

THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO

COLOMBIA



A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS

July 2014

COLOMBIA MAP



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A WELCOME LETTER

Dear Peace Corps/Colombia Volunteers:

For many, the sound of these words—Peace Corps/Colombia—is the answer to a long, lingering hope. Peace Corps Volunteers who served in Colombia remember the life-changing experience their service was and enjoy lasting bonds of friendship with their Colombian “families” and colleagues. When Volunteers were withdrawn in 1981 due to the complicated security situation, the returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) network of Friends of Colombia looked to the day when the program would be re-established. They, like you, believe that Peace Corps cooperation, over 50 years after the start of the program by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, is still very much alive and relevant. And so do we—the staff and Volunteers who were privileged to guide its return to Colombia in late 2010.

When you arrive in August you will meet Volunteers from the first groups to serve for the full traditional two years of service. Before them, two special groups of Peace Corps Response Volunteers arrived in September 2010 and January 2011 to help lay the foundation for this second phase of the program. They were enthusiastically received by counterpart colleagues and community members and, in collaboration with our partner institutions, provided a smooth transition for those coming for 27 months of service.

After 53 years, development challenges still abound in Colombia. In various important ways it is a different Colombia from that of 1961 and even from the country the last group of Peace Corps Volunteers experienced in 1981. In 1961, Colombia had a population of 12 million. Today, with a population of over 47 million, with close to 75 percent urban, Colombia’s formerly rural society has taken on new features and is facing new challenges. Latest estimates indicate that over a third of the population lives below the poverty line, and over 10 percent live in extreme poverty. Further, Colombia ranks among the top 10 countries in the world with the greatest inequality of wealth distribution. As a result, you will be serving in urban and peri-urban areas of conflicting and contrasting social conditions on the one hand, and great commercial and economic potential on the other. Your work over time will help open up opportunities of employment and greater income for persons living in poverty and often socially excluded.

The challenges you and future Volunteers face will be enormous. The security situation is such that you will be required to accept strict limitations on movement and travel during your service. You will witness the paradoxical complexity of a country that opens its arms and hearts to foreigners and, at the same time, needs to take special measures to offer the protection and safety they require.

For many, you will represent the welcome return of a corps of Volunteers willing to work side by side with the poorest, often under the most difficult conditions. For Colombia, and a new generation of Colombians, you will be someone talked or read about, and will definitely be a curiosity. Still others will insist on portraying a stereotype of a Peace Corps that is obsolete, one that promotes the idea that North Americans are superior, imbued with a paternalistic attitude of “helping the poor and underdeveloped.” This caricature will only be erased by new generations of exemplary Volunteer service like yours.

I am convinced that what is obsolete is the caricature of the condescending and paternalistic Volunteers, a perception held by individuals who have never worked side by side with them in the urban schools or rural villages, in the squatter settlements or counterpart institutions. It is the convenient stereotype of the ugly American that they have not met, but want to believe that you personify. It will be the testimony of your life and the quality of your service as Peace Corps Volunteers that will transform that image.

Welcome once again: We are anxiously looking forward to your joining us at Team Colombia!

George F. Baldino
Country Director, Peace Corps/Colombia

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CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

In working toward fulfilling the Peace Corps mission of promoting world peace and friendship, as a trainee and Volunteer, you are expected to do the following:

1. Prepare your personal and professional life to make a commitment to serve abroad for a full term of 27 months
2. Commit to improving the quality of life of the people with whom you live and work and, in doing so, share your skills, adapt them, and learn new skills as needed
3. Serve where the Peace Corps asks you to go, under conditions of hardship if necessary, and with the flexibility needed for effective service
4. Recognize that your successful and sustainable development work is based on the local trust and confidence you build by living in, and respectfully integrating yourself into, your host community and culture
5. Recognize that you are responsible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for your personal conduct and professional performance
6. Engage with host country partners in a spirit of cooperation, mutual learning, and respect
7. Work within the rules and regulations of the Peace Corps and the local and national laws of the country where you serve
8. Exercise judgment and personal responsibility to protect your health, safety, and well-being and that of others
9. Recognize that you will be perceived in your host country and community as a representative of the people, cultures, values, and traditions of the United States of America
10. Represent responsively the people, cultures, values, and traditions of your host country and community to people in the United States both during and following your service

PEACE CORPS/COLOMBIA HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

History of the Peace Corps in Colombia

After a 29-year hiatus, the Peace Corps returned to Colombia with a group of nine Peace Corps Response Volunteers in September 2010. The group was joined by 14 additional Peace Corps Response Volunteers who arrived in January 2011. Since then, the Teaching English for Livelihoods (TEL) project has had two inputs of the traditional two-year Volunteers and eight Response Volunteers working with youth, community development and disaster preparedness. Your group will be the third traditional two-year Peace Corps Volunteers to arrive. Prior to suspending the program in 1981, the Peace Corps/Colombia program was one of the original countries, with the first group arriving in-country in September 1961. When the program was suspended due to increasing insecurity, close to 4,650 Volunteers had served in Colombia.

Despite the suspension, former Volunteers continued their strong connection to Colombia, especially through an active Friends of Colombia group that organizes projects and service trips back to Colombia.

Peace Corps Programming in Colombia

As mentioned above, Volunteers worked in many different areas before the Peace Corps/Colombia program was suspended in 1981. With the invitation to return, Peace Corps focused the program initially on one project area, TEL. Geographically, the program is located in the greater urban and peri-urban areas of the three major cities along the North Atlantic Coast: Barranquilla, Cartagena, and Santa Marta. Volunteers are working with teacher training colleges (*normales*); primary, middle and high schools; and technical training institutes, which are part of a government network called SENA. The Volunteers are implementing a specially developed co-planning, co-teaching methodology with teachers to help them improve their English teaching techniques, including various co-teaching methods. They organize and implement workshops and direct English teaching to teachers, students, and community members alike. Evenings and weekends not spent working in the school will be open for secondary projects that the Volunteer and community identify. In addition to the current TEL project, Peace Corps/Colombia expects to add a youth project and expand its geographical placement of Volunteers in the next five years.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW: COLOMBIA AT A GLANCE

History

Colombia has had a long and often complex history, one that you will be privileged to experience firsthand. With its geographic location bordering Panama, Colombia served as the entry point for the continent's first settlers. Of those, the most famous are the Inca, who settled further south in Peru. While lesser known, Colombia's groups eventually formed into about a dozen independent scattered groups. In 1499, Alonso de Ojeda became the first European to set foot in what is now Colombia. As the Spanish conquest took hold, the settlers became obsessed with the myth of El Dorado, a land of gold mountains and emeralds. While they never did find El Dorado, they did succeed in conquering much of the interior of the country. After about 50 years, Colombia was brought under control of the Viceroyalty of Peru. Then, in 1564, Colombia became part of the Presidencia del Nuevo Reino de Granada under the jurisdiction of the Presidencia de Quito. With colonization taking hold, slaves were brought in from Africa. Cartagena became the main slave trading post and eventually slaves outnumbered the indigenous population. With the growth of the empire, Bogota became the capital of its own Viceroyalty, including what is modern-day Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

Eventually, dissatisfaction with colonial rule gave rise to rebellion. Colombia declared independence on July 20, 1810. The struggle, led by Simon Bolivar, continued through 1819. Hence, Gran Colombia (which consisted of modern-day Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador) was formed. It was eventually disintegrated and, by 1830, became three separate countries. Political instability and civil war between the Conservatives and Liberals followed, with at least eight civil wars fought through the 19th century.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the U.S. built the Panama Canal, leaving Colombia with the territory it has today. After a period of relative peace, violence erupted again between Liberals and Conservatives. Termed *La Violencia*, it claimed over 300,000 lives during the 1,000-day conflict. In 1953, the country experienced a military coup, the only military intervention into Colombian politics in the 20th century. Ironically this coup united the Liberal and Conservative parties, who signed a pact in 1957 to share power in the government, rotating the presidency between parties every four years. The 1960s saw a rise in leftist military groups and right-wing paramilitary groups. This led to many violent conflicts, with massacres and kidnappings on both sides. Further fueling the violence was the rise of the cocaine trade, sinking the country through perhaps its darkest years in terms of violence and turmoil. With the election of Alvaro Uribe in 2001 and his promise to root out the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC) and drug violence, Colombia began to turn the page. Uribe made good on his promise to establish greater security and maintained a high popularity rating through his two terms in office. While FARC has not been disbanded, security has improved, roads are safer to travel, and murder rates have dropped. Juan Manuel Santos, the current president of Colombia, has continued to maintain the hard line against insurgents while at the same time softening the tone with regional governments such as Venezuela and Ecuador. His government priorities have been to focus on reducing poverty through a variety of initiatives. His government is currently engaged in peace talks with the FARC of which the country is cautiously optimistic of potential outcomes.

Government

Colombia has a long history of constitutional government. In fact, the two major political parties, Liberals and Conservatives, are two of the oldest in the hemisphere. The current government format of Colombia takes place within the framework of a presidential representative democratic republic, as established in the Constitution of 1991. In accordance with the principle of separation of powers, the government is divided into three branches: the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judicial branch.

The president is elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms and is currently limited to a maximum of two such terms (increased from one in 2005). All regional elections are held one year and five months after the presidential election.

Economy

Due in part to the improvement in security, Colombia's economy has enjoyed positive growth for the past five years. This improvement is also due to efforts to reduce public debt and promote an export-orientated growth strategy, as well as to the benefits of high commodity prices. Colombia exports coffee, coal, petroleum, apparel, bananas, and cut flowers. Industries and services account for over 80 percent of the GDP, followed by agriculture. Finally, there is added optimism with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Despite recent growth, with unemployment at approximately 12 percent and 44 percent of the population living below the poverty line, much more improvement is needed. For the Atlantic Coast of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta tourism and port activities are the main contributors to the region's economy with Barranquilla boasting the lowest unemployment rate in Colombia.

People and Culture

Colombians are well known for their festive, friendly, and outgoing nature. Along the North Atlantic Coast, there is an influence of Caribbean culture and visitors encounter a characteristically warm and receptive welcome. It is customary for people to greet you with a friendly "*Buenas*" and you are expected to return the greeting. Colombia is also an ethnically diverse country—a diversity reflected in its music and dance, particularly the *cumbia*, *mapale*, and *vallenato*. When moving from one department to another, you will see the many different cultural expressions and accents that represent Colombian diversity. Spanish is the official language, and is considered by many to be the most pure form of Spanish spoken in Latin America. In addition to Spanish, there are at least 80 other indigenous languages spoken. Over 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Famous Colombians include singer Shakira, baseball star Edgar Renteria, and actress Sofia Vergara, all from Barranquilla; renowned Medellin-born singer Juanes; and Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The Barranquilla Carnival is a World Cultural Heritage Event that rivals the Rio Carnival in Rio de Janeiro for size and popularity. With Barranquilla celebrating its bicentennial, it was designated as the American Capital of Culture for 2013.

Environment

Colombia's rich biological diversity is housed in its 21 bio-vegetation zones, five major watersheds, vast wetlands, and numerous rivers and lakes. Colombia is one of the top five most biologically diverse countries in the world. Unfortunately, due to expanding agriculture—legal and illegal—population growth, and urbanization, Colombia's natural resources are threatened.

Here are a few examples of the natural biodiversity found in Colombia:

- The coral reef of San Andres is the third largest in the world. There are 150 different coral species in Colombia.
- Colombia is home to 10 percent of the world's amphibious species and has 1,865 different birds.
- Colombia is the only place in the world with a snowcapped mountain located next to the sea (the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta).

