

THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO
MADAGASCAR



A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS

January 2014



A WELCOME LETTER

Dear Prospective Volunteers:

Congratulations on making it this far on the road to becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer in Madagascar. On behalf of the entire staff of Peace Corps/Madagascar, we are very pleased that you are considering an invitation to join us here as a Volunteer.

I arrived in Madagascar in January 2013 and, in the short period of time I've been here, I can say without a doubt that this is a fascinating country to live in. People at home in the U.S. always ask me what my initial impressions of the country are, and I always tell them I feel as though I won the lottery being assigned to Madagascar. This is an incredibly unique country, with a rich diversity of people, environment, and wildlife that will surprise and delight you at every turn. The staff here are extremely knowledgeable, dedicated to the Peace Corps mission and to providing our Volunteers with excellent technical and emotional support, and our Volunteers are nothing short of exceptional.

As a returned Volunteer from Burkina Faso, I can honestly tell you that serving as a Volunteer was the single most defining experience of my life, and I am certain that if you choose to come to Madagascar it will have a similar effect on you. With an open heart and mind, you will learn to grow and change in so many uncountable ways. Africa has an overwhelming wealth of things to teach us.

Serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer is a privilege by any right; it is a unique experience where you can put your motivation, determination, and ability to learn and adapt to the highest test. Living as a foreigner abroad comes with obvious challenges, as many of you already know. With your daily learning and successes, there will also be difficult tasks to accomplish, including cultural integration, defining your role as a Volunteer, and speaking the local language and these things will all take time to achieve.

During your pre-service training, we will be evaluating your suitability for service and will ask you on several occasions about your commitment to serve here for two years. Please do not be offended by this. We have found that the Peace Corps is not for everybody and sometimes responsibilities in the United States make it difficult for people to commit to two years. The pre-service training program is designed to give you a realistic picture of what it's like to live and work in Madagascar and, armed with this information, we hope that you will make the decision that is best for you.

The Peace Corps staff and Volunteers eagerly await your arrival and are ready to provide you with top-of-the-line training to give you the knowledge and skills necessary for a successful service. However, at the end of the day, the success of your Peace Corps service will largely be in your hands. Again, I truly believe that this is a life-defining experience and a wonderful opportunity to serve the people of Madagascar.

Mazotoa (enjoy)!

Dee Hertzberg
Country Director
Peace Corps/Madagascar

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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 responsibly 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/MADAGASCAR HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

History of the Peace Corps in Madagascar

Despite political and economic reform measures, Madagascar continues to face many development challenges. The education system is burdened by overcrowded classrooms, poorly trained teachers, and a shortage of teaching materials. Widespread poverty, a poorly educated population, food insecurity, unsafe water supplies, and inadequate health services have resulted in a high rate of infant mortality. Madagascar has one of the highest levels of biodiversity on Earth, but its natural resource base is severely threatened by deforestation, soil erosion, and the decline in overall land productivity.

Volunteers in Madagascar teach English, conduct health education, and promote sustainable agriculture. The first 10 Volunteers arrived in Madagascar in September 1993 to initiate the teacher training project, which eventually became the English Education project. In August 1994, the Environment project started with the 13 trainees, and the Health project began in September 1995. In 2001, the Peace Corps/Madagascar program was suspended due to political instability resulting from a coup d'état; the program resumed operations in 2002.

In 2009, Madagascar experienced another coup d'état, where the president was overthrown and further political instability caused PC/Madagascar to suspend operations again from March to November of 2009. PC/Madagascar now maintains roughly 130 Volunteers year round. However, the long-term effects have caused Madagascar to suffer severe losses in the developmental gains it had once achieved. International aid has been greatly decreased, diplomatic relationships have been strained, and socioeconomic, health, education, and quality of life indicators have all declined. Given this context, there is a critical role that the Peace Corps can play by reaching underserved populations with much needed services and capacity building interventions in health, agriculture, and education.

Peace Corps Programming in Madagascar

Peace Corps/Madagascar focuses on three main areas of vital need: health, education, and agriculture. Health Volunteers help communities address health issues through behavior change interventions and promoting health awareness. Volunteers work primarily with health professionals and extension workers to build capacity to provide health services and outreach, aiming to improve maternal health and prevent childhood illnesses, malaria, and water-borne diseases through the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) approach.

Education Volunteers project work with students, teachers, and the broader community to improve English language proficiency. Volunteers support the government's initiatives to raise the standards of teaching, develop teaching resources, and strengthen the links between schools and their communities. Volunteers and their counterparts use English as a vehicle to promote awareness of community issues, to encourage using schools as a base for community activities, and to develop the future community development workers of Madagascar.

PC/Madagascar has long been a major partner to support national biodiversity conservation and to promote sustainable agricultural practices. Agriculture Volunteers are placed with strategic partners, so they can assist rural community members, especially the community forest management groups living adjacent to protected areas, to improve agriculture, animal husbandry practices, and food security. Volunteers focus on improving rice yields, establishing and maintaining school and community gardens, small animal husbandry, and agribusiness.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW: MADAGASCAR AT A GLANCE

History

Madagascar, as the fourth largest island in the world, is often called “the eighth continent.” Madagascar was settled in the past 2,000 years by people from Asia and Africa, yet its culture is neither African nor Asian, but an intriguing blend of the two that is uniquely Malagasy.

With thousands of species of plants and animals that exist only on this island, Madagascar is considered a global environmental hotspot. From an evolutionary perspective, it is “the path not taken” and is justly considered by many to be a world treasure to be preserved for future generations. While Madagascar supports a fairly large human population whose presence often threatens the environment, the Malagasy work hard at conserving their natural heritage while maintaining their culture and lifestyle.

Government

The nation’s constitution, which was approved on August 19, 1992, in a national referendum, established separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; a multiparty political system; and protection of human rights and freedom of speech. The president is elected by universal suffrage for a five-year period with a two-term limit. The prime minister is nominated by a bicameral Parliament consisting of the Senate and the National Assembly, then approved by the president. The Supreme Court has 11 members.

Local government consists of 28 regions with decentralized powers. A traditional village council (*fokonolona*) system supplements the modern political system. A proportional representation system encourages multiple candidacies. During the legislative elections in 1993, for example, more than 120 political parties entered 4,000 candidates for 138 seats. The presidential elections that took place in 2001, resulted in tremendous controversy. People took to the streets in protest of what was perceived as vote count fraud and, after months of sometimes violent conflict, overthrew the existing government and installed a new president. In April 2002, as things reached a boiling point, the U.S. Department of State required all Americans residing in the country in an official capacity, including Peace Corps Volunteers, to leave Madagascar. The Department of State declared the country safe again in July 2002, allowing for the reopening of the Peace Corps program and the arrival of trainees in February 2003.

In early 2009, anti-government demonstrations occurred in the capital of Antananarivo, which led to another military coup. The Peace Corps evacuated and temporarily suspended its program in Madagascar in March 2009 due to security concerns. In November 2009, 11 Volunteers and five Peace Corps Response Volunteers were reinstated to Madagascar. In January 2014, Madagascar successfully elected a new president, Hery Rajaonarimampianina.

Economy

The gross domestic product of Madagascar was estimated at \$9.9 billion in 2011. Prior to the 2009 political crisis, Madagascar was achieving a healthy 5 percent annual growth rate, but economic growth has been flat from 2009–13. The crisis has been responsible for a sharp increase in the poverty rate and, according to The World Bank, an estimated 92 percent of the population lives on \$2 a day or less. These poor households spend 74 percent of their income on food. The CIA World Factbook cites Madagascar’s population growth rate at 2.95 in 2012 (13th highest rate of growth worldwide). In 2011, the United Nations Human Development Index ranked Madagascar 151th out of 187 countries, placing Madagascar firmly in the “low human development” quartile. The current HDI ranking illustrates the political crisis’s impact on the erosion of development gains, given that Madagascar held the 135th spot in 2010 (a drop of 16 countries).

Contributing to the economic problems in Madagascar is the pullout of foreign assistance monies and sanctions against the government, which began after the 2009 coup d'état. These restrictions on foreign aid, which once made up a large part of the government's budget, have greatly increased the economic instability and have made foreigners wary of investing in Madagascar. More than four years after the coup, there is still no resolution to the political crisis and economic growth remains anemic. The resumption of foreign aid depends largely on the return of constitutional rule and democracy. Second-round presidential elections occurred in December 2013, and there is hope in the international community that a fair elections process could enable the return of international foreign aid to Madagascar.

Agriculture makes up a large portion of Madagascar's economy, constituting 29 percent of GDP in 2011. In addition to subsistence crops such as rice, cassava, legumes, and vegetables, Madagascar also produces a significant number of cash crops for export. It is one of the world's leading producers of vanilla, cloves, and ylang ylang; other exports include coffee, cinnamon, ginger, fruit, seafood, and cacao. Also suffering from the crisis is the essential tourism (mostly ecotourism) industry. Roughly 23 percent of all species in Madagascar are now endangered. Madagascar's unique and fragile environment is under pressure from population growth, illegal logging, the loss of environmental development money, and the drop in tourism.



Mining, primarily of minerals such as ilmenite and metals such as nickel, is one area of growth for Madagascar. Multinational companies such as Rio Tinto and Sherritt International operate mines in Madagascar. Offshore oil exploration has also begun under a private company called Madagascar Oil. Additionally, Madagascar contains a large quantity of sapphires, although their mining is usually done on a smaller scale. Madagascar's main export partner is France and its main import partners are China, France, and South Africa.

