

THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO  
**NICARAGUA**



**A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS**  
**June 2015**

# Map of Nicaragua



*This map is used with permission from the State Department.*

## A WELCOME LETTER

I congratulate you on your nomination for an assignment to work as a Peace Corps Volunteer and welcome you to this unique country. Based on my experience here over the years I characterize Nicaragua as a *casa abierta*, an open home, where those willing to come and work with dedication and mutual respect will find acceptance, an exceptional experience, and lasting friendship.

Nicaragua is also often described as the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. As such, you can be sure that Nicaraguans, especially those in the areas of need where we serve, face many challenges. *La vida es dura*. Life here for many is very hard. I ask you to take seriously this opportunity and your commitment to join them in the construction of a productive and healthy world for their families and communities.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nicaragua you will be a development professional working at the invitation of a Nicaraguan government ministry to work on a specific project addressing a national need of the Nicaraguan people. Your project has specific goals and objectives to provide technical assistance in the sector to which you have been assigned. You will work with Nicaraguan counterparts, community members, families, and youth all striving to achieve each of these goals for sustainable development.

You have been offered this invitation to serve based on the education and experience you already possess. Your knowledge will be enhanced by an intense pre-service training program designed to prepare you for Volunteer service. You will be provided outstanding training in practical Spanish, technical orientation for your project assignment, and cross-cultural orientation to assist you in the process of adapting your personal work and life styles to ensure your safety and effectiveness in Nicaragua. During the 12 weeks of training, you will be required to demonstrate your commitment and competence in language, technical, cross-cultural, and core skill areas in order to qualify for Peace Corps service and take the oath as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Throughout your years of service, you will be supported by the dedicated staff of Peace Corps/Nicaragua who will guide, support, and challenge you to maximize your service and provide meaningful contributions to the Nicaraguan people and their communities. There will be many challenges throughout your service, such as integrating into your host family and community, communicating meaningfully in Spanish, and finding local friends and a support system. You will be expected to become part of your community, spending most of your time, including your weekends, integrated into daily life and customs while living on a modest stipend. Upon completing service here, most Volunteers feel most strongly about the personal relationships and connections they have made, ones they will most likely remember and keep throughout the rest of their lives and careers.

Please carefully review this welcome book, your volunteer assignment description (VAD) and the Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook to learn more about Nicaragua, your assignment, and Peace Corps policies. I encourage you to reflect honestly on your willingness to commit to the highest standard of Peace Corps service.

All of the Peace Corps/Nicaragua staff and I look forward to meeting you soon and working with you for the next two years. I served here as country director from 1997–2001 and am fortunate to have returned to rejoin our efforts and shared purpose to better the lives of the Nicaraguans who have invited us to their beautiful *casa abierta*.

*Howard Lyon*  
Country Director

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## **CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS**

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

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

## PEACE CORPS/NICARAGUA HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

### History of the Peace Corps in Nicaragua

The first Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in Nicaragua in 1969. Between 1969–78, the program ranged in size from 75–125 Volunteers. Volunteers provided assistance in education, vocational training, rural nutrition, rural waterworks, agricultural extension, cooperatives, and municipal development. After the earthquake of 1972, efforts were dedicated to rebuilding the country's infrastructure.

The Peace Corps program in Nicaragua was suspended in 1978 because of civil war. In 1982, the Peace Corps attempted to re-establish a program in Nicaragua but was unsuccessful because of the highly polarized political situation in the country. Four Volunteers from Peace Corps programs in other Spanish-speaking countries reinitiated the program in May 1991. The program has since grown to more than 140 Volunteers working in four projects throughout Nicaragua.

### Peace Corps Programming in Nicaragua

Peace Corps/Nicaragua now works in four primary project areas:

- **Small business development (SBD):** This project provides sustainable business and life skills to youth, including out-of-school youth, enhancing their capacity to create or gain employment and increasing income and economic opportunities in their communities. In 1991, when the Peace Corps returned to Nicaragua, the first Volunteers were assigned to vocational training institutes. As a result, the SBD project was created. This project has since expanded and adapted to meet Nicaragua's emerging needs and challenges with three main goals: 1) youth entrepreneurship skills training, 2) technical assistance and small business advising, and 3) capacity building and teacher training.
- **Community health (HE):** Working in partnership with the Ministry of Health (MINSAs), Volunteers in this sector strive to improve the health and well-being of poor rural Nicaraguans.
- **Environmental education (ENV):** This project aims to change attitudes and promote positive behavior, at the community level, toward the sustainable use of natural resources.
- **Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL):** The TEFL project focuses on improving the quality of English instruction in Nicaragua's public secondary schools by introducing communicative and participatory methods and promoting language use in real-life situations.

All projects focus on helping Nicaraguans develop sustainable responses to local needs.

## **COUNTRY OVERVIEW: NICARAGUA AT A GLANCE**

### **History**

Nicaragua probably derives its name from an indigenous chief, Nicarao, who ruled part of the area at the time of the Spanish Conquest. Christopher Columbus, in 1502, was the first European to touch Nicaraguan soil. Francisco Hernandez de Córdoba followed in 1524 and founded the principal colonial cities of Granada and León. Granada evolved into a stronghold of the aristocracy, and León became the political and intellectual capital. The rivalry between these cities persists to this day. For three centuries, Nicaragua was a province of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, as the Spanish called their territories south of Mexico. Independence from Spanish rule came in 1821 and, for a short period of time, Nicaragua was a member of the Central American Federation, which included Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. In 1838, Nicaragua became an independent republic.

For the next 100 years, Nicaragua experienced periods of war and peace, including an attempted takeover by American William Walker in 1855. Walker was defeated and killed by an alliance of Central American nations. After another period of unrest in the early 1900s, Nicaragua's president invited U.S. Marines to restore and maintain order in the country. In 1934, the government was taken over by General Anastasio Somoza García, initiating more than 40 years of family rule under a military dictatorship. In 1972, downtown Managua was destroyed by an earthquake that killed tens of thousands. Managua was never completely rebuilt and has become a sprawling city without a center. In 1979, the Somoza regime was overthrown by a populist revolution, and was replaced by the Marxist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which ruled until 1990. This period included a U.S. government-supported civil war against the Sandinista government. A 1989 accord permitted free elections in 1990, in which Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, known for her conciliatory nature, became president. Nicaragua has experienced relative peace since 1990, and the country has celebrated four successive free elections to date.

### **Government**

Nicaragua is an independent republic with a democratically elected president and a unicameral National Assembly with 92 seats. The assembly members (called deputies) are elected by proportional representation and serve five-year terms. Presidential elections are conducted every five years. The current president, Jose Daniel Ortega, leader of the leftist revolution that helped overthrow the Somoza regime in 1979, was elected in democratic elections in 2006. He is the fourth democratically elected president since the end of the first Sandinista regime in 1990. Nicaragua's four significant political parties are Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (ALN), and Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS). Democracy in Nicaragua is in its infancy as it strives to move beyond its tense and troubled past.

### **Economy**

Agriculture is the cornerstone of the Nicaraguan economy. The principal crops are corn, beans, sorghum, and rice. Cotton, coffee, sugar, bananas, and tobacco are the principal export crops. Additional export products are beef and shrimp. In the early 1990s, Nicaragua experienced a very unstable economic situation, with hyperinflation, a large external debt, and high unemployment. During the past 15 years, the country has privatized many public institutions, but internal and external debt rates remain dangerously high. While Managua has grown and modernized, the poor rural and marginalized urban populations have experienced few economic gains. Droughts in 1996 and 1997, followed by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, caused tremendous economic hardship. The combination of unemployment and underemployment exceeds 50 percent. Nicaragua's annual per capita gross national product is currently less than \$500, making it one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.

## People and Culture

Nicaragua is the least densely populated of the Central American nations, with a population of 5.8 million (July 2014 estimate) and an average annual growth rate of 1.02 percent (2014 estimate).

The majority of Nicaraguans can best be classified as *mestizo*, a mix in which neither the European nor the indigenous cultures predominate. On the geographically and politically isolated Caribbean coast there are six different ethnic cultures, including the mestizo population. The others are Creole, Miskito, Garífuna, Rama, and Mayagna. The Caribbean region is multiethnic, multilingual, and culturally diverse, but its residents only represent about 10 percent of the total population.

The official and predominant language in Nicaragua is Spanish. Along the Caribbean coast some Miskito, Mayagna, and Rama cultures have maintained their indigenous languages; Afro-Caribbeans speak English and Creole.

More than 90 percent of the population belongs to Christian denominations (approximately 73 percent of which identify themselves as Roman Catholics; 15 percent as belonging to various evangelical churches; and the remainder to other Christian-based faiths, such as Moravians, Mormons, etc.); 8.5 percent have no religious affiliation or are atheist. The traditional social structure of Nicaragua has been essentially colonial, with a small number of wealthy landowning families at the top and a broad peasant class at the bottom. Despite the country's economic growth in the 1970s, the emergence of a middle class, and the decade of socialist rule, there are still stark inequalities in the distribution of wealth. The country's educational system, a major avenue for economic and social mobility, recently replaced the traditions of classicism and intellectualism with vocational training. Thus, the lower class now has a somewhat better chance for economic advancement. Due to a literacy campaign between May 2007 and June 2009, the illiteracy rate has been reduced to 3.56 percent, according to government statistics in August 2009.

