

Costa Rica

VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION

Community Economic Development



Since 1961.

Program: Community Economic Development

Job Title: Community Economic Development Promoter

Dates of Service: May 19, 2016- May 19, 2018

Staging Dates: February 22nd, 2016

(in the USA)

Pre-Service Training

(in Costa Rica): February 23, 2016 – May 18, 2016

*dates subject to change



This document is intended to give an overview of the project you are invited to work on in the Peace Corps. For more detailed information about Costa Rica and living there, please read the Welcome Book via the link included with your invitation and check out the related Web sites referenced in the welcome book.

For further information about serving as a Community Economic Development Volunteer in Costa Rica, call the Country Desk Officer for Costa Rica at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., (9AM to 5PM, EST):

Toll-free: 1-855-855-1961, press 1, then extension 2509;
or directly at (202) 692-2509
or via email at costarica@peacecorps.gov

A NOTE FROM THE PROGRAM MANAGER

Dear Peace Corps/Costa Rica Invitee:

Congratulations on your invitation to serve as a Community Economic Development Volunteer in Costa Rica! Thank you for seriously considering devoting two years and three months of your life to a good cause. Peace Corps/Costa Rica staff will support you to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes you need to effectively accomplish project goals and to maintain your health and safety. Flexibility, commitment, adjustment, tolerance, and cultural sensitivity are also essential to your success as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

At the end of your service, words such as: satisfaction, accomplishment, friendships, and rewarding will best describe your invaluable experiences. Many departing Volunteers share that they are taking home much more than what they brought with them. A positive attitude towards people, culture, work, and your site of assignment may prove to be worth more than a college degree or years of office experience. Please read this Volunteer Assignment Description thoroughly and carefully, and make sure you are committed to serve as a Community Economic Development Volunteer in Costa Rica prior to accepting this invitation.

It will be my pleasure to be your Program Manager and provide you direct support. I started working for Peace Corps in 1985 as the Program Manager for the Small Business Development Project. From 1993 until 2005, I worked as the Administrative Officer. Since 2005, I have had the pleasure of returning to the role of Program Manager for the Community Economic Development Project.

If you feel you are ready to help us accomplish project goals and are prepared for an enriching challenge, I hope you will accept this invitation to serve in Peace Corps/Costa Rica's Community Economic Development Project. I look forward to meeting you and working with you for the next 27 months.

Luis Mata Montero
Program Manager/CED
Peace Corps/Costa Rica

PEACE CORPS/COSTA RICA HISTORY

Since 1963, over 3,300 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Costa Rica in a variety of projects including health, education, environment, agriculture, small business development, and youth development. Peace Corps projects in Costa Rica have changed to respond and adapt to the needs and challenges of the country and its people.

In many respects, Costa Rica has attained impressive levels of social and economic development, manifesting a high level of material and human progress. However, growing social ills threaten to diminish the country's gains in education, democracy, and health care. Peace Corps projects are designed to address the needs of Costa Rica's most vulnerable populations. We also work to strengthen local agencies and communities to better serve these populations.

From the early-80s through the mid-90s the Small Business Development (SBD) project worked closely with cooperatives, farmers, small businesses, and the Chamber of Commerce. However, the SBD project was phased-out as the Costa Rica program reduced its size. In 2005, PC/Costa Rica re-initiated a commitment to the business sector through the implementation of a new Micro-Enterprise Development (MED) project. The MED project has evolved to its current state as the Community Economic Development (CED) project. The CED project focuses on working with entrepreneurs, especially women and youth, and community groups to increase their business and management knowledge, skills, and general capacities to promote and sustain community economic development.

As a CED Volunteer you will most likely have more than one partner at the community level, which could include: micro-entrepreneurs, high schools, women's groups, artisan groups, rural eco-tourism groups, youth groups, community credit enterprises, and cooperatives. You will also have support from host country agencies who work pursuing CED program goals and objectives such as: Junior Achievement (a financial literacy promoter for youth), National Vocational Training Institute (INA), Omar Dengo Foundation (FOD), and Ministry of Science and Technology (MICIT)—the government ministry responsible for the development of Centros Comunitarios Inteligent or Intelligent Community Centers (CECIS) which are computer labs with free internet access available to community members. Your contributions will help Costa Ricans improve their business knowledge and skills to increase family and community livelihood.

YOUR PRIMARY DUTIES

The overarching purpose of your work will be to strengthen the capacity of micro-enterprises, micro-entrepreneurs, and communities (operating in the services, agro-industry, and eco-tourism sub sectors) to sustain economic growth and improve the standard of living for families and communities.

The two CED project goals are:

1. Community members, especially women and youth, will improve critical workforce skills to improve employment opportunities and to provide local businesses and organizations with qualified human capital.
2. A new generation of entrepreneurs will improve their business skills and cultivate new business opportunities.

