

Panama: It's a big country.



HOLA

Congratulations for having been selected for an AFS program and accept to do your volunteer service in PANAMA. We are looking forward to meeting you in person and are eager to share our country with you.

You will find out that Panama is not just a Canal or bananas. It has a rich and distinctive, a diversity of identities. Here you will find and adapt to many new different customs, behaviors and foods, among many other things.

1. THE COUNTRY

Panama is, geographically, part of Central America but, culturally and historically influenced by the Caribbean and South America. There is very limited cultural or historical connection with Mexico, so you will not find spicy food, for example.

Panama has just over 4 million people. Over one million lives in Panama City and the surrounding urban areas, in a territory of 77,000 square kilometers, a bit smaller than Austria.

There are ten provinces and five indigenous territories. Each province has districts, and each district usually has a larger capital community of the same name. AFS programs operate in all provinces except in Darien. The first indigenous territories were first created in the 1930s and allow for the environment and the traditional cultures to be maintained.

The climate is Tropical, very hot and humid, except in certain towns in the highlands of western Panama such as Volcán, Río Sereno, Cerro Punta and Boquete, which can be much cooler. For most of the country, the daily average temperature is of 25c or 75F. It can reach as high as 39c or 90F. The dry season, which we call “Verano” lasts from early December to mid April. The rainy season is called “Invierno”, lasting from mid-April to early December.

2. HISTORY

Over 60 original indigenous tribes that lived in Panama were reduced to 7 after the arrival of the Spaniards in 1501: Kunas, Ngöbe, Teribe, Bokotá, Bri Bri, Emberá and Wuonaaan, which still exist today and are common to see wearing their traditional dresses walking around the cities.

Panama became independent from Spain on November 28th, 1821 and voluntarily joined the Grand Colombia federation of South American States. After various tries, Panama became independent from Colombia on November 3rd. 1903,

Shortly after this independence, a treaty with United States granted privileges for the construction of the Panama Canal and this project had a huge influence on the Panamanian culture with the influx of immigrants from all parts of the world.

Panama has totally and very successfully administered the Panama Canal since December 31st 1999. The expansion of the Canal in 2016 is an example of the high growth that the Panamanian economy had for the past 30 years.

3. PANAMANIAN PEOPLE

Stereotypes and generalizations are not a good way to describe a whole nation, but we can share views that foreigners usually have of Panamanians:

Friendly
Good dancers
Takes life without worries
Unpunctual
Loud
Concerned about other people's opinion
Gossipy



4. MANNERS

Especially in the beginning, when you are likely to be introduced to a lot of people all the time, please **remember that some common courtesies will help you** make a good first impression. You can then build the type of friendships and acquaintances that will make your stay in Panama a lot more fun.

When being introduced to anyone, shake hands firmly and look at the other person's eyes. When being introduced to a female close to your age, kiss each other once on the cheek.

It's good to say Please: **"Por favor"** and Thank you **"Muchas gracias"** whenever you ask for or are given something.

Entering or leaving a room without a greeting is rude in Panama! Be courteous to everyone, even small children or people you see often.

Always try to eat the snacks or cold drinks that may be offered to you at homes that you visit.

Keep your laundry in its proper place and separate from clean clothes. And **NEVER** leave wet towels or dirty clothes in the bathroom, over or under the bed. Because our climate is hot and humid, it will make the clothes get bad odors.

Most Panamanian households don't have hot water. But everyone is expected to take a shower every morning.

Panamanian parents will not allow that your friends visit you in your bedroom, especially if they are of the opposite sex.



5. YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people spend most of their time studying, watching TV, listening to music or in social networks. Parties, going out and social events are reserved for weekends.

Baseball, soccer and basketball are the most popular sports. Sport facilities and youth organizations are not well established in most communities.

Dating, as such, does not exist in Panama. Terms such as **"special friend"** or **"just a friend"** are not applicable here and couples that spend time together will be described as "novios". "Novios" are expected to eventually get married. To have a **"novio"** boyfriend, or a **"novia"** girlfriend, means that parents approve of the relationship.

