

The Peace Corps Welcomes You to México

A Peace Corps Publication for New Volunteers

February 2015





A WELCOME LETTER

I'm delighted to welcome you to Peace Corps/Mexico! As invitees to the Peace Corps' latest group of Volunteers, you will be contributing to the implementation of a very important undertaking between Mexico and the United States. Not only is this program breaking new ground in our relationship with one of our most important neighbors to the south, but it is an innovative initiative within the Peace Corps itself. It shows how technical cooperation and stronger personal and professional relationships between federal organizations can make an impact on the economic development and environmental management of another country.

We warmly welcome you here to Peace Corps/Mexico, where your value to this program comes from your professional experience and academic preparation, but, more importantly, from your expressed commitment to support Peace Corps' objectives. We believe your background, whether in private enterprise, academic institutions, government, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), will enable you to make an important contribution to the citizens of Mexico. Through your work, you will be able to make a real contribution to the missions of our two federal partner agencies, the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) and the *Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* (SEMARNAT) — agencies that are dedicated to improving Mexico's economic development and environmental management.

But you are doing more than simply contributing your technical advice and experience to Mexico's development efforts. You are part of an American team that is devising new and innovative ways to make a difference around the world. My outstanding colleagues and I want to come together with you frequently to assess how we can best push this program forward. We are all taking on an exciting new challenge. There are no fixed formulas for achieving these goals. Instead, both we as a staff and you as Volunteers will confer frequently as team players to assess our progress, address the inevitable challenges and frustrations, and think strategically about our next steps.

The experience you are now embarking on will go well beyond contributing your skills and experience to others. Not only will you be giving of yourself, but you will be receiving and gaining much as well. The people of Mexico have a fascinating history and rightfully take great pride in their culture. Your two-year stay is intended to provide you with a meaningful experience, during which you will integrate yourself fully into another culture, language, society, and working life, while contributing, both through knowledge and deeds, to Mexico's economic and environmental development.

¡Bienvenidos a México! Esperamos que su experiencia con Peace Corps en Mexico sea una de las mejores de su vida!

Jaime Kuklinski
Country Director

Table of Contents

A WELCOME LETTER.....	1
CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS	4
PEACE CORPS/MEXICO HISTORY AND PROGRAMS.....	5
History of the Peace Corps in Mexico.....	5
COUNTRY OVERVIEW: MEXICO AT A GLANCE.....	6
History	6
Government	7
Economy.....	7
People and Culture.....	7
RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.....	8
General Information about Mexico	8
Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees	8
Online Articles/Current News Sites About Mexico	9
International Development Sites About Mexico	9
Recommended Books	9
Books About the History of the Peace Corps.....	9
Books on the Volunteer Experience.....	9
LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE.....	10
Communications.....	10
Housing and Site Location	11
Living Allowance and Money Management	11
Food and Diet	11
Transportation.....	12
Social Activities.....	12
Professionalism, Dress and Behavior	13
Personal Safety	14
Rewards and Frustrations	15
PEACE CORPS TRAINING	16
Overview of Pre-Service Training.....	16
Technical Training.....	16
Language Training.....	17
Cross-Cultural Training.....	18
Health Training.....	18
Safety and Security Training	19
Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service.....	19

YOUR HEALTH CARE IN MEXICO.....	19
Health Issues in Mexico	20
Helping You Stay Healthy.....	20
Maintaining Your Health.....	21
Women’s Health Information	21
Your Peace Corps Medical Kit.....	22
Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist.....	22
SAFETY AND SECURITY IN DEPTH	24
Factors that Contribute to Volunteer Risk	24
Staying Safe: Don’t Be a Target for Crime	25
Support from Staff.....	26
Office of Victim Advocacy	26
Crime Data for Mexico.....	26
Volunteer Safety Support in Mexico	26
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION OVERVIEW	28
Diversity and Inclusion at Your Site	28
Cross-Cultural Considerations.....	29
What Might a Volunteer Face?.....	29
Possible Gender Role Issues	29
Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color	30
Possible Issues for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, Ally (LGBTQA) Volunteers	32
Possible Issues for Volunteers with Disabilities	33
Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples	33
Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers	34
Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers	34
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS	36
WELCOME LETTERS FROM MEXICO VOLUNTEERS	38
PACKING LIST	42
PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST	44
CONTACTING PEACE CORPS HEADQUARTERS	46

CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

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

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

PEACE CORPS/MEXICO HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

History of the Peace Corps in Mexico

The Peace Corps marked its entry into Mexico in 2004. This initiative originated in 2001 when Mexican President Vicente Fox and U.S. President George W. Bush signed the Partnership for Prosperity, an agreement that envisioned several initiatives to strengthen cooperation between the two countries.

Mexico's National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) expressed interest in working with the Peace Corps in several of its centers in an effort to strengthen how knowledge, processes, and technologies were being generated and transferred to those directly impacting the quality of life in Mexico. In November 2003, the first agreement was signed between the Peace Corps and CONACYT and the program began.

In anticipation of the arrival of the first group of Volunteers in October 2004, the Peace Corps established its office in Querétaro, an important city two hours north of Mexico City.

In June 2006, Peace Corps/Mexico signed a partnership agreement with the Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) and the first Environment Volunteers began their service in January 2007. Your Volunteer assignment description (VAD) contains more details about both CONACYT and SEMARNAT and the activities you can expect to be conducting throughout your service.

Currently, there are approximately 70 Volunteers working throughout most of central and southeast Mexico. Peace Corps/Mexico has expanded to work with an increasing number of state and municipal governments, as well as higher education institutions. The post recently revised and strengthened the strategic project frameworks for the two projects.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW: MEXICO AT A GLANCE

History

The first ancestral civilization in Mexico was that of the Olmecs (1200–600 B.C.), in the south of the modern-day country. By 300 B.C., they were joined by the Zapotecs of Oaxaca, and by A.D. 250, the Maya were building temple pyramids in the Yucatán Peninsula. Central Mexico's great civilization flourished at Teotihuacán between A.D. 250–600, to be followed by the Toltecs at Xochicalco and Tula. The Aztecs were successors to this string of empires, settling at Tenochtitlán in the early 14th century.

Almost 3,000 years of civilization was shattered in just two short years, following the landing of Hernán Cortés in 1519. The Aztecs were initially accommodating because, according to their calendar, the year 1519 promised the god Quetzalcóatl's return. By August 1521, Aztec resistance had ended.

The Spanish-born were considered nobility. By the 18th century, *criollos* (people born of Spanish parents in New Spain) were seeking political power. In 1808, when Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Spain, direct Spanish control over New Spain suddenly ceased, and in September 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a criollo parish priest, issued his call to rebellion. Spain agreed to Mexican independence in 1821. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, ceded a vast territory to the U.S. By 1862, France decided to colonize Mexico, which sparked yet another war and, in 1864, Archduke Maximilian of Habsburg became emperor of Mexico. His reign was bloodily ended by forces loyal to the country's former president, Benito Juárez. With the slogan "Order and Progress," dictator Porfirio Díaz, who ruled from 1878 to 1911, avoided war and steered Mexico into the industrial age. During the Mexican Revolution (1910–21), the basic ideological rift was between liberal reformers and radical leaders, such as Emiliano Zapata and Francisco "Pancho" Villa. Precursors of today's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) took power in 1934.

The oil boom of the late 1970s increased Mexico's oil revenues, but the oil surplus in the 1980s caused Mexico's worst recession in decades.

In 1998, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (PRI) brought inflation under control and established a privatization program. The high point of Salinas' economic reform came with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994. On the same day, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) demanded improved social and economic justice with a two-week armed rebellion.

In March 1994, Luis Donaldo Coló시오, Salinas' successor, was assassinated. His replacement, Ernesto Zedillo, was elected with 50 percent of the vote. Shortly after he took office in December 1994, Mexico's currency collapsed, bringing an economic recession. Zedillo's policies, along with an international bailout, gradually pulled Mexico out of its economic woes.

In the freest election since the Mexican Revolution, National Action Party (PAN) presidential candidate Vicente Fox won the election in 2000 and ended the PRI's 71-year reign. Fox sought to establish Mexico as an economic world player.

In 2006, PAN candidate Felipe Calderón narrowly defeated the Party of Democratic Revolution's Andres Lopez Obrador for the presidency. President Calderón supported law and order, the free market system, and more opportunities for Mexico's poor. Due to economic and crime related frustrations, the 2012 presidential elections brought the PRI back into power with the election of Enrique Peña Nieto. So far into his presidency, President Peña Nieto has focused on educational and economic reforms.

Government

Mexico is a federal republic governed by the 1917 constitution. The president is elected for a six-year term and may never be re-elected. The president appoints the cabinet, which is confirmed by the Congress.

