



## Focus on PANAMA

# Community Service Program

### Adult Program

*"I had the chance to work for six months in Dolega, Province of Chiriquí, in the Community Service program. This was a unique experience for me and changed my perspective of life. Life in the Panamanian culture is learning the warmth of Latin culture and the special qualities of the Panamanian. This was an incredible opportunity to live with a Panamanian family and also enjoy the small community where I interacted every day during the six months. I was working with teenagers in a regional school and also in a rehabilitation center for minors. This was exciting, valuable and demanding.... I would like to thank AFS Panama for providing me with a special experience – really, you can be limited in your experience just because your lack of creativity!*

*"A hug from a Chinese-Canadian-Chiricano-Panameño."*

*Alan Chu, participant from Canada, 2003*

Panama's culture reflects multiple influences, Spanish, African, Chinese, East and West Indian—and American. The U.S., after all, built and ran the 50-mile-long Panama Canal, the country's best-known economic asset, from 1914 through 1999. But today the U.S. is gone, and Panamanians, having lived many decades with a foreign presence and a canal that brings a nonstop flow of international commerce, are cosmopolitan and comfortable with visitors. Contrasting Panama's urbanity, however, more than half the country remains tropical rainforest, sheltering more species of birds than the U.S. and Canada combined. In addition, seven native Panamanian tribes still live according to prehistoric customs. At least one tribe still hunts with blowpipes.

### **Community Service Programs**

AFS's Community Service program gives you the opportunity to share in and contribute to the life of a community in Panama by living and working alongside its members in a community-based service organization. At the organization, you will be asked to pitch in and offer assistance in whatever capacity might be needed and to share the knowledge and experience you have gained from your home culture in the process. No one expects you to be an expert with all the answers to local problems or the ability to change local conditions. Rather, you are expected to be a willing participant in a process of mutual discovery. This experience will present you with innumerable learning opportunities both personally and professionally.

Worldwide, AFS Community Service program participants contribute their talents and energies to a variety of social programs that range from protecting the environment to teaching children or adults, from assisting the elderly and the disabled to defending human rights, from enhancing public health to helping local businesses become established.

Past participants in Panama have worked mostly at rural primary schools doing manual tasks, building and refurbishing classrooms and other facilities. However, all specifics—

including assignments, orientations, logistics and activities—vary depending on the program cycle.

## ***AFS & Your Experience***

The AFS Panama Community Service Program began in 1996 and has grown in the variety of participants from different countries. This program has also allowed us to serve rural communities that cannot host high-school participants.

### **Arrival orientation**

Participants are met at Panama City's airport by staff and volunteers. During a daylong orientation at a hotel in Panama City, participants receive basic information about Panama, an introduction to the service projects and their communities and an assessment of what to expect. Afterward, participants travel by bus to their host communities.

### **Additional orientations**

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Panama will provide you with several others. AFS orientations offer participants a chance to meet for several days and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions also provide language training as well as new information and ways of looking at things, while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experiences while preparing them to handle their community service assignments.

## ***Living in Panama***

### **Living arrangements**

Some participants in AFS Community Service programs live with local families, sharing their daily lives, their meals and perhaps a host sibling's bedroom. Other participants live where their community service organization conducts its business. Still others live in rooms provided elsewhere by their local service organizations.

### **Typical day**

A participant's typical day depends on the assignment and the location of the host community. In general, after participants finish with their daily work schedule, they join in various pastimes including sports, handicrafts or sharing activities with their families or other members of the host community or work placement.

### **Food**

Panamanian food reflects the influence of the different cultural groups that have settled the country. Rice is the staple of the diet and is eaten twice a day. Meals include meat, beans and *plantanos* and vegetables including tomatoes, carrots and cabbage. Spicy foods are very rare. Meals are often accompanied by sweet cold fruit drinks called *chichas*. Few Panamanian families are vegetarians.

