

VENEZUELA

“My Community Service was in Avepane in Valencia, Venezuela. I worked as a teacher's assistant. Avepane is a school for approximately 70 special children. In my class, there were 11 children between six and 11 years old. All were mentally retarded. I worked from Monday to Friday, from 7:00 in the morning to 1:00 in the afternoon. I helped teach the children the days of the week, letters, numbers and drawing. Every day there was a particular topic, for example, transportation or nature. We worked, then we went to a park to play. I learned a lot in the work. Mainly I learned about Venezuelan culture and customs, the work, how children grow and children with special needs. I also learned Spanish. At the beginning, it was a little bit difficult because I didn't speak the language, I didn't know the culture nor the children's level of development. It was very good to learn about children and Venezuelan people and to learn Spanish.” Anne Holen, participant from Norway, 2001

Venezuela's varied terrain encompasses Caribbean beaches, tropical rainforests, perennially snow-capped mountains, parched deserts and fertile farmland. Even so, 83% of Venezuelans live in northern cities, making their country the most urbanized nation in Latin America. Because oil production is Venezuela's chief industry, urbanization intensified during the 1970s when international petroleum prices quadrupled. The surging export income, however, failed to benefit all Venezuelans, which has led to political and social tensions. Nonetheless, most Venezuelans are laid-back, friendly, young (half the population is under 18) and unpretentious. In fact, they use “tú” (Spanish for “you” in the familial and intimate sense) more freely than Spanish-speakers anywhere else, who usually opt for the more formal “usted.” They also love to dance; even toddlers try salsa and meringue. And although Venezuela starts its workday an hour or two earlier than most other nations, unhurried workers often take extended lunch hours, sometimes even returning home. In Caracas and other cities, this creates four traffic-clogged rush hours every workday.

Community Service Program

AFS's Community Service program gives you the opportunity to share in and contribute to the life of a community in Venezuela 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 Venezuela have worked on social and educational projects. However, all specifics—including assignments, orientations, logistics and activities—vary depending on the program cycle.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS in Venezuela has been in existence since 1959. AFS volunteers across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Each participant will have a counsellor. Counsellors are AFS Venezuela volunteers who provide participants and host families with guidance and support. Participants and host families should communicate to them any problems or difficult situations they may have. Counsellors, in turn, report to local hosting coordinators who will contact the national office whenever a major problem or conflict occurs. National office staff members can communicate with the AFS office in a participant's home country which can contact the natural family if necessary.

Counsellors normally meet participants a few days after they meet their host families. In most cases, counsellors are already acquainted with the host families. Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

Orientations

Participants arrive at the airport in Caracas where they are met by AFS-Venezuela staff and volunteers who escort them to a day-and-a-half orientation. This provides information about AFS Venezuela, its rules and policies, the culture in Venezuela and safety tips.

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Venezuela 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 Venezuela

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.

When participants live with a host family, they are expected to ask for a parent's permission to go out and to bring friends home.

Typically in Venezuelan families, when grandparents grow old, it is common for them to move in with the younger generation. In addition, there are often clear hierarchical relationships among sisters and brothers. Older sisters and brothers are expected to protect and help educate younger siblings.

Venezuelan families expect all members to shower at least once a day. Showering more than once a day is common because of the heat. However, very long showers are not common because of water shortages. Bathrooms must always be left dry; leaving water on the floor is not acceptable. In most Venezuelan families, people avoid being seen naked or in their underclothes by other members in the family (especially members of the opposite sex).

Many Venezuelan families have pets (dogs, cats, birds, etc.) that they may treat with great affection. However, it is not common to let pets sleep on people's beds. Borrowing personal belongings from members of the family without asking their permission is not acceptable. Television can be turned on all day, and in some families it is kept on during their meals.

Finally, Venezuelan families expect their children to make their beds in the morning before leaving the house and to keep their bedrooms tidy. In most families, housework is shared between the mother and children. Many families have maids who come two or three times a week to do the heavy housework such as laundry and ironing. It is not usual for men to do the cooking, except perhaps on special occasions.

Diet and Meals

In most Venezuelan families, food and meal times are important in everyday life. Dinner is often a family event and is served at a set time. It is common to praise the food and converse during and after meals; usually each family member talks about his or her day at school or work. It is not common to eat snacks between meals.

Leaving food on your plate is acceptable only if the meal has been served in big portions. After helping yourself to food, it is polite to finish everything. Most families also consider it polite to ask for permission to have second helpings.