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Following is a list of websites for additional information about the Peace Corps and Colombia and to connect you to returned Volunteers and other invitees. Please keep in mind that although the Peace Corps tries to make sure all these links are active and current, the Peace Corps cannot guarantee it. If you do not have access to the Internet, visit your local library. Libraries offer free Internet usage and often let you print information to take home.

A note of caution: As you surf the Internet, be aware that you may find bulletin boards and chat rooms in which people are free to express opinions about the Peace Corps based on their own experiences, including comments by those who were unhappy with their choice to serve in the Peace Corps. These opinions are not those of the Peace Corps or the U.S. government, and please keep in mind that no two people experience their service in the same way.

General Information About Colombia

State.gov

The Department of State's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Colombia and learn more about its social and political history. You can also go to the site's international travel section to check on conditions that may affect your safety.

Gpo.gov/libraries/public/

The U.S. Government Printing Office publishes country studies intermittently.

lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html

The Library of Congress provides historical and sociological data on numerous countries.

http://unstats.un.org/unsd/pocketbook/World_Statistics_Pocketbook_2013_edition.pdf

United Nations resource book with 2013 statistical country data

Data.un.org

United Nations site with links to data from U.N. member countries

Wikipedia.org

Search for Colombia to find encyclopedia-type information. Note: As Wikipedia content is user-generated, information may be biased and/or not verified.

Worldbank.org

The World Bank Group's mission is to fight poverty and improve the living standards of people in the developing world. It is a development bank that provides loans, policy advice, technical assistance, and knowledge-sharing services to developing countries to reduce poverty. This site contains a lot of information and resources regarding development.

Data.worldbank.org/country

Provides information on development indicators on countries, including population, gender, financial, and education, and climate change statistics.

Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees

RPCV.org

This is the site of the National Peace Corps Association, made up of returned Volunteers. On this site you can find links to all the Web pages of the “Friends of” groups for most countries of service, comprised of former Volunteers who served in those countries. There are also regional groups that frequently get together for social events and local volunteer activities. Or go straight to the Friends of Colombia site:

<http://www.friendsofcolombia.org/default.htm>

PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org

This site, hosted by a group of returned Volunteer writers, is a monthly online publication of essays and Volunteer accounts of their Peace Corps service.

Online Articles/Current News Sites About Colombia

UN.org/News/

The United Nations news service provides coverage of its member states and information about the international peacekeeping organization’s actions and positions.

VOAnews.com

Voice of America, the U.S. government’s multimedia broadcaster, features coverage of news around the world.

<http://colombiareports.com/>

The site provides daily sports, culture, travel, and news articles from the country.

International Development Sites About Colombia

http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/environment/country/colombia.html

This site provides information on USAID’s work in Colombia.

http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/data_sheets/cty_ds_COL.html

This site provides United Nations Development Program data on Colombia.

http://www.worldteach.org/site/c.buLRibNOIbJ2G/b.6478379/k.8F4D/Colombia_Year.htm

World Teach describes its program in Colombia on this site.

Recommended Books

Books About the History of the Peace Corps

1. Hoffman, Elizabeth Cobbs. "All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s." Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
2. Rice, Gerald T. "The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps." Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.
3. Stossel, Scott. "Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver." Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004.
4. Meisler, Stanley. "When the World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and its First 50 Years." Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.

Books on the Volunteer Experience

1. Dirlam, Sharon. "Beyond Siberia: Two Years in a Forgotten Place." Santa Barbara, CA: McSeas Books, 2004.
2. Casebolt, Marjorie DeMoss. "Margarita: A Guatemalan Peace Corps Experience." Gig Harbor, WA: Red Apple Publishing, 2000.
3. Erdman, Sarah. "Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village." New York City: Picador, 2003.
4. Hessler, Peter. "River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze." New York City: Perennial, 2001.
5. Kennedy, Geraldine ed. "From the Center of the Earth: Stories out of the Peace Corps." Santa Monica, CA: Clover Park Press, 1991.
6. Thomsen, Moritz. "Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle." Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997 (reprint).

Books About Colombia

1. Anything by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but particularly "Love in the Time of Cholera" and "One Hundred Years of Solitude."
2. Ospina, William. 1996. "Once Upon a Time There was a Colombia." Villegas Editors.
3. Palacios, M. "Between Legitimacy and Violence. A History of Colombia 1875-2002." Duke University Press, 2006.
4. Safford, F. and Palacios, M. "Colombia: Fragmented Land and Divided Society." Oxford University Press, 2001.
5. Bushnell, D. "The Making of a Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself." University of California Press, 1993.

LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE

Communications

Mail

Mail from the U.S. to Colombia can arrive relatively quickly, taking up to three weeks, and so far has been fairly reliable. However, sending mail to the U.S. from Colombia can be unreliable and expensive; Peace Corps/Colombia has not yet found a reliable, affordable option as of the writing of this welcome book.

Please note that Colombian Customs will levy import tariffs on most all packages sent into the country. The amount charged is based on a percentage of the value declared by the shipper. Any customs fees must be paid by the trainee/Volunteer before the package will be released by customs (Peace Corps staff will help facilitate the process). Please advise friends and family to be conscientious of the value that they declare of anything they send to you, as it will cost you on this end. The value of used items being shipped to you should be based on the current value (not original price) and declared as “Used Personal Items.” Additionally, materials marked as “Educational Supplies” (books, markers, etc.) often get through without being charged customs fees. All packages are subject to search to verify the contents.

The mailing address is
Volunteer/Trainee Name
Cuerpo de Paz
Centro Empresarial Las Américas, Calle 77B No. 57-141, Piso 7, Oficina No. 713
Barranquilla, Colombia

Telephones

International phone service is good and reliable, albeit expensive. There are also several cell phone companies offering pre-paid services. For security purposes, during training, Peace Corps/Colombia will provide you with an initial cellphone and number that is part of the Peace Corps/Colombia cellphone plan for program purposes and emergencies, but it will be up to you to pay for extra minutes if and when necessary. Once you swear in as a Volunteer, you will be provided a cellphone as part of the Peace Corps plan and it will not be necessary (in most cases) to purchase extra minutes per month.

Computer, Internet, and email access

Internet access is widespread across Santa Marta, Barranquilla, and Cartagena. In addition to Internet cafes, there may be the option for a personal Internet connection in your host family home as some (but not all) host families may have Internet access. Many public areas and cafes have wireless access free of charge if you bring your laptop. If you do not already have one, it’s a good idea to set up a Skype account for yourself to make it easy to call family and friends. It is advisable to bring a set of headphones to use for Skype calls in Internet cafes. Additionally, the Peace Corps office has some computers in the Volunteer lounge as well as a wireless hotspot. Staff computers are not available for Volunteer use.

A note about laptops and other expensive electronic equipment: If you decide to bring your laptop, and you may find it useful in your work, please note that it may be susceptible to theft, water, or even sea salt damage. Peace Corps/Colombia will not reimburse for lost or damaged laptops and cannot provide technical support. If you do bring your laptop or other expensive electronics, **you are encouraged to purchase personal property insurance prior to leaving for Colombia.** You should also bring a jump drive or external hard drive to back up your laptop.

Housing and Site Location

Peace Corps/Colombia requires Volunteers to live with host families for their entire service. The initial host family will be pre-selected, during site development, by the host family coordinator, in conjunction with your project manager, the safety and security coordinator, and director of programming and training. Host families receive a brochure and brief training on hosting Peace Corps Volunteers. Housing for Volunteers must meet a minimum standard of a room that can be locked with a bed, table, chair, and fan. Volunteer contributions to host families for lodging, utility, and food expenses will be explained and discussed after arrival and during pre-service training.

Housing in the North Atlantic Coast will vary from community to community. Most houses will be block construction, some may be wood framed. Some host families live in apartments. Houses are constructed to allow air flow to counter the hot and humid conditions. Most will have water, electricity, and indoor plumbing. Some houses may have water outside the home and very few homes may have latrines instead of indoor toilets. Water may be unreliable, especially during the extended dry season.

Living Allowance and Money Management

Volunteers receive a monthly allowance in Colombia pesos that is sufficient to live at the level of the local people. The allowance covers food, housing, household supplies, clothing, transportation to and from work, utilities, recreation and entertainment, and incidental expenses. Peace Corps Volunteers are expected to live at a level that is comparable with that of their host country counterparts. The Peace Corps discourages Volunteers from supplementing their living allowance with funds from home.

While many bring additional money with them for out-of-country travel, the Peace Corps expects Volunteers to live at the same level as their neighbors and colleagues and strongly discourages Volunteers from supplementing their income with money brought from home. Furthermore, the Peace Corps cannot safeguard any extra cash you may bring with you.

Credit cards can be used and are widely accepted. Most credit card companies will assess an international service fee for transactions outside of the U.S. Given the difficulty of finding banks who can cash them, the use of Traveler's checks is discouraged.

Food and Diet

Living in a tropical section of the country, there is a plethora of tropical fruits, including mangos, papaya, melons, *lulo* and citrus fruits, among others. In the major cities there is a wide variety of restaurants that range from McDonalds to McMondongo's. The staple foods for the North Atlantic Coast are dishes that include rice, beans, plantains, *arepas*, and chicken or beef. Soups of various types—vegetable, fish or meat-based—are common. Finally, there is a wide variety of fresh seafood available.

You will have relatively close access to markets and grocery stores that sell a wide variety of products to meet most of your dietary needs. Vegetarians can maintain a healthy diet in Colombia and in the Atlantic Coast region. However, it may be difficult to maintain a strictly vegetarian diet when living and sharing meals with your host families. This may affect your cooking and meal arrangements with your host families, since they cannot be expected to change their regular diet to meet your needs. These issues will be discussed and explored further during pre-service training.

Transportation

Transportation within the North Atlantic Coast corridor from Cartagena to Santa Marta is fairly reliable and safe. There are several options available, from vans that provide nonstop travel between the major cities of Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Santa Marta, to “door to door” (*puerta, puerta*) vans, which, for a higher fee, will pick you up at your door and drop you off at your exact destination in the neighboring

city. Travel by buses that make frequent stops to drop off and pick up passengers is limited to a few trusted companies. In your communities there are inter-city buses and taxis that can take you where you want to go.

Volunteers may also travel in private cars when traveling with colleagues or host family or other well-known community members. Volunteers are not allowed to drive cars, except in exceptional circumstances outlined in the Peace Corps Manual, Section 522 (which will be explained in your Volunteer Handbook). Volunteers are also prohibited from either driving a motorcycle or riding as a passenger on the back of a motorcycle.

Volunteers are required to receive prior approval from the country director to ride bicycles in Colombia and, if approved, must wear helmets. Failure to do so will result in disciplinary action, up to and including administrative separation.

Being in Colombia, there are several travel restrictions in place. It is prohibited to travel by bus or car after dark. Furthermore, for travel to other parts of the country, you must solicit permission from the Peace Corps which, in turn, solicits approval from the U.S. Embassy security office. If approved, you must travel by airplane and follow the regulations of the U.S. Embassy.

Geography and Climate

The North Atlantic Coast, where you will be placed, is hot and humid all year long, with the average daytime temperature around 85 degrees Fahrenheit. During the dry season months of November through April, strong trade winds make the heat more tolerable. There are distinct rainy seasons that run from April through June and August to November, when torrential downpours can lead to dangerous flash floods in urban areas. Outside of the urban areas, there is moderate to severe deforestation for agriculture and cattle ranching.

Social Activities

Most social activities revolve around the family or community celebrations. For *Patronatos*, or Saint Day celebrations, religious processions are followed by large communitywide celebrations. *Carnaval*, the pre-Lenten celebration, is very popular in Barranquilla, which considers its Carnaval to be the second best in the world behind Rio de Janeiro's.

