

THE PEACE CORPS WELCOMES YOU TO

BULGARIA



A PEACE CORPS PUBLICATION
FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS



November 2008



A WELCOME LETTER

Greetings from Bulgaria!

On behalf of all of the Peace Corps/Bulgaria staff and Volunteers, I congratulate you on your decision to become a Peace Corps Volunteer. Your commitment to the cause of world peace and international understanding will serve you well as you navigate the twists and turns of two years of service to the people of Bulgaria. As a former Volunteer myself, I'm extremely proud of the Peace Corps, its history, and the exceptional people who have chosen to become a part of this large extended family. As your country director, I'm pleased to tell you that the staff and Volunteers here have created an optimal learning and working environment that will provide you with every opportunity to become an effective Volunteer.

It is important to understand that training is part of the qualification process prior to being sworn-in as a Volunteer. It is designed to equip you with the skills and knowledge (including language) needed to be an effective Volunteer. You will be expected to develop and demonstrate competence in the Bulgarian language and in cross-cultural, technical, health, and safety and security areas. Be assured that demonstrating a positive intention in all areas is more important than the specific level of mastery you gain. You will continue learning throughout your service.

The training you are about to receive is very intense. Your commitment to serve 27 months performing a tough job in a different culture needs to be a strong one. The support and encouragement you will receive during this learning process will be extraordinary. Staff effort notwithstanding, the most critical factors for your success are your own hard work, your professionalism, and your commitment to serve the Bulgarian people.

Peace Corps Volunteers are playing a small but important role here during an exciting period of social, economic, and political change. While the burden of this change falls heaviest on

Bulgarians themselves, the work that you carry out—facilitating an exchange of knowledge and experience between our two nations—will make a very real difference in many people’s lives. We have prepared this *Welcome Book* to provide you with some idea of what to expect, what to bring, and what you might want to read before departing. The economic and political situation here is constantly evolving. Some things will likely change a bit from the time we have written this book, to the time that you read it, to the time that you arrive in Bulgaria. The unpredictability that is inherent in Bulgaria’s evolution to a stable and prosperous democracy will be one of the most exciting and, at the same time, one of the most frustrating aspects of your experience here.

Despite appearances, it will not always be easy to function effectively as a Volunteer. While Bulgaria has joined the European Union, our site selection and placement strategy is to place most Volunteers in remote and underserved communities that are at the bottom of the United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Index. These are the communities with the greatest need, where opportunities and resources are limited, and where income, health, education, and opportunity lag far behind the many more developed cities and towns in Bulgaria. Challenges in these communities are much more like those one would encounter in a developing country. This translates into greater mental and institutional challenges for our Volunteers—and ultimately a richer experience.

It will take all of your skills, patience, understanding, and perseverance to be successful. Know that the entire team of Peace Corps/Bulgaria—staff and Volunteers—will welcome and support you. You have our admiration and respect, along with our sincere hope that these will be among the most rewarding and unforgettable years of your life.

Best wishes and good luck!

Lesley Duncan

Country Director (RPCV Paraguay 1987-1990)

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PEACE CORPS/BULGARIA HISTORY AND PROGRAMS



History of the Peace Corps in Bulgaria

In 1991, a year after peaceful public protest led to changes in Bulgaria's political structure and direction, the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers arrived in Bulgaria to teach English at secondary schools and universities. The first group of economic development Volunteers arrived the following year. Environmental Volunteers started assignments throughout the country in September 1995, and in 2003, the youth development program (YD) was initiated. In 2004, the community and economic development (CED) and environmental programs were merged to create a community and organizational development program (COD), with the goal of providing a comprehensive approach to assisting with community development at the local level.

As of August 2008, over 1,000 Volunteers have served in Bulgaria. Currently, 140 Volunteers are in-country; approximately half of them teach English as a foreign language (TEFL) in primary and secondary schools, the other half are in the COD and YD programs.

History and Future of Peace Corps Programming in Bulgaria

Since the late-1990s, Bulgaria has made exceptional progress in its transition to a decentralized, market-oriented economic system. Peace Corps has continually adapted and modified its programs to best serve the rapidly evolving needs of the people of Bulgaria and the communities it serves. Since January 2007, Bulgaria has been part of the European

Union (EU), and Peace Corps/Bulgaria is proud to be one of the first two Peace Corps programs to operate in an EU country. Bulgaria's rapid development has exacerbated a host of socioeconomic problems, including a rapidly growing development gap between cities and rural areas, high unemployment and poverty (particularly in more remote areas and among the elderly), youth disenfranchisement, degradation of educational institutions that have not adapted to the changing realities, separation of minority groups from mainstream society, and a limited understanding of a market economy and entrepreneurial skills. Current Peace Corps Bulgaria programs focus on assistance to underserved communities, including remote and smaller communities, minority populations, and disadvantaged groups. There is considerable opportunity for ongoing development work in Bulgaria, and Peace Corps/Bulgaria remains dedicated to best serving the needs of Bulgaria as an EU country.

TEFL Volunteers currently teach approximately 6,000 students. The need and desire for English language fluency has increased significantly as Bulgaria joins the global community. English fluency can open a host of opportunities for Bulgarian youth. Volunteers also help conduct extracurricular conversation courses and organize English language clubs. Bulgarian educators have reported extensive improvements in the English language fluency of students and a significant enhancement of Bulgarian English language teachers' capabilities and teaching techniques as a result of their partnerships with TEFL Volunteers. Volunteers have taught computer literacy and Internet use to secondary school students and trained staff how to most effectively use computers in the classroom. Outreach projects help provide children from minority groups with an alternative atmosphere for learning and social development, and help raise these children's confidence and self-esteem.

COD Volunteers assist in strengthening the organizational capacity of partner organizations at the local level. These Volunteers work with local and regional governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), economic development organizations, museums, and schools. They may help their organizations develop skills in community needs assessment and response, project initiation and implementation, grant writing, business administration and management, fundraising, environmental education and protection, and information and communication technology (ICT). COD Volunteers help regional and local governments foster transparency and public involvement in municipal affairs, address minority and NGO-sector issues, and promote community partnerships. Volunteers also work with local communities to enhance public knowledge of the environment and related issues, and to strengthen the public role in local decision-making. Volunteers may help conduct environmental education courses and organize outdoor activities and field trips for students. Volunteers also help teach Junior Achievement, applied economics and business English courses, and organize business and community development training events.

Youth development Volunteers are assigned to youth NGOs, municipal children's centers, youth clubs, schools, and orphanages/institutions for children who are homeless, at-risk, or have special needs. While Bulgarian youth are bright and curious about the rest of the world, many youth, particularly those in underserved and minority communities and institutions, lack the education, guidance, and support to help them become contributing, responsible community members. Gangs of youth and use of illegal drugs are becoming more common, and HIV/AIDS is a growing problem. Volunteers work with their local partners and communities to help develop program and community support networks to

support these youth, help them learn life skills, and help them achieve their potential. Many YD Volunteers are particularly involved in summer camps that focus on leadership skills and appreciation for diversity.

All Peace Corps Volunteers in all programs in Bulgaria serve as community development workers, and get involved in a multitude of projects in their communities. Many Volunteers in all programs are involved with youth and with local sports. Most Volunteers not focused on English language education still take a very active role in helping community members improve their English language skills.

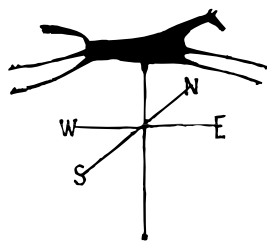
Many Bulgaria Peace Corps Volunteers are involved in helping youth learn decision-making skills, co-leading health and HIV/AIDS education sessions, and helping educate youth about the risks of human trafficking. Helping prevent human sex and labor trafficking is a priority of the Bulgarian government. Peace Corps Volunteers are in a unique position to partner with and help strengthen local anti-trafficking organizations and to reach some of Bulgaria's most vulnerable citizens in their local communities.

Many Volunteers in all programs are also involved in minority community development and tolerance-building activities, particularly with youth. There are significant Roma (gypsy), Turkish, and Bulgarian Muslim minorities in Bulgaria, and efforts to help minorities become contributing members of mainstream Bulgarian society are particularly important to Bulgaria's goals as an EU member. Many Volunteers work with Roma organizations and help them through activities such as summer camps, life skills sessions, leadership classes, and the creation of integrated community centers.

Bulgaria is at a stage in her rapid development where Peace Corps Volunteers can have significant and rewarding impact, as many local organizations and youth are eager for new ideas, and Peace Corps Volunteers can be excellent role models for Bulgarian youth and catalysts for change. Peace Corps Volunteers become members of the communities in which they live. Volunteers have an opportunity to touch the lives of those around them and to contribute to their community's development, often in ways that may initially seem small, but have the potential to positively impact the direction of someone's life. With Bulgaria's accession to the EU, Peace Corps Bulgaria breaks new ground and continues to evolve and respond to Bulgaria's rapid social and economic change.



COUNTRY OVERVIEW: BULGARIA AT A GLANCE



History

Bulgaria has a long and fascinating history that reaches back into antiquity. Bulgarians are proud of their history, and you will make rapid progress toward earning their respect if you are knowledgeable about it.

Slavic tribes settled in the Balkan Peninsula in the sixth and seventh centuries, followed a century later by the Proto-Bulgars, who conquered the Slavic tribes and founded the first Bulgarian kingdom in 681. The kingdom reached the height of its power in the ninth century and included most of the Balkan Peninsula. The royal capital at Turnovo was seized by the Turks in 1393, beginning nearly 500 years of Ottoman domination. During this period, Bulgaria's indigenous customs and values were preserved in monasteries and isolated mountain villages. In the 19th century, a strong national revival occurred, and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 resulted in the restoration of self-government to Bulgaria.

Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became Bulgaria's first monarch in 1887. He was forced to abdicate after World War I, and the throne was passed to his son, Boris III. With the support of the army, Boris III imposed a dictatorship on the country in 1934. His death in 1943 left the country without a strong leader. In September 1944, the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria and quickly occupied its territory. In the aftermath of that war, Bulgarian communists seized power and abolished the monarchy, establishing the People's Republic of Bulgaria in 1946.

The communists initiated a planned economy based on the Soviet model, which collectivized agriculture and permitted rapid industrialization. After more than 44 years under this system, popular unrest and political turmoil culminated in the collapse of communism in 1990. Since then, Bulgaria's transition to a democratic government and market economy has not been without difficulties. Following weeks of popular protest and strikes after hyperinflation and the collapse of the banking system in 1996 and 1997, the ruling Socialist Party stepped down, and unprecedented general elections were held. The new government initiated difficult but necessary reforms that helped bring a level of economic and political stability.

In 2004, Bulgaria became a member state of the NATO alliance. From 2001 until 2005, the Simeon II National Movement was the leading political party. The son of King Boris III, who grew up in Spain and was a successful businessman, led it. The movement formed a government that continued the commitment to political and economic integration with the European Union, but was seen as not being able to deliver on all of the promises it made. The subsequent elections on June 25, 2005, sent seven different parties to Parliament, none winning enough majority seats to form a government. During the past several years, there has been a rising right-wing nationalist anti-minority movement in Bulgaria, with a small, but vocal and growing support base. In October 2006, Georgi Parvanov of the relatively moderate Socialist Party was re-elected as president for a second term. This broad coalition government worked toward the January 2007 EU accession. The government has committed to continuing to work on the "development roadmap" that the EU and Bulgaria have agreed upon.

Government

The Constitution of Bulgaria, adopted on July 12, 1991, established the Republic of Bulgaria as a parliamentary democracy with universal suffrage at 18 years of age. The executive branch is composed primarily of the president, vice president, prime minister, and Council of Ministers. The president and vice president are elected by popular vote for five-year terms.

