

THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO

ALBANIA



A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION
FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS



November 2013 CCD

WELCOME LETTER

Congratulations on your invitation to become a Peace Corps Volunteer in Albania. Serving as a Volunteer will be one of the most challenging experiences of your life and will be as rewarding as you make it.

The Peace Corps arrived in Albania in March 2003 to re-open Peace Corps/Albania, and the first group of Volunteers arrived in September 2003. Yours is still among the initial groups of Volunteers that are helping to rebuild a quality Peace Corps program in a country struggling to throw off the legacy of an authoritarian and isolationist regime and to reconcile old and strong cultural traditions with modern Europe.

If you come with an open mind, a warm heart, lots of patience and flexibility, and a good sense of humor, you will do well.

The country's greatest needs are in rural areas, and the Peace Corps works in towns and villages throughout most of the districts. Being in such areas means that your ability to learn and use the Albanian language and adapt to local cultures and lifestyles will be critical to your success and satisfaction.

Housing is scarce in Albania and your continual safety and security is paramount. To integrate these realities into a site that combines meaningful work opportunities and risk mitigation, you will live with an Albanian family throughout pre-service training. After training you may live independently.

Peace Corps/Albania works to make site assignments on the basis of matching your skills and knowledge with the needs of a particular organization and community, not on the basis of your personal preferences, and you may be placed anywhere in the country.

Please think about all of these things carefully before you accept our invitation to Albania. You should be sure that being a Volunteer in a country of stark contrasts and tremendous challenges is right for you at this point in your life.

Upon arrival in Albania, you will begin 10 weeks of intensive training in language, culture, technical skills, health, and safety and security. You will spend most of the training period as part of a small group of trainees, living in the same small town. Your group will get together with the other trainees at a central site for one or two days a week. Pre-service training provides a strong foundation for service and requires your full participation.

The Peace Corps/Albania team looks forward to working with you in further developing a high-quality, safe and secure Peace Corps program in this historically rich part of the world. The Albanian people are eager to have you come and share in this vision to build a better future with the three goals of the Peace Corps that have stood the test of time for the past 50-some years. Let's continue to build upon that history by renewing our commitment to the Peace Corps in promoting friendship, peace, progress, and a brighter future for Albania and the global community.

Earl Wall, Country Director

CONTENTS

A WELCOME LETTER	1
CONTENTS	2
CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS	4
PEACE CORPS/ALBANIA HISTORY AND PROGRAMS	5
History of the Peace Corps in Albania.....	5
History and Future of Peace Corps Programming in Albania.....	5
COUNTRY OVERVIEW: ALBANIA AT A GLANCE	6
History.....	6
Economy.....	6
People and Culture.....	7
RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION	8
General Information About Albania.....	8
Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees.....	8
Online Articles/Current News Sites About Albania.....	8
International Development Sites About Albania	9
Recommended Books	10
Books About Albania.....	11
Books About the Volunteer Experience.....	11
LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE	12
Communications	12
Living Allowance and Money Management.....	13
Transportation	13
Geography and Climate	13
Social Activities	13
Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior.....	14
Personal Safety	14
Rewards and Frustrations	15
PEACE CORPS TRAINING	16
Overview of Pre-Service Training.....	16
Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service.....	17
YOUR HEALTH CARE AND SAFETY IN ALBANIA	20
Health Issues in Albania	20
Maintaining Your Health.....	20
Health Issues in Albania	20
Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist.....	22
Safety and Security in Depth.....	23
Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime.....	25
Support from Staff	26
DIVERSITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES	27
Overview of Diversity in Albania.....	27
What Might a Volunteer Face?	27
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS	30
WELCOME LETTERS FROM ALBANIA VOLUNTEERS	34
PACKING LIST	39
PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST	41
Family.....	41
Passport/Travel.....	41

Medical/Health 41
Insurance..... 41
Personal Papers..... 41
Voting..... 41
Personal Effects..... 42
Financial Management..... 42
CONTACTING PEACE CORPS HEADQUARTERS..... 43

CORE EXPECTATIONS FOR PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

In working toward fulfilling the Peace Corps mission of promoting world peace and friendship, as a trainee and Volunteer, you are expected to do the following:

1. Prepare your personal and professional life to make a commitment to serve abroad for a full term of 27 months
2. Commit to improving the quality of life of the people with whom you live and work and, in doing so, share your skills, adapt them, and learn new skills as needed
3. Serve where the Peace Corps asks you to go, under conditions of hardship if necessary, and with the flexibility needed for effective service
4. Recognize that your successful and sustainable development work is based on the local trust and confidence you build by living in, and respectfully integrating yourself into, your host community and culture
5. Recognize that you are responsible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for your personal conduct and professional performance
6. Engage with host country partners in a spirit of cooperation, mutual learning, and respect
7. Work within the rules and regulations of the Peace Corps and the local and national laws of the country where you serve
8. Exercise judgment and personal responsibility to protect your health, safety, and well-being and that of others
9. Recognize that you will be perceived, in your host country and community, as a representative of the people, cultures, values, and traditions of the United States of America
10. Represent responsibly the people, cultures, values, and traditions of your host country and community to people in the United States both during and following your service

PEACE CORPS/ALBANIA HISTORY AND PROGRAMS

History of the Peace Corps in Albania

Albania began the transition to a democratic, open-market nation later than the other Balkan states did. Former Communist leader Enver Hoxha headed an isolationist and authoritarian regime from 1944 until his death in 1985, and it was not until March 1991 that Albania and the United States reestablished diplomatic relations (after a 35-year break). The Albanian government invited the Peace Corps into the country soon after, and the first group of 21 Volunteers arrived in June 1992 to begin teaching English at secondary schools and universities. The Peace Corps program was expanded with a small business development project, whose first group of 12 Volunteers arrived in April 1993. The program expanded again in 1995 with the addition of 15 Volunteers for an agro-forestry project. A new group of Volunteers was scheduled to arrive in February 1997, but a breakdown in civil order and public safety precipitated by the collapse of fraudulent pyramid savings schemes led to closure of the post and evacuation of all Peace Corps Volunteers and U.S. staff in March 1997. At the time of the evacuation, 73 Volunteers were serving in the three Peace Corps projects.

In March 2003, Peace Corps returned to Albania. Thirty-two Volunteers arrived in the country in September 2003 to begin training for a community development project and another 29 arrived in March 2004 to begin training for English education and health education projects. Those first two groups established the three projects that are now operating.

History and Future of Peace Corps Programming in Albania

Volunteers serving in the English education project teach primarily in high schools throughout the country. The group that arrived in March 2006 included the first English educators to be placed at the university level and secondary schools of foreign languages.

The health education project is linked to the Albanian health system through Directorates of Public Health and at the rural health center level. Volunteers work with their colleagues to identify priority health education issues. They help design and deliver campaigns and training on health issues often using a calendar developed by the Institute of Public Health. To respond to changes in the institutional environment and local communities, Peace Corps/Albania continues to refine project structures and Volunteer roles. Projects strive to move Volunteers into smaller towns and villages to serve the communities that receive less outside attention, and where Volunteers can have the greatest impact.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW: ALBANIA AT A GLANCE

History

Albanians are descendants of the ancient Illyrians, and their history can be traced back to the Bronze Age in about 2000 B.C. Their name comes from the Albanoi tribe of Illyrians, and their language forms its own branch of the Indo-European language phylum, a group also containing the Slavic, Celtic, Germanic, and Romance languages. The history of Albania is one of occupation, including periods of administration or rule by Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and the Ottoman Empire—the latter beginning in the 14th century and continuing until 1912. The modern borders of Albania were drawn by the European powers during the First Balkan War in 1912, and excluded about half the former Albanian lands and 3 million Albanians. Albania had a brief period of independence from 1912–39, after which it was occupied by the Italians.

During World War II, the Germans replaced the Italians and a resistance movement began under the leadership of Enver Hoxha. In the aftermath of the war, Hoxha and his supporters took over the country and established a socialist republic. Foreigners were expelled and their assets nationalized, churches and mosques were closed, and agriculture and industry were collectivized. Hoxha was a doctrinaire Stalinist who broke away from Marshal Tito and Yugoslavia in 1948; from the Soviet Union in 1960 and from China in 1978, when China established diplomatic relations with the United States.

All outside assistance ended in 1978. Until his death in 1985, Hoxha made Albania one of the most isolated and repressed countries in the world. Hoxha had 700,000 reinforced-concrete bunkers built throughout the country to defend against a multi-front attack, each equal in cost to a two-bedroom apartment. Albania was the last country in Central and Eastern Europe to be caught up in the collapse of Communism, introducing its first cautious reforms in 1990. Even after his death in 1985, Hoxha's successors in the Communist Party continued to govern the country until elections in March 1992.

The period from the 1992 election victory by the opposition Democratic Party (DP) to the current day has been challenging and often tumultuous. The DP's Sali Berisha governed the country from April 1992 until mid-July 1997, when the Socialist Party's Fatos Nano formed a new government. Manic investment in a number of pyramid schemes marked the period from February 1996 to February 1997. When the pyramid schemes began to fail in late 1996, demonstrations erupted and soon turned violent; Peace Corps evacuated its 73 Volunteers in March 1997.

During spring and summer of 1999, Albania sheltered over 450,000 Kosovar Albanians, fleeing Kosovo to avoid the actions of Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic's regime and the dangers of the NATO action against it.

Recent elections (parliamentarian and local) were conducted in a peaceful atmosphere and were judged to represent some progress toward meeting democratic standards. Currently, a DP-led coalition is governing after the 2009 election. Albania was accepted into NATO in 2009 and is looking to join the European Union in the next several years. Relatively smooth parliamentary elections in June 2013 have Albanians optimistic that their political institutions are progressing.

Government

Albania is a republic with a multiparty, unicameral parliament, the Kuvendi Popullor. The parliament has 140 members. The parliament elects the president, a largely ceremonial office. The majority party in the parliamentary election chooses the prime minister. There is universal suffrage for citizens 18 years of age and older. A 2000 law on decentralization transferred many responsibilities from the national government to local governments and these entities have slowly become responsible for providing most public services to their citizens.

Economy

Albania is making the difficult transition to an open-market economy. Macroeconomic growth averaging at 6 percent (2004–08) declined 3 percent from 2009–11 and 0.5 percent in 2012. The government has taken measures to curb violent crime, and adopted fiscal reform aimed at reducing a large gray (or underground) economy and attracting foreign investment. The annual remittances from ex-pat Albanians—mostly residing in Greece and Italy—decreased significantly from 15 percent of GDP after the global crisis. The agricultural sector, which accounts for over half of employment, is limited primarily to small family farming because of lack of modern equipment, unclear property rights, and the prevalence of small, inefficient plots of land.

People and Culture

The population residing in Albania is about 2.82 million (2012 census), with as many as 800,000 living in Tirana, the capital. Only a few cities have populations over 75,000. The population for the most part is ethnically homogenous, with small ethnic Greek minority, Macedonians, Roma, Montenegrins, and Vlachs. More than 2 million ethnic Albanians live in Kosovo and the western portion of Macedonia.

From 1967–90, Albania banned all religious practices and was the only officially atheist state in the world. As of 2012 census, Albania is 56.7 percent Muslim, 10.03 percent Catholic, 6.75 percent Orthodox, 2.09 percent Bektashi, 5.49 percent undefined believers, 2.5 percent atheist and 0.14 percent evangelical Christians.