Legislative power is vested in a bicameral Congress. The upper house members, the Senate, are popularly elected for six-year terms. The lower house members, the Chamber of Deputies, are elected to three-year terms. The highest tribunal is the Supreme Court of Justice. The chief executive of each of the country's 31 states is a governor elected to a six-year term. Each state is subdivided into municipalities.

Economy

Mexico has a free market. The country's economy is currently driven by oil and gas production (more than 70 percent of its revenue), tourism, industrial production, textiles and clothing, and agriculture. The most important sources of foreign exchange are petroleum, tourism, and remittances from Mexicans working abroad. Income distribution remains highly unequal.

The U.S. is Mexico's most important trading partner. The diversity of climate and soils facilitates the production and export of a wide selection of agricultural goods. Mexico mines various minerals and also has a flourishing crafts industry. However, rapid population growth has led to high levels of unemployment, especially among youth.

People and Culture

As a result of the Spanish conquest, most Mexicans are *mestizo* but continue to be very proud of their pre-Hispanic heritage and traditions.

Mexican culture is known for the unified nature of the family. Children regularly live with their parents until they marry, and families remain connected to relatives, often living in the same area or even in the same house. In some family settings, *machismo* can be quite common, but there is a tremendous range of diversity in values and customs, from traditional to progressive, that can be encountered throughout Mexico.

During the Spanish conquest and colonization, Roman Catholicism was established as the dominant religion of Mexico, and indigenous religious practices were incorporated into the practices of Catholicism. Today, about 83 percent of Mexicans identify themselves as Catholics compared to roughly 90 percent in the 1970s. A diversity of other religions make up the remaining percentage.

An important Catholic and national symbol, which almost all of Mexico respects and celebrates, is Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Day of the Dead is another important celebration. In many Mexican communities, *curanderos* (traditional healers) use indigenous folk medicine, spiritual, and Christian faith healing to treat ailments and "cleanse" spiritual impurities.

Mexico is known worldwide for its folk art traditions. Clay pottery, colorfully embroidered cotton garments, cotton or wool shawls and outer garments, and colorful baskets and rugs are ubiquitous throughout the country.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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

A note of caution: As you surf the Internet, be aware that you may find bulletin boards and chat rooms in which people are free to express opinions about the Peace Corps based on their own 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 Mexico

www.countrywatch.com/

On this site, you can learn anything from what time it is in the capital of Mexico to how to convert from the dollar to the Mexican peso. Just click on Mexico and go from there.

www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations

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

www.state.gov

The State Department's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find **Mexico** 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.cyberschoolbus.un.org/

This United Nations site allows you to search for statistical information for member states of the U.N.

www.worldinformation.com

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

Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees

www.rpcv.org

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

<http://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.

<https://www.facebook.com/PeaceCorpsMexico>

Peace Corps/Mexico has a Facebook page that allows Volunteers in Mexico, including individuals invited to serve in Mexico, and former Volunteers, to stay connected and share their successes.

Online Articles/Current News Sites About Mexico

<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/noticias.html>

Website for *El Universal* newspaper (in Spanish)

<http://www.jornada.unam.mx>

Newspaper, with free access to website

International Development Sites About Mexico

<http://www.conservation.org/xp/CIWEB/programs/>

Conservation International's website, with Mexico programs

<http://www.gtz.de/en/weltweit/lateinamerika-karibik/638.htm>

German government aid agency's Mexico website

<http://www.iadb.org/exr/country/eng/Mexico/>

The Inter-American Development Bank webpage for Mexico

http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/country/mexico

The U.S. Agency for International Development's Mexico website

www.worldbank.org/laccountries

The World Bank website for Latin America

Recommended Books

Books About the History of the Peace Corps

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

Books on the Volunteer Experience

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

LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE

Communications

Mail

Mail can be received at the Peace Corps office through the Mexican postal system. The mail system in Mexico is generally reliable, but usually more expensive than mail in the United States. Mail from the U.S. to Mexico takes about 10 days and from Mexico to the U.S. takes about twice as long. You will have to pay import duties on everything but books sent from the United States to Mexico.

Mailing Address:

(Your name)

Peace Corps/Mexico

Av. Universidad Oriente 202

Colonia San Javier

76020 Querétaro, Querétaro

Mexico

Telephones

Mexico has good cellphone and regular telephone coverage throughout most of the country. While you are in pre-service training you will be provided a local cellphone to use for local calls. At the end of the three month training, you will have the option to buy the cellphone provided to you from the Peace Corps or purchase your own. It typically depends on your site and whether the same service is available.

There are also public phones nearby and you can receive phone calls in the homes of most host families. For international calls, most Volunteers use Skype or another free or low-cost provider via the Internet.

If you own a cellphone, ask if your plan has Mexico coverage. If you own a phone in the U.S. and it accepts a new SIM card, which many do not, you may consider taking it to Mexico where you can buy a new SIM card for a modest fee and use the phone there. Otherwise, there are a variety of plans and calling cards available that you can investigate once in-country. Each site may have a different recommended plan based on coverage.

The telephone number for the Peace Corps/Mexico office is 52.442.238.6900.

Computer, Internet, and Email Access

Mexico has a well-developed Internet system and Internet cafes are very accessible. In the larger cities, there are also locations with wireless access available to the public. Internet service is relatively cheap, usually less than \$1 an hour. DSL lines are commonplace, and the dial-up service is relatively fast as well.

Host families are not asked to offer Internet access. The training center has two public computers available for trainees' use. If you bring your laptop (most Volunteers have found them extremely valuable during their training and service) you will have access to the Internet through the wireless service. During training hours (9 a.m.–6 p.m.), trainees are expected to be fully engaged in the training sessions. You should prepare yourself to be somewhat “less” in touch with friends and families, via chat and email, than you may be accustomed to in the United States. This will allow you to be more focused on integrating into Mexico and connecting with other trainees, staff, and your host family.

Housing and Site Location

During pre-service training (PST), all trainees live with host families within a 45-minute walking distance of the training center. Living with a host family is a fundamental element of culture and language immersion. It also helps enrich each trainee's cultural knowledge and understanding, adaptation process, safety and security, and helps trainees to improve their language skills. The Peace Corps has certain requirements for family selection, but you can expect to live comfortably but modestly. The families where trainees stay have been highly rated by previous trainees or students.

After swearing in and moving to their sites, Volunteers are again required to live with a family for at least one month, but potentially up to three months. By doing this, Volunteers begin creating a local network, learn tips about what is safe and unsafe in a new place, and can better adapt to their sites. Between one and three months, Volunteers typically look for their own housing within the rental budget established by the Peace Corps and then Peace Corps staff members use a security checklist to determine if the housing is appropriate. Most Volunteers decide to live in apartments or small houses, but some continue to live with families. The Peace Corps will provide you with a settling-in allowance to buy basic furniture and household items.

Volunteer sites are located in a variety of medium- to large-sized cities and towns, in addition to small rural communities in central Mexico. Please refer to your Volunteer assignment description (VAD) for specific information about your potential worksite.

Living Allowance and Money Management

Volunteers will quickly realize there is a huge diversity in incomes in Mexico. The extremely wide disparity between the rich and the poor makes setting a single average income difficult. Poverty is still prevalent in much of Mexico, but the middle class is slowly growing. The average annual income is around U.S. \$2,000, but the poorest 40 percent of the population earn only about U.S. \$550 annually.

The Peace Corps provides each Volunteer with an adequate living allowance that is above the average income of most Mexicans and that allows Volunteers to live safely and modestly. Mexico's living allowance is based on surveys of Volunteers' expenses conducted each year and comparisons with cost of living in Mexico in cities, towns, and rural communities. It does not, however, always represent a "salary" similar to that of your potential counterparts. Due to the specialized level of the program here, a Volunteer might work with some counterparts whose standard of living is far above the Volunteer's allowance.

The living allowance is adjusted for four regional cost zones. All Volunteers open a bank account at BANAMEX during PST, where their allowance is electronically deposited each month. Volunteers can use debit cards to access their money at ATM machines and use e-banking to pay bills.

Food and Diet

While the Mexican diet revolves around meat, beans, chiles, corn salsas, moles, dairy products, and fruit, it is much more diverse and varies greatly depending on the time of year, region of the country, and the family budget. A wide diversity of climates, soils, and consumer tastes has resulted in Mexican farmers producing just about anything. Regional variation in dishes is common and you should explore the Mexican cuisine!

With increasing urbanization and exposure to other cultures, the Mexican diet is gradually changing. Unfortunately, today's Mexican diet is not necessarily a healthy one and modern diseases such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes are becoming epidemic. Vegetarians can easily find their food supplies, even though vegetarianism is uncommon. The training and host families are informed of food preferences (e.g.,

vegetarians) and any known allergies. It is important to respect your host family's budget by buying any preferred tastes, brands, or special food within your own budget, as these may be imported and out of the range of your host family's budget. In most cities you can now find a wide range of prepared and international dishes. In every Mexican neighborhood, you'll notice that the ubiquitous taco stands provide a wide range of fast food that is hard to pass up and attracts people of all ages.

