

“Individually, we are one drop.
Together, we are an ocean.” - Ryunosuke Satoro



FAQs for Families of Volunteers

Short-term Volunteer Abroad Programs

About United Planet Quests

United Planet programs focus on fostering cross-cultural understanding in the areas where volunteers work. We strive to provide full cultural immersion. Volunteers typically stay in local homes where they learn about daily family life, take language classes, and participate in cultural activities such as cooking or dance classes.

United Planet programs are flexible and allow participants to volunteer, learn the culture, and interact with people in various parts of the world for as much time as they are able to commit. Most programs run on a year-round, ongoing basis, beginning on the first and third Mondays of the month, with a choice of stay, from one to 12 weeks.

Who Can Participate in United Planet Quests?

Most programs require that volunteers be 18 years old. Six programs—Costa Rica, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Romania, and China—are open to individuals 16 and up. Other destinations are open to volunteers under 18 if they are accompanied by an adult. Quests are open to citizens of all countries.

How Does United Planet Determine Which Programs are Appropriate for Volunteers under 18?

There are two major considerations when choosing whether or not a Quest is appropriate for someone under 18: proximity to the main office/country coordinator and the environment of the project. We require a parent's session for volunteers under 18. During this phone conversation we will answer any questions you have, as well as provide you with all the information about the Quest.

What Measures are taken to Ensure Volunteer Safety?

Our volunteers' safety is very important to us, and we take many precautions to ensure they are in a safe environment.

- Our on-site In-Country Coordinators are either native to the country or have been living in the country for many years and have gone through extensive training in both risk management and safety.
- They have an emergency number at which they can be reached 24-7.
- They conduct an orientation with each volunteer upon arrival.
- Comprehensive travel insurance is included in the program fee.
- Our Boston office coordinators have training calls with all of our volunteers prior to their departure. We share the health and safety precautions they should take while abroad, and supply them with all necessary documents that can help with their experience.
- Our Boston office staff monitors world news and events through updates from our travel insurance company.
- United Planet is a registered organization with the Department of State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) which allows the Department to contact those living overseas in the event of an emergency.

While United Planet does all it can to ensure the safety of our volunteers, much depends on the volunteer making sensible decisions and behaving in a responsible manner during their Quest. We ask that you talk to your child about making smart choices during their Quest, e.g. traveling late at night, using caution when meeting new people, not drinking to excess or using illegal drugs.

How Does United Planet Prepare Volunteers Before They Leave the Country?

Volunteers will have an individual phone session with their Boston office Project Coordinator to discuss the volunteer's background and motivation for participating in a Quest. This helps us place the volunteer in the most appropriate project. Once a volunteer's project is confirmed, they are provided with the log-in details to the United Planet HUB and Community. This is an online platform where volunteers can access all information and documents necessary for their Quest, including safety and cultural adjustment information. In addition, there is a mandatory pre-departure session via phone and web conference that all volunteers must attend before their departure.

What Type of Work Will Volunteers Be Doing Abroad?

The work a volunteer does depends on the destination and project they have chosen. Volunteers typically work on a community project between 5-8 hours a day, five days per week. The volunteer receives additional information about the project they will be working on before they depart. Please ask your child to share this information. Be advised that a community's needs change regularly. This sometimes means that a volunteer works on a different project than the one they originally signed up for. While this is rare, it does happen. We encourage all volunteers to be open minded and flexible should this occur.

Is There a Supervisor throughout the Quest?

There is an In-Country Coordinator who arranges the program, home stay, and airport transfer. There are also on-site coordinators at the volunteer site (workers at the orphanage, teachers at the school, doctors at the health clinic, etc.) who will also supervise.

How is a Host Family Chosen?

Host families are chosen by our In-Country Coordinators. They have been handpicked and are usually a family that the In-Country Coordinator knows and trusts. Coordinators visit the homes of the families and conduct in-depth interviews. Families that are chosen generally host volunteers regularly throughout the year.

What Type of Accommodation Does the Volunteer Stay in?