Albania has preserved many of its cultural traditions and customs. Traditional dress is seen in many rural areas, especially among the older generation. Younger Albanians have adopted Western fashions for the most part. Indigenous Albanian music in the north recounts heroic epics and ballads on the themes of honor and vengeance. The southern Albanian tradition of polyphony (music with independent, simultaneous melodies) dates from Illyrian times.

Families, usually led by a patriarch, rely on the active participation of all members to help supply basic commodities and foodstuffs. Albanians identify with and support their families, first and foremost.

Environment

Albania has a narrow coastal plain and a mostly mountainous interior (about 36 percent forested). The country generally has hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters. About 40 percent of yearly rainfall occurs during winter, while the higher elevations are very cold with deep snow. A few large lakes stretch along the country's borders with Montenegro in the north and Macedonia and Greece in the southeast. Albania has six national forests, 24 nature reserves, and 2,000 natural monuments. Because nearly all raw sewage flows into rivers untreated and there is very poor management of solid wastes, environmental pollution is a major concern.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Following is a list of websites for additional information about the Peace Corps and Albania and to connect you to returned Volunteers and other invitees. Please keep in mind that although we try to make sure all these links are active and current, we cannot guarantee it. If you do not have access to the Internet, visit your local library. Libraries offer free Internet usage and often let you print information to take home.

A note of caution: As you surf the Internet, be aware that you may find bulletin boards and chat rooms in which people are free to express opinions about the Peace Corps based on their own experience, including comments by those who were unhappy with their choice to serve in the Peace Corps. These opinions are not those of the Peace Corps or the U.S. government, and we hope you will keep in mind that no two people experience their service in the same way.

General Information About Albania

www.countrywatch.com/

On this site, you can learn anything from what time it is in the capital Tirana to how to convert from the dollar to the Albanian lek. Just click on Albania and go from there.

www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations

Visit this site for general travel advice about almost any country in the world.

www.state.gov

The Department of State's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Albania and learn more about its social and political history. You can also go to the site's international travel section to check on conditions that may affect your safety.

www.geography.about.com/library/maps/blindex.htm

This online world atlas includes maps and geographical information, and each country page contains links to other sites, such as the Library of Congress, that contain comprehensive historical, social, and political background.

Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees

www.rpcv.org

This is the site of the National Peace Corps Association, made up of returned Volunteers. On this site you can find links to all the Web pages of the "Friends of" groups for most countries of service, comprised of former Volunteers who served in those countries. There are also regional groups that frequently get together for social events and local volunteer activities.

www.PeaceCorpsWorldwide.org

This site is hosted by a group of returned Volunteer writers. It is a monthly online publication of essays and Volunteer accounts of their Peace Corps service.

Online Articles/Current News Sites About Albania

<http://www.president.al>

This news site is about the Albanian president in both English and Albanian (*Shqip*).

<http://www.balkanweb.com>

This site covers different countries in the Balkan region, including Albania, in both English and Albanian.

www.onlinenewspapers.com/albania.htm

This website provides links to online newspapers covering Albania.

<http://www.tiranatimes.com/>

The site contains news, commentary, and analysis on Albania.

www.oneworld.net

This link provides links to news about Albania and the region.

www.shqiperia.com

This site contains information on Albanian culture, art, current events, news, history, trading, food, and an extensive photo album with pictures from all over Albania. This site is in Albanian.

<http://praguemonitor.com/2009/09/10/do-it-getting-there-here>

The link leads you at an article about Albania.

International Development Sites About Albania

www.usaid.gov/regions/europe_eurasia/countries/al/index.html

Information about the work of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Albania.

www.undp.org.al

The United Nations Development Programme in Albania.

www.ebrd.com

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

www.rec.org

Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe

www.soros.org

The Open Society Institute is a private operating and grant-making foundation that serves as the hub of the Soros Foundations Network, a group of autonomous foundations and organizations in more than 50 countries.

www.unesco.org

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

www.iom.int

International Organization for Migration

www.worldbank.org

Recommended Books About Albania

It can be difficult to find texts specifically about Albania, but because its history and culture are intrinsically bound with Balkans history, other books about the Balkans will provide insight into Albania.

1. Biberaj, Elez. "Albania in Transition: the Rocky Road to Democracy" (Nations of the World Series). Boulder, Colo.: Westwood Press, 1998 (hardback), 1999 (paperback).
2. Biberaj, Elez. "Albania: A Socialist Maverick." Boulder, Colo.: Westwood Press, 1990.
3. Carver, Robert. "The Accursed Mountains." London: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 2000 (paperback).
4. Durham, Edith. "High Albania: A Victorian Traveler's Balkan Odyssey." London: Phoenix Press, 2000 (paperback).
5. Fonesca, Isabel. "Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey." New York: Vintage Books, 1996 (paperback).
6. Glenny, Misha. "The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804-1999." New York: Penguin, 2000 (paperback).
7. Gloyer, Gillian. "Albania, 2nd: The Bradt Travel Guide," 2006.
8. Jones, Lloyd. "Biografi: An Albanian Quest." New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.
9. Kadare, Ismail. "Albanian Spring." London: Saqi Books, 2001 (paperback).
10. Kaplan, Robert. "Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History." New York: Vintage Books, 1994 (paperback).
11. Karklins, Rasma. "The System Made Me Do It: Corruption in Post-Communist Societies." Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2005.
12. Olsen, Neil and Rhodri Jones. "Albania." (Oxfam Country Profile Series). London: Oxfam Publishing, 2000 (paperback).
13. Pettifer, James. "Blue Guide: Albania and Kosovo." New York: W.W. Norton, 2001 (paperback).
14. Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie and Bernd Jurgen Fischer. "Albanian Identities: Myth and History." Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002 (paperback).
15. Vickers, Miranda. "The Albanians: A Modern History" (revised edition). London: I.B. Tauris, 2001 (paperback).
16. Vickers, Miranda and Pettifer, James. "Albania: From Anarchy to Balkan Identity." New York: New York University Press, 2000 (paperback).
17. West, Rebecca. "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia." New York: Penguin Books, 1995 (paperback).
18. Wilkes, John. "The Illyrians" (People of Europe Series). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995 (paperback).

Books About the History of the Peace Corps

1. Hoffman, Elizabeth Cobbs. "All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s." Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.
2. Rice, Gerald T. "The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps." Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.
3. Stossel, Scott. "Sarge: The Life and Times of Sargent Shriver." Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004.
4. Meisler, Stanley. "When the World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and Its First 50 Years." Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.

Books on the Volunteer Experience

1. Dirlam, Sharon. "Beyond Siberia: Two Years in a Forgotten Place." Santa Barbara, Calif.: McSeas Books, 2004.
2. Casebolt, Marjorie DeMoss. "Margarita: A Guatemalan Peace Corps Experience." Gig Harbor, Wash.: Red Apple Publishing, 2000.
3. Erdman, Sarah. "Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village." New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2003.
4. Hessler, Peter. "River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze." New York, N.Y.: Perennial, 2001.
5. Kennedy, Geraldine ed. "From the Center of the Earth: Stories Out of the Peace Corps." Santa Monica, Calif.: Clover Park Press, 1991.
6. Thomsen, Moritz. "Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle." Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997 (reprint).

LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE

Communications

Mail

International mail to and from Albania has improved a lot in the past years. In the past, both letters and packages have been opened in transit and valuable items taken. Packages are usually held by post office officials until you pay a small customs fee. Letters and packages from the United States can take two to three weeks to arrive, while packages can take anywhere from two to six weeks.

Before you leave for Albania, the Peace Corps will send you a mailing address that you can use for letter mail during your first 10 weeks in-country—the period of pre-service training. Once you have been sworn in as a Volunteer and move to your site, you will have your own address for mail. Packages cannot be received at the Peace Corps/Albania office address at any time during your service.

Telephones

Although expensive, direct dialing is available in many sites and from cellphones. Cellphone service is available. Do not expect to use phones like you do in America: conversations are short and texts used as a substitute. Calls from family and friends to a cellphone in Albania may be the best way for you to keep in contact. Additionally, using the Internet to call is often the best alternative. Albania uses the standard European GSM cellular system, so most U.S. cellphones will not work in the country. If, however, you have a SIM card phone in America, it is worth it to have it unlocked by your carrier for international use.

The Peace Corps gives all trainees a cellphone upon arrival, and monthly allowance for emergency calls. You can receive international calls at no charge.

Computer, Internet, and Email Access

For your personal laptop, the Peace Corps does not provide email accounts or technical and repair support for Volunteers. Insurance is recommended, but not required, for your computer and other electronic gear.

Almost all PCVs have an Internet cafe close by. That said, there is also no guarantee that the Internet will be available in your assigned town or agency. You may not have the access that you may be used to, so you will have to adjust. If you already own a laptop, you are advised to bring it. Volunteers also find that a USB flash drive and/or an external hard drive are very useful. The Peace Corps does not provide computer support, nor will it replace damaged or stolen computers. Insurance is readily available through a homeowner's policy or through personal property insurance, and the Peace Corps will provide you with an application for such insurance before you leave for Albania.

Housing and Site Location

Upon arrival in Albania, all trainees stay three days at a hotel in the city of Elbasan. During these days, Peace Corps will assign you to a training site where you will live during pre-service training (PST) with a host family. The training site is located outside of Elbasan, and there will be four to six other trainees living in your village. Together, you will have language, culture, and technical classes.

Before you complete PST, you will be assigned to your permanent site in Albania where you will serve the remaining two years of your term. Permanent sites are decided based on your skills and knowledge and the needs of a particular community or organization. These sites may be located anywhere except the capital city of Tirana, and are often smaller villages that have greater need for Peace Corps Volunteers. Currently, most Volunteers live in independent housing at their permanent sites. All housing must meet Peace Corps safety and security criteria, as well as cost limitations regarding rent, and will be checked and approved by a Peace Corps staff before you move in.

Living Allowance and Money Management

The Peace Corps will provide you with a monthly living allowance in Albanian lek for food, recreation, entertainment, and a very limited amount of replacement clothing, local transportation, and other incidentals. The Peace Corps expects you to live within the modest standards that most Albanians do.

It is challenging to explain that you are a Volunteer serving while living on limited means, but this is part of the essence of Volunteer experience.

The Peace Corps discourages the use of personal money to supplement living allowance. Albania is mainly a cash economy, with no personal checks for payment and limited use of credit cards. ATMs are available, enabling access to local banks, and certain accounts in U.S. banks. There will be ATM in or near your site.

It is advisable to leave some money in your U.S. bank account to access via ATMs in euros or dollars for vacation travel. Traveler's checks and credit cards are also an option for vacation travel outside of Albania. If you decide to bring your bank/personal debit/ATM card, be sure you notify your bank that you will be living overseas and inform them of the possible countries you may be visiting while living as a volunteer. Otherwise, the bank will likely reject your attempts to withdrawal cash.

Food and Diet

The availability of some vegetables and fruits in Albania is seasonal, but prices for locally grown produce are low. Imported produce is usually available year round at higher prices. Local produce in summer is wonderful in Albania. Salt, sugar, rice, flour, eggs, cooking oil, pasta, long-life milk, and other basic items are readily available and are of good quality. Fresh meat presents a problem, as inspections and refrigeration are minimal. During PST you can learn how to find and cook local foods. In winter in some areas, only potatoes, cabbages, leeks, onions, oranges, carrots, apples, bananas, and rice or pasta may be readily available. Vegetarians will have to be tactful, as many Albanian families will not know what it means to be a vegetarian and will want to serve you meat as an honored guest. Albanians do not use many spices in their cooking, so you may want to bring a supply of your favorite spices and recipes as well as collect them throughout your travels to neighboring cities and other countries.