Nicaraguans are warm, generous, and friendly. Despite the tensions between the United States and Nicaraguan governments in the 1980s, Nicaraguans are open to receiving Peace Corps Volunteers in their communities and homes. Their hospitality is humbling. Nicaraguans are proud of their cultural heritage, as seen in typical dances, such as the Güegüense, and in the continued importance of poet Rubén Darío. Nicaraguans are also passionate about politics and are quick to share their thoughts on past or current events.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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

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

### General Information About Nicaragua

#### State.gov

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

#### Gpo.gov/libraries/public/

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

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

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

#### [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/pocketbook/World\\_Statistics\\_Pocketbook\\_2013\\_edition.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/pocketbook/World_Statistics_Pocketbook_2013_edition.pdf)

United Nations resource book with 2013 statistical country data

#### Data.un.org

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

#### Wikipedia.org

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

#### Worldbank.org

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

#### Data.worldbank.org/country

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

## **Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees**

### [RPCV.org](http://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.

### [PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org](http://PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org)

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

## **Online Articles/Current News Sites About Nicaragua**

### [UN.org/News/](http://UN.org/News/)

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

### [VOAnews.com](http://VOAnews.com)

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

## **International Development Sites About Nicaragua**

### <http://managua.usembassy.gov/>

This is the site of the U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua.

### <http://nicaragua.usaid.gov/>

This is the U.S. Agency for International Development’s official Nicaragua website and provides valuable information on development trends in-country.

### [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)

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

### [www.oas.org](http://www.oas.org)

The Organization of the American States’ website contains information about development priorities, democracy, and other issues that are key in the Americas.

## Recommended Books

### Books About Nicaragua

1. Berman, Joshua, and Randy Wood. "Moon Handbooks Nicaragua" (by returned Nicaragua Volunteers). Emeryville, CA: Avalon Travel Publishing, 2002.
2. De La Selva, Salomon. "Tropical Town and Other Poems." Houston: Arte Público Press, 1999.
3. Glenn, Garvin. "Everybody Had His Own Gringo: The CIA and the Contras." United Kingdom: Brasseys, 1992.
4. Gould, Jeffrey L. "To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of the Mestizaje 1880–1965." Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
5. Kinzer, Stephen. "Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua." NY: Anchor Books, 1992.
6. MacAulay, Neill. "The Sandino Affair." Wacahoota Press, 1998.
7. Merrill, Tim L. "Nicaragua: A Country Study." Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1999.
8. Miranda, Roger. "The Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas." Somerset, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993.
9. Norsworthy, Kent. "Nicaragua: A Country Guide." Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, 1990.
10. Pezzullo, Lawrence. "At the Fall of Somoza." Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994.
11. Plunkett, Hazel. "Nicaragua: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture." Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 1999.

### 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

Relative to service in most developing countries, mail between the United States and Nicaragua is dependable. Airmail takes about two weeks; surface mail can take months. Packages sometimes mysteriously disappear in transit, and sometimes they are opened and the contents stolen. It is best if packages do not exceed 2 pounds. Padded envelopes work well. Dissuade family and friends from sending money, airline tickets, or other valuables to you through the mail. Sensitive items should be sent via an expedited—and insured—courier service such as DHL or UPS, but consider that some items are not allowed by DHL or UPS, such as liquids, credit cards, and money. You can consult with in-country staff on how to do this, if necessary.

It is usually not worth the effort to have large packages sent from the United States. Volunteers are responsible for paying customs fees on larger items, which may exceed the value of the items sent. Retrieving a package often means an entire day's travel to Managua. There are modern supermarkets and other well-stocked stores in the capital that should supply all your needs, although luxury or gourmet items can be very costly.

Your address during training in Nicaragua will be as follows:

“Your Name,” PCT  
Voluntario del Cuerpo de Paz  
Apartado Postal 3256  
Managua, Nicaragua  
Central America

Once your site has been identified, you will be responsible for sending the address to family and friends if you decide to have your mail delivered directly there.

#### Telephones

International phone service to and from Nicaragua is good relative to service in other developing countries. Claro and Movistar, the two main Nicaraguan telephone companies, have offices in most municipal centers and in all cities. International telephone calls can be very expensive; however, you can go to public call centers that provide international phone service, while Internet cafes throughout the country offer good communication services at more reasonable rates. For telephone communication to the States, most Volunteers use these centers and Internet cafes or have family and friends call them on their local cellphone or at a land line.

Many of the families who host Volunteers during training have telephones in their homes. If not, there is public phone access in all of the training communities. Nicaragua also has a fairly extensive and growing cellular phone service. All Peace Corps staff members have cellphones, as do the majority of Volunteers throughout the country. Peace Corps/Nicaragua is currently using a family plan that allows for free unlimited calls and text messages among staff and Volunteers. Other calls outside of the Peace Corps plan can be made through the purchase of prepaid minutes. Cellphone service is available in all departmental capitals, but because of mountainous terrain and scattered populations, service may not reach the more remote areas.

Differences in technology make many U.S. cellphones usually incompatible with the Nicaraguan system; therefore, it is best to purchase a cellphone in-country and with knowledge of which services are available in a given project site. Most Volunteers purchase inexpensive cellphones costing \$20–\$40.

Where cellphone service is unavailable, local communication methods are sufficiently reliable for Volunteers and are compatible with the Peace Corps' view that Volunteers should live modestly at the level of their local community members.

### **Computer, Internet, and Email Access**

Local Internet providers exist in the capital, in nearly all major cities, and are extending to many smaller towns. As a result, cities and towns throughout the country have Internet cafes that offer access to the public by the hour for a small fee. Connectivity charges in some towns may be higher than in cities if they do not have a local server and have to make long distance calls to connect. Many of the Internet cafes have Skype and Gmail chat/phone call capabilities.

Most Volunteers have regular (daily, weekly, or monthly) access to email. For most Volunteers, email is the primary form of communication with friends and family in the States. Additionally, the Peace Corps office in Managua has four computers with Internet access for Volunteers to use.

### **Housing and Site Location**

Housing options and site locations vary greatly depending upon your project. Business Volunteers tend to live in towns and cities ranging from 1,000 to 100,000 residents. TEFL Volunteers live in small- to medium-sized towns in both rural and urban areas. The location of health and environment assignments varies from medium-sized cities to remote rural communities.

Most (but not all) Volunteer homes have electricity and most have running water or wells. However, both electric and water service may be intermittent. Volunteers in very rural sites may have to haul water to their homes from communal pumps for their daily water supply. A few homes have telephones, and access to cable television is on the rise thanks to improved local services. Your volunteer assignment description provides more details about potential housing and site realities for your project.

Because of the importance of community integration and for your own safety and security, you are required to live with a host family for the duration of your Volunteer service. Couples are also required to live with host families. Program staff will identify a family, usually a local community leader or someone well-known by your project counterparts, with whom you will live initially. Later, you may change families, pending housing approvals, should you so desire for the duration of your service. The experience of sharing day-to-day life with a Nicaraguan family will hasten your cultural adaptation and will help you appreciate Nicaraguan culture. Your personal safety will also be enhanced when the community sees you as a part of a local family. As this housing policy is a mandatory and non-negotiable requirement, it is important to think about this commitment and your ability to be flexible enough to live with a family in basic conditions, with limited privacy. Housing can consist of small wooden, adobe, or cement block structures; some may have personal or community wells and others intermittent running water. During the dry season (November to April), there are often water shortages, so Volunteers may have to collect and save water for use. Many houses have outhouses and private outdoor shower facilities.

When you are sworn in as a Volunteer, you will be required to submit a site locator form that will enable Peace Corps to locate and communicate with you throughout your service and that must be updated every time you move after your house has been approved. Peace Corps staff will periodically visit you at your site to provide personal, professional, and medical support and guidance.

## **Living Allowance and Money Management**

As a Volunteer in Nicaragua, you will receive three types of allowances. The first is a one-time settling in allowance to assist you with expenses related to moving to your site following training as you transition into your new home. The second is a monthly living allowance to cover your basic living expenses, such as rent, utilities, food, household supplies, clothing, local travel, recreation, and entertainment. The living allowance is reviewed once a year through a market survey to ensure that it is adequate. The amount of the allowance varies based on the cost of living in different regions of the country, and is paid in local currency. It is deposited once a month into a Nicaraguan bank account that you will maintain. You are likely to find that you receive more remuneration than your Nicaraguan counterparts.

You will also receive a vacation allowance of \$24 per month, deposited in a local bank account in local currency, which can be used when taking annual leave. Finally, if the Peace Corps asks you to travel for either programmatic, medical, or other reasons, you will be reimbursed for hotel, transportation, and meals up to an established amount (as determined by Peace Corps/Nicaragua) and upon submission of a brief expense report.

Most Volunteers find they can live comfortably within the monthly living allowance, although some bring money from home to help pay for out-of-country vacation travel. Volunteers are responsible for managing their own resources. The Peace Corps expects Volunteers to maintain a lifestyle similar to that of the people with whom they live and work.