People and Culture

Madagascar's population of close to 22 million comprises 18 ethnic groups. According to the CIA Factbook, roughly 61 percent of the population is under 24 years of age. Each group has its own characteristics, but all share a version of the Malagasy language. Although French is an official language, it is not often spoken outside of the larger cities and towns.

Many Malagasy are Christian and combine church worship with a complex system of ancestor veneration. An intricate set of taboos, or *fady*, governs many aspects of behavior, including interactions with one another and the environment and, most importantly, the treatment of the dead. Roughly 50 percent of the population is Christian and 2 percent is Muslim.

Environment

Madagascar is one of the world's most biologically unique areas. Approximately 75 percent of its flora and fauna are endemic to the island. Of special note is the lemur, a primate that is found only in

Madagascar and the Comoros Islands. Despite its tremendous biological diversity, Madagascar faces extreme environmental problems. Most pervasive is its slash-and-burn agriculture: Nearly 80 percent of the original forest has been converted to agricultural use, and erosion and depletion of the soil's fertility have rendered a large portion of this land untenable for agriculture. Habitat loss and unsustainable agricultural practices have resulted in the reduction or extinction of many species of plants and animals. For example, nearly one-third of the 45 original lemur species have vanished. Another problem is the lost opportunity for alternative economic gain through the sustainable harvesting or conservation of these resources. Finally, land degradation has reduced agricultural production, leading to lower incomes, urban migration, poorer nutrition and health, and increased poverty throughout the country.

Most of the remaining forest land is demarcated by the government as protected areas (1.8 percent) and classified forests (6.4 percent). These areas have various levels of protection ranging from non-allowable use to harvesting allowed by permit. However, the management of these areas is often ineffective. The governmental and nongovernmental organizations responsible for management are understaffed and undertrained and lack the financial resources to adequately address the pressures exerted on the protected areas from encroaching on local populations. Without immediate attention, the continued destruction of the unique ecosystems of Madagascar will have irreversible effects on the plants, animals, and people of this island nation.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Following is a list of websites for additional information about the Peace Corps and Madagascar 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, please 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 experience, 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 we hope you will keep in mind that no two people experience their service in the same way.

General Information about Madagascar

www.state.gov

The Department of State's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Madagascar 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.

www.geography.about.com/library/maps/blindex.htm

This online world atlas includes maps and geographical information, and each country page contains links to other sites, such as the Library of Congress, that contain comprehensive historical, social, and political background.

www.worldinformation.com

This site provides an additional source of current and historical information about countries around the world.

www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations

Visit this site for general travel advice about almost any country in the world.

www.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.

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

www.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

www.peacecorpsconnect.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 Madagascar site:

www.friendsofmadagascar.org.

www.peacecorpsworldwide.org/

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

Online Articles/Current News Sites about Madagascar

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

The site of BBC News’ world edition, from which you can search for news on Madagascar.

<http://air-mad.com>

A travel site with information on all things Malagasy

<http://allafrica.com/madagascar>

This is a news site dedicated to the African continent, and it frequently runs news stories about political happenings in Madagascar.

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 news coverage around the world.

International Development Sites about Madagascar

http://www.pmi.gov/countries/mops/fy13/madagascar_mop_fy13.pdf

Find out information about malaria in Madagascar on the President’s Malaria Initiative website.

<http://stompoutmalaria.org/madagascar/>

Check out some projects that PC/Madagascar’s Volunteers are doing as part of the Peace Corps global Stomping Out Malaria initiative.

<http://www.care.org/careswork/countryprofiles/76.asp>

The global antipoverty organization CARE has a strong presence in Madagascar. Take a look at their website to peruse some of the work they are doing here.

www.conservation.org

Website of Conservation International, which does a lot of work in Madagascar on forest conservation and lemur habitat protection

www.durrell.org

Website of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, which operates a number of reserves in Madagascar and undertakes critical conservation work

www.unaids.org

Site of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, with thorough information on the worldwide AIDS epidemic

www.usaid.gov/regions/afr/country_info/madagascar.html

Provides an overview of the U.S. Agency for International Development's projects in Madagascar and other valuable information.

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, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
2. Rice, Gerald T. "The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps." Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.
3. Stossel, Scott. "Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver." Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004.
4. Meisler, Stanley. "When the World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and its First 50 Years." Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2011.

Books on the Volunteer Experience

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

Books about Madagascar

1. Bradt, Hilary. "Madagascar: The Bradt Travel Guide." Chalfont St. Peter: Bradt Travel Guides, 2005.
2. Garbutt, Nick. "Mammals of Madagascar." New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.
3. Jolly, Alison. "Lords and Lemurs: Mad Scientists, Kings with Spears, and the Survival of Diversity in Madagascar." Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 2004.
4. Lanting, Frans (photographer). "Madagascar: A World Out of Time." New York, NY: Aperture, 1990.
5. Lambek, Michael. "The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga Madagascar." Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002.
6. Sharp, Lesley A. "The Possessed and the Dispossessed: Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town." Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993 (out of print).

7. Tyson, Peter. "The Eighth Continent: Life, Death, and Discovery in the Lost World of Madagascar." New York: Avon Books, 2000.
8. Manser, Riaan. "Around Madagascar On My Kayak." Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2011.



LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE

Communications

Between cellphones, email, blogging, Skype, texting, and traditional mail, today's Peace Corps Volunteers enjoy a wide range of communication options. Although far from home, Volunteers in Madagascar are nevertheless able to keep in touch with friends and family on a frequent basis. While most Volunteers have access to fairly reliable communication methods, communication in Volunteers' sites can be intermittent and some sites do not have reliable cellphone service. Read below for more information on the various communication options available.

Mail

Few countries in the world offer the level of mail service considered normal in the United States. If you expect U.S. standards of mail service, you will be in for some frustration. Mail from the U.S. takes a minimum of two to three weeks to arrive in Madagascar. Some mail may simply not arrive (fortunately this is not a frequent occurrence, but it does happen). Advise your family and friends to number their letters and to include "Airmail" and "Par Avion" on their envelopes. Packages take anywhere from three to eight weeks to arrive from the U.S. (Mail is usually slower around holidays.)

If someone is sending you a package, it is a good idea to keep it small and to use a padded envelope; that way it will be treated as a letter and therefore arrive more quickly. For larger packages, most Volunteer families send USPS medium-size flat-rate boxes, which cost about \$60 to mail to Madagascar. Despite these delays, you are encouraged to write to your family regularly and to number your letters. Even though email is increasingly used by Volunteers, old-fashioned handwritten letters are still meaningful and worthwhile. Plan on buying *passeros* (prepaid envelopes for international letters) for writing home; this costs 2,600 ariary (a little over a dollar) and allows you to enclose two sheets of paper.

Volunteers in Madagascar who receive packages are responsible for all duty fees required to pick up their packages at the post office. Fees vary based on post office location, but a box generally costs between 10,000–15,000 ariary to pick up, with additional charges levied if it stays at the post office after a certain period of time. These fees vary depending on the listed value of the items being sent. Note that due to the potential for theft and steep custom fees, sending electronics or other valuables is strongly discouraged. If you need to get something valuable from the U.S., many Volunteers coordinate with a Volunteer who will be traveling home for a vacation and arrange to have them hand-carry it on their way back to Madagascar.

Your address during pre-service training will be

"Your Name," PCT Peace Corps
Corps de la Paix
B.P. 12091
Poste Zoom Ankorondrano
101 Antananarivo
Madagascar

Once you have become a Volunteer, you can continue to receive mail at this address, but if your site is a long distance from the capital, you may prefer to rent a post office box in your banking town. This cost can be shared among multiple Volunteers in your area, so check with current Volunteers when you get to your site.

Telephones

Many Volunteers purchase an inexpensive cellphone when they arrive in-country. Peace Corps staff will assist you with this purchase and the cost will be deducted from your settling-in allowance, the remainder of which you will receive after swearing in. While most Americans are accustomed to cellphone plans that offer lots of minutes, data, and text messages, be advised that in Madagascar, everything will be pay-as-you-go. You will buy credit to add to your phone instead of setting up a contract. Although it is free to receive incoming calls, it is extremely expensive to call home to the United States. Most Volunteers have their friends and family call their local number using Skype or another online telephone service (which costs the caller around 40 cents a minute), or wait until they have Internet access for free Skype calls.

Some Volunteers choose to bring their phones from the U.S. If you would prefer to do this, note that your phone must have a SIM card slot, since you will need to purchase a local provider SIM card to activate your phone line. If you opt to do this, Peace Corps staff will assist you with purchasing the local SIM card and the cost will be deducted from your settling-in allowance. Additionally, your phone must be unlocked in order to be able to use it in country. Because it will be difficult to impossible to get to the capital to do this during training, it is advised that you get your phone unlocked in the U.S. prior to arriving in Madagascar.

Also keep in mind that not all sites have comprehensive cellphone reception, although approximately 85 percent do. If your site does not have complete cellphone reception, chances are that there will at least be a spot in town where you can stand to get reception. For remote sites without reliable reception, Volunteers can request a satellite phone from Peace Corps for emergency use.

Computer, Internet, and Email Access

The majority of Volunteers bring a laptop computer to Madagascar, although some choose to bring a tablet computer instead. Computers come in handy for work projects, Peace Corps reporting, emails, social media, blogging, uploading photos, watching movies, listening to music, and talking on Skype to friends and family back home. Although not every Volunteer's house will have electricity, Volunteers without electricity usually bring their computers with them when they travel to larger towns to charge their batteries. If you're bringing a laptop, it's a good idea to bring an extra battery as well. And if you bring a tablet, you may want to bring a solar panel that is capable of charging it. If you do not bring a computer, there are desktop PCs available for Volunteer use at the Peace Corps office and at the mevas (regional transit houses). Additionally, there are Internet cafes all around the country.

