

PANAMA

“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. I would like to thank AFS Panama for providing me with a special experience! “A hug from a Chinese-Canadian-Chiricano-Panameño.” Alan Chu, AFS 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 are found in 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.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS Panama has been in existence since 1959. AFS volunteers from across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the school year, AFS Panama hosts more than 75 AFSers from as many as 15 countries.

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. 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.

Landing in Panama

When you land in Panama City, the capital of Panama, and collect your baggage, you and your fellow AFSers will pass through customs and be met by AFS Panama staff and volunteers.

Arrival and Post Arrival Orientation

Your immediate two-day arrival orientation will be held in downtown Panama City. You will have a chance to relax, get to know the other AFSers in the program and learn about AFS in Panama and Panamanian culture. Then you will travel to your host family by bus.

Early in your stay, after you have become settled with your host family, there will be a post-arrival orientation in your home community.

Life Style and Family Living

Panamanian host families, like all AFS host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to students in order to share their community and culture as well as to enrich their own family lives.

Panamanian families are usually very close and quite large, including aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. Privacy can thus be limited and children often must share rooms. Children remain close to their families even when they are grown, often living at home until they marry.

The father is the head of the household; parental authority is recognized and children are expected to follow their parents’ wishes. Because both parents often work outside the home, children (especially daughters) are expected to help with running the house, which is kept very neat. Most Panamanian host families are middle-class which means that their homes have the modern conveniences but no luxuries.

About 10% of AFSers will be placed in Panama City, 35% in small cities, and the rest in rural towns.

Dress and Appearance

Panamanian teenagers dress casually, but neatness is important; jeans and T-shirts are common as are shorts (longer shorts for girls). Also bring comfortable walking shoes, sneakers, and a swimsuit and towel. Students are encouraged to bring one or two nice outfits (dress shirts and long pants for boys, dresses for girls) for special occasions. Personal cleanliness is very important, and everyone takes a shower in the morning. The use of antiperspirant or deodorant is essential as Panamanians find body odor very offensive. All schools require students to wear uniforms, which consist of black leather shoes, blue or white socks, white shirts or blouses and dark blue pants or skirts. The cost of a uniform is about US\$70 and is paid for by the student.

Diet and Meals

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 like tomatoes, carrots and cabbage. Spicy foods are very rare. Meals are often accompanied by sweet cold fruit drinks called *chichas*.

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

School

The school year runs from early-March to mid-December and is divided into four terms or quarters. The school day starts at 7:00 a.m. with a break at noon for lunch. In the large cities, school transportation is usually provided by private bus service. AFS Panama pays for school transportation.

Panamanian schools are academically oriented. Classes are given mostly as lectures, and students are expected to take detailed notes. Homework is given almost daily. All high schools have an average of 10 compulsory subjects, and each day of the week has a different schedule of subjects. School friends usually form study groups that meet after school in their homes, especially before important exams. These groups, in addition to studying, also organize outings to the movies, parties and other activities. You can easily be invited to these groups if you take your schoolwork seriously. Panama has one of the highest literacy rates in the region, 97%. Wealthier families usually send their children to private schools or to study abroad.

Teen Life

Most teenagers are involved with their homework during the week, so weekends are the time for parties and socializing. Teens like to go out in groups, go to dances, play sports, go to movies or just hang out in the park. Baseball, soccer and basketball are favorite sports. Many families do not allow their daughters to go out to discos or to drink alcohol.

Teenage life is influenced by specific Panamanian culture, which derives fundamentally from European musical, artistic, and literary traditions brought by the Spanish. Important African and Native American influences have been added to these, however, creating hybrid forms unique to Panama. Popular music, while influenced by international recordings, draws heavily on Afro-Caribbean music.

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Panama will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions usually provide 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 young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

AFS volunteers may organize several activities for you during your stay. These may include informal get-togethers, weekend trips and picnics as well as a mid-stay orientation in the mountains or at the beach.

There will also likely be some short exchanges between different communities and a weeklong trip to Panama City to see the Panama Canal and other sites of interest.

At some point during the year, there is a two-day trip to the San Blas Islands along the Caribbean coast. Kuna Indians whose culture remains relatively undisturbed by outside factors, inhabit these islands. The trip is optional and requires a small additional fee. Then there is the so-called End-of-Stay orientation, which usually takes place in Panama City and is about looking back at your exchange experience and sharing memories with other AFSers. It is also about thinking of the future.

Language

Spanish is the official language of Panama. English is also spoken by approximately 10% of the population.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Panama AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have many opportunities to travel with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Panama. We strongly discourage travelling on your own or with friends, and if you do so, previous approval by the AFS National Office is mandatory to insure that proper planning has been made.

Spending Money

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do such things as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the expenses are your responsibility. AFS suggests you to bring US\$1,000 in traveler's checks or have a credit card to cover your spending money needs during the year. These credit cards must have a preset monthly expense limit of less than US\$250 to prevent misuse or fraud.

Panamanian young people are not used to carrying or spending large amounts of money. Spending more than your peers and family may create a distance between you and them. It is wise to learn to spend as they do.

Safety and Support

Panama is a safe country and you should do well if you follow the normal precautions you would use in your home country.

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.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no use of drugs for non-medical purposes. Any student who violates either of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Panama may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Panama (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor, 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.

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.

Once you are in Panama, the National AFS Office will start a process to obtain your "Temporary Residence Permit" at the Panamanian Immigration Department. Please bring US\$50 to pay for this permit. The process may take as long as six months.

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

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. Panama's flourishing jungles are filled with exotic native animals, and with two oceans washing its shores, it is also rich in marine life. In fact, the country's indigenous name means "abundance of fish" and "abundance of butterflies."

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 and Emberás. 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%).

Launching Your AFS Experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Spanish words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language.

To familiarize yourself further with life in Panama make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about Panama and its culture.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Panama. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living as a Panamanian. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or AFS Interculture Canada office. In addition, AFS Panama will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information.

Panamanians will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country. We wish you a wonderful experience!

Curiously Panamanian

- ☀ Panamanians use many gestures. Making a circle in the air means that the person is coming back. Wrinkling the nose means that the person does not understand.
- ☀ Until Lake Mead was formed by the building of the Hoover Dam in the United States, Panama's Gatun Lake was the largest artificial body of water in the world.
- ☀ Panama is the youngest country in Central America.
- ☀ Motorists can drive the Pan-American Highway all the way from northern Alaska to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America—except for a stretch known as the Darien Gap in Panama. To protect the rainforest along the border of Panama and Colombia, the two country's Presidents have signed agreements that they will not complete the road through the Darien National Park.
- ☀ Seventy-five thousand workers labored for 10 years to build the Panama Canal. Rather than cut directly across the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, the workers built locks that lift ships 26 m. (85 ft.) up to an artificial lake. Additional locks at the opposite end of the lake lower the ships to the other ocean.

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

Student age upon arrival	16 years to 17years 11months	
Country data	Size	75,990 sq km 29,340 sq mi
	Population	2,739,000
	Official language	Spanish
	Government	Constitutional republic
	Currency	US dollar known as balboa
Useful websites	www.visitpanama.com www.panamainfo.com www.pancanal.com	
AFS Panama website	http://afsweb.afs.org/countryp.nsf/pages/panama	