Parents usually don't react well to having their children, regardless of their age, in a relationship that they are not aware or disapprove of.

Anyone over 18 years of age dating a minor is against Panamanian law. Parents usually prohibit their daughters to have "novios" until they over 18 years old and are very much against close relations to boys or men who are from very different socioeconomic backgrounds, with an unusual lifestyle or much older. Even when most AFS participants are obviously not looking for marriage, the same rules apply to them. **Host parents might disapprove of dating or that you date someone they don't like.**

CLOTHES: Bring light, informal clothes such as jeans, cotton shirts and T-shirts, shorts, sneakers, one pair of black dress-shoes, socks, cotton underwear, swimming suit and a towel. Participants placed in Boquete, Rio Sereno, Volcán and Cerro Punta will also need sweaters, a light jacket and heavy socks due to the cooler climate.

Shorts are fine to use inside the house or for the beach, but **short shorts are not for walking around town**. It's a good idea for females to bring at least a few simple cocktail dresses, to be used if invited to special occasions such as a wedding, christening or funeral. For male participants, a few short or long sleeve shirts are fine.

Things that you **SHOULD NOT BRING:**

- **Clothes that need special cleaning procedures, such as dry cleaning.**
- **Expensive or gold jewelry**
- **Items of great sentimental value for you**

6. COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS IN THE HOME COUNTRY

Most families in Panama no longer have a phone at home, as most people have their own cell phones. To communicate with family and friends in your country, you will use your cell phone and AFS Panamá will give you a local SIM card at the Arrival Orientation to use during your stay in the country.

Shortly after, you should send a message to your contacts at home to inform your new Panamanian telephone number and stop using your number from the home country.

AFS Panama will not accept that you keep your number from the home country as the main contact, as this has proven to be a problem in case of Emergencies. If you don't have internet access, calling your foreign number or for you to call locally, may create problems when you most need to communicate quickly. Most people here use WhatsApp as their first choice for communication.

Don't bring an expensive cell phone and don't sign up for high-cost plan local cell phone plan. The best deal could be prepaid cell phone cards, which are more expensive to make calls per minute but easier to control the cost. Cards are no more than US\$10.00 and phone companies make offers that multiply the cost several times depending on the day or hour that you buy the card.



Before travelling to Panama, make sure your family and close friends know that you will be calling them through a free platform, for example WhatsApp. But be aware that these phone calls will interfere with the adaptation process if you call too often. The ideal would be to call no more than once or twice a month. If you are having a difficult situation, even if you inform your natural family first, it will be the responsibility of the local AFS volunteers and the AFS Panama National Office to help you find a solution. We encourage you to talk directly to this support network in Panama.

7. MAIL

Mail service in Panama is generally safe but letters to or from Europe take at least 2 weeks to arrive.

Sending or getting packages takes considerably more time, sometimes up to eight weeks. If you receive a package from home, you may have to pay **TAXES**, and **please don't have family and friends send personal packages to the AFS Panama office address.** Have them send any package directly to your host community. The AFS Panama office Staff can help you identify the best way to do this depending on where in the country you live.

Using courier companies like DHL, UPS etc. will be very expensive to send anything more than a small envelope with a card or piece of paper.

Most AFS participants have a general delivery mail address. You need to go to the local postal office to get your mail, by asking the clerk if there is any letter or package for you. **NEVER** send mail to your residential address. Your family and friends must send you mail to address that start with the words "Entrega General". A typical and correct general delivery address would look like this:

"your name"
Entrega General
"host town name", "host province"
PANAMA

Some host families have a post office box ("Apartado"). In that case, your name must be added by the host family so that the mail service accepts your letters and packages in that post office box.

A typical and correct post office address would look like this:

"your name"
C/O "your host father or host mother"
Apartado 9999-9999
"host town", "host province"
PANAMA

Please look in your Host Family Application to determine what type of mailing address you need to use while you live in that host family and leave the correct address to your natural family and friends.



8. GIFTS FOR THE HOST FAMILY

You may want to bring a small gift to your host family. Previous participants have suggested typical things from your country that are small, easy and safe to carry, such as books, candy, key-chains, etc.

