



Bienvenidos a Colombia!

Welcome Booklet

High School Programm



Programas
Interculturales
Colombia

Conectando Vidas, Compartiendo Culturas

Content

1. MEETING AFS	
AFS MISSION	3
AFS COLOMBIA	3
2. WHO IS AFS COLOMBIA?	
WELCOME TO COLOMBIA	4
YOUR SUPPORT TEAM	5
THE SERVICES	5
HIGH SCHOOL	6
HOST FAMILY	6
ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES	7
3. RULES AND RESPONSIBILITY OF PARTICIPANTS HOSTED BY AFS COLOMBIA	
RULES, TRAVELING, SCHOOL, VISITS	9
INDEPENDENT TRAVELING	10
LIVING SAFETY IN COLOMBIA	11
WHAT TO BRING	13
MEDICAL EMERGENCY	14
LIVING AWAY FROM HOME	15
4. COLOMBIAN FAMILIES AND SOCIETY	17
5. PRATICAL INFORMATION ABOUT COLOMBIA	20
GEOGRAPHY, FLAG	20
CLIMATE	20
LANGUAGE	20
BANKS AND MONEY	20
RELIGION	22
PEOPLE	22
BIG CITIES	22
GOVERNMENT	23
CULTURE	23
FOOD	24
TIME, POST, TELEPHONE	24

MEETING AFS

This booklet is a summary of recommendations/observations about Colombia and the School Program with AFS. It includes valuable general information, so you have a nice and safe stay in Colombia.

Remember to bring it with you and get back to it every time you have a doubt!

OUR MISSION

AFS is an international, voluntary, non-governmental non-profit organization that provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world.

AFS around the world

AFS enables people to act as responsible global citizens working for peace and understanding in a diverse world. It acknowledges that peace is a dynamic concept threatened by injustice, inequity and intolerance.

AFS seeks to affirm faith in the dignity and worth of every human being and of all nations and cultures. It encourages respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex, language, religion or social status. AFS activities are based on our core values of dignity, respect for differences, harmony, sensitivity and tolerance.

AFS COLOMBIA

In 2009, AFS Colombia celebrates its 50th anniversary. We promote intercultural learning experiences for adolescents and young adults, whose main components are sharing the home and life of a host family in diverse communities.

Staff and volunteers compose a motivated organization; the headquarters of AFS Colombia is located in Bogotá and 15 local chapters represent AFS all over the country.

AFS Colombia has recently re opened the hosting program and we are hosting on three different programs: high school program, community service for participants over 18 years old and also on the Weltwärts program (which is a special program with participants over 18 years old from Germany). We host participants from different countries of the world and we are proud to mention that we host over 100 students a year.

The reasons why AFS Colombia closed the hosting was because of the security in the country. We do not face the same problems anymore but we are very careful that the participants follow the AFS rules and also the travel rules. We can be a bit strict but this is for your safety. Remember if you do not follow the rules mentioned in this Welcome booklet you can be sent back to your country. So please read it throw and be sure that you have understood everything.

AFS Colombia also sends around 150 students abroad a year. These students go to different parts of the world. So have a look in your country if you can host an AFS participant from Colombia in your home and show them your culture.

THIS IS AFS COLOMBIA



**Programas
Interculturales**
Colombia

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WELCOME TO COLOMBIA

Colombia, situated in the north-western corner of South America, is the only South American country with coastlines on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. It has a rich natural and political diversity with landscapes ranging from the snow covered mountains of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta to desert zones in La Guajira, as well as historic architecture in the Candelaria in Bogotá. Rainforest in Amazonas and Caribbean beaches in Cartagena involve nice and warm people who welcome foreigners, making them feel at home within the tropic.

AFS Colombia offers a unique School Program in so far as it includes learning Spanish in the best country to do so. It's about getting to know Colombia first hand, not just hearing about it. Nice people will show you a beautiful country. You will have the privilege to get to know Colombia from inside.



YOUR SUPPORT TEAM

AFS Colombia consists of many different parts. We are volunteers, local committees, host families, host schools, host projects and staff. Together, will be here for you.