If you want to start getting into the most common of Mexican foods one can find just about anywhere, you can look up information for tortillas, tacos, burritos, enchiladas, gorditas, tamales and many more, varying by name and by region. You may be familiar with these in the United States, but they are not the same thing in Mexico.

Transportation

During PST, trainees mainly prefer to walk from home to the Peace Corps office, although they can choose to use public transportation (usually small buses).

Most Volunteers primarily use public transportation to commute to work and for weekend excursions in their sites. Volunteers living in downtown areas tend to prefer walking; it is often quicker to walk than to drive. In some cases, host agencies provide shuttle bus transportation to and from work for their employees. In other cases, Volunteers obtain rides with colleagues or friends. Several Volunteers have bicycles, but these are used mainly for recreation and running errands and not for commuting to and from work. (Note: Helmet use when biking is mandatory for all Peace Corps Volunteers.) Cheap taxis are common in all urban areas.

Mexico has an excellent system of intercity first-class buses and second-class buses are used to travel to every secondary city in the country. Airline travel, although somewhat expensive, is a viable option for long-distance travel. Volunteers are not permitted to own cars or motorcycles. With prior authorization of the country director, the use of rental vehicles for vacation travel may be permitted.

Geography and Climate

Mexico is a huge country, roughly one-third the size of the U.S., and shares its borders with the U.S. to the north and Belize and Guatemala to the south. It also has several thousand miles of shoreline along the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. Mexico has every conceivable land form and geographic feature, ranging from the deserts of the north, the volcanic ridge traversing central Mexico, the Sierra Madre ranges running along both sides of the country, the fertile plains and alluvial valleys of the coasts, to the tropical forest areas in Chiapas and Yucatan peninsulas. In the northern and central parts of the country, the climate is temperate, becoming more tropical toward the south and Yucatan. Most of Mexico has two distinct seasons, with November through May being dry and June through October being rainy, but frequently you will hear the climate has changed in the last few years. In the northern and central parts of the country, where Volunteers are assigned, winters are cold and dry, while summers are warm. Most buildings and offices in Mexico lack heating and air conditioning, so often there is not much difference between the temperatures inside and outside. Volunteers coming to Mexico can expect a variety of climates.

Social Activities

You will find a diversity of cultural ways of life and behaviors, but there are some common features. For most Mexicans, their social lives revolve around their families and, to a lesser extent, friends and life events. Family commitments take up a lot of the "free" time.

Volunteers assigned to large and culturally diverse cities will find no shortage of social activities in which to participate. Activities in the larger cities include restaurants, movies, plazas (*zocalos*), theater, concerts, fairs, open-air markets, religious celebrations, classes, organized trips to other locations, and sports.

Volunteers sometimes struggle to make acquaintances with similar interests. One should be proactive and try to make friends through work and recreational activities.

Volunteers assigned to rural areas or smaller cities will often find that social life can be even more centered around family. As a result, extra efforts should be made to integrate into different social circles to ensure a balance in one's life and to learn about different lifestyles and cultural norms. You should be proactive, but watch carefully, as you will find important differences related to gender, dress code, social interaction, etc. Give yourself some time to observe in order to learn more about the culture.

Professionalism, Dress and Behavior

As you will read in the section on pre-service training (PST), one of the most important competencies you will need to meet during PST is to exemplify professional service. By now you are well-versed in the core expectations for Peace Corps Volunteers. If not, please read them and then re-read them and then read them again! They are the foundation for the assessment of your readiness to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mexico. In addition to those core expectations, the following are just some of the indicators that staff will also use to assess your readiness to serve:

- Abides by the norms defined by the training class during the welcome retreat and holds her/himself and others accountable to those norms
- Supports others according to the group agreement to acknowledge and respect the diverse experiences of each Volunteer
- Conducts himself/herself according to policies in Peace Corps Volunteer and Peace Corps/Mexico handbooks
- Demonstrates respectful and professional relationships with local counterparts and partners, including Peace Corps staff
- Exhibits professional appearance and behavior following local norms
- Establishes respectful social interactions with host-family and community members in local language using culturally appropriate behaviors
- Manages adjustment stress using constructive coping strategies
- Makes acceptable progress in learning language

As Peace Corps Volunteers in Mexico, how you dress and your appearance will say a lot about you as a professional, as a U.S. American, and as a representative of the Peace Corps. The best advice for you to follow regarding your dress and appearance is to observe the local norms at your place of work and respect them. This does not mean you have to adopt 100 percent of the customs you observe in your site. Every Volunteer makes a personal decision about what behaviors he or she will modify and to what extent. There is one sure thing: If you do not adapt some of your behaviors to respect the local norms, you should accept that others in Mexico and in your site may misunderstand you or even perceive you in a negative light because of their own personal or cultural filters regarding appearance, behaviors, etc. This will definitely impede your integration process.

In addition to respecting the local norms in your future site, you are expected to adapt to the local norms in the Peace Corps office, including guidance for dress and appearance for staff, because you are part of the Peace Corps organization. Peace Corps/Mexico's guidance for staff could be described as business casual with a touch of casual Friday.

Peace Corps/Mexico's Dress Guidance for Trainees

- Footwear: Casual leather and business casual shoes for men are the norm, while women wear flats, heels, dress sandals, open-toed shoes, oxfords, and more. Tennis shoes, casual sandals (i.e. Chaco-type), and flip-flops are not appropriate. Sandals of any kind are not appropriate for men.
- Tops: No T-shirts, tank tops, or see-through shirts/blouses (unless over a camisole or nice T-shirt).
- Bottoms: Dress slacks, khakis, knee-length skirts, and capris are fine. Denim is fine as long as there are no rips or contrasting washes. Mini-skirts, shorts, yoga pants, and athletic/gym clothes are not appropriate.
- Body art: Body art (i.e. tattoos, piercings, ear plugs, gauges, etc.) is not uncommon in Mexico but might not be considered appropriate by your host family, host agency, counterparts or community members. Visible tattoos may draw unwanted attention or pose a challenge to your integration process due to negative associations/stereotypes some people attach to tattoos. Peace Corps/Mexico strongly recommends that during pre-service training and the first weeks/months in your site you should be prepared to cover tattoos. Visible body piercings (other than earrings for women) are not generally accepted in professional settings. Wearing facial piercings may make it more difficult to integrate into your community. Peace Corps Mexico does not require but does recommend that you remove such body art during the initial phases of your training and service.

There are also several activities during pre-service training that require a **minimum** business casual dress code, such as the Counterpart Workshop, when your future partners will meet you for the first time. The swearing-in ceremony at the end of PST requires business attire. On the other end of the spectrum are scheduled visits to national parks and other protected areas for natural resource management and environmental education trainees, for which casual yet appropriate attire, such as outdoor gear, is necessary. Technology transfer trainees will have frequent visits to science and technology research and development centers and universities for which the dress code is business/business casual. Casual dress is acceptable at your host family's home and when you are out in the evenings or on the weekends. More detailed information about professional dress and appearance is contained in a document called "Bridge to PST." Please use the packing list at the end of this welcome book as resource as you decide what to bring to Mexico.

Personal Safety

More detailed information about the Peace Corps' approach to safety is contained in the "Health Care and Safety" chapter, 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 Mexico Volunteers complete their two years of service without 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 Mexico. Using these tools, you are expected 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. We encourage Volunteers and families to look at our safety and security information on the Peace Corps website at www.peacecorps.gov/safety.

Information on these pages gives messages on Volunteer health and Volunteer 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

Peace Corps service in any country is both rewarding and frustrating at times; the Mexico program is no exception. A corollary to this is that Volunteers normally get out of their service what they put into it.

The rewards include learning another language and new skills; making new and lasting friendships; becoming acquainted with another country, its people, and its culture; and making a contribution to Mexico’s economic development.

Previous Volunteers have identified some common elements as “keys” to success and satisfaction during service: These include clarity about the service aspect, and all three goals of Peace Corps; commitment to both learn and give; understanding the need for and willingness to exercise patience to cope with a different rhythm in lifestyles; being prepared to be proactive, adaptable, flexible, and persevere in difficult situations; and understanding the needs of the host agency, then together planning the best contribution.

During PST and your service, we will provide support in strengthening and supporting these essential attitudes and skills. Potential frustrations are likely to be similar to those faced by anyone moving to a new city or town, with the added element of change in culture and nationality.