Transportation

Travel in Albania is an adventure, and often a very slow one. Buses may be crowded and unreliable, and roads in poor condition are made more dangerous by the chaotic mix of vehicular, pedestrian, and animal traffic. Train service is limited to a few areas and is very poor. Most travel is by bus and mini-bus, but some private cars and vans operate as taxi services among towns and villages. There were virtually no private cars in Albania before 1992, and Albanian drivers are learning as they go. You will have to take delays and detours into account when planning your trips and travel with a trusted companion when possible to help ensure your safety. The difficulties of travel are a good incentive for staying at your site and becoming part of the local community. Traffic accidents are one of the highest probable risks here. To mitigate that risk, Peace Corps/Albania has a transportation policy that you will need to learn and follow.

Geography and Climate

Albania is located on the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe, across the Adriatic and Ionian seas from Italy. It is bordered by Montenegro and Kosovo to the north, Macedonia to the east, and Greece to the southeast and south. It is a small, mountainous country with a narrow coastal plain. The climate is Mediterranean in much of the country, with four distinct seasons, though the rugged and broken mountains help create microclimates. Summers tend to be quite hot and dry while winters are very damp and cold in all parts of the country, including coastal areas. Winters can be very severe in the higher elevations, with snow on the ground throughout the winter. Layering your clothing is the best way to deal with the variable weather.

Social Activities

In the summer, the major source of entertainment in most towns is a daily promenade of men and women up and down the main street where they socialize with friends and acquaintances. In winter, entertainment comes primarily from visiting the homes of friends and you will rarely find people outside once the sun goes down. Additionally, there are interesting historical and archaeological sites throughout the country to visit. You will most likely depend on your friends and your own creativity for most of your social activities.

When men and women are seen socializing together, locals assume they are married, engaged, or part of the same family. Male Volunteers will be freer to socialize in pubs and cafes than female Volunteers, particularly after dark. Female Volunteers who smoke or consume alcohol in public may be compromising their reputations and those of their host families, as well as their own safety. Ultimately, how you interact with your community is a choice; many female Volunteers do not feel confined by these conventions while others do.

Volunteers should expect limited opportunities for dating and that their dating will be publicly scrutinized. Just as Volunteers are embraced and protected by host families as family members, their actions and public behaviors are also considered to reflect on the honor and respect of the family, as would those of any family member. Volunteers must accept and conform to this reality to successfully integrate into the local culture.

Professionalism, Dress, and Behavior

One of the difficulties of finding your place as a Peace Corps Volunteer is fitting into the local culture while maintaining your own cultural identity and acting as a professional, all at the same time. It is not an easy thing to do. You will be working in a professional capacity and will be expected to dress and behave accordingly. Stylish business casual is acceptable in most situations. Albanians dress in their fashionable best in public even if the clothes are worn. A foreigner who wears ragged or unkempt clothing is likely to be considered an affront. Although you must dress professionally for work, away from the office you can wear shorts, T-shirts, or casual clothing at your home.

Body piercing and tattoos are not common in professional settings in Albania. Peace Corps/Albania requires Volunteers to remove facial piercings through PST and for an adequate amount of time during the beginning of service as Volunteers (earrings in women are allowed). Peace Corps/Albania also asks that you cover tattoos as much as possible during PST and when you get to your site. This will allow time for you to be introduced and acclimate to your community. You will need to decide when to begin wearing your facial piercings based on the climate of your individual community and workplace. This decision should be based on the premise that Volunteers should aim to exemplify professionalism and respect for their communities at all times. Current Volunteers recommend that incoming trainees wear clear retainer jewelry during PST and for the first several months at their permanent sites while they acclimate and integrate into their respective community.

Personal Safety

More detailed information about the Peace Corps' approach to safety is contained in the Health Care and Safety section, but it is an important issue and cannot be overemphasized. As stated in the Volunteer Handbook, becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer entails certain safety risks. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment (oftentimes alone), having a limited understanding of local language and culture, and being perceived as well-off are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Many Volunteers experience varying degrees of unwanted attention and harassment. Petty thefts and burglaries are not uncommon, and incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur, although most Albania Volunteers complete their two years of service without incident. The Peace Corps has established procedures and policies designed to help you reduce your risks and enhance your safety and security. These procedures and policies, in addition to safety training, will be provided once you arrive in Albania. Using these tools, you are expected to take responsibility for your safety and well-being.

Each staff member at the Peace Corps is committed to providing Volunteers with the support they need to successfully meet the challenges they will face to have a safe, healthy, and productive service. Volunteers and families are encouraged to look at the safety and security information on the Peace Corps website at www.peacecorps.gov/safety.

Information on these pages gives messages on Volunteer health and safety. There is a section titled Safety and Security in Depth. Among topics addressed are the risks of serving as a Volunteer, posts' safety support systems, and emergency planning and communications.

Rewards and Frustrations

The Peace Corps experience is sometimes described as a series of emotional peaks and valleys that occur as you adapt to a new culture and environment. The potential for being productive and satisfied with your service is high, but so is the probability of being frustrated.

Here are a few things to remember:

- Your organization may not always provide the support you want, or it may not be sure about what it wants you to do.
- Living with a family in close quarters may be quite challenging.
- The pace of life and work may be different from what you expect, and many people will be hesitant about changing age-old practices.

In addition, you will have a high degree of responsibility and independence—perhaps more than in any other job you have had. You will be in situations that require an ability to motivate yourself and your colleagues with little support or guidance from supervisors. You may work for lengthy periods without seeing any visible impact and without receiving any supportive feedback. Development is a slow process, and you must possess the self-confidence, patience, and vision to continue working toward long-term goals without seeing immediate results.

Albanians are hospitable, friendly, and warm, and Peace Corps staff members, your co-workers, your community members, and fellow Volunteers will support you during times of challenge as well as moments of success.

With maturity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and resourcefulness approach you may overcome difficulties and contribute to the overall mission of the Peace Corps to promote world peace and friendship.

PEACE CORPS TRAINING

Overview of Pre-Service Training

The Peace Corps uses a competency-based training approach throughout the continuum of learning, supporting you from arrival in Albania to your departure. Pre-service training (PST) is the first event within this continuum of learning and ensures that you are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively perform your job. Pre-service training is conducted in Albania by Peace Corps staff, most of whom are locally hired trainers. Peace Corps staff measure achievement of learning and determine if you have successfully achieved competencies, including language standards, for swearing-in as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Peace Corps training incorporates widely accepted principles of adult learning and is structured around the experiential learning cycle. Successful training results in competence in various technical, linguistic, cross-cultural, health, and safety and security areas.

Integrating into the community is one of the core competencies you will strive to achieve both in PST and during the first several months of service. Successful sustainable development work is based on the relationships you build by respectfully integrating into the host country community and culture.

You will be prepared for this through a homestay experience, which often requires trainees to live with host families during PST. Integration into the community fosters language and cross-cultural learning and ensures your health, safety, and security.

Pre-service training (PST) is the first event within a competency-based training program that continues throughout your 27 months of service in Albania. Pre-service training ensures that Volunteers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively perform their jobs.

Pre-service training is conducted in Albania and directed by the Peace Corps with participation from representatives of Albanian organizations, Volunteers, and/or training contractors. The length of pre-service training varies, usually 10 weeks in Albania, depending on the competencies required for the assignment. Peace Corps/Albania measures achievement of learning and determines if trainees have successfully achieved competencies, including language standards, for swearing in as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Throughout service, Volunteers strive to achieve performance competencies. Initially, pre-service training affords the opportunity for trainees to develop and test their own resources. As a trainee, you will play an active role in self-education. You will be asked to decide how best to set and meet objectives and to find alternative solutions. You will be asked to prepare for an experience in which you will often have to take the initiative and accept responsibility for decisions. The success of your learning will be enhanced by your own effort to take responsibility for your learning and through sharing experiences with others.

Peace Corps training is founded on adult learning methods and often includes experiential “hands-on” applications such as conducting a participatory community needs assessment and facilitating groups. Successful training results in competence in various technical, linguistic, cross-cultural, health, and safety and security areas. Integrating into the community is usually one of the core competencies Volunteers strive to achieve both in pre-service training and during the first several months of service. Successful sustainable development work is based on the local trust and confidence Volunteers build by living in, and respectfully integrating into, the Albanian community and culture. Trainees are prepared for this through a homestay experience, which requires trainees to live with host families during pre-service training. Integration into the community not only facilitates good working relationships, but it fosters language learning and cross-cultural acceptance and trust, which help ensure your health, safety, and security.

Woven into the competencies, the ability to communicate in the host country language is critical to being an effective Peace Corps Volunteer. So basic is this precept that it is spelled out in the Peace Corps Act: No person shall be assigned to duty as a Volunteer under this act in any foreign country or area unless at the time of such assignment he (or she) possesses such reasonable proficiency as his (or her) assignment requires in speaking the language of the country or area to which he (or she) is assigned.

Peace Corps/Albania's competencies are designed to be accomplished throughout the Volunteer's 27 months of learning. A trainee may not be able to complete all learning objectives for a competency during pre-service training; however, he or she must show adequate progress toward achieving the competencies in order to become a Volunteer.

Peace Corps/Albania's competencies include the following:

Core Competency 1: Integrate successfully into the community

Core Competency 2: Commit to professionalism and a spirit of service that supports the mission and goals of the Peace Corps

Core Competency 3: Build capacity of community members

Core Competency 4: Commit to safety and maintaining well-being in Albania

TEFL Sector Competency: Transfer English language teaching skills and knowledge to local teachers and students

CD Sector Competency: Develop host organization's capacity to address local needs

Health Sector: Meet the health needs of your community through life-skills development

Evaluation of your performance throughout service is a continual process, as Volunteers are responsible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for personal conduct and professional performance. Successful completion of pre-service training is characterized by achieving a set of learning objectives to determine competence. Failure to meet any of the selection standards by the completion of training may be grounds for a withdrawal of selection and disqualification from Peace Corps service.

Progress in one's own learning is a dialogue between you and the training staff. All of the training staff—including the training manager (PST director), and the language, technical, medical, safety and security, and cross-cultural trainers—will work with you toward the highest possible competencies by providing you with feedback on learning objective performance throughout training. After reviewing and observing your performance, the country director will make the final decision on whether you are qualified to serve as a Volunteer in the host country.

Upon successful completion of training, trainees who qualify for Peace Corps service are required by law to swear or affirm an oath of loyalty to the United States; this cannot be waived under any circumstances. The text of the oath is provided below. If you have any questions about the wording or meaning of the oath, consult a staff member during training.

I, (your name), do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, domestic or foreign, that I take this obligation freely, and without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, and that I will well and faithfully discharge my duties in the Peace Corps.

The pre-service training experience provides an opportunity not only for the Peace Corps to assess a trainee's competence, but for trainees to re-evaluate their commitment to serve for 27 months to improve the quality of life of the people with whom Volunteers live and work and, in doing so, develop new knowledge, skills, and attitudes while adapting existing ones.

Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Albania by building on the skills you already have and helping you develop new skills in a manner appropriate to the needs of the country. The Peace Corps staff, Albania experts, and current Volunteers will conduct the training program. Training places great emphasis on learning how to transfer the skills you have to the community in which you will serve as a Volunteer.

Technical training will include sessions on the general economic and political environment in Albania and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your technical sector's goals and meet with the Albanian agencies and organizations that invited the Peace Corps to assist them. You will also meet with other Albanian and international organizations that support the activities of the particular sector. You will be supported and evaluated throughout the training to help build the confidence and skills you need to undertake your project activities and be a productive member of your community.