As a Volunteer working in the CED project your duties will include:

- * Transferring employability skills to community members (youth and adults) using Junior Achievement training materials. You'll be developing a training continuum during your two years of service, which will cover important areas such as life skills and leadership, 21st century skills, goal setting, career assessment, and job search skills, etc.
- * Teaching basic business skills to youth groups and /or helping them to start or operate a small business. This activity could take place at high schools or in a more informal setting;
- * Training youth and adults in basic English and digital technology (DT) as a way to help them access better job opportunities;
- * Teaching English to micro-entrepreneurs as it relates directly to the micro-enterprise within the rural-tourism arena;
- * Teaching basic financial literacy/management skills to youth and adults;
- * Assisting micro-entrepreneurs in the development of business plans;
- * Training micro-entrepreneurs, especially women, in improved business practices;
- * Coaching micro-entrepreneurs to conduct product and marketing research, surveys and assessments;
- * Collaborating with micro entrepreneurs on product development, production, quality control, and marketing strategies;
- * Training in basic bookkeeping and inventory control;
- * Coaching micro-entrepreneurs to develop and implement strategies to incorporate appropriate digital technology (DT) into business settings; (includes teaching basic computer skills).
- * Determining if web presence could be used for a micro-enterprise to promote rural-tourism or marketing of their products and help identify resources to implement these projects;
- * Supporting environmentally sustainable income generation activities (recycling, use of alternative sources of clean energy, biodigestors, family gardens, etc.), and
- * Monitoring, evaluating, and regularly reporting to Peace Corps on the results and impact of your work.
- * Some Volunteers may also work on strengthening the operations of community-based microfinance organizations through the guidance of FINCA (Fundación Integral Campesina)

The business climate, the level of development of micro-enterprises with which you will work (including levels of education of employees and sophistication of management systems), and access to training and other business support services will be significantly different from that to which you are accustomed. Consequently, you will likely be focusing more of your efforts on developing basic resources and systems. The formation of such building blocks is critical for developing sustainable micro-enterprises and will require a very positive attitude and a high degree of patience, humility, and flexibility.

All of PC/Costa Rica's projects are designed to promote participatory processes and ensure that beneficiaries are involved in decision-making and project implementation. To accomplish this, you will need to get to know your community and ensure local participation in all your work activities. You will also have to work at their speed, which means it may take longer than you expect to accomplish results.

Upon arrival at your site, you will conduct a Community and Sector Assessment (CASA) to identify the assets your community has to offer as well as their priorities (with an emphasis on economic development).

During pre-service training, you will gain the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively use the assessment tool. You and the community will use the information gathered to identify local assets and priorities and to develop and implement activities to address them. The capacity building activities that you develop and implement will depend greatly upon the realities of the community

Ensuring that gender is considered in all project activities is another essential component of your job. You are expected to promote women's access to micro-enterprise education and income generation opportunities. Special emphasis is also given to youth business education, training activities, and work force preparation. You are also expected to encourage the appropriate use and protection of local resources (human, financial, and environmental) in your activities.

Your specific daily tasks will vary depending on your site and the needs of your community, but they will largely be grounded in the project-related activities described above. Ultimately, you will strive to improve the quality of life for Costa Ricans by providing them with business and 21st century skills that empower them to achieve and sustain economic growth.

One of the exciting parts of your professional work is to participate in the Peace Corps monitoring, reporting, and evaluation (MRE) process. All Volunteers receive training on the Peace Corps MRE tracking and reporting system and an MRE Toolkit with project-specific guidance and data collection tools. Each Volunteer regularly reports MRE information and this information is summarized to describe overall progress of the project. This important MRE system helps Peace Corps improve its programming and report its accomplishments. The opportunity to learn and practice professional monitoring and evaluation skills are some of the many valued benefits of Peace Corps service.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SECONDARY/ COMMUNITY PROJECTS

There are many opportunities for Volunteers to participate in secondary projects. CED Volunteers may work with community organizations to help them develop proposals, implement projects, and participate in cultural, health or recreational activities. These activities may lend themselves to the inclusion of youth, such as conducting summer camps or making world map murals. Finally, you may also have opportunities to provide secondary support in business education to Volunteers working in the two other PC/Costa Rica projects: Youth Development and Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Available Resources:

As a CED Volunteer you are encouraged to utilize the resources available in or near your community. These include your partners, community groups, NGOs, etc. Some of you will have access to regional representatives of government agencies. You are encouraged to get to know the locally available resources upon arrival at your site.