Give them as soon as you arrive to the home or the day after. In Panama, people open their gifts in front of the person who gave them.

9. KEEPING YOUR VALUABLES SAFE

Carry small amounts of cash. Don't carry more than r US\$40 on you, unless you are planning to spend it right away in something specific. Don't leave any money in plain sight or anywhere that is not properly locked at your host family home. Your suitcase is a good place, that you should keep locked..

Never lend money to anyone: If someone asks you for money (friends, other AFS participants, host family members, etc.) just say that AFS does not allow you to lend or give money. Inform the AFS National Office Staff whenever someone asks you for money.

Never put your money in bank accounts of friends or members of the host family! It is difficult for foreigners to open a bank account in Panama, but never accept any offer to have your money under someone else's name or account. Participants are advised to discuss with AFS Panama National Office matters concerning their particular situation regarding money or safekeeping issues in order to avoid misunderstandings.

AFS Panama is not responsible for any loss or theft of money or valuables by the participants:

Never share with anyone your PIN (Personal Identification Number) to withdraw cash from your credit cards, not even your closest friends.

Be careful where you leave your passport and Residency card! Always carry a copy of your passport. Once you arrive to the country, AFS Panama will give you an AFS ID card. Until you receive your Temporary Resident Card, this will be your primary identification. Your passport will be used only for specific matters, such as cashing checks in a bank.

10. GETTING MONEY FROM HOME

By far, the best way to bring money from home is by getting a debit or a credit card before leaving. Make sure with your bank that it allows for withdrawals of cash at any ATM in Panama. The best systems are "Plus" and "Cirrus". These names should be in the back of your card.

The best ways to get money from home quickly may be through "**Western Union**". You can look for information about them in the internet at www.westernunion.com and find out how much is charged to send the amount of money you expect. If the host community in Panama is not listed as an agent location, there should be a larger city nearby where an agent operates.

10. BANK ACCOUNTS

It's very difficult for foreigners to open bank accounts in Panama. It depends on how flexible local bank officials decide to be with each foreign student. Host family members can be helpful in this matter, especially if they happen to know someone who works at a local bank but remember; **Bank accounts should only be opened under participant's name.** Never open a joint account with anyone and never deposit your money in someone else's account.

11. RESIDENCE PERMIT

Most AFS participants arrive to Panama without a visa or, for some nationalities, a "Tourist visa", which are easy to obtain.

AFS Panama has a special agreement with the Immigration Department. They will issue a Temporary Resident Permit, through a process in place since 2006.

At the Arrival Orientation, you will fill out the registration form and provide the following:

- A photocopy of **all pages** of your passport – In individual 8.5-inch X 11 in or in A4 pages. Please do not cut these pages to a different size.
- To pay for the residency permit, each Year or Semester participant should pay US\$350 in cash.
- 8 pictures (1.5 inches X 1.5 inches) or smaller size, but **NO BIGGER**, showing your full face, no glasses and **individually cut**.



The Temporary Residence Permit Fee – Explained

Foreign AFS participants hosted in Panama in the Year and Semester programs enter the country with a very easy process, either because they enter as Tourists that do not need a visa or get a Tourist visa that is easily obtained in their home countries. Participants going to most other host countries need to meet a series of requirements in order to get a visa that would be valid during the total duration of the program, or obtain a type of visa or residence permit that is then changed once they are in the host country. Sometimes, these requirements cost substantial amounts of money.

Many years ago, AFS Panamá signed an agreement with the National Migration Service office, which simplified the process for AFS participants to remain in the country for a Semester or a Year. This was necessary because AFS participants remain in Panama not as tourists, but engaging in a variety of activities such as attending a high school or doing community service at a local institution. Taking part in these activities would usually require obtaining different types of residence permits.