Most Volunteers can plan on being able to get online at least once a month, either by using a USB modem, visiting a meva to use Wi-Fi, or using an Internet cafe. In the past few years, the level of Internet access in Madagascar has improved dramatically, with many towns boasting 3G. Wireless Internet, though, is still trickier to find. Many Volunteers choose to purchase a USB modem after they swear in, in order to get online at site. The biggest difference with these is that you pay per megabyte used, so you'll have to track your data use. Additionally, a Volunteer's ability to use the USB modem at their site is dependent on whether there is local service provider network coverage there. Wi-Fi is available at all three of the mevas (regional transit houses), although the speed will not be what you are used to in the U.S. Wi-Fi is also now available at the training center, although its speed is quite slow and its use will be limited to a set list of trainees each day in order to not overwhelm the signal.

Finally, an increasing number of Volunteers are connecting to the Internet via smartphone. If you have an unlocked smartphone (iPhone, Android, etc.) that will accept a SIM card, you can purchase a SIM card from a local provider and buy credit to purchase an Internet plan. Similarly to how a USB modem works, you will pay per megabyte for this. Alternately, you can use your smartphone to connect to Wi-Fi where it is available.

While more and more Volunteers are bringing laptops to Madagascar, it is important to recognize the risks in doing so. Computers, phones, and other electronics are in high demand in Madagascar and there have been several incidents of theft of these items. Volunteers who bring electronics are encouraged to purchase personal article insurance and to protect these belongings as Peace Corps cannot reimburse Volunteers for any personal or non-work related property that is lost, stolen, damaged, or destroyed during service.

Housing and Site Location

Volunteers are posted throughout the country and are usually clustered in certain regions. Housing conditions here vary from *ravinala* palm huts to modern cement houses with running water and electricity. Your project, the area of the country, and the availability of housing all have a role in the type of home you will have. Most Volunteers have only a pit toilet and an outdoor shed for taking bucket showers. Agriculture and Health Volunteers tend to live in more remote areas, while Education Volunteers generally live in areas of greater population density.

During the first two-thirds of training, you will live with and have most of your meals with a host family. A homestay is considered one of the most important aspects of the training program and is required for this period. All trainees stay in a town close to the training center, so you will not be far from your fellow trainees. And although the homestay experience can be challenging at first, it is an invaluable resource for language and cultural learning. Volunteers often form strong and lasting friendships with their host families, and many continue to visit their host families during their service. During the last third of training, you will live and attend training sessions at the Peace Corps training center, located on beautiful Lake Mantasoa.



Living Allowance and Money Management

As a Volunteer, you will receive a modest living allowance that will allow you to live on a par with your colleagues and co-workers. The amount of the allowance is based on regular surveys of Volunteers and the cost of living in Madagascar. The living allowance is deposited monthly, in local currency, in Volunteers' bank accounts, so an ability to manage funds wisely is important. The allowance is currently equivalent to approximately \$150 per month. Peace Corps staff will set up a local bank account for you once you have received your site assignment, and you will receive a checkbook and an ATM card to allow you to access these funds.

In addition, you receive a monthly business travel allowance to cover the costs of traveling to trainings and work meetings. You will also receive a leave allowance of \$24 per month, which is standard across all Peace Corps countries and paid in local currency along with your living allowance.

Volunteers suggest you bring American cash and credit/debit cards for vacation travel and additional expenditures in country. The amount depends on the amount of traveling you plan to do while serving in

Madagascar. Only a few Malagasy establishments accept credit cards, which are mostly useful for travel to other countries. Please note that if you want to access personal funds in Madagascar, you should make sure your debit card is a Visa card, because MasterCard debit cards are not accepted at most ATMs. If you plan to travel internationally, keep in mind that it is very expensive to fly out of Madagascar.

The local currency is the Malagasy ariary (MGA). The current exchange rate is approximately 2,200 ariary to the U.S. dollar.

Food and Diet

The staple food in Madagascar is rice, which is eaten with vegetables, beans, or meat. In fact, rice consumption per capita in Madagascar is the highest in the world. Many fruits and vegetables grow in Madagascar, and the coastal regions boast an abundance of delicious, inexpensive tropical fruit and seafood. Most Volunteers prepare their own food. Some Volunteers, after becoming more familiar with their site, hire someone to help with cooking, or eat with a local family and share in the grocery buying. This decision is up to you, as every site and situation will be different.

Meat and dairy products are available in the larger towns, but they can be expensive. If you are a vegetarian, rest assured that you will be able to eat well in Madagascar after you learn about foods available in your town. Beans, lentils, eggs, and peanuts are all widely available, even in small towns, so getting enough protein won't be an issue if you shop and cook correctly. Some Malagasy are not familiar with vegetarianism and will not be prepared to serve a vegetarian meal if you are a guest in their home. However, a sensitive explanation of your preferences will be accepted. Most vegetarian Volunteers have no difficulty after an initial adjustment period, although they may find it difficult eating out in *hotelys* (small local restaurants), where often even the beans are cooked with animal fat.

Transportation

Volunteers' primary mode of transport is the *taxi-brousse*, which is a small van usually loaded with people and goods. These are usually packed full, with little leg or elbow room, so especially tall Volunteers may find *broussing* to be a bit challenging at times. *Taxi-brousses* travel between towns on somewhat irregular schedules (i.e., when full), so travel in Madagascar is rarely a timed affair. Frequently you'll be told, "It's leaving now!" when in fact there's no one else on the *brousse*, and so "now" actually ends up being an hour later.

Additionally, the Peace Corps issues every Volunteer a quality American-made mountain bike, and many Volunteers choose to bike instead of *brousse*, especially for short distances. Bikes come in handy when you're in a large, spread-out town, or if you need to travel out to the countryside for work. If you plan to ride a bicycle, wearing a helmet is required. The Peace Corps will issue you a helmet along with your bike. Volunteers are not allowed to drive or operate motor vehicles, nor may they operate or ride motorcycles (two- or three-wheeled) in Madagascar.

Geography and Climate

Madagascar is south of the equator, so its seasons will be the opposite of what you are accustomed to in the U.S. At the winter solstice, for example, when the sun is directly over the Tropic of Capricorn, the weather is warm. Conversely, at the time of the summer solstice in June, the weather is cool.

Madagascar has a tropical climate with rainy and dry seasons. However, because the island is so large, each region has its own mini-climate. Volunteers placed in the highlands region find themselves needing heavy coats and scarves to stay warm during the winter, while Volunteers in the north or southeast won't need anything more than a sweatshirt when the weather is coolest.

During the rainy season (November to March), southwest trade winds drop their moisture on the eastern mountain slopes and blow hot and dry in the west. North and northwest monsoon air currents bring heavy rains in summer, decreasing as one moves southward.

During February and March, eastern Madagascar can be hit by cyclones, particularly in the north. The dry season runs from April to October.

Seasonal changes in temperature in Madagascar are also influenced by altitude and latitude. From December to April, the coastal regions are very hot and dry in the west but very hot and wet in the east. Average midday temperatures in the dry season are 86 degrees Fahrenheit (30° C) on the coast.

From December to April (summer), the central plateau is warm, with periods of rain. In June, July, and August (winter), the central plateau gets very chilly, while the west coast is warm and dry and the east coast is warm with occasional showers.

Social Activities

Madagascar has several radio stations, some of which play popular music. Many Volunteers bring shortwave radios to listen to international broadcasts (BBC, Voice of America, Radio Netherlands, etc.). Madagascar has no cinemas.

For the Malagasy people, the most common form of entertainment is socializing with friends and neighbors. Music is very important to the Malagasy, and singing together can be a lot of fun. Attending concerts is also a popular activity, and when local groups tour the country, you'll find that almost everyone in town shows up to the concert. While Volunteers are encouraged to remain at their sites to develop relationships with people in their community, the Peace Corps recognizes that occasional trips to the capital or to visit friends, subject to staff approval, can also be good stress-relief opportunities for Volunteers.

Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior

One of the challenges all Peace Corps Volunteers have is attempting to fit into the local culture and act like a professional while at the same time maintaining one's own cultural identity. It is not an easy thing to resolve, and the Peace Corps can only provide you with guidelines. You will be working as a representative of a government ministry and will be expected to dress and behave accordingly, whether you are in training, traveling, or on the job. While some of your counterparts may dress in seemingly worn or shabby clothes, this is undoubtedly due to economics rather than choice. The likelihood is that they are wearing their best. A foreigner who wears ragged clothing, however, is likely to be considered an affront.

Malagasy regard one's dress as an expression of one's respect for others. Neatness of appearance is valued more than being stylish. It is a common sight to see Malagasy people carefully ironing their clothing, even if it's the only outfit they own. Unfortunately, just one inappropriately dressed Volunteer could cause a Malagasy host agency to form a negative opinion about the Peace Corps and share it with other officials at national and regional meetings. Volunteers are therefore expected to dress appropriately to avoid jeopardizing the credibility of the entire program.

Just as the weather is different in each region, so are the dress norms. In hotter coastal regions, shorts and tank tops are more acceptable and worn by the locals, but in more conservative regions such as the highlands, bare shoulders and knees are considered inappropriate. Following are Peace Corps/Madagascar's guidelines for Volunteers' dress. (They have been formalized in response to advice from people in Madagascar and other countries where the Peace Corps works and are meant to inform, not to offend.)

