

# TALES OF A TWENTY-SOMETHING TRAVELER

hi i'm Sara and here are some tales of life's new adventures as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama.  
This blog does not reflect the views of my host country or the U.S. Government.

all packed!



Here's everything!! Hard to believe it's almost February 23rd and I'm actually leaving... this day has been long anticipated since June and the excitement and nerves keep getting stronger! I fit everything into two checked bags and I have to say I'm pretty proud of myself and I'm excited to live a simpler life with less stuff... I'm sure I still overpacked anyway. Stay tuned for first week updates! Dallas here I come!

22ND FEB 2016

## la primera semana

It's been a hectic first week here in Panama, starting at 430am on Tuesday. The day finally arrived and I could not believe it! Once arriving in Dallas, we had staging during the afternoon with two returned Peace Corps Volunteers from the Dominican Republic who both now work

for Peace Corps in D.C. They were really amazing and threw lots of information at us that afternoon!

We left for the airport at 2:30am on Wednesday so we were all off to a very sleepy start. We flew from Dallas to Miami, Miami to Panama City, where we were greeted by Panama PC Staff that afternoon. Everyone made it through customs swiftly and ended up with all of their bags, so without any issues we went straight to Ciudad del Saber where the PC Office is located, and where we stay until Sunday.



The next two days were filled with lots of information regarding safety, health, etc... and meeting the staff here of over 50 people! At this point our whole training group, G78, is together, which includes 24 Community Environmental Conservation (CEC) Volunteers and 22 Teaching English (TELLS) Volunteers.

On Friday night we went to Albrook Mall, the largest mall in Latin America. It was overwhelming to say the least, and quite an experience with 46 gringos trying to get metro cards and cell phones at the same time.

Today we had the chance to visit a current CEC Volunteer in her site. The drive was up and down mountains and it was so incredibly beautiful and green. When we finally got to her site, her women's group greeted us. The group, one of many others at this site, focuses on making jewelry out of trash and recycled materials to sell and create a business. The women were so

empowered after a year of this Volunteer's work, and it was so incredible to see. I even bought some earrings made out of old magazines!

There are also various other projects going on in the community including trash pick ups, gardens and coffee farms. I was really impressed with this Volunteers impact in such a short amount of time.

I did not fully comprehend how all the projects worked simultaneously before seeing it, but the lifestyle really is so unique and so hard to explain without living it. Every day is different but it was so incredible and exciting to see a day in the life of this Volunteer.

Seeing the connections that this Volunteer had in her community made me even more excited to meet my training host family tomorrow. There is so much to look forward to and so much opportunity as a CEC Volunteer.



27TH FEB 2016

## one week down!

Sooo it's hot here. Like really hot. It's really beautiful in the evenings, and if you're in the shade during the day it's pleasant. But during the day the sun is so incredibly strong and it's definitely something to get used to coming from a New England winter.



The training community is amazing. All of the CEC Volunteers are here, which means there's 24 gringos scattered throughout the town for 10 weeks. They've been hosting PCVs for training sessions for many years, so they have had Americans living here for about half of the year every year for a while now (two groups come every year to Panama.. one with Teaching English and CEC, and the other with Environmental Health and Sustainable Agriculture).

I'm the 15th 'aspirante' (trainee) that my host family has hosted, and they're amazing. I live with my host parents, but they have two daughters who are out of the house, and one granddaughter. Often times most of the family is here. We live in a pretty central part of the community, so I don't have too far of a walk to Spanish class, which is in someone's backyard, or to technical training, which is in someone else's backyard. Generally, our schedule for training for the next two months has us all meeting on Mondays for more general training with the Teaching English Volunteers. Tuesday through Friday we have Spanish classes throughout the morning and technical training in the afternoon, which can include anything from information about Panamanian school systems to working on our garden within the community and getting sunburnt. For the amount of information we've been given, I feel like I've been living in my host community for much longer than a week.

So I also had a crazy Saturday night! Three other Volunteers who live close to me had come over and we were sitting in my bedroom. After spending quite some time just chatting, one noticed a fuzzy white tarantula looking creature about an inch from my foot underneath my bed. Naturally, we all screamed and ran out, and my Spanish skills were put to the test when I tried to tell my host parents. My host dad came in with a machete (they use these for literally everything here) and killed it. He then told us that it was extremely rare, but also extremely venomous.... so that was quite the adrenaline rush!

After being in Panama for nearly two weeks in all, I can say that I'm still scared, excited, nervous, happy, anxious, and somewhat confused about my experience as a PCV. But I can absolutely say that I feel like I'm in the right place for me right now, and that feels great. The people are amazing, I love living in a brightly colored house surrounded by more brightly colored houses, I love waking up to the sound of roosters (though this can get old when it's too early), and I love that I feel comfortable enough here to know that it's a place I will call home!

7TH MAR 2016

## sun, sweat, and semana santa

So we haven't had much unscheduled time these last few weeks... it's been busy and exhausting but also so exciting. We've been here in Panama for over a month now, and sometimes when I say that it feels too long to be a month, and other times too short. Over the past few weeks, our group has had the chance to explore Panama City, spend a week individually in site with a current Volunteer, and celebrate Panamanian Easter.





Panama City is very cool. We were originally sent on a scavenger hunt to find specific places within the city, but we also had time to relax and get to know each other. It was busy and really hot. It's definitely a cool city to have relatively close no matter where you are placed within Panama. There's almost everything you could think of there...rumor has it there's even a Gap in the Albrook Mall...



I had the wonderful opportunity to spend a week in a small community in the Azuero peninsula. It was a very unique and interesting experience, and gave me a much better understanding of what life is going to be like the next two years. It's challenging because our training schedule is so structured, we are told when to wake up and given food to eat when

we're hungry and money to get from place to place. But then once we get to our permanent sites, we are told to just be. We will be alone for the first three months, integrating into our community, and that's it...we'll see how it goes!

During my site visit, I loved spending time in the school. It was super small with only 14 students on a good day, and 1 teacher. I felt welcomed instantly, and I learned so much about how the Panamanian school system is structured just by being there. I loved that the community was small, and I felt comfortable there after only spending a few days with them. I saw the benefits of integration, and the importance of the trust that is built between the Volunteer and the community.



Spending Semana Santa with my host family was also extremely cool. There was so much food on Friday and all of it was so delicious and I had the opportunity to meet so much extended family. You could say that I'm living in the house of the 'Abuela' which means that everyone comes here to eat her delicious cooking. Though I wanted to help cook, on Good Friday she really commanded the kitchen. After about the third time I asked if I could help her,



she gave me an onion and a knife and told me to cut it while I sat in the corner of the kitchen... I think this was her way of getting me to stop asking and make sure I felt like I was helping... and it worked!

My family said that we would fast on Saturday because we ate so much on Friday. But I quickly learned this was a joke...

Today we are going to play bingo and I'm not yet sure what tomorrow has in store. Monday, we leave as a sector to spend the week in a community in Panama Oeste. I'm excited for more hands on learning, and to see a different site!

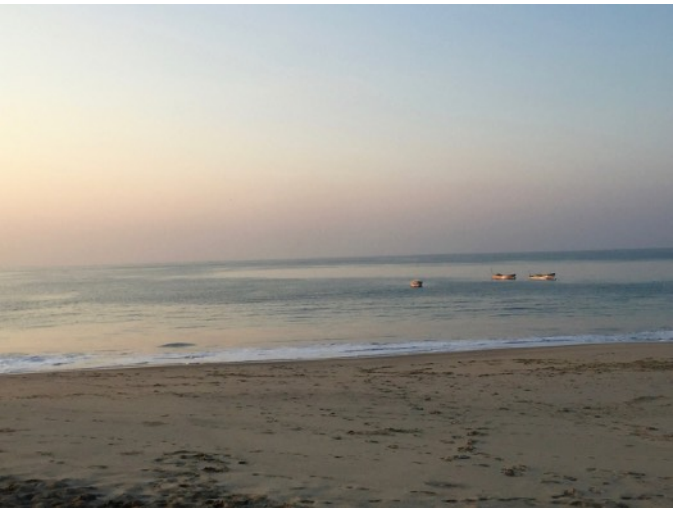
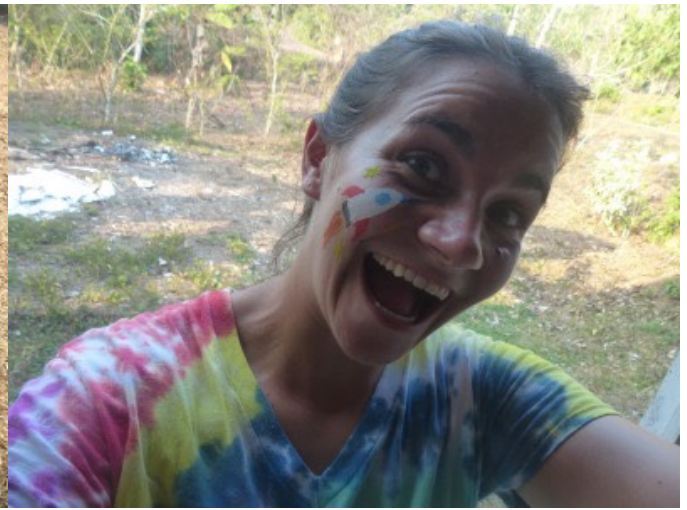
It's definitely interesting going from scheduled training days to real life in the campo and spending a holiday with our host families. Training has been super informative and we've been so busy, but life here in Panama seems to be busy in such a different way. Much of what I experienced during my individual site visit was centered around "pasear-ing", or spending time with the community members, which is amazing but also exhausting when you think your brain can't handle any more Spanish or coffee. Spending a holiday here was so incredibly interesting, but also super laid back. It will be interesting going from such a structured lifestyle in training to a total reversal when we get to site, especially the first three months.