AFS Colombia consists of 15 different committees around the country. The committees that host school students are: Ubaté, Bogotá, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Villavicencio, Cúcuta, Pamplona, Popayán, Boyacá, Pasto, Yopal and Pereira. You will be placed in one of these committees. They will welcome you with open arms and look forward to have you as a member of their town. Remember that AFS Colombia does not host students on the high school program on the coastline. But we can promise you that you will enjoy another part of Colombia. We host students in bigger and smaller towns. We do not change a placement because you do not enjoy your town. You will have to work active to find your activities during your free time.

The AFS volunteers are the human resource prepared to support intercultural learning experiences, since they live in your host communities. To be a volunteer means they do not get paid by AFS. They are taking a big part of their free time because they believe in the ideals and goals of the organization and enjoy working with people.

Your primary contact in Colombia are the AFS local volunteers. There is an AFS local chapter in your community that will be there for you. Remember that AFS cannot promise you a “personal counselor”, but a support system for your positive learning experience will be provided for you.

The AFS staff members are ready to help you make the best of your stay. Together with volunteers they do the screening of host families and finalizing placements, setting up global contacts with the organizations and host schools, arranging travel, orientations, and other logistics. There is also a 24 hours emergency phone number to the staff of AFS Colombia that you received at the page 4.

THE SERVICES

AFS offers you a comprehensive basket of services, some of which already have been rendered in your own country, while others will be offered to you at your stay in Colombia. Please remember that you have been promised general guidance, which tends to be incommensurable for the most part. This means that you will not always be able to allocate a certain portion of what you have paid the organization to every item, nor will every single service be reflected as a direct expense on you. But there will always be someone for you.



HIGH SCHOOL & HOST FAMILIES

HIGH SCHOOL

An agreement with the Ministry of Education authorizes schools to admit AFS participants as “guest students”. AFS’ers must attend school regularly. They are expected to take part in all academic activities that regular students are required to. Officially, schools cannot provide a guest student with a transcript of grades, but many schools will submit certificates to deserving AFS students.

We place students in either public or private schools. AFS Participants are the ambassadors of our organization. It’s very important for us to promote positive learning experiences for all and maintain good relationships with educational backgrounds.

HOST FAMILY

Far from “matching” participants and families, we place together representation of different cultures based on their strengths and needs, so that they can learn from each other and be mutually challenged within a supportive environment. AFS host families are not paid for their commitment.

While living in Colombia and sharing with native speakers you will most certainly:

- Develop the ability to communicate correctly and effectively in Spanish.
- Learn to produce and understand oral and written Spanish language which means the development of communication strategies and socio-linguistic records.
- Assimilate to the Colombian culture by means of cultural communicative processes.
- Strengthen your intercultural competencies in your community interactions while gaining global awareness and recognizing cultural frameworks.

But remember the most important way to learn is to try and not be afraid to make mistakes.

ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES

An important part of the AFS experience in Colombia is sharing with local volunteers, other participants and staff members. Actively participating in orientation activities will help you to enjoy, adapt and learn through your experience.

The exchange program includes 3 parties: participants, host families and natural families. These three parts will receive orientations for all there is to learn through the intercultural experience.

As an AFS participant in Colombia you will undertake a great range of activities, both national and regional ones. This will accompany the whole process, considering the adaptation issues which arise during your stay. They will help you maximize the AFS experience, offering tools to manage expectations, cultural impact, and gain the needed skills to create a more just and peaceful world.

Orientations are so important that we consider them MANDATORY!

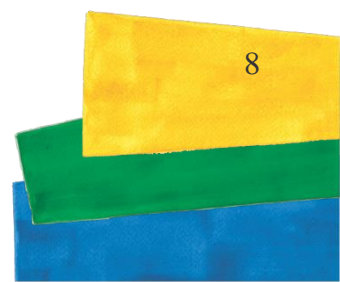
1. Welcome Orientation: Other than sharing your first impressions of Colombia, the general emphasis of this activity is placed on safety tips, AFS rules and very important security issues. You will receive an introduction to the following issues:
 - Colombian family, life styles and cultural differences
 - Spanish course, usual schedules and contents
 - Cultural activities available during the program, such as arts, crafts and dancing
 - Schools and educational commitment
 - Workshops on expectations and cultural impact
2. Mid Term Orientation: Will be held locally or nationally. It will be the chance to evaluate the challenges of your experience in the community, host organization and school. Together with AFS volunteers you will receive feedback and support so you and your fellow participants continue with a positive learning process. Your level of intercultural sensitivity will also be addressed in order for it to be more complex and deeper.
3. Final Orientation: will be held in Bogotá the days before your departure date. Other than gathering again with hosted participants you will receive important tools for the emotional closing of your experience. It also includes a workshop about the intercultural competences learned as well as some tools for the reentry adaptation process.