For a regular foreigner wanting to reside in Panama, a Temporary Residence Permit costs at least US\$1,500, just in legal fees. Year and Semester AFS participants to Panama are required to pay US\$350.00 to cover the expenses related to changing their status from Tourist to having a Temporary Residence Permit. These expenses include: Extra night in Panama City during the Arrival Orientation in order to visit the Immigration Office and get registered for the Temporary Residence Permit, meals and transportation during this day, payment to Immigration Officials who register AFS participants on a Saturday or Sunday (in order to avoid the huge crowds during weekdays), registration fee, notarizing copies of the passport, legal fees to prepare the formal request, any translation or notarizing that may be required, medical exam, the Temporary Residence Permit itself, transportation to and from a second visit to Panama City to get the immigration card, cost of the immigration card, meals and transportation during the stay in Panama City, one night at a hostel for participants living far from the city, closing of the Residence Permit at the end of the stay, etc.

The process to issue the Temporary Residence Permit card can take several months. The important thing is that, as soon as the participants are registered during the Arrival Orientation, their status becomes legal. Just the fact that the participants have registered, getting a stamp in their passports with the registration number, proves to authorities that they have started the process to change from a tourist to a Temporary Resident.

Some participants meet foreigners who recommend they remain in Panama until their time as tourists expire and they then leave the country for a few days and re-

enter as Tourists again. This practice is illegal, as these persons are, in fact, unauthorized residents.

It may happen that AFS Semester participants get their Temporary Residence Card just before their return to the home country at the end of the program. At this point, all of the expenses listed above have been made and the process by the Immigration Office was just too long. But as mentioned before, the entire stay in Panama was legally supported by the registration that took place upon arrival and the process needs to be completed.

In AFS Panama, we believe that the system of legalizing the temporary residence offered to AFS foreign participants is convenient and less costly than going through the process in the home country, which may involve more complicated paperwork, perhaps an in-person interview at a Panamanian Consulate, and having to complete the procedure before arriving to Panama would be a challenge if the desire is to start the program as planned.

If you have any question, please send an email to **info-panama@afs.org**



12. AFS PANAMA RULES

Some rules, defined both internationally and nationally, apply to all AFS participants and are designed to avoid situations that could jeopardize the participant's safety and success in the program.

AFS International rules

1) No driving

AFS participants can't drive motorized vehicles, including cars, motorcycles, motor scooters, airplanes, boats, etc. This rule applies to driving in private land, driveways, parking lots, private roads, etc. The participant is forbidden to drive in Panama, even if he or she has a valid driver's license from the home country.

2) No drugs

Possession, use and involvement in illegal drugs for non-medicinal purposes, is not allowed. AFS participants are not excepted from Panamanian laws and the penalties for dealing, carrying, using or being involved with illegal substances are very severe. Anyone breaking this rule that is caught by Panamanian police will be fined and imprisoned no matter how small the amount. Natural parents are responsible for all legal fees and costs related to any drug offense. AFS may send a participant home for using drugs, for selling drugs, holding drugs for a friend, going to or staying at a party where the participant knows that drugs are being consumed, etc.

3) No hitchhiking

Although it may be common and safe for you to hitchhike in your country, this can be quite dangerous in many countries, including Panama. It is very uncommon to find honest people asking strangers for a ride. For your own safety, you should refrain from the practice.

AFS Panama rules

1) Community Project attendance

All AFS participants must comply with the community project attendance requirements. This includes their rules regarding dress code, consistent attendance and acceptable behavior. In case a participant is expelled, it could be a cause for an early return home.

2) Policies on drinking alcoholic beverages

Most host families in Panama expect their AFS participant not to drink alcohol and will be upset if he/she comes home drunk. Host families determine specific rules regarding drinking alcohol. In case that a host family complains to AFS about the drinking habits or any specific incident involving alcohol consumption, AFS Panama will consider it ground for disciplinary measures and a change of behavior will be expected. If the participant insists in this behavior, it could be a reason for an ER.

All AFS Panama activities, including orientations, social events and trips organized by volunteers or the National Office are alcohol free. Everyone taking part in these activities needs to confirm that there will be no alcohol involved.

3) Policies on travel

For the first 4 weeks, we don't recommend our participants to leave their host community because this affect the adaptation process.

These rules apply to any travel that involves leaving the host community or overnights outside the host home.