Here's a picture of a puppy just because...



26TH MAR 2016







The last few weeks have been exciting as usual! We had the chance to visit a community as a sector, where we learned how to build an incinerator, work in the school, had an environmental fair and painted faces! (I got a super cool rocket ship).. we also had a free day to spend on the beach and got to be tourists at the canal!

18TH APR 2016

## site announcement!

It was the day we were all waiting for... when we finally learned where we would be living for the next two years. Everyone was gathered together with the staff from the PC office, as well as the former and new regional leaders for each province. It was nerve-racking to say the least. They called us one by one, by first describing the site, and alternating between the sectors. After you are called, you get to stick your picture on the PC map in your location. My site was the second called, and I was not nearly ready for it. I still knew nothing about my site besides the name, and that I was going to be living there for two years!





Just 3 days after learning where we were going to live, we got to go there for the week. We were met by community guides at the office, and taken to our new communities. It felt like the longest journey of my life before getting to see my community. Once I finally saw the sign for my community, I was more than excited.

I was able to meet my host family, who are angels, and the teachers and students at the school, along with the representante, mayor, and sheriff. I felt beyond welcomed and happy to finally be there.

I quickly learned that my community is only about a 15 minute drive from the beach, which was one of the first stops we made. It was beautiful and a nice surprise to a wonderful new home. I was able to travel to some surrounding communities as well, see some cool gardens and try some miel, which is this sticky sweet sugar cane honey that's extracted with the help of a horse walking around in circles.

It was a wonderful week to get a picture in my head of the place I will call home very soon. Less than 3 weeks until I move there!







18TH APR 2016

“I have come to accept the feeling of not knowing where I am going. And I have trained myself to love it. Because it is only when we are suspended in mid-air with no landing in sight, that we force our wings to unravel and alas begin our flight. And as we fly, we still may not know where we are going to. But the miracle is in the unfolding of the wings. You may not know where you are going, but you know that as long as you spread your wings, the winds will carry you.”

— C. Joybell

4TH MAY 2016







I officially swore in as a Peace Corps Volunteer! The Swear-In Ceremony was such a cool experience. It was held in the Panama Canal Museum, and all of Group 78 was together. We



had several people speak on our behalf, and had the wonderful opportunity to get sworn in by the ambassador. The whole ceremony was beautifully done, and it made me feel very official!

10TH MAY 2016

## trenzas and tembleques

I'm finally starting to figure out life here in Panama after 3 weeks in site. So far, I haven't woken up with any concrete plans (I have to admit I've had ideas), but every day has turned into an adventure and I've learned something new. These past few weeks have been filled with excitement, birthday parties, and mangos.

I am starting to get the hang of things...I've been going to artisan classes, learning how to make traditional Panamanian clothing, including mundillos and tembleques; I rode a horse like most Panamanians do on a daily basis; I was surprised with teaching a classroom full of primary school children after recess; I have made empanadas (and they were delicious); I found a spot in my community with cell phone signal AND shade; I've started using my bug spray as air freshener; I take siestas every day in my hammock... and that's just the beginning!

Overall life is good here in Los Santos.. I'm excited to see what comes next!





27TH MAY 2016





days are still busy and most recently filled with a rainy day visit to an island and looooots of bingo!

16TH JUNE 2016







my first Panamanian birthday party is in the books! the decorations sent from home were a big hit (thanks mom!) I also learned how to make chorizo and sembrar with the kids in school!



6TH JULY 2016



Update: Panama has a day for kids just like they have for father's day and mother's day and it's amazing; I planted some new fruit trees that I hope I can add to the collection I have

going; and the festival for Santa Librada, the Saint of Las Tablas, was very beautiful and filled with people and bull fights and polleras....and my friend Jenna!

23RD JULY 2016

## now what?

I'm writing this the day after my meeting (the one when our boss comes from the city to share a day with us, and we finally "officially" decide what projects we will be working on for the next two years). It's the meeting we've all been waiting to have; the meeting that has been hanging over our heads since arriving in Panama; the meeting that everyone says not to stress out about but we all stress out about; the meeting where we've been reminded to provide good snacks at the end, because that's really what makes a good meeting; the meeting where we're told to put that we'll have snacks on the invitation in hopes of people actually coming; the meeting that is "THE meeting".

In hindsight, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. Now I get to be the one to say, "Don't stress out" when I know everyone who hasn't had his or hers yet is doing just that. It felt really good to get that milestone out of the way, nearly 6 months in. This coming week I'll move into my new house, and will live without a host family for the first time since arriving here in February. I know that milestone will feel good too.

I have to say I thought I would feel different after this meeting. I feel the sense of relief that I thought I would, and the excitement of soon moving into a home here that will be all mine. But I definitely thought that I would have a better idea of what I'm doing... whereas now I still have no idea. If this were what I felt like 6 months ago, having all this new information thrown at me and not having a plan to execute it all smoothly, I would have probably quit before I started. However, 6 months ago, before arriving to Panama, we had so much thrown at us from Peace Corps to prepare for this journey...medical documents, legal documents, passport pictures, visa applications...we were given exact dates and times of flights and bus rides and maps of our training communities. It was definitely overwhelming, but it was a plan, plus I had all the answers to the questions my mom was asking me.

Up until this point in my life, there has always been a somewhat logical next step, both big picture and smaller details; after high school came college, after choosing my major came all the requirements for it, after some time in school came applying to summer internships for things to "build the resume", and after those 4 years came graduation (I have to admit at this point I did not know what I was doing but I did have the logical next step of looking for my logical next step). Soon after, I had accepted my invitation to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and though I wasn't leaving for nearly 8 months, I had found my next step. Fast forward to a year later, and I've made it through the crazy road map of training and the first 3 months in my community, where my job was to get to know everyone before this meeting. I was waiting for this big meeting to happen to give me my next step, but all it did was leave me overdosed on caffeine and confused. I presented to my community all the exciting new things I've learned and my new hat that I learned how to make, and they told me what they thought were some of the biggest issues we could work on in order to better the life here, and what they wanted to focus on the next two years. This all sounds great right? It was. It was a whirlwind of greatness. Ok awesome. So what now you ask? I have no idea.



What I didn't know before the meeting and what I do know now is that I was prepared for this moment to come. I was prepared with this crazy road map from training and a plan for every minute of every day to eventually being released into this free and liberating job of having no idea what I'm doing. I was trained to learn and to have an open mind, to ask questions, to trust other people, and to be okay without having a plan to move forward. If you're reading this and know me well you'll know that Sara without a to-do list or a plan is like jelly without peanut butter. It's definitely weird... but vamos a ver pue'

6th AUG 2016









after a very long but much needed and wonderful two weeks of training I'm ready to spend more time in site and get started on more projects!!

11TH SEPT 2016

## 7 months down...

I've officially completed over 7 months in Panama! The time has gone by both fast and slow, but I can't believe it's already been this long. We are no longer the newest group of Volunteers, which definitely has its pros... but it doesn't mean we have a better idea of what we're doing. I think the only change is that the "honeymoon phase" has started to wear out a bit...

I just got back from yet another training, which was my favorite one so far. The theme of this training was sustainable practices for cattle ranching, a huge part of Santeño livelihood. We learned from Panamanians about techniques to not only have successful cattle ranching, but also restore the environment, reforest, and better the productivity of their cattle while doing so. This is a great example of what Peace Corps Volunteers do, figuring out ways to work with the life of the host country, not necessarily change it.

I've heard people call Peace Corps Volunteers development workers, and in some senses this is true. To me however, in most ways it's not. I'm here to learn about a culture, and provide a resource to connect people who can work together to accomplish like-minded goals. I want

to provide resources and information and let the people take it and run with it in the direction and speed that they desire. This seminar connected me, fellow Volunteers and Panamanians to new resources, and it's up to the people, not me, to decide what to do with them.