The AFS orientation process also includes activities with host families and local chapter volunteers both before and while you are in Colombia.



In summary, before coming to Colombia, What can you do to make your experience more successful?

- Study as much Spanish as possible, especially if you don't know much Spanish yet.
- Read up about Colombia and its culture in order for you to visualize your experience here and be prepared for what you will find.
- Contact AFS returnees, they can give you a better idea of what to expect.
- Take some time to examine your own country and culture in order to be a better representative of your host community. It will help you to understand the differences or similarities to develop your intercultural competences.
- Attend all orientation activities.



RULES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARTICIPANTS HOSTED BY AFS COLOMBIA

RULES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Every participant coming to COLOMBIA on an AFS Program should read this document and bring it signed by him/her.

- 1- AFS RULES: WHILE ON THE PROGRAM, NO PARTICIPANT IS ALLOWED TO:
 - Drive a motorized vehicle.
 - Consume drugs or abuse alcohol.
 - Do hitch-hiking, either by requesting or accepting a car ride from a stranger in a public place, highway or road
- 2- TRAVELLING WITHOUT AN ADULT MEMBER OF YOUR HOST FAMILY IS NOT ALLOWED: Should you leave your host community without a member of your host family, and without the written authorization of AFS Colombia National Office, you will be sent home immediately. For more information about travelling see page...
- 3- SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY: School in Colombia is a great way to make friends, learn about the culture and improve your language skills. It's a basic component of the program. AFS Colombia will send you home early if you have an unjustified absence from school for more than one day in a row at any time during the school year, or after repeated absences of even just one day. It's important that you take active part in the school life. Remember that the schools in general are volunteers. You are not allowed to change host schools or to start the university. You will maybe have to study with other students that are younger then you are. Even if you have already graduated in your country you need to follow the same rules as any Colombian student. AFS will provide you with a school uniform. This can be a totally new one or have been used before by another student. You do need to buy your own shoes and socks, as well as notebooks, pens and other material you might need during your stay.
- 4- VISITS FROM HOME ARE RESTRICTED: Your family, relatives and friends should know that a visit could interfere with your adjustment process. Please consult with the AFS National Office in Colombia before making any plans along these lines, even if your host family seems to be enthusiastic about the prospect. We will make sure the right conditions are in place, but we also may advise you on the contrary.
- 5- HOST FAMILY: Remember that you are now a part of your host family. This means that you should follow the rules and norms that they put up and actively take part in their family life. We do not allow a student to change host family for no special reason. A nice way to meet your host family is to present them with a small gift (a dessert, flowers, something typical from your country, etc) to show them your appreciation for receiving you in their home.

After reading and understanding this document of rules and responsibilities of AFS International and AFS Colombia, I state my agreement to respect and abide by them for the time I am in Colombia on an AFS program. Should I choose not to abide by these rules, or fulfill these responsibilities, I will respect whatever decision AFS Colombia makes with regards to my situation in Colombia as an AFS participant.

Participant's Name _____

Country _____

Participant's Signature _____

INDEPENDENT TRAVELLING



For AFS Colombia it is most important to have happy participants, happy host families, happy AFS committees and happy host schools. Colombia is a beautiful country with a lot to discover. But remember this is not a year of being a tourist. You are here to learn about the culture, your host family, school and committee. Remember you can always come back to Colombia in the future to travel around.

But we understand if you do like to plan a trip. But there are rules that are important to follow to be able to do these trips.