- Women’s dresses and skirts should fall to or below the knees.
- If shorts are worn in public (only acceptable in certain areas), they should be close to knee-length, for both men and women.
- Hair should be clean and combed. Men’s hair should not be longer than shirt collar length; if men choose to grow their hair long, they should be prepared to keep it tied back.
- Men with beards should keep them neatly trimmed. Please note that dreadlocks have a negative connotation in certain areas and it is not advisable to arrive in-country with them. Once you’re at site, it may be acceptable to adopt the style, depending on your region.
- Men should not wear hats indoors.
- Flip-flops should not be worn as professional footwear.
- Female Volunteers who wear leggings should wear a long shirt that reaches the tops of the thighs.
- In areas where tank tops are acceptable, female Volunteers should ensure that bra straps are covered.
- Volunteers should wear appropriate undergarments, including bras for females.
- Excessive body piercings or tattoos should not be visible.

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 Madagascar Volunteers complete their two years of service without major incident. The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies designed to help you reduce your risks and enhance your safety and security. These procedures and policies, in addition to safety training, will be provided once you arrive in Madagascar. Using these tools, you can be empowered to take responsibility for your 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 www.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

Although the potential for job satisfaction is very high, you, like all Volunteers, will encounter numerous frustrations. Perceptions of time are very different from those in America. The lack of basic infrastructure can become tiring. Host agencies do not always provide expected support in a timely manner. The Malagasy generally perceive Westerners as very rich. Adapting to a new culture as a Peace Corps Volunteer is often described as an intense series of emotional peaks and valleys.

As a Volunteer, you will be given a great deal of responsibility and independence in your work—perhaps more than in any other job you will ever have. Often you will need to motivate yourself and others with little guidance. You might work for months with little visible impact and without receiving feedback on your work. Development is a slow process. You must possess the self-confidence, patience, and vision to continue working toward long-term goals without seeing immediate results.

Additionally, as a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will confront issues like disease, death, violence, and poverty on a very personal level and it is important to be aware of the high emotional toll that this can have. As you strive to integrate into your community, you will develop relationships with local people who might die or become ill during your service. Volunteers need to prepare themselves to embrace these relationships in a sensitive and positive manner. Likewise, malaria and malnutrition, motor vehicle accidents and other unintentional injuries, domestic violence, and corporal punishment are problems a Volunteer may confront. You will need to anticipate these situations and utilize supportive resources available throughout your training and service to maintain your own emotional strength, so that you can continue to be of service to your community.

To overcome these difficulties, you will need maturity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and resourcefulness. Judging by the experience of former Volunteers, the peaks are well worth the difficult times, and most Volunteers leave Madagascar feeling they have gained much more than they sacrificed during their service. If you are able to make the commitment to integrate into your community and work hard, your service could be a truly life-altering experience.

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 Madagascar 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 Madagascar 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.

The training in Madagascar is community-based, which means that the bulk of it takes place in the community instead of at a training center. Community-based training is a more difficult training model in some respects, as the learning environment is real, not artificial. Most of your time will be spent in villages similar to the one in which you will be placed as a Volunteer, living with a Malagasy family and attending training classes within the town and training center. The learning environment is designed to provide you with experiences and meetings that will help you develop the knowledge and skills you need in your work as a Volunteer.

Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Madagascar 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, Malagasy 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 environment, culture, economics, and politics in Madagascar and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your technical sector's goals and will meet with the Malagasy 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 on your progress, and be a productive member of your community.

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, they help you integrate into your community, and they 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. Malagasy language instructors teach formal language classes six days a week in small groups of four to five people.

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 that you can practice and develop language skills further on your own. Prior to being sworn in as a Volunteer, you will develop strategies to continue language studies during your service.

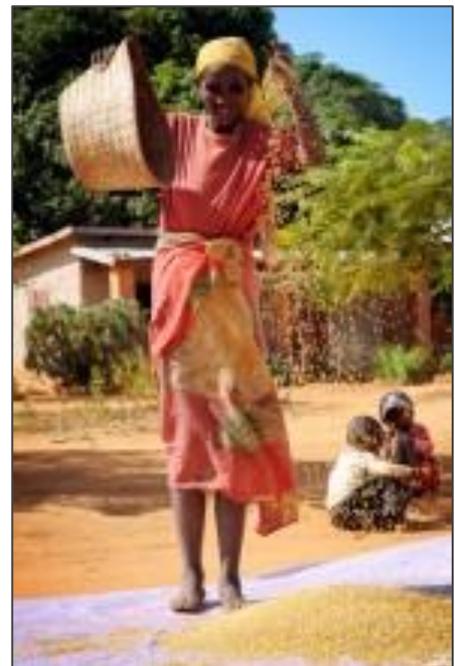
All trainees will spend the first part of training studying the official Malagasy dialect, which is spoken in the capital and the surrounding area. Then, once site assignments are distributed, trainees will be grouped into language classes based on their geographical area and will study the region's specific dialect for the remainder of training.

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 Madagascar. You will also discuss the questions you have about the behaviors and practices you observe in Madagascar, 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. You will be exposed to topics such as community mobilization, conflict resolution, gender and development, nonformal and adult education strategies, and political structures. 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.

For the majority of your pre-service training, you will live with a Malagasy 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 Madagascar. The homestay is considered to be one of the most important aspects of the training program. Although the homestay can be challenging at first, it is an invaluable resource for language and cultural learning. Volunteers often form strong and lasting friendships with their host families, and many continue to visit their host families during their service.



Health Training

During pre-service training, you will be trained in health prevention, basic first aid, and treatment of medical illnesses found in Madagascar. 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 Madagascar.

Safety Training

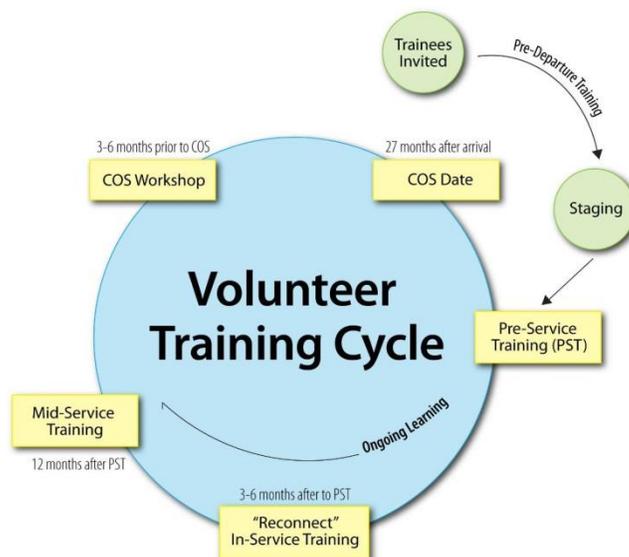
During the safety training sessions, you will learn how to adopt a lifestyle that reduces your risks at home, at work, and during your travels. You will also learn appropriate, effective strategies for coping with unwanted attention, how to identify safety risks in-country, and about the Peace Corps' emergency response and support systems.

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.*
- **Mid-Service Conference:** *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 the 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 MADAGASCAR

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. Peace Corps/Madagascar maintains a clinic with two full-time medical officers who take care of Volunteers' primary health-care needs. Additional medical services, such as testing and basic treatment, are also available in Madagascar at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill and cannot receive the care you need in Madagascar, 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 Madagascar

Most of the medical problems seen in Madagascar are also found in the United States, such as colds, diarrhea, skin infections, headaches, minor injuries, sexually transmitted infections, adjustment disorders, and emotional problems. For Volunteers, these problems may be more frequent or compounded by life in Madagascar because local factors raise the risk of or exacerbate the severity of certain illnesses. The medical problems specific to Madagascar are typical of those in any developing tropical country. Malaria, HIV/AIDS, schistosomiasis, gastrointestinal infections, typhoid fever, and hepatitis are all common illnesses, most of which are entirely preventable with appropriate knowledge and interventions. Because malaria is endemic in Madagascar, taking anti-malaria pills is required of all Volunteers. You will also be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B, meningitis, tetanus, typhoid, and rabies.

It is important for Volunteers to know that counseling services in Madagascar are extremely limited, with no therapists available for extended monitoring of mental health conditions. Also, there are no Alcoholics Anonymous facilities or support groups for recovering alcoholics. Alcohol is an integral part of many social interactions, and Volunteers may experience pressure to drink.

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 Madagascar, you will receive a medical handbook and 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 physical exams at mid-service and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Madagascar will consult with the Office of Medical Services in Washington, D.C., or a regional medical officer. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Madagascar, 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 Madagascar is to take the following preventive measures.

Malaria is present throughout the year in most of the country. It can be deadly if left untreated, so prevention and early recognition of infection are extremely important. It is important that you take the malaria prophylaxis, and other preventive measures are strongly encouraged. The Peace Corps will teach you how to recognize potential symptoms and what to do if you think you have malaria.



Rabies is also prevalent in the region, and you will receive a series of immunizations against it during training.

Schistosomiasis, or bilharzia, is a parasitic infection contracted by swimming in infected fresh water. Because most bodies of fresh water in the country harbor the parasite, you should avoid swimming in known contaminated water. Volunteers are prohibited from swimming in lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams in Madagascar. Symptoms of infection can take some time to develop, so the Peace Corps routinely screens for it at mid-service and end-of-service physical examinations.

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, tapeworms, and typhoid fever. Your medical officer will discuss specific standards for water and food preparation in Madagascar during pre-service training. All Volunteers will be issued a water filter for purifying drinking water during their service.