In most destinations, volunteers live with host families. In some countries they stay in a guest house or dorm-style accommodation. Volunteers must be prepared for living situations different than those they may be used to at home. They may be staying in communities with no running water and only sporadic electricity. All accommodations are safe and (relatively) clean. Remember that the idea of a Quest is to experience a foreign culture. This means that things will not be the same as in the U.S.!

Will There Be Other United Planet Volunteers at Each Site?

United Planet Quests are usually for individuals; each volunteer travels and works independently. Depending on the time of year, there may be other United Planet volunteers at a work site, but this is not guaranteed. Volunteers should be prepared and ready for the possibility that they may be the only volunteer in the community. This is the whole point of a United Planet Quest—to really be immersed in the culture and community.

Does the Volunteer Need to Be Able to Speak the Local Language?

Latin America is the only region with language requirements for Short-term Quests. Basic to intermediate Spanish knowledge is required for most Latin America programs, as talking with the local people is an integral part of the volunteer work. The coordinator in each country speaks English, but the volunteer's host family may only speak basic or very little English. We recommend that volunteers take a language dictionary with them.

Costs

Why Does the Volunteer Need to Pay a Fee?

The fee for our international volunteer programs covers all food, lodging, insurance, in-country orientation and coordination, program administration, cultural activities and excursions. We understand that this is a big investment for families.

How is the Program Fee Allocated?



While United Planet would love to sponsor every one of its dedicated volunteers to go abroad, without significant public donation, major gifts, or grants it is impossible for us to do so. Most of the program fee goes to Field Expenses. Field Expenses include food and accommodation, emergency medical insurance, airport transfers, activities, language classes and excursions, and a small donation to the project. Volunteer Preparation includes processing of enrollment, coordination with field staff and volunteer, pre-departure support, and cultural adjustment and pre-departure training. Please view more details on our website [why pay to volunteer](#).

How Can Some Costs be Offset?

Many of our volunteers fundraise to offset the cost of their trip. Some volunteers have been able to raise enough to cover the entire cost of their Quest and airfare. We have a Fundraising Kit with useful tips. You can find it on the United Planet website: <http://www.unitedplanet.org/quest/fundraising.html>.

We also encourage volunteers to set up an on-line donation page through the site First Giving. <http://www.firstgiving.com/unitedplanet>.

Enrollment Process

How do Volunteers Enroll?

There are 3 steps in the enrollment process.

1. Review our website and materials and choose a Quest. We encourage volunteers to contact the Boston office and talk with a Program Coordinator if they have any questions..
2. Enroll online. Complete the form and submit the deposit. The deposit is credited directly towards the program fee, and is necessary to hold a place in a Quest program.
3. Participate in a phone session. Once a volunteer submits an online enrollment form and a deposit, they are contacted via email by a Project Coordinator from the Boston office to set up a phone session. At this time the Program Coordinator will get to know the volunteer better and help place them in the project which is most appropriate for their goals and skills.

Once volunteers receive an email from the Project Coordinator confirming their placement in a project, they may book their flight. Flights should not be booked until this confirmation email is received. It contains key information including a checklist of steps that should be taken to ensure the volunteer is fully prepared for the Quest. Please ask the volunteer to share this information with you.

Pre-Departure Information

Will Pre-Departure Information Be Shared?

The philosophy at United Planet is that parents are an important part of the pre-departure process; however, the volunteer is the contact for all information we send. In order to be able to handle life on their own in a new country and culture, the volunteer needs to have done the pre-departure preparation themselves. This helps them believe that when they arrive in country, THEY have the resources and confidence to cope on their own – without mum or dad! The opportunity to grow in confidence, independence, and maturity needs to start as soon as they enroll.

By giving your son or daughter the chance to ask the questions you want answers to, and do the administrative work necessary, you are providing them with the skills they need to have a successful experience in country. Let your child be the “ambassador” for the family - they need the information we provide (and you require).

Is Information Provided to the Family about the Volunteers' Destination?

Once a volunteer is accepted into the program, they must create an account on United Planet's online platform – the HUB. The HUB contains further information about the volunteer's destination country and culture, health and safety information, a contract and health form that must be printed out, signed and returned to the Boston office, and a forum where they can leave messages for other volunteers traveling to the same destination. We strongly encourage you and the volunteer to research the Quest country and culture on your own. This essential preparation makes the Quest experience much more enjoyable and beneficial for both of you.