1. Students are not allowed to travel independently the first 6 months of the program.
2. The AFS National office needs a travel waiver signed by your natural parents sent to the office by fax or by scanner at least 15 days before the departure of the independent trip.
3. The trip will not be approved if the host family does not agree with the trip.
4. Students are not allowed to travel while school is taking place, just on weekends and holidays.
5. No independent trips are allowed to take place a week in row.
6. The national office in Bogotá needs the flight number, bus companies name, and the place where the student will stay (direction, phone number and with whom the trip will take place).
7. An independent trip is just allowed to take place in company with a responsible adult.
8. Participants are not allowed to travel by night bus. Students can travel by day bus but only in company with an adult.
9. Participants are allowed to stay at a hotel or hostel if travelling with adults.
10. Travelling with host families or host school is allowed but participants must always inform the local chapter and the national AFS office. This can be done via Email.



SAFETY

LIVING SAFETY IN COLOMBIA


Like any other country, Colombia faces the challenge of keeping citizens and visitors safe.

You can encounter complex situations along the way and there is a certain potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. Because of this, you will not be left alone. AFS has devised a 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 you can ask questions, obtain advice and help. AFS cannot supply all the possible answers but through our support systems, we can guide you towards asking the right questions.

Once you arrive here we recommend you to talk with the host family, AFS local chapter members and staff from the host school about any of the information in the safety tips guidebook. Ask about specific situations which concern or worry you.

Avoid problems by following these recommendations.

- Be aware that in countries or in communities with a high poverty rate there may be higher rates of crime or violence. Let your host parents know whenever you are concerned or frightened. Ask them what they recommend to help you feel more secure and to teach you where the dangerous areas in your city are, and how local people avoid or deal with dangerous situations.
- When you go out, inform your host family about where you are going and leave a telephone number of where you will be. Take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations.
- You will probably look different from most Colombians – nevertheless, 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). Observe their behavior and do as they do as much as possible.
- Remember to stay away from situations involving illegal drugs and substances. Find out about the places and people you go out with. Let your host family know with whom you spend your free time.

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- 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 come to know and trust is very valuable. You may be unsure in some situations if you are being sexually harassed or if someone's behavior is normal or just friendly. Use your instincts. Your host family and friends will be able to advise you about what is normal behavior regarding people you do not know.
 - As a foreigner you are obliged to carry your Colombian ID at all times and it is also advisable to always carry a photocopy of your passport as well as your AFS identification card. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by the authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident or if you become the victim of a crime and aren't able to communicate effectively.

Final important recommendations...

- Assume life in Colombia in a mature way by following the rules and dealing with the reactions created through the difference of appearance foreigners have.
- Be well informed about the political and social history of the problems within Colombia so you can take the problems seriously that Colombia is currently experiencing.

Colombia can provide a more interesting and fulfilling AFS experience than many other countries, since it is not inundated with foreigners, volunteers or backpackers and there is a curiosity for new cultures.

WHAT TO BRING

Participants coming to Colombia have to obtain a permission to stay in the country once they arrive; it costs approximately 54 USD (162.000 COP). Obviously bring your passport, which should be valid for the entire period of the stay. Before leaving Colombia at the end of your stay, you will have to pay an airport fee of approx. \$ 37 USD.

Clothing will depend on the location of your placement, but it is always perfect to bring clothing for cold and warm weather. It is appropriate to bring one formal dress for special occasions. Don't worry because you should be able to find pretty much the same items here that you have access to in your home country. You will sure have access to supermarkets, department stores and malls. If you are placed in Bogotá you should bring warm clothing, appropriate for average temperatures of 10° to 20° Celsius. If you are placed in Medellin or Bucaramanga you should bring light clothing, appropriate for average temperatures of 20° to 30° Celsius.

You should bring a Spanish dictionary with you. This will be essential at the beginning of your stay. You should also bring materials and photos to present your own country and a good supply of presents.

Other important items:

- Swimsuit
- Light socks, not white
- One light jacket or a sweater (something you would wear during your springtime)
- Jeans
- Handkerchiefs
- Hat or cap (very necessary)
- Sunglasses
- Personal/specific medicines
- A good camera (batteries and film included). You have to be careful with it, remember AFS has no theft insurance!!!

IMPORTANT!!! Do also remember to bring a present for your host family. This can be something from your country, a typical souvenir or something typical to eat.



MEDICAL EMERGENCY

What to do in case of a Medical Emergency?

AFS Colombia will cover medical costs that arise during your stay in our country. This does not apply, however, to dental/eye care, preventive medicine, vaccines or any other situation resulting from a pre-existing condition.