The Peace Corps office in San José has books and other resources to support your technical needs (including a Resource Center, computers with internet access, as well as Wi-Fi for Volunteers with laptops, and a virtual SharePoint site). You may also be able to access the internet by purchasing a data card to use with a laptop, at schools or at internet cafes in your community or in nearby communities. The cost of occasional internet use is compensated in your monthly living stipend. However, you should not count on Peace Corps to provide financial resources or supplies to support your project activities. These will have to be obtained or leveraged at the local level. You should discuss any specific needs or ideas with your Program Manager or Program and Training Specialist prior to initiating the activity.

As you research Costa Rica prior to arrival, you might like to review the following web sites and/or documents:

The Latin American Information Network Center (LANIC) from the University of Texas is a very thorough resource on all of Latin America. It organizes country links to a variety of web sites on multiple topics: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/cr>

The official Peace Corps website makes available a number of electronic resources that we frequently use in country. There are numerous resources that will help you with technical topics, language acquisition, and cross-cultural adaptation. These resources can generally be found at the following website: <http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=library.volres>

Location of Job:

Each Volunteer's work site is unique. CED Volunteers are placed primarily in rural communities that may be small (fewer than 1,000 community members) or medium sized between 1,000 – 10,000 community members). Volunteers work primarily in the communities in which they live; some Volunteers also collaborate with micro-entrepreneurs, community credit enterprises or other committees and groups in neighboring communities. Volunteers periodically travel by bus to meet with agency project partners in regional offices or in San José.

While sites vary in size, climate, and distance to downtown San José, all are pre-selected because they offer capacity building opportunities consistent with the project goals, demonstrate adequate levels of local support, and meet Peace Corps/Costa Rica's criteria with regards to need, safety, communication, (e.g. at least one working telephone line or radio in the community and/or cell service), transportation (e.g. at least one bus a week or no more than two hour walk to the nearest bus stop), and health. Some project sites are in poor, isolated, rural communities as this is where Volunteers are most needed.

Volunteers assigned to rural communities usually work with a population of fewer than 1,000 people, with LIMITED infrastructure and communications (many Volunteers purchase a data card which allows for Internet access on smart phones or personal tablets/computers, limited cell coverage, and infrequent or irregular bus access). Most Volunteers find it useful to bring an old or inexpensive laptop computer. This will allow you to communicate with other Volunteers, access resources, prepare materials and work reports, and keep in contact with home. Many communities are in mountainous regions of Costa Rica, between three (3) and eight (8) hours on public transportation from San José.

Your Program Manager considers a variety of factors in assigning your site. In general you can expect to be placed where your skills and experiences best match the assignments defined with the receiving host community and partners.

There may be Volunteers from any of the other Peace Corps/Costa Rica projects in a nearby site with whom you may collaborate on some activities. You will either be assigned to a new site or to a site where you are replacing a previous Volunteer. It is anticipated that each Volunteer will bring unique strengths and interests to a site with the opportunity to expand on work initiated by a previous Volunteer(s).

Working Hours:

According to the Peace Corps manual, Volunteers are on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This means that being a Volunteer requires a full-time commitment. The “normal” division between professional time and private time does not exist as a Volunteer. You are likely to have work activities on weekends and evenings, depending on when your community and project partners can meet. You are also expected to spend most weekends in your site, as that time contributes to the effective fulfillment of all of Peace Corps’ goals, as well as cultural integration, language acquisition, and community acceptance.

Actual work hours vary considerably depending on your assigned site. Most CED Volunteers work in informal settings with little direct supervision. No matter where you are assigned, you will need to comply with established work schedules and business practices of your project partners. Above all, you will find that success in your work is primarily reliant upon your own initiative and tenacity.

Please note that Trainees cannot take vacation while in Pre-Service Training (PST) and do not accumulate vacation days during this period. Trainees are only allowed two non-consecutive weekend nights (a Saturday to Sunday) outside of your training community during PST. These nights have to be approved by the Training Manager and under no circumstances can a Trainee miss training sessions unless authorized by a Peace Corps Staff member. As such, Trainees are not permitted to receive international visits from family and friends during PST. **Volunteers are also not permitted to take vacation during their first three months and last three months of service at site.**

Cultural Attitudes and Customs in the Workplace:

In general, Costa Ricans are very accepting and eager to work with Peace Corps Volunteers. Assistance provided by Volunteers complements the work carried out by host country agency personnel. Peace Corps has a relationship with the Ministry of Science and Technology, the National Vocational Training Institute, Junior Achievement, FINCA, Omar Dengo Foundation (FOD), and Intel. As the CED project continues to cultivate relationships with new partner agencies and community organizations, you may be among the first Peace Corps Volunteers with whom your project partners have worked. We look forward to building positive relationships and maintaining the professional image that PCVs portray.

