

Selected Anecdotes From Peace Corps Volunteers

With Related Internet Links

Africa

Volunteer: Barbara Davis	Country of Service: Botswana	Years of Service: 1984–1990
Place and location: Gomare, where I did the majority of my service, was 1,500 km northwest of the capital, Gaborone		

Independence Day (September 30) is similar to small-town celebrations in the United States, centered on the local dignitaries, the chief, the other district council members. They are impressive, in so far as beasts are slaughtered and a huge feast is prepared for everyone in the village. I guess that's like a huge country fair or pot luck, but the village people do not bring anything; they are fed by the district council. Schoolchildren have traditional dance competitions, and at our school (the junior high school), we had several sports competitions, such as a foot race run by girls who were balancing a bottle of water on their heads. They had to do a 50-meter dash without touching the bottle with their hands, and without spilling the bottle. We also had a Miss Independence competition, which included not only the usual poise and grace type stuff, but questions concerning the history of Botswana. The young woman who won the competition in '86 (the 20th anniversary of independence) was also the heaviest girl in the school. Schoolchildren in the United States find it hard to believe that a heavy girl would win a beauty competition.

Volunteer: Erica Clark	Country of Service: Morocco	Years of Service: 1996–1998
Place and location: I am serving in Tazarte (Fig), which is 60 km northeast of Marrakech in the mountains and plains.		

On Ashora, children go from house to house asking for 10-centime pieces (like a penny). If you don't give them one, they can throw water on you, or use a squirt gun, etc. Usually mass water fights break out in the streets between everybody, adults and children alike. It is similar to Halloween in the "trick or treat" spirit of things. A super-soaker water gun is our ultimate wish for the day—or a giant hose! It is a simultaneous water fight throughout all of Morocco.

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The Americas and the Caribbean

Volunteer: Stephen Church	Country of Service: Ecuador	Years of Service: 1996–1998
Place and location: I am a Volunteer in Azogues, which is in south central Ecuador, about 40 km northeast of the city of Cuenca.		

Here in Ecuador, the celebration that stands out most in my mind is *Carnaval*. When I first heard it mentioned by Ecuadorians and fellow Volunteers, images of loud music, festive parades, and people celebrating throughout the night filled my mind. As I pressed for more details, both Ecuadorians and veteran Volunteers responded with an evil grin, pausing to savor the memories of *Carnavals* past, muttering something to the effect of "Just wait. You'll find out soon enough."

Samba isn't quite as popular in Ecuador as it is in Brazil, and Quito isn't quite Río de Janeiro, but does that mean they can't celebrate *Carnaval* in Ecuador like they do in Brazil? After all, both countries are in South America and both have a celebration called *Carnaval* before Easter. Isn't it logical for inexperienced Volunteers and travelers to assume that it would be celebrated the same way? Well, surprise: It's not.

Throughout the country, from the hot and humid coastal lowlands to the cool and dry Andes highlands and down into the wet Amazon Basin, Ecuadorians celebrate **Semana Santa**, the week leading up to Easter, by dousing each other with water, and among friends, anything else that happens to be handy. Walking down the street, you become fair play for children and teenagers hiding in doorways and waiting on balconies with buckets, balloons, local versions of the famous Super-Soaker, and anything else that will hold water long enough for them to take aim and let fly. Traditionally, *Carnaval* is only celebrated the three days before Easter, but each year it seems to start a day earlier. The beginning of the week is more *tranquilo*, or tranquil, with things getting more intense and less dry as the week progresses.

On the street, there are some unwritten guidelines that most *Carnavaleros* adhere to. For example, the elderly and those in business clothes or other formal attire are usually ignored, but there are always exceptions. Also, those who find themselves on the receiving end of things are supposed to laugh it off and continue on to their destination dripping all the way. Once wet, they will generally be avoided as targets, at least until they start to dry off again. After all, who wants to soak someone who is already wet when there are plenty of dry or almost dry people wandering around?

Friends often get together to celebrate *Carnaval* with a picnic or a barbecue, listening to music, hanging out, and having fun before people start to get wet. Water, of course, is the favorite weapon of choice, but eventually it runs out. Whatever else happens to be handy, liquid or otherwise, is often poured, thrown, or dumped on whoever happens to be nearest. Some common additions are flour, cornstarch, and eggs, among others.

Another important part of *Carnaval* is the food. At home, after the water stops flying and everyone has towed off, it's time for the traditional meal. The meal begins with a serving of *motepata*. *Motepata* is a soup made with mote, a stewed corn similar to hominy; other grains; *patas* (pigs feet), and other cuts of pork. In some homes, the traditional *pata* is left out in favor of more bacon and pork. The main entree of *cuy* follows the *motepata* served on a bed of rice. *Cuy* is an Andean delicacy dating back to pre-Columbian times, more commonly known in English as guinea pig. Most prefer their guinea pig barbecued, but roasted or baked guinea pig is also common. Dessert comes last, consisting of *dulce de higo*, or candied figs, in a sweet sauce.