AFS Colombia has the support of specialized doctors to attend the health needs of our participants. In case of an emergency you may go and see any other doctor or the nearest hospital, but inform the National Office as soon as you can or your local chapter volunteers.

It is important to keep your AFS Participant Identification Card handy in case you may be required to show it. Also remember to keep the receipts if reimbursement applies. For example if you buy your medicines at a drugstore, you will have to pay for them directly, but will be reimbursed to you as soon as possible. It's important that you send the receipts to the national office or pass them to your local chapter as soon as possible. We are not able to reimburse any receipts that are older than 2 months.

If your host family has a doctor, you may go and see him/her; but always report the situation to the National Office or local chapter.

LIVING FAR AWAY FROM HOME

No matter how big and strong you are, there will be times when you miss some things about home: where everything functions more easily, where you have friends you can rely on, where the food is familiar. This is normal and it means you have something to go back to at the end of your stay. Try not to let these feelings get the better of you, though. You will have a contact person which will love to help you to deal with all the issues during your stay.

How?

Well - show your emotions to whoever is close to you, your family, friends, and your AFS contact person. They will not turn their back on you and it may help to fortify the bond between you. Try doing something else; go to the cinema, to an art gallery or for a walk somewhere you haven't been before. Everyone has different ways of dealing with this and there is no magic cure but a half-hour chat usually helps. Colombians consider the family the basic element of society. A majority of young people stay living with their parents even after entering college or becoming financially independent. They usually will not leave the home until they get married, and even then they will try to remain close to their parents.

Masculine and feminine roles are clearly defined in the society and in the family culture, which includes "machismo" -the idea that men are superior to women. The father is usually the head of the family, his authority is final and his word is respected, even if what he says only confirms what the mother or somebody else has already decided.

This male chauvinism has been gradually diminishing in recent years, when more and more women have integrated themselves to the economy and political life of the country and also have become "breadwinners." Still, in practice, the men of the family are granted certain privileges that women do not fully enjoy, such as minor participation in the household chores, and fewer restrictions regarding social life, going out, permissions, drinking, smoking, having sex, etc.

Looking good...

Young people wear jeans and T-shirts a lot, but as a rule they should look neat. Personal cleanliness is also very important, everybody showers (and is expected to shower) every day, and bodily odors are very much frowned upon!!! You must bring deodorant and use it every day; put clean clothes on after every shower and take the laundry for washing as soon as possible and according to what is usual in the host family. Don't keep your laundry on a corner pile or under the bed!

LEARNING SPANISH

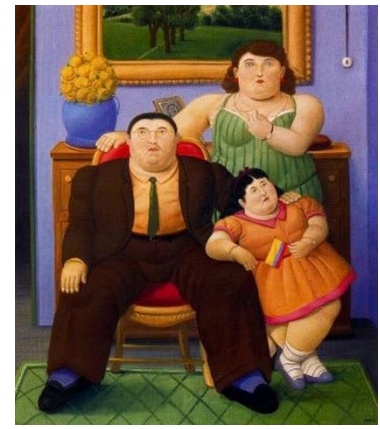
- You should realize that Spanish is not an easy language to learn and be prepared not to be perfect at it straight away. The most important thing, however, is not to be scared to speak. Don't be concerned if your conjugation is not 100% good and never be afraid to ask if you don't know a word or what something means. Getting your message across is not so hard, don't worry! With a little bit of work and a positive attitude you'll be fine.
- You'll learn a lot faster if you insist on speaking Spanish as much as possible. Be prepared to say that you want to practice Spanish, as people will often be keen to speak English.
- There are wide differences in accent/pronunciation and colloquialisms. People from the North Coast (costeños), for example, generally do not pronounce "s" sounds; those from Medellín strongly pronounce "s" sounds and have a melodious way of speaking; people from Cali have a friendly way of speaking - look out for the use of the word vos; those from Bogotá consider themselves to speak the best Spanish and they are indeed easy to understand.