The prime minister chairs the Council of Ministers and is nominated by the president for confirmation by the National Assembly. The prime minister is normally proposed by the majority party or coalition in the National Assembly. Deputy prime ministers are nominated by the prime minister. The legislative branch is composed of a unicameral National Assembly, or *Narodno Sobranie*, of 240 seats. Members are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. The judicial branch is composed of the Supreme Administrative Court and the Supreme Court of Cassation, whose chairmen are appointed for seven-year terms by the president; and a constitutional court made up of 12 justices appointed or elected for nine-year terms. The legal system of civil and criminal law is based on Roman law.

Economy

Under the communist system, Bulgaria had a centrally planned economy in which the government set economic goals and directed production. Although this system worked effectively during the early stages of industrialization, it was inadequate for a more complex economy. With the fall of communism in 1990, Bulgaria began moving toward a free-market economic system.

The post-communist Bulgarian economy has encountered significant challenges. Former Soviet and Warsaw Pact markets, important for both imports and exports, disappeared. Embargoes on Iraq and Yugoslavia further reduced sources of fuel and foreign currency. Inflation and unemployment rose sharply, and food and fuel shortages became widespread. In an effort at revitalization, the government declared its support for a transition to a market-oriented system and began a far-reaching program of denationalization and privatization. Until recently, complex internal politics delayed privatization and structural reform.

The reform agenda was similar to that of other EU nations, but successive Bulgarian governments were not able to implement it. Between 1993 and 1996, privatization virtually stopped and elements of central planning (i.e., price controls, transfer of enterprises to state control, and political control over the central bank's policies) were restored. By late 1996, Bulgaria entered a period of catastrophic currency depreciation, runaway inflation, and economic collapse. In 1996, the Bulgarian economy endured its severest crisis since 1990: GDP declined by 10 percent, followed by a further 9.8 percent drop in the first half of 1997.

The year 1997 was one of profound economic and political changes. The establishment of the new democratic government in February brought stability and confidence to the country. Positive economic developments, such as growth in economic activities, increased foreign investment, stabilization of the financial sector, and strengthened inflation control, were reinforced with the introduction of the Currency Board in July 1997. By September, inflation was 3.6 percent, compared with 561.8 percent during the first three quarters of the year. Foreign reserves also grew substantially. The government adopted a long-term economic development program to achieve sustainable private sector and competition-led growth.

Hopes for continued economic progress, however, were derailed by events in Kosovo in 1998. Real GDP growth dropped to 0.5 percent in 1999. While exports were seriously curtailed, foreign direct investment managed to hold level with the amount of the previous year. In July 1999, the lev was revalued at 1:1 with the German mark. In December 1999, Bulgaria was invited to participate in EU accession talks. The country began chapter negotiations in January 2000. These negotiations on the 31 chapters were closed on June 15, 2004, and Bulgaria signed the Accession Treaty on April 25, 2005. Bulgaria joined the EU on January 2, 2007, and continues to work toward reforms aimed at eliminating corruption, reducing crime, tightening border control, improving government administration, strengthening the rule of law, and increasing the efficiency of the judicial systems. Even with EU accession, many Bulgarians still struggle to make ends meet as they cope with the impact of economic reform. While most Bulgarians are proud they have become EU members, many are struggling with inflation, stagnant or slowly increasing salaries that cannot keep up with prices, and the potential for increased regulation.

People and Culture

Ethnic Bulgarians are descendants of the Slavs who settled in the region in the sixth century. The country's name comes from the Bulgars, a nomadic people from Central Asia who arrived a century later. They conquered the Slavs and together created the first Bulgarian kingdom. The largest minority groups within Bulgaria are Turkish (The government's efforts to forcibly assimilate ethnic Turks in the late-1980s caused many to flee the country), Bulgarian Muslims (Ethnic Bulgarians who have converted to Islam are recognized as a separate group), and Romani (Gypsy). Other minorities include Armenians, Greeks, Russians, and Jews.

Bulgaria's cultural life was rich during the Middle Ages. The Orthodox Church struggled to keep Bulgarian culture and tradition alive during the years of Ottoman rule. In the 19th century, Bulgaria's cultural life was influenced by both foreign models and native traditions. Bulgaria has developed particularly strong traditions in literature, music, and the arts, and has produced some world-famous opera singers.

Environment

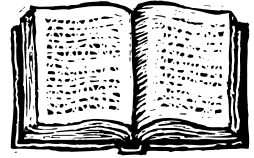
The Danube River plateau produces wheat, corn, sugar beets, and sunflowers; while the Maritsa Valley produces tobacco and attar of roses, a key ingredient in perfume. Bulgaria's mountainous areas contain valuable forests, about three-quarters of which are broadleaf (the remainder are coniferous). Bears, wolves, foxes, squirrels, elk, and wildcats still exist in these forests. In addition, several rare and endangered species of birds can be found in Bulgaria, particularly during the fall migrations.

Like much of Eastern Europe, Bulgaria has suffered for many years from heavy industrialization and poor pollution controls. There have been some positive changes since the transition to a democratic government and market economy, though much of the reduction in pollution is due to the shutdown of factories. The poor condition of many cars, the lack of emission controls, and the use of soft coal for heating contribute to the current level of air pollution.

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RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION



The following is a list of websites where you can find additional information about the Peace Corps and Bulgaria and links to help you connect to returned Volunteers and other invitees. Please keep in mind that although we try to make sure all these links are active and current, they are always in flux.

A note of caution: As you surf the Internet, be aware that you may find personal websites, blogs, bulletin boards, and chat rooms where people freely express opinions about the Peace Corps based on their own experiences. You will find statements by Volunteers and former Volunteers who write glowingly of their Peace Corps experience and 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. Please keep in mind that no two people experience their service in the same way.

General Information About The Peace Corps

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Corps

The Peace Corps Wikipedia site

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2260908312>

National Peace Corps Association on Facebook

General Information About Bulgaria

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulgaria>

Wikipedia's entry on Bulgaria covers its history, culture, politics, and much more. It also serves as a starting point to browse through much more information on more specific Bulgarian topics.

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.

www.b-info.com/places/Bulgaria/ref/

This is a thorough reader's guide to Bulgaria.

www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations

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

<http://programata.bg/index.php?ln=2>

Provides cultural highlights; restaurant, club, and bar guides; movie, concert, and theatre listings; and more for Bulgaria's major cities.

www.state.gov

The U.S. State Department's website issues background notes periodically about countries around the world. Find Bulgaria and learn more about its social and political history.

<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>

Provides statistical information for all countries

www.cyberschoolbus.un.org/infonation/info.asp

This United Nations site allows you to search for statistical information for member states of the U.N.

www.worldinformation.com

This site is an additional source of current and historical information about countries around the world.

www.countrywatch.com

On this site, you can learn anything from what time it is in Sofia to how to convert from the dollar to the lev. Though you can access general information about Bulgaria, you must pay a fee and log on to access regular country updates.

www.psr.keele.ac.uk/official.htm

This site includes links to all the official sites for governments worldwide, although not all of the information is in English.

Connect With Returned Volunteers and Other Invitees

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PCBulgaria2/>

A bulletin board for Volunteers, invitees, RPCVs, and staff from Peace Corps/Bulgaria. Here you can ask any questions you have for other members of the Peace Corps/Bulgaria community.

www.rpcv.org

This is the site of the National Peace Corps Association, composed 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, made up of former Volunteers who served in those countries. There are also regional groups who frequently get together for social events and local volunteer activities.

<http://www.rpcvwebring.org>

This site is known as the Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Web Ring. Browse the Web ring and see what former Volunteers are saying about their service.

www.peacecorpswriters.org

This site is hosted by a group of returned Volunteer writers. It is an online publication of essays and Volunteer accounts from countries around the world.

<http://www.lgbrpcv.org/>

This website for the organization of lesbian, gay, and transgender returned Peace Corps Volunteers enables invitees and Volunteers to connect with LGBT returned Volunteers to ask questions about the rewards and challenges of serving as an LGBT volunteer.

<http://www.minoritypca.org/>

The website for the Minority Peace Corps Association, a nonprofit organization founded by returned Volunteers of Color, provides support and assistance to Peace Corps applicants and Volunteers of Color

Online Articles/Current News Sites About Bulgaria

www.bulgaria-embassy.org

The site of the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

www.travel-bulgaria.com/explore/history.html

A travel site with information on Bulgarian history and culture.

www.sofiaecho.com/

The online version of Bulgaria's English language newspaper.

www.novinite.com

Sofia News Agency site with news in English.

<http://www.vagabond-bg.com/>

The website for the English language monthly magazine.

International Development Sites About Bulgaria

<http://www.undp.bg/>

The United Nations Development Programme in Bulgaria.

www.usaid.gov/countries/bg/

Information about the U.S. Agency for International Development's work in Bulgaria. Note that the USAID mission in Bulgaria "graduated" Bulgaria, and the office closed in September of 2008.

www.hrw.org/wr2k1/europe/bulgaria.html

Human Rights Watch report on Bulgaria.

Recommended Books

1. Crampton, R.J. *A Short History of Modern Bulgaria*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
2. Fonseca, Isabel. *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
3. Kaplan, Robert D. *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.
4. Karklins, Rasma. *The System Made Me Do It: Corruption in Post-Communist Societies*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2005.
5. Kostich, Dragos D. *The Land and People of the Balkans: Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1962, 1973.
6. MacDermott, Mercia. *The Apostle of Freedom: A Portrait of Vasil Levsky*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1967.
7. Sanders, Irwin T. *Balkan Village*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1949.

8. Townson, Annabelle. *We Wait for You: Unheard Voices from Post-Communist Romania*. Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2005 (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.

Books on the Volunteer Experience

1. Dirlam, Sharon. *Beyond Siberia: Two Years in a Forgotten Place*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: McSeas Books, 2004.
2. Erdman, Sarah. *Nine Hills to Nambonkaha: Two Years in the Heart of an African Village*. New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2003.
3. Hessler, Peter. *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*. New York, N.Y.: Perennial, 2001.
4. Kennedy, Geraldine ed. *From the Center of the Earth: Stories out of the Peace Corps*. Clover Park Press, 1991.
5. Thompsen, Moritz. *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle*. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1997 (reprint).

NOTES



LIVING CONDITIONS AND VOLUNTEER LIFESTYLE



Communications

Mail

Few countries in the world offer the level of mail service considered normal in the United States. If you expect U.S. standards for mail service, you will be in for some frustration. Mail sent via airmail typically takes three to four weeks, and packages sent by surface mail take from two to six months. Some mail may simply not arrive (fortunately, this is not a frequent occurrence, but it does happen). It is a good idea to advise family members that snail-mail can be sporadic.

Packages and letters arriving in Bulgaria are often checked by officials for dangerous items. The inspectors usually reseal the packages and letters and send them on, but there are reports of some never arriving at their destination and others arriving without money or expensive items that had been enclosed. Advise your family and friends to number their letters and include "Airmail" on their envelopes. (For letters, we recommend global airmail, available at U.S. post offices.)

We don't recommend that your friends and family declare large values for packages sent or insure them, as you may need to pay a tax to release packages of considerable value from customs.

After pre-service training, you will become a Volunteer and move to your site. Mail should then be addressed directly to you at your new residence. You can provide this information to family and friends toward the end of training prior to moving to your site. If your residence does not provide for

a secure or private mailbox, it may be better to have your personal mail sent to you at your work address.

