



**Programas  
Interculturales**  
*Colombia*

## **Safety Tips for Colombia**

### **WELCOME TO COLOMBIA!**

AFS Colombia and its volunteers would like to welcome you to our country.

Colombia is a country full of culture, traditions, color and friendship. Hoping that your AFS stay is a pleasant experience, we ask you to follow these suggestions. Like any other country, Colombia faces the challenge of ensuring citizens and visitors' safety. In order to avoid problems, we have created this manual with some recommendations.

These will be useful for your own safety.

### **Introduction – General Advice by AFS International**

A primary objective of experimental learning programs such as those offered by AFS is to help the participant learn through observation, question, dialogue, discussion and experience. From experience, AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn is great, but it is not necessarily easy. Participants encounter complex situations along the way and there is potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. If participants are left on their own, the consequences could be very distressing. For these reasons, with the help of host families, local community, AFS contacts and project personnel, AFS has devised the system of "Program Support" for all participants providing a wide range of supportive activities and services. The purpose is to provide a "Safety Net", a consistently supportive environment in which participants can ask questions, obtain advice and help.

AFS cannot supply all the possible answers but through our support systems, we can help to guide participants towards asking the right questions.

It is not possible to try to anticipate all possible situations pertaining to individual safety concerns. Many of these issues are specific to individual countries or parts of a single country. In general, AFS recommends talking with the host family, AFS local committee members and staff from the host

project soon after the participant arrives at the host family home about any of the information in this guidebook and any question participants may have about specific personal issues.

AFS suggests that participants ask their host family about specific situations about which they are concerned or worried, recognizing that most of the information about the host country, prevalent in movies and in media publications, may not be accurate for the country or the specific area in which the family lives.

Within this context, what follows are some general tips and suggestions.

## **Safety at home**

### **General advice by AFS International**

In general, the family is not likely to know what you are worried about and needs to be informed about this by you. For example, such questions as "I have heard it is unsafe to walk around outside after dark, is this true here? Is it safe to wear my jewelry to work?"

In general, AFS encourages you to ask the family about how they secure their home, for example: How should you respond when a stranger calls at the door? Will you receive a house key? Who can you call if you arrive home without a key or there is no one in the house? Your neighbors? Which ones? What should you do in the event of an earthquake or some other disaster? What does your family advice about answering the door when you are home alone? Please keep in mind that doors are locked at all times in Colombian homes, and you should adopt this practice.

Host families will usually explain about making telephone calls, but may not realize that you may have concerns about how to answer the telephone, especially if you are not comfortable in using the host country language and are not yet familiar with people who may be calling. AFS encourages you to ask your host parents how you should respond when answering the telephone. What information should you give? What information should you not give?

### **Specific information and instructions by AFS Colombia**

- Most houses and buildings have bars on the windows, on the doors and a fence around the property. Furthermore a lot of condos, but also single-family-homes have armed security guards.
- Keep the doors of the house locked at all the time. When you are alone, always make sure the door is locked and chained.
- Never open the door to strangers, unless your family informs you that a relative/friend is coming.
- Ask your host family what to do when a stranger comes to your home when you are alone. For example, whether or not you should answer the intercom or receive deliveries. If yes ask to them how.
- If someone is at the door, always be sure to check who is there by looking through the peephole or talking on the intercom before opening the door. If you cannot understand what the person is saying or you are not sure who it is, ask them to come back later.

- If your host family gives you their house key, you should be careful not to lose it. Ask your host family whether you need to lock the doors and windows when you go out or at night, and when and how to lock them; be sure to follow the instructions correctly.
- Ask your host family what you should do in case you lose your house keys and you find the house locked. Ask them where you should go or who you should call.
- It is important to know who you should contact in case there is a problem when you are alone at home.
- It is a good idea to have emergency phone numbers listed near the telephone and in your personal phonebook. Emergency phone numbers are different depending on the city. We suggest you to check with your host family or local chapter the numbers you must call in case of an emergency in your city.
- It is good to know if the family has first aid equipment at home and if they have it, ask where it is.
- Strangers may sometimes call your home and ask you over the phone for your address. Do not provide your address or other family information to any stranger. Suspicious calls that you do not understand well should be kept as short as possible.
- Never say you are alone at home if you do not know who you are talking to. Sometimes, if a stranger calls, it may be necessary for you to say you are not alone. Of course, if a close neighbor or someone you know well comes to your home when you are alone, after properly checking to see who they are, you may decide to open the door, if you think it is safe.
- Always keep your valuables as well as important documents (passport) locked in a safe place. Since many Colombian homes have domestic help, usually poorly paid, it may be tempting for maids and other house help to see money, jewelry, or even small appliances lying around.
- Bring copies of all kind of documents you own.
- Keep the documents in different locations and carry important documents with you only when you need them.