There are several Spanish courses to be found online, for example:

- AFS CRC Spanish introductory language learning site
<http://afs.or.cr.z.m6.net/Varios/flash.text/Curso/Curso.html>
- Test your Spanish--quiz from the BBC
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/gauge/>
- Pronunciation, grammar, and verb drills <http://www.studyspanish.com>
- Beginner to Intermediate <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/>
- Shared learning activities <http://www.quia.com/shared/spanish/>

COLOMBIAN FAMILIES

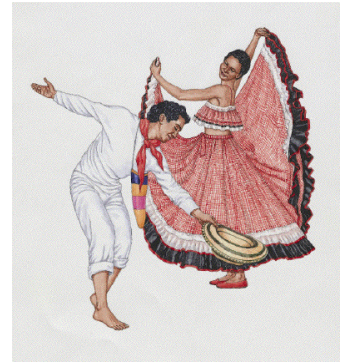
AND SOCIETY



- You should be aware that hosting families are voluntary and, as such, do not receive any money towards the expenses incurred as a result of hosting. They simply want to share what they have, even though this may be little, economically speaking. A smile, enthusiasm and appreciation will repay their hospitality and also allow you to gain the most from your stay with them by participating fully and building bonds that will last.
- Family life is extremely important in Colombian society and your role within the family will be treated as equally important. This means that you may feel less independent here than in your own country, but that is part of the experience. Generally speaking this tends to be more noticeable with girls as there are strongly defined sexual roles in Colombia. Although this last part applies less to the larger cities where female independence is becoming more common, but that does not mean that a female student living in Bogotá should expect to have utter freedom.
- Be warned, you will normally find that you have ten uncles and ten aunts, never mind all the cousins you will meet. They will all be really friendly, and you will find that the family will hope that you spend as much time as possible with them, especially at weekends.
- You will have to go with your family to lots of events: funerals, weddings, Birthday parties, christenings, etc. Keep this in mind when you are packing your clothes, as all these occasions are very formal.) With growing trust between you and your family, you shouldn't have problems.
- Colombian families can be very conservative and protective of their children, no matter how old they are. Given that you should expect to have to tell your parents what you are going to do and to ask permission at times, even if you live alone in your own country. This is also important as your parents will have a better idea than you on safety, although, especially at first, they may not explain their reasons very clearly. You should be aware that dangers exist even if at first you think the advice might seem exaggerated. Listen to your parents and ask for their advice. (Please listen to all advice given, they really do know what they are talking about, at least at first, as although this is a wonderful country with the nicest people imaginable, it has its problems, and advice from locals is essential.)
- You may find yourself confronted with cultural stereotypes. Please don't take these personally and try to defend yourself, your country and your continent calmly and objectively.

- Machismo is prevalent and hence the father is usually the head of the family and his views are very important. The father will generally not contribute a great deal to housework. It is quite common for a house to have a maid, who is responsible for the housework and food.
- In this vein, as a foreigner you will stand out and people will stare at you. This will usually be little more than many comments about how beautiful your eyes are (if your eyes are not brown), although occasionally it may be a little more serious. This rarely causes any problems if you are relaxed about it. If you have blonde hair you probably will be called “mono”, and “gringo” is a term widely used here.
- Greetings are very important in Colombian society and you will encounter a huge variety of them from the first day on. Don't expect everyone to greet you with Buenos días; you will also find Qué hubo (pronounced Kiubo), Qué hay, Que tal, Cómo te va/le va, Qué más (de nuevo), Cómo amaneciste, Cómo te sientes, Qué cuentas, Qué dices... Often one after the other and the reply is almost invariably “bien, gracias”. Generally after the second meeting men and women touch cheeks and kiss the air on meeting and parting.
- It is also important to recognize the courtesy in the use of usted. This is generally used with people in positions of respect or with a more elderly person, although this is not universally true as in some parts of Colombia it is also customary to use usted in place of tú. The best advice is to follow the way in which you are spoken to and always use usted when you feel you should show respect. Vosotros (you plural) is never used in Colombia other than the unconventional use of vos in Cali and Medellín.
- You should be prepared for huge differences in wealth within very small areas; rich neighborhoods are located directly beside extremely poor ones. This is a fact of life in large Latin American cities and is particularly seen in Colombia.
- Religion is an important part of Colombian life although this doesn't mean that all families attend church regularly or that they necessarily act in a particularly religious manner. This country is very religious, they cross themselves every time they pass a church, or go on a drive.