It may be impractical to receive anything except letter mail during training. Tell family and friends that they should not send packages until after you have completed training and are at your assigned site. At that time, you will be better able to assess what things from home you really need and how best to have them sent. If you receive packages during training, you may also find it challenging to find space to store them at your host family's house and to transport these additional items to your permanent site.

Telephones

Your apartment may or may not have a landline telephone—many don't. For in-country calling, most Volunteers use mobile phones. During your first weeks of training, you will be given money for purchasing a mobile phone, which you will be expected to keep charged and with you throughout your service. Most Volunteers, however, find that talking for long periods of time on the phone is not within their budget. Thus, Volunteers (and most Bulgarians) generally rely heavily on text messaging from cellphones, which is much cheaper than voice calls. All of the major Bulgarian cellular service providers also offer free text messaging from their Internet sites.

Standard long-distance telephone service is available but expensive. If you are calling on a landline from outside the capital, it may take a while to get a connection. Some calling cards from the United States (e.g., those issued by AT&T, MCI, and Sprint) can be used to call the United States.

However, you cannot use these cards to call from Bulgaria to other countries because of a phone block in Bulgaria. There are multiple alternate providers that offer calls for just a few

cents per minute from the U.S. to Bulgaria and from Sofia and a few other major cities in Bulgaria to the U.S., including "Foneca" and others. You can search for such services online, and usually purchase minutes using a credit card.

Most Volunteers who have home Internet access use Skype or VOIPStunt to call to the U.S. using their laptops. Those who don't, tend to call from an Internet club in their village or a nearby town or have family and friends in the U.S. call them. You alternatively can make international calls from a local public telephone or post office. The country code for Bulgaria is 359.

Computer, Internet, and E-mail Access

Some, but not all, Volunteers have access to computers at their worksites, which may or may not have Internet and email capabilities. Worksite equipment should, however, be used primarily for work-related activities, and you should not assume that it can be used for personal purposes. Internet and email access has become widely available throughout Bulgaria, and Internet cafes can be found in most towns, although they are generally not found in all rural villages. While it is likely you will have Internet access not far from your site, you should not assume that you will have constant email access. Advise family that in the case of a family emergency, they should contact the Peace Corps' Office of Special Services in Washington, D.C., which will then work to make quick contact with you.

The Peace Corps does not provide email accounts or technical and repair support. Repair services do exist in major towns and cities throughout Bulgaria, and service centers that represent some major computer manufacturers can be found in Sofia. Peace Corps does not replace computers in the event of loss or theft. If you do bring computer equipment, insurance is highly recommended.

Housing and Site Location

The Peace Corps staff uses an involved and thorough process to identify Volunteers' host organizations and towns. Potential host organizations fill out an in-depth application in which they state their reasons for wanting to work with a Volunteer, their organizational goals, how they see a Volunteer fitting into their organization, what specific work the Volunteer will assist with, desired skills, and available resources. Staff visits each site and discusses these items with the potential hosts, and ultimately uses a methodical system of evaluating potential sites based on community needs, the ability of Peace Corps Volunteers to help address those needs, the ability of a community to support a Volunteer, and the potential for a Volunteer to be successful at that site.

Toward the middle of your pre-service training (PST), the Peace Corps office and training staff match trainees and sites, and trainees learn where they will live and work for the next two years. Education, professional experience, and level of Bulgarian language ability are considered in matching individual Volunteers' skills with the needs of each site. While Volunteer interests are taken into account when possible, priority is given to local needs and how PCV skills match those needs. Volunteers should be prepared to serve in any region of Bulgaria on any assignment within their project area (YD, COD, or TEFL).

Housing is generally provided by a Volunteer's sponsoring organization. Most Volunteers live in a modest studio or one-bedroom apartment with plumbing, heating, and electricity. The range of available housing may vary greatly between Volunteers and sites. If you live in a town or city, you will likely live in an apartment in a communist-style housing "block," that, from the exterior, resembles the high-rises in public housing projects in U.S. cities.

Volunteers assigned to smaller communities should be prepared for the possibility that they may live in a private room in the home of a Bulgarian family. This can offer huge advantages, as you may be accepted into a local family and be “taken care of.” Note that Bulgarian standards of privacy differ from those in the U.S. It is also common that landlords may leave some of their personal items in an apartment they are renting out.

Your heat source could be either one or more portable heaters, central heat, or wood-burning stoves in some rural areas. Heat and electricity are very expensive, and Bulgarians usually only heat the room they are currently in. They usually limit the use of their hot water boiler to allow for showering. Expect it to be cold inside during the winter and very hot during the summer. Indoor climate control concepts differ from what you are likely accustomed to in the U.S.

Living Allowance and Money Management

You will receive a monthly living allowance that will enable you to maintain a modest lifestyle similar to that of average Bulgarians within your community. This allowance will be deposited in your bank account every month by Peace Corps/Bulgaria. It is intended to cover food, household supplies, local transportation, recreation, entertainment, and incidental expenses such as postage, film, reading material, stationery, and toiletries. In most cases, rent and utilities are paid by the sponsoring organization, but the Peace Corps assists with these expenses in some circumstances.

Most Volunteers in Bulgaria find their living allowance to be sufficient, as long as they live a frugal lifestyle. The lifestyle you adopt while serving in Bulgaria will determine how far your living allowance goes. These days in Bulgaria, there are many

things to spend money on, and if you choose to eat frequently in restaurants, travel frequently, and buy imported food and toiletries, your living allowance likely will not last through each month. You may also have a harder time becoming a part of your community if you live at a higher economic level than the average community member. If you adopt a more typical average Bulgarian lifestyle, cook frequently, and choose primarily from the ample selections of local goods, your living allowance should be more than adequate.

Food and Diet

It is possible to eat a very healthy and natural diet in Bulgaria, if you prepare many of your own meals and use local foods. Larger towns and cities offer many of the same basic staples that you can find in the United States, with the exception of most pre-prepared and instant foods. Volunteers in smaller towns sometimes experience shortages of certain items, especially in the winter, but there is typically an ample food supply if you are flexible about cooking with what is currently available. If you live in a small village, you may choose to occasionally shop in larger towns in your region, to fill in your food supplies and get items unavailable at your site.

Grilled meat and potatoes or salads best capture the essence of Bulgarian cuisine. Meals served in a family setting are heavy, oily, filling, and take hours to finish. Many dishes are salty by American standards and Bulgarians cook with lots of sunflower oil. Pork and chicken are the most popular meats—served roasted, breaded and fried, or grilled. The selection of seafood is limited, and it is advisable to refrain from eating it unless you know its origin. Seafood from the Danube or the Black Sea should generally not be eaten, while trout from mountain streams and fish raised on farms are generally safe to eat.

Vegetarians may get weary of eating breaded cheese, fried potatoes, or salad every time they go out for a meal or visit Bulgarian friends, but the abundance of wonderful fresh fruit and vegetables in season make it possible to prepare delicious meals at home. Prices of produce fluctuate greatly according to the season. Peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, cabbages, eggplants, zucchinis, and carrots are almost always available. However, in the winter in some communities, you may have to rely mainly on potatoes, cabbages, carrots, dried beans, and canned items. Locally grown fruits are available from late spring to late fall. During the winter, you may have to make do with canned fruits and fruit juice and imported fruits such as bananas, apples, and oranges.

Cereal and grains are available, although breakfast cereals can be expensive, as Bulgarians typically do not eat cereal for breakfast. The typical Bulgarian breakfast is “banitzia,” a delicious pastry made from filo dough and cheese—which is made fresh daily in most towns and villages and costs around 50 U.S. cents. Bulgarians eat bread with every meal, and even most small towns have a place where you can buy freshly baked bread on a daily basis. Rice, pasta, and all-purpose white flour can also be purchased easily, but you will have to search extensively for whole-wheat flour. Various types of beans are widely available, and lentils are widely used. Dried soybean product was used in the past as a cheaper substitute for meat, and is available in specialty stores in the larger towns and cities. Milk is readily available. The two types of local cheese (white and yellow) are delicious and always available. Imported cheese is also available but expensive. Bulgarian yogurt, made primarily from cow and sheep milk, is a staple of the country, and is well known worldwide.

A cookbook of recipes to help you make the most of products available in Bulgaria will be given to you during training. You

will be making a lot of things from scratch here, and if you do not already know how to cook, you will learn. Don't worry, before long you will be sharing your favorite recipes with others.

Transportation

Bulgaria has a large network of bus and train routes, which makes it possible to travel to practically all destinations by public transportation. Many Volunteers have experienced thefts while traveling, however, so you must be vigilant in protecting your valuables while using public transportation. Traveling on trams in Sofia requires extra vigilance. When traveling on trains, it is safest to travel in a compartment with a *baba* (grandmother).

Geography and Climate

Bulgaria is located in the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe. The country is bordered by the Black Sea in the east, Turkey and Greece in the south, Macedonia and Serbia in the west, and Romania in the north. Although slightly larger than Tennessee, Bulgaria stands out as a land of great geographic and environmental diversity. The average elevation is 480 meters (1,584 feet) above sea level.

The country has four major geographic regions. The most northerly is the Danube plateau, which rises from the shores of the Danube River to the foothills in the east. Its climate is continental, with hot summers and cold winters. The second region is the Balkan Mountains (or *Stara Planina*, which means "Old Mountains" in Bulgarian), which extends across the center of the country and blocks cold winds from the plains of Russia. The third region, the valley drained by the

Maritsa River in the south, has a Mediterranean climate with mild, rainy winters and warm, dry summers. South of the Maritsa Valley is the fourth region, the Rhodope Mountains, which forms the border between Bulgaria and Greece.

Bulgaria has a Mediterranean climate with four distinct seasons. As in the United States, weather patterns have been changing in recent years, so it is difficult to describe a “typical” year. Spring generally brings frequent rain. Spring and fall are temperate and feature beautiful flora. Summer temperatures average about 75 degrees Fahrenheit (24 Celsius); but in July and August, they can reach 90F to 100F range for a two-week period or longer. The highlands in the northeast are cooler than the more Mediterranean climate of the southwest. Bulgaria can get cold and gray in the winter, with temperatures averaging around 32F (0C).

Social Activities

There will be times when you get bored and lonely. Available activities sometimes will seem uninteresting or “cheesy.” There are a multitude of activities you can explore, however, if you are open to trying new activities that you may have not previously thought of as social/recreational activities. You may find out that you enjoy hanging out with the local *babas* (grandmothers) and learning to can food, that you get used to spending hours on end at a local coffee shop (this is likely to be the most popular social activity in your town!), and that you are not comfortable spending much time at the local disco, as it may be full of your high school students. The trick is to find things that give you satisfaction and enjoyment. It is up to you to make the most of your leisure time, and there is plenty to do if you just go out and look for it.

Bulgaria has museums, concerts, town festivals, theaters, athletic events, hot springs, outdoor markets, historical and ethnographic centers, coffee shops, bars, discos, and cinemas (in bigger towns and cities) for you to enjoy. The most recently released American films are shown in English with Bulgarian subtitles, but are usually dubbed by the time they make it to the video rental shops.

Bulgaria boasts some of the most magnificent natural areas in Eastern Europe, with a great diversity of flora and fauna. Opportunities for outdoor recreation include hiking, camping, rock climbing, and bird watching. Many of the towns in mountain regions have local hiking clubs. During the winter, Bulgarian ski resorts attract skiers from the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, and the Nordic countries.

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 being a professional all at the same time. It is not an easy thing to do successfully, and we can only provide you with guidelines. As a representative of a Bulgarian organization, you will be expected to dress and behave accordingly. “Business casual” is the catchall term for appropriate professional attire as a Volunteer in Bulgaria. You will be expected to dress as such throughout your pre-service training and throughout your service as a Volunteer in Bulgaria.