## Safety outside of the house

### General advice by AFS International:

You should be aware that in countries or in communities with a high poverty rate there may be higher incidents of crime or violence, (burglaries, purse snatching, thefts, assault, pick pocketing). AFS encourages you to let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. Ask them what they recommend to help you feel more secure.

When you are going out, AFS suggests that you inform your host family about where you are going and leave a telephone number - if possible - of where you will be. Your host family knows more about the local community than you do and is best prepared to give you advice about places it would be better for you to avoid and how best to get around. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

### Specific information and instructions by AFS Colombia:

Get to know the host culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers and the AFS local contacts. You will probably look different from most Colombians, therefore it is important that you stay relaxed and calm, also in situations which might be new for you in the beginning. Try to adapt your clothing style to Colombians (long jeans or pants). It is also important to observe their behavior and do as they do as much as possible.

- You should carry a photocopy of your passport in your purse or wallet, as well as the Colombian ID card (as soon as you get it). Keep your passport in a safe place at home. You can ask host parents where to keep your passport.
- Carry your back-pack in crowded streets or places in the front.
- If you go down town or to crowded places do not wear valuable jewelry, expensive watches or fancy sunglasses.
- Always change your money at a bank. Your host family or local chapter can help you with this matter. We strongly recommend that you open a bank account.
- Do not carry a lot of money with you. You should have only what you need for the day.
- Make sure the water you drink is purified. Do not drink water straight from the pipe. Prefer bottled and boiled beverages, such as soft drinks or coffee.
- Be careful with (Do not buy) food in the streets, it might not be clean and could be harmful to your health
- Do not accept anything from unknown people in the streets.
- Do not tell unknown people how much money you own or about your properties.
- Be careful with pickpockets and thieves in crowded or lonely places.
- Do not walk alone in the streets after dark. Even during daylight try to walk along with other people, if you do not know the area. Avoid empty streets.
- Do not give your telephone number or address to strangers who approach you in the streets, buses or Metro.
- When friends invited you out, please obtain permission from your host family before agreeing to go anywhere. Ask your family if there is any risk related to the place you are going to. Under no circumstances give money to traffic police or other police officers.
- If a police officer insists on stopping you or retaining your documents for no apparent reason, ask him for his police batch and to escort you to the nearest police station to clear the problem

## **Public Transportation & Traffic**

In Colombia cars are driven on the right hand side of the street. The traffic is known to be rather chaotic and you will need to pay special and careful attention when you walk or cross the streets. In most Colombian cities and towns, the public transportation system consists of small and large busses.

- Be careful when you cross the streets. Sometimes drivers do not stop at the light or transit signals.

- When you go out, sometimes your host parents can pick you up when you want to come home. Sometimes, you can take a ride with AFS volunteers or a family friend. In general taking taxis on the street is not very safe, unless belong to a specific private taxi line, which you call and picks you up.
- Never ask or accept rides from strangers. Never hitchhike. This is a must for boys and for girls.

### **Transportation in buses**

- There are no bus stops; you need to give the driver a sign to stop the bus. Once the bus is moving, you stop it anywhere by pushing a button or tell the driver to stop (in smaller buses).
- Make sure that you are not the only one in the bus.
- Do not pay with large bills in the bus; make sure that you have the money ready in your hand when you enter the bus.
- Never take anything valuable with you in the bus.
- If you carry a back-pack keep it in your hands and never leave it unattended.
- In Buses (especially when they are crowded) you should pay special attention to your personal belongings, because of pickpockets.

### **Transportation in Taxis**

- If you want to use a taxi, the safest way to use it is to call it by phone.
- Make sure the taxi driver is unaccompanied.
- Ask the cab driver before you enter approximately how much he will charge for the service.
- Make sure the taxi uses "taximeter" which is a system that counts time and distance by numbers, when you get to your final destination; you figure out the fare by comparing the numbers of the "taximeter" with a chart of prices that all taxis must have.
- Even if the cab driver seems to be friendly, do not tell him anything about you what could make him think that you have much money.
- Do not give the cab driver details of where you live or where you are going.