Colombians are hospitable and inviting and want to share their culture with you. As a result, you may be invited to share in family meals and celebrations, which serve as good opportunities to build strong ties with the community. You will find that traditional gender roles are more common, with females being expected to maintain the home and be subject to more travel restrictions. While you may see females out jogging, those who do almost never do so alone. You need to be mindful and moderate in your alcohol consumption, as not only are you an example for the youth in schools, but statistics show that the majority of Volunteer security incidents are alcohol-related. A Volunteer whose consumption of alcohol results in behavior that is unsafe, culturally inappropriate, and not professional will be disciplined or, depending on the severity of the case, may be administratively separated.

Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior

To be effective, Volunteers must be respected by the communities in which they work. The Peace Corps builds its reputation not through massive publicity campaigns, but through its Volunteers, one school and one community at a time. You should be prepared to be a role model throughout your service. When a Volunteer is unable to gain and maintain the respect and confidence of a school and community, it is almost always due to a failure to meet the school's and community's standards of behavior. Behavior that is detrimental to the image of the Peace Corps or that threatens the reputation or physical safety of other Volunteers can result in administrative separation.

Colombians are generally well dressed, especially in the workplace. During pre-service training, you will learn how to dress and act appropriately. Your community is likely to hold you to higher standards because you will be working in a school and you are a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Dressing appropriately can enhance your credibility, since it reflects your respect for the customs and expectations of the people with whom you live and work. Inappropriate dress, like inappropriate behavior, is something that can set you unnecessarily apart from your community. Until you become well-known by Colombians, your dress will be an important indicator to them. For better or worse, you will be judged in part by your appearance.

During pre-service training you are expected to dress as you would on the job. Shorts, T-shirts, flip-flops, rubberized clogs, waterproof sandals, etc., will not be accepted and the trainee will be asked to change. Men will be asked to remove any earrings during pre-service training and the first few months at their site. Facial piercings are not permitted during pre-service training and are discouraged during service. If you have a tattoo, it is best to keep it covered. For men, if you have facial hair it is recommended that it be trimmed and well kept.

Personal Safety

More detailed information about the Peace Corps' approach to safety is contained in the Safety and Security section, but it is an important issue and cannot be overemphasized. As stated in the Volunteer Handbook, becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer entails certain safety risks. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment (oftentimes alone), having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as well-off are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Many Volunteers experience varying degrees of unwanted attention and harassment. Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur, although most Colombia Volunteers complete their two years of service without incident. The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies designed to help reduce the risks and enhance your safety and security. These procedures and policies, in addition to safety training, will be provided once you arrive in Colombia. Using these tools, one can be empowered to take responsibility for his or her safety and well-being.

Each staff member at the Peace Corps is committed to providing Volunteers with the support they need to successfully meet the challenges they will face to have a safe, healthy, and productive service. Volunteers and families are encouraged to look at safety and security information on the Peace Corps website at peacecorps.gov/safety.

Information on these pages gives messages on Volunteer health and safety. There is a section titled Safety and Security in Depth. Among topics addressed are the risks of serving as a Volunteer, posts' safety support systems, and emergency planning and communications.

Rewards and Frustrations

You are likely to derive much satisfaction from helping to improve the living conditions of Colombians and from learning a new culture and language. You will also encounter unusual social and cultural situations that will require flexibility and understanding on your part. By communicating honestly and demonstrating an interest in Colombia and its people, you will soon come to enjoy your community, its customs, and your role as a Volunteer. A low level of interest, motivation, or participation by community members and co-workers, however, may cause you some frustration. You must remember that development takes time and that you may not immediately see any demonstrable impact from your work.

The Peace Corps is not for everyone. Being a Volunteer requires greater dedication and commitment than most other work environments. It is for confident, self-starting, concerned individuals who are interested

in participating in the development of other countries and increasing human understanding across cultural barriers. The key to satisfying work as a Peace Corps Volunteer is the ability to establish successful human relationships at all levels with your host family, the community members with whom you work, partner agency personnel and school officials, and your fellow Volunteers. This requires patience, sensitivity, empathy, and a positive, professional attitude. If you have the personal qualities needed to meet the challenges of two years of service in Colombia, you will have a rewarding, enriching, and lasting experience. At the same time, you will contribute to the development of Colombia and leave a part of yourself and your culture behind.

PEACE CORPS TRAINING

Overview of Pre-Service Training

The Peace Corps uses a competency-based training approach throughout the continuum of learning, supporting you from arrival in Colombia to your departure. Pre-service training (PST) is the first event within this continuum of learning and ensures that you are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively perform your job. Pre-service training is conducted in Colombia by Peace Corps staff, most of whom are locally hired trainers. Peace Corps staff measure achievement of learning and determine if you have successfully achieved competencies, including language standards, for swearing-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Peace Corps training incorporates widely accepted principles of adult learning and is structured around the experiential learning cycle. Successful training results in competence in various technical, linguistic, cross-cultural, health, and safety and security areas.

Integrating into the community is one of the core competencies you will strive to achieve both in PST and during the first several months of service. Successful sustainable development work is based on the relationships you build by respectfully integrating into the host country community and culture.

You will be prepared for this through a homestay experience, which often requires trainees to live with host families during PST. Integration into the community fosters language and cross-cultural learning and ensures your health, safety, and security.

Prior to arriving in your site, you will participate in an 11-week pre-service training and orientation. The training will focus on technical, medical, language, cultural, policies, and safety and security topics as they relate to Peace Corps/Colombia. You will be placed with a host family, in a neighborhood of Barranquilla or in a community close to Barranquilla. Toward the end of the training there will be a two-day counterpart day that will preclude a one-week future site visit. At the end of training, if you meet the minimum technical, language, safety and security, and cross-cultural requirements, you will be sworn in as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Colombia by building on the skills you already have and helping you develop new skills in a manner appropriate to the needs of the country. The Peace Corps staff, Colombia experts, and current Volunteers will conduct the training program. Training places great emphasis on learning how to transfer the skills you have to the community in which you will serve as a Volunteer.

Technical training will include sessions on the general economic and political environment in Colombia and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your project's goals and objectives and will meet with the Colombian agencies and organizations that invited the Peace Corps to assist them. You will be supported and evaluated throughout training to build the confidence and skills you need to undertake your project activities, report your progress, and serve as a productive member of your community.

The focus of the technical training will be to provide a general overview of teaching English in Colombia, including the techniques you will be using and history of English teaching in Colombia. Much of the technical training will revolve around the co-teaching model and its use in the Colombian context.

Language Training

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will find that language skills are key to personal and professional satisfaction during your service. These skills are critical to your job performance, help you integrate into your community, and can ease your personal adaptation to the new surroundings. Therefore, language training is at the heart of the training program. You must successfully meet minimum language requirements to complete training and become a Volunteer. Colombian language instructors usually teach formal language classes six days a week in small groups.

Your language training will incorporate a community-based approach. In addition to classroom time, you will be given assignments to work on outside of the classroom and with your host family. The goal is to get you to a point of basic social communication skills so you can practice and develop language skills further once you are at your site. Prior to being sworn in as a Volunteer, you will develop strategies to continue studying language during your service.

Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural training will provide opportunities for you to reflect on your own cultural values and how they influence your behavior in Colombia. You will also discuss the questions you have about the behaviors and practices you observe in Colombia, exploring the underlying reasons for these behaviors and practices.

Cross-cultural and community development training will help you improve your communication skills and understand your role as a facilitator of development. Training will cover topics such as the concept of time, power and hierarchy, gender roles, communication styles, and the concept of self and relationships. Because adjusting to a new culture can be very challenging, you will participate in resiliency training which provides a framework and tools to help with adjustment issues.

The host family experience provides a unique context for cross-cultural learning, and is designed to ease your transition to life at your site. Families go through an orientation conducted by Peace Corps staff to explain the purpose of PST and to assist them in helping you adapt to living in Colombia. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families.

As part of your pre-service training (and throughout your service), you will live with a Colombia host family. This experience is designed to ease your transition to life at your site. Families go through an orientation conducted by Peace Corps staff to explain the purpose of pre-service training and to assist them in helping you adapt to living in Colombia. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families.

Cross-cultural and community development training will help you improve your communication skills and understand your role as a facilitator of development. You will be exposed to topics such as community mobilization, conflict resolution, gender and development, nonformal and adult education strategies, and political structures.

Cross-cultural training will provide you with an understanding of the unique culture in which you will be working. This will prepare you to develop tools to overcome “culture shock” and provide an appreciation for the Colombian Atlantic Coastal culture in which you will be living and working. The training will also be geared to introduce you to Colombian history and culture.

Health Training

During pre-service training, you will be trained in health prevention, basic first aid, and treatment of medical illnesses found in Colombia. You will be expected to practice preventive health and to take responsibility for your own health by adhering to all medical policies. Trainees are required to attend all medical sessions. Health education topics will nutrition, food and water preparation, emotional health, dealing with alcohol, prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and common illnesses in Colombia.

Safety and Security Training

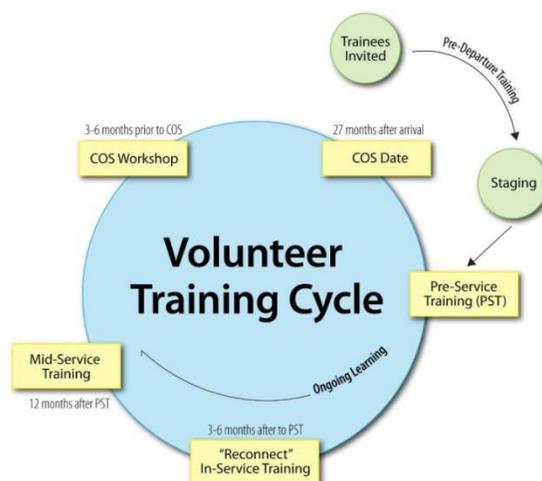
During the safety and security training sessions, you will learn how to adopt a lifestyle that reduces your risks at home, at work, and during your travels. You will also learn appropriate, effective strategies for coping with unwanted attention, how to identify safety risks in-country and about the Peace Corps' emergency response and support systems. Furthermore, due to high security concerns in Colombia, there will be an orientation on travel and security policies.

Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service

The Peace Corps' training system provides Volunteers with continual opportunities to examine their commitment to Peace Corps service while increasing their technical and cross-cultural skills. During service, there are usually three training events. The titles and objectives for those trainings are as follows:

- **In-service training:** Provides an opportunity for Volunteers to upgrade their technical, language, and project development skills while sharing their experiences and reaffirming their commitment after having served for three to six months.
- **Midservice training** (done in conjunction with technical sector in-service): Assists Volunteers in reviewing their first year, reassessing their personal and project objectives, and planning for their second year of service.
- **Close-of-service conference:** Prepares Volunteers for their future after Peace Corps service and reviews their respective projects and personal experiences.

The number, length, and design of these trainings are adapted to country-specific needs and conditions. The key to the training system is that training events are integrated and interrelated, from the pre-departure orientation through the end of your service, and are planned, implemented, and evaluated cooperatively by the training staff, Peace Corps staff, and Volunteers.



YOUR HEALTH CARE IN COLOMBIA

The Peace Corps' highest priority is maintaining the good health and safety of every Volunteer. Peace Corps medical programs emphasize the preventive, rather than the curative, approach to disease. The Peace Corps in Colombia maintains a clinic with a full-time medical officer who takes care of Volunteers' primary health-care needs, including evaluation and treatment of most medical conditions. Additional medical services are also available in Colombia at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill and cannot receive the care you need in Colombia, you will be transported to a Peace Corps-approved regional medical facility. If the Office of Health Services (OHS) determines that the care is not optimal for your condition at the regional facility, you will be transported to the United States.