Bulgarians dress very stylishly and take great pride in their appearance. They commonly, however, only have a few outfits that they wear repeatedly. While there is no hard-and-fast rule, a foreigner who wears ragged, torn or dirty clothing is likely to be considered disrespectful

and possibly unreliable. Sloppy or overly casual attire can make it difficult to gain the respect and acceptance of your Bulgarian colleagues, particularly the older ones in positions of authority, whose support you will need to be successful. At the same time, Volunteers who out-dress the Bulgarians they work with may find they have difficulty fitting in. In general, Volunteers should dress to match their colleagues. Sometimes this can mean nice jeans and a casual, button-up shirt; other times this can mean wearing a tie daily. In an ethnic Bulgarian community, colorful and stylish attire is likely very appropriate, while in some minority communities, more modest dress is important. Keep in mind that you can purchase most clothing you would want for day-to-day use for reasonable prices throughout Bulgaria, so you may want to bring minimal clothing from the U.S. You will also have semi-regular occasions to dress up for weddings and other special events, so bring some more formal attire in addition to professional clothes for everyday wear in the office or classroom. Casual clothes like jeans, shorts, T-shirts, and tank tops are also appropriate in some situations, but almost always outside of the professional environment. More casual printed T-shirts and baggy or old sweatshirts are typically used only for wear around the home and for sports activities, so you may find that newer looking solid colored T-shirts or fitted T-shirts (for women) are more versatile.

Personal Safety

More detailed information about the Peace Corps' approach to safety is contained in the "Health Care and Safety" chapter, and 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; Volunteers may be at the highest risk for pickpocketing when they are in cities with other Volunteers and are speaking English on the street. This makes it obvious that they are foreigners, and they are less attentive because they are distracted by conversation. Incidents of physical and sexual assault do occur, although most Bulgaria Volunteers complete their two years of service without personal security incidents. The Peace Corps has created procedures and policies designed to help reduce your risks and enhance your safety and security. You will get more information about these, along with safety training, when you arrive in Bulgaria. You are expected to take personal responsibility for your safety and well-being.

Rewards and Frustrations

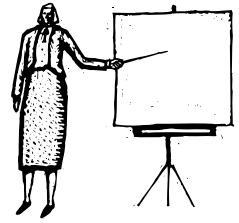
Volunteers in Bulgaria must demonstrate a great deal of flexibility, patience, and maturity. You should expect frequent and lengthy delays in almost everything you are engaged in. Counterparts may sometimes feel threatened by your different methods, your energy, and your drive to work. When you first arrive at your site, you will need to focus on building relationships and gaining the trust of your colleagues and community. Then, you will be in a much stronger position to get things done. Many Volunteers find that once they are accepted by a community, they are “in” and are both embraced by their communities and are well-respected. It takes considerable time and effort to get to this point. Although earlier groups of Volunteers in Bulgaria have made the Peace Corps known to many communities, you may have to explain your role as a development worker. The concept of volunteerism is a bit odd to most Bulgarians. In spite of your

modest stipend, you may be perceived as a rich foreigner. All Volunteers are expected to be highly motivated and proactive, flexible, professional, and committed to the Peace Corps' ideals and goals. The Peace Corps staff and current Volunteers take their commitment to serve the people of Bulgaria seriously. We invite you to join us in this effort, but only if you are confident that you can commit yourself to this challenging two-year assignment.

Because of the many economic and political difficulties and changes Bulgaria faces, the atmosphere in the country is one of uncertainty. The changes occurring in Bulgaria today are some of the most significant in its history, and Bulgarians from all walks of life are sacrificing time and comfort to make a new Bulgaria that is part of the global world. Being a part of this historic moment in Europe should be both fascinating and immensely satisfying to any Volunteer who is willing to work hard and give generously of his or her time.



PEACE CORPS TRAINING



Overview of Pre-Service Training

Prior to being sworn in as a Peace Corps Volunteer, you will participate in an intensive multiweek training program. The training is conducted in Bulgaria and is based on adult learning principles. Training aims to help you achieve learning objectives that help you work toward core competencies you will need to be successful in your service. The training focuses on Bulgarian language study, cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation, health and personal safety, and development of technical skills.

Training will take place in a small community, where you will live with a host family and study the Bulgarian language with four or five other trainees. This community-based training involves a lot of experiential learning in which community members are called upon to cooperate in the training process. Periodically, you will join other trainees from your group at a hubsite, for administrative, technical, medical, and safety training.

Technical Training

Technical training will prepare you to work in Bulgaria by building on the skills you already have and by helping you develop new skills and acquire knowledge of the Bulgaria-specific environment, so you will be prepared to help your Bulgarian community address its needs. The Peace Corps staff, Bulgarian experts, and current Volunteers will help lead sessions during the training program. Training places great emphasis on learning how to help communities help themselves using your special skills.

Technical training will include sessions on the economic and political environment in Bulgaria and strategies for working within such a framework. You will review your technical sector's goals and meet with the Bulgarian agencies and organizations that invited the Peace Corps to assist them. You will be supported and evaluated throughout training to 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 the 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, and you must successfully meet minimum language requirements to complete training and become a Volunteer. Experienced Bulgarian language instructors teach formal language classes five days a week in small groups of four to five people. Peace Corps/Bulgaria has developed an extensive collection of language training resources designed specifically for Volunteers and their language learning needs. Your language training follows a community-based approach. You and about five fellow trainees will stay in a small community to learn Bulgarian with the help of the language instructor assigned to your group and with the support of your host family. This method immerses you in the language and allows you to acquire hands-on experience in the Bulgarian environment. 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.

If you accept the invitation to serve in Bulgaria, you will receive a URL address to access introductory Bulgarian language materials in the “My Toolkit” section found on the Peace Corps website. Peace Corps/Bulgaria recommends you listen to the language materials in order to get acquainted with the sounds of the language and the Cyrillic alphabet before you arrive in Bulgaria.

Cross-Cultural Training

As part of your pre-service training, you will live with a Bulgarian 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 to adapt to living in Bulgaria and learning to integrate into a Bulgarian community. 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, nonformal and adult education strategies, and political structures.

Health Training

During pre-service training, you will be given basic medical training and information you will need to stay healthy during your service. You will be expected to practice preventive health care and to take responsibility for your own health by adhering to all medical policies. The topics include preventive health measures and minor and major medical issues that you might encounter while in Bulgaria. Nutrition, mental health, responsible alcohol use, and how to avoid HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the Bulgarian context are also covered.

Safety Training

During the safety training sessions, you will learn how to adopt a lifestyle in Bulgaria 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 staying safe throughout your service.

Additional Trainings During Volunteer Service

In its commitment to institutionalize quality training, Peace Corps worldwide has implemented a training system that provides Volunteers with continual opportunities to reflect on their commitment to Peace Corps service while further developing 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 trainings*: Provide opportunities for Volunteers to further develop 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*: 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 BULGARIA



The Peace Corps' highest priority is maintaining the good health and safety of each Volunteer. Peace Corps medical programs emphasize the preventive, rather than the curative, approach to disease. The Peace Corps in Bulgaria maintains a health unit with three full-time medical officers (Bulgarian physicians), a medical assistant, and a medical secretary. The medical staff takes care of Volunteers' primary health care needs as a team.

Additional medical services, such as laboratory testing, imaging diagnostics, and evaluation by specialists are also available in Bulgaria at local facilities. Usually the complete medical evaluation and treatment is done in-country by the medical officers. If you become seriously ill or injured, you will be transported either to the closest regional medical facility or to the capital for emergency care and treatment. If your condition requires further evaluation or treatment that is unavailable in Bulgaria, then the Office of Medical Services (OMS), Peace Corps, Washington, D.C., approves medical evacuation to a country with better medical standards in the Europe, Mediterranean, and Asia (EMA) region (regional medevac) or to the United States (most frequently to your home of record). If your condition requires more than 45 days for complete resolution or has a long-term effect on your health, OMS will determine whether you are able to complete your Peace Corps service.

Health Issues in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's history of heavy industrialization with poor pollution controls has left a legacy, particularly in air pollution. Although greater attention is being given to reducing industrial emissions, this is occurring gradually, and many of the reductions in pollution so far are due to shutdowns or slowdowns of factories. Much of the air pollution in urban areas comes from auto emissions and the use of soft coal for heating. Volunteers assigned to urban areas may experience moderate to severe air pollution comparable to pollution levels in Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago. Although most Volunteers do not suffer health effects from Bulgaria's air pollution, those with severe allergies or asthma will not be placed in heavily polluted areas.

Additionally, Bulgaria has an older-style nuclear power plant. This plant, which is vital to the country's electric power supply, is monitored regularly by the International Atomic Energy Agency, and some of its systems and controls have recently been upgraded. No Volunteers are placed at sites close to the plant.

Heavy cigarette smoking takes place in most homes, cafes, and workplaces. Those who are very sensitive to cigarette smoke, or to air pollution in general, should carefully consider whether to accept an assignment in Bulgaria.

Helping You Stay Healthy

The Peace Corps medical staff will provide you with all the necessary immunizations, medications, and information to stay healthy. Upon your arrival in Bulgaria, you will receive a health manual. Before you go to your host family, you will receive a medical kit with over-the-counter medications and supplies to take care of mild illnesses and first aid needs. The contents of the kit are listed later in this chapter.

During pre-service training, you will have access to over-the-counter medications and medical supplies through the medical officers. 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, one of the medical officers in Bulgaria will consult with the Office of Medical Services in Washington, D.C. If it is determined that your condition cannot be treated in Bulgaria, you may be sent out of the country for further evaluation and care (medevac).

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 ... ,” becomes extremely important in areas where diagnostic and treatment facilities are not up to the standards of the United States.

Smoking, alcohol consumption, and an unhealthy diet are all serious health issues in Bulgaria. As in most European countries, smoking is common in public and in the workplace. Volunteers must be prepared to be in situations in which a staunch nonsmoker might be uncomfortable. Alcohol consumption is commonplace during meals and social occasions so you should be prepared to be offered alcohol at such times, (even in the workplace). Although you might

consider the amount people drink somewhat high, public drunkenness is not socially acceptable in any circumstance. Finally, maintaining a heart-healthy diet may be difficult because of the high levels of salt and fat in many Bulgarian dishes.

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

Abstinence is the only certain choice for prevention of HIV/AIDS and other STDs. 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 STDs. AIDS (SPIN in Bulgarian) is a growing issue in the country, STDs are extremely common, and though condoms are readily available, they are not widely used by Bulgarians. You will receive more details from the medical officers.

Volunteers are expected to use 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 health unit.

It is crucial that you promptly report to the medical office for scheduled immunizations, and that you let your medical officer know immediately of significant illnesses and injuries.

Women's Health Information

Pregnancy is treated in the same manner as other Volunteer health conditions that require medical attention, but also has 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 extremely rare that the Peace Corps' medical and programmatic standards for continued service during pregnancy can be met.

The Peace Corps medical officer in Bulgaria stocks regular Tampax tampons, and some feminine hygiene products (mostly "OB"-style tampons without applicators) are available for purchase on the local market. If you need special feminine hygiene products, please bring them with you.

Your Peace Corps Medical Kit

The Peace Corps medical officer provides Volunteers with a medical 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 in Sofia.) In addition to the items listed below, multivitamins, calcium, aspirin, and antifungal powder are available, as needed, from the medical office.