Family members may eat informally and at different times. Few families have the habit of gathering at the dinner table every evening. That custom is reserved for special occasions or when families have visitors. Panamanians often offer food as a sign of friendship.

### **Clothing**

Clothes needed for the Community Service program depend on the assigned activities or tasks. For example, participants who work with small children dress informally in T-shirts and jeans. Though nice clothes are recommended for special occasions, most of the time, participants dress casually and comfortably.

### **Activities**

In addition to orientations, AFS Panama organizes an optional trip to Bocas Island or Kuna's Islands. Furthermore, each local chapter organizes activities within the community such as recreational trips to the beach, mountains, picnic, etc. or educational trips to museums, factories, handicraft centers, etc. Participants are also expected to integrate themselves into their host communities' daily activities.

### **Health**

AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Panama (which you can get from your government or find easily on the Internet) with your doctor at home, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

### **Safety**

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Panamanian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

### **Travel**

AFS's Community Service programs allow participants to travel on their own through their host countries, typically for a week or more, to explore and absorb each country's cultural diversity.

### **Program Prices**

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host community; travel from your host community to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host family or other placement arrangement; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price are: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

## ***Country Information***

### **Geography and Climate**

The Republic of Panama is about the size of the Czech Republic, Austria or Sierra Leone, and forms a link between Central and South America on the narrowest part of the Central American isthmus. It borders both the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean and lies between Colombia to the south and Costa Rica to the north.

The climate is tropical and daily temperatures range between 21°C and 32°C (70°F and 90°). It is cooler in the mountains (between 10-18°C/50-64°F). The rainy season is from mid-April to December; the dry season is from January through early April. With two oceans washing its shores, Panama is rich in marine life; its flourishing jungles are filled with exotic native American animals.

The country's indigenous name means "abundance of fish."

### **Population**

The population numbers more than 2.8 million. People of mixed descent, called mestizos (mixed Amerindian and white) make up 70% of the population. Blacks and other ethnic groups account for 21%. American Indians represent 9%, and they are concentrated in three tribes: the Kunas, Ngobe-Bugles (or Guaymies) and Chocoos. The capital city of Panama is Panama City (population 700,000).

### **Government**

The country has had a democratic form of government since 1989. The president is elected by popular vote every five years. There is also the Assembly, consisting of 67 legislators, and the Supreme Court.

### **Religion**

The majority of Panamanians are Roman Catholic (85%), followed by Protestant (10%) and Muslim (5%).

## ***Before You Go***

### **Looking Forward**

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that if you prepare prior to leaving, you will have the best experience.

Make every effort to improve your Spanish language skills before departure. Then, to familiarize yourself with life in Panama, visit your local library or search the Internet.

AFS International's website, AFS.org, provides links to websites for each participating country.

Although every participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Panama. This veteran will be an excellent resource regarding living and working there. If you do not know a veteran, please contact your local AFS volunteer or your country's AFS office.

In addition, AFS will provide you with essential information about your host country to prepare you for immersion in a new and exciting culture.

Finally, Panamanians will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised how much they already know about your country's history and politics. Therefore, you will find it helpful to be informed about current events in your home community and country.

### **Documents**

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you will need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. AFS will help you obtain the visa and provide you with instructions regarding the required documents.

### ***How to Apply***

To become a participant in this country's Community Service Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Country data	Size	75,990 sq km, 29,340 sq miles
	Population	2,739,000
	Official language	Spanish
	Government	Constitutional republic
Currency	US dollar known as balboa	
Useful website	<a href="http://www.visitpanama.com">www.visitpanama.com</a> <a href="http://www.panamainfo.com">www.panamainfo.com</a> <a href="http://www.pancanal.com">www.pancanal.com</a>	
AFS Panama website	<a href="http://afsweb.afs.org/countryp.nsf/pages/panama">http://afsweb.afs.org/countryp.nsf/pages/panama</a>	

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>