To obtain cash (in Córdoba's or U.S. dollars), a variety of ATM machines are available in Managua and in all department capitals throughout the country. Traveler's checks are increasingly less convenient, and can only be cashed for a fee at a few banks in the capital. U.S. dollars are accepted at most businesses in Managua and other major cities, but must be free of marks and tears. Credit cards are accepted in many establishments in Managua and in some major cities throughout the country; they are useful for vacations and travel.

Trainees and Volunteers are responsible for the safety and replacement of their own property and personal documents.

## **Food and Diet**

The staples of the Nicaraguan diet are beans, rice, eggs, dairy products, meats, and foods made with corn (e.g., tortillas, *nacatamales*, and *pinolillo*, a popular beverage made with ground corn and cocoa). A wide variety of fruits and vegetables are grown locally, from cabbages and carrots to pineapples and papayas. Their availability varies by the season and access to markets. As a result of the endemic poverty in Nicaragua, most Nicaraguans' daily diet consists of *gallo pinto*, a mixture of red beans and rice fried in vegetable oil, which might be accompanied by corn tortillas, cabbage salad, a small amount of red meat or chicken, or locally made salty cheese. Most dairy products are made in a traditional fashion in rural settings and, thus, are not pasteurized.

The food generally is not spicy, and many Volunteers find that Nicaraguans use too much oil, salt, and sugar for their tastes. Many Volunteers enjoy *frescos*—a concoction of freshly squeezed fruit and vegetable juices mixed with water and sugar that come in many distinct flavors. In coastal areas, Volunteers find fresh fish and occasionally even lobster or shrimp. Beef, pork, and chicken are widely available throughout the country, but cuts of red meat differ greatly from those found in the United States. It is difficult to find meats that meet U.S. standards for flavor and quality.

It is possible to maintain a vegetarian diet in Nicaragua. However, there is greater variety and availability of certain food items in Managua than in outlying areas. It is important to note that Nicaragua is a beef-producing country, and some Nicaraguans, particularly in rural areas, will not understand vegetarianism.

As a vegetarian, you will need to develop a culturally sensitive approach to declining meat products. Since you will be living with a Nicaraguan family during training and for the duration of your service, you will be immediately exposed to Nicaraguan eating habits and methods of food preparation. Host families receive information regarding any special dietary concerns. Although the families are generally quite accommodating, you should be prepared to have less control over your diet while living with a host family.

Some Volunteers cook for themselves to have more control over their diets. Volunteers who cook enjoy exploring new ways to use the local foods available, and often share these recipes with their Nicaraguan friends and family. There is even a recipe book written by Volunteers.

### **Transportation**

Most Volunteers travel in Nicaragua on commercial public buses; a very small number of sites are accessible by ferry or *panga* (passenger only) boats. For the vast majority of Volunteers, traveling to and from their site entails a ride in an old school bus, which may be overcrowded and slow, though schedules are set and buses typically depart at scheduled times. At more rural sites, Volunteers may be required to travel in converted flatbed trucks, as the rough terrain makes bus passage impossible. Volunteers are not permitted to own, drive, or ride on motorcycles or to own or drive other motorized vehicles at any time during their service. Violation of these policies may be grounds for termination of service.

Most Volunteers get around their site and visit nearby communities on foot or use locally available transportation methods. Some Volunteers find that travel by bicycle is the most practical way to get around and purchase a bicycle with their settling-in allowance. Though bicycles bought locally are not of the same quality as those available in the United States, they are more than sufficient for Volunteer transportation needs. If you choose to ride a bike, helmet use is mandatory. Noncompliance with the Peace Corps mandatory helmet use policy can be grounds for administrative separation.

In very few instances, Volunteers own or rent horses to travel from home to isolated communities and farms. You should familiarize yourself with your site and consult your program manager regarding appropriate methods of transportation.

### **Geography and Climate**

Nicaragua is the largest of the five Central American republics, with a land area of almost 50,000 square miles (slightly smaller than New York). Known as the land of lakes and volcanoes, Nicaragua has a diverse environment, including highlands, lowlands, tropical forests, lakes, and two oceans. Lake Nicaragua is one of the largest freshwater lakes in the world and contains such aquatic oddities as freshwater sharks. Nicaragua's location and diverse geography make it a beautiful and resource-rich country, yet it is also vulnerable to many natural disasters, including earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, droughts, and hurricanes. This vulnerability has increased as a result of deforestation and construction in unsafe areas.

Nicaragua can be divided into four geographic areas: the coastal area between the lakes and the Pacific Ocean; the Great Rift, a low depression in which Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua lie; the central highlands to the north and east of the rift; and the Caribbean coast lowlands, which account for more than 40 percent of the land area but only 10 percent of the population.

The climate varies with the region, but Nicaragua generally is hot and tropical, with a very short cool season. The Northern region, including Estelí, Jinotega, Matagalpa, and Nueva Segovia, is mountainous with a noticeably cooler climate than the rest of Nicaragua. The eastern third of the country, composed of the eastern slopes of the central highlands and the Caribbean lowlands, has a wet, tropical climate, with little or no dry or cool season. The climate of the central highlands is variable because of its ridge and valley topography, but generally it is an area of moderate temperatures and year-round rainfall. The hottest regions of Nicaragua include Leon, Chinandega, and Managua. These Pacific regions experience a distinct tropical wet season (May through November) and tropical dry season (December through April).

### **Social Activities**

Social activities will vary depending on where you are located and the size of your site. Nicaraguans are generally kind and open, with celebrations of all types being common. You are encouraged to become a part of your community and participate in family celebrations, local dances, and folkloric activities as long as they occur in safe environments. The U.S. Marines are credited with popularizing baseball in Nicaragua in the early 1900s, and it is now the national sport. Most communities have baseball teams and weekend games. Soccer is also wildly popular and volleyball, too, continues to grow in popularity throughout the country among both men and women.

You will be expected to fully integrate into your community. This means you will spend the vast majority of your time in your Peace Corps site, including weekends and most of your free time. Volunteers occasionally visit nearby Volunteers or go to a regional center to watch a movie, use the Internet, have a special meal, buy supplies, or just relax in a place with air conditioning. Volunteers are discouraged from spending leisure time in Managua because of the expense and security concerns. Peace Corps/Nicaragua maintains strict policies regarding trips away from site.

### **Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior**

A Volunteer assignment is a professional position. Although you may work in an informal setting, you will be expected to act and dress professionally. Almost all Volunteers spend some of their time working in local schools and are seen as community leaders and mentors. More specific information on dress codes and teachers' roles is available in your volunteer assignment description. You will receive an orientation to appropriate behavior and cultural sensitivity during pre-service training. As a Volunteer, you will have the status of an invited guest and must be sensitive to the habits, tastes, and taboos of your Nicaraguan hosts. Your effectiveness as a development worker, satisfaction as a Volunteer, and safety as a foreigner living in a community will all be enhanced by professional behavior. Behavior that jeopardizes the Peace Corps mission in Nicaragua or your personal safety cannot be tolerated by the Peace Corps and could lead to administrative separation—a decision on the part of the Peace Corps to terminate your service. The Volunteer Handbook provides more information on the grounds for administrative separation.

Nicaraguans consider personal appearance an important individual characteristic. Proper dress can help establish your credibility as a professional, and it reflects your respect for the local customs and expectations of the people with whom you live and work. Inappropriate dress, like inappropriate behavior, is something that can set Volunteers apart from their communities. The best guideline is to dress as your Nicaraguan colleagues do. Nicaraguans dress business casual: neat, clean, and ironed. You should bring casual professional attire for all venues when you are working.

Appropriate attire may include cotton pants (nice khakis are acceptable), nice cotton shirts and/or blouses (not T-shirts), and cotton skirts or dresses for women (not mini length). Neat blue jeans (dark and not bleached out) are acceptable and used by a number of professionals, including teachers, in spite of the hot temperatures. Neither shorts nor faded T-shirts are appropriate for Volunteers in the workplace. Dresses or shirts that are tight or spaghetti-strap tank tops are also not appropriate work attire. Comfortable walking shoes or sandals are suitable; however, Nicaraguans view outdoor sandals as inappropriate for the work environment. Shorts and tennis shoes are acceptable sportswear, but are inappropriate for work.

During training, you will be expected to observe the same clothing guidelines. Shirts and shoes must be worn at all times. Visible body piercings (other than earrings for women) and long hair on men are not generally accepted in professional settings. Wearing facial piercings may make it more difficult to integrate into your community. Earrings and ponytails are not permitted for male Volunteers during service. All PCVs should keep their hair neat and clean throughout service. Keep in mind that conforming to local norms is a small sacrifice for the great adventure and lasting friendships that await you.

### **Personal Safety**

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

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

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

### **Rewards and Frustrations**

Being a Volunteer in Nicaragua can be both highly rewarding and terribly frustrating. This is one reason why serving in the Peace Corps is often called "the toughest job you'll ever love." A trainee often arrives with idealistic notions of wanting to save the forest, find new ways to increase food production to decrease hunger and malnutrition, or develop new local products that will make a community prosperous. But then frustrations often arise over the difficulty of getting things accomplished, the lack of support from local counterparts, and the obstacles of poverty and poor education.