Being a successful Peace Corps Volunteer isn't about knowing the most scientific names of native tree species or speaking grammatically correct in the local language, it's about caring about the culture and wanting to support it. You can provide countless information and education about new ideas or ways of doing things, but ultimately if the people don't want to work with you, they won't. A lot about being a Peace Corps Volunteer is not necessarily finding information to present, but perfecting how to present it so it's actually enticing to people, seeing what they take hold to, and running with it.

Some parts of life are so engrained in people; it's nearly impossible to change them no matter how unhealthy they are. But who am I to come here and say the way people are living is wrong? I've been here for 7 whole months yes, but these people have been here their whole lives and I'm not going to change the way they live, I'm not going to develop their lives into something that they were never meant to be. I'm here to support the people of this wickedly beautiful country; to appreciate every aspect of the rich culture; to gain respect of Panamanians wiser beyond their years; to leave my community a bit better, even if it's just through a garden in my neighbors yard or teaching kids how to make friendship bracelets. I still might not know exactly what I'm doing, but by learning as I go and by doing all of these things, I hope to succeed as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

5TH OCT 2016

“To laugh often and to love much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics, endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived, this is to have succeeded.”

5TH OCT 2016





My first Panamanian Thanksgiving proved to be exciting and fulfilling! A small get-together turned into a big get-together in my house. Though it was crowded in my little home, it was filled with good friends and good food, and it felt empty when everyone piled out the next day. We didn't have a conventional turkey, but we did have this incredible veggie turkey! Cheers to more Panamanian celebrations!

26TH NOV 2016

## listo y frito

Exactly ten months from when I left my home for my new Panamanian adventure, I flew back to the states for the holidays. Even through college, studying abroad, and internships, this was the longest I had ever been away from my family and what I had known as home.

In these ten months away from all that I knew as familiar and comfortable, I have been fortunate enough to be thrown into a new type of home, within Peace Corps and within a small community in rural Panama. I have to admit I had no idea what I was signing up for by accepting an invitation to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer a year and a half ago; I did not understand what my job would entail or what my life would turn into. And now, nearly a year into my service I would consider myself very lucky... I have learned more about myself and the rest of world than I have in the previous 22 years of my life combined; I have made dear friends whose language I didn't speak until recently; I have had countless miscommunications and awkward encounters that have led to positive experiences; I have learned to be comfortable in the uncomfortable corners of my craziest dreams that have become my realities. I have had successes and I have setbacks, and I have a long way to go and a lot more to learn, but we have all made it this far and that is something to be celebrated.

It feels good to be in the States...it was a much needed break, an opportunity to take a step back and look at this new home that came from this crazy Panamanian adventure that I chose

to take on. Now I feel ready for the challenges that lay ahead in my Peace Corps service in Panama.... let's see what 2017 has in store!

27TH DEC 2016

“Be strong enough to stand alone, smart enough to know when you need help, and brave enough to ask for it.”

18TH JAN 2017

## sprains and spam.

This past week, I was lucky enough to have the chance to embark on an excursion through Cerro Hoya National Park, the last virgin forest on the Azuero Peninsula. Originally this part of the peninsula was left untouched because of its remote location, but has since been designated as a National Park to preserve the area surrounded by an otherwise degraded landscape. The park also contains the highest peak located on the peninsula that I now consider home.

This journey consisted of ten Volunteers including myself, and two Panamanian guides from a neighboring communities, Mingo and Alquiades. There is no designated trail throughout the park, so we relied on our two guides and their machetes, which I now consider multi-tools after this trip; appreciating a clear trail and seeing spoons carved out of tree branches. These two men grew up in the forest, learning the ins, outs, ups, and downs of every creek and peak of the park, thus providing us with their knowledge in order to complete this excursion safely.

Mingo and Alquiades know every inch of this area of the peninsula, they learned it and relied on it as a part of their livelihood while growing up. Without them, we wouldn't have been able to complete this feat, nor would many others. However, as they get older, the way of life is changing as more people move into neighboring towns to have access to stores and the advantages of living in a close-knit community. Now that nobody grows up the way that they did, only seeing their family members, living days walking distance from the closest town, and relying on the land to live...they're worried about how they'll pass this knowledge on, how they'll keep this beautiful adventure into the forest alive.

We became part of a relatively small group of people who have reached the top of Cerro Hoya, translated to a “pit” for its three peaks that look like a three stone stove you could put a pot on. The week was full of sleeping in hammocks in the forest, eating only the food we could carry on our backs, slipping down the side of a mountain, getting eaten alive by bugs whose bites I am still itching, countless blisters and one sprained ankle, spam, bathing in creeks, and nicknames...and it was absolutely beautiful.

We ended on a beach community consisting of 4 houses, located on the southwestern, part of the peninsula, only accessible through horseback, boat, or foot for the majority of the year. When we emerged from the forest smelly and exhausted, we couldn't get into the ocean fast enough. We were picked up the next morning by a boat to enjoy a very wet but beautiful ride along the southern part of the peninsula to make it back to Los Santos, where we could catch



a bus back out to civilization. We headed out after enjoying a bit more ocean therapy for the afternoon.

I continue to be dumbfounded by the beauty of this country and its people. These are the experiences that I grow to appreciate more and more each day during my service in this amazing country.



18TH JAN 2017

“Some people feel the rain; others just get wet.”

— Bob Dylan

10TH FEB 2017

## life's a beach

No matter where you are or what you are doing, there will be bad days and good days. There will be days where nothing seems to be going right, you make mistakes, or you wish something turned out differently. There will also be days that are filled with celebration and nothing but happiness and good people. I have experienced plenty of each of these days over my first year in Panama... and I've learned that no matter how hard a day can be, there is something good, no matter how small, in every day.

There will be people that hurt you and people that help you. There will be people who don't support you in your thoughts or ideas. There will also be truly good people who will go out of their way to help you, without any other end game in mind but to be a good person. The majority of people I have been surrounded by in my service thus far have been truly good people. They love to sit and chat over a cup of coffee or an orange from the back patio, but they never expect anything in return and have taught me that giving is so much better than getting. They volunteer their time to help you and expect nothing in return.

There will be good habits and bad habits; healthy ways of living and unhealthy ways of living. There are certain ways of life in every culture, one that is foreign to you or one that is your own, that embody all of these habits and living styles. Certain things that we do can be really productive, other things may not be. Sometimes we are aware of this unproductiveness and continue to do these things anyway, other times we are not aware of what we are doing could be harming something else. These “good” and “bad” ways of life exist everywhere, but what I have learned is that it is easier to critique parts of life that you are not accustomed to, parts of a culture that is new to you. When you’re in a new culture, a new living space, you take in so much more. You are more aware of your surroundings because they are new to you, and more noticeable, maybe because it’s less comfortable. You are experiencing daily living habits with the utmost interest in learning about them, and there is no sense of normalcy until you become comfortable in it, making it easier to defend the life choices people also living in that culture make.

Good days, bad days, good people, bad people, good habits and bad habits exist everywhere with everyone. No one way of life or one culture is better than another. This is something I find myself explaining more than I thought I would during my time here in Panama, and something I have struggled with. Because I am from the United States does not mean I know more or have the answers or will “make things better”. In fact it means almost the opposite. It means I must learn from the people here about who they are and how they live, learn their living styles and habits, help them find the answers to the questions that they ask, which in turn will allow them to make a choice to change what they want to change (if anything), not what I tell them to.

After a year in Peace Corps, I still couldn’t tell you exactly what my job is. I couldn’t quantify everything I’ve done or I haven’t done. I couldn’t put into words what everything has meant to me. I couldn’t accurately describe to you everything that I have learned or how I have changed over a year here in Panama.

I could tell you that I have had great days and I have had not so great days; I have met great people and I have met not so great people; I have made mistakes and I have succeeded. I could tell you I’ve learned about this culture and I’ve done my best to integrate into it without forgetting where I come from. I could tell you that I’m not here to tell people to change; I’m here to learn and support but not to dictate. I could tell you I’ve learned how to live alone and depend on myself but have the confidence to ask for help when I need it. I could tell you I still have bad habits, I’ve recognized some of them, and I’m still not sure I’ll ever change them. And I could tell you that I agree with what they say; this is the toughest job you’ll ever love.

22ND FEB 2017







had a really awesome week with some really awesome people!!

5TH MAR 2017

“She wasn’t afraid to wipe the slate clean. She wasn’t afraid to go off solo and spread her wings in a brand new way. She wasn’t afraid to follow the tenuous threads of her dreams and see where each glittering fiber would lead, whose paths she would cross, what explosions of love and gritty truth she could create.

She always has the option to break free. And she knew this, in the feathery depths of her falcon soul, from the trembling height of her wandering spirit, from the rocky valleys of her flowing tears.

She moved with the wind, with the melting shadow of the sun; she moved when the whispers of her heart told her to.”