We want to help you achieve your expectations and support your personal and professional success in this journey. The clarity of your motivation for serving in Mexico, coupled with your commitment and attitude, are your most important resources.

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 Mexico 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 Mexico 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 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.

Pre-service training is a 12-week program that begins when you arrive in early March and ends when you swear-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer in late May or early June, should you successfully complete the training program.

PST is designed to help you meet key competencies that are essential for successful service in Mexico. Much of the training is conducted in the form of workshops at the Peace Corps office in the city of Querétaro, and every Peace Corps trainee lives with a host family that is within walking distance of the office. Throughout PST there are many activities outside of the office, including a three- to four-day trip to your future site, some day trips and overnight outings for field-based training, and a one- or two-week field-based practicum. Add on the language and intercultural training activities outside of the office and your personal time on weekends and Mexican holidays and you will find that PST is a balance among 1) theory and practice, 2) classroom and field-based activities, and 3) pre-designed training and self-directed learning.

The 12 weeks you will spend in PST will be rigorous and demanding yet dynamic and rewarding. It will be up to you to take advantage of every opportunity to demonstrate your readiness to serve. Staff will support you and provide you with guidance and feedback throughout PST. There will also be periodical assessments of your readiness to serve using a variety of methods and activities as you acquire new knowledge, apply new skills, and demonstrate key attitudes that are essential for success. You will also have the opportunity to self-assess your progress and give feedback to staff about your PST experience. If you are professional, flexible, open-minded, and work well with others, you are already on your way to swearing-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mexico.

Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Mexico 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, Mexican experts, and current Volunteers will conduct the training program. Training places great

emphasis on learning how to transfer the skills you have to the community in which you will serve as a Volunteer.

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

PST focuses on three core competencies that all Peace Corps Volunteers must meet in order to demonstrate their readiness to serve: 1) integrating into the community, 2) facilitating participatory development, and 3) exemplifying professional service. You will also need to meet technical competencies and learning objectives related to your assignment (environmental education, natural resource management, or technology transfer), as well as medical, safety and security, intercultural, Spanish language and other learning objectives – all important learning that will help you to have a safe and productive service in Mexico.

You will gain valuable new knowledge, skills, and attitudes through your core and technical training that will not only make you a more successful Volunteer but will also serve you in your post-Peace Corps endeavors in the U.S. or abroad. If you bring significant life and work experience with you, you'll contribute to the group's learning, and you yourself will learn a great deal about your field in the Mexican context and how you can adapt your attitudes and expertise in order to integrate successfully, transfer your knowledge and skills to others, and add value to existing projects and initiatives at your future site. If you're a recent graduate or a young professional, you'll gain the necessary knowledge and skills you need to go to your site with confidence and integrate with local people and partners, conduct an assessment of your site's needs and priorities, work effectively with your counterparts, identify your niche, and start planning to strengthen local capacities in the area of environmental education, natural resource management or technology transfer.

Language Training

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

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

Language classes are conducted daily at the Peace Corps office with professional Spanish teachers, all of whom have university degrees in Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language. Class sizes are small (three to six students) and groups are assigned by language level using a brief pre-departure phone conversation you will have with the language, culture, and host families coordinator.

Spanish is essential for safe and productive service in Mexico and trainees are required to take an oral exam, or Language Proficiency Interview (LPI), at the end of PST before they are authorized to swear-in as Volunteers. **The best advice is to start learning Spanish now.** Currently serving Volunteers strongly

recommend studying pre-departure, whether it's with free online resources, with Spanish-speaking community members where you live, or even taking classes at a local community college if your budget permits.

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 Mexico. You will also discuss the questions you have about the behaviors and practices you observe in Mexico, exploring the underlying reasons for these behaviors and practices.

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

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

Two-thirds of the Peace Corps mission is intercultural relations. During PST, you will have infinite opportunities to learn about Mexican culture, discover the differences between U.S. American and Mexican culture, think about how those differences may impact your service, and develop strategies to adapt your behavior to respect the local norms and values, stay safe, be productive in your work, and contribute to Goals 2 and 3 of the Peace Corps mission.

A very significant component of your language and intercultural training is the homestay experience during PST. You will have a private room, a shared bathroom in most cases, and you will eat breakfast and dinner with your host family nearly every day. All of the Peace Corps/Mexico host families have been vetted to ensure that their homes are in compliance with the agency's demanding safety standards, and only families who are genuinely interested in the Peace Corps mission are selected. Every family participates in our orientation program to ensure that they understand the key role they play in your integration, learning, health, and safety. Trainees who make the effort to spend time with their host families learn more Spanish, integrate faster into Mexican society, and overall have a more satisfying PST experience.

Health Training

During pre-service training, you will be trained in health prevention, basic first aid, and basic treatment of medical illnesses found in Mexico. 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 cover nutrition, food and water preparation, emotional health, alcohol awareness, prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), common illnesses, domestic and intimate partner violence, emergencies, and medical policies in Mexico.

The local Peace Corps medical officer (PCMO) will provide you personalized medical care and orientation during PST. There are specific learning objectives and expectations from the Medical Unit for trainees during PST that will be used to assess your readiness to serve.

Safety and Security Training

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

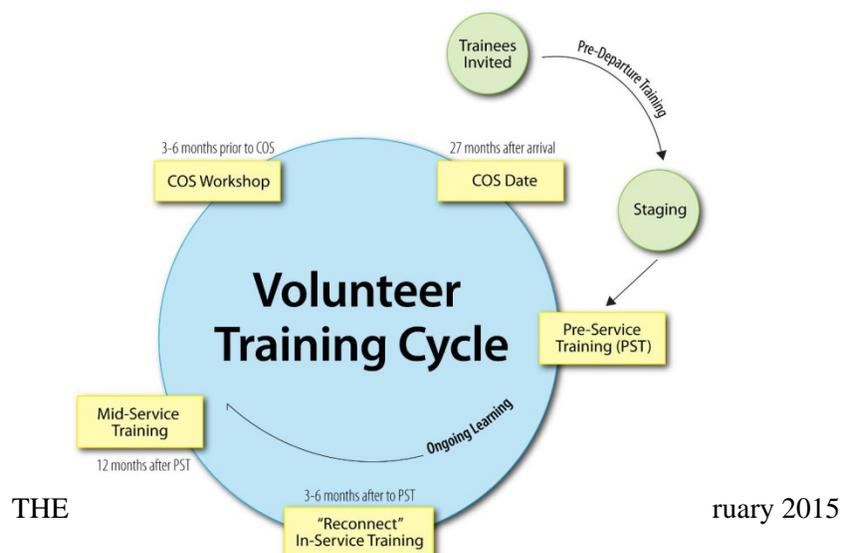
The safety and security of trainees and Volunteers is the Peace Corps' top priority. Peace Corps/Mexico has one of the lowest rates of crimes committed against Volunteers in the Inter-America and Pacific region. Volunteer sites are rigorously vetted to mitigate safety and security risks. Querétaro, where PST will take place, is touted as one of the safest cities in Mexico, but like any city of its size (nearly 1 million inhabitants and growing very fast), it has its share of crime. During the safety and security training sessions, facilitated by the safety and security manager, you will learn skills that will serve you during your service and likely beyond, including personal security and risk reduction; coping with unwanted attention and sexual harassment; sexual assault awareness, impact, reporting, and response; bystander intervention; Mexican crime statistics/trends; and more. During PST, your readiness to serve will be assessed based on your compliance with safety and security policies and procedures and your successful completion of the learning objectives associated with the safety and security training sessions.

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 three mandatory and various optional 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 training** (done in conjunction with technical sector in-service): Assists Volunteers in reviewing their first year, reassessing their personal and project objectives, and planning for their second year of service.
- **Close-of-service conference:** Prepares Volunteers for their future after Peace Corps service and reviews their respective projects and personal experiences.

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



YOUR HEALTH CARE IN MEXICO

The Peace Corps' highest priority is maintaining the good health and safety of every Volunteer. Peace Corps medical programs emphasize the preventive, rather than the curative, approach to disease. The Peace Corps in Mexico maintains a clinic with a full-time medical officer who takes care of Volunteers' primary health-care needs, including evaluation and treatment of most medical conditions. Additional medical services are also available in Mexico at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill and cannot receive the care you need in Mexico, 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 Mexico

Some illnesses in Mexico are related to the consumption of contaminated or inappropriately prepared food and beverages. This may result in gastrointestinal infections, dysentery, parasites, trichinosis, hepatitis, or typhoid fever. The best way to safeguard your health is to avoid improperly cooked foods, carefully prepare food and water, and practice safe personal hygiene. Brucellosis is mainly transmitted by drinking unpasteurized milk or eating dairy products or fresh cheese that has not been properly pasteurized. It is very important to only drink pasteurized milk and dairy products. Consuming foods containing chilies can also temporarily upset your stomach and cause diarrhea.

Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, are also an important concern and proper precautions should always be taken. In the coastal areas of the country, malaria is also prevalent, so prophylaxis may need to be taken when traveling.

Diabetes and asthma are increasing health concerns, particularly in larger urban areas. Poor air quality also may result in respiratory infections, allergies, and breathing problems. Obesity and heart disease are also increasing in Mexico as people become more sedentary and fast-food diets become more commonplace.

In addition to infectious diseases, automobile accidents, either while driving or as a pedestrian, are a major public health concern.

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 Mexico, you will receive a country-specific medical handbook. By the end of training, you will receive a medical kit with supplies to take care of mild illnesses and first aid needs. The contents of the kit are listed later in this section.

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

You will have physicals at midservice and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Mexico will consult with the Office of Health Services in Washington, D.C., or a regional medical officer. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Mexico, 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 Mexico is to take the following preventive measures:

- Do not wait until a medical problem becomes critical before seeking treatment.
- Adhere to food and water preparation practices.
- Understand and follow Peace Corps policies relating to drug use (zero tolerance) and alcohol consumption (use in moderation).
- If sexually active, comply with safe-sex practices, including the use of condoms for all sexual activity.
- Use an effective method of contraception if sexually active.

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 Mexico during pre-service training.

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

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

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

Women’s Health Information

If feminine hygiene products are not available for you to purchase on the local market, the Peace Corps medical officer in Mexico will provide them. If you require a specific product, please bring a three-month supply with you. Many female Volunteers take menstrual cups (The Diva Cup, The Keeper, The Moon Cup, etc.) to avoid potential problems with availability or disposal of feminine hygiene products, as well as to be environmentally friendly and reduce waste. (Additional Volunteer recommendations are in the Packing List.) The female Volunteer medical kit has the Emergency Contraception Pill.

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 dentist or Peace Corps dental consultant has recommended that you undergo dental treatment or repair, you must complete that work and make sure your dentist sends requested confirmation reports or X-rays to the Office of Health Services.

If you wish to avoid having duplicate vaccinations, bring a copy of your immunization record to your pre-departure orientation. If you purchase any immunizations prior to Peace Corps service that are not listed as requirement in your Medical Applicant Portal, the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for the cost. The Peace Corps will provide all the immunizations necessary for your overseas assignment. Volunteers must be willing to get all required vaccinations unless there is a documented medical contraindication. Failure to accept required vaccination is grounds for administrative separation from the Peace Corps. You do not need to begin taking malaria medication prior to departure.

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

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

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

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

SAFETY AND SECURITY IN DEPTH

Ensuring the safety and security of Volunteers is the 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 Mexico there are several measures you can take to reduce your risk:

- Leave valuable objects in the United States, particularly those that are irreplaceable or have sentimental value
- Leave copies of important documents and account numbers with someone you trust in the States
- Purchase a hidden money pouch or "dummy" wallet as a decoy
- Purchase personal articles insurance

After you arrive in Mexico, 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 Mexico 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 Mexico. You can reduce the risks by avoiding situations that place you at risk and by taking precautions. Crime at the village or town level is less frequent than in the large cities; people know each other and generally are less likely to steal from their neighbors. Tourist attractions in large towns are favorite worksites for pickpockets.

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

- Drug-related violence, particularly in northern Mexico, has been highlighted in the press and it is a very real problem for many border states. However, Mexico is a very large country and many areas are relatively safe. The Peace Corps tracks crime statistics and trends, and places Volunteers in areas where little or no violence has occurred. The central part of Mexico, where Volunteers are concentrated, represents one of the safest regions in the country. Volunteer travel is also restricted and closely monitored to assure that Volunteers avoid the most dangerous cities and states. In spite of the many press stories about the violence and crime in Mexico, the rate of crime incidents affecting Volunteers is among the lowest in the region.
- While whistles and verbal harassment based on race or gender may be fairly common on the street, this behavior may be reduced if you abide by local cultural norms, dress conservatively, and respond according to the training you will receive.
- The image of Americans is often influenced by what Mexicans see on television and in the movies, as well as the behavior that often prevails during U.S. college students' spring break vacations. Volunteers need to practice basic risk-avoidance strategies and use common sense to ensure that their habits do not make them easy targets.

Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime

Depending on your assignment you may be placed in a rural community, a large town, or a city of millions. Regardless of where you live, 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 Mexico 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 Mexico will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

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 Mexico

Crime data and statistics for Mexico, which are updated yearly, are available at the following link: <http://files.peacecorps.gov/manuals/countrydata/mexico.pdf>

Please take the time to review this important information.

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 Mexico

The Peace Corps' approach to safety is a five-pronged plan to help you stay safe during your service. The plan includes information sharing, Volunteer training, site selection criteria, a detailed emergency action

plan, and protocols for addressing safety and security incidents. Mexico's in-country safety program is outlined below.

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

Volunteer training will include sessions on specific safety and security issues in Mexico. 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/Mexico'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 Mexico at predetermined locations until the situation is resolved or the Peace Corps decides to evacuate.

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

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION OVERVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

Diversity and Inclusion at Your Site

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

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

Cross-Cultural Considerations

Outside of Mexico's capital and its larger cities, 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 Mexico 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 together.

To ease the transition and adapt to life in your host country, you may need to make some temporary, yet fundamental, compromises in how you present yourself as an American and as an individual. For example, female trainees and Volunteers may not be able to exercise the independence they have in the United States; male Volunteers may be expected not to 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.

While female Volunteers are likely to face some issues not faced by their male peers, these issues are unlikely to dramatically affect their Volunteer experience. Typically, women in Mexico do not enjoy as much freedom and independence as their counterparts in the U.S.

Volunteer Comments

“During my first couple of months at site I expressed interest to one of my coworkers in planting a small vegetable garden all my own. He excitedly offered me a small corner of his campo and even said he would pitch in to help me get the land ready. I figured this was a generous offer since it can sometimes be hard work to turn over soil. When we go out to the campo, I grabbed a shovel and set to work. After working in a botanical garden, I had a lot of experience preparing soil for planting and knew that it was going to take both of our efforts to get the plot ready by the end of the day. "Put that shovel down" he told me, "You're not supposed to do that" "You're going to get tired." I just laughed at his warnings and kept digging. After about an hour of working we took a break and I showed him a blister that was forming on my thumb from gripping the shovel handle. "What did I tell you! You should have never touched that shovel. Wait until Doña Paty (my counterpart) hears about this!" Again I laughed off his grave warnings and more or less forgot about them until I got into the office that evening. When I arrived everyone already had heard about my blister and the fact that I was trying to prepare soil. "Women do not prepare soil here Tricia, that is a man's job. If you want to plant the seeds that is acceptable, but you have no business digging." I wasn't laughing anymore. This wasn't someone thinking I couldn't do something because I was a girl, which is how I interpreted the whole situation. This was the comment I received from my counterpart, my coworker's parents, my own host family, and other neighbors who heard about the blister. Though I knew a lot more about preparing soil than my male coworker it was seen as too rough of work for a woman to do, and therefore I was told that by every person who heard the story. Now I am a more sensitive about acting within my gender: it is not so much because I don't want to receive the same lecture again, but more so because community members get generally concerned for my well-being if they see me acting outside of my gender role.” - **Tricia Kent**

“I am a young female who was involved in forest fire management projects as part of my Peace Corps service in Mexico. As in the US, wildfire management in Mexico is a male dominated field, with few, if any, females involved in projects at the ground level. I quickly learned that I had to be overly professional in order to be taken seriously. In the US, I found that I could joke and "be one of the guys" quite easily without it affecting my work. In Mexico, however, I realized that I had to be more professional than friendly in order for the firefighters and communities to listen to me and work with me. Once I proved myself though, I was met with the utmost respect.” - **Rachel Sheridan**

Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color

Volunteers of color sometimes, but not always, have a different Peace Corps experience than white Volunteers. Because of limited exposure, some foreign nationals will expect to see U.S. citizens who are white. Cultures of the world do not typically envision the States as a place of rich diversity with various

culturally acceptable perspectives, personalities, and characteristics. Thus, a Volunteer of color may be questioned as about their U.S. citizenship.