Health Issues in Colombia

Among the important health issues in Colombia to take into consideration are dengue and yellow fever, which are endemic to the Caribbean region of Colombia. You will be provided with a yellow fever vaccination if you do not already have one prior to arrival. You will also be provided with a mosquito net and repellent to prevent dengue fever once in-country.

Malaria, while endemic in parts of Colombia, is not prevalent on the north coast. Currently, Volunteers are not routinely required to take prophylactics for malaria, but would be required to do so if traveling to malaria-affected areas of the country. Standard policy could change in the future depending upon Volunteer site placements.

Bites and scratches by rabies-carrying animals can also be life-threatening, so pre-exposure and post-exposure rabies vaccines are also mandatory. Existing skin conditions like acne and eczema often worsen in the Caribbean region of Colombia because of the hot climate. Sun-aggravated and fungal skin conditions are fairly common. Others, such as solar keratosis, a precancerous skin condition, can be acquired from prolonged exposure to the sun without adequate protection.

Helping You Stay Healthy

The Peace Corps will provide you with all the necessary inoculations, medications, and information to stay healthy. Upon your arrival in Colombia, you will receive a country-specific medical handbook. By the end of training, you will receive a medical kit with supplies to take care of mild illnesses and first aid needs. The contents of the kit are listed later in this section.

During pre-service training, you will have access to basic medical supplies through the medical officer. However, during this time, you will be responsible for your own supply of prescription drugs and any other specific medical supplies you require, as the Peace Corps will not order these items during training. Please bring a three-month supply of any prescription drugs you use, since they may not be available here and it may take several months for shipments to arrive.

You will have physicals at midservice and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Colombia will consult with the Office of Health Services in Washington, D.C., or a regional medical officer. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Colombia, you may be sent out of the country for further evaluation and care.

Maintaining Your Health

As a Volunteer, you must accept considerable responsibility for your own health. Proper precautions will significantly reduce your risk of serious illness or injury. The adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" becomes extremely important in areas where diagnostic and treatment facilities are not up

to the standards of the United States. The most important of your responsibilities in Colombia is to take the following preventive measures:

- Drinking tap water is considered safe in the Barranquilla, Cartagena, and Santa Marta areas, but if you do not feel safe drinking tap water, boiling the water is recommended. Volunteers living outside of main cities are provided with a water filter. Further guidance will be provided during pre-service training.
- Exercise caution with “street food.”
- Use mosquito repellent and mosquito netting.
- Use sunscreen regularly.
- Avoid stray dogs and animals.

Many illnesses that afflict Volunteers worldwide are preventable if proper food and water precautions are taken. These illnesses include food poisoning, parasitic infections, hepatitis A, dysentery, Guinea worms, tapeworms, and typhoid fever. Your medical officer will discuss specific standards for water and food preparation in Colombia during pre-service training.

Abstinence is the most effective way to prevent infection with HIV and other STIs. You are taking risks if you choose to be sexually active. To lessen risk, use a condom every time you have sex. Whether your partner is a host country citizen, a fellow Volunteer, or anyone else, do not assume this person is free of HIV/AIDS or other STIs. You will receive more information from the medical officer about this important issue.

Volunteers are expected to adhere to an effective means of birth control to prevent an unplanned pregnancy. Your medical officer can help you decide on the most appropriate method to suit your individual needs. Contraceptive methods are available without charge from the medical officer.

It is critical to your health that you promptly report to the medical office or other designated facility for scheduled immunizations, and that you let the medical officer know immediately of significant illnesses and injuries.

Women’s Health Information

If feminine hygiene products are not available for you to purchase on the local market, the Peace Corps medical officer in Colombia will provide them. If you require a specific product, please bring a three-month supply with you. Many female Volunteers take menstrual cups (The Diva Cup, The Keeper, The Moon Cup, etc.) to avoid potential problems with availability or disposal of feminine hygiene products.

Pregnancy is treated in the same manner as other Volunteer health conditions that require medical attention. The Peace Corps is responsible for determining the medical risk and the availability of appropriate medical care if the Volunteer chooses to remain in-country. Given the circumstances under which Volunteers live and work in Peace Corps countries, it is rare that the Peace Corps’ medical standards for continued service during pregnancy can be met.

The Peace Corps follows the 2012 U.S. Preventive Services Task Force guidelines for screening PAP smears, which recommend women aged 21–29 receive screening PAPs every three years and women aged 30–65 receive screening PAPs every five years. As such, most Volunteers will not receive a PAP during their service, but can use Peace Corps supplied health insurance after service to have an exam.

Your Peace Corps Medical Kit

The Peace Corps medical officer will provide you with a kit containing basic items to prevent and treat illnesses that may occur during service. Kit items can be periodically restocked at the medical office.

Medical Kit Contents

First Aid Handbook	Decongestant
Ace bandages	Dental floss
Acetaminophen (Tylenol)	Gloves
Adhesive tape	Hydrocortisone cream
Antacid tablets	Ibuprofen
Anti-diarrheal (Imodium)	Insect repellent
Antibiotic ointment	Iodine tablets (for water purification)
Antifungal cream	Lip balm
Antihistamine	Oral rehydration salts
Antiseptic antimicrobial skin cleaner	Scissors
Band-Aids	Sore throat lozenges
Bismuth Subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol)	Sterile eye drops
Butterfly closures	Sterile gauze pads
Calagel anti-itch gel	Sunscreen
Condoms	Thermometer (Temp-a-dots)
Cough lozenges	Tweezers

Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist

If there has been any change in your health—physical, mental, or dental—since you submitted your examination reports to the Peace Corps, you must immediately notify the Office of Health Services (OHS). Failure to disclose new illnesses, injuries, allergies, or pregnancy can endanger your health and may jeopardize your eligibility to serve.

If your dental exam was done more than a year ago, or if your physical exam is more than two years old, contact OHS to find out whether you need to update your records. If your dentist or Peace Corps dental consultant has recommended that you undergo dental treatment or repair, you must complete that work and make sure your dentist sends requested confirmation reports or X-rays to the Office of Health Services.

If you wish to avoid having duplicate vaccinations, contact your physician's office to obtain a copy of your immunization record and bring it to your pre-departure orientation. If you have any immunizations (other than yellow fever vaccination as directed by OHS) prior to Peace Corps service, the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for the cost. The Peace Corps will provide all the immunizations necessary for your overseas assignment, either at your pre-departure orientation or during your first six months in Colombia. Volunteers must be willing to get all required vaccinations unless there is a documented medical contraindication. Failure to accept required vaccination is grounds for administrative separation from the Peace Corps. You do not need to begin taking malaria medication prior to departure.

Bring a three-month supply of any prescription or over-the-counter medication you use on a regular basis, including birth control pills. Although the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for this three-month supply, it will order refills during your service. While awaiting shipment—which can take several months—you will be dependent on your own medication supply. The Peace Corps will not pay for herbal or nonprescribed medications, such as St. John's wort, glucosamine, selenium, or antioxidant supplements. Medications supplied may be generic or equivalent to your current medications (including birth control pills).

You are encouraged to bring copies of medical prescriptions signed by your physician. This is not a requirement, but they might come in handy if you are questioned in transit about carrying a three-month supply of prescription drugs.

If you wear eyeglasses, bring two pairs (of the current prescription) with you. If a pair breaks, the Peace Corps will replace them, using the information your doctor in the United States provided on the eyeglasses form during your examination. The Peace Corps Office of Health Services strongly discourages Volunteers from wearing contact lenses while overseas unless there is a true medical indication documented by your ophthalmologist. Contact lenses, particularly extended use soft contacts, are associated with a variety of eye infections and other inflammatory problems. One of the most serious of these problems is infectious keratitis which can lead to severe cornea damage which could result in permanent blindness requiring corneal transplantation. These risks of permanent eye damage are exacerbated in the Peace Corps environment where the Volunteer's ability to properly clean the lenses is compromised due to limited access to sterile water as well as decreased effectiveness of cleaning solutions due to prolonged storage in unsatisfactory conditions. In addition, when bacterial eye infections occur, assessment and treatment within hours by a competent ophthalmologist is indicated. This is virtually impossible in the Peace Corps setting. If you feel that you simply must be able to use your contacts occasionally, please consider using single use, daily disposable lenses which do not require cleaning.

If you are eligible for Medicare, are over 50 years of age, or have a health condition that may restrict your future participation in health-care plans, you may wish to consult an insurance specialist about unique coverage needs before your departure. The Peace Corps will provide all necessary health care from the time you leave for your pre-departure orientation until you complete your service. When you finish, you will be entitled to the post-service health-care benefits described in the Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook. You may wish to consider keeping an existing health plan in effect during your service if you think age or pre-existing conditions might prevent you from re-enrolling in your current plan when you return home.

SAFETY AND SECURITY IN DEPTH

Ensuring the safety and security of Volunteers is Peace Corps' highest priority. Serving as a Volunteer overseas entails certain safety and security risks. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment, a limited understanding of the local language and culture, and the perception of being a wealthy American are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Property theft and burglaries are not uncommon. Incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur, although most Volunteers complete their two years of service without a serious safety and security incident. Together, the Peace Corps and Volunteers can reduce risk, but cannot truly eliminate all risk.

Beyond knowing that the Peace Corps approaches safety and security as a partnership with you, it might be helpful to see how this partnership works. The Peace Corps has policies, procedures, and training in place to promote your safety. The Peace Corps depends on you to follow those policies and to put into practice what you have learned. An example of how this works in practice—in this case to help manage the risk and impact of burglary—follows:

- The Peace Corps assesses the security environment where you will live and work.
- The Peace Corps inspects the house where you will live according to established security criteria.
- The Peace Corps ensures you are welcomed by host country counterparts or other community leaders in your new community.
- The Peace Corps responds to security concerns that you raise.
- You lock your doors and windows.
- You adopt a lifestyle appropriate to the community where you live.
- You get to know your neighbors.
- You decide if purchasing personal articles insurance is appropriate for you.
- You don't change residences before being authorized by the Peace Corps.
- You communicate your concerns to Peace Corps staff.

This welcome book contains sections on Living Conditions and Volunteer Lifestyle, Peace Corps Training, Your Health Care, and Safety and Security, all of which include important safety and security information to help you understand this partnership. The Peace Corps makes every effort to give Volunteers the training and tools they need to function in the safest way possible and prepare for the unexpected, teaching you to identify, reduce, and manage the risks you may encounter.

Factors that Contribute to Volunteer Risk

There are several factors that can heighten a Volunteer's risk, many of which are within the Volunteer's control. By far the most common crime that Volunteers experience is theft. Thefts often occur when Volunteers are away from their sites, in crowded locations (such as markets or on public transportation), and when leaving items unattended.

Before you depart for Colombia there are several measures you can take to reduce your risk:

- Leave valuable objects in the United States, particularly those that are irreplaceable or have sentimental value
- Leave copies of important documents and account numbers with someone you trust in the States
- Purchase a hidden money pouch or "dummy" wallet as a decoy
- Purchase personal articles insurance. (If you are interested in this, Peace Corps staff can provide more information.)