You might struggle to perfect the language, adapt to certain Nicaraguan customs, or find sufficient financial resources. The family or church just down the street from your house might play loud music every night, or the rooster next door might begin crowing each morning at 2 a.m. You are certain to miss your family and friends back home.

But over time, your initial idealism is likely to be replaced by a sense of practicality. Saving the forest becomes planting a few trees to protect a watershed. Feeding a nation becomes feeding a family. Revolutionizing a business becomes helping a business run better. This isn't so much a loss of idealism but, rather, a realization that development comes from small but significant steps taken in partnership with your community.

To be successful as a Volunteer, you will need to be flexible, resourceful, and patient. You will be given a high degree of responsibility and independence in your work—perhaps more than in any other job you have had or will have. You will often find yourself in situations that require an ability to motivate yourself and others with little guidance from supervisors. You will learn to take joy from the little things: the smiles and laughter of children walking to school, the welcome sound of rain on a zinc roof, the sparkle in a child's eyes when he realizes that saving a tree means saving a bird, the comfort in a mother's face when her baby is healthy and well-nourished, the satisfaction of a business owner when she is able to pay her debts and save money.

When you complete your service in Nicaragua, you will leave knowing that you have not only overcome frustrations and obstacles, but also made lasting friendships and helped people build better lives for themselves and their families. If you are committed to integrating into your community and working hard, you will be a successful Volunteer.

## 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 Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua by Peace Corps staff, most of whom are locally hired trainers. Peace Corps staff measure achievement of learning and determine if you have successfully achieved competencies, including language standards, for swearing-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

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

Integrating into the community is one of the core competencies you will strive to achieve both in PST and during the first several months of service. Successful sustainable development work is based on the relationships you build by respectfully integrating into the host country community and culture. You will be prepared for this through a homestay experience, which often requires trainees to live with host families during PST. Integration into the community fosters language and cross-cultural learning and ensures your health, safety, and security.

Upon your arrival in Nicaragua, you will participate in a three-day orientation that will provide you with basic, pertinent information on living in Nicaragua. You will find out about Peace Corps administrative issues as they pertain to Peace Corps training. Additionally, you will learn what the Peace Corps expects from you during pre-service training and what you can expect from the Peace Corps. You will have the opportunity to speak with current Volunteers in your project and ask staff members questions about any initial medical concerns. After this orientation, you will begin living with a host family, spending Saturday night and Sunday with them before beginning pre-service training on Monday morning.

Training will consist of several components, including Spanish language, technical skills, and the core curriculum, which consists of cross-cultural awareness, the role of Volunteers in development, and health and safety issues. You will attend Spanish classes and carry out technical and cross-cultural tasks in your community Monday through Friday. Usually on Wednesday and Friday afternoons and some Saturdays, the entire training group will come together for more formal training sessions. During training, you will be evaluated regularly on your ability to acquire and demonstrate the language, technical, core, and safety competencies needed to be a Volunteer.

You will live with your host family for the entire 12-week training period. Two or three other trainees will live in the same community with different families, and you will study Spanish and carry out individual technical tasks together. Even though the entire training group will be spread out among four or five communities, Peace Corps staff members will be present on a daily basis. The training director and other Peace Corps staff will make frequent trips to each community to ensure that training objectives are being met, and provide guidance in the process.

Note to couples: Peace Corps/Nicaragua encourages married couples to participate in our program; couples have found service in Nicaragua to be very rewarding. More specific advantages and challenges to serving as couples are mentioned later in this book. However, if you are considering service in Nicaragua, it is important to note that you will each live with a different host family during the 12-week pre-service training period and will most likely also be living in separate, but neighboring, communities.

This will better enable each of you to develop your language and technical skills, and to share in the rich cross-cultural experience of spending time with your own host family and community. The success in the training program will be due in large part to a couple's willingness to put their individual learning objectives first, realizing that each person will need time and personal space to meet the challenges ahead and to fully engage in the training activities. Couples have plenty of opportunities to see one another during the week at plenary sessions and can spend weekends together during the pre-service training period. Please contact your placement officer or the country desk unit for more specific information.

### **Technical Training**

Technical training will prepare you to work in Nicaragua 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, Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your project's goals and objectives and will meet with the Nicaragua 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.

### **Language Training**

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

Your language training will incorporate a community-based approach. In addition to classroom time, you will be given assignments to work on outside of the classroom and with your host family. The goal is to get you to a point of basic social communication skills so you can practice and develop language skills further once you are at your site. The minimum level of Spanish proficiency to swear in at the end of PST is Intermediate-Mid on the ACTFL scale (more detailed information will be provided at the Orientation Retreat). If you are a novice Spanish speaker, you are urged to begin conversational Spanish classes as soon as possible, so you have some preparation before arrival. Prior to being sworn in as a Volunteer, you will work on strategies to continue language studies during your service.

## **Cross-Cultural Training**

Cross-cultural training will provide opportunities for you to reflect on your own cultural values and how they influence your behavior in Nicaragua. You will also discuss the questions you have about the behaviors and practices you observe in Nicaragua, 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 Nicaragua. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families.

## **Health Training**

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

## **Safety and Security Training**

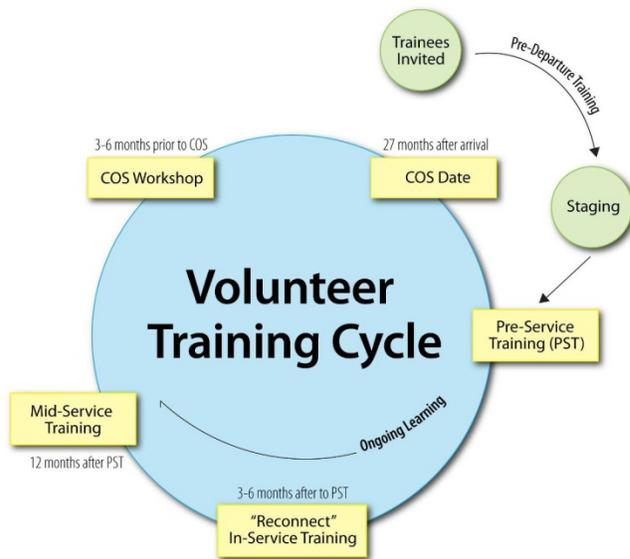
During the safety and security training sessions, you will learn how to adopt a lifestyle that reduces your risks at home, at work, and during your travels. You will also learn appropriate, effective strategies for coping with unwanted attention, how to identify safety risks in-country and about Peace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

## **Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service**

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

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

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



## **YOUR HEALTH CARE IN NICARAGUA**

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 Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill and cannot receive the care you need in Nicaragua, 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 Nicaragua**

The most common health problems among Volunteers and the Nicaraguan population in general, which also occur in the United States, are upper respiratory infections and diarrhea. These problems may be more frequent or compounded by life in Nicaragua because certain environmental and cultural factors in the country raise the risk or exacerbate the severity of illnesses and injuries. Some gastrointestinal problems can be avoided by boiling drinking water and thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables before eating them.

Two additional major health concerns are malaria and dengue fever. Because malaria is endemic here, the Peace Corps requires all Volunteers to take anti-malarial medication. The anti-malarial medications currently approved by headquarters and used by Volunteers are chloroquine phosphate on a weekly basis or doxycycline daily; most Volunteers have no problems taking them. It is crucial that all Volunteers strictly follow medical office guidelines to prevent mosquito bites, in addition to taking anti-malarial prophylaxis, which will also help to prevent dengue fever. You will also be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B, tetanus/diphtheria, polio, typhoid, measles, mumps, rubella, rabies, H1N1, and seasonal influenza as part of the Peace Corps' preventive health program.

### **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 Nicaragua, 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 mid-service and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua, 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 Nicaragua is to take the following preventive measures:

Parasitic infections come from eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water. During training, you will learn how to properly wash and prepare foods and how to boil your drinking water. You will also receive training on how to recognize symptoms and what immediate actions to take if such symptoms occur.

Many illnesses that afflict Volunteers worldwide are entirely preventable if proper food and water precautions are taken. These illnesses include food poisoning, parasitic infections, hepatitis A, dysentery, Guinea worms, tapeworms, and typhoid fever. Your medical officer will discuss specific standards for water and food preparation in Nicaragua 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. If you are taking a specific contraceptive, you should bring a three-month supply since they may not be available in Nicaragua and may take several months to order. Also, your current brand of contraceptive may be changed to an equivalent or similar medication by the medical officer, if your brand is difficult to obtain in-country.

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 Nicaragua will provide them. If you require a specific product, please bring a three-month supply with you. Many female Volunteers take menstrual cups (The Diva Cup, The Keeper, The Moon Cup, etc.) to avoid potential problems with availability or disposal of feminine hygiene products.

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

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

## Your Peace Corps Medical Kit

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

### Medical Kit Contents

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

### Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist

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

If your 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 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 Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua, 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 Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua. 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.