After the big meal I had a feeling similar to the one I get after a big Thanksgiving meal in the States. All I wanted to do was relax and watch some football. Of course in Ecuador I would be watching *fútbol* (soccer) instead of football, but what better way to end my Ecuadorian *Carnaval*!

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Volunteer: Judy D'Amore	Country of Service: Panama	Years of Service: 1996–1998
Place and location: I am serving as a Volunteer in París de Parit, about 25 miles north of the city of Chitré, on the eastern edge of the Azuero Peninsula.		

There are so many celebrations here, from the anniversary of the school, or the patron saint of the town, to the huge number of national festivals and holidays, day of the flag, day of the Patria, children's day, student's day, mother's day ... and, of course, *Carnavales (Fat Tuesday)*, in February.

Carnavales is celebrated most exuberantly in the city of Las Tablas, to the south of us, but it was also celebrated within my small community. There was coronation of the queen, parades, and formal presentation of the queen and important members of the community. The queen and her attendants are dressed in elaborate, expensive embroidered dresses reminiscent of Spain. Another characteristic part of *Carnavales* festivities here is the spraying of water on each other from every available hose and faucet, and there are even trucks with water tanks on the back for dumping on people. Nobody leaves their houses during *Carnavales* unless they're dressed to get very wet. It's the only time here where you see people scantily dressed, with flashy sunglasses and silly hats. Dancing goes on 24 hours a day. During the day in wet, open-air dance halls, the dancers getting sprayed as they dance. At night the hoses are put away and people dress up. The music might be discotheque, or live bands playing *musica tipica*, immensely popular local bands starring accordion players, drum, and guitar. There's also a wonderful traditional music in this part of Panama based on small, hand-made wooden drums. The energetic drumming is accompanied by a women's song, led by a lead singer and answered by a chorus. A man and woman dance within the circle of singers and drummers, but the individuals change rapidly, a second man replacing the one who's dancing and the woman stepping out to let a new woman in.

I think the most striking part of *Carnavales* and indeed of all festivals here is that they are celebrated so universally by all members of the community and equally by all ages. These are all very much family events.

Related Internet Link

Easter Weeks in Mexico/Pascua/Semana Santa:

http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/feature/easterindex.html

The Pacific

Volunteer: Barbara Sallettes	Country of Service: Malaysia	Years of Service: 1964–1966
Place and location: I served in Kota Tinggi, Johor, which is 26 miles from Johor Bahru, Johor. (Johor Bahru is the capital of the state of Johor.)		

Although there are other religions, the predominant religion of Malaysia is Islam. The month of Ramadan is called Puasa. The first year I was in Malaysia, I decided to observe Puasa to get a feel for what the people were experiencing. During daylight hours, you cannot eat or drink anything. Not eating wasn't too difficult, but going without anything to drink was another story. Malaysia has an extremely warm climate and by the afternoon my mouth felt like cotton. Observing Puasa was difficult. I certainly gained a sense of understanding and respect for those who follow this Islamic practice.

Related Internet Links

Festival of Malaysia - Hari Raya Puasa: <http://www.regit.com/malaysia/festival/haripuas.htm>

Malaysia/Festivals: <http://www.visitmalaysia.com/holhariraya.html>

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Asia

Volunteer: Rex Dufour	Country of Service: Thailand	Years of Service: 1985–1987
Place and location: I was a Volunteer in Nakorn Ratchasima (also known as Korat). I lived about five km outside of Korat in Development Village.		

The Thai New Year, known as *Songkran*, on April 13, was always a big celebration. Depending on the locality in Thailand, it may be celebrated for 1 to 5 days. A lot of folks from Bangkok head up to Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, to celebrate *Songkran*. *Songkran* occurs during the hottest part of the year and some have called it a national water fight. A lot of the celebration involves pouring (or splashing) water on anyone and everyone you meet. There's also quite a bit of baby powder smeared on people's faces—I'm not sure where that tradition came from. The more polite (*rip-roy*) way of doing *Songkran* is to ask the pardon of someone prior to gently pouring a small amount of water on his or her shoulder. I've only seen this done at official ceremonies, however. Most of the celebration is much more rowdy. In the northeast (Esan) of Thailand, the villagers, I'm told, used to place a cat in a cage and splash it with water. This was done in order to attract the monsoon rains (perhaps attracted to the cat's yowling?). I never personally saw this activity, but I did participate in many *Songkrans*. One year I invited several other Volunteers to Korat for *Songkran*. We borrowed a pickup truck and a 50-gallon drum along with some very large blocks of ice and drove around Korat cooling people off. There's nothing quite like being splashed with ice water on a 100-degree Fahrenheit day. It was great fun for both splashers and splashees and we *farong* (foreigners) attracted our share of water and powder, and even some tapioca.

