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Violent crime remains an ever-present threat in South Africa; the Department of State gives each of the four cities that host U.S. diplomatic posts a “critical” rating for crime. However, U.S. citizens are not singled out for criminal activity, as most crimes are opportunistic in nature. Common crimes include murder, rape, armed robbery, carjacking, home invasion, property theft, smash and grabs, and ATM robberies. Armed robbery is the most prevalent major crime in South Africa, most often committed by organized gangs that are armed with handguns or knives.

Terminal Surveillance

While serious incidents of criminality such as armed muggings or robberies sporadically occur in and around isolated public areas such as beaches and hiking trails, these incidents also often occur in busy, secure areas, to include airports. Criminals have been known to loiter around airports in order to conduct surveillance against potential targets—particularly foreigners—while they extract cash from the airport money exchange counters or arrange for an airport transfer car. Criminals then follow, attack, and rob the victim upon arrival at their destination, whether it is a private residence or a hotel. Any residence or hotel’s most vulnerable chokepoint is the driveway or entrance gate, as criminals attack when victims are waiting for the vehicle gate to open or close. If you think you are being followed, drive to the nearest safe area (police station, hospital, store, or any area that is populated or normally covered by security personnel or cameras).

Pilferage of luggage at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg (JNB) is common, and airline check-in staff will regularly remind travelers not to place valuables inside luggage. Most recently, in October 2016, an armed robbery occurred at the JNB International arrivals hall when several armed men stole numerous bags from the baggage claim area before fleeing the scene.

In August, three American citizen employees of an OSAC constituent organization were robbed at gunpoint as they were disembarking from the hotel shuttle from JNB airport to a prominent hotel in the Menlyn neighborhood of Pretoria. All luggage and laptops were stolen, in addition to mobile phones and a female traveler’s purse. There was a single security guard at the entrance to the hotel parking lot who had been locked into an adjacent vehicle during the robbery. Neither wallets nor passports were taken, but approximately $30,000 in costs were incurred. It is likely that the group was identified at the airport and followed to the hotel by the assailants. No injuries were reported.

“Blue Light” Robberies

There have been numerous incidents of fake police officers pulling over vehicles to rob them at gunpoint—these are referred to as “blue light” robberies. These incidents often occur near JNB and the connecting freeways to Johannesburg and Pretoria. Many victims had just withdrawn large sums of money from ATMs or exchanged money at a foreign exchange booth inside the airport terminal. Criminal observers inside the terminals watch for such transactions, and notify their accomplices who are posing as police officers with information about the victim’s departure from the airport and the make, model, and license plate number of the vehicle. If the vehicle stops for these police imposters, the occupants are robbed at gunpoint of their money and valuables, sometimes including their car; personal and rental cars have been
targeted, as well as private airport shuttles. These fake police officers use unmarked vehicles with a police light in the dashboard and flash what appears to be an official badge to pull over vehicles. In addition, these fake police officers often use high-quality, modified (but fake) marked police vehicles and wear police uniforms.

If forced to pull over for any reason by a police vehicle (marked or unmarked), or if you are unsure of a situation involving a purported police vehicle, turn the emergency blinkers on and drive at a slow pace to a secure and well-lit area, such as a police station, mall, gas station, service area, or any populated area covered by security personnel and cameras. If a vehicle is on the side of the road, do not stop to render assistance. Instead, call 10-111 (nationwide emergency police number) to report the vehicle’s location so that the appropriate authorities can respond. It is suggested that travelers avoid using armored vehicles, as they are often easily identifiable and frequently targeted by well-armed gangs who will not hesitate to use weapons, even in crowded, public areas. If you hear gunshots, get down low to the ground and do not try to investigate or intervene.

Best practices for transiting airports in South Africa:

- Arrange airport transportation prior to arrival, to ensure that you are using a vetted, reputable transfer/shuttle service
- Communicate a meeting place to meet your driver, and verify the driver’s identification credentials
- Avoid exchanging cash at the airport if possible
- Ensure your luggage is secured with locks and marked with name tags
- Be aware of your surroundings – your vigilance may convince a potential attacker to find an easier target
- Keep a low profile and dress casually to deter any perceptions of wealth
- When transiting the airport periodically, check to see if other cars are following you
- If confronted by an armed criminal, surrender the requested items and do not resist

Can the U.S. Government Help Me?

If you are injured during a criminal act in South Africa, call 10-111 immediately. You can also report a crime or register a complaint at any police station; a friend or family member can make the report under some circumstances. The crime does not have to be reported in the jurisdiction where the crime took place. A statute of limitations governs some crimes and the reporting of them. You will be given a copy of the police report, and the police and courts will provide an interpreter if required. A U.S. Embassy or Consulate cannot file a complaint on your behalf. Nevertheless, it is important to report any criminality to the nearest Embassy or Consulate in addition to the police. More information on response to crime and victimization can be found on a special webpage from the U.S. Mission to South Africa.
Additional resources:

For questions about this report or additional information on South Africa, please contact OSAC’s Regional Analyst for East and Southern Africa.

OSAC South Africa 2016 Crime and Safety Report


South Africa Police Service