

Making the Most of Volunteer Service With the Peace Corps

Proactive Ways to Improve Your Experience

By Brianne Goodspeed

I recently returned to the U.S. after one year as a **Peace Corps** volunteer in Cameroon, West Africa. In principle, I had a year left to go, but I decided to call it quits. It was not the heat nor the desert that convinced me to leave. And I adjusted pretty quickly to reading by a kerosene lamp, riding bush taxis, and eating fish heads. I quit because, after a year, I felt my absence would be more beneficial than my presence ever was.

Before I joined the Peace Corps I was fairly realistic about what to expect. I knew that development work is slow and complicated and that sometimes it takes many years to see the results. I knew that I might feel I was accomplishing nothing. However, I also wanted to live in a developing country long enough to know it, not just see it. I believe that world peace and homeland security begin by understanding and caring about how other people live.

After two months of training, I arrived in a small village in the arid north of Cameroon. I was technically the third volunteer there, though nothing remains of previous work. There was no NGO or community organization to guide me. There was only a village chief who initially requested a volunteer because he needed someone to plant his mango orchard. He was under the impression that volunteers came to his village to work for him personally.

The first volunteer planted the chief's orchard, but it was later destroyed by an arsonist. The chief routinely seizes fields, steals wives, and unjustly locks people in a cement storage house where they are beaten by his henchmen. Burning the orchard could have been anyone's revenge.

The second volunteer, a woman, ran away with a villager's husband after only three months. When I arrived in my village I didn't know that I was seen as the next white woman who was there to find a husband.

I gradually began to feel that not only was I accomplishing nothing beneficial, but rather my mere presence was causing harm. The chief began sabotaging my farmers' work by seizing their land and assets and extorting money from them for crimes they did not commit. Several fled the village after he accused them of theft.

When I questioned why the Peace Corps hadn't inform me about the past behavior of volunteers at my post or the brutality of the village chief, the response was, "We didn't know. This is the first we've heard of it."

If I had known this village's history, received more than a few cursory language classes, or had had a counterpart in my village to advise me, I would have been more effective in dealing with the problems that arose.

So, do I regret my year in Cameroon with the Peace Corps? Absolutely not. I loved learning Fulfulde and Hausa, teaching evening English classes at my house, and working in the cotton fields alongside a group of 15 men and women. The experience was surreal and life changing, just as Peace Corps service should be, and I hope that I did some good while there. Many volunteers and staff care deeply about development and, through their work, they send a positive message about America's role in the world.

Recommendations for Future Peace Corps Volunteers

During the Application Process: This is your time to learn as much as you can about the Peace Corps experience. Speak to a recruiter, visit the Peace Corps website (www.peacecorps.gov), and search for books written by volunteers (There are many, but a particularly good one is [So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps...What to Know Before You Go](#) by Dillon Banerjee, Ten Speed Press.). Also check out **World View** (www.worldviewmagazine.com), a quarterly magazine that covers topics about the Peace Corps and the developing world. While the Peace Corps does not have an official program to connect applicants with returned volunteers, finding a former volunteer is not as hard as it might sound. If you are thinking of applying, tell everyone you know. Chances are, a lot of people will respond with, "Oh, my nephew was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana," or "I work with a woman whose husband served in El Salvador." Get in touch with these volunteers, even if they served in a different part of the world than interests you.

When you receive an assignment, try to learn as much as you can about the country and the Peace Corps administration within that country before you accept it. The welcome packet you receive will include testimonials written by volunteers who served in that country and might also include their email addresses. Your recruiter might be able to help you get in touch with recently returned volunteers in your area. Contact volunteers and ask them about the country director, the [associate Peace Corps director \(APCD\)](#) for the project you've been offered, and the medical staff.

According to Nathan Arnold of the Peace Corps press office in Washington, "One of the great things about the Peace Corps is that we allow each country [administration] to develop the programs that work for them. What works in South Africa might not work in Uganda. Each country director develops their own structure for how the country will be run."

This means that while all Peace Corps countries share certain mandates handed down from Washington, the country director has considerable flexibility in how he or she manages the country and implements the budget. This can have a significant effect on your service.

Many volunteers now keep web logs during their service. This practice is causing a certain amount of controversy among volunteers and the administration because of the high value the Peace Corps places on cultural sensitivity and discretion. However, it remains a good way to learn about the host country and the administration within that country. Although you should take what you read with a grain of salt, try to find and read some web accounts from the country where you've been invited to serve before you accept an assignment. The following are a few useful sites:

- Thirdgoal.com is specifically for Peace Corps web logs
- Ringsurf.com hosts many volunteer blogs (search "Peace Corps")
- Peacecorpsonline.org has a bulletin board with messages listed by country

During Training: About mid-way through training, you should pay a site visit to your potential post. If you are replacing a volunteer, read his or her post book, ask questions, and try to get a sense of that volunteer's role in the community. You may or may not want to emulate it. Find out the history of the post as best you can. Finally, ask other volunteers in the region about the post and about the last volunteer. One of the hardest things about Peace Corps service can be learning when to react to a situation and when to let something go. Still, if you have concerns after your site visit, raise them with the Peace Corps training staff, your APCD, or the country director.

At Your Post: Arnold explains, "Because of increased concerns for safety and security, Peace Corps-Washington is placing more of an emphasis on site visits—getting staff out to volunteer sites to make sure that they're adequate, safe, and there is a real job to do. Of course, it depends on the country directors and how they choose to spend their budget, but Washington is taking safety and security more seriously."

Your country director and your APCD should know the history of your post. It is their job to be aware of what's going on in the field. While no one can completely eliminate the dangers of living in a developing country, a negligent in-country staff will increase your risks and hinder your efficacy.

Once you are at post if you have a problem that you feel goes beyond the scope of normal hassles, speak to your APCD or country director about it. Although many volunteers feel that Peace Corps administration often complicates problems further, sometimes they can help you resolve a problem before it gets out of hand. Use your judgment and remember to document everything: save the emails you send and receive, and keep a log of phone calls.

As your last resort, if you feel that the country staff is not responding appropriately to your concerns, contact your country desk at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington.

Brianne Goodspeed received her B.A. from the Univ. of Massachusetts-Amherst in 2002. She has hiked the Appalachian Trail, volunteered with **Peace Corps** and **Americorps**, and is currently a freelance travel writer and environmental journalist. Brianne has written for **E/The Environmental Magazine**, **Backpacker**, and www.eco-chick.com, among others.