Language Training

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will find that language skills are key to personal and professional satisfaction during your service. These skills are critical to your job performance, they help you integrate into your community, and they can ease your personal adaptation to the new surroundings. Therefore, language training is at the heart of the training program. You must successfully meet minimum language requirements to complete training and become a Volunteer. Albania language instructors teach formal language classes five days a week in small groups of four to five people.

Your language training will incorporate a community-based approach. In addition to classroom time, you will be given assignments to work on outside of the classroom and with your host family. The goal is to get you to a point of basic social communication skills so you can practice and develop language skills further once you are at your site. Prior to being sworn in as a Volunteer, you will work on strategies to continue language studies during your service.

As a Volunteer, you will find that language skills are the key to your personal and professional satisfaction. These skills are critical to your job performance, integration into your community, and can ease your personal adaptation to new surroundings. Language training is the heart of PST, and you must successfully meet minimum language requirements to complete training and become a Volunteer. Albanian language instructors teach formal language classes four or five days a week in small groups at your site. In addition, you will be given assignments to work on outside of the classroom and with your host family.

You should continue making a serious effort to learn the language throughout your entire term of service. While you can be an effective Volunteer without speaking Albanian well, knowledge of the language will unquestionably increase your effectiveness. Depending on English-speaking Albanians to communicate detailed or abstract information will significantly limit what you can do as a Volunteer, especially if you are not placed in a large city.

It is a good idea to start studying Albanian as soon as you accept the invitation to come to Albania.

One useful resource that is widely available is Pimsleur International's audiotope series for self-instruction in Albanian. There are also numerous videos about learning basic phrases in Shqip on Youtube.

Cross-Cultural Training

As part of your pre-service training, you will live with an Albanian host family. This experience is designed to ease your transition to life at your site. Families go through an orientation conducted by Peace Corps staff to explain the purpose of pre-service training and to assist them in helping you adapt to living in Albania. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families.

Cross-cultural and community development training will help you improve your communication skills and understand your role as a facilitator of development. You will be exposed to topics such as community mobilization, conflict resolution, gender and development, non-formal and adult education strategies, and political structures.

Cross-culture training provides information and methods for integrating into the Albanian culture, and will help you understand your community more deeply. As part of your PST, you will live with an Albanian host family. This experience will ease your transition to life at your site. Host families have gone through an orientation by Peace Corps staff to explain the purpose of pre-service training and to assist them in helping you adapt to living in Albania. Many Volunteers form strong and lasting friendships with their host families. Cross-cultural training will help you improve your communication skills and understand your role as a development facilitator.

Health Training

During pre-service training, you will be given basic medical training and information. You will be expected to practice preventive health care and to take responsibility for your own health by adhering to all medical policies. Trainees are required to attend all medical sessions. The topics include preventive health measures and minor and major medical issues that you might encounter while in Albania. Nutrition, mental health, setting up a safe living compound, and how to avoid HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are also covered.

Safety Training

During the safety training sessions, you will learn how to adopt a lifestyle that reduces your risks at home, at work, and during your travels. You will also learn appropriate, effective strategies for coping with unwanted attention and about your individual responsibility for promoting safety throughout your service.

You will learn how to assess basic risks and hazards and to identify and manage risks you may encounter. There will be tests of the emergency action plans (EAP) and your compliance is required to complete training. You will learn that safety and security are team efforts and, if you do not work and live safely, you can put other members of the team at risk. As one Volunteer said, “Safety is a team sport in Albania and never takes a vacation.”

Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service

In its commitment to institutionalize quality training, the Peace Corps has implemented a training system that provides Volunteers with continual opportunities to examine their commitment to Peace Corps service while increasing their technical and cross-cultural skills. During service, there are usually three training events. The titles and objectives for those trainings are as follows:

- In-service training: *Provides an opportunity for Volunteers to upgrade their technical, language, and project development skills while sharing their experiences and reaffirming their commitment after having served for three to six months.*
- Midterm conference (done in conjunction with technical sector in-service): *Assists Volunteers in reviewing their first year, reassessing their personal and project objectives, and planning for their second year of service.*
- Close-of-service conference: *Prepares Volunteers for the future after Peace Corps service and reviews their respective projects and personal experiences.*

The number, length, and design of these trainings are adapted to country-specific needs and conditions. The key to the training system is that training events are integrated and interrelated, from the pre-departure orientation through the end of your service, and are planned, implemented, and evaluated cooperatively by the training staff, Peace Corps staff, and Volunteers.

YOUR HEALTH CARE AND SAFETY IN ALBANIA

The Peace Corps' highest priority is maintaining the good health and safety of every Volunteer. Peace Corps medical programs emphasize the preventive, rather than the curative, approach to disease. The Peace Corps in Albania maintains a clinic with a full-time medical officer, who takes care of Volunteers' primary health-care needs. Additional medical services, such as testing and basic treatment, are also available in Albania at local hospitals. If you become seriously ill, you will be transported either to an American-standard medical facility in the region or to the United States.

Health Issues in Albania

Good health results from good health maintenance. Major health problems among Volunteers in Albania are rare. The majority of health problems in Albania are similar to those that exist in the United States: colds, flu, diarrhea, skin infections, headaches, minor injuries, dental problems, sexually transmitted infections. All Volunteers should expect to be at greater risk for a variety of medical problems in Albania because of the stressful nature of day-to-day life as a Volunteer. Stress-related medical problems can include menstrual irregularities, diarrhea, constipation, headaches, muscle aches, depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse.

Helping You Stay Healthy

The Peace Corps will provide you with all the necessary inoculations, medications, and information to stay healthy. Upon your arrival in Albania, you will receive a medical handbook. At the end of training, you will receive a medical kit with supplies to take care of mild illnesses and first aid needs. The contents of the kit are listed later in this section.

During pre-service training, you will have access to basic medical supplies through the medical officer. However, you will be responsible for your own supply of prescription drugs and any other specific medical supplies you require, as the Peace Corps will not order these items during training. Please bring a three-month supply of any prescription drugs you use, since they may not be available here and it may take several months for shipments to arrive.

You will have physicals at mid-service and at the end of your service. If you develop a serious medical problem during your service, the medical officer in Albania will consult with the Office of Medical Services in Washington, D.C. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Albania, you may be sent out of the country for further evaluation and care.

Maintaining Your Health

As a Volunteer, you must accept considerable responsibility for your own health. Proper precautions will significantly reduce your risk of serious illness or injury. The adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" becomes extremely important in areas where diagnostic and treatment facilities are not up to the standards of the United States. The most important of your responsibilities in Albania is to take the following preventive measures:

Many illnesses that afflict Volunteers worldwide are entirely preventable if proper food and water precautions are taken. These illnesses include food poisoning, parasitic infections, hepatitis A, dysentery, Guinea worms, tapeworms, and typhoid fever. Your medical officer will discuss specific standards for water and food preparation in Albania during pre-service training.

Abstinence is the most effective way to prevent infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. You are taking risks if you choose to be sexually active. To lessen risk, use a condom every time you have sex. Whether your partner is a host country citizen, a fellow Volunteer, or anyone else, do not assume this person is free of HIV/AIDS or other STIs. You will receive more information from the medical officer about this important issue.

Volunteers are expected to adhere to an effective means of birth control to prevent an unplanned pregnancy. Your medical officer can help you decide on the most appropriate method to suit your individual needs. Contraceptive methods are available without charge from the medical officer.

It is critical to your health that you promptly report to the medical office or other designated facility for scheduled immunizations, and that you let the medical officer know immediately of significant illnesses and injuries.

Women's Health Information

If you are on birth control pills, please be advised that Peace Corps/Albania medical unit (as well as all Peace Corps medical units worldwide) routinely stocks five formulations of birth control pills:

- 0.1 mg levonorgestrel/20 mcg ethinyl estradiol (e.g., Aleese)
- 0.3 mg norgestrel/30 mcg ethinyl estradiol (e.g., Lo-Ovral)
- Norgestimate/ethinyl estradiol; 0.18 mg/35 mcg; 0.215 mg/35 mcg; 0.25 mg/35 mcg (e.g., Orthotricyclen)
- 0.15 desogestrel/30 mcg ethinyl estradiol (e.g., Orthocept)
- 3 mg drospirenone/30 mcg ethinyl estradiol (e.g., Yasmin)

Once you arrive in-country, the medical officers will review the birth control pills that you currently use during medical intake interviews. If your birth control pill differs from any of the stocked categories as listed above, an appropriate switch will be suggested and discussed. Please note that the decision to accept an appropriate switch is yours. If for any reason you do not want to consider this, or you've had problems with other types of pills in the past, the medical unit will do its best to provide you with your particular brand of birth control. You are strongly encouraged to discuss this with your current health-care provider. If possible, show him/her the list of the formulations routinely in stock and make the switch before coming to Albania.

Pregnancy is treated in the same manner as other Volunteer health conditions that require medical attention but also have programmatic ramifications. The Peace Corps is responsible for determining the medical risk and the availability of appropriate medical care if the Volunteer remains in-country. Given the circumstances under which Volunteers live and work in Peace Corps countries, it is rare that the Peace Corps' medical and programmatic standards for continued service during pregnancy can be met.

Please note that in Albania, feminine hygiene products are available for you to purchase on the local market. The Peace Corps medical office in Albania will not provide them.

Your Peace Corps Medical Kit

The Peace Corps medical officer will provide you with a kit that contains basic items necessary to prevent and treat illnesses that may occur during service. Kit items can be periodically restocked at the medical office.

Medical Kit Contents

First Aid Handbook	Cough lozenges
Ace bandages	Decongestant
Acetaminophen (Tylenol)	Dental floss
Adhesive tape	Gloves
Antacid tablets	Hydrocortisone cream
Anti-diarrheal (Imodium)	Ibuprofen
Antibiotic ointment	Insect repellent
Antifungal cream	Iodine tablets (for water purification)
Antihistamine	Lip balm
Antiseptic antimicrobial skin cleaner	Oral rehydration salts
Band-Aids	Scissors
Bismuth Subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol)	Sore throat lozenges
Butterfly closures	Sterile eye drops
Calagel anti-itch gel	Sterile gauze pads
Condoms	Sunscreen
	Thermometer (Temp-a-dots)
	Tweezer

Before You Leave: A Medical Checklist

If there has been any change in your health—physical, mental, or dental—since you submitted your examination reports to the Peace Corps, you must immediately notify the Office of Medical Services. Failure to disclose new illnesses, injuries, allergies, or pregnancy can endanger your health and may jeopardize your eligibility to serve.

If your dental exam was done more than a year ago, or if your physical exam is more than two years old, contact the Office of Medical Services to find out whether you need to update your records. If your dentist or Peace Corps dental consultant has recommended that you undergo dental treatment or repair, you must complete that work and make sure your dentist sends requested confirmation reports or X-rays to the Office of Medical Services.

If you wish to avoid having duplicate vaccinations, contact your physician's office to obtain a copy of your immunization record and bring it to your pre-departure orientation. If you have any immunizations prior to Peace Corps service, the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for the cost. The Peace Corps will provide all the immunizations necessary for your overseas assignment, either at your pre-departure orientation or shortly after you arrive in Albania. You do not need to begin taking malaria medication prior to departure.

Bring a three-month supply of any prescription or over-the-counter medication you use on a regular basis, including birth control pills. Although the Peace Corps cannot reimburse you for this three-month supply, it will order refills during your service. While awaiting shipment—which can take several months—you will be dependent on your own medication supply. The Peace Corps will not pay for herbal or nonprescribed medications, such as St. John's wort, glucosamine, selenium, or antioxidant supplements.