Most CED Volunteers have multiple project partners. Your project partners and beneficiaries may be one in the same. Working in the rural areas in Costa Rica you will notice that there is often a lack of resources; national and international NGOs rarely reach these communities and government agencies in Costa Rica are bureaucratically structured, sometimes lack coordination and direction, and may have limited resources. Co-workers in Costa Rica tend to share more personal information during working hours than is customary in the U.S., and the pace of work tends to be slower than that to which you may be accustomed. These differences may require some adjustment for you.

Regardless of whether there is an election, there is a great deal of "small-town politics" at the local level which may influence Volunteer involvement in community projects. There is likely to be a great deal of excitement as well as some conflict among the competing factions.

Volunteers are prohibited from taking part in political activity of any kind.

Customs and beliefs are held very dearly and thus change comes very slowly. An important component of your work will be to get to know the local beliefs and customs, including gender roles, and work within those realities to promote behavior change. As a Volunteer, you must commit to demonstrating sensitivity toward and respect for Costa Rican culture(s). The



challenge and opportunity is to find creative and respectful ways to be a change agent – to facilitate rather than to impose, and to respect people's right to manage their own process of change.

Peace Corps/Costa Rica utilizes a gender and development approach to promote the participation of men, women, boys, and girls, in accordance with culturally determined roles. This will help ensure the sustainability of any activity undertaken. You may find that the roles of men and women are different than those to which you may be accustomed. For you to be successful, it will be important to develop strategies for working with local cultural attitudes and customs. This does not imply changing your own values, but learning how to be respectful of local leaders, institutions and customs. As you demonstrate interest in and appreciation for your community's customs, you will find people more open to working with you. Your project partners, other local contacts you make, and Peace Corps/Costa Rica Staff are resources you can access to assist you with this process. During your pre-service training you will learn more about social traditions, values and norms to better understand and work within Costa Rican culture.

Dress Code:

As in the United States, the way you dress in Costa Rica is very important. Proper dress can help establish your credibility as a professional, and it reflects your respect for the local customs and expectations of the people with whom you live and work. Costa Ricans dress very neatly, shower daily, and take great pride in looking sharp in public and at social affairs. Inappropriate and very informal dress, like inappropriate behavior, is something that can set a Volunteer unnecessarily apart from his or her community.

You are moving to a new place for work; you are not going on a two-year camping trip. You will be relating to Costa Rican professionals who, for the most part, dress business casual: neat, clean, and ironed. It is suggested that you bring business casual attire for occasions when you go to meetings at schools and in government offices, etc. Business casual attire includes cotton pants (pressed khakis), blue-jeans (not torn/worn out/frayed at the hems), collared cotton shirts and/or modest blouses, cotton skirts or dresses for women (NOT mini length). Comfortable walking shoes or sandals are suitable. Shorts, faded t-shirts and tennis shoes are acceptable sportswear but should not be considered appropriate for work. Flip-flops are okay in your home or to go to the park or *pulperia* (local store), but should not be worn to meetings, schools or offices.

Although some women in Costa Rica wear tight fitting, revealing clothing, PC/Costa Rica discourages female Volunteers from wearing tight fitting or revealing clothing as it may attract unwanted attention, as well as result in people judging you as unprofessional. Tight fitting dresses or shirts and spaghetti-strap tank tops are not appropriate work attire.

During training, you will be expected to observe the same guidelines for dress. Shirts and shoes (and bras for women) must be worn at all times, and shorts may not be worn at the Peace

Corps office or for any official Peace Corps activity. Visible body-piercings and tattoos are not considered appropriate at your training and work sites and should be covered to the extent possible; nor are earrings, open-toed sandals, or pony-tails appropriate for men. Men should wear sports sandals for recreation only; closed-toed shoes are most appropriate for men in work settings.

In general, the best guideline is to dress as most Costa Ricans do in the same situation. If you are going into a school, dress the way teachers dress. If you are going into an office, dress the way staff in that office dress. If you are going to participate in recreational activities, wear comfortable, informal clothing. Bring your favorite business casual and leisure clothes from home as most of it will be appropriate here and Volunteers often regret not bringing the clothing that they would want from home.

TRAINING FOR YOUR JOB

Upon arrival, you will participate in Pre-Service Training (PST), which consists of 13 weeks of intensive in-country preparation in five major areas: language (Spanish), technical assignment orientation, cross-cultural adaptation, health management, and safety & security. This program has been designed around the competencies that you will need to be successful. You must demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to swear-in as an official Peace Corps Volunteer. Throughout PST, both you and PC staff will evaluate your performance and commitment to service.

Your first PST activity is a four-day Orientation Retreat immediately upon arrival in country. During this retreat you will receive detailed information on: 1) How Pre-Service Training (PST) is carried out (competencies, content, methodology, qualification criteria, etc.) and 2) What you can expect for the following 12 weeks (overview and weekly schedules). You will also receive an administrative, medical, and safety & security orientation.

