Guyana 2012 Crime and Safety Report

Stolen items; Theft; Murder; Hotels; Transportation Security; Floods; Drug Trafficking; Bribery; Travel Health and Safety

Western Hemisphere > Guyana > Georgetown

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The estimated population of Guyana is 750,000 and about two percent emigrate every year, primarily to the United States. Emigrants include over 80 percent of those with a high school diploma.

Crime Threat

Criminal activity continues to be a major problem, particularly violent crimes and crimes against people and property. Guyana remains rated as CRITICAL for crime. Foreigners in general are viewed as targets of opportunity but are not specifically targeted. Serious crime, including murder and armed robbery, are common, especially in the interior regions. The most recent information from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime lists Guyana’s 2010 homicide rate per 100,000 people as 18.4; the fourth highest in South America behind Valenzuela, Colombia, and Brazil. Per capita, the murder rate in Guyana is three times higher than the United States.

Criminals are frequently armed and appear to be able to obtain weapons with ease, despite the arduous licensing requirements for the average person. A handgun, knife, and/or machete or "cutlass" are the weapons of choice. Criminals may act brazenly, and police officers themselves have been the victims of assaults and shootings.

Armed robberies occur regularly, especially in major businesses and shopping districts. Armed robberies of business/patron establishments are becoming increasingly common in Georgetown. Criminals are usually organized, travel in groups of two or more, and conduct surveillance on their victims. Criminals will not hesitate to show a knife as an intimidation tactic during a robbery. Periodically, there are reports of robberies/attacks on American citizens and in areas frequented by expatriates.
Hotel room strong-arm break-ins also occur, so travelers should use caution when opening their hotel room doors and should safeguard valuables left in hotel rooms.

Robbery and vehicle theft occur with some frequency in Georgetown and New Amsterdam (Guyana’s second largest city).

Road Safety

Traffic accidents are a major concern in Georgetown with speeding and driving under the influence of alcohol contributing factors. Road and driving conditions are poor. Police only sporadically enforce local traffic laws, and local drivers often drive recklessly. Stop signs and traffic signals are often treated as suggestions only. Be very cognizant of other cars, large commercial vehicles, mini-buses, horse drawn carts, bicycles, mopeds, scooters, motorcycles, stray dogs, sleeping animals, and free range livestock, as they all share narrow, poorly maintained roads. A combination of very aggressive experienced drivers, along with inexperienced, timid drivers makes driving in Guyana especially dangerous. Driving at unsafe speeds, reckless driving, tailgating, quick stops without signaling, passing at intersections, and passing on crowded streets is commonplace. Driving at night poses additional concerns as many roads are not lit, drivers frequently do not lower high beam lights, livestock sleep on the road, and many pedestrians congregate by the roadside.

If you are involved in an accident, you are expected to stay at the scene until the police arrive to take a report, unless there is an imminent threat.

Political Violence

Historical Perspective

Although Guyana has ongoing border disputes with its neighbors, Venezuela and Suriname, Guyana is not engaged in any armed hostilities. The U.S. Embassy does not anticipate violence resulting from existing territorial or political controversies with neighboring countries in the near future.

U.S. companies and individuals have not been singled out as targets of politically-motivated violence. General and regional elections were held in November 2011 and were mostly peaceful with only minor protests and demonstrations following announcement of the election results. Elections were generally deemed free and fair by international observer groups.
Civil Unrest

Some past acts of violence are apparently politically motivated. On July 17, 2009, arsonists razed the Ministry of Health’s main building and an annex, destroying records and vehicles along with the building, in a major blow to the health sector. On November 4, 2009, armed gunmen went on a rampage in Georgetown attacking two police stations and setting fire to the High Court (equivalent of Supreme Court in U.S.) and a major public high school. Though these violent acts have not destabilized the government, they raise legitimate concerns about underlying political tension.

Post-Specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

There are two main rainy seasons in Guyana (December-January and May-July). However, even at other times of the year, heavy rains are possible, and flash flooding can occur. The coastal plain floods occasionally. Serious flooding occurred in Greater Georgetown and along the East Coast in January 2005, causing significant damage. There was also isolated flooding on the East Coast in early 2009.

Drugs and Narco-terrorism

Drug trafficking organizations are prevalent and pose the biggest challenge to local law enforcement in Georgetown. Airport security and customs officials are detaining and arresting individuals on a weekly basis who are trying to smuggle drugs out of Guyana into the United States. Apprehensions of drug "mules," often U.S. citizens perceived to be able to travel easily with their U.S. passport, have also increased this past year.

Police Response

The limited police presence in most areas is largely ineffective in preventing crime. Local police have resource and manpower limitations that inhibit their ability to deter or respond to criminal activity. There is an emergency telephone number "911" for police, fire, or rescue. The fire department generally provides a timely response, while a police response, especially during the night is less dependable. The police response to emergency calls is often too slow (15 minutes or longer) or not at all. When the police do respond, they have a limited amount of authority to act on their part, and at times attempt to solicit bribes, as officers are not compensated well.
Corruption is widely perceived to be commonplace within the police department and overall government in Georgetown. Many police are reportedly paid off by criminal elements and are alleged to work with the criminals by either assisting or protecting them. The Guyanese judicial system is strained by limited resources and subject to threats and/or bribes, and defendants involved in drug organizations can usually field better attorneys than the government’s prosecutors. As a result, criminals go free on a regular basis. It is a common perception that some police are, or have been, involved in criminal activity.