You are encouraged to bring copies of medical prescriptions signed by your physician. This is not a requirement, but they might come in handy if you are questioned in transit about carrying a three-month supply of prescription drugs.

If you wear eyeglasses, bring two pairs with you. If a pair breaks, the Peace Corps will replace them, using the information your doctor in the United States provided on the eyeglasses form during your examination. The Peace Corps discourages you from using contact lenses during your service to reduce your risk of developing a serious infection or other eye disease. Most Peace Corps countries do not have appropriate water and sanitation to support eye care with the use of contact lenses. The Peace Corps will not supply or replace contact lenses or associated solutions unless an ophthalmologist has recommended their use for a specific medical condition and the Peace Corps Office of Medical Services has given approval.

If you are eligible for Medicare, are over 50 years of age, or have a health condition that may restrict your future participation in health-care plans, you may wish to consult an insurance specialist about unique coverage needs before your departure. The Peace Corps will provide all necessary health care from the time you leave for your pre-departure orientation until you complete your service. When you finish, you will be entitled to the post-service health-care benefits described in the Peace Corps Volunteer Handbook. You may wish to consider keeping an existing health plan in effect during your service if you think age or pre-existing conditions might prevent you from re-enrolling in your current plan when you return home.

Safety and Security in Depth

Serving as a Volunteer overseas entails certain safety and security risks. Living and traveling in an unfamiliar environment, a limited understanding of the local language and culture, and the perception of being a wealthy American are some of the factors that can put a Volunteer at risk. Property theft and burglaries are not uncommon. Incidents of sexual and physical assault do occur, although almost all Volunteers complete their two years of service without a serious safety and security incident.

Beyond knowing that the Peace Corps approaches safety and security as a partnership with you, it might be helpful to see how this partnership works. The Peace Corps has policies, procedures, and training in place to promote your safety. The Peace Corps depends on you to follow those policies and to put into practice what you have learned. An example of how this works in practice—in this case to help manage the risk of burglary—follows:

- The Peace Corps assesses the security environment where you will live and work
- The Peace Corps inspects the house where you will live according to established security criteria
- The Peace Corps provides you with resources to take measures such as installing new locks
- The Peace Corps ensures you are welcomed by host country authorities in your new community
- The Peace Corps responds to security concerns that you raise
- You lock your doors and windows
- You adopt a lifestyle appropriate to the community where you live
- You get to know neighbors
- You decide if purchasing personal articles insurance is appropriate for you
- You don't change residences before being authorized by the Peace Corps
- You communicate concerns that you have to Peace Corps staff

This welcome book contains sections on Living Conditions and Volunteer Lifestyle, Peace Corps Training, and Your Health Care, and Safety and Security that all include important safety and security information to help you understand this partnership. The Peace Corps makes every effort to give Volunteers the tools they need to function in the safest way possible, because working to maximize the safety and security of Volunteers is the agency's highest priority. Not only does the Peace Corps provide you with training and tools to prepare for the unexpected, but also teaches you to identify, reduce, and manage the risks you may encounter.

Factors that Contribute to Volunteer Risk

There are several factors that can heighten a Volunteer's risk, many of which are within the Volunteer's control. By far the most common crime that Volunteers experience is theft. Thefts often occur when Volunteers are away from their sites, in crowded locations (such as markets or on public transportation), and when leaving items unattended.

Before you depart for Albania there are several measures you can take to reduce your risk:

- Leave valuable objects, such as those that are irreplaceable, in the United States
- Leave copies of important documents and account numbers with someone you trust in the United States
- Purchase a hidden money pouch or "dummy" wallet as a decoy
- Purchase personal articles insurance

After you arrive in Albania, you will receive more detailed information about common crimes, factors that contribute to Volunteer risk, and local strategies to reduce that risk. For example, Volunteers in Albania learn to do the following:

- Choose safe routes and times for travel and travel with someone trusted by the community whenever possible
- Make sure one's personal appearance is respectful of local customs
- Avoid high-crime areas
- Know the local language to get help in an emergency
- Make friends with local people who are respected in the community
- Limit alcohol consumption

As you can see from this list, you must be willing to work hard and adapt your lifestyle to minimize the potential for being a target for crime. As with anywhere in the world, crime does exist in Albania. You can reduce your risk by avoiding situations that place you at risk and by taking precautions. Crime at the village or town level is less frequent than in the large cities; people know each other and generally are less likely to steal from their neighbors. Tourist attractions in large towns are favorite worksites for pickpockets.

The following are other security concerns in Albania of which you should be aware:

While whistles and unwelcomed comments may be fairly common on the street, this behavior can be reduced if Volunteers abide by local cultural norms, and respond according to the guidance provided during training.

Staying Safe: Don't Be a Target for Crime

You must be prepared to take on a large degree of responsibility for your own safety. You can make yourself less of a target, ensure that your home is secure, and develop relationships in your community that will make you less likely to be a victim of crime. While the factors that contribute to your risk in Albania may be different, in many ways you can do what you would do if you moved to a new city anywhere: Be cautious, check things out, ask questions, learn about your neighborhood, know where the more risky locations are, use common sense, and be aware. You can reduce your vulnerability to crime by integrating into your community, learning the local language, acting responsibly, and abiding by Peace Corps policies and procedures. Serving safely and effectively in Albania will require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

Support from Staff

If a trainee or Volunteer is the victim of a safety incident, Peace Corps staff is prepared to provide support. All Peace Corps posts have procedures in place to respond to incidents of crime committed against Volunteers. The first priority for all posts in the aftermath of an incident is to ensure the Volunteer is safe and receiving medical treatment as needed. After assuring the safety of the Volunteer, Peace Corps staff response may include reassessing the Volunteer's worksite and housing arrangements and making any adjustments, as needed. In some cases, the nature of the incident may necessitate a site or housing transfer. Peace Corps staff will also assist Volunteers with preserving their rights to pursue legal sanctions against the perpetrators of the

crime. It is very important that Volunteers report incidents as they occur, not only to protect their peer Volunteers, but also to preserve the future right to prosecute. Should Volunteers decide later in the process that they want to proceed with the prosecution of their assailant; this option may no longer exist if the evidence of the event has not been preserved at the time of the incident.

Crime Data for Albania

Crime data and statistics for Albania, which are updated yearly, are available at the following link:

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/countrydata/albania>

Please take the time to review this important information.

Few Peace Corps Volunteers are victims of serious crimes and crimes that do occur overseas are investigated and prosecuted by local authorities through the local courts system. If you are the victim of a crime, you will decide if you wish to file a complaint with local law enforcement. If you decide to do so, Peace Corps staff will be there to assist you. One of the Peace Corps' tasks is to ensure you are fully informed of your options and understand how the local legal process works. The Peace Corps will help you ensure your rights are protected to the fullest extent possible under the laws of the country.

If you are the victim of a serious crime, you will learn how to get to a safe location as quickly as possible and contact your Peace Corps office. It's important that you notify Peace Corps staff as soon as you can so the Peace Corps can provide you with the help you need.

Volunteer Safety & Support in Albania

The Peace Corps' approach to safety is a five-pronged plan to help you stay safe during your service and includes the following: information sharing, Volunteer training, site selection criteria, a detailed emergency action plan, and protocols for addressing safety and security incidents. Albania's in-country safety program is outlined below.

The Peace Corps/Albania office will keep you informed of any issues that may impact Volunteer safety through **information sharing**. Regular updates will be provided in the All-Volunteer Memo (AVM) and in memorandums from the country director. In the event of a critical situation or emergency, you will be contacted through the emergency communication network. An important component of the capacity of Peace Corps to keep you informed is your buy-in to the partnership concept with the Peace Corps staff. It is expected that you will do your part in ensuring that Peace Corps staff members are kept apprised of your movements in-country so they are able to inform you.

Volunteer training will include sessions on specific safety and security issues in Albania. This training will prepare you to adopt a culturally appropriate lifestyle and exercise judgment that promotes safety and reduces risk in your home, at work, and while traveling. Safety training is offered throughout service and is integrated into the language, cross-cultural aspects, health, and other components of training. You will be expected to successfully complete all training competencies in a variety of areas, including safety and security, as a condition of service.

Certain **site selection criteria** are used to determine safe housing for Volunteers before their arrival. The Peace Corps staff works closely with host communities and counterpart agencies to help prepare them for a Volunteer's arrival and to establish expectations of their respective roles in supporting the Volunteer. Each site is inspected before the Volunteer's arrival to ensure placement in appropriate, safe, and secure housing and worksites.

You will also learn about Peace Corps/Albania's **detailed emergency action plan**, which is implemented in the event of civil or political unrest or a natural disaster. When you arrive at your site, you will complete and

submit a site locator form with your address, contact information, and a map to your house. If there is a security threat, you will gather with other Volunteers in Albania at predetermined locations until the situation is resolved or the Peace Corps decides to evacuate.

Finally, in order for the Peace Corps to be fully responsive to the needs of Volunteers, it is imperative that Volunteers immediately report any security incident to the Peace Corps office. The Peace Corps has established **protocols for addressing safety and security incidents** in a timely and appropriate manner, and it collects and evaluates safety and security data to track trends and develop strategies to minimize risks to future Volunteers.

DIVERSITY AND CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES

In fulfilling its mandate to share the face of America with host countries, the Peace Corps is making special efforts to assure that all of America's richness is reflected in the Volunteer corps. More Americans of color are serving in today's Peace Corps than at any time in recent history. Differences in race, ethnic background, age, religion, and sexual orientation are expected and welcomed among our Volunteers. Part of the Peace Corps' mission is to help dispel any notion that Americans are all of one origin or race and to establish that each of us is as thoroughly American as the other despite our many differences.

Diversity helps the Peace Corps accomplish that goal. In other ways, however, it poses challenges. In Albania, as in other Peace Corps host countries, Volunteers' behavior, lifestyle, background, and beliefs are judged in a cultural context very different from their own. Certain personal perspectives or characteristics commonly accepted in the United States may be quite uncommon, unacceptable, or even repressed in Albania.

Outside of Albania's capital, residents of rural communities have had relatively little direct exposure to other cultures, races, religions, and lifestyles. What people view as typical American behavior or norms may be a misconception, such as the belief that all Americans are rich and have blond hair and blue eyes. The people of Albania are justly known for their generous hospitality to foreigners; however, members of the community in which you will live may display a range of reactions to cultural differences that you present.

To ease the transition and adapt to life in Albania, you may need to make some temporary, yet fundamental compromises in how you present yourself as an American and as an individual. For example, female trainees and Volunteers may not be able to exercise the independence available to them in the United States; political discussions need to be handled with great care; and some of your personal beliefs may best remain undisclosed. You will need to develop techniques and personal strategies for coping with these and other limitations. The Peace Corps staff will lead diversity and sensitivity discussions during pre-service training and will be on call to provide support, but the challenge ultimately will be your own.

Overview of Diversity in Albania

The Peace Corps staff in Albania recognizes the adjustment issues that come with diversity and will endeavor to provide support and guidance. During pre-service training, several sessions will be held to discuss diversity and coping mechanisms. The Peace Corps looks forward to having male and female Volunteers from a variety of races, ethnic groups, ages, religions, and sexual orientations, and hope that you will become part of a diverse group of Americans who take pride in supporting one another and demonstrating the richness of American culture.

What Might a Volunteer Face?