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

For Volunteers of color, the range of responses to their skin color may vary from the extremely kind to the very insensitive. In African and Latin American countries, host country nationals may say “welcome home” to African Americans or Hispanic Americans. Sometimes Volunteers expect to be “welcomed home” but are disappointed when they are not. More commonly, if a Volunteer is mistaken for a host-country national citizen, he or she is expected to behave as a male or female in that culture behaves, and to speak the local language fluently. Host country nationals are sometimes frustrated when the Volunteer does not speak the local language with ease. Conversely, some in the same country may call you a “sell out” because they feel the United States has not done enough to help with social issues. These instances can be turned into teachable moments for the Volunteer and the host country national, in which the Volunteer can ask questions surrounding perception and collaborate with respect to issues and projects at hand, while engaging in cross-cultural exchanges. All Volunteers, to include white Volunteers and those of color, should be mindful of the issues of race that are embedded in U.S. culture and within the culture in your country of service. These issues may significantly affect how Volunteers interact with fellow Volunteers and host country nationals. Being open and inclusive to everyone will improve your experience in interacting with fellow Volunteers and members of your host community.

Volunteers Comments

“My experience as a volunteer of color in Mexico.....I am a first generation American, born in Florida and raised by Indian immigrants. When a Mexican thinks about what an American looks like, they probably picture someone who is white, with blonde/brown hair and blue or green eyes. I am brown, dark brown hair/almost black and brown eyed. At first glance people think I am Mexican, but when I start to speak Spanish they look again and upon noticing the slight difference in skin tone, big dark eyes and nose ring they can then quickly guess correctly that I am from Indian descent. No one guesses American. To describe how I can be an American and Indian at the same time I use a very clear example: I ask everyone if they have family in the U.S. and when I see that almost everyone has their hand up I say something like, "well your brother, cousin, sister, whoever went to the US, they are likely to start a family and their children will be born on US soil. They might stay there, go to school and then join the work force. They are Americans, but also Mexican. And just like them my parents did the same thing. They went to the US looking for work, had me, and so I am an American and also an Indian. There are so many people in the US who are just like me. In fact everyone in the US is just like me because we are a country of immigrants. The US is not just white and you know that from your own personal experiences."

For me personally, the fact that I don't stand out like a sore thumb makes life a lot easier. It gives me the privacy I sometimes desperately need, and I think it helps to be thought of as "one of us." Also, even though I always say I am an American and was born in Florida, no one really cares. I'm sorry guys, but the U.S. is old news. Mexico's proximity to the U.S. and the fact that most of

the men in my community travel back and forth from Mexico to the U.S. makes it so that people feel like they have a decent understanding of the United States, but India, India might as well be in another universe. My Indian background has been a huge part of my integration process, luring people with the photos of my family and our colorful and festive decorations and dress. When I came back from my brother's wedding in December everyone was eager for videos and pictures of the wedding and the rituals and customs that are so normal to me are simply fascinating to them (i.e you have a celebration to worship cows??)

The other thing about being Indian is that for some reason people feel like I understand their problems better than a "normal" American would (yeah I've gotten used to being told that I'm not a normal American). For example Mexico has problems, but India has bigger problems. They know that India is more populated, poorer and stuck in ancient systems of caste and patriarchal traditions. An American couldn't possibly understand Mexico's poverty the way an Indian could. Of course this is not true, and one of my favorite parts of being a volunteer is breaking these perceptions. One of the ways to do that is to bring volunteers to my site and introduce them to my community members. What this does is show people that not all Americans are what they see in *Sex and The City* and gives them the chance to interact on a personal level and hear their stories. Everyone has a unique story and this is what contributes to the diversity of the United States. Also, I think it's important to recognize that you can be different and still be able to sympathize with someone, which is what Peace Corps volunteers do very well. Most of us will have, in comparison, grown up with privileges that our Mexican friends will not have experienced but that doesn't mean we can't sympathize and learn from each other. Actually, this last statement is from someone living in the campo, but for those of you in cities and nicer parts of Mexico, your Mexican friends will probably have had a much more "fresa" lifestyle than you, because Mexico itself is so very diverse." - **Priyanka Jagtap**

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

For LGBTQ Volunteers: Given Mexican 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. 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 lgbrcpv.org. Additionally, the Peace Corps' LGBTQ employee resource group, Spectrum, can be reached at spectrum@peacecorps.gov.

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

Many LGBTQ Volunteers have served successfully in Mexico and have very fond memories of their community and service. That said, you may find that certain places in Mexico are less open and inclusive environments than you have previously experienced. To provide support to all diverse Volunteers, including LGBTQ Volunteers, Peace Corps/Mexico is establishing a diversity committee with resources

and a support network. Peace Corps staff will work with Volunteers to provide them with locally informed perspectives, and will work to help ensure their successful service.

Volunteers Comments

“I am a gay male volunteer in a rural town, and although I have only been in site for a short time, I get the feeling that even in rural populations people may have prejudices, but they aren't that rigid. When confronted with something that is to them abnormal, I have noticed people are quick to accept it and change their attitude. Mexico, like the U.S., is undergoing a dynamic and powerful shift in the perspective on sexuality, gender, race, etc. It's a slow moving process, but the trend is toward acceptance and inclusion and that has been incredibly moving to see.” - **Ryan Zefferin Llamas**

“I come from a progressive liberal state in the U.S. and, after noting the strong gay presence in Querétaro during training, was all set to “be me” in my site. The reality of my site, a pueblito in rural Oaxaca, proved to be a place where sexual orientation and gender roles are still traditional, and the few queer locals face daily harassment and discrimination. These observations filled me with enough doubt that I decided to remain closeted with my host family and co-workers. I have come out to a few friends in my site, but it has generally not been received with support or understanding. Finding a support community was not a priority during my first six months of service, but I will be increasing my efforts to find a support network in the city of Oaxaca.”

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

In recent years, Mexico has made significant strides in making its public areas more accessible to people with disabilities. For example, in the downtown areas most sidewalks are paved and have ramps leading to the street. Most government buildings and shopping centers have handicapped parking and access ramps. However, these amenities notwithstanding, Mexico is a very difficult place for the visually impaired to function normally. Despite recent progress, the opportunities for people with disabilities are still lacking. Fortunately, in the last few years, you can see some people with disabilities working in different offices and capacities and with greater acceptance.

Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples

Before committing to Peace Corps service, couples should consider how different degrees of enthusiasm about Peace Corps service, adaptation to the physical and cultural environment, and homesickness will affect their lives. It can be helpful to recognize that your reactions to these issues will change throughout your service, and you may not always feel the same as your partner. You and your partner will have different jobs, different schedules, and difference societal pressures. One partner may learn the language faster than the other or have a more satisfying assignment. This can create competition and put different kinds of stress on each person. Anticipating how these pressures will affect you and your partner differently throughout your service can help you remain a source of support for each other. Making friends with other Volunteers is a critical part of fitting into the larger volunteer culture and can also be a good way to expand your support network.

While couples will live together during their service, they may live in separate houses during their pre-service training. This is a stressful time for most Volunteers, and it can be helpful to discuss in advance how you will deal with this potential separation. Your partner can be an important source of stability but

can also add stress to your training experience. You may feel torn between traveling to visit your partner and focusing on your training, your host family, and friends you have made at your training site.

Couples often face pressure from host country nationals to change their roles to conform better with traditional Mexican relationships. Mexican 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 Mexican 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.

The issues for married Volunteers will depend on the type of relationship the couple has and the common expectations of their service. Married couples typically speak more English and less Spanish with each other so they may be less likely to learn at the same rate as single trainees. Often, one of them relies on the most capable to speak the language. Couples may tend to socialize less with Mexicans and may not make as many friends as single Volunteers, although there are significant cases where this has worked the other way around. Typically, men are given more status in the workplace, but this is gradually changing. In some cases, people may assume that the husband is the one with the advanced degree and the wife with the lower one.

Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers

In Mexico it is pretty much assumed that everyone is a Catholic and that you go to the local church on Sundays. In reality, there are a fairly large number of religious denominations and many people don't go to church every Sunday. People may frequently ask what religion you belong to and whether you go to church. The ones who ask are often the people who have strong feelings on the topic. Religions and politics can always be controversial so once you master Spanish you will be in a better position to explain your particular point of view.

Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers

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

Older Volunteers 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 older trainees, whose lifelong learning styles and habits may or may not lend themselves to the techniques used. A 50+ Volunteer 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 find this to be an enjoyable experience, while others choose not to fill this role. Some older Volunteers 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.

Volunteers Comments

“As an older woman who is a feminist and atheist, I hoped that living in a larger city would enable me to live more anonymously and with more freedom from cultural pressures. So far that has been the case (though I have only been at my site for one month). Machismo and homophobia abound, but I have managed thus far to avoid being too directly impacted by it. Our Peace Corps

group has a good mix of old and young. I have experienced nothing but great support and feelings of inclusion by the young people in our group. It has been a rich and rewarding experience thus far, and I'm looking forward to deepening friendships during my service. - **Kathryn Parker**

“As a 50+ (68+) volunteer, I haven't had any issues. Students in Mexico have been easy to work with, and they treat me like a friend. Same with the young adults. I stay up late, usually past midnight and often past 1 am, so it is not a problem for me to hang out with the night owls. Most older volunteers that I know go to bed around 9 to 10 pm. As an older Volunteer, I find it very difficult to learn a new language well enough to be fluent. No cultural integration problems, just language problems.” - **Bob Asadorian**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much luggage can I bring to Mexico?