8TH APR 2017



Hi One-Year-Ago Sara,

How are you? I'm sure you're feeling like a pretty weird version of yourself... more like stressed out, overpacked, sleep-deprived Sara.

Well, I'm One-Year-Into-Service Sara. I got the idea to write you this letter from my friend Morgan. You don't know her yet, but you will. She's wonderful. So is the rest of your Peace Corps family.

I wanted to write you this letter for a few reasons. First, to answer some questions I know you have and are nervous about. Second, to tell you not to pack so damn much. I know you will unpack and repack several more times, but trust me, you have way too much stuff. Lastly, to tell you that you have a lot to look forward to in this coming year... so stop freaking out and take a deep breath before you venture on this crazy Peace Corps journey.

What is my job?

That's a good question. You are a friend, student, daughter, sister, teacher, mentor, just to name a few. Your job thus far has been to learn, support, share, and embrace every little part of your new life, while providing some new ideas and projects to your community.

You now work with an environmental group that you helped create in your community. It is full of strong, vocal leaders, and they are excited about the tree nursery you all have started to help reforest parts of the community. You all have created a recycling system to support the ongoing efforts of trash management, and have helped start home gardens for people who are interested.

The environmental work has proven to be challenging, but also to be only part of your job. You spend most of your time with children, often have paint all over your front porch, and kids climbing your mango trees in the back. You help out in the school, sometimes with English class or school garden, really just whatever you can get your hands on. You also really love spending time with the Soccer Club and Artisan Group, two things that existed before you got here but welcomed you with open arms the moment you arrived.

Can I speak Spanish?

Ahora siiiii! It's been a long road, but now people tell you that you speak like a Santeña, and that makes you really proud. You are at a point where you actually add to conversations and you can get people to understand what you actually mean to say, rather than just listening, mostly understanding, and nodding along.

You have integrated into the culture of your community, not only speaking like them, but some people even say you look like them. I think they just do it to make you feel good, but you take what you can get.

Am I loved?

Yes. You are so loved. You have an incredible host family, one that you have laughed and cried with, one that you have been accepted into as if you were one of their own. They even call you Sara Soriano, and that makes you smile every time. Once you moved out of their house, you were scared you weren't going to feel as close to them, but it was the opposite. You visit them, they visit you, and your host mom still calls to check up on you. Your best friends are part of this family, they're 6 and 65, and you love them so much. They are your best source of information, and have taught you more than you could imagine.

The rest of the community loves you too. You were at the front of the parades for independence days and are invited to birthday parties weekly. You can't make it anywhere quickly, because people stop and want to talk to you on the street. They invite you to ride horses, to harvest rice, to learn how to make Panamanian food. They love you for just existing, and you are so grateful. You have learned that human interaction and love is really important to you, and you have been placed into a loving support network that you wouldn't want to imagine your life without.

Am I different?

I think so. You definitely look a little different and your jeans are a little tighter thanks to all the food. But don't think of it as a bad thing. It stems from how much you are loved. People feed you constantly, even if you tell them you just ate. So yeah, I guess you're different in that sense.

You also think about things differently. I've been with you throughout this journey so I couldn't tell you exactly when things started to change, but they have. You worry less about things that you used to worry about a lot before. You do things on your own that you wouldn't have done before. You fight less and accept more. You have gotten to know yourself more so than you had before you started your service, you know what makes you happy, what reenergizes you, what makes you upset, things you want to work on, and things you don't.

I think we're all always growing and changing, and you've been doing that your whole life. But I think that during your service you have been much more aware of your growth and change, and it's been a good thing.

You're about to begin an epic journey. I don't want to tell you too much, because learning things for yourself and making mistakes have been some of the most rewarding experiences you've had here. Don't worry about having regrets. Even if things don't go your way, you're always learning how to improve and always working to make things just a little bit better. So, take a deep breath and know you're going to do great.

Safe travels, One-Year-Ago Sara. Nos vemos pronto.

11TH APR 2017



“You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.”

— René Daumal

3RD MAY 2017

## my whirlwind rollercoaster

As time passes in my service, I realize more and more that I had no idea what I was signing up for when I accepted my invitation to become a Peace Corps Volunteer. I knew there would be challenges about living and working in a foreign culture, but I still had no idea what to expect for my future, what experiences might be lying ahead. I've learned that even after over half of my time here, I will never be able to predict what is coming next, I will never be fully prepared for things that happen. What I know now is that I can't always worry about what is going to happen because there is a lot I cannot control. It's how I react to what happens that really counts, how I move forward from all these things that happen. That is what I was really signing up for with Peace Corps; I was signing up for the challenge of reacting to unpredictable situations.

These last few weeks have embodied some of my highest highs and my lowest lows during my service this far, and most of it has been unexpected. Wrapping up my first year of service has been full of experiences that have been relative to the others; hard, easy, good, bad, long, short, high, low. It's been a whirlwind and a rollercoaster, but here we are.

At the beginning of April I was honored with the opportunity to help train the new group of Volunteers who arrived here at the beginning of March. It was an incredible week filled with meeting new people, gaining some new ideas and new energy, and reiterating how much I have learned in this past year. Before being posed with questions, I didn't realize that answers I had. I didn't realize how much I had learned because I didn't realize how much I didn't know when I first arrived in Panama. I didn't realize how far I had come because I didn't know where my starting point was. I didn't realize how crazy this journey was until I was given the closest thing to a mirror of myself a year ago. By being with this group of fresh eyes and new faces, I was able to look back and look forward at the same time, thinking of everything I have gone through in this past year, and imagining what this next year has in store.

The day after finishing one of my favorite weeks in Peace Corps, we were informed a fellow Volunteer had passed away in his community. It was a horrible, devastating accident, and there was no way to move forward but to be together with the Peace Corps family. The Administration pulled together a beautiful celebration of life that week. Meeting his family and closest friends shed the most positive light on this young man's life, and celebrating it was the only option. I didn't know Cody, but hearing his stories made me want to be a better Volunteer, a better friend, a better person. It was a wake up call, and reminded us that nothing is guaranteed, and sometimes really awful things can happen, but we have to keep moving forward in the best way we know how.

In light of this horrible event, the month ended with an adventure. A fellow Volunteer and I organized a hike through the only virgin forest left in the Azuero Peninsula with eight other Volunteers and two Panamanian eco-guides. This was a trip I had attended previously in January, and it was an experience we wanted to pass along to others. This excursion only exists because of the knowledge of locals and their desire to share the forest with us, and it is a truly raw and beautiful experience. Spending days in nature in an otherwise environmentally degraded landscape is refreshing, and it was a wonderful way to learn more about landscapes otherwise unexplored, and to spend time submerged in nature with a great group of people.

A few days after returning from April's hike, I had an uncomfortable abscess on my knee, presumably from a bug bite I had gotten from camping in the woods. It wasn't super worrisome at first, I was sent to a clinic and given antibiotics and was told it would go away on its own. But after a few days, the abscess had opened, and we had exhausted all natural healing remedies that my community members had thought of. They were stumped, but their money was on "gusano de monte", or "worm of the mountain", that had set up camp in my body when I was living in the forest. My knee looked gnarly, and even my community members thought it was time to give Peace Corps doctors another call.

I was immediately sent to the emergency room in Panama City, and the following day underwent surgery to remove this infected abscess that was making itself far too comfortable in my skin. To our surprise, the doctors pulled out some sort of fly larvae and a sack of eggs from my knee, and my little roommates and I quickly became topic of conversation within the hospital and Peace Corps Panama. My host mother was especially excited to know that she was right in saying it was a gusano, and photos began circulating quickly. We will never be sure exactly how these creatures got there, but it's possible they have been there for up to several months, which is you know... comforting.

I have been here for more time than I have left in my service. It is overwhelming thinking of all that has happened that I didn't expect, and all that I have left that I want to do. I have no idea what will happen in the remaining months I have in Panama. I can plan for certain things to happen, and I know other things will just happen. I know that there are both pleasant and unpleasant experiences coming my way, but I know that they are relative, and will come and go just as the time does. We'll see where the next unexpected experience comes from in this wild journey, and hope it doesn't come in larvae form...

12TH MAY 2017



## a craved kind of crazy

Life here is crazy. But it's a good kind of crazy. The crazy that makes you crave more of it. The crazy that makes you think that not-so-crazy, normal-to-most-people days are boring. The crazy that is full of lessons learned and new challenges. The crazy that makes you feel like you're in a test you never studied for. The crazy that also makes you crazy.

I think that if a situation like this had happened in another, less crazy, time of my life, a situation that hospitalized me in a foreign country, caused me to undergo surgery, left me immobile with 3 t-shirts and 3 weeks alone in a city, a situation that I am in now, I would have quit. I would have quit whatever put me in that situation because it wouldn't be worth chancing going through again. I can't think of anything else I have done that would have been worth going back to if it brought about this situation. Let's say all of this was possible in another time of my life. It might not have been the best choice to quit, but I think I would have.