After you arrive in Colombia, you will receive more detailed information about common crimes, factors that contribute to Volunteer risk, and local strategies to reduce that risk. For example, Volunteers in Colombia learn to do the following:

- Choose safe routes and times for travel, and travel with someone trusted by the community whenever possible
- Make sure one's personal appearance is respectful of local customs
- Avoid high-crime areas
- Know the local language to get help in an emergency
- Make friends with local people who are respected in the community
- Be careful and conscientious about using electronics (phones, cameras, laptops, iPods, etc.) in public or leaving them unattended
- Limit alcohol consumption

As you can see from this list, you must be willing to work hard and adapt your lifestyle to minimize the potential for being a target for crime. As with anywhere in the world, crime occurs in Colombia. You can reduce the risks by avoiding situations that place you at risk and by taking precautions. Crime at the village or town level is less frequent than in the large cities; people know each other and generally are less likely to steal from their neighbors. Tourist attractions in large towns are favorite worksites for pickpockets.

The following are other security concerns in Colombia of which you should be aware:

- While whistles and verbal harassment based on race or gender may be fairly common on the street, this behavior may be reduced if you abide by local cultural norms, dress conservatively, and respond according to the training you will receive.

Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime

You must be prepared to take on a large degree of responsibility for your own safety. To reduce the likelihood that you will become a victim of crime, you can take steps to make yourself less of a target such as ensuring your home is secure and developing relationships in your community. While the factors that contribute to your risk in Colombia may be different, in many ways you can do what you would do if you moved to a new city anywhere: Be cautious, check things out, ask questions, learn about your neighborhood, know where the more risky locations are, use common sense, and be aware. You can reduce your vulnerability to crime by integrating into your community, learning the local language, acting responsibly, and abiding by Peace Corps policies and procedures. Serving safely and effectively in Colombia will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

For your safety, remember the following:

- No travel on roads between cities at night
- Stick to approved travel routes
- Seek approval for travel to towns and cities not along the North Caribbean Coast

Support from Staff

If a trainee or Volunteer is the victim of a safety and security incident, Peace Corps staff is prepared to provide support. All Peace Corps posts have procedures in place to respond to incidents of crime committed against Volunteers. The first priority for all posts in the aftermath of an incident is to ensure the Volunteer is safe and receiving medical treatment as needed. After assuring the safety of the Volunteer, Peace Corps staff response may include reassessing the Volunteer's worksite and housing arrangements and making any adjustments, as needed. In some cases, the nature of the incident may necessitate a site or housing transfer. Peace Corps staff will also support and assist Volunteers who choose to make a formal complaint with local law enforcement. It is very important that a Volunteer

reports an incident when it occurs. The reasons for this include obtaining medical care and emotional support, enabling Peace Corps staff to assess the situation to determine if there is an ongoing safety and security concern, protecting peer Volunteers and preserving the right to file a complaint. Should a Volunteer decide later in the process to file a complaint with law enforcement, this option may be compromised if evidence was not preserved at the time of the incident.

Office of Victim Advocacy

The Office of Victim Advocacy (OVA) is a resource to Volunteers who are victims of crime, including sexual assault and stalking. Victim advocates are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to help Volunteers understand their emotional, medical, and legal options so they may make informed decisions to meet their specific needs. The OVA provides a compassionate, coordinated, and supportive response to Volunteers who wish to access Peace Corps support services.

Contact information for the Office of Victim Advocacy

Direct phone number: 202.692.1753

Toll-free: 855.855.1961 ext. 1753

Duty phone: 202.409.2704 (available 24/7, call or text)

Email: victimadvocate@peacecorps.gov

Crime Data for Colombia

Crime data and statistics for Colombia, which are updated yearly, are available at the following link: <http://www.peacecorps.gov/countrydata/colombia>

Few Peace Corps Volunteers are victims of serious crimes. Crimes that do occur abroad are investigated and prosecuted by local jurisdictional authorities. If you are the victim of a crime, you will decide if you wish to file a complaint with law enforcement, who will then determine whether to prosecute. If you decide to file a complaint, the Peace Corps will help through the process. The Peace Corps staff will ensure you are fully informed of your options and understand how the local legal process works. Further, the Peace Corps will help you exercise your rights to the fullest extent possible under the laws of your host country.

The Peace Corps will train you on how to respond if you are the victim of a serious crime, including how to get to a safe location quickly and contact your Peace Corps office. It's important that you notify the Peace Corps as soon as you can so Peace Corps staff can provide assistance.

Volunteer Safety Support in Colombia

The Peace Corps' approach to safety is a five-pronged plan to help you stay safe during your service. The plan includes information sharing, Volunteer training, site selection criteria, a detailed emergency action plan, and protocols for addressing safety and security incidents. Colombia's in-country safety program is outlined below.

The Peace Corps/Colombia office will keep you informed of any issues that may impact Volunteer safety through **information sharing**. Regular updates will be provided in Volunteer newsletters and in memorandums from the country director. In the event of a critical situation or emergency, you will be contacted through the emergency communication network. An important component of the capacity of Peace Corps to keep you informed is your buy-in to the partnership concept with the Peace Corps staff. It is expected that you will do your part to ensure that Peace Corps staff members are kept apprised of your movements in-country so they are able to inform you.

Volunteer training will include sessions on specific safety and security issues in Colombia. This training will prepare you to adopt a culturally appropriate lifestyle and exercise judgment that promotes safety and reduces risk in your home, at work, and while traveling. Safety training is offered throughout service and is integrated into the language, cross-cultural aspects, health, and other components of training. You will be expected to successfully complete all training competencies in a variety of areas, including safety and security, as a condition of service.

Certain **site selection criteria** are used to determine safe housing for Volunteers before their arrival. The Peace Corps staff works closely with host communities and counterpart agencies to help prepare them for a Volunteer's arrival and to establish expectations of their respective roles in supporting the Volunteer. Each site is inspected before the Volunteer's arrival to ensure placement in appropriate, safe, and secure housing and worksites. Site selection is based, in part, on any relevant site history; access to medical, banking, postal, and other essential services; availability of communications, transportation, and markets; different housing options and living arrangements; and other Volunteer support needs.

You will also learn about Peace Corps/Colombia's **detailed emergency action plan**, which is implemented in the event of civil or political unrest or a natural disaster. When you arrive at your site, you will complete and submit a site locator form with your address, contact information, and a map to your house. If there is a security threat, you will gather with other Volunteers in Colombia at predetermined locations until the situation is resolved or the Peace Corps decides to evacuate.

Finally, in order for the Peace Corps to be fully responsive to the needs of Volunteers, it is imperative that Volunteers immediately report any safety and security incidents to the Peace Corps office. The Peace Corps has established **protocols for addressing safety and security incidents** in a timely and appropriate manner, and it collects and evaluates safety and security data to track trends and develop strategies to minimize risks to current and future Volunteers.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION OVERVIEW

The Peace Corps mission is to promote world peace and friendship and to improve people’s lives in the communities where Volunteers serve. Instituting policies and practices to support a diverse and inclusive work and Volunteer environment is essential to achieving this mission.

Through inclusive recruitment and retention of staff and Volunteers, the Peace Corps seeks to reflect the rich diversity of the United States and bring diverse perspectives and solutions to development issues. Additionally, ensuring diversity among staff and Volunteers enriches interpersonal relations and communications for the staff work environment, the Volunteer experience, and the communities in which Volunteers serve.

The Peace Corps defines diversity as a “collection of individual attributes that together help agencies pursue organizational objectives efficiently and effectively. These include, but are not limited to, characteristics such as national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, veteran status, and family structures. Diversity also encompasses differences among people concerning where they are from and where they have lived and their differences of thought and life experiences.”

We define inclusion as a “culture that connects each [staff member and Volunteer] to the organization; encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness; and leverages diversity throughout the organization so that all individuals are able to participate and contribute to their full potential.” The Peace Corps promotes inclusion throughout the lifecycle of Volunteers and staff. When staff and Volunteers are able to share their rich diversity in an inclusive work environment, the Peace Corps mission is better fulfilled. More information about diversity and inclusion can be found in the Volunteer Handbook.

An inclusive agency is one that seeks input from everyone in an effort to find the best ideas and strategies possible to execute its objectives. When input is solicited, heard, and considered from a rich multitude of individuals the best course of action usually emerges. The Peace Corps seeks to improve its operations and effectiveness by ensuring that all voices and ideas are heard and that all Volunteers and staff feel welcome and appreciated. When each person’s voice is heard, the agency is stronger and the impact of Volunteers is strengthened.

Diversity and Inclusion at Your Site

Once Volunteers arrive at their sites, diversity and inclusion principles remain the same but take on a different shape, in which your host community may share a common culture and you—the Volunteer—are the outsider. You may be in the minority, if not the sole American like you, at your site. You will begin to notice diversity in perspectives, ethnicity, age, depth of conversation, and degree of support you may receive. For example, elders, youth, and middle-aged individuals all have unique points of views on topics you may discuss, from perspectives on work, new projects, and social engagements to the way community issues are addressed.

Peace Corps staff in your host country recognize the additional adjustment issues that come with living and working in new environments and will provide support and guidance to Volunteers. During pre-service training, a session will be held to discuss diversity and inclusion and how you can serve as an ally for your peers, honoring diversity, seeking inclusion, challenging prejudice and exclusion, exploring your own biases, and learning mechanisms to cope with these adjustment issues. The Peace Corps looks forward to having Volunteers from varied backgrounds that include a variety of races, ethnic groups, ages, religions, sexual orientations and gender identities. The agency expects you to work collaboratively to create an inclusive environment that transcends differences and finds common ground.

Similar to American culture, Colombia is also a country of rich diversity. Colombian people are descendant from indigenous tribes, white Europeans, and black Africans. This racial mixture has provided Colombia with inhabitants that are representative of all colors, shapes, and sizes. The different cultural identities are celebrated frequently and in various ways. There are almost 90 different indigenous tribes in Colombia, which still follow traditional customs and choose to live apart from modern society. Many of these groups make their culture known by creating art or offering tours of indigenous areas. The Carnaval de Barranquilla is one of the largest cultural celebrations in the world, which highlights the city's history, traditions, and present-day culture. Throughout this four-day fiesta, spectators will see Carnaval characters and dances based off of the white European (*los Garabatos*) and the African slave (*los Son Negros* and *las Negritas Puloy*).

While Colombia is a melting pot of cultures, it is important to note that discrimination still exists, especially among the different regions of the country. It is not uncommon to hear people labeled as the Costeño, (Caribbean Coast), the Paisa (Medellin), or the Cachaco (Bogotá), depending on where they are from. There are also many stereotypes that derive from geographical identity, such as all Cachacos are unpersonable and cold, or all Costeños are loud and rowdy. Despite their differences however, all Colombians bond together and have a strong sense of national pride, which is strongly expressed during any *Selección* soccer game.

It is also important to note that larger cities, such as Bogotá or Barranquilla, attract immigrants from other countries. Barranquilla has a prominent Middle Eastern population, whose culture is representative in food and dance.

Cross-Cultural Considerations

Outside of Colombia's capital, residents of rural communities might have had little direct exposure to other cultures, races, religions, and lifestyles. What people view as typical U.S. behavior or norms may be a misconception, such as the belief that all Americans are rich and have blond hair and blue eyes. The people of Colombia are known for their generous hospitality to foreigners; however, members of the community where you will live may display a range of reactions to cultural differences that you present.

As a Volunteer and representative of the United States, you are responsible not only for sharing the diversity of U.S. culture (to include your individual culture and the culture of other Americans) with your host country national counterparts, but also for learning from the diversity of your host country. An important aspect of this cultural exchange will be to demonstrate inclusiveness within your community in a sensitive manner. Additionally, you will share the responsibility of learning about the diversity of your fellow Peace Corps Volunteers and exploring how best to respect differences while serving as supportive allies as you go through this challenging new experience.