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

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

What is the electric current in Mexico?

The electric current is 110/120 volts. All electric appliances used in the United States will function well in Mexico. However, during the summer months electrical storms can cause strong electrical surges that can damage sensitive equipment. Voltage regulators and surge protectors are widely available locally.

How much money should I bring?

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

When can I take vacation and have people visit me?

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

Will my belongings be covered by insurance?

The Peace Corps does not provide insurance coverage for personal effects; Volunteers are ultimately responsible for the safekeeping of their personal belongings. However, you can purchase personal property insurance before you leave (contact your own insurance company). Volunteers should not ship or take valuable items abroad. 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 Mexico do not need an international driver's license because they are prohibited from operating privately owned motorized vehicles. Most urban travel is by bus or taxi. Rural travel ranges from buses and minibuses to trucks, bicycles, and lots of walking. On very rare occasions, a Volunteer may be asked to drive a sponsor's vehicle, but this can occur only with prior written permission from the country director. Should this occur, the Volunteer may obtain a local driver's license. A U.S. driver's license will facilitate the process, so bring it with you just in case.

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

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

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

Due to the visa requirements for Peace Corps Volunteers in Mexico, Peace Corps trainees are assigned their sites before arriving and will be informed of their future sites within the first two weeks of training. Please 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. Refer to your Volunteer Assignment Description for information about site placements.

How can my family contact me in an emergency?

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

How easy is it to call home from Mexico?

Through the national telephone companies or any of the cellphone operators you can easily call home. Also, many of the Internet cafes offer web phone service and there are pre-paid phone cards to use for a public or home phone. If you have Internet access you can usually use Skype to make calls.

Should I bring a cellphone with me?

It isn't necessary, but you may. Verizon and Nextel phones may be used in Mexico; check with your service provider in the U.S. In Mexico, for a reasonable price you may also buy a cellphone with a plan or for use with a calling card, or change the SIM card in your cellphone if you bring it (please check first whether your phone is able to replace its SIM card).

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

Internet access is readily available at the training center and at Internet cafes at reasonable rates. Some cafes have wireless connections as well. The training center has two computers available for trainee and Volunteer use. Most Volunteer sites have Internet service providers and Internet cafes. There are a growing number of public Wi-Fi sites as well. Volunteers and trainees have found it very useful to bring their laptops. It is recommended that you bring a laptop if you have one available. You will find it useful for Internet access, reporting on your activities, and potentially for some work-related activities as well, depending on your assignment and location.

WELCOME LETTERS FROM MEXICO VOLUNTEERS

Hello Peace Corps Invitees!

As current Peace Corps/Mexico Volunteers, and members of the PCM Spanish Learning Task Force, we would like to add our congratulations to the country director's welcome. Mexico is a wonderful country and Peace Corps/Mexico will give you many opportunities to get to know the people and culture of this land.

If you asked Volunteers what brings the most satisfaction and also the most frustration, most would say their ability to communicate in Spanish. Most Volunteers are placed in locations where little to no English is spoken both on the job and in the community. You will be attending intensive Spanish language classes during pre-service training. The training helps; however, as Volunteers who arrived in Mexico with very little Spanish, we strongly encourage you to begin or to refresh your Spanish while you are still in the States. The more you know ahead of time, the more you will learn in training and the better off you will be once you reach your site.

You will be very busy preparing to come to Mexico but depending upon your learning style, time, and resources, we suggest that you consider taking formal classes, online tutorials, or other language packages. Speaking from personal experience, the higher your level of Spanish, the more satisfied you will be. We are accomplishing a lot at our sites and we are comfortable in our communities. We often reflect, however, on how much more we would understand and appreciate if our Spanish were better.

Want to learn more? Check out the Peace Corps/Mexico Facebook site.

¡Bienvenidos a México!

Mary Hektner
Peace Corps/Mexico Natural Resource Management,
2012–14

Guy Crawford
Peace Corps/Mexico Technical Transfer, 2013–14

Dear Peace Corps/Mexico Invitee,

Way to go! Whether your application and medical clearance process was quick and easy or long and arduous, you are now on the path to becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer and I cannot tell you how excited I am for you.

When I first started to let my friends, family, and co-workers know of my intentions to travel to Mexico as a PCV, I recall their responses. Some of my co-workers asked if I would be living in the jungle in a tent. Friends would cleverly recite the Peace Corps slogan, "How far will you go?," to which I would just as cleverly respond, "Not very far ... just 187 miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border." A misinformed relative asked me why I was giving up my good job to take up working in the fields, because to her that is what Mexicans do, right? "No, that's not it," was my response.

I left my friends, family, job, and two grandchildren to be a change-agent for the National Science Foundation of Mexico. Two years later, I'm heading home with a heart full of experiences—some exotic like the jungle and others more like the U.S.—but my billion photos cannot describe the changes I have seen and been party to. They cannot describe the genuine warmth of the Mexican people I have met and worked with, nor the pleasure I have taken from our relationships and accomplishments. I know how lucky I have been to be a part of Peace Corps/Mexico and trust you are also feeling incredibly lucky.

So, go ahead and give yourself a pat on the left shoulder for being one of the applicants who made it, and then pat yourself on the right shoulder for having the good fortune to be assigned to the Mexico program. There are “muchos abrazos” awaiting your arrival and I promise that it will be the experience of your lifetime and it will change you!

Carole
Peace Corps/Mexico

Dear Peace Corps/Mexico Invitee,

Let me first congratulate you on your decision to take part in the great adventure of the Peace Corps, and secondly, for being lucky enough to work in Mexico! Although Mexico is our geographical neighbor with the associated connections to the United States, its culture remains quite distinct and full of surprises. You might have gotten a taste of Mexico as a tourist or through relationships with Mexican-Americans, but nothing can fully prepare you for your future endeavor. The cultural wealth and diversity of this country is as indescribable as the beauty of a sunset in San Blas or the waterfalls of the Sierra Gorda. In Mexico you will see the generosity of others and the hope of where this country is going.

Before my arrival, despite my excitement, I was somewhat apprehensive because neither my job nor my future location was certain. Given my natural propensity to plan everything, how could I figure out what to pack if I didn't know where I was going? Not to worry. Everything you really “need” is either available, or with some creativity you can figure it out. This situation is a metaphor for your future life and work in Mexico.

Flexibility has been very helpful in integrating with the Peace Corps, the organization where I work, and my day-to-day living. There were times when I had to take a step back, and really analyze if something was a requirement or if another option or alternative idea could function just as well. I have found more success when I incorporate the input of others and allow tasks to develop with time. Some of my greatest discoveries and successes could not have been planned or organized. You just have to remain ready and open to the possibilities.

With that being said, there are times when you, as a Peace Corps Volunteer, will be looked to as a leader or technical adviser. I spent the first six to eight months working on smaller-scale projects, assisting my counterpart, learning the organization, and improving my Spanish skills. At the end of that time frame, I had built enough credibility with my co-workers that I could offer my recommendations through firsthand knowledge. Although this period is different depending on the position, the vast majority of Volunteers tend to go through this learning curve within their organization. Imagine the challenges of being a new employee and then add to that the language and cultural differences. In addition, I have found that the organization where I work is not always aware of its developmental areas. There are processes and planning that are considered fundamental to U.S. companies, which might not have been introduced to your future organization. These are the times when you can step forward, make recommendations, incorporate the help of others, and share what you do best.

In closing, I wish you the best of the luck! As my time winds down, it feels as if I am passing the baton to the next generation. I hope that Peace Corps/Mexico will be the experience you wanted. The training you will receive in Querétaro and your Peace Corps support system, both the staff and Volunteers, will be invaluable. Try to remain open-minded and positive, especially on those days that are most difficult. If things are tough, you can always ask for help. And, last but not least, travel and enjoy all the local food specialties. You are in for the time of your lives!

Nos vemos en Mexico,

Kristi
Peace Corps/Mexico Volunteer

Dear Peace Corps/Mexico Invitee,

Welcome! I have served here for one year, and it has been an exciting and rewarding time. Our training period was intense. For many it involved the first real use of a foreign language—one of the most significant features of my Peace Corps experience. Understanding Mexico’s history, culture, and environmental problems was also necessary for our Volunteer service. Trainees lived with a host family. For non-Spanish speakers, this was challenging, but it accelerated language learning and provided a helpful initial intercultural exchange. Fraternalization among our group of 19 trainees, who shared this common experience, helped the adjustment to a new culture and provided memorable times.