I would have quit because I wouldn't have wanted to chance putting myself through this again. Whatever I was doing was important, but maybe not worth fighting for because I didn't crave it like I crave this experience. Even if this happened 6 months ago, I don't know if I would have stuck with it. Until now, I don't think I could have justified going through this because I didn't fully understand what I was doing it for. I could have found something else to do with my time, another adventure, another experience. But I now know that this experience is worth it, because of everything I've done up until this point, and everything I will do after it. Now, I know what I'm fighting for. I'm fighting for this crazy life I've grown to love, this craved kind of crazy I now thrive off of. This crazy that I'm not sure I could ever live without now that I've tasted it. This crazy that challenges what I considered normal. This beautifully crazy life that I now call mine.

28TH MAY 2017

“Serving is different than helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those with lesser strength. If I'm attentive to what's going on inside of me when I am helping, I find that I am always helping someone who's not as strong as I am, who's needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity, and wholeness. When I help I am very aware of my own strength. But we don't serve with our strength, we serve with ourselves. We draw from all of our experiences. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, even our darkness can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me. Service is a relationship between equals. Helping incurs debt. When you help someone, they owe you one. But serving, like healing, is mutual. There is no

debt. I am as served as the person I am serving. When I help I have a feeling of satisfaction. When I serve I have a feeling of gratitude.”

27TH JUN 2017







Día Nacional de Reforestación - Mogollón, Los Santos, Panamá - 06.24.2017

2ND JUL 2017







La marcha de orgullo - Panamá City, Panamá - 07.01.2017

2ND JUL 2017

## color-coded calendars

I recently completed Mid-Service Training, which is the last training event of my service. This is a training event to update our medical records (no cavities for me!!) and reflect on our time here in order to head into the next year with a boost of energy and new ideas. I have survived the majority of my service, but I cannot believe how fast it has gone. I also know that time continues to accelerate here, and this next year will fly by even faster.

This training was also an opportunity to share experiences with other Volunteers, see how everyone is doing, how else we can work together. It was great to see fellow Volunteers I hadn't seen in months. Even though we're not close geographically, we are forever bonded through this experience and are together growing in it.

It was interesting speaking with other Volunteers, listening to their stories. We shared some challenges, some successes, but all in the while knowing words will never accurately describe this past year. Our definition of success has definitely changed since arriving in Panama. We have now learned that the littlest things can make the biggest impact, and we probably won't see the change we have started. We could say these things a year ago, but we all really feel it now. Everything takes *time*.

This time together allowed us to reflect on what we've done, how we've been challenged physically, mentally, and emotionally. I thought about all the uncomfortable situations I've been thrown into, and all the lessons I've learned along the way. If I had to define this experience in one word... unpredictable... but I guess that doesn't tell you all that much.

Everyone in the group who I arrived with would be defined as a "millennial", born in between the years 1980 and 1995... And we as a generation have created a reputation for ourselves. We (as a stereotype, of course) don't want to do the work that has been done by generations before us or work anywhere but a start-up in the same city as our college roommates. The thing we as a generation (still stereotypically speaking) look for in jobs is ping pong tables in the office and discounts at Starbucks, and maybe an exercise ball as a desk chair.

But what if everyone in our generation had to complete a minimum of two years of service before entering "the real world". What if serving others was as important as a bachelor's degree, or was required to earn a degree for that matter. What if we were required to serve the "real world" in order to enter it. How would it be different?

It is a common feeling amongst volunteers that 2+ years sounded like a huge commitment before entering the Peace Corps. And it is. It is a long time. But it flies. And after completing more than half of this time, I'm not sure it's quite long enough.

I've learned from this experience that we never really know what we're committing to, whether its committing to a job at a new start-up or becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer or whatever it may be. Because life is unpredictable. Even if we study the job description as much as we can and do our research on apartments in the area, follow traffic patterns and metro schedules online to figure out the best commute...if you're committing to a new job, you don't *really* know what it is until you're in it. Same thing with relationships, college, apartment leases, and anything really. It's all part of life, which as we know, is unpredictable.

So yeah, maybe it is a huge commitment to say “yes” to two years of living in a foreign country you know nothing about. But why? Because you don’t know what is coming? But with that argument, it is a huge commitment to say “yes” to any new job, new lease, new car, new anything. We never really know what is coming. So what makes certain decisions harder to commit to?

Anyone who is reading this and knows me even just a little bit, knows I’m a planner. I have multiple color-coded calendars and daily to-do lists that I adore checking off and completing. This experience has challenged that part of me, among many other parts. I used to think time was so sensitive and due dates couldn’t be broken. Here, I have lived an unpredictable life, where I have learned that time is so relative and that everything needs a balance. Our experiences are relative, and everything can be good in moderation. We define our feelings and how hard to be on ourselves, or how easy to let things slide. We never really know what is coming, so it’s in our best interest to always be ready for anything.

Though I still have my color-coded calendars and to-do lists, they’re different now. Like most things in my life, they have changed since arriving here in Panama. I have learned lessons, some easier and some a lot harder, and I have had successes sprinkled in with a lot of setbacks. No color-coded calendar or to-do list can prevent those things from happening. They won’t prevent any setbacks. Though they can make me feel satisfied for a brief moment after checking something off, it won’t be long until I add something else onto them.

No matter where in life you are, hybrid-bouncy-exercise-office-ball-chair, living in your grandma’s basement, uncomfortable-cow-milking-stool, the list goes on, there will be unpredictable moments, uncomfortable moments. What I do think is important though, is that no matter where we are in all aspects of life (geographically, mentally, physically, emotionally, etc.) it is important to take a break from color-coded calendars and to-do lists, and enjoy it, because time really does fly...

10TH JUL 2017

“I’m in too deep to quit now, too changed to remain the same, too in love to hate, way too involved to detach.

The storm does not frighten me, for I have danced in the rain.”

10TH JUL 2017







Proyecto de Huertos Caseros - Paritilla, Los Santos - 07.27.2017

14TH AUG 2017









Día de Reforestación en la Escuela Justo Vásquez B. - Paritilla, Los Santos - 08.04.2017

14TH AUG 2017













Santa Rosa de Lima - Paritilla, Los Santos - 08.30.2017

14TH SEP 2017









I had a really great week with some really great visitors!

14TH SEP 2017









Dias Patrias - Paritilla, Los Santos - 11.03.2017 - 11.04.2017

23RD NOV 2017









Anniversario de la Comarca Emberá Wounaan - 11.05.2017 - 11.09.2017

23RD NOV 2017

## twenty-three months.

Twenty-three months ago, I left everything I knew as home and everyone I knew as family. I didn't know where I was going, I just knew I was leaving everything I knew for a lot of things I didn't know. I remember telling myself I could always quit if I wanted to. I was committed to giving it my best shot, but twenty-three months ago, I was giving myself the option quit if I couldn't handle it. I would be okay quitting in order to go back to everyone and everything I was comfortable with.

I was scared and nervous. I wasn't ready, but I was going. I was excited but also not quite sure what to be excited about. I didn't know how I would be able to talk to my family back home or if I would have friends here. I didn't know what my house would look like, if I would have electricity or running water, or if I would like the food. I was worried about the things I would have, but mostly about everything that I wouldn't have, and if I would last living for two whole years without all the things I had grown comfortable with having all of my life.



Twenty-three months ago, I didn't know what I was saying yes to. I didn't know that I would fall in love with the people of this country or the life they have helped me create here. I didn't know I would become addicted to this experience, addicted to the feeling I get from waking up to roosters screaming and children knocking on my door. I didn't know I would worry so little about the things I don't have in Panama, because I would be so fulfilled by the things I do have. I didn't know that I wouldn't feel lonely from being far away from my family and friends because I would be so loved and so welcomed into another place I could call home with more people I could call family.

I love when the hardest part of my day is not being able to spend time with everyone I wanted to, not being able to attend everything I was invited to. I love that after the hardest days here, even when nothing seems to go the way I want it to, I still go to sleep with a smile on my face. I love how long it takes me to walk anywhere in my community because people refuse to let me pass their house without giving me coffee or a bag of oranges, and never without yelling my name first. I love that I can spend full days in my house, but never have a minute alone because of the children that come rushing in to tell me the latest and greatest news of the day, or because of the neighbors that come to bring me coconuts or freshly made tamales. I love that my service has redefined my definition of success to something more important than what you can write on paper, but to something you can measure by the smiles you put on peoples' faces and the way that you make them feel.

Twenty-three months ago, I left a lot of things behind. I left who I loved for people I didn't know. I left a way of life that I was comfortable with for a life I had never experienced. I left because I was telling myself it was always an option to quit, I was leaving the door open to turn back to what I was comfortable with. I was preparing myself to just get through these two years, and if I couldn't do it, I could always leave. No big deal. I was just trying to get through my time here, just trying to make it to the finish line. But twenty-three months later, I am trying to make my time here last longer, to push my finish line further away.