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

### **Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime**

Because many Volunteer sites are in rural, isolated settings, you must be prepared to take on a large degree of responsibility for your own safety. To reduce the likelihood that you will become a victim of crime, you can take steps to make yourself less of a target such as ensuring your home is secure and developing relationships in your community. While the factors that contribute to your risk in Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

Volunteers have reported being robbed of purses, watches, wallets, cellphones, and other personal possessions while riding on crowded buses or walking in urban areas at night or early morning. Most petty thieves want only your belongings, and Volunteers are always encouraged to give up personal items should they encounter a thief. Do not bring to Nicaragua any item that you are not willing to lose or to carry items you would not be willing to give up.

Some Volunteers have had their houses broken into and personal items stolen. This typically happens when Volunteers leave their sites. Part of the Volunteer settling-in allowance is dedicated to home security items, such as good locks and bars for doors and windows. A Peace Corps staff member will visit your home to inspect your housing conditions and make recommendations to maximize home security. You will receive more information on how to prevent petty theft and burglary during training, and you will receive routine visits to your site from the safety and security coordinator as needed.

Alcohol abuse occurs at a higher rate in Nicaragua than in the United States, so you should avoid areas where there is heavy drinking, especially at night. As a professional, you are expected to adhere to high standards of behavior at all times. If you choose to drink, you must drink responsibly.

Alcohol use by Volunteers is a common factor in incidents involving their safety. During training, you will learn how to recognize alcohol abuse and learn strategies to be responsible. Irresponsible behavior related to alcohol use is grounds for administrative separation from the Peace Corps.

Statistically speaking, the risk of sexual assault in Nicaragua isn't substantially higher than in the U.S. Most sexual assaults in Nicaragua occur as a result of domestic violence. Very few Peace Corps Volunteers have been sexually assaulted in Nicaragua. Women serving in Nicaragua should know that some men may see them as sexual objects, that friendships with men are not culturally the norm, and that they need to maintain a constant awareness of the threat of sexual assaults. "Come-ons" made by men to women as they walk by are common and can be especially offensive to American women. You will receive information during training on how to minimize your risks of sexual assault and harassment throughout your service.

While whistles and exclamations may be fairly common on the street, this behavior can be reduced if you dress conservatively, abide by local cultural norms, and respond according to the training you will receive.

### **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](mailto:victimadvocate@peacecorps.gov)

### **Crime Data for Nicaragua**

Crime data and statistics for Nicaragua, which are updated yearly, are available at the following link:

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/countrydata/nicaragua>

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 Nicaragua**

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. Nicaragua's in-country safety program is outlined below.

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

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

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

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

### **What Might a Volunteer Face?**

#### **Possible Gender Role Issues**

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

females are encouraged to attend school, while in other countries females are discouraged from engaging in such activities and instead work inside or outside of the home.

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

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Nicaragua has a prevalent culture of *machismo*, and traditional women's roles are sometimes undervalued. While there have been quite a few female leaders in Nicaragua over the years, including former President Violeta Chamorro, most women still find their primary role in society to be in the home.

There is a high dropout rate among girls in secondary school, a very high incidence of teenage pregnancy, and a high rate of negligent paternity, all of which reinforce the highly defined gender roles. Peace Corps/Nicaragua has a very active gender and development committee that works with Volunteers and Nicaraguans alike to raise consciousness and support culturally appropriate activities that address issues of gender inequality among girls, boys, women, and men in the field.

Female Volunteers may find that being a single woman living alone is considered odd. They may receive more inappropriate and unwanted attention from men than they are accustomed to receiving. They may have to work harder than male Volunteers to gain the respect of Nicaraguan colleagues in the workplace or they may experience resentment from Nicaraguan women for their male-like position of authority in the community. Female Volunteers need to be aware of gender roles in Nicaragua and practice discretion in public to avoid developing an undesirable reputation in their communities (e.g., wear conservative clothing and refrain from smoking in public, drinking in bars, or even dancing with men).

**Volunteer Comment:**

“I find that my biggest challenge in the Peace Corps is neither the loneliness nor the language, but the fact that I am a woman. Daily, I am harassed by men for merely walking down the street—even though I am dressed conservatively. As a feminist from the States, where gender equality is a generally accepted concept, I struggle within this *machista* culture.”

**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.

In Nicaragua, skin color can be the most common way people identify one another. Terms such as *moreno* (colored person), *negro* (black), *chefe* (white), and *Chino* (Asian) are considered by many to be socially acceptable. Therefore, Volunteers may face constant verbal and nonverbal reminders that their skin color is different from that of the majority. Nicaragua has a large Afro-Caribbean population along its east coast, so African-American Volunteers are often confused with people from those communities or believed to be from Cuba. Negative stereotypes sometimes exist as well. After an initial settling-in period at their sites, however, most African-American Volunteers have very positive experiences living and working throughout Nicaragua.

Hispanic Volunteers also face challenges. At first they are often thought to be Nicaraguans or Central Americans. Even when host country nationals realize Hispanic Volunteers are neither, they commonly have difficulty believing Hispanics are “real” Americans. It may also be hard for community members to accept that a Hispanic Volunteer is not a native Spanish speaker. However, most Hispanic Volunteers find they are welcome and readily accepted in Nicaragua.

Asian-American Volunteers may be associated with characters in the martial arts movies that play repeatedly in urban areas of Nicaragua. Females may be viewed according to the mystique with which Asian women are often portrayed on television or in movies. Asian-American Volunteers may encounter stereotypes that also exist in the United States—such as the view that all Asians are extremely intelligent, good business people, and wealthy. Volunteers who are not of Chinese descent may be frustrated when Nicaraguans do not consider them Americans or associate them with a different ethnic background. For example, Korean-American Volunteers may be labeled as Chinese. For the most part, however, Nicaraguans are curious about, and interested in, the heritage of Asian Americans and welcome them into their homes and communities.

**Volunteer Comments:**

“The reality of Nicaragua is that color defines everyone. If you’re not *chele*, then you’re *moreno*. And if not *moreno*, then you’re probably either super-*chele* or *negro*. Being half Mexican and having darker skin than the majority of my classmates and neighbors in the U.S., being classified as the white guy took some getting used to. I had, of course, already become accustomed to sarcastic cultural remarks made by my closest friends in the States as a way to egg me on, but had never experienced such an unabashed comfort in labeling complete strangers by skin tone. I began to notice, however, that even Nicaraguans toting blond hair, blue eyes, and skin as pale as a Scandinavian’s would holler our shared *chele* mantra to get my attention. Choosing to not initially overreact to something that would be considered nothing less than gross racism in the States, I was able to slowly realize that skin tone in Nicaragua acts as the same arbitrary physical identifier as eye color and hair length. My advice is to try not to take offense to whatever physical label your community gives you. Almost undoubtedly, no one understands that you could take offense.”

“It’s funny because coming from Puerto Rico and mastering the Spanish language (given it’s my native language), there were people who often told me, ‘Your Spanish is pretty good for a *gringa*.’ Even as a Latina, at first they saw me as an *extranjera* (foreigner). They thought I was too *chele* (white) to be Puerto Rican. Given my language knowledge, I was able to establish good relationships, integrate into the community, and quickly get to work. Yet, I wouldn’t dare state that my language skills are by any means more rooted or my work any better than those whose initial Spanish was not as strong as mine. It is what you put in that gives fruit to your experience here, not your level of Spanish.”

“Being an Asian-American Volunteer in Nicaragua can have its challenges at times. Coming from a politically correct environment, it can be difficult to accept that any ‘Asian-looking’ person will be labeled as *chino* no matter what ethnic background he or she is from. In my site, I am, of course, known as *la chinita*. Even people with whom I have *confianza* (trust) still call me *la chinita* when speaking in reference to me. I have also encountered people who try to imitate the Chinese language, and people automatically assume that I know karate. However, these are things that I have learned to cope with and live around. Overall, in my experience, I find that people are genuinely curious. They look at me and they see someone different and they want to know more about me. Yes, they have their preconceived notions, but then I have a chance to confront those stereotypes. As an Asian-American Volunteer, I have an opportunity to teach people about the diversity of the U.S. and of Asia as well.”

“Being a Mexican-American Volunteer has been both a positive and a negative experience. People think I’m a host country national when they first look at me, but as soon as I speak, my Mexican accent gives me away. It has been a positive experience in that it has allowed me to connect immediately with Nicaraguans. However, no one believes me when I say that I am an American. They think Americans are blue-eyed and blond, and I’m definitely not. Also, at times, people naturally assume that since I’m Latino like they are, I should know all the rules about how to cook rice and beans, how to act at fiestas, or the rules of dating. I don’t. I’m an American, and my culture—a blend of American and Latino cultures—and ways of thinking are very different. This puts me at odds sometimes with host country nationals.”

“I can’t tell you how many times I have been called ‘*negro*.’ It is my badge of identity here. Forget about being a Peace Corps Volunteer or being from the United States—the sole thing people refer to is my color.

This perplexed me in the beginning, considering we are in a country where there are people of color everywhere. Everyone’s a shade of brown here, so why is my color so important for the people of my community that they refer to me as ‘the Negro’? But I also have to be *costeño* or *cubano*. At first, this was very flattering because it kind of signified that I had some connection to Nicaragua. Little did I know that such distinctions carried some unwanted, negative repercussions.”