Querétaro has a large historic *centro* and was a fine place to begin Peace Corps service. The locations of individual assignments varied considerably in rural versus urban settings, so adjustment was needed for the transition. The rural assignments can be more similar to traditional Peace Corps work. Assignments in urban areas have some aspects of work and living in a U.S. city, though the culture differs substantially. I was assigned to a modest-sized city of about 100,000 people, which has offered some exposure to indigenous culture, as well as that of modern Mexico. This small state has issues related to overuse and contamination of the environment, but includes some beautiful natural areas. The natural areas, such as Volcan Malintzi, are also under pressure of resource exploitation from surrounding communities.

Mexico has spectacular natural resources, but with significant environmental problems, including deforestation, critically limited water supplies, loss of habitat for endangered species, and contamination. The lack of knowledge and understanding in many poor areas makes the solutions even more difficult. Peace Corps/Mexico can provide an exceptional opportunity to work on these issues. There will be hurdles to effectively make changes, though overcoming them can be part of the Volunteer’s learning experience. Mexico has a lower degree of organization compared to the United States. Also, the idea that in America “time is money” is contrasted in Mexico, where time is not necessarily valued in those terms. Aspects of this new culture can be both a frustrating and welcome change. Living in this culture has raised my awareness of both my culture and foreign ones. Addressing problems of sustainability and environment in Mexico is of profound importance for Mexico, North America, and our world. This is an exceptional place to serve with the Peace Corps.

My time with the Peace Corps has been one of welcomed change, personal growth, and an opportunity to contribute to an important mission. I wish a similar outcome for you.

Tim
Peace Corps/Mexico Volunteer

¡Bienvenidos a Mexico!

Like many other Volunteers here in Mexico, I took my first step off that plane into a foreign country and experienced the adventure of a lifetime many years prior to the beginning of my Peace Corps service. For me, my first international adventure was in the Amazon rain forests of Peru one college summer long ago. I was 19 years old and, during that trip, I had the opportunity to eat strange foods, visit remote villages, find romance, see exotic wildlife, and practice a new language.

I suspect many of you can relate. You have traveled and seen many wonderful people and places. You have a passport chock full of stamps, each a reminder of stories and adventures that are unique to you and your life's journey. You didn't join the Peace Corps as a fresh college graduate looking to get some international experience before coming back home and settling down.

So why did you and I join the Peace Corps at this stage in our lives? Well, that's a question you'll continue to answer for yourself over time. As for me, my reasons were legion. I wanted to bond with my wife in a shared new adventure. I wanted to apply what I had learned in my education and career toward tangible service to others. I wanted to improve my Spanish in Latin America. I wanted to work in the developing world. I wanted to apply my GIS skills to conservation projects. I wanted to collaborate with other folks who were passionate about their work abroad.

I hope that your experience here in this great country fulfills your desires!

Saludos,
Christian
Returned Peace Corps/Mexico Volunteer

Dear Peace Corps/Mexico Invitee,

One day I asked a manager in my office what she was working on. She told me that she had to develop a training evaluation system within the next six weeks and had no idea where to start or how you could develop a system that would work for all different types of training. It was a lucky break for me because up to that time I had been more or less underemployed and not feeling very effective. But training evaluation systems are something I know about, having worked in the training field for almost 20 years.

I went to the Internet and quickly put together a packet for her with the underlying philosophy of any good training evaluation system. Then, with a team of three, we worked to put together the entire system from scratch. Together we designed the process and the tools that we would use. Six weeks later, with a week to go before auditors were to show up to evaluate our system, we had a fully operational system, approved by the directors and being used by all employees receiving training at CIDESI. In the process, I made two good friends and work confidants and gained the trust of my counterpart.

Bienvenidos!
Nancy
Peace Corps/Mexico Volunteer

PACKING LIST

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

For example, within 15 minutes of the Peace Corps office there is a Wal-Mart Supercenter, Sam's Club, Costco, Office Depot, and more. There are also many, many shopping malls with all of the merchandise you could find in the U.S., although many brands you would buy in the U.S. are a little more expensive because they are imported.

Be prepared for both cold and warm weather, as Mexico's temperatures vary greatly. Layering is your best strategy!

General Clothing

- Enough clothing for a one-week wash cycle
- One suit, dress shirt, and tie (for occasional formal events or important meetings) or sports coat and slacks and tie
- Two to four sets of presentable attire (blouse, polo, or nice shirt)
- Chinos or nice jeans
- Jeans or field pants (you will most likely wear these every day, especially if you are an Environment Volunteer)
- Casual light clothes and some sweaters (some workplaces will be informal)
- Shorts (for the field or hiking, as appropriate)
- Warm clothes, heavy coats, gloves, and winter hat (it does freeze in this part of Mexico!)
- Windbreaker (good on cool nights)
- Sun hat
- Light packable waterproof rain jacket

Note: Because Peace Corps/Mexico sites are so variable, it is hard to make specific recommendations, but make sure to have the full range, from field clothes to professional office wear that covers both hot and cool weather.

Shoes

- Comfortable shoes (if you have a relatively large foot size it will be hard to find shoes in Mexico, especially for females)
- Good-quality athletic shoes for walking or running
- Nice "non-sneakers" shoes
- Flip-flops/sandals/Texas (for inside your house)
- Dress shoes (or dressy sandals for women)

Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items

- Tooth whitener (expensive in-country) or toothpaste (specialized brands can be hard to find)
- Earplugs
- For women, reusable feminine hygiene products such as The Diva Cup, The Keeper, Moon Cup, Sea Pearls, Glad Rags, to reduce waste
- Specialized toiletry products if you use/need them

Electronics

- Laptop (or netbook because of lighter weight)
- eReader (especially nice for more rural Volunteers)
- Most smartphones can be adapted for use here and are recommended by some Volunteers. Volunteers can purchase new SIM cards in-country. New cellphones are also easily acquired here.
- A surge protector and extension cord, plus three-prong adapter.
- GPS unit (if you are likely to be working in the field)
- MP3 player
- Recovery disks for your computer (in case of a crash)
- Good antivirus software (viruses are rampant in Mexico)
- Digital camera and memory cards
- USB drive (with ample storage capacity)
- Backup hard-drive
- Travel alarm clock
- Electronic dictionary/translator

Note: Electronics are generally much more expensive in Mexico.

Miscellaneous

- Family photos and favorite photos (to show your friends and counterparts)
- Mexico guidebook; bird, planet, nature guidebooks (if of interest)
- Small set of tools to include a pocket knife, measuring tape, and screwdriver (also available in-country)
- Backpack or small bag (for day or overnight trips)
- Trinkets from home to give to host families (e.g., key chains, photographs, something your state or town is known for, etc.)
- Water bottle
- Protection for anything delicate, like your glasses
- Sleeping bag
- Quick-dry towel
- Musical instrument (could buy in country) or favorite hobby item

Kitchen

- Spices and seasonings, if you like to cook. The basics are easy to find (peppers, salt, oregano, parsley, etc.) but everything else is a challenge (cumin, sage, nutmeg, curry powder, etc.)
- Any special vitamins or other products (e.g., organic toothpaste)
- Your favorite tea (not widely available in most areas of Mexico)
- French press for coffee (if you use these for coffee they are very expensive here)

PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST

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

Family

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

Passport/Travel

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

Medical/Health

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

Insurance

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

Personal Papers

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

Voting

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

Personal Effects

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

Financial Management

- Keep a bank account in your name in the United States.
- Obtain student loan deferment forms from the lender or loan service. (Information about loan deferment is at peacecorps.gov/loans.)
- Execute a power of attorney for the management of your property and business.

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

CONTACTING PEACE CORPS HEADQUARTERS

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

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

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

For Questions About	Staff	Toll-free extension	Direct/Local
Responding to an invitation	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Country information	Kimberly Helm Desk Officer	ext. 2521 mexico@peacecorps.gov	202.692.2521
Plane tickets, passports, visas, or other travel matters	CWTSatoTravel	ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Legal clearance:	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Medical clearance and forms processing (includes dental)	Screening Nurse	ext. 1500	202.692.1500
Medical reimbursements (handled by a subcontractor)			800.818.8772
Loan deferments, taxes, financial operations		ext. 1770	202.692.1770
Readjustment allowance withdrawals, power of attorney, staging (pre-departure orientation), and reporting instructions	Office of Staging	ext. 1865	202.692.1865
<i>Note: You will receive comprehensive information (hotel and flight arrangements) three to five weeks prior to departure. This information is not available sooner.</i>			
Family emergencies (to get information to a Volunteer overseas) 24 hours	Counseling and Outreach Unit	ext. 1470	202.692.1470
Office of Victim Advocacy		ext. 1753 24 hours (call or text)	202.692.1753 202.409.2704