I am still scared, still not quite ready. But after twenty-three months, I have become addicted to that feeling. I have become addicted to the feeling of fear and excitement and the constant adrenaline of never really knowing what to expect. I have become addicted to the comfort of knowing more now than I knew when I arrived, but also addicted to my curiosity to learn more. I have grown comfortable with being uncomfortable, actually to the point of preferring the discomfort of all the unknowns and uncertainties, because that's how things stay exciting.

These last twenty-three months have left me with new stories and new scars. They have left me with new lessons learned and even more lessons to be learned. They have given me new knowledge and have allowed me to see things differently. They have given me another place to call home, they have given me a bigger family. These last twenty-three months have made me fall in love with this country, with these people, and with my experience with them here.

After twenty-three months, I am leaving again. I am leaving the job I have grown to love for a new one. I am leaving the community I call home for a different place. I am leaving the habits I have grown accustomed to for ones I will eventually become accustomed to. I am leaving the life I have grown to love here in order to create a new one. Though my time has come to leave again, I'm not going quite as far...

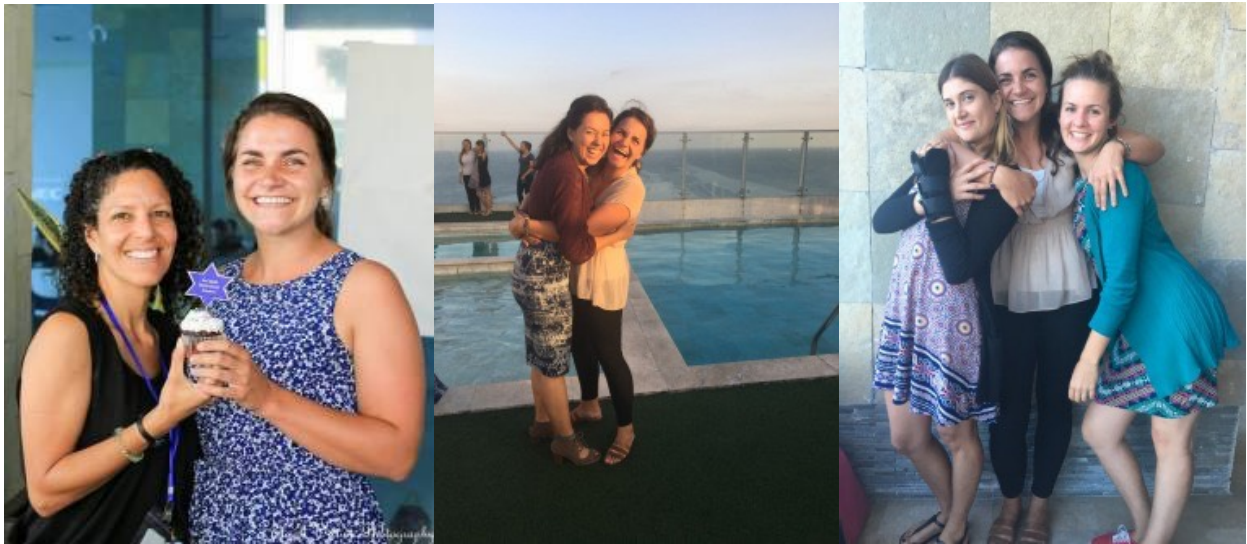
I have decided to extend my time with Peace Corps Panama. I have accepted the position as Regional Leader of the Azuero Peninsula region of Panama, and I could not be more excited. I

am excited for the new challenges and the unpredictable experiences that this next year will bring. I am excited for the comfort of being in the same country, but the discomfort of being in a new city with a different job. I am excited to continue to learn and develop both professionally and personally in a country I now call home and with people I now call family. I am excited that twenty-three months after telling myself I could quit, I have decided to add more time until I reach the finish line that once seemed so far away.

17TH JAN 2018







Close of Service Conference - Panama City, Panama - 01.12.2018 - 01.13.2018

18TH JAN 2018

“Love and learning are similar in that they can never be wasted.”

9TH MAR 2018

Hi two-years-ago-Sara,

I wrote to you a year ago, I hope the letter made it to you alright. I'm writing to you again now from my hammock, a spot that you will be spending a lot of time in over the next two years, just to see how you were doing. I wanted to answer some questions I think you might still have and see how you were handling everything before leaving for your Peace Corps journey.

I know you're going through a lot of emotions right now, but I'm hoping this letter will give you a chance to breathe for a few minutes and let you think about something other than what won't fit in your suitcase.

You just had your going-away-party in your community after two years of living here. I know that two years sounds like forever to you right now, but trust me, it goes by so much faster than you think. You're looking ahead right now, and it seems like a lifetime away and you'll never actually reach the finish line. But looking back on it, it feels like a blink of an eye, and you wish it lasted longer.

I won't lie to you, you haven't been perfect, but I will tell you that you did your absolute best, because that is most definitely true. You're leaving with no regrets, and that's the dream isn't it? You made a lot of mistakes, but you didn't know any better. You thought you were coming in to change the world, or maybe even just your part of it, but once you realized it was better to let the world change you, that's when you started making a real difference. You are a friend, a daughter, a sister, a cousin, a co-worker, a babysitter, a teacher, a student. You rely on people here, and people here rely on you. You are somebody to everyone here in your little community in Panama, and everyone here is somebody to you.

so.... what do you feel like after two years in Panama?

aaaauuuuuuooooeeeeeiiii no tienes las palabras... your heart is so full. you feel accomplished. you feel happy. you feel sad. You feel excited, strong and capable. You feel like a part of something bigger than you ever thought you'd be. You feel loved. You feel like you have embedded your roots into the Paritilla soil, as it has allowed you to see the world with new colors and extra light.

You feel like you want to give more to people. You feel like you could have been better, you could be better. You have loved and you have lost. You feel full. Of love but also rice. You feel at home.

What still scares you?

You're scared that you haven't given enough, that you haven't been enough to the people who have given you so much. You're scared that no job will make you feel as fulfilled as this one does, or that no lifestyle will compare to the one you have now. You're scared that people here will forget you, even though you know you won't ever forget them because they have had such a large influence in the person you have become. You're scared you will forget some of your favorite habits you have developed here in your little community, and you're scared you will forget what it's like to live simply.

What excites you?

People. You love the way they say good morning to you, the way they yell your name when they are excited to see you. You're excited that you now know the difference between the good yelling and the bad yelling of your name. You thought that after two years seeing the same faces and after learning the language, you would get bored and maybe even lonely, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. You are excited to see where their lives take them. You are excited to continue to share your life with them. And you are excited that you have had the opportunity to cross paths with such amazing people from such an amazing place. You



are excited to see how even after leaving your community, it will continue to influence your life.

What piece of advice would I give to you?

Life is a steep uphill battle but it's fierce and its beautiful and you'll be sad to see it go if you live it right. Sometimes there are a few fallen trees in the road, a rapid river to cross, or a venomous snake in your path, but keep climbing. Even if you've been climbing for a while, you continue to see new beauty and have new experiences along the way. Sometimes you fall. Sometimes the road becomes a little less steep. Sometimes a lot steeper. But always keep climbing uphill. It is a fierce and beautiful trek that will knock you down, strip you raw, and then probably kick you while you're down. It will change you, and it will give you the physical strength to pick yourself back up no matter how many times you fall.

Take a deep breath, you'll be great. You're about to start the most challenging and most rewarding experience of your entire life, be excited! Also... stop worrying so much! I read somewhere once that if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. And trust me, you'll get here just fine. I am jealous of the journey you are about to embark on, two-years-ago Sara... may you worry less and make the most of every single little thing that comes your way.

Que te vaya bien pueeee...

17TH APR 2018





Peace Corps Panama Group 82 Swear-In - Panama City, Panama - 04.26.2018

8TH MAY 2018









Cartagena, Colombia - 05.11.2018 - 05.14.2018

14TH MAY 2018



Gran Día Nacional de Reforestación - Divisa, Herrera - 06.02.2018

3RD JUN 2018





Corpus Christi - La Villa, Los Santos - 05.31.2018

3RD JUN 2018

“You get a strange feeling when you’re about to leave a place. Like you’ll not only miss the people you love but you’ll miss the person you are now, at this time and this place, because you’ll never be this way ever again.”