To most closely approximate the experience of life and work as a Volunteer, PC/Peace Corps/Costa Rica uses a "Community-based Training" (CBT) model. After the Orientation Retreat, you will be divided into your language levels (as determined through a standardized oral language proficiency test) and assigned to one of five different training communities where you will live with a host family for the following 12 weeks. The experience in these communities serves as an introduction to Costa Rican life and culture and should be seen as a transition to more challenging sites, where you will be assigned for your service.

Community-based Training (CBT) will allow you to face realistic challenges from the beginning. Because you live and train in communities, you are able to develop relationships, work with community members, and negotiate daily life in a new culture and language. This will enable you to adapt and apply your theoretical knowledge immediately in real situations. The host family experience is one of the most valuable aspects of PST. PST allows you to learn about many aspects of Costa Rican culture and daily life in neighborhoods, including family and



community life, customs, values and behavior, diet and humor, while developing strategies to confront daily challenges. Host families will have received an orientation from Peace Corps Staff, and will be active participants in your training. You will have your own room and bed in the home, and will be expected to integrate into the family as much as possible by sharing meals, helping around the house, etc. The standard of living in the training communities is higher than that of the communities to which you will be assigned. You can expect to be more comfortable, with more amenities and familiar foods, during training than during service in your community of assignment.

During PST, we use and model a participatory, experiential approach to learning, known as Non-Formal Education (NFE), which you are expected to use with community members to help people build on their own strengths, take charge of their lives, and address their expressed needs.

Training activities will be a combination of small group work with peers from your training community, self-directed learning activities, group lectures, workshops, field visits and practicum. Spanish classes take place in each training community in small groups. Only in unique circumstances and as needed will a Trainee be offered one-on-one language instruction. For technical, cross-cultural, health and safety & security training, your training group meets at a larger community location. The content of the different areas is organized around weekly themes and you can expect to carry out several integrated activities, where you will be working simultaneously in language, technical, cross-cultural, health, and safety & security goals.

Although the majority of PST activities take place in the training communities, there are three field activities:

PCV Visit: Each Trainee travels independently or in pairs on public transportation to a CED Volunteer site for three to four days. The purpose of the visit is to experience life in Costa Rica, practice health and safety techniques, and to become familiar with the role of the Volunteer.

Tech Week: Trainees travel in small groups on public transportation to a CED Volunteer site to participate actively in hands-on project-related activities. Trainees continue to receive some technical instruction during Tech Week by training staff.

Site Visit: Trainees travel independently on public transportation to the future site of assignment. Trainees initiate relationship building with future host family and project partners(s), explore the community, practice Spanish, and complete a site locator form.

PLEASE NOTE: All Trainees will live with host families during the field visits. Couples may travel to different communities during tech week. However, when possible, couples will be sent to visit another married couple for the PCV visit.

Regardless of your prior professional experience, all Trainees follow the same technical training curriculum. The goal of our training program is not to turn you into an expert in the field, but to

assist you in understanding the conditions and resources you will encounter while working in the technical sector in Costa Rica. You can expect your technical training to be participatory, dynamic, and to require self-guided study.

The importance of language ability in your future role as a Volunteer cannot be emphasized enough. Your ability to transfer information (coaching, training, teaching, etc.), to serve as a community resource and a grassroots development facilitator, as well as your integration into Costa Rican culture, are all directly related to your ability to communicate in the local language. Although language training is provided during PST, you are strongly urged to initiate further Spanish language studies before your departure. Language learning requires dedication and hard work; the majority of Trainees are able to reach the language level required to swear-in.

Throughout PST, you are encouraged to continue examining your personal motivation for having joined the Peace Corps, as well as your level of dedication, commitment and attitude. In this way, when you swear-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer, you are making an informed and serious commitment, which will sustain you through the full two-years of service. PST can be a stressful and challenging time, but you will find a great deal of support from an experienced training staff. It should be noted that to best prepare you for service in all areas, training is an intensive period of time (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). For this reason, **visitors are not allowed during PST since you will not have time to host friends and family.** Be patient and confident that there will be many opportunities to enjoy visitors during your service. Your weekends are considered an essential part of the community integration experience. Therefore, you will only be permitted two nights out of your training community during PST. These nights are to be taken separately, beginning after the first month of training. Vacation is not permitted during PST, or in your first three months of service.