Possible Issues for Female Volunteers

Gender stereotypes are much more evident and accepted in Albania than in the United States. By tradition, women are expected to cook and to look after the needs of their husbands and children even if they work outside the home. Albanian women lead much more restrictive lives than American women do. Women do not go out alone at night, and jogging or walking alone for exercise is uncommon. Outside of downtown Tirana and in the larger city centers, women almost never smoke or drink alcohol in public. Young women are sometimes verbally harassed by groups of men in the streets, and looking foreign or walking alone on the street will heighten the likelihood that harassment will occur. Your adjustment to Albanian customs will be difficult and frustrating at times, but you must modify your behavior to avoid compromising yourself and your host family.

Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color

There are very few people of color in Albania, and many Albanians have never met anyone of color. Some older Albanians may have met Chinese technicians and workers in the 1960s and '70s, when Albania was aligned with China. They may have unpleasant memories from that period. Although there are currently foreigners from a variety of countries and races in Tirana, there are very few people of color in the smaller towns and rural communities. Many Albanians will not know what to make of a person of color who calls her/himself an American. If you are of African, Hispanic, or Asian descent, you will probably be the only such person in your community.

You may encounter varying degrees of harassment in your day-to-day life because of ignorance or stereotyped cultural perceptions. You may be evaluated as less professionally competent than a white Volunteer. You may be stared at, pointed to, and commented on. You may hear comments that would be considered completely inappropriate in the United States. Children and teenage boys can be particularly insensitive and hurl comments or even rocks. In those situations, your greatest support will be your host family and local counterparts—people with whom you have established strong relationships—who consider you a friend. They will introduce you to others in the community and intervene with children and others who may bother you. You will have to learn to live with a constant level of attention that you may have never had to face before. It can be very difficult.

Possible Issues for Senior Volunteers

Respect comes with age in Albania. Younger Volunteers may have to work harder than their older colleagues to be accepted as professionals. There are situations that senior Volunteers will find challenging, however. Younger counterparts at your assigned organization may feel that the Peace Corps let them down by not assigning them a younger and presumably more energetic, eager Volunteer. It may take some time for them to see that age has nothing to do with energy or eagerness. Older people in Albania generally are less active than older people in the United States, and your Albanian friends may assume that you would rather stay home than socialize. You may also feel isolated within the Peace Corps community because most Volunteers are likely to be in their 20s.

Possible Issues for Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Volunteers

For LGBTQ Volunteers: Given Albania's traditional values, sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identities might not be discussed openly. In some cases, the LGBTQ community may be stigmatized. Mindful of the cultural norms and country-specific laws, the decision to serve openly is left to each individual Peace Corps Volunteer. Many LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to be discreet about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within their host communities. Some LGBTQ Volunteers have chosen to come out to community members, with a result of positive and negative reactions, while some have come out only to select Peace Corps staff and Volunteers. Dealing with questions about boyfriends, girlfriends, marriage, and children may, at times, be stressful for LGBTQ Volunteers. You may find that Albania is a less open and inclusive environment than you have previously experienced. Please know, however, that Peace Corps is supportive of you and Peace Corps staff welcomes dialogue about how to ensure your success as an LGBTQA Volunteer. More information about serving as an LGBTQ Volunteer is available at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Peace Corps Alumni website at lgbrpcv.org. Additionally, the Peace Corps' LGBTQ employee resource group, Spectrum, can be reached at spectrum@peacecorps.gov.

For Ally Volunteers: Peace Corps staff intends to create open, inclusive, and accepting environments. As an agency, the Peace Corps encourages Volunteers to serve as allies to their LGBTQ colleagues in order to create a safe environment.

Many LGBTQ Volunteers have served successfully in Albania and have very fond memories of their community and service. LGBTQ support groups may be available in your country of service, providing a network to support the needs of the Peace Corps LGBTQ community. Peace Corps staff will work with Volunteers to provide them with locally informed perspectives.

Albania has a homophobic culture, and many Albanians view homosexuality as immoral. The gay and lesbian community in Albania is deeply underground. Being sensible and extremely cautious about revealing one's sexual orientation in one's home, workplace, and community is advisable.

Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers

Albanians' religion generally varies by location. Some areas of the country have more Muslims, some have more Albanian Orthodox people, and some have more Roman Catholics. Though Albania is sometimes characterized as more Muslim, this refers more to heritage than to religious beliefs and practices. Most Albanians identify with one of the three religions because of family history, but tend to be non-practicing members. All religions are fairly well-tolerated in Albania, and practicing a religion is not likely to be an issue. The Peace Corps forbids Volunteers from proselytizing or participating in other religious activities that could impair their effectiveness as Volunteers.

Possible Issues for Volunteers With Disabilities

As a disabled Volunteer in Albania, you will face a special set of challenges. People with disabilities are often kept out of public view in Albania, and there is very little infrastructure to accommodate those with disabilities. There are no ramps in public places, and roads and sidewalks are uneven or otherwise in poor condition. Traffic throughout the country is chaotic. Nevertheless, the Peace Corps Office of Medical Services determined that you were physically and emotionally capable of performing a full tour of Volunteer service in Albania without unreasonable risk to yourself or interruption of your service. Peace Corps/Albania will work with disabled Volunteers to make reasonable accommodations in training, housing, and job sites to enable them to serve safely and effectively.

Possible Issues for Married Volunteers

All married couples will live together during PST and when they move to their permanent sites as Volunteers. However, there might be times during PST where spouses will go in different directions to conduct a project or a practicum.

Married couples may face challenges stemming from traditional Albanian gender roles. A married female Volunteer may find herself the object of gossip among Albanian women, who may wonder whether she is taking proper care of her husband, can cook and preserve enough vegetables for the winter, or spends too much time with other men. While the wife may be expected to do all the domestic chores, the husband may be expected to assume an overtly dominant role in the household. In addition, the independence exercised by each member of an American couple may be perceived as immoral behavior. On the other hand, Albanians value marriage and married Volunteers find a lot of support from the Albanian community. To date, married couples have served effectively in Albania without having to make unreasonable compromises.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Albania?

Most airlines have baggage size and weight limits and assess charges for transport of baggage that exceeds those limits. The Peace Corps has its own size and weight limits and will not pay the cost of transport for baggage that exceeds these limits. The Peace Corps' allowance is two checked pieces of luggage with combined dimensions of both pieces not to exceed 107 inches (length + width + height) and a carry-on bag with dimensions of no more than 45 inches. Checked baggage should not exceed 100 pounds total with a maximum weight of 50 pounds for any one bag.

Peace Corps Volunteers are not allowed to take pets, weapons, explosives, radio transmitters (shortwave radios are permitted), automobiles, or motorcycles to their overseas assignments. Do not pack flammable materials or liquids such as lighter fluid, cleaning solvents, hair spray, or aerosol containers. This is an important safety precaution.

What is the electric current in Albania?

The electric current is 220 volts, 50 hertz. Electrical outlets use round, two-pronged plugs that are standard in Europe, so most American appliances (e.g., hair dryers and CD players) will require transformers and plug adapters. It is best to buy these before leaving the United States. However, European-made electronics are becoming more widely available in Albania at somewhat reasonable prices, so if you do not already own an American item, you can wait until you get to Albania and buy one that does not need a transformer or plug adapter. Check out the website of Walkabout Travel Gear (www.walkabouttravelgear.com) for helpful products (converter plugs, small surge protectors, etc.) and tips on dealing with differences in electric current. More expensive electronics like laptops and MP3 players should be purchased in the United States. Electricity can be very unreliable and of poor quality. Some areas of Albania have experienced outages lasting as long as 10 hours per day during the winter and summer months.

How much money should I bring?

Volunteers are expected to live at the same level as the people in their community. You will be given a settling-in allowance and a monthly living allowance, which should cover your expenses. Volunteers often wish to bring additional money for vacation travel to other countries. Credit cards and traveler's checks are preferable to cash. If you choose to bring extra money, you may decide to bring your debit/ATM bank card to access while in Albania. Bring the amount that will suit your own travel plans and needs. Make sure you notify your bank that you will be living overseas and inform them of the possible countries you may be visiting while living as a Volunteer.

When can I take vacation and have people visit me?

Each Volunteer accrues two vacation days per month of service (excluding training). Leave may not be taken during training, the first three months of service, or the last three months of service, except in conjunction with an authorized emergency leave. Family and friends are welcome to visit you after pre-service training and the first three months of service as long as their stay does not interfere with your work. Extended stays at your site are not encouraged and may require permission from your country director. The Peace Corps is not able to provide your visitors with visa, medical, or travel assistance.

Will my belongings be covered by insurance?

The Peace Corps does not provide insurance coverage for personal effects; Volunteers are ultimately responsible for the safekeeping of their personal belongings. However, you can purchase personal property insurance before you leave. If you wish, you may contact your own insurance company; additionally, insurance application forms will be provided, and you are encouraged to consider them carefully. Volunteers

should not ship or take valuable items overseas. Jewelry, watches, radios, cameras, and expensive appliances are subject to loss, theft, and breakage and, in many places, satisfactory maintenance and repair services are not available.

Do I need an international driver's license?

Volunteers in Albania do not need an international driver's license because they are prohibited from operating privately owned motorized vehicles. Most urban travel is by bus or taxi. Rural travel ranges from buses and minibuses to trucks, bicycles, and lots of walking. On very rare occasions, a Volunteer may be asked to drive a sponsor's vehicle, but this can occur only with prior written permission from the country director. Should this occur, the Volunteer may obtain a local driver's license. A U.S. driver's license will facilitate the process, so bring it with you just in case.

What should I bring as gifts for Albanian friends and my host family?

This is not a requirement. A token of friendship is sufficient. Some gift suggestions include knickknacks for the house; pictures, books, or calendars of American scenes; souvenirs from your area; hard candies that will not melt or spoil; or photos to give away.

Where will my site assignment be when I finish training and how isolated will I be?

Peace Corps trainees are not assigned to individual sites until after they have completed pre-service training. This gives Peace Corps staff the opportunity to assess each trainee's technical and language skills prior to assigning sites, in addition to finalizing site selections with their ministry counterparts. If feasible, you may have the opportunity to provide input on your site preferences, including geographical location, distance from other Volunteers, and living conditions. However, keep in mind that many factors influence the site selection process and that the Peace Corps cannot guarantee placement where you would ideally like to be. Most Volunteers live in small towns or in rural villages and are usually within one hour from another Volunteer. Some sites require a six- to eight-hour drive from the capital. There is at least one Volunteer based in each of the regional capitals and about five to eight Volunteers in the capital city.

How can my family contact me in an emergency?

The Peace Corps Counseling and Outreach Unit provides assistance in handling emergencies affecting trainees and Volunteers or their families. Before leaving the United States, instruct your family to notify the Counseling and Outreach Unit immediately if an emergency arises, such as a serious illness or death of a family member. The number for the COU is 855.855.1961; select option 2, then ext. 1470. After normal business hours and on weekends and holidays, the COU duty officer can be reached at the above number. For non-emergency questions, your family can get information from your country desk staff at the Peace Corps by calling 855.855.1961.

Can I call home from Albania?

Yes, but you will need to pay for all personal calls from your living allowance, and their cost can be substantial. All Volunteers have access to a phone in their communities, but it may be in a post office some distance away. Some host families may have a phone in their home that you may use to make local calls and receive local or international calls. Volunteers receive a cellphone during training that can be used to call home if they wish to pay the fees. While the Peace Corps provides funds for phone time each month for safety and security purposes, it is not enough to call home. However, you can receive calls on your cellphone at no charge. You can also use Skype to make calls from your computer or a computer at an Internet cafe.

