimes against private U.S. citizens, specifically failure to facilitate filing of police reports.

**How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment**

Corruption continues to exist. For example, an officer may request a bribe during a routine traffic stop. If you feel you are the victim of police harassment or corruption, report it immediately to the police emergency number and to the Embassy’s American Citizen Services section. The police have a complaint line (Tranparencia Institucional): 166.

**Crime Victim Assistance**

The CNP is a nationwide service responsible for enforcing Colombian laws. In urban areas, police are posted at neighborhood substations known as Centros de Atencion Inmediata (CAI). The police can be contacted at the following numbers:

- General Emergencies: 123
- Anti-kidnapping/anti-extortion (GAULA): 165
- Complaints about the police: 166
- Women’s issues: 155
- Road Safety and Transit: #767
- Antiterrorism: 018000-919621

**Medical Emergencies**

Medical care is adequate in major cities but varies in quality elsewhere. Public hospitals are well below U.S. standards. Ambulance service is frequently delayed due to traffic; should consider alternative options in a medical emergency.

**Contact Information for Available Medical Services**
Nationwide Emergency Services (24 hours) Tel: 123
MediHelp Services Colombia, Tel: (5) 656-9400, (5) 656-9403
Hospital Naval de Cartagena (24 hours), Tel: (5) 677-8021, (5) 665-5360, (5) 665-5364
Hospital Bocagrande (24 hours), Tel: (5) 650-2800 Ext. 100
Available Air Ambulance Services
Europ Assistance
Global Response Center
+1-877-710-4082 or +1-240-330-1523
Email: logistics@eausa.com (Logistics Platform)
ops@eausa.com (Operations Platform)

International SOS Assistance, Inc. (ISOS)
Philadelphia Assistance Center
3600 Horizon Blvd., Suite 300
Trevose, PA 19053
+1-800-523-6586 or +1-215-942-8226
Fax: +1-215-354-2338
Email: phlopsmed@internationalsos.com

REVA
1745 NW 51st Pl, Hanger 73, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33309
POC: Brian Weisz, bweisz@flyreva.com, 954-730-9300 Ext. 201
24-hour response center: +1-800-752-4195 or +1-954-730-9300
Email: operations@flyreva.com
Web: flyreva.com

Insurance Guidance
It is important to confirm that your medical insurance provides coverage in Colombia, including treatment of complications from elective procedures or medical evacuation if necessary. It is advised to purchase additional travel medical insurance, especially if your medical insurance does not provide coverage in Colombia or requires you to pay for foreign medical care out-of-pocket and seek reimbursed later. Uninsured travelers without financial resources may be relegated to seeking treatment in public hospitals where the standard of care is below U.S. standards.
Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance
The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for Colombia.

OSAC Country Council Information
The Barranquilla Country Council launched in February 2017, covering the north coast and run in conjunction with RSO Cartagena. The Council has met once and has approximately 20 members. Please contact OSAC’s Western Hemisphere team with any questions or to join.

U.S. Embassy Branch Office Location and Contact Information
Branch Office Address and Hours of Operation
Calle 24 Bis No. 48-50 (main entrance, working hours only)
Or
Carrera 45 No. 24B-27 (back entrance, 24 hrs)
Bogotá, D.C. Colombia
Monday-Friday, 0800-1700 (closed on American and Colombian holidays)

Embassy Contact Numbers
Embassy Switchboard: (57) (1) 275-2000
The Regional Security Office (RSO): (57) (1) 275-2903/2458
The RSO Duty Agent, in emergencies, can be contacted 7 days a week, 24-hours a day through the Marine Security Guard at Post 1, (57) (1) 275-2701
Consular American Citizen Services (ACS): (57)(1) 275-2000
ACS email: ACSBogota@state.gov

Nearby Posts
Embassy Bogotá: www.botoga.usembassy.gov

Embassy Guidance
American visitors should register with the Department of State’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) and should check the Embassy Bogotá website routinely for messages regarding travel or security issues.

Additional Resources
Colombia Country Information Sheet

Colombia Travel Warning