- Dancing and music are also important elements of Colombian culture. Colombia has a huge variety of types of music from all over Latin America and the Caribbean. North American music is also important. It is socially important to dance, but don't worry as there is no shortage of Colombians willing to teach foreigners.
- In terms of Cultural sensitivity, Colombians put high emphasis on cleanliness. Water is normally abundant and people bathe frequently. Colombians have been known to comment on "smelly foreigners". Foreigners who offend –due to dirty clothes or lack of personal cleanliness- may create unnecessary obstacles in forming personal relationships.
- Hosts appreciate compliments about their families and the things in their homes. People frequently exchange small gifts of all kinds on special occasions.
- The Colombian perception of time is quite relaxed; in general they are not very punctual. "Hora Tipica"--Colombian time-, means that the person will arrive 20 or 30 minutes later. This also goes for deadlines. Being on time for a party or social gathering usually means that you'll have to wait a while for the other guests to start arriving!
- Colombians are very house-proud; the house is cleaned regularly, and is kept in order. Although some families have full or part-time maids, in many other cases the whole family shares the house chores, especially when parents are young. Usually women have more responsibilities around the house than men, but host mothers and sisters will greatly appreciate an AFS participant (no matter what sex or age!) who is cooperative and willing to do his/her share of house work.
- Individual privacy is limited by the small size of the houses and the commonly big families, and therefore children usually share rooms. In a large portion of the cases, foreigners have to get used to less privacy and a more modest way of living than what they are used to back in their home countries.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

ABOUT COLOMBIA

Geography

Colombia is bordered on the northwest by Panama, on the east by Venezuela and Brazil, and on the southwest by Peru and Ecuador.



Through the western half of the country, three Andean ranges run north and south. The eastern half is a low, jungle-covered plain, drained by spurs of the Amazon and Orinoco Rivers, inhabited mostly by isolated tropical-forest Indian tribes. The fertile plateau and the valley of the eastern range are the most densely populated parts of the country.



Flag

Yellow symbolizes our golden past. Blue stands for our two oceans, and red for our independence heroes' blood and sacrifice.

Climate

Colombia is a tropical country with practically every climatic condition imaginable. The climate varies with altitude, the higher the location, the colder. For example, Medellín which is at 1538m above sea level has a temperature of 18-28°C, and Bogotá which is much higher, at 2600m above sea level, has a temperature between 6 and 24°C.


Language

The official language is Spanish

Banks and money

Monetary Unit: Peso (1US\$ = \$ 3.000 app.) The process of changing travellers' cheques is slightly more complicated than in Europe or North America, but it's possible. You will need to take with you your passport, your "cédula de extranjería", a local telephone number and an abundance of patience. It is also advisable to go with someone else when changing money.

It is an option to open a new account with a local bank. Although this is not a complicated process it may nevertheless be unnecessary as cards displaying the cirrus symbol are accepted in practically all "cajeros" or autotellers.



In terms of credit cards, visa, maestro and MasterCard are widely accepted with MasterCard perhaps slightly more so. If your card does not work in a machine displaying the appropriate symbol it is a good idea to discuss this inside with bank staff as they will usually be prepared to give you the money after a phone call.

Private and public banks will exchange U.S. dollars (cash or travelers' checks) into pesos, and to do this you will only need to present your passport. Sometimes people will offer to exchange your dollars on the street, but that can be very risky. A few foreign currencies other than U.S. dollars can be exchanged, but only at official banks. It's definitely better to bring your money in U.S. dollars. Whatever amount of money you are bringing with you, we strongly recommend you to put it in the bank as soon as possible, by opening a savings account in your name at a bank office in your host community. You may open a bank account before coming to Colombia, one that has cirrus, visa, maestro, MasterCard. Major credit cards (particularly VISA and MasterCard) are accepted practically everywhere.

To open the account usually you will only have to present your passport and the amount of money you want to deposit. Never keep large amounts of money in your home or in your suitcase, and never go out with large amounts of money in your pocket!