“I am Lebanese American, but in Nicaragua I am often mistaken for Hispanic. When people ask me if I am Latina and I say, ‘No, my family is from Lebanon,’ I usually get a blank, confused look. Sometimes I think they just don’t believe me. People here have had very little contact or experience with the diverse people, cultures, religions, and history of the Arab nations. From the news, they get the perspective that all Arabic people wear turbans and are terrorists. We have been able to talk more about these issues, so maybe, just maybe, some of the stereotypes and preconceived ideas about Arabic nations have been changed or even broadened.”

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

For LGBTQ Volunteers: Given Nicaragua’s traditional values, sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identities might not be discussed openly. In some cases, the LGBTQ community may be stigmatized. Mindful of the cultural norms and country-specific laws, the decision to serve openly is left to each individual Peace Corps Volunteer. Many LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to be discreet about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within their host communities. Some LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to come out to community members, with a result of positive and negative reactions, while some have come out only to select Peace Corps staff and Volunteers. Dealing with questions about boyfriends, girlfriends, marriage, and children may, at times, be stressful for LGBTQ Volunteers. You may find that Nicaragua is a less open and inclusive environment than you have previously experienced.

Please know, however, that Peace Corps is supportive of you and Peace Corps staff welcomes dialogue about how to ensure your success as an LGBTQA 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](http://lgbrcpv.org). Additionally, the Peace Corps’ LGBTQ employee resource group, Spectrum, can be reached at [spectrum@peacecorps.gov](mailto: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 Nicaragua and have very fond memories of their community and service. LGBTQA support groups may be available in your country of service, providing a network to support the needs of the Peace Corps LGBTQA community. Peace Corps staff will work with Volunteers to provide them with locally informed perspectives.

To fit into the conservative Nicaraguan culture, most Volunteers find that there are things about themselves that they choose not to share with their neighbors. Most LGBTQ Volunteers find that it is more comfortable and convenient for them to be discreet about their sexual orientation with the people in their community because Nicaraguans generally view gay or lesbian relationships as morally wrong.

Given the prejudices in the country the LGBTQ community, being out at one's site could jeopardize one's professional image and effectiveness.

All Volunteers face the challenges of being collaborative in their Nicaraguan communities in their own way. Inquiring about one's love life is part of Nicaraguan small talk, so LGBTQ Volunteers may find navigating these conversations particularly challenging. Some create imaginary girlfriends or boyfriends, while others try to skirt the issue the best they can. Some Volunteers feel isolated from the identity they may have had in the States, or from other Volunteers for whom the particular challenges that LGBTQ Volunteers face may be difficult to understand. Despite the challenges, many develop meaningful relationships with people at their sites, make wonderful Peace Corps friends, and have a satisfying service. Currently, there is a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer Volunteers organized by Volunteers and supported by Peace Corps/Nicaragua.

**Volunteer Comment:**

“As a pansexual woman, I face disbelief, prejudice, and discrimination in the States as well as here. However, as in the U.S., I have been able to be selective about to whom I reveal my sexual orientation. I have not come out to anybody in my rural site nor did I during training. Though this is never an easy thing to hide about oneself, preparing to be silent about it before service made it much easier to execute once here. Many other personal aspects have had to be molded or temporarily stopped to better fit my current situation, and I continually tell myself that all of these things will re-emerge after this experience. I have adapted my personality to survive as best as I can, and I know that it is worth it. There are other Volunteers to support me when I need it, and Peace Corps/Nicaragua is committed to making the office a welcoming and safe place for everyone. Each Volunteer will have a different experience, in more ways than one, and a beautiful, memorable service is possible for all of us.”

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

As a Volunteer in Nicaragua, you may find that you face a special set of challenges. In Nicaragua, as in other parts of the world, some people hold prejudicial attitudes about individuals with special needs and/or requiring accommodations and may discriminate against them. In addition, there is little of the infrastructure to accommodate special needs that one may see in the United States.

**Possible Issues for Volunteer Couples**

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

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

Your partner can be an important source of stability but can also add stress to your training experience. You may feel torn between traveling to visit your partner and focusing on your training, your host family, and friends you have made at your training site.

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

In Nicaragua, marriage is an interesting amalgamation of religious, legal, and societal constructs. Many couples in Nicaragua may have been married in a church, but never legally married, nor do they necessarily live together. There are other couples that may be legally married, but never held a ceremony or religious recognition of their marriage. Probably most common are couples that live together and have families together, but are never officially married either religiously or legally. This unique aspect of Nicaraguan marital culture has other implications for Volunteer couples, married, non-married, same-sex, and even single. As mentioned above, different-sex couples whether married legally or not will generally be considered a marital pair. Similarly, since same-sex marriage is neither recognized nor common in Nicaragua, married same-sex couples may find it difficult to explain their marriage to Nicaraguans. Single Volunteers who have dated or are in a relationship may be considered to have been married and/or seeking marriage. An additional aspect of Nicaraguan marital culture is the prevalence of extramarital affairs, and its effect on Volunteer couples. Many PCV couples report additional strain on their relationship from the expectation or solicitation of extramarital affairs.

Finally, it is important to note that while there are certainly additional stresses and factors that Volunteer couples will have to face throughout their service, Volunteer couples also benefit from being in a loving relationship and sharing their experience together. They often serve as each other's support system, coach, motivator, and sounding board. They are there to help each other with cultural adaptation, community integration, and each other's professional goals. Volunteer couples are also likely to be treated with more respect by community members because marriage is held in high regard as a respectable responsibility and commitment. It is also common for other Volunteers to look to couples for advice and support.

**Volunteer Comments:**

“As a married couple living in a large city, our experience has been wonderful, but not without problems. My wife had trouble exercising freely, such as jogging, because of unwanted comments and attention on the streets. As a result, the lack of exercise created a lot of pent-up energy and compounded the stress that she was already feeling from adapting to a new environment and culture. This negative energy was directed toward the person closest to her—her husband. We needed to recognize the problem and remedy the predicament through our own self-awareness and situational management; then we searched for other outlets of stress relief. My wife does, however, still run regularly. The cultural adaptation process, we have learned, can be accelerated by having someone with you to recognize, share, and assist with each other's personal dilemmas.”

“Concerning traditional Nicaraguan gender roles, my husband has chosen to lead by example and doesn’t drink despite the social pressure and he has never hesitated to help with the dishes. His explanation was: ‘It’s true, we come from different cultures; please allow me the courtesy of continuing one of my cultural aspects.’ He found that Nicaraguans do understand that there are cultural differences between us and are often open to varying roles and perspectives. In fact, we usually take the opportunity to display the differences in a positive and generally humorous way.”

“For us, living apart during training was not difficult because we had host families who were extremely welcoming and we were able to visit each other often enough. We did sometimes stress about our host families having a second person to feed, but this was resolved through thoughtful communication. We feel we benefited greatly from having not just one, but two fabulous host families.”

“The key to a successful Peace Corps journey as a married couple, especially in a more stressful environment, is to pay close attention to each other, be supportive, offer outlets to vent but do not direct that frustration toward each other (this can be a tricky process), and utilize the strengths of the couple while developing the weaknesses. When we first arrived to our site, a piece of advice from another married couple was to be able to express to your partner that, ‘I am not mad at you, I am mad at our current situation,’ which could refer to anything from unwanted comments in the street to a lack of water. Good luck with your service.”

“Something that I can’t attest to yet, but can only assume I’ll appreciate later, is that when we get home, we will have someone to listen to our stories over and over again—each other! In all seriousness, it will be nice to have someone who shared the experience and can relate to some of our emotions, experiences, thoughts, etc.”

“I find that not changing our habits within our relationship has actually helped us with one of the goals of Peace Corps: sharing our culture with the host culture. We don’t hide the fact that my husband does housework and that certainly opens up interesting conversations with some people! We do get asked a lot why we don’t have children yet, especially since we are both 30ish. We just explain that we got married shortly before coming to the Peace Corps and that there is plenty of time still to have kids: We try to show that we can have careers and a family! And yes, there are also challenges to serving together, although I, for the most part, find it all really wonderful! You need to be prepared to spend a lot of time together, even if you work on separate projects! Learning to accept your partner’s ups and downs and the fact that they aren’t necessarily at the same time as your own is very important.”

### **Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers**

Nicaragua is a predominantly Roman Catholic country with a large evangelical presence, but an influx of Protestants, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims, and other Christian denominations is changing the religious makeup of the country. Non-Christian groups are practically nonexistent, however, which can be a challenge for practicing Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other groups. Most Nicaraguans are curious about and tolerant of other religions, but there is little education about the history, beliefs, and practices of other faiths.

### **Volunteer Comments:**

“During Peace Corps training, your host family may invite you to religious functions, such as baptisms, Masses, and holidays. I recommend attending these events in order to gain trust and to

learn about Nicaraguans' religious beliefs. If attending these functions conflicts with your personally held beliefs, it is important to maintain cultural sensitivity and find a polite way to decline the invitations.