Abstinence is the most effective way to prevent infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. 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

All female trainees should arrive in Madagascar with a three-month supply of feminine hygiene products. After swearing in, female Volunteers can request tampons and pads without charge from the medical office. Many female Volunteers bring 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 the Office of Medical Services 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 Medical 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, shortly after you arrive in Madagascar. 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 non-prescribed medications, such as St. John's wart, 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 (with a 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. OHS 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 Madagascar, 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 U.S.
- Purchase a hidden money pouch or dummy wallet as a decoy
- Purchase personal articles insurance

After you arrive in Madagascar, 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 Madagascar 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 Madagascar. 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. In general, the majority of theft crimes arise out of opportunity. Don't leave personal items lying around unattended or improperly secured, and theft will therefore become more difficult or impossible.

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

- The most important safety risk in Madagascar you should be aware of is road travel. Public transport is rudimentary, and vehicles often are in poor condition, are overcrowded, and travel too fast. What is more, the roads are often in a state of disrepair. It is important to use common sense when traveling on any form of public transport and, if you are uncomfortable, to voice your concerns to the driver. Motor vehicle accidents, although infrequent, are the biggest cause of fatalities and serious medical problems among Volunteers worldwide.
- In addition, there are certain areas in Antananarivo where robberies and muggings are more frequent. These will be pointed out to you, and you are advised either to avoid walking in these areas altogether or to make sure you are not alone if you must go through these areas.
- For female Volunteers, whistling, hissing, and exclamations of "Cherie" may be fairly common on the street. This behavior can be reduced if you dress conservatively, abide by local cultural norms, and respond according to the training you will receive.

Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime

Because many Volunteer sites are in rural, isolated settings, 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 Madagascar 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 Madagascar will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

Volunteers attract a lot of attention in large cities and at their sites, but receive far more negative attention in highly populated centers, where they are anonymous, than in smaller towns, where “family,” friends, and colleagues look out for them. Keep your money out of sight by using an undergarment money pouch, the kind that hangs around your neck and stays hidden under your shirt or inside your coat. Do not keep your money in outside pockets of backpacks, in coat pockets, or in fanny packs. You should always walk with a companion at night.

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 Madagascar

Crime data and statistics for Madagascar, which are updated yearly, are available at the following link: <http://www.peacecorps.gov/countrydata/madagascar>. The incidence rate for each type of crime is the number of crime events relative to the Volunteer/trainee population. It is expressed on the chart as a ratio of crime to Volunteer and trainee years (or V/T years, which is a measure of 12 full months of V/T service) to allow for a statistically valid way to compare crime data across countries.

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 Madagascar

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

The Peace Corps/Madagascar 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 in ensuring that Peace Corps staff members are kept apprised of your movement in-country so they are able to inform you.

Volunteer training will include sessions on specific safety and security issues in Madagascar. 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/Madagascar'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 Madagascar 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 security incident 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 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 members in Madagascar 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.

Cross-Cultural Considerations

Outside of Madagascar'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 Madagascar 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 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.

There is great variance in Malagasy views of gender equality. In remote villages, gender roles are clearly defined, while in larger towns, gender roles are less strictly characterized. But wherever they live and work, the behavior of female Volunteers will be more closely scrutinized and more often criticized than that of their male peers. Additionally, Female Volunteers won't be able to partake in some of the socializing opportunities afforded to male Volunteers by their neighbors and counterparts. Although the Peace Corps emphasizes understanding of and sensitivity to other cultures, it may occasionally be necessary to explain why you believe something or behave a certain way. Female Volunteers should expect frequent questions from host country counterparts and friends regarding their marital status and whether they have children. Most Malagasy women get married and have children quite young, so it will often be difficult for them to understand how a female Volunteer could be unmarried and not have children.

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 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 “sellout” 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, including 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.

Many Volunteers will find themselves addressed frequently as a “vazaha,” or foreigner. Many Malagasy people assume that anyone with white skin is a (wealthy) French tourist, and will often continue speaking to you in French even if you say you’re American. The fact that someone could be white and not French, or American and *not* white is a difficult concept for many Malagasy people to grasp.

In Madagascar, as in other traditional societies, members of American ethnic minorities may feel less freedom to “be themselves” than they do in the United States. It may be difficult for them to find or establish a support network, and they are likely to encounter prejudicial beliefs or expectations on the part of some Malagasy (e.g., that they will learn the local language and adapt to the climate and culture more easily than other Volunteers, that they are not as technically competent as other Volunteers, or that they are not “real” Americans).

Volunteers of all backgrounds, however, have dealt with these issues and have had productive and fulfilling experiences in Madagascar. They have also brought new depth to the Second Goal of the Peace Corps, which is to promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the Malagasy people by living and working with them.

Possible Issues for African American Volunteers

There is great ethnic and racial diversity among Malagasy. Having been settled by people from Malaysia, India and other parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe, Madagascar features a mosaic of cultures and lifestyles that can shift from region to region and sometimes from village to village. While the Malagasy strive to maintain a harmonious relationship with one another, there are some tensions among the different groups. In particular, the dominant group living around the capital is considered somewhat suspect by the people living on the coast. Volunteers can expect to be treated very politely but need to be aware that behind the politeness may lay some unstated ill will.

Many Malagasy people will find it difficult to understand the concept of being “African-American,” because, to them, being American means being white. African-American Volunteers may find themselves having to tell people that they are actually from America, and even dispel the notion that they are Malagasy! However, being African-American can sometimes prove beneficial because it means that people won’t immediately assume you are a foreigner.

Volunteer Comments

“Diversity education in Madagascar is very limited! That is one of the most frustrating things I have experienced here in Madagascar because I always have to explain that I'm not Gasy. I really do not look Gasy except my skin tone, but people assume that I'm Gasy merely based on that. I have even had people tell me that my ancestors are Malagasy and went to America a long time ago and that's why I am American, but I'm still Gasy! Ha! I think that one is my favorite!

“Honestly, it has its perks though. Being a darker-skinned Volunteer, I rarely get overcharged for anything. Taxi drivers usually give me the cheaper prices, and I get very cheap *frip* (secondhand clothes). That makes retail therapy that much more fun! Another good thing about ‘looking Gasy’ is that I rarely get called *vazaha* because they just assume I am one of them until I start talking! People never assume that you are a foreigner because in their heads, only *vazaha* come here to volunteer. I feel like people like to get closer to me because they feel like I can relate better to them and I could be very helpful, so I have a lot of really close friends. All the friends that I have here are genuine and they like me for who I am, not because they think I will give them money. They also protect me from anyone who is going to be a threat to me in the future. When I am with a group of white Volunteers and someone is bothering them, if I say ‘go away’ they usually respect it and leave. That makes me feel powerful!

“Being a darker-skinned Volunteer would seem to be a lot easier than being a white Volunteer in Africa, but it's not. There are many times when I get overlooked by white Volunteers and French people here, because they think I am Gasy so they just ignore me. Then, there are the times when I am standing with a group of Volunteers and someone new will walk up and they will introduce themselves to everyone but me and I think that hurts the most—people who feel like you are not worthy of talking to because they think that you are a native. But they, too, are a native so they feel their own people are beneath them. It used to hurt my feelings really bad, but now that I'm used to it I just brush it off and laugh at their ignorance.

“I just want the future Volunteers to know what happens before you get here so you all can mentally prepare yourselves. Madagascar is a wonderful place, it's beautiful and it's somewhere you would probably never get the chance to go again. At the point of writing this letter I have been here a year and, I promise you, it's worth it! I have been a lot of places and there is no place like Madagascar. It's a challenge, but totally a fight worth fighting! Good luck to you!”

- PCV 2012–14

“When I arrived to my staging in D.C., I was surprised that only two people looked like me. I am Cape Verdean (a mix of African and Portuguese) and there were two other African-Americans present. Since we all know America is so diverse, I was surprised the room was not. There were other ethnicities present: two Asians and one Hispanic. I thought out of our group of 30 trainees, the six of us would have it easy in Madagascar because we would blend in nicely (so I thought from the pictures I had seen on Google). Once I arrived, I realized that I could not have been more wrong. You find really quickly that you no longer belong to any group, or are attached to every group: It is one extreme or the other. For example, sometimes

people think I am Malagasy here, so when people see me on the streets they often talk to me like any Malagasy person: asking if I wanted to buy a chicken, or asking me the time. However, sometimes when I see Americans or anyone speaking English, I say ‘hello’ only to be ignored. I think they see me as a Malagasy woman trying to speak English to foreigners. The first time this happened, it hurt. I explained who I was and they eventually apologized and started asking questions. But I learned to let it go, because I knew this would happen to me for two years. Could I deal with that? I realized that I could. You have to ask yourself that question and figure out ways to deal with it. Talking to friends dealing with the same issue helps a lot.

“In Madagascar, unlike in America, your skin color and features determines who you are. I can say that I enjoy ‘being Malagasy’ when it suits me, like not being told higher prices just because the sellers think I am have money. Or not being harassed by men who like foreign women. It’s fun having my hair braided and looking like all the other women in my village, and not having half the children afraid of me because I do not look like them. The Peace Corps will teach you many things, including tolerance and forgiveness in the biggest of ways. I hope that you will embrace this experience as I have and even be able to shed some more light on it for the next Volunteers.”

- PCV 2012–14

Possible Issues for Asian-American Volunteers

As stated above, many Malagasy people don’t understand that being American doesn’t necessarily mean being white. Asian-American Volunteers will experience some of the same issues that African-American Volunteers do, and people will not always understand that you are American even though your family heritage may be Asian. You will also have to cope with people assuming that you are Chinese or Japanese, regardless of your ethnic background. You might also encounter Malagasy children and teenagers making squinty-eye gestures at you; this is not meant to offend, but is part of a Malagasy cultural norm of pointing out things that they notice.