Note to couples:

In order to take full advantage of PST, couples may be separated during specific training events (i.e. Spanish classes, field visits, etc.). To the degree we are able to treat the couple as two individuals, respecting your individual learning styles, personalities, interests, strengths, challenges, motivation, and expectations, we are best able to meet the optimal training and service goals for each. You will be assigned to the same host family; however, if you have different language levels, one of you will travel daily to another community for the appropriate Spanish class. Maturity, flexibility and a true commitment to the training process is critical to a couple's success during this time.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Currently, CED Volunteers are situated in rural and semi-rural parts of the country. Some of the Volunteer sites are very rural, while others are more accessible. All are chosen because of their economic potential and needs. Most Volunteer sites are in or require travel through mountainous regions. Roads in rural communities may be unpaved and become very muddy in the rainy season. Volunteers assigned to this project should be prepared to walk 2 -3 kilometers



regularly, on steep inclines over uneven terrain, occasionally through thick mud or a few inches of water, to get around and in and out of the community.

As a tropical country, there are two primary seasons: the dry season (or summer) from December to April; and the winter rainy season (or "green" season as it is referred to here), from May through November.

Because of the importance of community integration and for your own safety and security, you **are required to live with a host family for the first six months of Volunteer service.** This is a mandatory and non-negotiable requirement. It is important to think about this commitment and your ability to be flexible enough to live with a family in basic, and sometimes cramped living conditions, with limited privacy. Couples are also required to live with a family, often in close quarters.

Prior to your arrival, Program staff will arrange housing with a respected family recommended by community leaders and/or Volunteers, and inspect the house for approval. The home stay experience will help orient you to local customs and safety considerations, and serve as a bridge to integrate into your new community. As with your PST family, you will have your own room and bed in the home, and will be expected to integrate into the family as much as possible by sharing meals, helping around the house, etc. Although living with a family has certain challenges (such as lack of privacy, a different diet and noise), it also has multiple rewards: community integration, increased language skills, friendship, sharing, and gaining a unique understanding of the Costa Rican culture. Remember, Costa Rica is a tourist destination; living with a family will help you be seen as a respected community member.

After the initial six months at site, Volunteers are eligible to live independently provided you seek and receive approval by your Program Manager and you identify a safe and affordable living situation in the community to which you are assigned that meets Peace Corps/Costa Rica's housing criteria. You may also choose to continue to live with the same host family, or identify another host family. Regardless, you **MUST** have prior approval from your Program Manager before moving out of your initial home stay family's home. Living independently is an option for Volunteers subject to the availability of acceptable housing in the community of assignment; it is not a right.

You will find that many houses in the rural areas are spread out on dirt roads (or muddy roads, during the rainy season). Most housing structures are made of cement blocks, have two to three rooms, and a corrugated steel roof. Some houses are made of wood. With rare exception, CED volunteer homes have electricity and running water. Most CED volunteer homes have indoor bathrooms and showers. Most homes do not have hot water.

Land line phone services cover the majority of the country and most (not all) PCVs have a phone in their home or a public phone available in their site, but local services vary. Even if you have the luxury of a phone in your home you may not be able to place international calls on these telephones. Peace Corps does not purchase cell phones for volunteers. Both pre-paid and

post-paid cell phone services are now available. Some PCVs are able to purchase a local number and use cell phones brought from the U.S. (these phones may need to be “unlocked” in order to function outside of the US), while others purchase cell phones in Costa Rica. Most CED PCVs have cell phone service in their communities, though it may not be reliable from the PCV’s home.

All sites are accessible to San José within eight (8) hours by bus, and occasionally bus/boat combination. Bus transportation is available from most communities and is relatively inexpensive, and dependable; however the more rural sites have less frequent service. In the capital city’s metropolitan area, where over 1,000,000 people live, one may purchase all of one’s needs, without relying on supplies from the U.S. However a majority of services (banking services, e-mail, limited shopping, etc.) are usually available in a nearby town.

The local diet consists of *gallo pinto* (beans and rice) for breakfast, supplemented with local cheese, eggs or a baguette. Eggs and chicken are the most common protein sources. Vegetables, such as squash and carrots, or a basic salad with cabbage and tomato accompany white rice and beans as a typical lunch plate.

Vegetarian Volunteers should be prepared to make some adaptations and encounter some challenges. Technically, much of the local diet is vegetarian, but the concept is foreign and the idea that you don’t want animal fat or meat broth in your beans is considered unusual. Vegan Volunteers will find considerable challenges in meeting their dietary needs when eating with a host family. You will need to be adaptable and find ways to supplement the local diet without offending host family and community members.

In general Volunteers feel very safe in their sites. Rural Costa Ricans are often considered neighborly and kind. However, despite precautions taken, some Volunteers have been assaulted in their sites; many are victims of petty theft. You will receive a number of sessions during PST on personal safety. Being aware of your surroundings, taking appropriate precautions, living with a family, and integrating into the community may mitigate some of these security risks. This could include the reality that you will not be able to go out or return home late at night and your social life may be different than that to which you are accustomed. Your health, safety and security are a priority of Peace Corps, but you also have to take responsibility to minimize your risk as we prepare you with the tools for your two years as a Volunteer.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES & REWARDS

Please reference the [Welcome Book](#) for more detailed information regarding diversity and cross-cultural issues, and safety and security in the Peace Corps.