One of the Peace Corps' goals is to share America's culture, and our varied religious backgrounds are an important component of diversity in the United States. Sharing your own religious or spiritual beliefs with Nicaraguans will help them gain a better understanding of who you are, but you must also stress that our work here is nonreligious in nature. Within the Volunteer network, you may find individuals of the same faith with whom to celebrate holidays or form a support group. I have also found it constructive and enjoyable to invite Volunteers outside my religion to participate in religious holidays. Whatever your background, Nicaragua offers a rich social experience that is deeply interwoven with religious faith. As Volunteers, we have a wonderful opportunity to learn about Nicaraguan culture, which in turn helps us learn more about ourselves."

### **Possible Issues for 50+ Volunteers**

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

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+ individual 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 50+ 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.

Respect comes with age in Nicaragua. Younger Volunteers may have to work harder than their older colleagues to be accepted as professionals.

During training, older Volunteers may experience frustration in having most of their time and activities scheduled for them. It may be difficult to adjust to living with a host family where you have to adapt to the family's way of doing things. Also, adjustment to the learning environment, which includes intensive hands-on training, doing research, interviews, and homework, may prove unexpectedly challenging. Another issue for some 50+ individuals in training is the feeling of being left out of the social activities, or not having the same interests as trainees in their 20s. At the same time, the life experiences that seniors bring with them to the training process can enrich others and provide a secure base to deal with the challenges that the cultural adaptation process brings.

### **Volunteer Comments:**

"As an older Volunteer you may discover that much of the technical knowledge that you have accumulated over the years has little relevance to this place and time. You came here to give of yourself, but you are likely to discover that you are learning more and receiving more from the locals than you are able to give them in return. It can be a humbling experience that requires you

to adapt and change. If you are open to accepting how much you don't know, you can find yourself being reinvigorated.

You will be pushed outside of your 'comfort zone' on many occasions, but you will feel good about yourself every time you make it through another challenge. I like to think of my Peace Corps experience as a re-tooling of myself for taking on whatever may come my way in the future. The past was pretty good, but I still want to have a future. For better or worse, the Peace Corps experience offers no choice except to break the old routine and ways of thinking."

"My experiences as a senior (more experienced) Peace Corps Volunteer have been very positive. Being the oldest Volunteer in my group, I was a bit nervous about how to fit in; I was the age of most of their parents or even older. But my nervousness disappeared as soon as I got to know my fellow Volunteers. Age just did not seem to be an issue. We were all in the Peace Corps for various reasons, and we all supported each other. We were able to learn from each other and share different life experiences. I have established friendships that will last and last. This whole experience has changed my life for the better, and I will treasure my years in the Peace Corps forever and ever!"

"I have not had significant problems as a senior Volunteer. The most difficult part was returning to a classroom atmosphere during training. Most of the other Volunteers are 20 years younger than me, but I have had their support and friendship throughout my service. Also, at times my age is an advantage. In Nicaragua, I am treated with respect because of my age, and the other Volunteers are always looking out for me. I was apprehensive about joining the Peace Corps at my age, but it has been one of the best decisions of my life."

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Nicaragua?**

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 for any one 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 Nicaragua?**

It is 110 volts—the same as in the United States. You might want to bring a two-pronged adapter for three-pronged grounded plugs. These are also available in-country.

### **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/debit cards are the preferred method since you can take out money when necessary. Traveler's checks can be difficult to cash in Nicaragua. 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 insurance company for information). Volunteers should not ship or take valuable items overseas. Jewelry, watches, radios, cameras, electronics, and expensive appliances are subject to loss, theft, and breakage, and, in many places, satisfactory maintenance and repair services are not available.

### **Do I need an international driver's license?**

Volunteers in Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua friends and my host family?**

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

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

Peace Corps trainees are not assigned to individual sites until after they have completed pre-service training. This gives Peace Corps staff the opportunity to assess each trainee's technical and language skills prior to assigning sites, in addition to finalizing site selections with their ministry counterparts. If feasible, you may have the opportunity to provide input on your site preferences, including geographical location, distance from other Volunteers, and living conditions. However, keep in mind that many factors influence the site selection process and that the Peace Corps cannot guarantee placement where you would ideally like to be. Most Volunteers live in small to medium-sized towns and are frequently within one hour from another Volunteer. Some sites require a day's travel to reach the Peace Corps/Nicaragua post.

**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 Nicaragua?**

The main Nicaraguan telephone company, Claro, has offices in most towns and in all cities. To make international calls, many Volunteers visit Internet cafes in order to use Skype or Gmail services, which are more economical. Many training host families have telephones in their homes. If not, there is public phone access in all the training communities. There are two cellphone companies, Claro and Movistar, and it is free to receive calls in Nicaragua via cellphone, and affordable to make calls to the U.S.

**Should I bring a cellphone with me?**

Cellphone coverage in the country is fairly broad and cellphones are affordable. Differences in technology make many U.S. cellphones incompatible with the Nicaraguan cellular system (which utilizes a GSM network); however, phones in which you can insert a SIM card are usually compatible, but only if they are capable of being unlocked. In most cases it is recommended that you purchase one locally from one of the many providers, as an expensive smartphone from home can make you a target for theft.

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

Most Volunteers choose to bring a personal laptop computer and find it helps them greatly in their work. This is an individual choice. A personal computer can be difficult and expensive to maintain given the dust, heat, and humidity. Like other expensive items, a laptop can make you a target for crime, and it is recommended that you take out personal articles insurance to cover a potential loss. Volunteers have access to computers at the Peace Corps office, at local Internet cafes, and sometimes through their host agencies.

While some Volunteers find that having a laptop is helpful on a number of different levels, it is difficult to know what will be appropriate for your specific circumstances until you get here. Some Volunteers suggest waiting until you are settled into your community. In these instances, a family member or friend could bring you a laptop when visiting.

## WELCOME LETTERS FROM NICARAGUA VOLUNTEERS

Hello Prospective Volunteers!

Welcome to the start of an incredible journey. A journey that at this point in time may seem uncertain and daunting, but as you will see in the upcoming months, a journey that is well worth it.

There is so much waiting for you here and you will experience amazing things. Lagoons and volcanoes appear out of the blue as you drive upon the highway. New and exotic fruits with astonishing colors will fall off trees as you walk to school. During hot days, there will be a constant stream of sweat running down your face while you sit in rocking chairs with your Nicaraguan friends, laughing about just how hot it is, and wondering when the rains will come. And when the rains finally come, you will celebrate with your community and dance in the streets. Roosters and fireworks will become a natural alarm clock. Rice and beans, with a hot cup of coffee and a tortilla with *cuajada* cheese, will be a meal you start to crave.

You may not know this now, but you are about to meet some of your best friends. Other Volunteers, site mates, and staff will become your family and you will go through this experience together. You will soon learn that you can talk to these people about anything. Nicaraguans will become your second family as well. You will work, laugh, and sometimes cry with them. They will open up their homes and will share their lives with you. You will walk through your site, waving and saying *adios* to just about every person passing by. The people here are some of the most genuinely kind people that you will meet.

A popular phrase in Nicaragua is *el futuro es dudoso*, the future is unknown. You probably have questions and doubts about your upcoming experience in the Peace Corps, questions that will be answered once you arrive and start to experience this country through your own eyes. However, you will start to realize that everything is already here, waiting for you.

You are about to start to an incredible country in a country filled with laughter, joy, color, and sometimes a touch of absurdity. Don't be afraid to take chances, try new things, and live life to the fullest. Nicaraguans embrace this type of attitude. *Bienvenidos!*

—Katherine Wzorek  
TEFL 2013-15

*¡Bienvenidos a Nicaragua!* You are in no doubt in for the ride of your life. If you are anything like I was when I received my assignment, you are looking over every communication and trying to imagine what the next 27 months have in store for you. You might be feeling anxious about leaving your family and friends, questioning your qualifications for your project assignment, nervous about living in a new culture, and learning to speak Spanish, but all of these things are normal and you can take comfort in knowing that the 1,600 plus Peace Corps/Nicaragua Volunteers who came before you felt the same way. Rest assured that as a Volunteer you will be trained and supported by a dedicated staff who have helped us to earn recognition as one of the strongest Peace Corps programs in the Inter-America and the Pacific region.

Your first few months in Nicaragua will be a grueling test of your commitment to being a Volunteer. You will face three months of training that will ultimately prepare you for the two years to come.

You will be asked to integrate yourself into this beautiful culture as your body begins to feel the effects of a change in diet, climate, and sleeping patterns, and you will be rewarded with lasting friendships with the people you share this experience with, and a new home away from home with your host family. Then,

you'll be asked to do it all over again, this time alone in a place you've probably never heard of before. But you'll be ready.

Every Peace Corps service is different, there will be ups, and there will be downs, but you are not in it alone: Your fellow Volunteers will be there to commiserate with you when you are down, and they will also be there with you to celebrate your successes. Regardless of where you are in your service you will probably climb volcanoes, eat exotic fruits you've never heard of before, swim in the powerful waves of the Pacific and the crystal clear calm of the Caribbean, and explore coffee country. You will also live and work in a community of the most humble and generous people you'll ever meet.

The Peace Corps is more than just the development work you'll be doing; it's also about sharing who you are with Nicaragua.

Live in every moment. Take advantage of every experience. Don't take yourself too seriously.