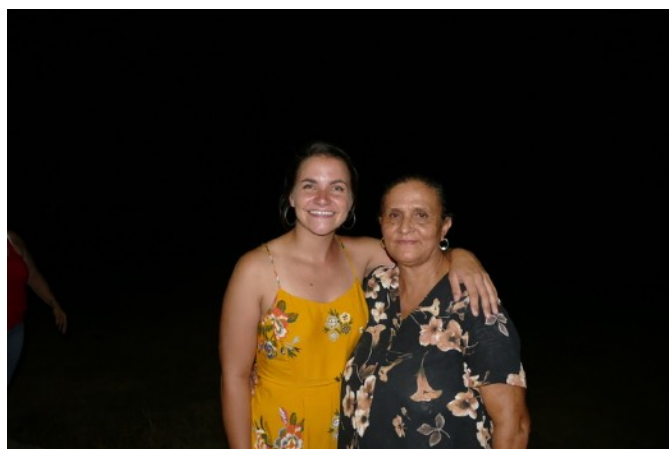
— Azar Nafisi

7TH JUN 2018

“The true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit.”

— Nelson Henderson

7TH JUN 2018







Better late than never!

Despedida de Paritilla - 04.07.2018

29TH JUL 2018

## avoca-do's and don'ts

Part of my new job as Regional Coordinator is to visit the new volunteers in their communities. It has been my favorite part of the new job so far, especially with the communities that I helped develop before the arrival of the volunteers. By visiting the volunteers in their communities, I have been able to see the change in the communities that a few months ago didn't know what Peace Corps was, and also the change that the volunteers go through between training and their first couple months of service.

In a span of about 3 weeks, I visited 12 different communities, spending the night in most of them. Some of the communities I had visited before, but a lot of them were new to me. I hiked in and out of different towns, I was caught in downpours and got more than my fair share of a farmer's tan, and I met the community members who see Peace Corps Volunteers as their sons and daughters, friends, teachers, and most importantly, part of their communities.

In Panama it is common when you pass a neighbors house, that they gift you a cup of very sugary coffee or a bag of in-season fruit. If it's someone you don't know or are visiting for the first time in their home, not only do they open their doors to you and give you the best seat in the house (most likely a rocking chair or hammock) but they expect you to leave with bags of fruit from the backyard or freshly made tamales. This parting gift is usually in addition to a full meal, especially if you're visiting them close to lunch hour which I've learned to define between 10am and 3pm. This meal always includes more rice than you think you can fit in your body, but somehow you do.

Since most of my time on these visits was spent meeting community members, I never left hungry or empty handed. In addition to the massive amounts of food I was given to eat in these homes, I was gifted everything from eggs to plantains to cheese, and thanks to being in mango and avocado season, an excessive amount of mangoes and avocados. When I say excessive, I mean I was gifted boxes to carry this fruit. As the visits went on, I started leaving extra room in my backpack just so I could carry this fruit more comfortably. When I did a few visits in a row, I would regift the mangoes and avocados from one community to the next, and use the box from the first visits to bring the newer harvest back to my home.

Of course because these fruits were all picked at the same time, they usually ripen at the same time. And thanks to the humidity in Panama, all of these fruits ripen quickly. When I wasn't on a visit, I was eating mangoes and avocados for breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks in between. I made smoothies and salsa. I froze them and I blended them. I was putting fresh guacamole on my avocado toast. I was consuming as much as I could, because who could let mangoes or avocados go to waste?

When I started to sweat avocado, I decided to look up other ways I could use it besides eating it. After browsing the internet, I settled on a mixture of avocado, lemon juice and olive oil to put in my hair, then mixed with some coffee grounds to exfoliate my skin. So I started this process while I was home alone in my house, which is a rarity these days. My roommate wasn't around, and usually my home is flooded with volunteers or even sometimes with visitors from my old community. I was excited to do something for myself in the comfort of my own home, pamper myself if you will. And even better, it wasn't going to cost me anything but my time. It was the perfect plan.



I first put the avocado mixture in my hair, then mixed it with the coffee grounds to exfoliate, which I washed off right away. My skin felt wonderful. And then, as the internet told me, I planned to wait 20 minutes to wash the avocado out of my hair.

Almost immediately, I get a phone call from a community member who tells me he is running some errands in Chitre, the town I now live in. “¡Que bueno!” I say, always happy to hear from old community members and what they’re up to, just thinking he was calling to say hi.

“Estoy afuera de su casa...” he says, “quisiera saludarle” (“I’m outside your house, I want to say hi”)

I immediately rush through the possibilities of how this situation would play out, as I wipe some avocado out of my ear. I tell him to wait a couple minutes, hoping the avocado would wash out quickly, but he tells me he is in a bit of a rush and has to leave “de una vez.” Because we are in Panama and nothing is ever rushed, I knew he actually had to go. So, there I was, standing in my living room with avocado in my hair, and I come to the realization I had to answer the door.

I walk downstairs, feeling avocado drip onto my shoulders each step I take. Usually Panamanians greet you with a kiss on the cheek, but when I answered the door, I just got a funny look instead.

“Y eso?” pointing to my hair, leaning in to smell it.

“Es aguacate. Me lo puse porque es bueno pa’ el cabello”

“Como sabes eso Sara... aguacate es pa’ comer no es pa’ el cabello...”

So we went back in forth, me trying to explain that avocado has healthy oils in it, and putting it in your hair and on your skin is good for you. He didn’t believe a word I said, and just kept saying, “avocado is for eating, Sara.” We had a nice visit over a cup of sugary coffee, and every other sentence was him making fun of the “gringa rara con aguacate en el cabello.”

A few days later it was time for me to go back to my old community for the first time to visit the new volunteer who lives there. I ran into several familiar faces at the bus stop, and was flooded with excitement to head back to my first Panamanian home. I get off the bus at one of the first stops at the host family’s house of the new volunteer. Though people always give you something to eat, they usually ask you if you like whatever it is they have to offer you, but you must always say yes. Within the first five minutes, the family asks me if I like avocado, so the answer is obviously, “si, claro que si.” But they corrected themselves, trying not to laugh, and said, “nooo... si le gusta pa’ el cabello”

As if it were timed, the community member who had found me with avocado in my hair a few days prior pulls up along side the house and asks if I still smell like avocado. Everyone of course says, “Si!”

So what if I did?! Avocado smells great! I would imagine people would pay lots of money for avocado smelling hair!

As the visit continues, I learn that this avocado story had spread throughout the entire town, just as all weird stuff that the gringa does does. People would come up to me and before saying anything, smell my hair and say “ahhh si, huele aguacate.” I felt like I spent half the day

defending my decision to put avocado in my hair ONE TIME. I told people that they had to try it before they could make fun of me, and the unanimous answer was always, “no, we can make fun of you now.”

So, I learned that avocado does in fact make your hair softer. But as most things go living in a small town, people will know about it, and if its something that they're not used to doing, they will most definitely make fun of you for it.

29TH JUL 2018

“Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that will ever come can depend on what you do today.”

2ND SEP 2018







La Silampa - Veraguas, Panama - 09.22.2018

23RD SEP 2018

“Become friends with people who aren’t your age.

Hang out with people whose first language isn’t the same as yours.

Get to know someone who doesn't come from your social class.

This is how you see the world.

This is how you grow.”

26TH SEP 2018

## adios beaches

I started writing this post my thirty second straight day in the states, the most time I had spent in the U.S. since I left in February 2016, as I sat at my gate waiting for my first flight of the day back towards Panama. And of course I had plenty of time before boarding thanks to my extremely punctual mother. But I was actually glad I was so early, I had time to get my last Dunkin' run in before heading back to Panama for another year, time to charge up my phone before binge-watching criminal minds I had downloaded on my Netflix app, time to start processing that I was headed back to the country I have called home the past 2+ years. I had an amazing time in the states, and to be honest, I wasn't quite ready to leave.

When I first started thinking about extending my service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama, it was mostly based on me enjoying my life here, not feeling like I had anything pulling me urgently back to the states. It was fun, I had friends, I was learning, why would I want to leave? But what I didn't think about was everything that was going to change between my first two years and my third, where I'm at now. I didn't realize how different my job would be, how different my life would be.

So when I wasn't quite ready to leave the states after spending a month there, it scared me. It scared me because I wasn't going back to the Panama I had known the last two years, I was going to a new city with neighbors I didn't know and without a community I had become a part of. I was going back to familiar place, but not a place that I had ever called home. I was scared to leave again because after a month in the states, I thought I would be sick of being there, sick of the speedy lifestyle, sick of the amenities I had grown comfortable living without. But I wasn't. I wasn't sick of anything. Yeah, I was shocked when my brother ordered Starbucks online to have it ready for us right when our Uber pulled up outside, but I didn't hate that at all. It freaked me out a little sure, why can we go through life ordering \$5 coffees from our phones and have drivers waiting for us outside when so many people don't even have garbage pickup or running water? It was crazy to me, but I wasn't complaining.