Volunteer Comments

“Before coming to Madagascar, I didn’t know that there were other Asians here, but there more Asians in my region than I expected. They are mostly of Chinese descent and they’ve been living here for several generations. A typical Malagasy person in the north is accustomed to seeing people with ‘Asian’ appearance. Being Asian-American, you can sometime pass for *Gasy-Chinois*. I feel like I get less attention drawn to me, in comparison to other more ‘Western’-appearing Volunteers. Most Malagasy think automatically that I’m *Chinois*. One has to explain to them that America is a very big, diverse place, and we have President Obama. America is a place where a black person can become president. The Asian-American or African-American population in America is bigger than the population of Madagascar. Putting things into perspective helps them to understand better. I do hear ‘ching-chong’ sometimes from little kids. This is probably the result of Chinese films that they see. ‘Ching-chong’ from adults is rare. But in the end, they are all harmless.

“I also see many Malagasy of Pakistani or South Asian descent. They’re generally referred to as *Korany*. So if you fit that profile, you can probably pass as a *Korany* too. A typical Malagasy would assume if you don’t fit the ‘Western’ look, then you

must not be American. Slowly, one conversation at a time, we hope to present a more realistic view of Americans.”

- PCV 2011–14

“As you may have heard by now, patience is probably the most important virtue you can have as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Being a minority serving in Peace Corps/Madagascar may require extra patience. I didn’t think being an Asian-American Volunteer (more specifically, Vietnamese-American) would be any more challenging, especially since I read that the Malagasy are a mix of Asian and African descent. However, as soon as I arrived in-country, I learned that being Asian-American has its own difficulties. During my first night with my host mom, she pulled her eyelids back and made squinty eyes at me. The next day, another Volunteer’s host brother did the same thing. At this point, I had only had about four hours of language lessons and had no idea how to explain to them how inappropriate or offensive their actions were. Whenever I walk through a big city (besides Antananarivo), I’m guaranteed to get a lot of ‘*ching chong ching chong*’ or ‘*ni hao!*’ comments from passing students or teenagers. I cannot tell you how maddening it can be, especially when it’s the 20th time you’ve heard it that day.

“The Malagasy have a very limited knowledge of geography. Most of them think the world consists of Madagascar, Africa, the U.S., France, and China. Most cannot comprehend that I’m actually not Chinese. Most cannot understand that I’m also American, and that even though I am not white like the Volunteer I’m standing next to ... I’m still American. When I’m at site, I make it a point to tell people, ‘No, I’m not Chinese. I was born in America but my parents are from Viet Nam. So I’m not Chinese, but I’m Vietnamese-American.’ Some of my most satisfying moments at site are when I’m at an *epicerie* or *hotely* and people walking by will say, ‘*Sinoa?*’ (Chinese?), only to have the storekeeper or nearby Malagasy friend yell back, ‘She’s not Chinese. She’s American and her parents are from Viet Nam.’ There will always be days when being shouted and pointed at for looking Chinese or when people speak gibberish to me will bother me, but for the most part, I remember that for every ignorant kid who does that to me, there about 20 other kids in my town who know me by name.”

- PCV 2012–14

“My family is Sri Lankan-American and, since my hometown does not have a huge Sri Lankan community, I’m used to standing out and being asked, ‘What are you?’ I wondered about how my ethnic background and my physical appearance would affect my service. For the most part, it has been an unexpected blessing. For the first time in my life I can blend in. Depending on whom I’m with, how I am dressed, and whether or not I’ve opened my mouth, people often assume I am Malagasy. There is a significant minority of Indian Malagasy here, known as Karana. People often assume that I am one of them, but with that come the stereotypes and resentments associated with that cultural identity. There is growing resentment here toward Karana, who are generally members of the merchant class. They are perceived as rich, refusing to integrate, and speaking only French rather than Malagasy.

“Tourists and expatriates are still a novelty that comes with a special name: *vazaha*, or foreigner. Chances are that you will hear kids scream this at you. This can be unsettling, especially when you have worked hard at learning the local language and culture. Keep this in mind, because some of you will be the first Volunteers at your site. If you are of North Asian descent—a Chinese-American or a Japanese-American, for example—people will ask if you are a *sinoa*, a Malagasy of Chinese descent.

“I have had to answer a lot of questions about America, especially since I look nothing like the American people they thought they were going to encounter. Besides answering the not-so-subtle question, ‘Don’t all Chinese people know kung-fu?,’ it has been fun sharing with the people the United States I know—and starting to understand the Madagascar they know.”

- PCV Madagascar

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

For LGBTQ Volunteers: Given Madagascar’s traditional values, sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identities might not be discussed openly. In some cases, the LGBTQ community may be stigmatized. 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 Madagascar 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 www.lgbtrpcv.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.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual Volunteers need to know that Madagascar has a very strong cultural taboo against homosexuality. However, homosexuality is accepted among foreigners who visit the country. Homosexuality is not illegal per se—it is not even mentioned in Malagasy law—but public displays of behavior associated with homosexuality can affect a Volunteer’s acceptance into the culture by confirming his or her “vazaha-ness.”

Nevertheless, many LGBTQ Volunteers have served successfully in Madagascar and have very fond memories of their community and service. Peace Corps staff will work with Volunteers to provide them with locally informed perspectives.

Volunteer Comments

“Being a lesbian has neither helped nor hindered my Peace Corps experience here in Madagascar, primarily because I don’t talk about it with people in my village.

Homosexuality, although visible here, is not discussed and is heavily taboo, so I choose not to divulge my sexuality to my village in order to make my life easier and to respect their culture. However, I have chosen to entrust a few of my close Malagasy friends with this knowledge and I have been pleasantly surprised by the outcome. I first made sure that I trusted them and made an educated guess as to what their reaction would be. Ultimately, the two I entrusted were primarily curious. They asked a lot of questions about whether being gay is accepted in America, if it was real love, if I thought God was OK with it, etc. I just explained to them how I felt about it, and in the end, they thought no differently of me, and because Malagasy people put a lot of weight on personal relationships, chose to accept me regardless of my lifestyle.

“As far as my experience within Peace Corps is concerned, among Volunteers, I have experienced nothing but acceptance and the open-mindedness one would expect from a Peace Corps Volunteer. I also have experienced no adversity from the staff, but because the staff is largely Malagasy, I don't discuss it much with them in order to remain respectful to their cultural beliefs. I do suspect that the majority of them would have no problem discussing this topic with me, especially because of the new Safe Zone initiative that has been implemented by Peace Corps.

“Ultimately, it is a little strange to be back in the closet in my village, but I personally find that the support I receive from my fellow Volunteers and the staff helps to alleviate stress related to masking that part of my life.”

- PCV 2012–14

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 Madagascar without a significant risk of harm to yourself or interruption of service. The Peace Corps/Madagascar staff will work with disabled Volunteers to support them in training, housing, jobsites, or other areas to enable them to serve safely and effectively.

The Malagasy are enormously tolerant and respectful, and it is inherent in their culture that they be helpful to all. This carries over into their treatment of people with disabilities, even though there is very little infrastructure in the country to accommodate individuals with disabilities.

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.

Couples often face pressure from host country nationals to change their roles to conform better to traditional Malagasy relationships. Malagasy 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 Malagasy 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 Religious Issues for Volunteers

Regardless of whether you practice a particular religion, you will probably be exposed to religious practices that are different from those in the United States. Although Madagascar is predominantly Christian, with some Muslims, the practices of *fady*, a ritualized system of taboos and cultural mores combined with ancestral veneration, have tremendous significance for Malagasy. (There will, of course, be differences in the degree of these beliefs depending on your location.) Be prepared to tolerate views and practices very different from your own. Many Malagasy people are very devout and towns often boast five or 10 different churches, and if you do not attend church, be prepared to answer questions about why you do not.

Volunteer Comment

“Although there are no synagogues and no Jewish presence in Madagascar, it is not a country that has any prejudice against Jews, so Jewish Volunteers will not have to worry about feeling the need to hide their religion. It is your choice whether you want to talk openly about your religion, but because almost all Volunteers will find themselves being asked by Malagasy people why they don’t go to church every Sunday, it may be something you do want to talk about. The biggest issue that Jewish Volunteers will face is a lack of knowledge about the religion, and it can be difficult to explain to Malagasy people. Even describing it as ‘Old Testament’ will be met with puzzled looks, and many people will think that not being Christian means being Catholic. If people ask why you don’t go to church, you can say that there are no Jewish ‘churches’ in Madagascar, and that you pray at home.”

- PCV Madagascar

Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers

Senior Volunteers may find their age an asset in Madagascar. They will often have access to individuals and insights that are not available to younger Volunteers, whereas younger Volunteers may have to work harder than their older colleagues to be accepted as professionals. On the other hand, seniors 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.

Age is positively viewed in Madagascar. The Malagasy people are respectful in all interactions, yet they reserve a special place for senior citizens, so much so that it may be difficult for Malagasy to help guide an older Volunteer in culturally appropriate behavior for fear of seeming disrespectful.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Madagascar?

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 not to 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, hairspray, or aerosol containers. This is an important safety precaution.

What is the electric current in Madagascar?