### **Getting lost**

When you are lost the best place to ask for directions will be a "tienda" (small corner grocery store), a supermarket or a gas station. Another suggestion is to ring your host family or close relative, a friend, your local AFS contact person or, ultimately, the AFS National Office or the AFS 24-hour emergency service.

## **Identification & Passport**

You are required to carry a copy of your passport (including the seal with the date you entered the country) and your Colombian ID with you at all times. Every now and then immigration or other authorities might request identification .Please make sure that the person who is asking for your passport is a certificated police agent. For that reason you should always carry with you these two

pieces of identification. If you get into trouble because you are not carrying your identification, contact your host family, the AFS office or the AFS emergency service immediately. No authority is entitled to take your passport away from you.

Furthermore we recommend to always carry the name, complete address and telephone number of your host family and close relatives with you. When traveling out of town take note of the name, address and telephone number of the family or friends you will be visiting.

## Specific Areas & Traveling Colombia

- In most cities there are some areas that are considered unsafe, especially after dark. Ask your host family, counselor and local AFS volunteers to teach you where the dangerous areas in your city are, and how local people avoid or deal with dangerous situations. We recommend that you get to know the layout and names of these places in your area, as well as the times you should particularly avoid them.
- Always Keep in touch with your host family and/or Local Chapter when traveling.
- Always inform the address and phone number where you can be reached.
- Traveling without the permission of the AFS Office might result in an Early Return.
- There is no problem regarding permission from AFS if the participant is traveling with the host family or with a group of participants and local volunteers.
- A phone call to inform us at the office is enough if a trip is planned for no longer than one day.
- If you want to travel outside the host country without your host family, you need the permission of your AFS Office.
- Traveling with the Local Chapter personnel is permitted, just inform AFS national office.
- There are armed conflicts in some parts of the country, where authorities' presence might be rare. Please inform yourself about those areas and always avoid them. The AFS National Office can always give you any advice you need before planning any trip in Colombia.

## Uncomfortable situations

### General advice by AFS International:

All participants are forbidden to use, or become involved with, illegal drugs and substances. Explicit violation of this rule is cause for dismissal from the program and immediate return to the home country. It is most important that you remember this rule should you find yourself in a situation where illegal substances are being used.

In general, knowing something about the culture is usually the best preparation for knowing how to handle uncomfortable social situations. It is also good for your host parents to meet your friends and to know with whom you spend your free time. If you are invited to go to a party or other event such as a rock concert or soccer game and are not sure if it is safe to go. AFS recommends that you find out a little about the party or event, where it is being held and who will be there.

Usually your host siblings, parents, friends or coworkers at project can give you information about the event and the people expected to attend. Some host parents may also "forbid" participants to attend certain kinds of parties, soccer games, concerts, etc. Participants should consider their parents' advice, even if other people the participant knows will be there or if other exchange participants will be attending.

### **Laws**

AFS participants are subject to the laws of their hosting country. Neither AFS nor the national government of the participants' home country has the power to protect the participant from punishment with respect to drugs, thefts and other legal offenses.

### **Illegal drugs**

Never take or accept drugs if someone offer them to you. The Colombian legal system establishes severe penalties for illegal drugs consumption or possession, which always includes going to jail.

Please remember: it is forbidden for all AFS participants to consume drugs not prescribed for medical purposes. Violation of this rule is a cause for dismissal from the AFS program and immediate Early Return. Excessive alcohol consumption has the same consequences.

### **Drinking**

Many countries have a 'legal drinking age' and young people are not allowed to drink if they are below this age. In Colombia the drinking age is 18, but there are only few limitations in practice, so it is very common to find people under 18 years of age drinking. This does not mean that is considered socially acceptable in all situations, especially by parents and other adults.

Excessive drinking will always be a source of problems in your relation with family school/ work and the community, and it could lead to your dismissal from the AFS program.

### **Driving**

Beside you might think twice about driving in the Colombian traffic, it is an AFS "NO" during your intercultural exchange.

## **Sex and sexual harassment**

### **General advice by AFS international**

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behavior and practices between young people. Often clarification of attitudes may be necessary and here, again the advice of people you have come to know and trust is very valuable. Knowledge about the people you socialize with is important, and this is acquired best through increasing knowledge of the culture.

Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behavior. In societies where some young people are sexually active, there are also many that are not. You should not compromise your own personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behavior.

You may be unsure in some situations if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behavior would be considered as normal or just friendly. An important source is your own instinct.

Often your host siblings/parents and friends will be able to advise you about what is normal behavior regarding people you do not know. Other people to whom you can turn to for advice or help are the AFS contacts within your community or at the National Office.

### **Specific information and instructions by AFS Colombia**

Sexual harassment is likely to happen in any country. Females especially, although not exclusively, are subject to harassment.

In case you might be subject to an assault. Try to avoid this by moving away from the person or by loudly yelling at the person to intimidate him/her. Avoid going to isolated places with people that you don't know well.

If you realize that someone is following you, try to go into a public place (a bar, a shop, and a restaurant) and ask someone for help.

In the event of an assault, the participant should notify the AFS Local Chapter or/and National Office. They will be in charge of arranging medical check-ups and inform authorities. The AFS National Office will always be consulted regarding a police report, since it may be mandatory or optional, depending on the participant's age, nationality and other factors.

## **Emergencies**

### **General advice by AFS international**

In most countries adolescent boys are more likely than girls to find themselves being questioned by the police or other civil authority officer. AFS advises that you show respect and cooperation with authorities, even though you may be innocent of any crime and think you are being treated unfairly.

In such a situation, it is unlikely that you will understand what is being said by the authority figure. In general, the best advice would be to say that you do not understand what is happening and identify yourself as an exchange student. As a foreigner you are obliged to carry your Colombian ID all times and it is also advisable to always carry a photocopy of your passport. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident or if you become the victim of a crime and may not be able to communicate effectively.

### **Specific information and instructions by AFS Colombia**

#### **Medical Emergencies**

- In case you need to go to a doctor, you can go and AFS will reimburse you the medical expenses.

- If it is an emergency please call our 24hrs mobile phone and leave your phone number, a short message and we will contact you immediately.
- AFS will provide you with a Medical Program Verification Card. Please keep it with you. If you run into an emergency and you cannot contact the AFS office, call worldwide assistance for immediate help.

**In case of emergency please provide**

- The Worldwide Assistance membership number.
- A telephone number where you can be reached.
- A description of the emergency.

Please keep the following information with you all the time (do not just store it in your mobile phone, in case it get stolen).

In case of personal emergencies, please call the following phone numbers in the following order:

- Your host family, a close relative or a friend.
- Your local chapter representatives.
- National Office.

Telephone number of the **local chapter: Every chapter has their own 24 hours phone number to call.**

The National Office in Bogota is open Monday to Friday from 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.

Telephone number of the **National Office** (1) 612 8775

After work hours or during weekends you can call the emergency mobile phone in case of an emergency. In the rare case that you do not get in touch with anybody, leave a message with your name, country and phone number where you can be reached. A staff person on duty will answer your call as soon as possible

**Emergency mobile phone number:** 310 813 8740

Official emergency numbers:

<b>Police</b> (Policia)	<b>112/123</b>
<b>Fire Department</b> (Bomberos)	<b>119</b>
<b>Ambulance</b> (Ambulancia)	<b>127/ 132</b>

Accidents on the road when you call from a mobile phone **#767**

**General information** (telephone numbers, addresses, etc.) **113**

## **Robbery**

If a stranger demands you to surrender your money and/or personal belongings on the street, please stay calm and give them what they want. Under no circumstances try to resist, your personal safety is much more important than any material belongings you might lose.

## **Natural Disasters/ Riots/ Earthquakes**

In case of a national emergency such as an earthquake, participants should follow the government or local authority's recommendations. The National AFS office will immediately contact the students to provide any necessary help.

## **Final Important Recommendations**

- Assume life in Colombia in a mature way by following the rules and dealing with the reactions resulting from the differences and the appearance foreigners have in Colombia.
- AFS participants coming to Colombia must be able to avoid any problems by following the rules and regulations set down by the program.
- AFS participants coming to Colombia will need to be well informed about the political and social history of the problems within Colombia.
- AFS participants coming to Colombia must follow AFS procedures and recommendations, along with those issued by Foreign Embassies and Consulates. Colombia provides a more interesting and fulfilling AFS experience than other countries, since it is not inundated with foreigners, volunteers or backpackers and there is a real need for quality Service and qualified people with the willingness to contribute positively to this extraordinary country.