3.1. Inside the country with members of the host family: With any member of his or her immediate host family (parents, siblings) or the community service project, you need to inform the AFS Local volunteer the dates, itinerary and telephone number where you can be reached in case of emergency.

3.2. Outside the country with members of the host family or project: You can travel outside the country with host parents, host siblings and project **after** you receive their temporary resident card. Don't plan trips or purchase tickets before having the resident in your hands. Any special situation will be managed in the AFS National Office.

Participants traveling outside Panama are responsible for the costs and the migration procedures. You need to fill in a form called "TRAVEL WAIVER" which releases AFS from any responsibility, including care and welfare, travel arrangements, arrangement of medical services, legal assistance, food and lodging, medical or financial assistance. This form will also include travel dates, destination, accommodation, names and age of travel companions and contact information in case of emergencies.

3.3. Inside the country without members of the host family:

Any trip inside the country without members of the immediate host family involving at least one overnight stay is considered independent travel. Depending on the nature of the independent travel and the level of personal risk for the participant, as perceived by the Staff of the AFS Panama National Office, a "TRAVEL WAIVER" may be required. It is understood that the participant covers all expenses related to independent travels.



Local tour operators may offer optional tours to hosted AFS participants and paid by the AFS participants themselves: The fees are paid directly to the tour operators or organizers. These trips are considered “independent trip”, and the participant needs to sign a Travel Waiver and AFS Panama is not responsible for care and welfare, travel arrangements, arrangement of medical services, legal assistance, food and lodging, medical or financial assistance, or any other responsibility during these trips.

Places in Panama that REQUIRE TRAVEL WAIVERS when participants travel there by themselves or with a tour operator are: the islands in Bocas del Toro, Venao Beach, Santa Catalina Beach, Iguana Island, Guna Yala, Coiba Island, Darien Province, climbing Barú Volcano, trips to Embera. If you want to make an independent trip, you will always need to contact your local volunteer and ask if AFS Panama will require the TRAVEL WAIVER.

If AFS Panama organizes a trip to hosted participants, a Travel Waiver is not necessary and the fees are paid by the hosted participants.

3.4. Outside the country without members of the host family:

Any trip outside the country without members of the host family is considered as an independent travel and will require a “TRAVEL WAIVER”. It is understood that the participant covers all expenses related to the trip. AFS Participants can travel outside the country **after obtaining the Temporary Resident ID CARD.** Participants that travel outside Panama are responsible for the costs and the migration procedures.

Participants are not to travel independently or outside the country for more than two weeks at a time and only during their vacations from the project.

Trips outside the country need to be informed to the AFS National Office more than 2 weeks in advance and have permission from your project.

Please remember that the main point is to help you make safe choices in a new and unfamiliar culture and that before travelling you are well informed about the risks during the trip.

3.4. Program Termination or stay in Panama after the program ends:

When the participant voluntarily abandons the program or if they do not return to the home after the program ends, they will need to sign a “PROGRAM TERMINATION FORM”. This document releases AFS from any responsibility, including care and welfare, travel arrangements, medical, legal & financial assistance and services. The participant will accept that

all program services provided by AFS will be terminated. Besides this, the participant needs to leave the country after the program ends, for example to Costa Rica, and come back as a ‘tourist’ to Panama.

4) Policies on visits by relatives or friends from the home country.

Visits by members of the natural family and friends from the home country can be very disruptive to the participant's adaptation process and, regardless of the circumstances of the visit, they put undue burden on the participant and the host families.

AFS participants in Panama are strongly encouraged to delay visits by relatives and friends until the last two months of the program and are ALWAYS required to inform the AFS Panama National Office, at least four weeks in advance, about their plans to have this type of visits.

Any relative or friend from the home country that is planning to visit a participant in Panama must first contact the AFS Office in the sending country to ask for approval for the visit. This approval will be made in cooperation with AFS Panama.

Any AFS participant that receives a visit by a relative or friend from the home country and is planning to travel with this person around the country, must present a “TRAVEL WAIVER”, that must be in the AFS Panama Office 15 days before the participant leaves the host family.