Dress and Appearance

In general, you will need T-shirts and jeans, mostly casual clothing along with a couple of nice outfits for special occasions (slacks and a dress shirt for men, a dress or blouse and skirt for women).

Activities

Each local chapter organizes activities for participants and host families throughout their stay. These can include informal gatherings, fieldtrips, sports events, picnics and weekend excursions. Your local chapter may also ask you to give a presentation about your home community and country, so participants should bring information and materials about their country.

Health Precautions

AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Venezuela (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 and Support

Members of your host family know their community and they are prepared to advise you about such considerations as places it would be wise to avoid and how best to get around. Please take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations.

In addition, during your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Venezuelan. 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. AFS Venezuela's rules include no driving, no drinking of alcohol and no drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Also, participants must regularly attend Spanish language courses.

Travel

AFS participants may travel with members of their host family to any destination within Venezuela on weekends or holidays. In addition, 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. Note, however, that all independent trips and journeys undertaken by AFS participants must be authorized by the host family and by the local chapter. Also, trips should not interfere with the schedule of activities planned by AFS Venezuela, such as community work, Spanish classes, chapter meetings, etc.

Independent travel is optional, and each participant must pay his or her travel costs.

Documents

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices in your region and requirements often 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. It is your responsibility to obtain your visa and pay the fees. However, AFS will let you know how to proceed and will provide you with the documents you need to apply for the visa.

Program Prices

All participants are required to pay participation fee and do a mandatory fundraising. To get further information, please visit our website www.afscanada.org or contact us.

The program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; 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: 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

Venezuela lies at the northern extreme of South America, bordered by Colombia to the west, Brazil to the south, Guyana to the east, and the Caribbean Sea to the north. In area, the country is just over 900,000 km² (351,000 mi²), divided into 23 states. Its borders seem to hold all of South America in miniature: fine stretches of the Andes Mountains, huge areas of Amazonian rainforests, fertile plains known as *llanos*, miles of Caribbean shoreline and even a small desert. The nation also has a few geographical superlatives, including the world's highest waterfall and South America's biggest lake. Elevations range from sea level to 2,500 m (8,200 ft) in the Guiana Highlands and up to 5,007 m (16,427 ft) in the Andes mountains.

The temperature varies little during the year, and most parts of the country maintain an average above 25°C (77°F). The capital, Caracas, has an average annual temperature of 22°C (72°F), which varies by only 4°C (8°F) over the year. However, temperatures drop with altitude. The mountainous regions can get cold, especially at night, and there is even snow in the highest parts of the Andes.

Like all tropical countries, Venezuela has only two seasons, the dry season, known as *verano*, and the rainy season, known as *invierno*, which are marked by differences in rainfall rather than in temperature. Generally, the dry season is from December to April/May, and the rainy season lasts for the rest of the year.

Population

The population of Venezuela is approximately of 23.5 million; the majority is *mestizo* (mixed Indian, African and Spanish heritage).

Language

Spanish is the official language of Venezuela. However, Venezuelan Spanish differs in pronunciation from Spanish as spoken in Spain. There are also some variations in vocabulary. Venezuelans call their language *Castellano*.

Government

Venezuela is a federal republic with a congressional system and has been a democracy since 1958. The President, elected by direct vote for a non-renewable term of five years, is head of state and appoints a council of ministers.

Members of congress are elected at the same time as the President and also serve five-year terms. Voting is compulsory for everyone over the age of 18.

The Supreme Court of Justice heads Venezuela's judicial system. Judges and magistrates are elected by the chambers of congress.

Religion

Most Venezuelans belong to the Catholic Church, and a great number follow religious tradition. It is common to go to church on Sundays and on special occasions such as Christmas, Easter and for weddings.

Launching your AFS experience

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 Venezuela, 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 Venezuela. 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 AFS Interculture Canada 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, Venezuelans 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.

How to Apply?

You first have to fill out the Preliminary Application form that you can find on our website at www.afscanada.org. If you don't have access to Internet, call us at (514) 288-3282 or 1-800-361-7248 and we will send you the document by mail.

Quick Facts

Country data	Size	912,050 km ² (566,383 mi ²)
	Population	23,542,649
	Official language	Spanish
	Government	Federal republic
	Currency	1 Bolivar (Bs) = 100 centimos
Useful website	http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/destinations/south-america/venezuela	
AFS Venezuela website	http://www.afs.org.ve	