Should I bring a cellphone with me?

Not unless it is a European GSM (Global System Mobile) phone that accepts SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards. Most common U.S. cellphones will not work in Albania, though there are GSM/SIM card phones in the U.S. that will (usually called tri-bands). Contact your service provider to learn if you have one of these phones and how it can be unlocked for international use. You will receive a cellphone from the Peace Corps as part of the Safety and Security program.

Will there be email and Internet access? Should I bring my computer?

Internet access is becoming readily available and at a fast pace. Many Volunteers have Internet access in their homes; however, the majority do not and you should not expect this. But most Volunteers at least have an Internet cafe in their town. However, during pre-service training, trainees live in small villages and likely only have access one to two times a week when they travel to a larger city. If you cannot get Internet directly on your computer, you can access it at an Internet cafe and transport documents using a USB. On Internet cafe computers, viruses are a given. Make sure your computer has virus protection ahead of time (AVG has a recommended free version). If you already have a laptop and do not bring it with you, you will probably wish you had. If you do bring a computer, you are responsible for insuring and maintaining it. Powering your laptop may be challenge.

WELCOME LETTERS FROM ALBANIA VOLUNTEERS

There will be many similar obstacles and many common joys among you and the rest of the Volunteers, but the way you look at and react to everything is what defines your experience in Albania.

Why are you here? Don't forget that.
Each Volunteer is unique. You don't have to be anyone else.

These are two notions I've tried to keep in mind always, and ones I reflect upon throughout my journey.

I've learned a foreign language and to communicate in it. I've learned what it's like to be a teacher. And I've learned how to improve how I communicate with other people.

There is no greater window into the culture of Albania than through its language. The opportunities to connect and to communicate over coffee, in the work place, or in your neighborhood will overwhelm you: You can hardly walk down your street without a greeting or an offer to sit and chat. And though you may not leave the training period with fluency, your desire to learn and communicate throughout your service, through mistakes and pronunciation gaffs, will open numerous doors for you in the months to come. I share some of my best moments exchanging English and Albanian poetry with an elderly artist, debating poetry and prose with a colleague at school, and relating the history of my family when I am a guest in a new home. This is why I have come.

There are no greater challenges here for me than in the classroom. Students and teachers have some different views, attitudes, and ethics. They are not mine and I am continually processing how to react, and whether to accept or to combat what I see. Are we here always to accept things as appropriate, or to critique things as wrong? I have seen enough films about inspiration to believe I can motivate students, but it has taken some time to accept that I am only one, that I am limited, and that I cannot just up and change mentalities, mine or others'. But in the words of a good friend here, what I am doing is showing something different, and that is what will be remembered. Whether you change someone or not isn't the question to lose sleep over. But if you don't even show up in the first place, all opportunities for you and your community disappear.

There is nothing greater, I firmly believe, than to say that you are doing something that stretches you beyond your boundaries. It is uncomfortable. I do not always want to be asked if I will marry a woman from this country. It is exciting. I have never seen landscapes and seascapes like those that fill this land. And it is exhausting. I am confronted with a new climate, new diet, new schedule, new language, new community, new tasks, new projects, new rules, new ... you get my drift. That is why I have come. Not just because I have the chance to work with others, but because I chiefly value the opportunity to challenge myself in the life that I have.

—Chris Chaulk

Elders, especially older men, are particularly deferred to. It is startling to have a younger woman get up to give you a seat and almost impossible to allow someone to enter a door before you do. Apparently it is also a sign of respect to allow you to walk in the front, which makes it difficult at times when you don't know where you are going and are trying to follow. If you are a man, some of your neighbors will be amazed that you are able to cook and clean for yourself. If you don't drink alcohol, there will be some awkward social moments, as Albanians do not consider beer, wine, or raki alcohol. If you do drink alcohol, maintaining moderation may be difficult. The same goes regarding food. Being moderate in your diet can be difficult at times among the over generous Albanians, although I am not sure if this is more of a problem for the older Volunteers except that as one ages one usually must be more careful with eating in terms of variety and, particularly, amount.

It is a bit more difficult socializing with the younger Volunteers. Obviously their interests in music and culture will be different from the older Volunteer and their stamina for partying will be quite different. For some, this is their first time away from home outside of college, and they act the way the older Volunteers probably did at their age. The most startling thing to me is the number that have had difficult relationships with their parents. It must be hard for them when they witness the close Albanian families. I think some of the older Volunteers can be helpful by creating a home environment that is open to the younger Volunteers, especially at the holidays, and, of course, this is rewarding for the older Volunteer as well.

As an American who has traveled extensively in the past, it is a continuing source of amazement the degree to which Albanians like America and Americans. It has been a delight to meet Albanians on a personal level and to learn about the history and culture of an ancient country that is little known to most Americans.

—Mike Weiss

Congrats on your invite to Peace Corps/Albania! When I signed on to be a Volunteer, I thought life would be like that of my friend in Mozambique who has bats living in her straw hut's ceiling and a hole in her floor for a toilet. Instead, I am writing to you from my apartment with water, electricity, and Internet. And a western toilet and a washing machine. That's right: You've hit the jackpot as far as living conditions for the Peace Corps.

Now then, things won't always be sunshine and daisies. My personal challenges come from work. It would appear that other letters have thoroughly covered the subject, but some issues bear repeating: Albanians work at their own pace; they respect hierarchy above innovation; they see many problems and few solutions; they stick to whatever structure there has always been, etc., etc. You'll quickly discover what issues you personally find challenging, and you'll discover how to overcome or deal with them. Like you haven't heard it enough already, but the best thing you can do is be flexible.

Other topics which have been thoroughly covered are Albanian hospitality, occasionally aggressive friendliness, and blunt delivery, but I want to end on these best of features of the Albanian culture/mentality, and so I will tell a story to refrain from generalized observations. You can take from the story what you will, but I promise you none of it is fictionalized.

I had planted myself at one of the turnoffs of the highway and was waiting for a passing furgon (public shuttle). Already there was a mother with few teeth, her college-aged daughter, and two young sons playing with a deflated soccer ball. The mother thought I was very bukur (beautiful) and that I was Kinese (Chinese) and could not possibly be American. I have had this observed many times and thus have the photo ready, and so I showed them all the picture of me with my brother, mother (Japanese-American) and father (Caucasian-American mutt), which produced the usual Albanian sound of understanding (“Waaah!”). They ate the apples I offered, and I took their green plums (imagine a plum and a lemon had a baby) as they were thrust on me in return. The daughter insisted I have her silvery bracelets, and I insisted on playing soccer with the boys, who couldn't believe I was going to root for the U.S. in the World Cup. I was asked if I had any interest in marrying the mother's eldest son, which I politely declined, but I did exchange phone numbers with them, promising to dine with them next time I was in the area. When the furgon came, I insisted the family go as they had been waiting for a half hour, but the mother was adamant that we would all be able to fit, which ended up being technically true, even if some passengers had to stand folded over. They would not let me pay for my pilaf (rice) at the rest stop and, when I got off at my destination four hours later that was one city further than theirs, the furgon driver informed me that the mother had paid for my trip.

—KT Gustafson

If I had to put my impression of serving in the Peace Corps in Albania in a few words they would be, “Is this really the Peace Corps?” That may be because I work in a program where Volunteers are in a professional

setting with local engineers, urban planners, and even politicians (and dressing in business casual). When I enlisted, I envisioned I would be digging fishponds in Central America. I have been assigned to work with a national park in southern Albania. As a landscape architect, I have had national parks as clients, but I had never worked for a national park. Not only is it a good change of pace for me, but it is an excellent opportunity for professional development with an international slant. My résumé will not skip a beat with my two years of service and I will have had the chance to travel in Europe as well.

Albania is one big paradox. It has the history and culture of an ancient civilization, but it lacks the sophistication of Europe. There are no such things as credit cards, shower curtains, or electricity. But things are changing fast.

Albania is also one of the few places left in the world where they actually like Americans: We helped with Kosovo and they don't forget those kinds of things here. The mountains and the southern coast are dramatic and beautiful; the roads are terrible; the apartment flats from the socialist period are very ugly; and in the town of Lac where I lived for three months during training, there were pigs on the sidewalk in front of the Internet cafe—a land of contrasts.

—Gary Wimberly

If you are interested in getting a handle on the history of the Balkans and the mentality of the Albanian people, I recommend two books: “Accursed Mountains” by Robert Carver and “Balkan Ghosts” by Robert Kaplan. “Accursed Mountains” is specifically about a trip to Albania in summer 1996. Carver’s insights into the Albanian mentality may help speed your acclimation process. The author’s observations are generally right on, if not occasionally embellished for the sake of the novel. “Balkan Ghosts” has helped me better understand the region and why there has been such tumult for so long.

My personal reactions to a number of things:

Food: It has been better than I expected. You will eat pretty well here. Salt and olive oil (plenty of each) are the condiments of choice. Vegetables and fruit are generally abundant. Vegetarians will have fun trying to explain their aversion to meat, but their choices will be respected.

Landscape: The country can be absolutely beautiful at times and shockingly ugly at others. There is more urban decay than I expected, but 50 years of totalitarian rule and lack of money can do that. There is a lot of trash. Be prepared to see piles of trash placed in some surprisingly prominent places—in the center of small towns for example. Though city locations will vary, there is a sameness to them in terms of buildings and houses. You will quickly learn that Albanians build their homes in stages, so when you see metal bars sticking up from the roofs of so many houses, it's because they plan to build another floor if and when they have money to do so.

People: The people are generally extremely generous with food, time, and lodging, whatever they have. Americans are almost universally liked and appreciated (at least the first time you meet—the rest is up to you!).

Work: I think for many of us the work (or lack thereof) has been the most challenging aspect of our service. Depending on what you will be doing, be prepared to put aside your Western notions of initiative, planning, productivity, and collaboration. Planning for the future is still a new concept. Albanians were told what to do by the central government for 50 years, so the idea of taking initiative and working on something without

being told to is still new. Generally, people here adhere to a hierarchical style of management. The boss is the boss, he or she tells me what to do, and I do it. I generally do not do more than I am told to. Working together and collaborating on ideas are second nature to Americans, but still new here. You may have to work hard at getting different groups to see the benefit of sharing ideas and working together.

There can sometimes be a disconnect between the organization that has requested a Peace Corps Volunteer and the people you ultimately work with. Your colleagues may need some time to get used to the idea of working with you without feeling threatened by your presence. Depending on your job, be prepared to look outside your prescribed role to find fulfillment. Ultimately, you will have to work harder to find a sense of accomplishment.

Like anybody, I am occasionally frustrated by what goes on here, but I am usually buoyed by the fact that our presence in Albania is received so positively.

—Ted Feeny

I didn't really know what to expect when I first got off the plane in Rinas. Albania is a country full of contradictions. It's a country you'll love one minute and hate the next. But what will make your experience worthwhile are the wonderful people you will meet and places you will visit.

Albanians are some of the most curious, generous, and hospitable people I've ever met. Strangers will strike up conversations with you if you just smile or say "hi" to them. They enjoy talking to foreigners and even love you when you speak in Shqip (Albanian language). They'll invite you to their homes even if they've just met you. But Albanians also like to ask the most personal questions, usually without intending to. Albanians are blunt. They'll tell you if you're fat or skinny to your face without thinking that they're offending you. Be prepared to answer questions about how much money you have or are making as a Volunteer. Albanians are kind and generous. Even if they're poor, they will bring you their best food and drinks (homemade wine or raki). Albanians take pride in what they serve you. Don't be surprised if random people start giving you gifts like sweets, fruits, and socks or invite you for coffee when you first get to your site. Sometimes they'll want something in return (like ask you to tutor their kids in English or help them get a U.S. visa), but most of the time they're just kind. When you live with your host family, they'll expect you to be part of the family, paying them visits and calling them on occasion after you move to your permanent site or apartment.