Medical Kit Contents

- Acetaminophen 500 mg (Tylenol)
- Adhesive tape
- Antacid tablets
- Antibiotic ointment
- Antiseptic antimicrobial skin cleaner (Hibiclens)
- Aquatabs - water purification tablets

Band-Aids (assorted sizes)
Clotrimazole (antifungal cream)
Condoms
Cough suppressant and sore throat lozenges
Degan (metoclopramide) tablets (anti-vomitting medication)
Dental floss
Diphenhydramine HCL 25 mg (Benadryl)
Elastic bandage
Electrolyte replacement tablets
Emergency First Aid Pocket Guide
Eye wash
Gauze pads
Hydrocortisone anti-itch cream
Ibuprofen
Insect repellent
Latex gloves
Lip balm
Pepto-Bismol
Pseudoephedrine HCL 30 mg (Sudafed)
Scissors
Sterile gauze pads
Sunscreen (SPF 30)
Thermometer (oral disposable)
Tweezers
Whistle

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 you have screening tests done after you have received your medical clearance from the Peace Corps, you must bring copies of the results with you (which involves signing a form for release of records at your health care facility). If any of the results are abnormal, you must contact the Office of Medical Services.

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, 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 shortly after you arrive in Bulgaria.

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 nonprescription medications, such as St. John's wort, glucosamine, selenium, or antioxidant supplements.

You should bring copies of medical prescriptions signed by your physician since they will be 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—a pair and a spare. If a pair breaks, the Peace Corps will replace it, 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 consumables for them.

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 and/or pre-existing conditions might prevent you from re-enrolling in your current plan when you return home.

Safety and Security—Our Partnership

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 physical and sexual assault do occur, although almost all Volunteers complete their two years of service without serious personal safety problems. In addition, more than 83 percent of Volunteers surveyed in the 2008 Peace Corps Volunteer Survey say they would join the Peace Corps again.

The Peace Corps approaches safety and security as a partnership with you. This Welcome Book contains sections on: Living Conditions and Volunteer Lifestyle; Peace Corps Training; and Your Health Care and Safety. All of these sections include important safety and security information.

The Peace Corps makes every effort to give Volunteers the tools they need to function in the safest and most secure way possible, because working to maximize the safety and security of Volunteers is our highest priority. Not only do we provide you with training and tools to prepare for the unexpected, but we teach you to identify, minimize 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 incidents that Volunteers experience are thefts. Frequently these occur in crowded locations, such as markets or on public transportation, or are due to Volunteers leaving items unattended. More serious assaults, however, do occasionally occur. Based on information gathered from incident reports worldwide in 2007, the following factors stand out as risk characteristics for crimes against Volunteers, many of which can be avoided with appropriate actions. Assaults consist of physical and sexual assaults committed against Volunteers; property crimes include robbery, burglary, theft, and vandalism.

- Location: Most assaults (53 percent) occurred when Volunteers were in public areas (e.g., street, park, beach, public buildings). Specifically, 36 percent of assaults took place when Volunteers were away from their sites. Most property crimes occurred in the Volunteer's residence or another Volunteer's residence, followed closely by public areas. Forty-eight percent of property crimes occurred when Volunteers were away from their sites
- Time: Assaults usually took place during the evening, between 6 p.m. and 11 p.m.— though the single hour with the largest percentage of assaults was 1:00 a.m. (8 percent) Property crimes were more common in the middle of the day, from noon to 9 p.m.
- Day: Assaults and property crimes were more commonly reported on weekends (48 percent and 49 percent, respectively).
- Absence of others: Assaults and property crimes (64 percent and 53 percent, respectively) occurred more frequently when the Volunteer was alone.
- Relationship to assailant: In most assaults and property crimes (64 percent and 85 percent), the Volunteer did not know or could not identify the assailant.
- Consumption of alcohol: 23 percent of all assaults and 4 percent of all property crimes involved alcohol consumption by Volunteers and/or assailants.

Risk factors can vary within countries throughout the world that are served by the Peace Corps. A Volunteer in Bulgaria may face risks specific to this country in addition to risks associated with living in a developing country.

Summary Strategies to Reduce Risk

Before and during service, your training will address these areas of concern so you can reduce the risks you face. For example, here are some strategies Volunteers employ:

Strategies to reduce the risk/impact of theft:

- Know the environment and choose safe routes/times for travel
- Avoid high-crime areas per Peace Corps guidance
- Know the vocabulary to get help in an emergency
- Carry valuables in different pockets/places
- Carry a "dummy" wallet as a decoy

Strategies to reduce the risk/impact of burglary:

- Live with a local family or on a family compound
- Put strong locks on doors and keep valuables in a lock box or trunk
- Leave irreplaceable objects at home in the U.S.
- Purchase the Peace Corps recommended personal property insurance
- Follow Peace Corps guidelines on maintaining home security

Strategies to reduce the risk/impact of assault:

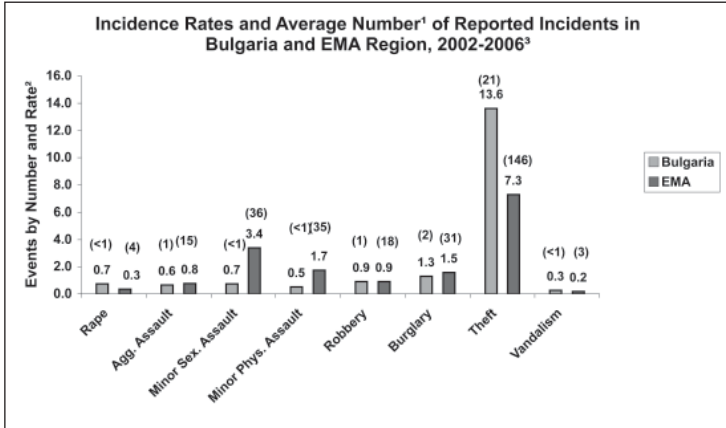
- Make friends with local people who are respected in the community
- Make sure your appearance is respectful of local customs; don't draw negative attention to yourself by wearing inappropriate clothing
- Get to know local officials, police, and neighbors
- Travel with someone trusted by your community whenever possible
- Avoid known high crime areas
- Limit alcohol consumption

Support from Staff

In March 2003, the Peace Corps created the Office of Safety and Security with its mission to “foster improved communication, coordination, oversight, and accountability of all Peace Corps’ safety and security efforts.” This office is led by an associate director for safety and security who reports to the Peace Corps Director and includes divisions which focus on Volunteer safety and overseas security and crime statistics and analysis.

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 members provide support by 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.

The country-specific data chart below shows the incidence rates and the average number of incidents of the major types of safety incidents reported by Peace Corps Volunteers/trainees in Bulgaria as compared to all other Europe,



¹The average numbers of incidents are in parenthesis and equal the average reported assaults for each year between 2002–2006.

²Incident rates equal the number of assaults per 100 Volunteers and trainees per year (V/T years). Since most sexual assaults occur against females, only female V/Ts are calculated in rapes and minor sexual assaults. Numbers of incidents are approximate due to rounding.

³Data collection for Azerbaijan began as of 2002; due to the small number of V/T years, incidence rates should be interpreted with caution.

Sexual Assaults are termed Other Sexual Assault and Other Physical Assault per CIRF definitions as of the year 2006. Prior to CIRF and prior to 2006, Sexual Assaults were termed Minor Sexual Assault Assault and Minor Physical Assault per ANSS definitions.

Source data on incidents are drawn from Assault Notification Surveillance System (ANSS), Epidemiologic Surveillance System (ESS), and Crime Incident Reporting Form (CIRF); the information is accurate as of 03/20/07.

Mediterranean, and Asia Region programs as a whole, from 2002–2006. It is presented to you in a somewhat technical manner for statistical accuracy.

To fully appreciate the collected data below, an explanation of the graph is provided as follows:

The incidence rate for each type of crime is the number of crime events relative to the Volunteer/trainee population. It is expressed on the chart as a ratio of crime to Volunteer

and trainee years (or V/T years, which is a measure of 12 full months of V/T service) to allow for a statistically valid way to compare crime data across countries. An “incident” is a specific offense, per Peace Corps' classification of offenses, and may involve one or more Volunteer/trainee victims. For example, if two Volunteers are robbed at the same time and place, this is classified as one robbery incident.

The chart is separated into eight crime categories. These include vandalism (malicious defacement or damage of property); theft (taking without force or illegal entry); burglary (forcible entry of a residence); robbery (taking something by force); other physical assault (attacking without a weapon with minor injuries); other sexual assault (fondling, groping, etc.); aggravated assault (attacking with a weapon, and/or without a weapon when serious injury results); and rape (sexual intercourse without consent).

When anticipating Peace Corps Volunteer service, you should review all of the safety and security information provided to you, including the strategies to reduce risk. Throughout your training and Volunteer service, you will be expected to successfully complete all training competencies in a variety of areas including safety and security. Once in-country, use the tools and information shared with you to remain as safe and secure as possible.

What if you become a victim of a violent crime?

Few Peace Corps Volunteers are victims of serious crimes and, naturally, crimes that occur overseas are investigated and prosecuted by local authorities through the local courts system. If you are the victim of a crime, it is up to you if you wish to pursue prosecution. If you decide to prosecute, Peace Corps will be there to assist you. The Office of Safety and Security, through our regionally-based Peace Corps safety and security officers, will work with the security officer at the U.S.

embassy and the staff at the Peace Corps office in-country to coordinate with local police and prosecutors. One of our tasks is to ensure you are fully informed of your options and understand how the local legal process works. We are here to provide support and assistance every step of the way. 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, get to a safe location as quickly as possible and contact your Peace Corps office. It's important that you notify Peace Corps as soon as you can so we can get you the help you need.

Security Issues in Bulgaria

When it comes to your safety and security in the Peace Corps, you have to be willing to adapt your behavior and lifestyle to minimize the potential for being a target of crime. As with anywhere in the world, crime does exist in Bulgaria. You can reduce your risk by avoiding situations that make you feel uncomfortable 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 will not steal from their neighbors. But because you are a foreigner and will probably be considered rich, your home may be more prone to break-ins than those of your neighbors. Fortunately, violent crime is rare.

Although Bulgaria is a relatively safe place to live, it is not without petty crimes and assaults. Pickpocketing occurs on some forms of public transportation, especially in Sofia. If you follow a few simple guidelines, you will reduce most risks. Carry valuables close to your body or under your clothing. Do not keep money in outside pockets of backpacks, in coat pockets, or in fanny packs. Undergarment money pouches, the

kind that hang around your neck and stay hidden under your shirt or inside your coat, are highly recommended. Never keep your backpack on your back while on public transportation; place your arm across the zippers of your backpack and hold it in front of you. Hold small bags tightly under your arm. While in restaurants, place your pack or bag in your lap or next to you, not on the floor.

Be wary of overly friendly strangers, particularly near bus and train stations. Do not accept food or drink from persons you do not know. If you choose to accept an offer to share refreshments, go with the person to purchase the food and drink. This will prevent someone from attempting to drug you and rob you (which has been known to happen on occasion) and avoid the danger of an adverse drug reaction.

Avoid dangerous places. Make inquiries before you wander off somewhere alone. Develop local friends and contacts; they are the best source of information. Try to stay out of underpasses, and do not linger in train stations. Do not carry any valuables or important documents in your backpack. Always secure your valuables while you are away from home: Lock your apartment and bicycle (if you have one). Use safety deposit boxes in hotels, and consider purchasing personal property insurance so you can replace valuable items if a theft does occur.

Women should not walk alone after dark. Suggestive comments to women from men in the streets are common. While annoying, this is generally not a safety threat. This is considered more acceptable or "normal" in Bulgaria than it is in the U.S., although this is beginning to change. You may have to adjust some recreational activities to daytime hours.

