

Crime, Scams & Safety in Bolivia: What to Watch Out For

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Although Bolivia has some of the lowest crime rates in South America, it still has its share of crime and scams. Here are some handy tips to avoid the inconvenience of becoming the next unsuspecting victim.



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Petty & Violent Crime

Petty crime, like pickpocketing and theft is unfortunately increasing – so be aware of your surroundings at all times. Sadly this is especially true in the locations popular with tourists: La Paz, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Copacabana, and Oruro – particularly during festival times.

Thefts at ATMs are also becoming increasingly common, with many of them resulting in assaults. Avoid withdrawing cash especially at night and in secluded or isolated locations.

More violent crimes in Bolivia include express kidnappings, which typically involve criminals targeting a foreigner, taking them hostage and driving from ATM to ATM forcing them to withdraw money.

The areas where kidnappings are most likely to occur in La Paz include Plaza Abaroa, Plaza Humbolt (Zona Sur), Plaza Isabel La Católica, Plaza del Estudiante, Plaza San Francisco, and the Altiplano, as well as the downtown area of the city.

The typical scenario involves the unsuspecting victim boarding a taxi in which the driver is an accomplice. The criminals then also hop in the taxi and proceed to rob, assault and hold the victim hostage. For this reason, it's recommended that you always use reputable cab companies.

Tourists are advised to avoid the Coronilla Hill in Cochabamba, located near the main bus terminal. This area has become a haven for drug addicts and alcoholics and is dangerous for both foreigners and locals.

A strong police presence has yet to deter the criminal activity, so you're best to steer clear. Additionally, the tourist site of Rurrenabaque has become a popular site for thieves to target lone travelers taking motorbike taxis, so be particularly diligent when visiting this area.

Cameras and binoculars are favorites of thieves in the Chapare and the Yungas areas, so hold on to them tightly. Car jackings are also on the rise in these 2 locations.

Drug Crime in Bolivia

There is an ongoing drug problem in Bolivia, particularly since it happens to be the third largest cocaine producer in the world.

As a consequence there are strict laws and penalties for anyone guilty of trafficking or possessing an illegal substance. Offenders could face a minimum prison sentence of eight years.

Dangers After Dark

As with many travel destinations, certain areas pose a greater threat of crime than others, as do certain times of day. Bolivia is a country where traveling after dark is particularly dangerous so caution should be exercised to avoid potential safety issues.

Bolivia's vibrant and colourful culture provides a pretty exciting nightlife. But as much fun as you may be having, keep in mind that there are laws in place prohibiting alcohol service after 4 am.

You'll certainly find a number of speakeasies that don't honor this law, but there are strict penalties enforced on anyone caught at one of these establishments. The risk multiplies when drugs are present, so don't party too much or you may find yourself facing criminal charges.

Cocaine bars can be found in La Paz and they generally target foreigners. Cocaine consumption and trafficking is illegal in Bolivia which can lead to you seeing the inside of a jail cell for a very long time.

Travel to and within Copacabana is advised to be done during daylight hours. Bus travel from Copacabana to La Paz overnight is especially dangerous and should be avoided.

While it is supposed to be a non-stop trip to the La Paz bus terminal, shady bus drivers are often in cahoots with criminal taxi drivers, and purposely stop short of the destination, ejecting the confused passengers and leaving them with no choice but to hail taxis. Once inside the taxis, victims are robbed of their valuables.

Scams to Watch Out for in Bolivia

Cunning criminals have developed successful scams in an attempt to steal from unsuspecting tourists in Bolivia. Here are three of the more popular ones to watch out for:

1. The "Spilled Substance" Scam

This is a pretty simple, straightforward petty theft scam. A stranger will "accidentally" spill something on you (mustard, sauce, etc.) and then another person will come along and offer to help you clean up. While doing so, they will also relieve you of your valuables. If someone drops something on you, handle the clean-up yourself.

2. The "False Police" Scam

This con involves criminals posing as police officers, complete with uniforms, realistic-looking identification and even false building fronts that appear to be police stations. These phoney "officers" target foreigners and "arrest" them, often for supposed drug trafficking, and demand payment of a fine on the spot or that you hand over your identification (which they will quickly make off with).

If you are ever approached by an officer and aren't sure whether they are legitimate, demand to see a warrant and contact your Embassy immediately. Bus terminals and other busy tourist areas are popular spots for this scam.

3. The "False Tourist" Scam

In this scam, a friendly fellow "tourist" will approach you and try to befriend you. He or she may suggest you go with them to a friend's home. Don't go - if you do, you will likely be kidnapped and robbed.

Another variation involves some phoney police officers (in cahoots with the "tourist") accusing your new found friend of drug possession. They will take both of you to the "station" where all of your belongings will be confiscated.

If you meet someone on the street in Bolivia, no matter how nice they seem be polite but keep going. It's not worth the risk.

You should also note that counterfeit banknotes are often circulated so you're advised to only exchange money at reputable places.

Tour Safety in Bolivia

Many of the tours in Bolivia such as 4WD'ing to Salar de Uyuni, day trips by bike outside of La Paz and others have become popular with tourists, which supports the local economy. However, not all operators have your safety as their priority so it pays to ask around and do your research before booking.

Some operators offer tours of local prisons. These are highly illegal not to mention dangerous. It is strongly advised to avoid these lest you wish to end up with the ultimate experience behind bars.

The Political Climate in Bolivia

It has been said that the country of Bolivia, though financially one of the poorest in the world, is one of the richest in terms of natural resources. There is also a generally optimistic attitude among the people, however despite this fact, protests and demonstrations are commonplace throughout the country.

While these gatherings are generally peaceful, they can (and often do) turn violent quickly so you should do your best to avoid them.

Road blockades are often put up – do not attempt to cross one and get yourself out of the area as quickly as possible.

You may find yourself on the receiving end of a rock, or worse, an explosion. Police and government authorities can and will use force to disband protests, including tear gas. In addition, frustrated and angry protestors have been known to throw rocks.

If you decide to join in, do so at your own risk (and without insurance cover).

By ,

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