Being in Panama, there hasn't been much from the states that I have missed besides my friends and family, and definitely the cold weather. But I didn't ever feel like I missed the timeliness of life in the states, because in Panama I had some of my best conversations waiting for public transportation in the rain to leave my community or waiting for meetings to start. I didn't ever feel like I missed the convenience of certain things in the states, like having cell phone coverage everywhere you go because all the people you need to work with don't live on the same street as you. I knew it was going to be nice to go back, but I didn't realize how nice it would be to reconnect with people, to be reminded of where I come from and the life I left behind when I decided to join Peace Corps over three years ago. Of course I missed a lot about Panama, I missed pastelitos fresh off the pan and hot cups of coffee during a rainy afternoon with my host mom. But after 32 days in the states, I felt torn between wanting to



stay there, where I was still comfortable and spending time with people I love, and going back to a different culture that a couple years ago, I knew absolutely nothing about.

The time since arriving back in Panama has flown by, and has been a blur to say the least. I have been to parts of the country I had never been to before, I have met new volunteers who have been here just as long as me, and I have helped train volunteers newly into their services. I have visited new Peace Corps communities, I have visited old Peace Corps communities. I've explained to Panamanians what Peace Corps is, and I've connected with Panamanians who knew about Peace Corps since before I was born. I've learned my small little place in the corner of this wild ride of Peace Corps, and seen just a snapshot of how big our impact really is.

I finish this post on nearly my 975th day since first arriving in Panama in February 2016, my 83rd day since arriving back from my months vacation in the states in July. I finish this post realizing how much I have learned here in Panama. And although I don't notice how much has changed each day, looking back at all of these days I have crossed off my calendar, I realize how much has happened, and how much has actually changed.

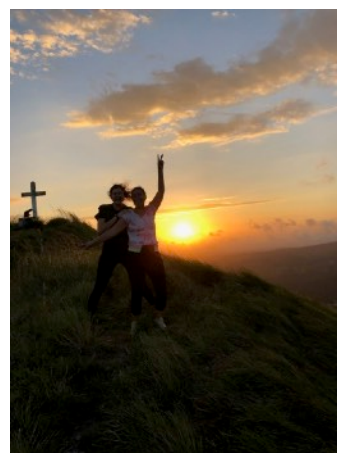
People who used to be strangers are now my family, a language I used to not know have now become my first words each morning, rice is now a staple to my diet. Before arriving in Panama, I couldn't have imagined how comfortable I would eventually feel in a foreign country speaking a different language every day. But after 975 days, I have learned that Panama will now also always be my home. Of course when I am in Panama, I miss parts of life in the U.S. But when I was back in the states just visiting, there was so much I missed about Panama. I have realized that I will never be completely at home again, because part of me will always be elsewhere. But that is the price of loving and knowing people in more than one place, and it's totally worth it.

22ND OCT 2018

**“Nothing is worth more than laughter. It is strength to laugh and to abandon oneself, to be light.”**

— Frida Kahlo

12TH DEC 2018





Amazing visit with an amazing friend - 12.10.2018 - 12.20.2018

14TH JAN 2019









Bogotá, Medellín, Cartagena, Colombia - 12.27.2018 - 01.04.2019

14TH JAN 2019

“We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.”

14TH JAN 2019











Desfile de las Mil Polleras - Las Tablas, Los Santos - 01.12.2019

Matanza y Vacunadera - Paritilla, Los Santos - 02.09.2019

15TH FEB 2019

“May you always find yourself exactly where you want to be, may it always be difficult to leave where you are, and may where you are and where you’ve been always be with you when you get to where you’re going.”

30TH MAR 2019

Hi three-years-ago Sara,

I am three-years-into-service Sara. I’ve been writing you these letters once a year since your arrival in Panama in February 2016, mostly just to check in to see how you’re doing, clear up some questions I know you have, and remind you that you have so many things to look forward to in the next three years. I’m hoping this letter will calm your nerves and give you a sense of comfort before you head out on your newest adventure, or at least distract you from packing for a couple of minutes.

I am writing to you now from the capital city in the province of Herrera, where you now live as a Regional Coordinator for the Volunteers located in the Azuero Peninsula region, a place you proudly call home. You just finished helping facilitate a week of training for the new group of trainees that will be serving for the next two years as Peace Corps Volunteers in your beloved Panama. This is the third group of trainees that you have trained, and every time you meet a new group you are surprised by how much you’ve learned since you first arrived. You still feel like you’re learning new things every day and you haven’t quite mastered your job, but meeting new groups every year has made you reflect upon what exactly you knew during your first couple months in Panama, and just how much you have learned since then. So, don’t



worry that you feel overwhelmed by all that you have to learn when you arrive to Panama. Although I couldn't tell you when exactly you became "fluent" in Spanish, or when you learned to work in a culture foreign from your own, or how you learned to dance típico, I can tell you that little by little, you have learned more than you thought you ever could.

You extended a third year as Regional Coordinator because of how you felt after the first two years, loved, supported, challenged, and accomplished, and you wanted to support other Volunteers to be able to feel the same. You felt that even after two years in Panama, the country still had more to teach you, and you still had more to share. I know at this point it seems crazy that you decide to stay a third year, you barely thought you would make it through the first two before getting on that plane. But I'm here to tell you that you did it, you absolutely crushed it, and I am so excited for you.

So... three years in... how do you feel?

You feel proud. You have now dedicated three years of your life to Peace Corps service. You feel proud for the work that you accomplished in your community, for the work that you accomplished on a regional level. You feel proud of the inspiration and support you have given others.

You feel happy. You feel full. You have made strong relationships with people whose language you didn't speak when you first met them. You have been here for the births of new babies and the passing of people who you were close to. You have seen other Volunteers grow so much in such short periods of time. You have seen lives change. You feel like you belong.

You bought your one way ticket back to Boston last week. I know you're feeling a mix of emotions now; you're ready but not ready at the same time, you're excited to go but sad to leave. I want to warn you, three years later, you will feel all of that and more. Your life has been forever changed by this experience. You feel sad that you are saying goodbye to people who have welcomed you into their family and a place you have called home for three years. You're also so happy that you get to be close to your family again, so excited to hug your grandmothers and see your sister get married. You're excited to go to the lake and hang out with your parents and celebrate your birthday with your brother, something that has become more of a rarity these days.

You're sad because you feel like you'll never quite feel at home again because some part of you will always be somewhere else with other people. You're worried that you've tapped into new parts of yourself that only shine through when you're surrounded by a different language and culture, and you might lose those parts of yourself that you've grown comfortable with when you leave. But more than anything, you're eternally grateful to have had this experience. You're so grateful to have learned so much about others and yourself, to know and love people in more than one place. You're so grateful to feel sad to leave, because you know you feel sad because of how much this experience has meant to you. You're grateful because of the strong connections you have made and how at home you have felt in a place you knew nothing about three years ago.

What have you learned?

You learned how to speak Spanish, how to dance típico, how to milk a cow and ride a horse, how to cut tires to make a chair, how to identify tree species you don't even know the names

of in English. You learned that you love afternoon naps especially during rainstorms, that you sweat even more than you thought you ever could living in a tropical climate, that human connection is what energizes you most. You learned how to become friends with people of all ages who you felt like you didn't have anything in common with, and definitely how to keep an open mind. You learned that you have a family so much larger than you once thought, that you will forever be a part of this place.

You learned that people can surprise you. You learned that spending quality time, and I mean *quality* time like two naps, three meals, and four cups of coffee later, can be so fulfilling. You learned that you start to develop relationships when you spend quality time with people, and you hear and see them in a different light when you get to know people for the first time that way. You learned the importance of listening, empathizing, and understanding.

You learned that things work out. You can do the best you can to plan, to expect the unexpected, but things will inevitably not go according to plan, and that's just fine. You've learned this the hard way, but you've learned to stop worrying about what you can't control. You've learned and felt that giving the best you can is truly all you can do, and everything else will be as it is.

What piece of advice would I give you?

My advice to you is to let this experience take you. Give in to it all. You're going to regret the things you didn't do, so go to that birthday party no matter how tired you are, study more Spanish no matter how much you feel like you've already learned, hang out with the people that make you feel loved, and love them back with all of your heart.

Embrace the awkwardness and be confident! Ask questions and try all the food. Let yourself fall in love with new things. Fall into conversations, into books or music, over your morning cup of coffee or long bus rides. Give everything you do your absolute best, and don't be surprised when your heart breaks a little bit when it's all over. Embrace the feelings of discomfort, happiness, frustration, excitement. Embrace everything, even if that means hurting a little more, because that has been when you have learned the most and that is how you have grown.

Oh! And don't forget, vale la pena. It's all worth it, but it's up to you to make it so. Continue to see the world as if it were all unfamiliar, and take everything in. I hope you never stop asking questions and never stop learning, three-years-ago Sara, and good luck finishing packing.

¡Suerte pue!

3RD APR 2019

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the



great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

20TH APR 2019





Despedida season - Azuero Region - 04.2019 - 05.2019

14TH MAY 2019







Close of Service Ceremony - Panama City, Panama - 05.15.2019

20TH MAY 2019