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. Only you can make yourself less of a target, ensure that your home is secure, and develop relationships in your community that will make you an unlikely victim of crime. In coming to Bulgaria, do what you would do if you moved to a new city in the United States: 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 Bulgaria may require that you accept some restrictions on your current lifestyle.

Volunteers attract a lot of attention both in large cities and at their sites, but they are likely to receive more negative attention in highly populated centers than at their sites, where “family,” friends, and colleagues look out for them. While whistles and exclamations are fairly common on the street, this behavior can be reduced if you dress conservatively, avoid eye contact, and do not respond to unwanted attention.

Preparing for the Unexpected: Safety Training and Volunteer Support in Bulgaria

The Peace Corps' approach to safety is a five-pronged plan to help you stay safe during your two-year 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. Bulgaria's in-country safety program is outlined below.

The Peace Corps/Bulgaria office will keep you informed of any issues that may impact Volunteer safety through **information sharing**. Regular updates will be provided in Volunteer newsletters and in memoranda from the country director. In the event of a critical situation or emergency, you will be contacted through the emergency communication network.

Volunteer training will include sessions on specific safety and security issues in Bulgaria. 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. Site selection is based, in part, on any relevant site history; access to medical, banking, postal, and other essential services; availability of communications, transportation, and markets; different housing options and living arrangements; and other Volunteer support needs.

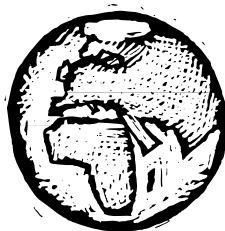
You will also learn about Peace Corps/Bulgaria's **detailed emergency action plan**, which is implemented in the event of civil or political unrest or a natural disaster. When you arrive at your site, you will complete and submit a site locator form with your address, contact information, and a map to your

house. If there is a security threat, you will gather with other Volunteers in Bulgaria 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 see 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 years. 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.

Our diversity helps us accomplish that goal. In other ways, however, it poses challenges. In Bulgaria, 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 Bulgaria.

Outside of Bulgaria'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 Bulgaria 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 Bulgaria, 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 Bulgaria

The Peace Corps staff in Bulgaria 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. We look 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

Bulgaria has been working to align its laws with the requirements of the European Union, which it joined in January 2007. Yet legislation to protect women against sexual harassment and discrimination has only recently been introduced.

As with any other social matter, there is a large difference in attitudes toward gender between smaller communities and big cities and between the older and younger generations. Traditionally, especially in more rural areas, Bulgarian women are expected to cook and look after other needs of their husbands and children while they also hold jobs outside of the home. In turn, women often expect men to open doors for them, to give them their seats on public transportation, and to show them other signs of courtesy. Women also often expect men to help if they are performing a task that is considered difficult or demeaning, and men will offer to help women whom they believe are confused by minor mechanical or equipment-related problems. Female Volunteers may therefore feel that their skills are questioned in the typically male professional environment. Another common occurrence is for young women to be honked at by drivers or yelled at by groups of young men in the streets. If this happens to you, it is best to ignore the behavior and avoid making eye contact, as any response is likely to aggravate the situation.

Possible Issues for Volunteers of Color

You may be the only minority trainee or Volunteer within a particular project. You may not receive, or be able to receive, the type of personal support you want from other Volunteers. While staff and your fellow Volunteers will do their very best to support you, there may not be current Volunteers or staff role models who can personally relate to your experiences.

Once you move to your site, you are likely to live among people who have no experience or understanding of a non-Caucasian-American culture. Because of ignorance, stereotypes, cultural perceptions, or Bulgaria's historical involvement with certain countries, you are likely to encounter varying degrees of harassment in your day-to-day life. Most commonly, you may not be perceived as being

American. In any community where you are not known, you need to be prepared for staring, pointing, and comments, mainly because people find you interesting. Finally, you should be prepared to hear derogatory terms and racial comments that would be completely inappropriate in the United States. Such offensive terms usually are uttered because people are not aware of acceptable terms in English, and instances when the intent is to harass or offend are infrequent. Bulgarians as a whole tend to be very accepting, curious, and open to individuals once they get to know them on a personal level. Many Volunteers of color have been extremely well accepted and well liked in their communities, once their communities came to know and accept them, and once they become more comfortable with higher levels of attention when they traveled outside their communities. Their time in Bulgarian communities has had a significant and positive impact on how the community members understand and appreciate diversity.

Peace Corps/Bulgaria currently has African Americans, Arab Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other members of minority groups among its Volunteer corps. They all manage these issues in their own way. Members of the Peace Corps staff will do everything they can to help you work through any challenges.

Possible Issues for Senior Volunteers

Overall, senior Volunteers are highly valued for the wealth of experience they bring to their communities and counterparts. Yet you may sometimes feel isolated within the Peace Corps community because most Volunteers are in their 20s. They may have little understanding of, or respect for, the lives and experiences of senior Americans. You may also find that while younger Volunteers cannot always offer you support, they still look to you for advice and support. While some seniors

find this a very enjoyable part of their Volunteer experience, others choose not to fill this role.

Training may present its own special challenges. Older trainees have sometimes found that the learning environment does not completely match the learning style and material they are most comfortable with in terms of timing, presentation of materials, comfort level, and health. You may need to be assertive in developing an effective individual approach to language learning. And, when possible, you may need to collaborate on identifying sites and assignments most appropriate for an older Volunteer. Peace Corps staff has much experience supporting and mentoring Volunteers of all ages and is here to work to support you.

Before leaving for Bulgaria, you should consider how you will deal with issues such as possible family emergencies, maintaining lifelong friendships, and deciding who will have Power of Attorney for attending to your financial matters.

Possible Issues for Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual Volunteers

In general, Bulgarians view homosexuality as immoral. There are, of course, many Bulgarians with alternative lifestyles, but their lifestyle would not be well accepted in Bulgaria if they chose to be open about it. Most Bulgarians choose to keep their personal lifestyles private, and there seems to be an attitude of acceptance when a community does not need to acknowledge a person's sexual preference. Almost all GLBT Peace Corps Bulgaria Volunteers find that they cannot be open about their sexual preference in their assigned communities, although some find a few close Bulgarian friends who they can confide in. Most GLBT Bulgaria Peace Corps Volunteers find that they can be open with Peace Corps Bulgaria staff and Volunteers, and find the Peace Corps community to be a source of significant support.

Relationships with host country nationals can happen, but they may not be easy. Lesbians, like all American women, are likely to have to deal with constant questions about boyfriends, marriage, and sex. Wearing an “engagement ring” may help. Gay (and straight) men may have to deal with machismo while with Bulgarian males, including talk of sexual conquests, girl watching, and dirty jokes. Volunteers with alternative lifestyles have occasionally set up informal forums for support and information sharing.

Possible Religious Issues for Volunteers

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is the dominant religion (official statistics report that 83 percent of Bulgarians consider themselves members), so you may not be able to find an active Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim congregation near your site and may need to travel to a bigger city to attend religious events or ceremonies. Only Christmas and Easter are observed as official religious holidays. Alternatively, you could be living in a primarily Muslim community, and only Muslim religious services may be easily accessible.

As in most countries, there are some people who hold stereotypes about members of other faiths. Volunteers have reported being asked about their religion and not always getting a positive response, depending on their own response. Some Volunteers say they try to avoid discussion of religious beliefs. In general, Bulgarians are not an overly religious people, but Bulgarian culture and religious heritage go hand-in-hand for many Bulgarians. Peace Corps/Bulgaria has Volunteers of many faiths, and most of them find that the question of religion does not interfere with the work they are doing in Bulgaria or the friendships they form with Bulgarians.

Possible Issues for Volunteers With Disabilities

As a Volunteer with a disability in Bulgaria, you may face a special set of challenges. Bulgaria has an old, poorly maintained infrastructure that does not always accommodate individuals with disabilities. Few public places, for example, have been made accessible to wheelchairs. Because sidewalks are uneven and cars frequently park in pedestrian areas, visually impaired Volunteers may have a harder time moving around on their own. If you are reading this *Welcome Book*, the Peace Corps' Office of Medical Services determined that you were physically and emotionally capable, with or without reasonable accommodations, of performing a full tour of Volunteer service in Bulgaria without unreasonable risk to yourself or interruption of your service. Peace Corps/Bulgaria staff will work with disabled Volunteers to make reasonable accommodations in training, housing, jobsites, and other areas to enable them to serve safely and effectively.

Possible Issues for Married Volunteers

Married couples should expect to live separately during their pre-service training. Typically, married trainees in Bulgaria, particularly those working in the same Peace Corps sector, live with separate host families in the same community during their pre-service training, and attend language classes together daily. Most Peace Corps couples report that the advantages—more opportunities to speak Bulgarian during the host family stay, more opportunities to have their own host family experience—are well worth the challenges of living apart for these weeks. Occasionally, couples have had to live in separate communities during pre-service training when they are in different program sectors (YD, COD, and TEFL), because of technical training groups. Peace Corps Bulgaria will make reasonable efforts to take proximity into account and to support some visitation for married couples during

training. All married couples will live together as Volunteers at their permanent sites after they finish pre-service training and swear-in as Peace Corps Bulgaria Volunteers.

Married couples may face challenges stemming from traditional Bulgarian gender roles. A married female Volunteer may find herself the object of gossip among older Bulgarian 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 in more conservative communities. Most married couples, however, have served successfully in Bulgaria without making unreasonable compromises.

NOTES



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



How much luggage am I allowed to bring to Bulgaria?

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 (short-wave 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. Please make sure you are aware of the current security restrictions both on what items you can pack in your luggage and what you can carry-on with you at the time of your travel, as these regulations have been in a state of flux. Please check the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) website for a detailed list of permitted and prohibited items at <http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/prohibited/permitted-prohibited-items.shtm>.

We also recommend that whatever luggage you choose to bring should be easily transportable. Often Volunteers travel alone and are forced to make frequent bus changes, walk between different stations within a given city, or use public transit. Any baggage that is too bulky or ill suited to being carried by hand could cause a traveling Volunteer problems. Many Volunteers find the best option is to purchase large travelers' or hiker's backpacks.

What is the electric current in Bulgaria?

It is AC 220 volts (V), 60 hertz. Plugs are the standard rounded European two-pronged type. Current converters and plug adapters are available in most U.S. stores specializing in travel or electronics. Adapters are typically available in the larger Bulgarian cities, but may not always be easy to locate. Many devices, especially equipment like laptops or iPod chargers with their own AC adapters, can accept 220 V Bulgarian current in addition to U.S. 110 V and only need a plug adapter. Many devices have text written on them stating whether they are able to work on both 220 and 110 V.

How much money should I bring?

Volunteers are expected to live at the same level as the people in their community. They are given a settling-in allowance and a monthly living allowance, which should cover their expenses. Often Volunteers wish to bring additional money for vacation travel to other countries. Credit cards, debit cards, and traveler's checks are preferable to cash. It is very difficult, however, to cash a traveler's check in Bulgaria, so do not plan to use one within Bulgaria. If you bring an ATM or debit card to withdraw cash, you may want to confirm with your U.S. bank that your card will work in Bulgaria, as some financial institutions block the use of cards from countries known to have problems with financial fraud. More and more businesses in the larger cities in Bulgaria have started to accept credit cards, but this is only until recently. If you choose to bring extra money, bring the amount that will suit your own travel plans and needs.

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, so please plan accordingly.*

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 their personal belongings. We recommend that you purchase personal property insurance before you depart. Peace Corps will also provide insurance information and forms from a private insurance company when you arrive. Volunteers should not ship or take valuable items overseas. Jewelry, watches, radios, cameras, and expensive appliances can easily be lost, stolen, or broken, and in many places, satisfactory maintenance and repair services are not available.