To ease the transition and adapt to life in your host country, you may need to make some temporary, yet fundamental, compromises in how you present yourself as an American and as an individual. For example, female trainees and Volunteers may not be able to exercise the independence they have in the United States; male Volunteers may be expected to not perform chores or other tasks ascribed to women; political discussions need to be handled with great care; and some of your personal beliefs may best remain undisclosed. You will need to develop techniques and personal strategies for coping with these and other limitations. The Peace Corps staff will lead a diversity, inclusion, and sensitivity discussion during pre-service training and will be on call to provide support. This training covers how to adapt personal choices and behavior to be respectful of the host country culture, which can have a direct impact on how Volunteers are viewed and treated by their new communities. The Peace Corps emphasizes professional behavior and cross-cultural sensitivity among volunteers and within their communities to help integrate and be successful during service.

An ideal way to view the pursuit of cross-cultural adaptation and/or cultural integration is to recognize that everything done in your host country has both a specific reason for why it is done and an expected outcome. Trust that your host country counterparts are acting with positive intentions and work to mutually seek understanding and commonality. Language differences may add a communication barrier and lead to misunderstandings. Listen more than you speak and seek clarity. Remember that having the ability to laugh at yourself and at life's little surprises goes a long way—laughter is universal.

What Might a Volunteer Face?

Possible Gender Role Issues

Gender is a set of socially constructed roles, responsibilities, behaviors, and opportunities. Gender differs from sex, which refers specifically to biological and physiological characteristics of males and females. Gender roles and expectations are learned, change over time, and vary within and among cultures. Volunteers are trained in gender awareness as they approach their work in the host country. Gender roles in the United States may differ greatly from those in your country of service. It is important to absorb and to attempt to understand the cultural nuances of gender where you are. For example, in many cultures males are held in higher regard than females and females may manage the households. In some places, females are encouraged to attend school, while in other countries females are discouraged from engaging in such activities and instead work inside or outside of the home.

During the pre-service training, trainees receive an introduction to gender awareness in their country of service, and examine their own thinking about gender roles and how this thinking has impacted them. They then learn how to analyze development projects using a gender lens to better understand gender roles in their host country and to understand how these gender roles can benefit or limit what females and males may or may not do. During their 27 months of service, Volunteers will further engage in gender trainings to understand better how their gender identity impacts who they are as females or males in the host country and how this perception influences their work and relationships.

Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color

Volunteers of color sometimes, but not always, have a different Peace Corps experience than white Volunteers. Because of limited exposure, some foreign nationals will expect to see U.S. citizens who are white. Cultures of the world do not typically envision the States as a place of rich diversity with various culturally acceptable perspectives, personalities, and characteristics. Thus, a Volunteer of color may be questioned as about their U.S. citizenship.

In places where American stereotypes and/or caste system dynamics influence perception, Volunteers of color should be mindful of the reasons for these views without creating contentious environments. All too often, host country nationals are simply unaware of the diversity of the United States and require additional information and dialogue. Direct interactions with someone new or something different can take time to get used to, but those who take the time tend to be better off. Although host country nationals may assert that the United States is made up of predominately one race, we know that is not true. If a member of your community knows of compatriots living in the United States or of notable U.S. citizens of color, you can build on this knowledge as a point of reference for discussing diversity within the States.

For Volunteers of color, the range of responses to their skin color may vary from the extremely kind to the very insensitive. In African and Latin American countries, host country nationals may say “welcome home” to African Americans or Hispanic Americans. Sometimes Volunteers expect to be “welcomed home” but are disappointed when they are not. More commonly, if a Volunteer is mistaken for a host-country national citizen, he or she is expected to behave as a male or female in that culture behaves, and to speak the local language fluently. Host country nationals are sometimes frustrated when the Volunteer

does not speak the local language with ease. Conversely, some in the same country may call you a “sell out” because they feel the United States has not done enough to help with social issues. These instances can be turned into teachable moments for the Volunteer and the host country national, in which the Volunteer can ask questions surrounding perception and collaborate with respect to issues and projects at hand, while engaging in cross-cultural exchanges. All Volunteers, to include white Volunteers and those of color, should be mindful of the issues of race that are embedded in U.S. culture and within the culture in your country of service. These issues may significantly affect how Volunteers interact with fellow Volunteers and host country nationals. Being open and inclusive to everyone will improve your experience in interacting with fellow Volunteers and members of your host community.

Possible Issues for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, Ally (LGBTQA) Volunteers

For LGBTQ Volunteers: Given Colombia’s traditional values, sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identities might not be discussed openly. In some cases, the LGBTQ community may be stigmatized. In Colombia, the Constitution specifically prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Mindful of the cultural norms and country-specific laws, the decision to serve openly is left to each individual Peace Corps Volunteer. Many LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to be discreet about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within their host communities. Some LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to come out to community members, with a result of positive and negative reactions, while some have come out only to select Peace Corps staff and Volunteers. Dealing with questions about boyfriends, girlfriends, marriage, and children may, at times, be stressful for LGBTQ Volunteers. You may find that Colombia is a less open and inclusive environment than you have previously experienced. Please know, however, that Peace Corps is supportive of you and Peace Corps staff welcomes dialogue about how to ensure your success as an LGBTQ Volunteer. More information about serving as an LGBTQ Volunteer is available at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Peace Corps Alumni website at lgbrpcv.org. Additionally, the Peace Corps’ LGBTQ employee resource group, Spectrum, can be reached at spectrum@peacecorps.gov.

For Ally Volunteers: Peace Corps staff intends to create open, inclusive, and accepting environments. As an agency, the Peace Corps encourages Volunteers to serve as allies to their LGBTQ colleagues in order to create a safe environment.

Many LGBTQ Volunteers have served successfully in Colombia and have very fond memories of their community and service. LGBTQ support groups may be available in your country of service, providing a network to support the needs of the Peace Corps LGBTQ community. Peace Corps staff will work with Volunteers to provide them with locally informed perspectives.

Possible Issues for Volunteers with Disabilities

As part of the medical clearance process, the Peace Corps Office of Health Services determined you were physically and emotionally capable, with or without additional medical support, to perform a full tour of Volunteer service in Colombia without a significant risk of harm to yourself or interruption of service. The Peace Corps/Colombia staff will work with disabled Volunteers to support them in training, housing, jobsites, or other areas to enable them to serve safely and effectively.

Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples

Before committing to Peace Corps service, couples should consider how different degrees of enthusiasm about Peace Corps service, adaptation to the physical and cultural environment, and homesickness will affect their lives. It can be helpful to recognize that your reactions to these issues will change throughout your service, and you may not always feel the same as your partner. You and your partner will have different jobs, different schedules, and difference societal pressures. One partner may learn the language faster than the other or have a more satisfying assignment. This can create competition and put different

kinds of stress on each person. Anticipating how these pressures will affect you and your partner differently throughout your service can help you remain a source of support for each other. Making friends with other Volunteers is a critical part of fitting into the larger volunteer culture and can also be a good way to expand your support network.

While couples will live together during their service, they may live in separate towns during their pre-service training. This is a stressful time for most Volunteers, and it can be helpful to discuss in advance how you will deal with this potential separation. Your partner can be an important source of stability but can also add stress to your training experience. You may feel torn between traveling to visit your partner and focusing on your training, your host family, and friends you have made at your training site.

Couples often face pressure from host country nationals to change their roles to conform better with traditional Colombia relationships. Colombia men and women alike will often not understand American relationship dynamics and may be outwardly critical of relationships that do not adhere to traditional gender roles. It is also helpful to think about how pressures to conform to Colombia culture can be challenging to men and women in very different ways. Considering how your partner is being affected and discussing what, if any, aspects of your relationship should be changed can help reduce stress for you both.

Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers

Senior Volunteers may find their age an asset in Colombia. They will often have access to individuals and insights that are not available to younger Volunteers. On the other hand, they will be in a distinct minority within the Volunteer population and could find themselves feeling isolated, looked up to, or ignored.

Seniors are often accustomed to a greater degree of independence and freedom of movement than the Peace Corps' program focus and safety and security practices allow. Pre-service training can be particularly stressful for seniors, whose lifelong learning styles and habits may or may not lend themselves to the techniques used. A senior may be the only older person in a group of Volunteers and initially may not feel part of the group. Younger Volunteers may look to an older Volunteer for advice and support; some seniors find this to be an enjoyable experience, while others choose not to fill this role. Some seniors may find it difficult to adapt to a lack of structure and clarity in their role after having worked for many years in a very structured and demanding job.

More than younger Volunteers, older Volunteers may have challenges in maintaining lifelong friendships and dealing with financial matters from afar. They may want to consider assigning power of attorney to someone in the States.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Colombia?

Most airlines have baggage size and weight limits and assess charges for transport of baggage that exceeds those limits. The Peace Corps has its own size and weight limits and will not pay the cost of transport for baggage that exceeds these limits. The Peace Corps' allowance is two checked pieces of luggage with combined dimensions of both pieces not to exceed 107 inches (length + width + height) and a carry-on bag with dimensions of no more than 45 inches. Checked baggage should not exceed 100 pounds total with a maximum weight of 50 pounds per bag.

Peace Corps Volunteers are not allowed to take pets, weapons, explosives, radio transmitters (shortwave radios are permitted), automobiles, or motorcycles to their overseas assignments. Do not pack flammable materials or liquids such as lighter fluid, cleaning solvents, hair spray, or aerosol containers. This is an important safety precaution.

What is the electric current in Colombia?

110 volts.

How much money should I bring?

Volunteers are expected to live at the same level as the people in their community. You will be given a settling-in allowance and a monthly living allowance, which should cover your expenses. Volunteers often wish to bring additional money for vacation travel to other countries. Credit cards and traveler's checks are preferable to cash. If you choose to bring extra money, bring the amount that will suit your own travel plans and needs.

When can I take vacation and have people visit me?

Each Volunteer accrues two vacation days per month of service (excluding training). Leave may not be taken during training, the first three months of service, or the last three months of service, except in conjunction with an authorized emergency leave. Family and friends are welcome to visit you after pre-service training and the first three months of service as long as their stay does not interfere with your work. Extended stays at your site are not encouraged and may require permission from your country director. The Peace Corps is not able to provide your visitors with visa, medical, or travel assistance.

Will my belongings be covered by insurance?

The Peace Corps does not provide insurance coverage for personal effects; Volunteers are ultimately responsible for the safekeeping of their personal belongings. However, you can purchase personal property insurance before you leave. If you wish, you may contact your own insurance company; additionally, insurance application forms will be provided, and you are encouraged to consider them carefully. Volunteers should not ship or take valuable items overseas. Jewelry, watches, radios, cameras, electronics, and expensive appliances are subject to loss, theft, and breakage, and, in many places, satisfactory maintenance and repair services are not available.

Do I need an international driver's license?

Volunteers in Colombia do not need an international driver's license because they are prohibited from operating privately owned motorized vehicles. Most urban travel is by bus or taxi. Rural travel ranges from buses and minibuses to trucks, bicycles, and lots of walking. On very rare occasions, a Volunteer may be asked to drive a sponsor's vehicle, but this can occur only with prior written permission from the country director. Should this occur, the Volunteer may obtain a local driver's license. A U.S. driver's license will facilitate the process, so bring it with you just in case.

What should I bring as gifts for Colombia friends and my host family?

This is not a requirement. A token of friendship is sufficient. Some gift suggestions include knickknacks for the house; pictures, books, or calendars of American scenes; souvenirs from your area; hard candies that will not melt or spoil; or photos to give away.

Where will my site assignment be when I finish training and how isolated will I be?