Talking about money, here is a list of some average costs that may be useful for you to know:

A. Fast Food Restaurants:

Pizza Hut 1 middle pizza with 2 cokes COP 15.000

McDonalds (1 Hamburger, fries and coke) COP 8.000

B. Middle Class Restaurant:

Meal for 1 person (lunch or dinner) COP 12.000

“Corrientazo” COP 5.000 – COP 7.000

At restaurants taxes are usually not included in the price quoted on the menu, but they will be included in the bill (so be careful with what you order, because sales tax is 13% and service tax is 10%). This service tax is used instead of tipping, and you are not expected to tip over it.

C. Transportation

Taxis - minimum fare	COP 1.900
Additional kilometer	COP 5.000 each
Urban buses	COP 1.500 - COP 2.000

D. Entertainment

Movies	COP 7.000 – COP 15.000
The disco	COP 0 – COP 20.000

Religion: Roman Catholicism, 95.4%

The Catholic religion has a lot of importance in this society, but there is absolute freedom of religion, and Protestant churches are found in many cities. Most people actively practice their religion and attend church regularly, but many others go to church only occasionally, or are Catholics only by name. AFS host families are tolerant and respectful about the participant's religious beliefs, and this is rarely a cause for difficulties.

People

Population: 41.468.384 (Census 2005)

You will find an incredible mixture of races in Colombia. We have blond, black, indigenous people, brunettes etc., all of a very Latin appearance.

Big Cities - Population

Bogotá	7.674.366
Medellín	2.417.325
Cali	2.319.684
Barranquilla	1.206.946
Cartagena	978.600
Cúcuta	637.302
Bucaramanga	526.827
Pereira	464.719

(Wikipedia 2013)



Government

Form of Government: Unitary republic.

Voting Qualification: Age 18

Political Divisions: 32 departments, 1 capital district.

Culture

Family life is extremely important in Colombian society. For most Colombians, family is the basic element of society. Families are very close and they stay close. It is not unusual to find grandparents living at home and the majority of young people continue living with their family throughout their time at university and even beyond, when they are financially independent.

We cannot stress strongly enough the importance of family activities in our society. While you may feel, from your own cultural background, that this is sometimes oppressive or limits your activities, it is an aspect of our culture which we invite you to experience for the time you are here. It is important to remember that this year is not just “your” exchange year, it is also the host family’s exchange year and culturally they will expect you to become very active and integrated into their daily life and way of living.

Many families have a maid: treat her as a part of the family and help out with the housework. Selfishness and strong individualism are regarded badly. It is common to offer to share what you are eating. It is considered rude if you eat something in front of others without offering. Colombian families can be very conservative and protective of their children, no matter how old they are.

Greetings are very important in Colombian society and you will encounter a huge variety from the first day. Generally after the second meeting men and women touch cheeks and kiss the air on meeting.

Dancing and music are also important elements of Colombian culture. Colombia has a huge variety of types of music from all over Latin America and the Caribbean. North American music is also becoming increasingly important. It is socially important to dance, but don’t worry as there is no shortage of Colombians willing to teach foreigners.



Food

Expect a lot of carbohydrates. Every day you are likely to be confronted with a plate of meat, potato, rice and “patacon” (that’s fried banana, although not the type of banana you get back home, you’ll understand when you arrive.) Beans are also important. Fruit juices are very widely drunk and you are likely to be surprised by the diversity in types of fruit available.



Time

You will have to forget all European or Canadian notions of time. If you are arranging to meet someone and they say 2pm, this could signify anything from 2:15 to 3:00. It’s just a fact of life in the country.


This does not, however, apply to airport check in times, which are strictly adhered to. You should give more time than advised in this regard to be sure. It is a regular occurrence for people to be turned away at check-in although arriving over an hour before the advertised take-off.

Post

The Colombian postal system is getting better and a letter to or from Europe can take under a week to arrive. However many people experience problems receiving letters. Best practice is to get up an e-mail account.

Telephone

There are a number of different companies currently battling for custom in Colombia and you will undoubtedly notice the large numbers of advertisements for their services. It is impossible to say which is cheaper and they each have periodic promotions. Generally, lines are of a good standard although cross lines are not uncommon.



We now hope that you got to know a bit more about AFS and Colombia.
We are happy to receive you and hope that you feel as ready as we do to
receive you for one of your best experience in your life.
Welcome to Colombia!

If you have any questions don't hesitates to contact ex participants in Colombia
or our hosting and sending coordinators
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Martina Koleva
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