Do I need an international driver's license?

Volunteers in Bulgaria do not need to get an international driver's license because they are prohibited from operating motorized vehicles. Most urban travel is by bus or taxi. Rural travel ranges from buses, trains, and minibuses to trucks, bicycles, and lots of walking.

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

This is optional, as candy, wine, and flowers are all typical Bulgarian gifts that you can purchase here. That being said, Bulgarian host families, colleagues, and friends will be thrilled with small gifts from your area of the U.S. Some gift suggestions include refrigerator magnets, keychains, pictures, books, or calendars of American scenes; souvenirs from your area; hard candies that will not melt or spoil; or photos to give away. In particular, gifts that represent your unique cultural community

within America are appreciated by Bulgarians and provide the opportunity to teach that not all Americans are alike.

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 the middle of pre-service training. This gives Peace Corps staff the opportunity to try to understand each trainee's specific skills and strengths before matching Volunteers and sites. You may have the opportunity to provide input on your site preferences, including type of town or village, local needs, basis of the local economy, type of school, and geographical location. However, keep in mind that many factors influence the site selection process, and community needs and how Volunteer skills can help communities address those needs will be the biggest factors driving site placement. It is integral to your success as a Peace Corps Volunteer that you are flexible and are up for any site placements and situation. Most Volunteers live in small towns or in rural villages, where the need is the greatest, and are usually within one hour from another Volunteer by public transportation.

How can my family contact me in an emergency?

The Peace Corps' Office of Special Services provides assistance in handling emergencies affecting trainees and Volunteers or their families. Before leaving the United States, instruct your family to notify the Office of Special Services immediately if an emergency arises, such as a serious illness or death of a family member. During normal business hours, the number for the Office of Special Services is 800.424.8580; select option 2, then extension 1470. After normal business hours and on weekends and holidays, the Special Services duty officer can be reached at the above number. For nonemergency questions, your family can get information from your country desk staff at the Peace Corps by calling 800.424.8580.

Can I call home from Bulgaria?

You will not have quick or easy access to a telephone when you initially arrive in Bulgaria. Advise family and friends that it could be several weeks after your arrival in Bulgaria before you have the time or opportunity to call home. This situation may change after you purchase a cellphone and determine the best options for Internet access available to you.

Standard long-distance telephone service is available but expensive. If you are calling on a landline from outside the capital, it may a while to get a connection. Some calling cards from the United States (e.g., those issued by AT&T, MCI, and Sprint) can be used to call the United States. However, you cannot use these cards to call from Bulgaria to other countries because of a phone block in Bulgaria. There are multiple alternate providers (such as Foneca) that offer calls for just a few cents per minute from the U.S. to Bulgaria and only from Sofia and a few other major cities in Bulgaria to the U.S.

Most Volunteers who have home Internet access and a laptop use Skype or VOIPstunt to call to the U.S. Those who don't, tend to call from an Internet club in their village or a nearby town or have family and friends in the U.S. call them. You alternatively can make international calls from a local public telephone or post office. The country code for Bulgaria is 359.

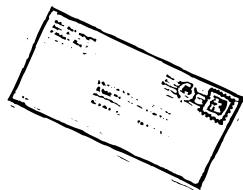
Will there be email and Internet access?

Should I bring my computer?

Internet and email access is becoming more available, and Internet cafes can be found in most major cities and towns. Many small villages, however, do not have Internet access. Many Volunteers bring laptops with them, and are happy that they have them, but many other Volunteers do fine without them. If you bring a computer, you should purchase personal property insurance for the computer and other valuables before you leave; it is not that expensive and well worth the price. The Peace Corps does not provide this coverage.



WELCOME LETTERS FROM BULGARIA VOLUNTEERS



Greetings from Bulgaria,

I imagine you are excited, nervous and more than a bit curious about the next two years of your lives. Many of you will be living in small villages. Living in a village offers a number of challenges, which are without a doubt outweighed by the rewards.

The most obvious challenges, but in fact the easiest to deal with, will be material. You will have to cope with some or all of the following inconveniences: limited or no Internet access, regular power outages, water shortages, limited bus access to and from the village, and the joys of trying to stay warm with a wood stove in the winter. During the past two years, working as a teacher, I have learned that the obvious challenges are quickly forgotten while the real challenges are less tangible and more job related. Many of your students will have little or no experience with computers. Most of your co-workers will be farmers and will divide their time between the two jobs; often giving more attention to the latter depending on the season. If you are in a minority community many of your students will not be proficient in Bulgarian. Whatever challenges you face, it's important to remember that challenges open up opportunities for solutions, in which you will play a part.

Bulgarians, especially in the villages, are famous for their hospitality. My co-workers and neighbors feel personally responsible for my well-being. This manifests itself primarily through appeals to my stomach. As a teacher, I am a respected member of the community, which allows me to effectively fill the role of a change agent. The sense of community and the openness with which people have invited me to be part of their lives has motivated me and made this experience meaningful.

Learning the language is the key to living and working in a foreign country. People are much more inclined to sit down with me and share their lives because they know that I am able to share my opinions in an intelligible way. It would be very difficult to work with the students and with my co-workers if we could not communicate effectively. Besides learning the language, the only other piece of advice I can offer is the importance of being flexible. Let your circumstances shape your expectations and work tirelessly to accomplish as much as possible.

You are about to take on a service that will mean a lot to many people. I can guarantee that you will get as much out of your experience here as you put into it.

Good luck

— An English teacher (TEFL) Volunteer

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Life in Bulgaria can be confusing, exciting, intensive, relaxing, and enlightening all at the same time. A day feels like eternity, but two years feels like a day. When I came to Bulgaria I expected crowded smelly buses, less than ideal customer service, small town gossip, and weird stares. What I did not expect was to stand out because I am African American.

The first few weeks I was at my permanent site I noticed people would hang out of their car windows to get a better look at me. Some people went as far as to yell the “N” word or “Black Monkey” as if they did not want me here. I felt insulted and hurt because I had traveled so far away from my family to come. I felt ill prepared; no one told me that I would encounter people who were not tolerant of racial differences. The hardest part of my service was adjusting to this aspect of Bulgarian culture.

Two years later I still stand out; however, now I understand the reason why. Most Bulgarians did not have contact with people from different cultures until the fall of communism in 1989. I got the full understanding of how I must look to Bulgarians after I saw black people in my town for the

first time. They really stood out and I was drawn to them. I shouted for them to turn around but they kept walking. I began to wave my hands and screamed louder to get their attention but they ignored me. I realized at that moment I was treating them the same way Bulgarians treated me! It clicked that people were simply interested in me because I am different.

I am still in Bulgaria and even decided to extend a year because, looking over the past two years, the number of positive experiences outweighs the negative experiences. I cannot let a few people and situations stop me from accomplishing my goals of volunteering with the Peace Corps. I had to change my attitude to focus on the positive things rather than the negative. I have tons of friends who love and care about me in Bulgaria. I cannot imagine serving anywhere else in the world.

— Crystal H. Brown, Community and Organizational
Development B20 Volunteer

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Greetings!

You are about to come to a place that is impossible to describe in only a few words. In Bulgaria, laundry on the line fights for space with satellite dishes on the balconies of the ubiquitous communist-era block apartments. One walks to school past an old woman wearing a scarf, herding her goats, contrasted with teenage girls wearing platform shoes and trendy zigzag parts in their hair. The Backstreet Boys are on the radio in the background as families make homemade *rakiya*.

Cellphones are everywhere, but people still go to city parks to collect chestnuts for the winter and for home remedies. Why does a good bottle of wine cost less than a can of tuna? Why is it bad luck to sit at the corner of a table or to place your bread loaf upside down? You'll discover the answers to these questions and much more. If you're a teacher, be prepared to wrestle with tough educational issues: teaching to multilevel classes and to students without textbooks.

What to bring? Bring small gifts for your host family, such as nice paper napkins with interesting designs, general-interest magazines with lots of pictures, and packaged foods that are specific to the United States or your region (such as wild rice or dried cranberries). Bring photos of family and friends and postcards showing your hometown and state (especially in different seasons). Bulgarians are very curious about life in the United States. Many of them think it's exactly like what they see on "Baywatch" and "Dynasty"; it's good to give them a more accurate picture.

As a teacher, I'm happy I brought my laptop, thick markers, and colorful alphabet cards to post. I wish I had brought stickers (with English expressions like "Fantastic!" and "Super!"). Bring professional-looking clothes that are easy to maintain (hand-washable, in dark colors). Business-casual mix-and-match items seem the best for crossover from professional to hiking and leisure. Bring sandals, nice shoes, and boots that look good but are practical for walking everywhere. You can have things sent from home, but receiving packages can be dicey, so bring the more valuable and bulky belongings with you. The most important thing: Bring flexibility and an open mind. You'll be frustrated at times by your lack of ability to express yourself or be listened to. For example, I have yet to meet a host mother who acknowledges the phrase, "No thank you, I'm full."

You will be surprised at what you miss about America and sometimes exasperated by what you might perceive as backward or defeatist thinking, but it's fascinating to discover who these people are and how they've come to be this way. You are likely to realize that you are learning more than you are teaching.

— An English teacher (TEFL) Volunteer

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I was watching an interview on CNN about the recently passed Egyptian director Youssef Chahine, and one of his protégés made a comment about him that stayed with me. He said that success is a combination of talent, skill, and

luck. I really like true statements and I think that it's very true about my Peace Corps service as a youth development Volunteer. I have been working almost daily in a community center and NGO for Roma and Bulgarian youth; I have done a lot of successful projects as a volunteer, and not one of them lacked any part of the aforementioned trifecta. There are skills I had that applied to writing grants, encouraging a consistent work ethic with my co-workers, and organizing activities for others, like my baseball club. My co-workers tell me that I'm really talented at art, as well as the performing arts, which helps me win over the attention of the youth I work with for the theater and art clubs, who are marginalized from most after-school activities by their ethnicity, economic status, and even their location in the city. But the biggest part of my success is probably luck. I am lucky in so many ways, some of which are very visible and some are just below the surface. I'm lucky that I am able to work with so many bright and personable children who inspire me to fill their heads with such ideas as civil rights, equality, and the golden rule. I'm lucky that I have colleagues who consistently break stereotypes placed upon them and are very progressive.

I am a somewhat openly* gay volunteer, and I do not feel ostracized by the few people I have shared this information with, including some of my co-workers; it's important to mention that when working with children, you are put in a compromising situation since there are a lot of stereotypes that homosexuals are pedophiles. Thus – whether you can be open with anyone at your site or not depends; some/most Volunteers can't be, and you definitely can't be in the beginning. I am lucky that most people I meet are supportive of me completely, whether it's a group of high school kids willing to pick up garbage with me on Thursdays or the secretary of the municipality giving me 20 boxes of clothes for the kids and families in need that we work with. My greatest accomplishment here is that the little successes I have had were always shared with someone else as their successes, which is the way it should be, and is the real meaning of "skills transfer."

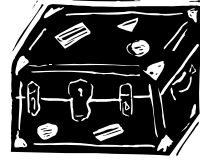
(* I need to clarify “openly gay” because as a Peace Corps Volunteer, you receive quite a bit of attention. I do not tell Bulgarians that I am gay simply because it is a guessing game on who is going to accept it and who is going to cause you problems. I have come to Bulgaria to serve my country, to serve a population in need, and to give my time to a few people who may benefit from it. I can do all of these things without addressing my sexuality to people, therefore I don't. I have a nice personal life and I do a very good job of keeping it separate from my work life.)