Peace Corps trainees are not assigned to individual sites until after they have completed pre-service training. This gives Peace Corps staff the opportunity to assess each trainee's technical and language skills prior to assigning sites, in addition to finalizing site selections with their ministry counterparts. If feasible, you may have the opportunity to provide input on your site preferences, including geographical location, distance from other Volunteers, and living conditions. However, keep in mind that many factors influence the site selection process and that the Peace Corps cannot guarantee placement where you would ideally like to be. All of our assignments will be in urban or peri-urban settings in the cities of Cartagena, Barranquilla, or Santa Marta. As a result, you will generally not be isolated and will have relatively easy access to transportation, communications, and supplies.

How can my family contact me in an emergency?

The Peace Corps Counseling and Outreach Unit provides assistance in handling emergencies affecting trainees and Volunteers or their families. Before leaving the United States, instruct your family to notify the Counseling and Outreach Unit immediately if an emergency arises, such as a serious illness or death of a family member. The Counseling and Outreach Unit can be reached at 855.855.1961, select option 1, ext. 1470. After business hours, on weekends, and on holidays, the COU duty officer can be reached at the same number. For non-emergency questions, your family can contact your country desk staff through the main Peace Corps number: 855.855.1961.

How easy is it to call home from Colombia?

Yes. Dial 009+1+number to call to the U.S. There is widespread Internet access, which makes VOIP programs such as Skype, Yahoo, Gmail, etc., easy to use.

Should I bring a cellphone with me?

No, Peace Corps/Colombia will provide you with a basic model for your use. As mentioned above, for security purposes, Peace Corps/Colombia will provide you with an initial cellphone and number that is part of the post's cellphone plan for program purposes and emergencies, but it will be up to you to pay for extra minutes if and when necessary.

Will there be email and Internet access? Should I bring my computer?

Yes, there will be email and Internet access. A laptop will be useful as you develop lesson and work plans with your fellow teachers and for accessing several Wi-Fi hot spots along the North Atlantic Coast. Nevertheless, if you do bring a laptop, keep in mind that it is an attractive item for theft and that weather, sea salt, dirt, and humid conditions can damage the laptop, and Peace Corps/Colombia will not reimburse you for your loss. Furthermore, you should also bring jump drives or an external hard drive, which are useful in backing up your data in case your laptop does crash.

WELCOME LETTERS FROM COLOMBIA VOLUNTEERS

Dear invitees,

Congratulations! Your commitment to serve in the Peace Corps in Colombia has been confirmed. Your life is officially about to change. One of the most powerful parts of the Peace Corps is the fact that your two-year service affects not only yourself but many Colombians as well. Your experience from here on out will be what you make of it and you will be tested; But as we know, with personal struggle comes priceless rewards. Your Peace Corps journey is about to start, your story is about to begin, and you are the author.

I came into the Peace Corps with a limited Spanish background, I had never traveled outside of the United States, and I had never eaten culturally diverse food. But what I did have was a positive attitude, and that has taken me to great heights in my Peace Corps service. I am currently a Volunteer near Santa Marta, a beautiful coastal city with incredible beaches and arid mountains. I live in the Sierra Nevadas in a small coffee-cultivating town. I am living with three grandmothers in a house on the river. Living with a host family has been incredible in the fact that you becoming culturally fluent. As you find out your future host families, you will be tested in ways that you can't prepare for, with that being said, set boundaries early and be honest! They want to be a part of your life in Colombia and, at the end of the day, it is so nice to have family support.

I teach in a school of 150 students and work with a counterpart to help structure, sustain, and develop the English program in my school. I love my job as it is filled with new challenges. Working in a Colombian school can at times be hectic, as there is a lack of structure, but your ability to truly shape your student's future as an English teacher, role model, and as a friend is remarkable. You will leave your school having shaped the lives of students, and what more could a fellow human ask for? Being an educator allows you to educate students on a plethora of levels. With this, you will be much more to your community than a teacher.

Your Peace Corps experience will be determined by the actions that you choose to take through success and failure, and yes there will be plenty of failure. In my opinion, the best Volunteers are those who are able to plan and reflect. Your reflection process is just as instrumental as your planning, inside and outside of the classroom! I challenge you to step off the plane with the anticipation of failure as well as success and the ability to become a youthful ambassador to the Colombian people. Again, *bienvenidos al equipo Colombiano* and be prepared to learn more about what you as a future Volunteer is truly capable of doing!

TEL Volunteer, CII-4

2012–14

Bienvenidos a Colombia! You have in your hands an invitation for the experience of a lifetime. Working on the Colombian coast really does embody the famous Peace Corps motto: "The toughest job you'll ever love." However, being a Peace Corps Volunteer involves more than just work; you'll be bringing your whole self and growing not just professionally, but personally as well.

The first thought you will probably have when you step off the plane is, "Wow! It's really hot here!" The sluggish, sweaty heat is a good metaphor for coastal life, the pace of life here is slower and more relaxed. This can be a challenge when it comes to working, as organization and planning are interpreted differently. However, this also lends to amazing personal interactions and friendships you'll maintain for a lifetime, with other PCVs as well as Colombians. In fact, the *calor humano*—the human warmth—

you'll feel is even greater than the high temperatures! Colombians are so friendly and interested in learning and sharing their lives, which makes our Peace Corps goals not only a whole lot easier, but also a joy to fulfill.

Your (first) destination is Barranquilla, the fourth-largest city in Colombia and the location of Peace Corps/Colombia. It's also the home of more than 20 Volunteers, including me. Needless to say, Barranquilla isn't your "typical" Peace Corps site—no mud huts or villages here. Living in a site with a population of 1,000,000+ has its challenges (warning: bring earplugs!) but there are amazing benefits, like a huge network of nonprofits and resources and lots of cultural events. Every day brings something new, whether it's an abrupt schedule change, yet another type of rice, a Spanish vocabulary word, or a new connection with a friend. No matter what happens, it's always an adventure, and there is no typical day. That's the best part about the Peace Corps experience: It's truly what you make of it.

Come with an open mind, a big heart, and a strong stomach, and you'll be ready to serve in Colombia.

Best wishes,
TEL Volunteer, CII-4
2012–14

PACKING LIST

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Colombia and is based on their experience. Use it as an informal guide in making your own list, bearing in mind that each experience is individual. There is no perfect list! You obviously cannot bring everything on the list, so consider those items that make the most sense to you personally and professionally. You can always have things sent to you later. As you decide what to bring, keep in mind that you have a 100-pound weight limit on baggage. And remember, you can get almost everything you need in Colombia, although many things are less expensive in the United States (see below).

During training, your time will be limited, but once you are off to your own site, there will be many opportunities to buy what you need. Also, do not bring anything with you that you do not want to lose. Items may be lost, stolen, or damaged. Additionally, the hot and humid conditions can wreak havoc on clothes, so if you have favorite essentials, it may be wise to leave them home.

There are two, distinct types of site placements in Colombia: rural and urban, with some in-between. The most typical “rural” site is comprised of a small community and unpaved, sandy roads near or on a beach. Urban sites, still the most common, are located in large cities. For the latter, roads are paved, fashions come from all over the world, and there is always something happening during the day and night.

When choosing what clothing and footwear to bring for both work and play, pick items that are comfortable, presentable, and compatible with your personal style. Remember that you will be living and working without air conditioning in weather that is 90–100+ degrees in high humidity. Downpours will be a regular part of life for about five months out of the year, and the streets you walk daily will either flood or turn to swamps on a regular basis.

That said, Colombia is a country where appearance very important. Colombians view themselves as fashion-forward individuals and enjoy expressing themselves through their dress. What you may imagine as typical “Peace Corps attire,” i.e., Chacos, cargo pants, and T-shirts, will cause you to stand out significantly. If this is your personal style, do not feel you need to change. However, after a few months in-country, Volunteers routinely express how they wish they had brought “regular clothes” because they are more in line with how people dress on the coast. Luckily, Colombia is not a country where you need to buy a new wardrobe to serve in the Peace Corps.

General Clothing

Cultural Note: Especially for females, there are often distinct differences between what locals and Volunteers choose to wear. One common difference is that most local women wear tight jeans, no matter the weather, for work and play. Volunteers who routinely wear skirts are often asked about their religious beliefs. That said, all Volunteers will mostly likely be questioned about personal lifestyle choices on a level never before experienced; no matter your gender or clothing choices, eventually you will be seen and respected as an individual. The most important thing is dress in a way that allows you to feel comfortable and confident! North American women, especially blondes, will attract a great deal of attention on the streets no matter the clothing. Just as is the case for Colombian women, the vulgarity and frequency of comments directed toward female Volunteers often correlates to the amount of skin shown or the tightness of the outfit.

At Work/School

Shorts are inappropriate for both men and women, with occasional exceptions for men working in casual rural communities. By coastal Colombian standards, nice jeans are considered dressy.

Female Colombian teachers wear anything from tight-fitting jeans and T-shirts or blouses/polos and, occasionally, skirts or dresses. Female Volunteers, in contrast, often find breathable, business-casual clothing to be appropriate and functional: lightweight jeans (any color), light airy shirts and blouses, and skirts and sundresses (with short sleeves or wide straps). High heels, wedge sandals, etc., are common footwear choices. Presentable sandals (no flip-flops) are acceptable footwear, along with heels or dressier flats.

Male Colombian teachers wear jeans or khakis with nice T-shirts, short-sleeve button-down shirts, or polos. Male Volunteers most often wear the same. Nice sandals, nice sneakers, or loafers are all acceptable male footwear.

General

Dress as you would dress for any very hot, humid climate, although on the conservative side. Remember that you will be the object of attention for many things, and your appearance will be judged first. Looking and feeling confident and like yourself will be key to being happy!

- Five pairs of comfortable, presentable capris/pants/skirts/jeans (two-week supply); jeans are considered “dressy” for males and females, but more hot-climate-friendly clothing is acceptable and often more comfortable.
- Seven to 10 hot weather appropriate business-casual shirts (polos, cotton shirts, button-downs, non-revealing tank-tops, etc.; short sleeve is fine). Keep in mind that you will likely be sweating most of the day. Most Volunteers recommend avoiding colors that easily show sweat.
- Two to three weeks’ worth of cotton underwear
- Five to 10 pairs of cotton socks, mainly for exercise. Those who prefer closed-toe shoes should bring more socks.
- Two pairs of pajamas; shorts are suggested for the heat
- A few outfits for going out or casual “off duty” times, in whatever your style is. In your free time, it is not uncommon that you will visit town centers or malls with your colleagues or friends, where people dress as they would in the United States during the summer.
- One to two pairs of running or exercise shorts for playing sports, going to the beach, etc.
- Rain gear. You may want to bring a light, breathable rain jacket/windbreaker/poncho for traveling and/or downpours during the rainy season. On the coast, downpours often end within an hour. Also, a small travel umbrella is convenient for protection from the rain and sun, as used by many Colombians. The coast is known for being especially windy for parts of the year; it is worth investing in a windproof umbrella, as quality, affordable ones are hard to find in Colombia.
- Bathing suit(s). Being on the Atlantic Coast, there will likely be many opportunities to go swimming. Bring whatever type of bathing suit you like, but remember that whether or not you’re swimming near your site, someone you know will probably observe you. Colombian swimwear tends to be more revealing than in the United States.

