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TRAVELING TO COLOMBIA



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With the securing of a peace agreement with one guerrilla group and the prospect of a permanent cease-fire with the remaining terrorist organization, the decades-long fight against domestic terror in Colombia appears close to an end. However, recent bombing attacks on three police stations, which killed seven police officers and injured 42, resulted in the suspension of peace talks with the Marxist National Liberation Army (ELN). Thus, while lasting peace is within the country's grasp, more lives may be lost before that happens.

In response to the changes in Colombia's security situation, the U.S. Department of State recently changed its travel advisory from a category three down to category two, signaling an improvement in Colombia's overall safety and security for foreign visitors. However, it pays to read the Department's warnings in full, as the advisory recommends not traveling to certain cities and reconsidering travel to others. In order to stay up to date on the security situation in Colombia, follow the Department of State's Twitter and Facebook accounts. In addition, pay close attention to news coverage by creating Google Alerts related to Colombia and security.

Notwithstanding the change in the U.S. government's view on Colombia, U.S. government personnel still face restrictions on travel within the country. These restrictions include limited use of public transport, travel only within daylight hours in certain parts of the country, and—in the more dangerous areas that experience terrorist activity regularly—a requirement to travel in armored vehicles or carry personal trackers.



Looking Beyond the Threat of Terrorism

While the removal of one terrorist group and the likely disbanding of another means that traveling to Colombia is becoming less risky, the threat of continued sporadic terrorist activity looms large. What else should business travelers pay attention to when traveling to and around Colombia?

- **Treacherous driving conditions.** The poor condition of roads coupled with inattentive driving and the lack of traffic law enforcement makes driving in Colombia a risky proposition. If you must drive, do so during the day, preferably using a prescreened driver with in-depth local knowledge of the areas to avoid. Make sure the driver uses main roads, as traveling through rural areas on minor roads increases the chances of crime.
- **Express kidnapping.** Similar to other countries in the region, terrorists and criminals often resort to express kidnapping, which involves depriving a person of his or her freedom until he or she pays a ransom, normally by withdrawing funds from an ATM. Don't drop your guard while in public, as kidnappings take place in large cities and in tourist areas. Avoid using public taxis, as the drivers sometimes work with criminals to target victims. Foreigners employed with oil and gas companies present particularly attractive targets; their mining activities run contrary to the Marxist ELN's ideology, while their deep pockets increase the chances of extorting a significant ransom.





- **Public protests.** Colombians often express their displeasure with government policy or big businesses via public protest. Avoid large gatherings, since they often turn violent. If you find yourself in the middle of protest, do not participate. Comply with the directions given by local law enforcement, while staying on the lookout for a potential safe haven such as a large hotel or shopping mall.

- **Street crime.** Assault, robbery, and muggings, etc., take place frequently in large cities. Avoid attracting the attention of street criminals by wearing nondescript, cheap clothing. Leave your jewelry and watches at home and avoid using your smartphone in public. Maintain your situational awareness by paying close attention to your surroundings and avoid interacting with anyone that appears intent on attracting your attention. If at all possible, avoid being alone in a public place, and certainly after dark.

- **Danger in bars and restaurants.** Criminals in Colombia sometimes contaminate food and drink with various forms of drugs to incapacitate or disorient their victims. Avoid going to bars or restaurants by yourself; never leave your food or drink unattended or trust a stranger to guard them in your absence. Don't accept food or drinks from strangers, as they might be laced with drugs, and avoid accepting such innocuous items as flyers or business cards from strangers on the street, as they too might contain an illegal or incapacitating substance.

- **Hotel security. While rare, gangs sometimes attack tourist accommodations.** Pick a hotel that appears committed to ensuring the safety and security of its guests. In the event of an attack on your hotel, create a barricade in your room using the furniture available. Remember to block the doors to connecting rooms and stay clear of windows and doors to avoid stray bullets.



For decades, the Colombian government has wrestled with violent and entrenched insurgency. As that risk dissipates, business travelers continue to face threats raging from petty crime to murder. For executives with a connection to large, well-known companies, including those in the oil and gas sector, the risk is particularly acute. As demonstrated by the security advisories issued by many governments, including the U.S. Department of State, trouble hotspots exist throughout the country, and avoiding them requires advanced planning and willingness to adapt your travel plans accordingly. However, there is no substitute for an experienced security professional with extensive experience mitigating risk for traveling business executives.

For additional information on how to prepare for international travel, [click here](#). To learn about FirstCall's security services for traveling executives, including our in-vehicle security and GPS monitoring capabilities, contact us today at:

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