Volunteer: Leslie Wilson	Country of Service: Thailand	Years of Service: 1990–1992
Place and location: I was a Volunteer in Pathiu (village), Chumphon (province).. It was an 8-hour train ride south of Bangkok.		

One celebration in Thailand was *Songkran*, the traditional Thai water festival that occurs in the middle of April each year. It's a bit like Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year all rolled into one big, big holiday. You will, I hope, get lots of details about the history and practice of the holiday which, among other things, involved the "blessing" of others with water. Or, at least that's how it started out in ancient times—water poured respectfully and delicately over the wrists of those you wanted to honor. Now teenagers cruise around with 50-gallon drums of water loaded in the back of pickup trucks and drench passersby with buckets of water. Or, they just hook up a rubber hose to the household faucet and spray people who walk past their houses. All in good fun, of course, but a bit more than the tradition called for, I'm sure.

Related Internet Link: The *Songkran* Festival

http://sunsite.au.ac.th/thailand/special_event/songkran/index.html

Volunteer: Judith Painter	Country of Service: Thailand	Years of Service: 1982–1984
Place and location: I was a Volunteer in the Tungfun district, in Udorn province. This small sub-district is 70 km east of the provincial capital Udorn Thani in the northeast section of Thailand.		

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Loi Kratong is a celebration in Thailand when people float small boats decorated with flowers, candles, and candy. This symbolizes sending off your sins from the previous year. It is similar to a Jewish holiday following Yom Kippur, in which bread is cast into the water as a way of casting off sins.

Europe

Volunteer: Lisa Burrowes	Country of Service: Lithuania	Years of Service: 1994–1996
Place and location: I was a Volunteer in Marijampole, which is southwest of the capital, Vilnius—it's about a 1.5 hour drive by car and three hours by bus or train.		

Lithuanians love to celebrate! And there are many days of celebration; but I think that quite possibly their favorite holiday is celebrated on June 24 every year. It is the longest day of the year ... and in Lithuania, it never really gets completely dark on this day (the sun is always low on the horizon). The holiday is called *Jonines (YONINNESS)*, or John's Day. Most people go to the forest and drink and sing and dance all night long. There is one tradition where all the young maidens send wreaths down a creek in a race. Whoever has a wreath that gets stuck on twigs or sinks or comes in last is said to be a *senmerge (SAN mare gay)*, or spinster! Usually, there is traditional folk dancing and singing accompanying this holiday. This holiday is different from any I've celebrated in the United States because Lithuanians, including the young children and teenagers, love folk tradition. They love to dress in their national costumes. They are a proud people and they never forget their ancestry.

Volunteer: Rich Bartell	Country of Service: Armenia	Years of Service: 1996–1998
Place and location: I am a Volunteer in Hrazdan, which is about 50 km northeast of Yerevan, Armenia's capital.		

While I am not sure what is being celebrated, my favorite holiday in Armenia is *Vartevor*. A literal translation of *Vartevor* is "Rose Day." Like Easter, the exact date of *Vartevor* varies from year to year, but it is always on a Sunday in the month of July. I am told that the holiday stems from an old pagan celebration of some sort, as does the American Halloween. And like Halloween, *Vartevor* is a holiday enjoyed most by children—and, of course, by us child-like adults.

The celebration of *Vartevor* involves water and people dousing one another with it. As I strolled through the streets of Yerevan on *Vartevor*, I saw hundreds of people, primarily but not exclusively children, throwing water at one another. It came by the cupful and the bucketful. It came out of squirt guns and in balloons. It was administered by frontal assaults and from upper-story windows. It was directed at pedestrians, private automobiles, and public buses. But it was always delivered with a smile. As a foreigner (which even the smallest of children can somehow immediately discern) and as an adult unknown to the assailants, I initially proved immune to the direct assaults. At one point a group of boys approached me tentatively, their buckets overflowing and poised for attack. I asked them to wait and removed my camera from its protective plastic bag to take their photograph. They were happy to comply and posed for me, grinning and with buckets ready. After I stowed the camera I expected to be doused, but to my disappointment the children moved on without attacking.

When I reached Republic Square in the center of Yerevan, my immunity at last came to an end. Apparently anyone willing to come that close to the large fountains with their endless supply of liquid ammunition was fair game, foreigner or not. After the initial daring attack, the simple fact that I was already wet seemed to remove any inhibitions the children had, and for the rest of the afternoon we exchanged dousings over and over again. It was not only fun, but proved a welcome relief from the sweltering heat of summer in Yerevan. And I will never forget the smiles.

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Related Internet Links:

Calendar Celebrations in Lithuania: <http://javlb.org/folklife/calendar.html>