It is roughly 230 volts (it ranges from 190 to 260 volts), 50 cycles. Batteries are available locally, though they may be of poor quality. The electrical outlets in Madagascar are of the "European" style, so you will need round, two-prong outlet adapters that look like this:



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. If you choose to bring extra money, bring the amount that will suit your own travel plans and needs. (Credit or debit cards are preferable to bringing large amounts of cash.) Note that it is very expensive to fly in and out of Madagascar, even to relatively close destinations such as South Africa. If you wish to access personal funds in Madagascar, be prepared to bring a Visa debit card, which is more widely accepted at ATMs than MasterCard.

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. If you wish, you can purchase personal property insurance before you leave; you will need to make these arrangements yourself. 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 Madagascar 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. Volunteers may want to bring their U.S. driver's license in case they would like to drive in other countries while on annual leave.

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

A token of friendship is sufficient. Some gift suggestions include knick-knacks for the house; pictures, books, or calendars of American scenes; age-generic toys for children; souvenirs from your area; hard candies that will not melt or spoil; or photos to give away. Also recommended is bringing a small empty photo album, which you can fill up with photos from your homestay experience to give as a gift to your host family at your swearing-in ceremony. Because not many people in Madagascar have a camera, photos are very cherished and valuable, so this will make a special gift.

Where will my site assignment be when I finish training? 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. Most Volunteers live in small towns or in rural villages and are usually within one hour from another Volunteer. Some sites require a two or three days' *taxi-brousse* journey from the capital. Other sites are designated "fly sites" due to poor road conditions, and Volunteers in those areas will be flown to and from the capital for trainings and required events.

How can my family contact me in an emergency?

First, if you purchase a cellphone in-country, make sure that your family has that number and is aware of your cellphone reception level at site. Second, the Peace Corps Counseling and Outreach Unit (COU) provides assistance in handling emergencies affecting trainees and Volunteers or their families. Before leaving the United States, instruct your family to notify COU immediately if an emergency arises, such as a serious illness or death of a family member. During normal business hours, the number for COU is 855.855.1961, then select option 2; or directly at 202.692.1470. 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.

Can I call home from Madagascar?

Yes, if you purchase a cellphone locally, but calls from Madagascar to the U.S. are extremely expensive. You can call friends and family for free using Skype when you have Internet access, or have your friends and family call you on your Madagascar number, so the call will be free for you to receive. Calling Madagascar via Skype will cost someone in the U.S. about 40 cents a minute, so it's fairly affordable for them. You can also send text messages to the U.S. from your cellphone if you buy one in Madagascar, but it will be significantly more expensive than sending text messages locally.

Should I bring a cellphone with me?

Only if you have an unlocked phone that has a SIM card slot, such as an iPhone, that will accept a SIM card. Otherwise, it makes sense to buy an inexpensive phone when you arrive in Madagascar, as the systems in Madagascar are different from those used in the United States.

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

Volunteers can plan on being able to get online at least once a month, either by using a USB modem, visiting a meva (transit house) to use Wi-Fi, or using an Internet cafe in a larger town. In the past few years, the level of Internet access in Madagascar has improved dramatically, with many towns boasting 3G. Wireless Internet, though, is still trickier to come by. Many Volunteers choose to purchase a USB modem in order to get online at site. The biggest difference with these is that you pay per megabyte used,

so you'll have to use your data sparingly. These are good for less data-intensive activities like email and Facebook. Wi-Fi is available at all three of the mevas (regional transit houses), although the speed will not be quite what you are used to in America. Wi-Fi is also available at the training center, although its speed is quite slow and its use will be limited to a set list of trainees each day in order not to overwhelm the signal.

Finally, an increasing number of Volunteers are connecting to the Internet via smartphone. If you have an unlocked smartphone (iPhone, Android, etc.) that will accept a SIM card, you can purchase a local SIM card and buy credit to purchase an Internet plan. As with USB modems works, you will pay per megabyte for this. Alternately, you can use your smartphone to connect to Wi-Fi where it is available.

Many Volunteers bring a laptop computer to Madagascar, although some Volunteers choose to bring a tablet computer instead. Computers come in handy for work projects, Peace Corps reporting, emails, Facebook, blogging, uploading and editing photos, watching movies, listening to music, and talking on Skype to friends and family back home. Although not every Volunteer house has electricity, Volunteers without electricity usually bring their computers whenever they travel to larger towns in order to use it there and recharge the battery. If you bring a laptop, it's not a bad idea to bring an extra battery as well, in case your site doesn't have electricity. And if you bring a tablet, you may want to bring a solar panel capable of charging it. If you do not bring a computer, desktop PCs are available for Volunteer use at the Peace Corps office and at the mevas.

Be forewarned that Madagascar is not known for being kind to electronics or their chargers. Whether through unreliable electrical currents, heat, humidity, theft, or accident, a large portion of Volunteers experience problems with, or loss of, their computer during their service, and often need to replace it at some point. So if you're thinking of buying a new laptop for Peace Corps, it's not advisable to spend a lot of money, and it may be wise to purchase personal items insurance. Think durable and affordable! Netbooks are popular with Volunteers for their low price and portability. If you choose to buy a tablet, be sure that it has USB ports since there is no "cloud" here, and you'll need to use USB drives for accessing and trading files.



WELCOME LETTERS FROM MADAGASCAR VOLUNTEERS

Dear Peace Corps Madagascar invitees,

Congratulations and *arahabaina*! You have not only been selected to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer, but you will have the distinct privilege of serving in one of the most unique and beautiful countries in the world. Madagascar really is like no other place on earth: It is wild and wonderful, and I (like most of us) feel incredibly blessed to be able to live and work here for two years. When I first got my invitation, a then-current PCV told me, “Congratulations on hitting the Peace Corps jackpot.” So I will tell you the same thing. That’s not to say that other Peace Corps countries don’t offer rewarding and fulfilling experiences—but we have brilliant green rice fields, abundant tropical fruit, soft sandy beaches, breathtaking mountains, enchanting forests, beguiling lemurs, and thousands of other cool animals that you’ll probably be the first of your friends and family to see. (And just maybe have living in your house.)

I remember being where you are right now, excitedly poring over my invitation letter, then quietly going a little mad over the following weeks and months as I tried to complete all of the paperwork, finish up my job, tackle the daunting task of packing for two years, and generally wrap up my life in America. But although this is easier said than done, have faith that everything will come together in the end. Packing will seem like an all-important task, but then you’ll get here and become settled and realize that it’s really not all about the stuff. Soon enough, you’ll have a curious and satisfying revelation: Madagascar is not a foreign place; it’s home.

Much of the questioning you’ll get from friends and family will center around lifestyle and well-being: How will you live without running water for two years? What happens if you get sick? You realize there’s no Taco Bell, right? And truth be told, these are the issues that will probably be on the forefront of your mind as you prepare to leave for Madagascar. But the biggest realization I had was that the things I thought would be challenges—lack of indoor plumbing, having to cook without a real kitchen, dealing with illness, being bored—were not really challenges at all. I quickly learned to adapt, as you will, too, and this new way of life pretty easily became my way of life. What ended up being the biggest challenges were things that I didn’t anticipate, such as trying to find work projects that made me feel like I was having an impact and utilizing my skills. Or having to work hard to overcome my inherent self-reliance and independent nature (which I thought would only be a benefit during Peace Corps) in order to make myself talk and socialize with my neighbors more.

The other thing you might hear a lot of from friends and family is well-intentioned hyperbole about how you’re going to change the world. Realistically, unless you happen to invent a perpetual motion machine during your service that will solve the global energy crisis, you aren’t really going to be changing the world. But what you will be able to do is make a lasting impact on the life of the people in your town, and in doing so, you will change their world. But make no mistake, your Peace Corps experience will impact you just as much (if not more) than it affects the people in your community. The challenges that you overcome will only help you in the end, and you’ll develop a unique-to-Peace-Corps-Volunteers blend of toughness, flexibility, perseverance, propensity for not wanting to speak English, and ability to deal with awkward life situations (a surprising number of which involve chickens). Probably the most rewarding thing for me is being a part of a community and feeling like I have truly integrated into my town. When I stop at my neighborhood coffee stand for breakfast, I am no longer someone to be gawked at—I’m just Emily who lives in the neighborhood, joking with the ladies and giggling with the kids as I get my daily dose of caffeine. And although I can think of a dozen other things I’d rather do than study Malagasy, the satisfaction, pride, and sense of accomplishment that I get from speaking the local language here (and being able to shock the locals when I do!) is priceless.

Soon enough you'll arrive here and will start to make this amazing island your home. But until then, while you're still ensconced in the comforts of America, enjoy every second of time with your friends and family, eat lots of ice cream, and get yourself excited for life on the "eighth continent"!

PCV Emily Silman, Vangaindrano 2012–14

Tongasoa eto Madagasikara!

First of all, welcome and congratulations on your Peace Corps assignment! I was at an RPCV event a few months back explaining to group of returned Volunteers that here in Madagascar we tend to think we won the Peace Corps lottery with our placement. An older gentleman in the back, old enough to be one of the first Volunteers ever, propped himself up and said, "Trust me, we all think that."

Let's be real, though: You nailed it. Madagascar is unequivocally one of the most ecologically stunning and culturally fascinating countries in the world and you'll be immeasurably rewarded if you allow yourself to delve into it. Not to mention that when you're done here you'll have a secret language back stateside to speak with your fellow Mada Volunteers ... because no one else speaks Malagasy. True, you're about to put yourself through the ringer trying to get a handle on a language spoken by no one but the 20 million or so people that live on this island. That may seem daunting, but I've come to see it as a true test of conviction. Many people do Peace Corps to broaden horizons, explore the world, seek adventure, but more than that a lot of people sign up because they don't believe the world is just, don't think it's fair that so much of the world lives in abject poverty, and feel compelled to help. You'll learn Malagasy not because it's a good career move or because it might come in handy down the road, but because it's a necessary precondition to make a difference here. You'll do it because you truly care about what you're doing here as a Peace Corps Volunteer and you're willing to put in an effort not to advance yourself, but to make a difference in your community. More than anything else, Peace Corps in Madagascar tests the strength of your convictions and the depth of your resolve.