For Women

- One nice/dressy light sweater or jacket
- One semiformal dress and shoes
- One or two pairs of capris/casual skirt/appropriate-length shorts (see Cultural Note above)
- Three to four comfortable bras and one or two sports bras (depending on the frequency of your typical workouts, you may want to bring more)

For Men

- One collared long-sleeved dress shirt
- One tie
- One or two pairs of casual or business casual shorts for non-work occasions

Shoes

- **Sandals:** A good, comfy pair of sturdy, waterproof sandals for everyday wear is advisable, especially during the rainy season. Also, you will need a cheap pair of flip-flops to serve as shower shoes. These can be found easily in Colombia for sizes up to 10–11. Nice sandals can be considered business casual wear: Durable, comfortable, and, if possible, water-resistant are key work-sandal properties as you will be walking frequently and the uneven sidewalks cause major wear and tear. Flip-flop style sandals are not permitted during training or in the office.
- **Sneakers/running shoes:** Depending on your preference, you can either bring hiking boots or a good pair of sneakers (or both if you use them for different purposes). Given that your assignment will be urban, there may be less opportunity to use hiking boots, but this is also a matter of personal preference. Quality sneakers can be found in cities on the coast, though they will be expensive and will not be available in sizes larger than 10–11.
- **Comfortable dress shoes:** Given that your primary assignment is in the schools, it is imperative that you bring one to two pairs of comfortable, durable dress shoes for work. Nice sneakers or loafers work best for men; women can wear sandals, flats, or heels. All are available here, although the quality may be low and they will not have sizes larger than 11 for men. Dressy shoes that can survive lots of rain and the accompanying arroyos are your very best option; you may also choose to carry a pair of spare sandals during the rainy season.
- **Heels (optional):** Colombian women wear heels for work and going out. Many Volunteers enjoy having a pair of heels for weekends. These are optional.

Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items

- Anti-bacterial hand gel in travel sizes
- Stain-removing wipes or a stain-removing fabric pen
- Nail clippers and tweezers
- Brush/comb
- Toothbrush and travel toothbrush case
- Hair clippers (men)
- An ample supply of your favorite brand of tampons. Though not hard to find, can be extra-expensive here. Female Volunteers have found it useful to bring a few months' supply or more of these feminine products; some female Volunteers recommend a reusable menstrual cup.
- Deodorant. Though not hard to find, can be extra-expensive. It is worth bringing extra.
- Makeup (foundation, eyeliner, lipstick, eye shadow, etc.), if it's your preference. Almost all Costeño women use makeup on a daily basis. In fact, the female Volunteers who do not use makeup daily are often asked why that is. Good makeup is very expensive here and the range of colors for foundation is limited. Volunteers with very light skin or very dark skin have expressed difficulty in finding makeup for their skin color. Rain and humidity make waterproof options key.
- Perfume or cologne (to help mask unpleasant odor you may develop during your daily commute)

Also, if there are any specific, nice-quality hygiene items that you use regularly (e.g., body lotions, hair products, oil-free sunscreen), you may want to bring these to make your life here more comfortable. However, most people find that the local products are just fine, and that they can live without a lot of “essentials” after a few weeks.

Electronics

- **Durable AA flashlight or headlamp (LED).** While most sites have electricity, there are rolling blackouts at any moment of the day that can last for indefinite periods of time. Thus, a sturdy flashlight (e.g., Maglite) or headlamp (perfect for hands-free cooking) is essential.
- **Battery re-charger (AA).** Batteries here are expensive, low-quality, and (as anywhere) horrible for the environment. So, it is recommended to bring a battery re-charger according to the size of

batteries required by whatever electronics you bring with you. Also two to three sets of rechargeable batteries are recommended. Some Volunteers solely use battery-operated equipment due to the power outages that can ruin appliances. A few non-rechargeable spares may be useful as well, in case your charger is damaged.

- **A camera.** If you are one of the few people who still use a film camera, be aware that film and processing are expensive here, and the quality is not great. As with all larger ticket items, it is a good idea to insure your camera before arrival.
- **Watch/travel alarm clock.** You should bring a small clock that does not need electricity, and that will wake you up. You will also receive a basic cellphone during training, which has a basic alarm feature.
- **A small CD player/MP3 player/iPod/radio.** Many Volunteers bring their iPods or MP3 players with small speakers to turn them into stereos. You can also buy these or other electronic equipment in-country, but be aware that they can be extremely expensive in comparison to prices of similar equipment purchased in the U.S. If you bring a laptop, consider bringing small external speakers as your laptop could become your entertainment center.
- **Portable USB memory drive or external hard drive.** Not considering whether you have a personal computer or computer available at your site, there are plenty of instances where a memory stick comes in handy. You can use them at Internet cafes, fellow Volunteers' sites, and the Volunteer-designated computers at the Peace Corps office to transfer information and resources easily and safely (especially reports), and to trade photos and music. Also, investing in an external hard drive is a smart idea, as it allows you to easily back up your files on your laptop, as well as store much more information than a flash drive.
- **Surge protector/regulator and uninterruptible power supply (also known as voltage stabilizer) for your electronics.** The inconsistent electricity in Colombia is harmful to most electronics. While you may find these items in larger stores in Colombia, you may prefer to bring one or more with you.
- **E-reader.** While there is a growing Peace Corps/Colombia Library based on contributions from current and former Volunteers, avid readers have found the consistent access to books that e-readers provide a boon in daily life.

Miscellaneous

- **Bath towel.** While you can buy smaller, cheaper-quality bath towels in Colombia, most Volunteers bring one full-size, medium-weight towel with them to use during training and throughout service. You may find a quick-dry towel, like the kind you can buy in camping stores, helpful as well.
- **Medium-sized backpack.** A lot of people have made the mistake of bringing large expedition backpacks with nothing for day-to-day use or a weekend trip. No matter what the size, packs with zippered side pockets are great and will always be useful. Current Volunteers recommend bringing a large backpack and daypack. Avoid a "flashy" travel backpack, as you will use it often to travel on buses.
- **One or two durable water bottles.** Many Volunteers like re-usable hard plastic bottles because they are so tough. Re-using plastic water bottles is another option.
- **Travel sewing kit.** Clothes go through more wear and tear here than in the States, especially during washing. A sewing kit also is more of a necessity than an option.
- **A money belt or small purse.** Most people feel safer with one to conceal their money when traveling. Small purses are available quite cheaply here.
- **Optional: one set of sheets and pillow.** Your host family will most likely provide you with a set of sheets and a pillow during training. You may also want a second pair of sheets or nicer pillow, but because of space and, as bed sizes vary, it's best to purchase in Colombia. Prices are equivalent to the U.S. but this is not included in your stipend, so you may want to budget personal funds just in case.

- **Sleep sack or light sleeping bag.** A light sleeping bag is not a necessity but could be useful during your service in Colombia, especially if you plan to do personal trips to areas such as Manizales or Bogota, or even Parque Tayrona overnights, where the weather is cooler. Make sure it is light so that it is also practical for the warm weather in this part of Colombia.
- **Sunglasses.** This sunny country can do major harm to your eyes. Bring at least one pair of inexpensive pair of sunglasses; flashy ones are too tempting for thieves. You can always buy a replacement pair in-country although full UV protection is not assured.
- **Personal and family photos.** These are not only great for the occasional pick-me-up, but also to show your host family and the folks in your site. People love seeing these photos, and they are a good way to practice your Spanish and develop relationships. You will find that people often ask what your house, school, street, and malls look like, and it's great to have photos to be able to show them if you wish.
- **Pocket Spanish/English dictionary.** You will be provided a full-size dictionary in training, but having another one on hand can be useful.
- **Exercise mat (and other exercise equipment, such as a jump rope, ankle weights, etc.).** Many Volunteers like to bring their yoga mats to be able to practice exercise in their homes. They are hard to come by in Colombia and are very expensive.
- **School supplies for English teaching (optional).** Stickers that have English phrases (e.g., GREAT JOB!, You're a star!), ESL workbooks, or flashcards can be really helpful when teaching in the classroom. It is not essential to bring these items but many Volunteers have brought them to aid their teaching and to reward students with something unique (English stickers).

PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST

The following list consists of suggestions for you to consider as you prepare to live outside the United States for two years. Not all items are relevant to everyone, and the list is not comprehensive.

Family

- Notify family that they can call the Counseling and Outreach Unit at any time if there is a critical illness or death of a family member (24-hour phone number: 855.855.1961 ext. 1470).
- Give family and friends the Peace Corps On the Home Front handbook.

Passport/Travel

- Forward to the Peace Corps travel office all paperwork for the Peace Corps passport and visas.
- Verify that your luggage meets the size and weight limits for international travel.
- Obtain a personal passport if you plan to travel after your service ends. (Your Peace Corps passport will expire three months after you finish service; if you plan to travel longer, you will need a regular passport.)

Medical/Health

- Complete any needed dental and medical work.
- If you wear glasses, bring two pairs.
- Arrange to bring a three-month supply of all medications (including birth control pills) you are currently taking.

Insurance

- Make arrangements to maintain life insurance coverage.
- Arrange to maintain supplemental health coverage while you are away. (Even though the Peace Corps is responsible for your health care during Peace Corps service abroad, it is advisable for people who have pre-existing conditions to arrange for the continuation of their supplemental health coverage. If there is a lapse in coverage, it is often difficult and expensive to be reinstated.)
- Arrange to continue Medicare coverage if applicable.

Personal Papers

- Bring a copy of your certificate of marriage or divorce.

Voting

- Register to vote in the state of your home of record. (Many state universities consider voting and payment of state taxes as evidence of residence in that state.)
- Obtain a voter registration card and take it with you overseas.
- Arrange to have an absentee ballot forwarded to you overseas.

Personal Effects

- Purchase personal property insurance to extend from the time you leave your home for service overseas until the time you complete your service and return to the United States.

Financial Management

- Keep a bank account in your name in the United States.
- Obtain student loan deferment forms from the lender or loan service. (Information about loan deferment is online here: peacecorps.gov/learn/whyvol/finben/. Answers to frequently asked loan deferment questions are here: peacecorps.gov/learn/whyvol/finben/faq/.)

- Execute a power of attorney for the management of your property and business.
Arrange for deductions from your readjustment allowance to pay alimony, child support, and other debts through the Office of Volunteer Financial Operations at 855.855.1961 ext. 1770.
Place all important papers—mortgages, deeds, stocks, and bonds—in a safe deposit box or with an attorney or other caretaker.

CONTACTING PEACE CORPS HEADQUARTERS

This list of numbers will help connect you with the appropriate office at Peace Corps headquarters to answer various questions. You can use the toll-free number and extension or dial directly using the local numbers provided. Be sure to leave the toll-free number and extensions with your family so they can contact you in the event of an emergency.

Peace Corps headquarters toll-free number: 855.855.1961, press 1, then extension number (see below)

Peace Corps mailing address: Peace Corps
Paul D. Coverdell Peace Corps Headquarters
1111 20th Street NW
Washington, DC 20526

For Questions About	Staff	Toll-free extension	Direct/Local
Responding to an invitation	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Country information	Country Desk Officer Desk Officer	ext. 2515 colombia@peacecorps.gov	202.692.2515
Plane tickets, passports, visas, or other travel matters	CWT SATO Travel	ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Legal clearance:	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Medical clearance and forms processing (includes dental)	Screening Nurse	ext. 1500	202.692.1500
Medical reimbursements (handled by a subcontractor)			800.818.8772
Loan deferments, taxes, financial operations		ext. 1770	202.692.1770
Readjustment allowance withdrawals, power of attorney, staging (pre-departure orientation), and reporting instructions	Office of Staging	ext. 1865	202.692.1865
<i>Note: You will receive comprehensive information (hotel and flight arrangements) three to five weeks prior to departure. This information is not available sooner.</i>			
Family emergencies (to get information to a Volunteer overseas) 24 hours	Counseling and Outreach Unit	ext. 1470	202.692.1470
Office of Victim Advocacy		ext. 1753 24 hours (call or text)	202.692.1753 202.409.2704