—Chris Ortiz y Pino  
Agriculture and Food Security, 2012–15

Dear Prospective Volunteer,

Welcome to the Peace Corps/Nicaragua family! We are so glad you have. Get ready for the most incredible 27-month learning experience of your life. Whether you are fresh out of college or coming in after a try at other things, you are sure to benefit personally and professionally from your service.

My first bit of advice to you is to erase all expectations that you may currently have. Each sector, site, and counterpart is unique, so it is best to create your expectations as you go. Secondly, take things one day at a time, especially during training. Your days will be filled with language classes, training sessions, community integration initiatives, and hanging out with your host family. Keeping a positive attitude while embracing the chaos will help you through it all! Your time here will feel as if it is flying by and at the same time you will discover there is "*más tiempo que vida*" (more time than life). The highs and lows you experience will be the basis for some unforgettable stories; document them in your personal journal, your blog, or whatever medium may be best for you. In the future you will appreciate using them to reminisce on your Peace Corps journey.

As a small business development Volunteer, I dedicate most of my time to working in the schools; however, I still have plenty of time to work with community business owners and pursue other projects that interest me. That is the beauty of this job: You have the flexibility to make it your own and to create projects that benefit your community while fulfilling your passion at the same time. There is no such thing as a "typical day," as things here occur spontaneously and are often subject to change.

Pack lightly, but remember to include the essentials that will keep you sane throughout your service: earplugs, to block out the early-morning crow of your neighbor's rooster; a hard drive loaded with music, movies, exercise videos, books, and photos; a yoga mat or resistance bands to satisfy your physical fitness needs; and light, loose-fitting clothing (because the sun here is hot!).

Welcome on board! We look forward to seeing you soon!  
*Bienvenido/a a la tierra de lagos y volcanes!*

—Tracy Skluzacek  
Small Business Development, 2013–15

## PACKING LIST

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Nicaragua 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 Nicaragua.

The items under the Kitchen, Electronics, and Other Suggestions categories are more optional. You can buy a lot of what you need in Nicaragua, but some items are either difficult to come across in rural areas or are expensive (when compared to the States and in relation to Volunteer salary). Also, mail to Nicaragua is generally reliable. Many Volunteers have items sent to them once they are in-country.

Although packages can be expensive, they do generally arrive with their contents intact. To send packages, use the U.S. Postal Service.

FYI: Many great brands offer discounts for Peace Corps Volunteers. Make sure to ask if a discount applies when you are buying new items. You may have to provide a copy of your acceptance letter.

### General Clothing

Keep in mind: Clothing stores are accessible in Nicaragua and many Volunteers buy used U.S. clothing in thrift shops. High-quality personal items, such as underwear and socks, tend to be more difficult to find. Clothes are generally washed with cold water on a concrete washboard and are hung to dry. Cottons and linens are breathable, which is good for the hot weather, but stretch and wear out quickly; also consider bringing some clothes made of fabrics that tend to hold their shape better and last longer (i.e., nylon, spandex, and polyester blends). Some Volunteers found that purchasing a lot of outdoor camping clothing was unnecessary and made them stand out because the local people do not wear similar attire, but that buying a good pair of shoes was well worth the investment.

- Two pairs of dress pants
- Two to four pairs of casual pants (including jeans, which in Nicaragua can be worn in the professional setting as well)
- Two to three dresses and/or skirts for women
- Two or three long-sleeved shirts or blouses
- Several short-sleeved shirts or blouses (polos are recommended by male Volunteers)
- Several T-shirts and tank tops for casual wear
- Lightweight jacket or cotton sweater for breezy days
- Fleece sweatshirt or insulated jacket (for mountainous, cooler areas)
- One nice outfit for special occasions, especially the swearing-in ceremony (sport coat or dress shirt and tie for men; nice dress or skirt for women)
- Casual evening clothes (for going out in the cities)
- Rain gear: lightweight raincoat (with hood), poncho, and/or durable umbrella
- Swimsuit
- Three to four pairs of shorts/capris
- Exercise wear (e.g., sports bras [hard to find locally] and bicycle shorts) as some larger cities have gyms or aerobic classes
- Good supply of socks (those with a cotton-polyester blend last longer and dry quicker)
- A three- to four-week supply of underwear (cotton is best)

- Three to four good bras for female Volunteers (items of comparable quality to U.S. brands can be expensive)
- Sleepwear
- Lightweight robe
- Belt
- Hat or cap for sun protection

### **Shoes**

- One or two pairs of shoes for professional wear (nicer sandals or comfortable closed-toed shoes that you would be able to walk long distances in if needed)
- One or two pairs of tennis or running shoes
- One pair of sport sandals for casual wear
- Flip-flops or other shoes for the shower (also available locally)
- Hiking boots (if you are a serious hiker and plan to do some intense excursions, but many Volunteers have found that the extra bulk is a burden and that they are not necessary for most outdoor activities)

### **Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items**

- Small (travel size) supply of toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, soap (and dish), sunscreen, etc., to use upon arrival and to refill for short trips that you might make. You will be able to find these items, even American brand names, readily available and affordable
- Any makeup that you might want to use (small availability in-country and expensive)
- Contact solution (if you choose to wear contact lenses; solution is not provided by Peace Corps and difficult to find)
- A three- to six-month supply of tampons (the local selection is limited and more expensive than in the United States; many female Volunteers have tampons sent to them in packages from home; pads are readily available in-country) OR, as an alternative to tampons, some female Volunteers suggest investing in a reusable menstrual cup
- Any special products that you use (i.e., special brand of deodorant, hair products, face wash, razor blades etc.) The Peace Corps/Nicaragua medical office provides your medication, as well as sunscreen, insect repellent, vitamins, Band-Aids, condoms, and you can replace most of what is provided for you in the medical kit you will receive once in-country. Do not over pack on these items.

### **Kitchen**

- Special spices/seasoning that you enjoy using at home that are difficult to find in Nicaragua (e.g., taco seasoning, garlic pepper, lemon pepper, Italian seasoning)
- Recipes
- Vegetable peeler
- Garlic press
- Mess kit (useful when cooking on your own before buying a whole dishware/cookware set)
- Plastic storage containers
- Measuring cups/spoons
- One good kitchen knife (difficult to find)

### **Electronics**

All electronics are very expensive in Nicaragua. Volunteers suggest bringing these from home. You might want to consider getting personal property insurance if your electronics are especially valuable

- Laptop or netbook (Internet access is available throughout Nicaragua and Volunteers find personal laptops helpful in writing work reports, other work related letters/grants/budget proposals, and for communication purposes)
- Portable DVD player
- Digital camera
- USB, thumb/flash drive
- MP3 player or small radio
- Speakers
- Surge protector
- Most Volunteers purchase inexpensive cellphones after several weeks in-country (the system is set up to pay-as-you-go and you are able to make calls to the U.S. as well as in-country)

### **Miscellaneous**

- Inexpensive battery-powered watch and/or travel alarm clock
- A set of sheets (double-size flat sheets will fit any bed)
- Two lightweight bath towels and washcloths (quick-dry towels can be found at most outdoor gear stores)
- Camping knife and/or utility tool
- Sewing kit
- Plastic bags (for keeping things dry and/or free of dust)
- Bandanas or handkerchiefs
- Earplugs (very difficult to find in-country)
- Posters for decorating your home (and mounting material, i.e., tacks)
- One or two pairs of sunglasses
- Large duffel bag or hiking backpack for traveling
- Tote bag or daypack for traveling to school or around town
- Gardening gloves and tools
- Sturdy water bottle
- Workout materials (such as a jump rope or resistance bands)
- Headlamp and/or good flashlight
- Extra batteries
- Pictures of family and friends to share with members of your community (they also come in handy when you are trying to practice your Spanish and talk about home)
- Small amount of school supplies (markers, glue, scissors, stickers, etc.) to use in schools and with youth and community groups
- Games (cards, travel board games, etc.)
- Sports equipment (an American football, Frisbee, baseball glove, cleats, basketball shoes, etc.)
- Yoga mat
- French press
- Plug converter (two prongs to three)
- Extension cord

The Peace Corps Office has a fully stocked library full of many resource books, as well as novels and other reading material. Instead of packing a lot of books initially (which can be heavy and bulky), consider bringing one or two and then having more sent to you or using/trading those in the Peace Corps office. The Peace Corps will also give you a lot of Spanish language resources—dictionaries, grammar books, etc.—as well as technical resource manuals for your specific project.

## **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 will be relevant to everyone, and the list is not comprehensive.

### **Family**

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

### **Passport/Travel**

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

### **Medical/Health**

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

### **Insurance**

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

### **Personal Papers**

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

### **Voting**

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

### **Personal Effects**

- 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](http://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

<b>For Questions About</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Toll-free extension</b>	<b>Direct/Local</b>
Responding to an invitation	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Country information	Benjamin Rance Desk Officer	ext. 2611 <a href="mailto:brance@peacecorps.gov">brance@peacecorps.gov</a>	202.692.2522
Plane tickets, passports, visas, or other travel matters	CWT SATO Travel	ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Legal clearance:	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Medical clearance and forms processing (includes dental)	Screening Nurse	ext. 1500	202.692.1500
Medical reimbursements (handled by a subcontractor)			800.544.1802
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