When you first arrive, you'll likely be struck by how dramatically different the conditions of life are here, but as time passes, if you take a step back, you be struck instead by how accustomed you've become. I remember in the early days seeing the cow-drawn carts (*saretys*) rolling down the main streets of town and thinking it was picture-worthy. The first time I was asked if we had *saretys* in America I responded without thinking, Yeah, like 200 years ago. I quickly realized that may not have been a tactful response, so I backpedaled and tried to save face by launching into a bit about how the Amish still use them. Not my finest hour. What I'm trying to say is that at first things will throw you off balance, you won't always be on your game, and you'll often find your head spinning as you try to puzzle your American self into life here. As you get further into it however, balance will return and you'll go from snapping photos, to getting peeved at *saretys* for clogging up the road, to thinking that, hey *sarety* might be the best way for me to get from point A to point B today.

Without a doubt, you hit the Peace Corps jackpot getting Madagascar. This place is incredible, believe it. But like the old man said, maybe everyone says that about their country of service. If so, I think that says a lot about what you're about to enter into. You're about to make your life here for the next two years, but this experience will be something that will stick with you forever. Trust me; it will be the toughest job you'll ever love.

Mazotoa.

PCV Eric Rahman, Arivonimamo 2012–14

Hello, incoming trainees!

Welcome, in advance, to Madagascar and the beginning of your Peace Corps experience! You are incredibly fortunate to be invited to serve in Madagascar, not only because of its tremendous beauty and diversity, but also because our Peace Corps staff is truly dedicated to its Volunteers. You will receive fantastic training throughout your time here and you should feel at ease relying on our staff and other Volunteers. Though we may be separated by several hours' travel or not yet acquainted, Volunteers are always willing to help one another.

I live on the extreme southeastern coast of Madagascar in a remote fishing village of roughly 1,100 people. My village is about 50 km from the nearest metropolitan area, but the last 18 km must be walked or biked because of the terrible road conditions. My home is located approximately 200 meters from a gorgeous beach which doubles as our fish market and soccer field. I have no electricity or running water, which may be the case at your site, too, but you do become accustomed to the change in lifestyle and realize that the benefits of participating in your community offset the creature comforts you may miss from home.



In my experience, the relationships you form at site and in neighboring towns become an enormous motivation and essential support for Volunteers. Your community will be overjoyed to include you into their culture and daily activities starting from the first day onward. Be sure to show excitement and your commitment to becoming a community member by participating in numerous events, if even they may be mundane. Having a solid, positive foundation within your community will allow for a smoother transition from newcomer to community motivator and resource liaison. It can be intimidating to work in a new and dramatically different atmosphere from what you are accustomed to; therefore, make allies and tackle new initiatives as a group rather than alone.

You will face difficult challenges regularly during your entire service but with perseverance, compassion, and patience, your Peace Corps service will be the adventure of a lifetime. Best of luck with pre-service training and remember to keep an open mind. Malagasy culture is fun and beautiful but differs greatly from mainstream American culture. What may shock you today will be your “normal” soon enough. Make the most of your 27 months! Enjoy.

Amin'ny manaraka indray,

PCV Samantha Bezdek, St. Luce 2012–14

PACKING LIST

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Madagascar based on their own experiences. Use it as an informal guide in making your own list, bearing in mind that each experience is individual and that these items are by no means required. There is no perfect list! Keep in mind that you have a 100-pound weight limit on baggage, and although it's easier said than done, try not to stress about packing too much. Your Peace Corps experience won't be defined by the stuff that you bring or don't bring. Once you've covered the essentials, just bring what makes you happy, whether it's a guitar or your favorite pair of shoes.

Because the climates can be so varied in Madagascar, you won't know what type of clothing you'll need until you get to site. A good bet is to bring a basic assortment of practical clothes and then, once you get to site, supplement by shopping locally in the fantastic *frip* (used clothing markets) that are all over the country. You can always have things sent to you later. The ideal characteristics of clothing in Madagascar are dark colors, multiple pockets, the ability to withstand rain and mud splatters, and the durability to be hand-washed and line-dried. Although it's in Africa, Madagascar does get quite cold in some regions, so don't forget to bring some warm clothes. And remember, you can get almost everything you need in Madagascar.

General Clothing

- Lightweight all-weather jacket
- 1–2 hooded sweatshirts/fleeces
- Knit hat and lightweight scarf
- Swimsuit (make sure it will stand up to the intense Indian Ocean waves!)
- 1–2 bandanas
- Baseball cap or straw hat for sun protection
- Good-quality lightweight raincoat
- For men, a button-down shirt and tie for special occasions
- For women, 2–3 knee-length dresses/skirts (more, for teachers)
- 2 pairs of jeans
- 2–3 pairs of khakis or cargo pants
- 1–2 pairs of shorts (around knee length)
- 4–5 T-shirts
- 4–5 long-sleeve shirts
- 1–2 tank tops
- Workout/biking-appropriate clothing
- Leggings or sweatpants
- Pajamas
- Plenty of underwear, bras (including a few sports bras), and socks
- Belt

Shoes

- 1 pair sturdy sandals
- 1 pair sneakers
- 1 pair hiking boots/shoes
- Professional shoes for teachers (with closed toes and comfortable for standing)
- 1 pair dress shoes for special occasions
- 1 pair flip-flops

Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items

- Enough deodorant, shampoo, toothpaste, lotion, etc., to last you through training
- A few toothbrushes
- Small amount of makeup, nail polish, and perfume, for special occasions
- Tampons and/or feminine pads to last the first three months
- Razor and extra blades
- Manicure set
- Hair-cutting scissors for do-it-yourself haircuts
- Hairbrush, comb, hair elastics/clips
- Baby powder
- Hand wipes/hand sanitizer
- Lip balm with SPF

Electronics

- Laptop with (optional) extra battery and extra charger cord
- Shortwave radio
- Kindle or other e-reader
- Solar battery charger and rechargeable batteries
- Disposable batteries (sized depending on what your items need)
- iPod or MP3 player, charger, and USB connector cord
- 2–3 pairs small headphones
- iPod/MP3 player speakers (rechargeable is preferable to battery-powered)
- Small portable external hard drive (500GB–1TB) for storing and trading media
- 3–4 USB thumb drives, for transferring and sharing documents
- Battery-powered travel alarm clock
- 5–6 plug adapters for Madagascar (see Frequently Asked Questions)
- Small portable solar charger
- Solar-powered light
- Camera with sturdy case, battery charger, connector cord, and extra memory cards
- Unlocked smartphone, if you have one

Miscellaneous

- 1–2 sturdy liter-sized water bottles
- Leatherman/Swiss army knife/folding utility knife
- Compact sleeping bag (nights can be chilly in some seasons)
- Quick-dry travel towel
- Illuminating watch
- Bungee cords for strapping things to your bike
- Headlamp, a few flashlights, and appropriate batteries
- Duct tape
- Scissors
- Glue sticks and tape
- Ballpoint pens
- Set of colored permanent markers
- Journal and 1–2 notebooks
- Malagasy/English dictionary (available on Lulu.com)
- U.S. stamps for sending letters with travelers (and for student loan deferments, taxes, etc.)
- Flat sheets (full)

- Your favorite pillow
- Sewing kit
- 1–2 pairs sunglasses
- A voided check or deposit slip from your U.S. bank account
- Games (Scrabble, cards, chess, Frisbee, etc.)
- Musical instruments (harmonica, guitar, etc.)
- A few books (to swap after reading)
- Hobby materials such as sketch pads and colored pencils
- Day pack, purse, and/or messenger bag
- Sturdy gardening gloves
- Good-quality small packable umbrella
- Dry bag for electronics
- Earplugs
- Small photo album with pictures of family and friends (great for showing your host family)
- Photos and wall decorations for your house
- Sturdy pocket-sized notebook
- Some favorite American snacks to help you get through those first few weeks of local food!
- Powdered drink packets to mix with water
- Kitchen items such as a vegetable peeler, spatula, measuring cups, quality knife, and bottle opener
- 2–3 good quality locks (key or combination)
- Plastic food storage containers
- Hammock, perhaps with attached mosquito net

What Not To Bring:

- Valuables, such as expensive jewelry or heirloom keepsakes
- Extreme technical clothing or safari gear (not necessary!)
- Mosquito net or water filter (these will be provided by Peace Corps)
- First aid kit (this will be provided by Peace Corps)
- Bike helmet or other bike gear (this will be provided by Peace Corps)
- Electricity converters (most electronics that you'll bring have built-in converters and only need the adapter)

PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST

The following list offers 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 your service, so 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 overseas, 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

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

Financial Management

- Keep a bank account in your name in the U.S.
- Obtain student loan deferment forms from your lender or loan service. Information about loan deferment is online here: www.peacecorps.gov/learn/whyvol/finben/. Answers to frequently asked loan deferment questions are here: www.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	Placement Office	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Country information	Sarah Singletary Desk Officer	ext. 2635 madagascar@peacecorps.gov	202.692.2635
Plane tickets, passports, visas, or other travel matters	CWT SATO Travel	ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Legal clearance	Placement Office	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	Staging Office	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-hour hotline	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