Volunteers serving in Costa Rica have an incredible opportunity to experience the local culture, the hospitality unique to Costa Rican families, and the beautiful climate of Central America. You will face certain challenges during your work that will utilize your skills, test your flexibility, and cause you to change and develop your personal commitment to helping those around you.

A challenge that many Volunteers face during their first few months is acquiring sufficient Spanish to feel comfortable in their work and social lives. The intensive language training during PST will provide all the support you need to learn basic Spanish and you will have two years in which to practice! Although many Volunteers feel anxious about not learning Spanish quickly enough, a vast majority enter their communities after PST feeling confident enough to initiate community integration and project-related tasks. Almost all Volunteers continue to improve Spanish during service.

Living with a family can be challenging for some. Volunteers experience a lack of privacy as walls do not always go all the way up to the ceiling and are very thin. In addition, the concept of personal space may be different in Costa Rica than that to which you are accustomed. If you have lived on your own, you may find it difficult to adjust to living in a small area with others and having your host mother cook your meals (which may be heavy in carbohydrates and often fried), wash your clothes and ask you where you are going.

Volunteers often receive a warm welcome and are readily accepted into their communities. However, for many Volunteers, the constant answering of personal questions, the lack of privacy, being considered a rich foreigner and the need to be constantly aware of different social norms can be real challenges. As a novelty in the community, you may be the subject of considerable gossip. While you may perceive gossip as hurtful, it often stems from genuine curiosity rather than malicious intent. You will confront additional challenges associated with facilitating change in a cultural setting where time is viewed differently than in the U.S. You may also encounter many communities that are accustomed to receiving donations from government agencies and NGOs. It can be difficult to enter into these situations where you have no financial resources and are nevertheless seen as a rich foreigner. Your primary and secondary project activities might not be considered as valuable as monetary donations or larger infrastructure projects, however they go much farther to promote sustainable changes that can benefit families and communities for generations.

Living conditions and transportation can be physically demanding (heat, abundant rain, and muddy roads) and can be a factor in your ability to serve in the project. The complex social problems you will encounter can be mentally stressful (e.g. poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquency, school desertion, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, low level of formal

education and employability). Your ability to be patient, sensitive, and creative will grow, and be a great source of satisfaction to you. Your growth will be enriched through experiencing a new culture, befriending kind people, and developing an awareness of new values. You will find that many Costa Ricans are exceptionally generous and will insist on sharing, no matter how little they have.

The rewards are many. You will find the key to satisfying work as a Peace Corps Volunteer is the ability to establish successful human relations at all levels: with your host family; co-workers and project partners with whom you work; various community members, micro-entrepreneurs; and your fellow Volunteers. You will acquire a sense of accomplishment when small projects are rendered effective due to your motivation and effort. Acceptance into a foreign culture and the acquisition of an additional language are also significant rewards.

Your dedication can lead to real and lasting results that empower community members not only to achieve project goals, but also to identify and address other needs. You will have the deep satisfaction of having played a significant role in grassroots community development processes that can lead Costa Ricans to assume greater control of their lives. If you have the personal qualities needed to accept the challenge described above and can demonstrate them in two years of service in Costa Rica, you will have a rewarding and enriching experience, while at the same time making a much needed contribution to the exciting goals of the CED project.

In Peace Corps/Costa Rica, we welcome Volunteers that represent the diversity of Americans in terms of race, age, sexual preference, religious beliefs, national origin, disabilities and ethnic background. To best support all of our Volunteers, we established a Volunteer Support Network. If you are interested in learning more about the Volunteer Support Network, contact your Program Manager to initiate discussions about possible issues of interest to you.

COMMENTS FROM VOLUNTEERS

The experience to date has been more than I could have hoped for. The heart of it for me has been the gratifying work and daily challenges that have allowed me to see who I am and what I am capable of. Every day I am constantly pushed to see the problems I can solve, the amount I can learn, and the relationships I can build. It is so emotionally gratifying to see the progress of your work and relationships on a daily basis.

My time is spent between a recycling program that is reducing trash, protecting the environment, and generating income to microfinance work with a local credit business consisting only of women. I also support computer and English classes. In my free time I enjoy playing soccer, fishing, and listening to stories about how much things have changed. My work here in Costa Rica is capacity development, showing people in these communities that they have the ability to solve the problems that confront them.



“The toughest job you’ll ever love,” couldn’t be truer in my case. Peace Corps is an incredible experience that allows you to find out more about who you are while learning from and teaching those around you. It’s the freedom to define your own experience and the next two years of your life. Erase your expectations and get excited!