— A B20 youth development Volunteer

NOTES



PACKING LIST



The following recommendations are based on the experiences of Volunteers serving in Bulgaria. Use them as an informal guide, bearing in mind that each experience is individual. There is no perfect list! You obviously cannot bring everything that is mentioned, so consider those items that are most important to you personally and professionally. Many past and current Volunteers wish they had not brought so many clothes and toiletries and had instead focused on specialty items. You should not hesitate to bring items of sentimental value that will help you feel content at your site, but you can always have things sent to you later. Keep in mind that you have a 100-pound weight limit on checked luggage; you will be responsible for any fees for overweight baggage.

Except where otherwise indicated, all the following items are also available in Bulgaria. They are listed here as items to bring because the quality of the items may be inferior, their price may be significantly higher, or the selection may be limited.

General Clothing

Volunteers need an assortment of clothing for work, play, and socializing. Volunteers in various sites and professional roles will have different clothing requirements. Bulgarian teachers and other professionals have a fairly sophisticated fashion sense, which has been described by some as “elegantly casual,” and your Bulgarian colleagues are the best models for what to wear in the workplace.

Attire for male teachers usually consists of slacks with a nice shirt and optional tie. COD Volunteers may find a jacket and tie *de rigueur* for the office or that slacks or a skirt, and a

shirt or sweater, are more appropriate. Youth development Volunteers generally work in a more casual environment, but still need appropriate business attire for occasional use. Suits, dresses, and skirts or nice slacks with blouses are all suitable work attire for women; however, avoid clothing that requires dry cleaning because this service is usually only available in larger cities. For both men and women, nice jeans dressed up with a nice shirt and jacket is acceptable in many situations. Three or four outfits should be sufficient for work. You will also need casual clothes for relaxing around the house, socializing, hiking, skiing, and travel. Printed and casual T-shirts and sweatshirts are fine for sports activities or for use at home, but are not usually worn for other activities. Quality jeans (i.e., solid color and no tears) are available in Bulgaria, but they are expensive by Bulgarian standards, so you may want to bring one or two pairs of your favorite brand from the United States (dark or black ones are better than light ones). Clothes that are comfortable and can be layered as needed to accommodate the season are best. Dark clothes are easier to keep clean and hand-wash, and cotton knits are best avoided because they don't keep their shape when line-dried (plan on not having access to a clothes dryer).

In general, most day-to-day clothing you will need can be purchased for reasonable prices in Bulgaria, so you may want to use your limited packing space to focus on specialty clothing, such as hiking apparel or sporting attire/shoes and other unique and specific items.

Clothing suggestions:

- Bathing suit (Bulgarian women tend to wear two-piece suits, so either a two-piece or one-piece suit is fine)
- Two or three pairs of fleece or silk long underwear (what is available locally is not of great quality, and keep in mind that white can be difficult to clean)

- Your favorite sweater (keep in mind that good sweaters can be purchased locally at reasonable prices)
- A lightweight skirt(s) for summer for women
- Slacks and a sports jacket or one suit and tie for men (You can alternatively purchase this here)
- A scarf, hat, and gloves (think fleece, Thinsulate, and waterproof; it gets very cold in the mountains in winter. All of these items can also be purchased locally, although it may be hard to find waterproof gloves)
- High quality warm socks, such as "smart wool" ones (you can buy normal day-to-day ones locally)
- Lightweight "shell" and a fleece or warm jacket that is windproof and waterproof (mid-thigh or knee-length winter coats will keep you warmer than waist-length jackets). A wool coat is easy to buy locally, but it is not easy to find a truly waterproof jacket. Jackets with removable lining are particularly flexible for various weather conditions.
- Additional clothing for women who wear larger sizes. Note that it can be very challenging for female Volunteers who wear larger and tall sizes to find clothing that fits locally.
- Specialty or "high-tech" sporting good clothing, including sports bra(s) for women. While day-to-day sports clothing can be purchased throughout Bulgaria, don't count on being able to easily find technical clothing such as wicking and gortex items, except for in a few pricier specialty stores in Sofia.
- Shoes:
 - Hiking footwear: high-quality, lightweight, waterproof hiking boots are desirable if you are a serious hiker, but some Volunteers advise that trail running-type shoes or good sneakers are adequate. You can, buy good-quality hiking boots from major manufacturers at a few stores in Sofia.

- Larger sizes: Good-quality shoes in large sizes are hard to find; women’s shoes and boots are especially difficult to find in larger sizes (over size 9). If you wear a larger size, you may want to consider bringing all of the shoes you will need for your stay, including work shoes, waterproof boots, and casual shoes.
- Running: If you are a runner, you'll likely want to bring good running shoes with you. While stylish athletic shoes are readily available, only a few stores in the larger cities carry high quality running shoes. Prices are high and sizes tend to be very limited.
- Quality: The quality of much of the footwear in Bulgaria is low, although there are some high-end stores in larger cities (with high-end prices to match).
- Insoles: Dr. Scholl's type insoles can be helpful if you purchase shoes locally, as they are more often made for looks than for comfort.
- Slippers (worn in Bulgarian households) and flip-flops (you'll want a pair for showering) can be easily purchased throughout Bulgaria, so no need to bring these with you.

Personal Hygiene and Toiletry Items

Practically speaking, bring only enough to get through training. A wide variety of both locally produced and imported items (particularly in the cities) are available in Bulgaria, so do not pack extra toothpaste, toilet paper, dental floss, and shampoo, unless you are very particular about what brands you like. This goes for cosmetics, too. Some Volunteers do say, however, that they wish they had brought more of a favorite brand of a cosmetic, lotion, or deodorant.

Kitchen

There are kitchen stores in larger cities in Bulgaria with practically everything you will need to equip even a gourmet kitchen; however, it might be easier and less expensive to pack some of the following:

- Favorite local spices, such as chipotle sauce or items generally purchased at specialty or ethnic food stores
- Favorite recipes using basic ingredients (you will also receive an excellent cookbook during training that was prepared by previous Volunteers)
- Plastic measuring cups and spoons (it can be tricky using recipes with U.S. measurements and metric measuring tools)
- Rubber scrappers and spatulas (if you would be lost without them)
- Chocolate chips (OK, you can cut up a Bulgarian chocolate bar), marshmallows, and graham crackers are not available locally, and you can amaze your host family and Bulgarian friends with items (i.e., chocolate chip cookies and s'mores) made from these items.

Miscellaneous

- Compact sleeping bag, for weekend travel and winter warmth (consider a lightweight pad too, although foam pads that are cheap and lightweight but are not small in size can be purchased locally)
- Contact lenses and cleaning solutions (the Peace Corps does not provide contact lens supplies and they are expensive locally)
- Sunglasses (can be bought locally, but cheap ones can be of poor quality, and expensive ones are really expensive)

- Sturdy, water-resistant watch with an alarm (and an extra watchband)
- Durable water bottle
- Small backpack—durable, lightweight, and of good quality for overnight trips (suitcases are a nuisance and large packs may be cumbersome for short trips)
- Money pouch or belt (to hide your passport and other valuables when traveling)
- Swiss Army knife, with a corkscrew
- Camera (compact ones are best, since they are inconspicuous and easier to travel with). For those who use film cameras vs. digital ones: 35mm film (Kodak and Fuji) can be bought and developed in Bulgarian towns & cities, but not in most villages. There are few places, even in large cities, that can process Advantix and Advanced Photo System film. Slide processing is expensive and only available in the largest cities. Most Volunteers rely on digital cameras and you can bring a CD or USB device to photo stores in towns and cities to have prints made
- A debit card or ATM card to withdraw cash that you know should work in Bulgaria and this region (for vacation travel)
- Personal checks from a U.S. checking account (handy if you plan to apply to graduate school while you're here and as a service to Bulgarian students, who need personal checks, in exchange for cash, to pay for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and SAT tests)
- Index cards (for flashcards)
- Washable markers and fun stickers if you will be teaching
- Credit card (Good for travel in other countries). Select places in Bulgaria that cater to expats now take credit cards,,but there are some reports of stolen credit card numbers

- Laptop—if you decide that you want one here with you (most Volunteers do). Remember to bring a plug adapter (to European two-prong) with a surge protector. You don't need a voltage converter, as laptops are equipped for both 220 and 110V
- An Ipod (*optionally, obviously, but highly recommended by many Volunteers*)
- A few novels to swap and any resources related to your program that you feel you must have
- Small, durable flashlight
- Compact sewing and tool kits
- Games (Scrabble, Uno or Phase Ten, other boards games that only require minimal knowledge of English, cards from a Pictionary set, Frisbee, etc.)
- Holiday and birthday cards in English to use for Bulgarian friends and colleagues
- Plastic ziplock storage bags of various sizes (non-ziplock ones can be found in Bulgaria)
- Postcards, maps, and pictures from home to show your community and to remind you of home
- Small gifts from the U.S./your state for your host family and Bulgarian colleagues and friends. (Stickers, refrigerator magnets, postcards, key chains, pens, candy, etc.)
- An American football

Note: If you bring valuable items such as a laptop, CD player, or musical instrument, bring a sales receipt or other documentation of ownership. If you or Peace Corps sends your items home as unaccompanied baggage, proof of ownership prior to your arrival in Bulgaria must be presented to Bulgarian customs officials to avoid excessive customs fees and/or export restrictions. Also remember to insure any items of value.



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' Office of Special Services at any time if there is a critical illness or death of a family member (telephone number: 800.424.8580, extension 1470; after-hours duty officer: 202.638.2574).
- Give the Peace Corps' *On the Home Front* handbook to family and friends.

Passport/Travel

- Forward all paperwork for the Peace Corps passport and visa to the Peace Corps travel office immediately so a Bulgarian visa can be obtained for your PC passport.
- Verify that 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) that 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

- 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 800.424.8580, extension 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



The following list of numbers will help you contact the appropriate office at Peace Corps headquarters with various questions. You may use the toll-free number and extension or dial directly using the local numbers provided. Be sure to leave the Peace Corps' toll-free number and extensions with your family so they have them in the event of an emergency during your service overseas.

Peace Corps Headquarters

Toll-free Number:

800.424.8580, Press 2, then
Ext. # (see below)

Peace Corps' Mailing Address:

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

For Question About:	Staff	Toll-free Extension	Direct/Local Number
Responding to an Invitation	Office of Placement Europe, Mediterranean, and Asia	Ext. 1875	202.692.1875
Programming or Country Information	Desk Officer E-mail: bulgaria@peacecorps.gov	Ext. 2414	202.692.2414

For Questions About:	Staff	Toll-free Extension	Direct/Local Number
Plane Tickets, Passports, Visas, or Other Travel Matters	Travel Officer (Sato Travel)	Ext. 1170	202.692.1170
Legal Clearance	Office of Placement	Ext. 1845	202.692.1845
Medical Clearance and Forms Processing (including dental)	Screening Nurse	Ext. 1500	202.692.1500
Medical Reimbursements	Handled by a Subcontractor		800.818.8772
Loan Deferments, Taxes, Readjustment Allowance Withdrawals, Power of Attorney	Volunteer Financial Operations	Ext. 1770	202.692.1770
Staging (Pre-departure Orientation) and Reporting Instructions <i>Note: You will receive comprehensive information (hotel and flight arrangements) three to five weeks before departure. This information is not available sooner.</i>	Office of Staging	Ext. 1865	202.692.1865
Family Emergencies (to get information to a Volunteer overseas)	Office of Special Services	Ext. 1470	202.692.1470 (24 hours)

PEACE CORPS

Paul D. Coverdell Peace Corps Headquarters

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