What is Included in the Travel Insurance Coverage?

The insurance that United Planet provides to all its volunteers is emergency medical insurance which includes evacuation and repatriation services. If a volunteer needs to be treated at a hospital or clinic in-country, they will have to pay at the time of treatment and call the 24-hour number to report that treatment. Then you have 60 days to send in a claim form and receipt for reimbursement. Please see the document of travel insurance benefits located on the HUB for reimbursement and other details.

Will the Volunteer Need a Visa?

Most U.S. citizens do not need a visa for stays of less than 3 months in most of the Quest countries. India, Tibet, Cambodia, Ghana, China, and Tanzania are the exceptions. The volunteer will receive information about acquiring a tourist visa. This is their responsibility.

Does the Volunteer Need Vaccinations or Anti-Malarial Medications?

Some Quest destinations do require vaccinations and anti-malarial medications. We recommend that the volunteer make an appointment with their doctor or a local Travel Clinic well in advance of their Quest to discuss the necessary vaccinations and medications needed. They can also find a list of recommended vaccinations on the Center for Disease Control website – www.cdc.gov.

Does United Planet Arrange Flights?

Volunteers will need to arrange their own airfare or international transportation. We hope to have a designated travel agent in the near future; please contact us for more information.

Will the Volunteer be Picked Up at the Airport?

Volunteers are met at the airport by our In-Country Coordinator, their host family, or a representative of United Planet. They will need to look for a person holding a sign with their name on it. If they do not see this person, they must call the In-Country Coordinator (whose number is listed on their emergency contact card) or the Boston office.

During the Quest

The Parents' Manual that can be downloaded from www.unitedplanet.org contains useful information on how to communicate with and support your child while they are abroad.

Will Family and Friends Be Able to Communicate with the Volunteer During the Quest?

On a Quest, your child will be communicating with you much less than you would expect at home. Calling or emailing too much can make it difficult for the volunteer to 'let go' of life at home and really become immersed in the new culture.. The In-Country Coordinator will show them where the nearest phone is and how to use it, how to buy an international calling card, or where the nearest internet café is. Prior to departure, talk with your child and determine how you will communicate. . The volunteer will also be provided with an emergency contact card before their departure, giving the emergency number of the In-Country Coordinator.

There is no reason to worry if you don't hear from your child within the first 24 hours. The first day is often extremely busy with orientation. The volunteer will contact you as soon as possible. In many destinations electricity and phone networks are not as reliable as you may be used to and they may not be able to communicate as easily or as frequently, especially internationally. Volunteers are often too busy to call or email frequently.. This is a positive thing. Your child is gaining greater independence and maturity through this process, and is relying on themselves rather than you to work out any issues that are arising.

The Volunteer Has Called and Is Not Enjoying the Quest – What Can I Do?

If this should happen, you need to provide support. Remind them that every day will not be a good day. There are always low moments when your child may miss familiar things from home. Accommodations, food, and culture will not be the same as at home. This is the reality of living in another country. Remind your child that the reason they went abroad is to experience something new and different and to get out of their comfort zone! Urge your child to be the one to find solutions to any problems they are having. Part of the experience is to learn to deal with a new place and new situations on their own. They will come out of the experience with much more confidence and determination if able to deal with any problems themselves.

After the Quest

How can Volunteers Stay in Touch with United Planet?

Each volunteer will receive a Welcome Back package about how to stay in touch with United Planet and the country they volunteered in. They are then considered United Planet alumni and receive our monthly e-newsletter with information about Quests and Special Projects.

How does the Volunteer Receive the Evaluation Refund?

The volunteer will receive an email asking them to fill out an on-line survey upon their return. Once the survey is submitted, we will mail a check for \$25 as thanks for completing it. Volunteers may decide to donate the \$25 refund to

their Quest's Country Fund. Country Funds are special funds set up for each Short-term Quest Destination. A portion of the Quest fee that you pay goes towards that Quest's Country Fund. These funds allow the host community the opportunity to apply for funding for special projects happening locally.