- **Eric Smith, Tico 20**

After being a Peace Corps volunteer for 30 months, I can look back on my projects and there is no denying how varied they have been. I have been able to teach many different classes from Elementary to adult English as well as computer courses for adults. Information sessions (*charlas*) about environmental awareness, youth business development, young women’s empowerment, project development and management, even fitness classes to name a few. Then when not involved in one of these, I could have been found working on projects like bio-digesters or tilapia ponds.

These experiences were combined with the daily life of living in a rural sugar cane town nestled in the mountains of Turrialba, filled with hiking, swimming in rivers and unlimited exploring. This 470 person *pueblito* that I came to love is where I have had some of the best and some of the most challenging experiences of my life. It truly has become my second home and the people my second family. Being as small as it is, I have lived with a host family for my entire service. We have had our hiccups, but in the end, I wouldn’t trade them for the world.

If I can offer any advice to new volunteers from my experiences here in Costa Rica, it would be in regards to dealing with being a female in a heavily *machista* community. It was really hard for me at the beginning when attempting to work with different community leaders in various capacities and repeatedly being blown off. In their eyes I was just a young *gringita* female and couldn’t possibly have anything to offer them. It got to the point where a few times when I attempted to speak at a meeting I was cut off and told maybe next time. This was a pretty defeating feeling and hard to accept that potential projects would never be realized because of this type of limited thinking still very prevalent in Latin culture, and specifically in my site. As hard as it was to walk away, I had to in order to make time for projects with people that wanted to work with me. But then something magical happened, and after months of working hard on all kinds of other projects, I started hearing feedback from these former non-believers. The same men that had no interest in working with me before were now telling people that they regretted throwing away the opportunity they had with me now that they were seeing all that I was accomplishing. They had gained respect for me. Even to the extent that one community leader stood up in front of a Municipality meeting in Turrialba to praise me, my work and projects for all to hear. I was in complete shock. I learned from this that no matter how frustrating it can be to be the one breaking the gender role barriers in a culture different than the one you came from, it will be worth it. I know that even though I may not have worked with these people on a project directly, my example as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and hard worker, and a young female, changed the way these men now see a woman’s role and potential to contribute. That to me is worth more than 100 projects I could have ever done with them.

- **Audrey Metcalf, Tico 21**

I write this letter to you now 18 months after arriving in Costa Rica. It feels like only a few weeks ago that I was in a conference room at staging in DC meeting my fellow trainees for the first time. We've all gone through remarkable developments since then, and we still have so much time to go. It's a beautiful thing.

One thing you will have an abundance of during your time in site is free time. Devote this time to bettering yourself somehow. Read everything you can get your hands on, meet new people, learn an instrument, study for graduate admission exams, write a blog, and never hesitate to take up a new opportunity. Most importantly, keep an open mind, form as few expectations as possible, and work on ridding yourself of pride. If you do these three things, you will get the most you can out of this experience; you'll learn new things from unexpected sources, learn how to work effectively in team, and realize what leadership is all about. Be prepared to go through the most extensive personal transformation of your life. If there's just one thing I can say about Peace Corps service is that it breaks you down to the core of what makes you human and rebuilds you into a better, stronger, and more capable human being. You won't be the same person when you leave; you'll be (your name) 2.0.

You may think as I once did that you're in this experience on your own, that your fellow volunteers won't be involved with your life, work, or personal development. This can be an accurate assumption if you allow it to be, but don't. You've arrived to Costa Rica with dozens of other people who are very similar to you yet entirely different. You are all here for the same reasons; to serve your country, help the unfortunate, learn a new language, and grow into a more capable individual. You all come from different backgrounds and have had unique experiences, yet something has led y'all to the exact same opportunity. That means something, and if you open up your heart and mind to your fellow servicemen and women, you will learn what that something is. Welcome to Peace Corps/Costa Rica. We're so excited to have you.

-Farid Mozafari, Tico 24

Making the decision to join the Peace Corps is stepping into the unknown. Just like our reasons for joining, every volunteer experience in country is different. Yet, it is safe to say we all go into it knowing that we probably won't change the world in two years, and that is okay.

What we need to remember are the opportunities we have to influence the lives of those around us, whether through the implementation of projects or the cultural sharing that takes place as you build relationships and form friendships.

During our time in the Peace Corps our projects have varied significantly, from the construction of a recycling center, to hosting a rural tourism conference focused on developing entrepreneurial skills in the youth of Costa Rica, to the construction of 5 bio-digesters at surrounding dairy farms. Variety is the spice of life and Peace Corps offers it in abundance.

With patience and humility a volunteer quickly finds their place and learns how to best help



their community. Some days you are the teacher and others, the student. But, every day you are an explorer; exploring your surroundings and yourself. Enjoy it!

- **Jameson & Emesha Jackson, Tico 24**