Albania is a beautiful country. Expect to find old castles on mountains, unique landscapes, and gorgeous valleys. At the same time, be prepared to find dumps of trash and rivers turned into sewage canals. Take the time to travel around the country. But expect to find crazy furgon (mini-buses) drivers. They can fit their vehicles into the smallest possible area and stop in the middle of the road to talk to a fellow driver. You'll wonder who gave them driver's licenses.

If you think Albania has Mediterranean, warm weather, think again. In winter, it can get really cold in Albania, especially up in the mountains. It can get so cold that you can see your breath in your room and you'll dread putting on cold clothes. There's no centralized heating in most Albanian homes. Even if you have an electric or gas heater, you're lucky if there's power 24/7 or you don't smell gas in your room. Bring a sleeping bag! I wouldn't have survived this past winter without it.

Life in Albania is slow. Be prepared to sometimes be bored at home and at work. Bring lots of music and books to keep your mind busy. If you're used to working with computers and lots of paper, lower your expectations. Work in Albania is not about doing paperwork, but about maintaining relationships, usually built

through cups of coffee. Don't expect to be told what to do. The job description they give you in the beginning doesn't mean anything—you can be a strategic planner one day, IT helpdesk the next, and English translator the third. Your job and experience here will be what you make of it.

—Anna Gutierrez

Working with Albanians can be exceedingly difficult. It takes a lot of patience and tolerance. They tend to be suspicious and jealous of each other, and there is a tendency to criticize and find fault. Albanians have refused to work on a project because it wasn't their idea. Some have gotten angry at me for sharing and trying to find partners for ideas we were working on together.

There is an anecdote I've heard several times from Albanians. They tell it in a joking manner, but they admit it has a ring of truth.

The Albanian king decided he would grant some of his subjects anything they desired. The first Albanian peasant approached the king. "What is your desire my loyal subject?" the King asked. "The only request I have is that you give me a cow that I might provide my family with milk." The king was a little taken aback by such a simple request but granted the peasant his wish. The peasant took his cow home and proudly showed it to his neighbor. The next day the peasant's neighbor went to the king to have his request granted. The king asked his loyal subject what he wished. This peasant replied, "Your lordship, I don't want anything except that I want you to take the cow away from my neighbor."

I find myself always breaking some sort of cultural practice. I have been accused of trying to accomplish too much and trying to give too much assistance to certain people. In this culture it is easier to do nothing than try something and risk failure. There is also an underlying belief that if you can't do a project perfectly, it is better not to do it at all. When I ask Albanians how things are going to get better in their country, they almost always say that outsiders are going to have to come in and make things better. They do not feel connected to their government and don't understand why America supports and works with their government. They feel the government is surely corrupt. Yet they feel powerless to hold their leaders responsible.

—Mike Benjamin

The first thing I'd like to say about you moving to Albania is that you will be safe here. For some reason, many people think of Albania and think it is dangerous here. There is crime here, but the crime consists of very high-level crime that you won't be involved in and low-level petty theft, which most often happens in the capital. I have lived in a number of cities and towns in the U.S. and feel safer here than I did in any of them. The only exception is the drivers here. For some reason drivers here think they are more important than any pedestrian and drive with the thought that it is the pedestrian's job to get out of the way. As far as the Kanun-related blood feuds, they do exist and are pervasive across the north of Albania. I live in the south, and I know nothing of them here. Volunteers who are in the north say how they know people whose families are involved in them and it is heartbreaking to see, as often men never leave their house in their entire lives from fear of being killed in the street due to being involved in a blood feud. There are entire towns where only women are outside due to them. You will not be placed anywhere where blood feuds are pervasive like this, and as a foreigner, you are exempt from them as long as you do not align yourself with one family against another.

An additional note on safety is that 99 percent of Albanians love Americans-almost unconditionally. There are historic reasons for this, as president Wilson is seen as helping make sure that Albania was kept as a sovereign

country rather than being eaten up by its neighbors, and of course the US's lead role in the Kosovo situation. They do have a generally negative view of what is going on politically now with the US, but less so even than many Americans. The pro-American sentiment takes on surreal dimensions, a great example of which was during the elections that took place this summer. During almost every event for each of the parties you could see three flags waving in the crowd: the Albanian flag, the political party's flag, and the American flag (which believe it or not was not on fire!). It was really weird, but nice to know that most Albanians are generally positive toward us, unlike much of the world.

I must say that I and most Volunteers love it here. There are minor cultural differences here, and I have gotten (mostly) used to those differences quickly. It's a great place, people befriend you so quickly here and there are so many people who are so excited to talk to you. When I am on long bus rides, and we have a coffee break, other passengers often fight with one another about who is going to sit and hang out with me and buy me a coffee, and this is descriptive of my interactions with Albanians in general. If you have any doubts about coming, get rid of them, it's a wonderful experience here.

—Chris Cudebec

PACKING LIST

This list has been compiled by Volunteers serving in Albania and is based on their experience. Use it as an informal guide in making your own list, bearing in mind that each experience is individual. There is no perfect list! You obviously cannot bring everything on the list, so consider those items that make the most sense to you personally and professionally. You can always have things sent to you later. As you decide what to bring, keep in mind that you have a 100-pound weight limit on baggage. And remember, you can get almost everything you need in Albania.

General Clothing

- Professional clothes: Albanians are very well dressed and expect you to look professional in work settings.
- Wicking clothing/towels: Towels are not provided in your homes and are great to have while traveling (all the better if they dry fast).
- Outer clothes: You will be outside a lot and outer clothes are great for layering when it gets colder.
- House clothes: Who doesn't like comfy clothes to relax in? House slippers/sandals are great to have also.
- Warm hats/socks: If you haven't gotten it yet, it's cold here! Be prepared! Attack the winter!
- Thermal underwear: unavailable in Albania and great to have for cold winter

Shoes

- Walking shoes: You will be walking a lot throughout your entire service. Durable and comfortable shoes are of utmost importance.

Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items

- Any favorite nonprescription medical supplies (those provided by the Peace Corps may not be your favorite brands, e.g., Nyquil or Zicam)
- A supply of feminine hygiene products (or menstrual cup) to last throughout pre-service training (Tampons can be purchased in Tirana; o.b. tampons can be found in pharmacies in larger cities.)
- Contact lens solutions (not supplied by the Peace Corps and not readily available outside of Tirana)
- Small supply of cosmetics or creams (the quality in Albania varies); hair-care items of certain brands may be difficult to find; if you are particular about this, pack enough until you can get more shipped
- Quick-drying towel
- Hand sanitizer/wet wipes

Miscellaneous

- Sleeping bag: Essential for the winter and also great for traveling to other sites
- Headlamp/flashlights: Power outages are frequent and having these will help you to maintain a routine when this happens.
- Leatherman or Swiss Army Knife
- Sturdy umbrella: You can buy umbrellas locally, but they're not good quality.
- Nalgene bottle: Dead giveaway that you're a foreigner but good to have and track water consumption.
- Hobby things/exercise equipment: Bring what makes you happy: guitars, drawing tools, knitting needles, etc. Exercise bands, jump ropes, and other things to keep you active are great to have. Women typically don't work out in public here, but if you feel comfortable running in your community that is also an option.

- Notebooks/studying materials: Learning a language is hard enough as is, so make it easier on yourself by bringing materials that help your learning process (notebooks, flash cards-not available in country, highlighters, etc.).
- Comfort foods: Bring individual servings of comfort foods to get you through long training days. After training, favorite foods that you miss are great ideas for care packages.
- Reusable grocery bags: PCVs are working hard to eliminate the plastic bag problem here in Albania and this will help you become part of the solution.

PRE-DEPARTURE CHECKLIST

The following list consists of suggestions for you to consider as you prepare to live outside the United States for two years. Not all items will be relevant to everyone, and the list does not include everything you should make arrangements for.

Family

- Notify family that they can call the Peace Corps Counseling and Outreach Unit at any time if there is a critical illness or death of a family member (24-hour telephone number: 855.855.1961 ext. 1470).
- Give the Peace Corps' On the Home Front handbook to family and friends.

Passport/Travel

- Forward to the Peace Corps travel office all paperwork for the Peace Corps passport and visas.
- Verify that your luggage meets the size and weight limits for international travel.
- Obtain a personal passport if you plan to travel after your service ends. (Your Peace Corps passport will expire three months after you finish your service, so if you plan to travel longer, you will need a regular passport.)

Medical/Health

- Complete any needed dental and medical work.
- If you wear glasses, bring two pairs.
- Arrange to bring a three-month supply of all medications (including birth control pills) you are currently taking.

Insurance

- Make arrangements to maintain life insurance coverage.
- Arrange to maintain supplemental health coverage while you are away. (Even though the Peace Corps is responsible for your health care during Peace Corps service overseas, it is advisable for people who have pre-existing conditions to arrange for the continuation of their supplemental health coverage. If there is a lapse in coverage, it is often difficult and expensive to be reinstated.)
- Arrange to continue Medicare coverage if applicable.

Personal Papers

- Bring a copy of your certificate of marriage or divorce.

Voting

- Register to vote in the state of your home of record. (Many state universities consider voting and payment of state taxes as evidence of residence in that state.)
- Obtain a voter registration card and take it with you overseas.

- Arrange to have an absentee ballot forwarded to you overseas.

Personal Effects

- Purchase personal property insurance to extend from the time you leave your home for service overseas until the time you complete your service and return to the United States.

Financial Management

- Keep a bank account in your name in the United States. Notify your bank that you will be living in Albania and inform them of the possible/likely countries you may be visiting (on annual leave) while living abroad.
- Obtain student loan deferment forms from the lender or loan service.
- Execute a Power of Attorney for the management of your property and business.
- Arrange for deductions from your readjustment allowance to pay alimony, child support, and other debts through the Office of Volunteer Financial Operations at 855.855.1961 ext. 1770.
- Place all important papers—mortgages, deeds, stocks, and bonds—in a safe deposit box or with an attorney or other caretaker.

CONTACTING PEACE CORPS HEADQUARTERS

This list of numbers will help connect you with the appropriate office at Peace Corps headquarters to answer various questions. You can use the toll-free number and extension or dial directly using the local numbers provided. Be sure to leave the toll-free number and extensions with your family so they can contact you in the event of an emergency.

Peace Corps Headquarters toll-free number:

855.855.1961, press 2, then the extension number (see chart below)

Peace Corps mailing address:

Peace Corps
Paul D. Coverell Peace Corps Headquarters
1111 20th Street NW
Washington, DC 20526

For questions about:	Staff:	Toll-free extension:	Direct number:
Responding to an invitation	Office of Placement	ext. 1840	202.692.1840
Country and program information	Country Desk Officer	ext. 1184	202.692.1184
Plane tickets, passports, visas, or other travel matters	CWT SATO Travel	ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Staging and reporting instructions <i>(Please note that you will receive comprehensive information, including flight and hotel information, approximately three to five weeks prior to departure.)</i>	Office of Staging	ext. 1865	202.692.1865
Loan readjustments, tax readjustments and power of attorney	Office of Financial Services	ext. 1770	202.692.1770
Family emergencies	Counseling and Outreach Unit (24-hour line)	ext. 1470	202.692.1470