Americans who become victims of crime while in Guyana are advised to contact American Citizen Services (ACS) at 011-592-225-4900 x4222, or the U.S. Embassy Duty Officer after hours at 011-592-623-1992.

**Medical Emergencies**

Medical care does not meet U.S. standards. Care is available for minor medical conditions, although quality is very inconsistent. Emergency care and hospitalization for major medical illnesses or surgery are very limited, due to the lack of appropriately trained specialists, below standard in-hospital care, and poor sanitation.

Emergency medical services can be contacted by either "911" or "913" for an ambulance, but this number is not always operational, and an ambulance may not be available.

There are very few ambulances. Generally, ambulance service is limited to transportation without any medical care and is frequently not available for emergencies.

Only Davis Memorial hospital has two equipped ambulances with driver/attendants trained and certified in EMT. They can be contacted through Davis Memorial Hospital at 011-592-227-2041.

The Georgetown Public Hospital on Thomas and New Market Streets is the one commonly used for responding to medical emergencies and trauma such as traffic accidents. The hospital is located approximately a quarter mile from the U.S. Embassy and has adequately trained staff and equipment to stabilize those in need of attention, before medical evacuation to the United States or elsewhere can be arranged.

Visitors are advised to bring prescription medicine sufficient for their length of stay and should be aware that Guyana’s humid climate may affect some medicines. Some prescription medicines (mainly generic) are available.
CDC Guidance

Special attention should be paid to HIV/AIDS. In addition to elevated infection rates among high-risk populations such as commercial sex workers and mobile populations such as miners or loggers, data from the World Health Organization shows that Guyana has among the highest prevalence rates in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Personnel traveling to regions one (1), seven (7), eight (8), Nine (9), and Ten (10) are advised to use Malaria Prophylaxis.

Incidences of water-borne diseases increase during periods of flooding. Only bottled or purified water should be consumed, and special precautions should be taken when eating fruits and vegetables, especially during the rainy seasons.

**Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim**

All Americans are reminded to be aware of their surroundings at all times. Local and international news broadcasts should be monitored for events that may impact on the local security situation.

Most foreigners are very visible in public and should take precautions when visiting downtown areas. Visitors should avoid wearing expensive jewelry, displaying large sums of cash in public, or otherwise appearing ostentatious.

Criminals are increasingly willing to resort to violence while committing all types of crimes. If confronted by an armed criminal, do not argue or attempt to confront him/her in any way. Quickly relinquish what you are asked to surrender.

Visitors are advised to make every attempt to change currency at hotels or airports. Visitors are strongly discouraged from exchanging currency on the street, as this is a dangerous practice.

There have been reports of criminal incidents in the vicinities of the major hotels used by tourists and U.S. government employees traveling on official orders. Walking alone outside after dark, even in the immediate vicinity of these hotels, is not recommended. Most violent crimes against foreigners have been confined to the capital. However, there have been a few incidents of violent crimes committed in other parts of the country as well.
The use of public transportation, such as mini-buses, by visitors unfamiliar with the country, is highly discouraged. The use of reputable taxis is generally acceptable, such as those offered through the major hotels and tourist agencies, as they are usually safer, more reliable, and inexpensive. Travel to the interior of the country requires caution; therefore, travelers wishing to visit the interior are advised to make use of well-established tour companies for safer experiences. There have been reports of tourists and foreigners being robbed while traveling in the countryside, and occasional reports of bandits on rural roads and piracy on the local rivers.

U.S. citizens are encouraged to maintain a high level of vigilance, consider security issues when planning activities throughout Guyana, and avoid traveling at night, when possible.

Vehicle thefts do occur, and vehicle occupants should keep their doors locked, never leaving items in plain sight, and be aware of their surroundings at all times.

After dark, it is highly advisable not to walk or bike and only drive from venue to venue.

Residential burglaries are less common when homes have guards who pose a deterrent to would-be thieves.

Further Information

The U.S. Embassy is located at 100 Young and Duke Streets, Kingston, Georgetown. The American Citizen Services Section can be contacted at 011-592-225-4900 x4222. The Regional Security Office number is 011-592-225-4900 ext: 4243. After regular business hours and on weekends the Embassy Duty Officer can be reached at 011-592-623-1992.

The Embassy operates a warden system to communicate with registered American citizens in Guyana. To register your stay in Guyana and ensure that you receive warden messages in an emergency, please visit our website at: https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/. Consular information can also be found on the Embassy Georgetown website at http://georgetown.usembassy.gov/.


OSAC Country Council
U.S. Embassy launched the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) Country Council in Georgetown in 2009. The Regional Security Office provides country briefings for representatives of American businesses when requested. For information on joining the OSAC Country Council Georgetown, attending Country Council meetings, or adding your organization to our electronic mailing list for security information, please contact the RSO by calling 011-592-225-4900 ext: 4243 or email at GeorgetownRSO@state.gov.

Further information on OSAC Country Councils can be obtained by visiting http://www.osac.gov or by contacting the Overseas Security Advisory Council in Washington D.C. at 571-345-2223.