Because the participant is expected to attend or the work project as a priority, travel around the country with friends or relatives from the home country should happen during the vacation time allocated by the work project.

The recommended times of the year to do this are: For participants arriving in August/October: During the months of January or February. For the participants arriving in March: the last week in July and first week in August.

6) Policies regarding places of entertainment

Participants in the Community Service and University Programs, all of which are over the age of 18, are cautioned about the type of safety measures that anyone attending these places should exercise. These include avoiding talking drinks that have been handled by strangers, taking extremely good care of personal possessions such as handbags, wallets, cameras, etc.



13. CORONAVIRUS IN PANAMA

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected Panama as much as most other countries. Participants travelling during 2021 will receive an update before their departure from the home country, but this information from October 2020, is provided to share what is happening at this time.

Anyone looking for information about the epidemic, will find that the number of cases in Panama are relatively high compared to countries with a similar population. This has been attributed, among other things, to the fact that the first local cases happened to Panamanians that went on vacation to Europe and the US, during our carnival holidays, when there were no special precautions in those destinations as these countries were still in their own initial stages of the epidemic

Despite the many small outbreaks that happened when the travelers returned home, the number of cases was kept relatively low for several months, until the economic activity was reopened, when the number of cases increased as expected.

From the start, Panama has conducted a higher number of tests per million people than most countries and the death rate has been maintained at around 2%, which are considered positive indicators of the effectiveness of the testing capability and of the medical attention. The transparency of the statistics is another reason to properly evaluate Panama's response to the epidemic. It is well documented that every positive case has been counted and every fatality related with the virus has been included in the reports.

The Panamanian health system, and the extraordinary measures to increase its response to the people requiring medical treatment, has resulted in appropriate care to anyone becoming sick during this time.

Coronavirus tests are readily available to anyone anywhere in the country. All positive cases are reflected in a real time digital map and some areas have been subject of specific precautions and quarantine measures.

It is expected that the economic activity will continue to reopen according to the national plan. Panama had one of the most dynamic and growing economies in the world for the past 25 years. It is expected to regain and surpass this usual level of growth during 2021, to be again one of the three fastest growing economies in Latin America.

14. ARRIVAL ORIENTATION

Even if there is no a quarantine requirement for visitors arriving in Panama at the time, the Orientation for

participants coming in the first part of 2021 will be for 10 days and at a location where there is controlled contact with anyone outside the group. This should make the participants and host families feel more confident about the program during the previous months, when there may still be some concern about the epidemic.

During this Orientation, there will be Spanish classes, discussions about Panamanian culture, the adaptation process and outings to points of interest.

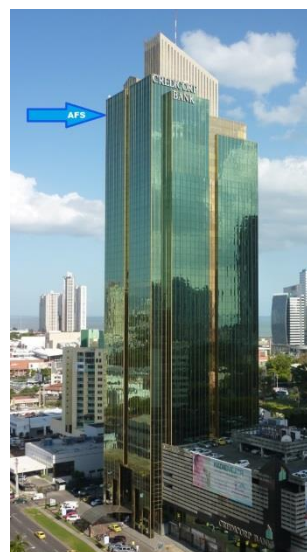
15. AFS in Panama

AFS operates in Panama since 1959. Most larger communities in the country have an AFS Local Chapter, and there are 33 chapters. Local volunteers are the ones that look for and select host families, organize local events and provide support to the participants.

Each chapter has a volunteer that coordinates the Local Chapter and other may help as Counselors or Treasurer.

The AFS Local Chapters sometimes organize social or educational events for the AFS participants, any trip or fun activity they do is voluntary and there is no obligation or plan for them to coordinate tours to other places in the country.

The AFS Panama National Office is located in Panama City. Participants are always welcome to contact the Staff by calling the office phone 223-8477 or the **Emergency Phone 6677-3032**, which is available 24/7. If you want to visit the office, please call the Staff ahead of time, to confirm that the person you want to talk to will be in.



The AFS Panama office is located in a high rise building in downtown Panama City, in a coworking environment. All participants are welcome to visit and events are organized periodically.