

Service with On the Ground International

FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions

Service Location: Pamplona, Colombia

Small university town at the base of the Andes mountains, two hours from Cucuta, four hours from Bucaramanga.

What will I do as an OTGI volunteer?

OTGI is in Colombia in response to a crisis, and as the situation is often in flux, we have taken on a variety of projects as they have arisen. Currently, OTGI's main focus is providing support and relief for "los caminantes", or "the walkers", the Venezuelans who are walking across the country in search of jobs and a place to live. OTGI is heavily involved in the network of shelters along the route, which provide the walkers with food and a place to sleep for one night, sometimes even laundry services and showers. Local shelter volunteers work very long hours to keep up with the constant flow of refugees, and are exhausted. One of our goals with international volunteers is to relieve their burden by helping with the daily tasks of cooking, cleaning, delivering food, and managing individual needs as they arrive.

While fulfilling and rewarding, shelter work is often not glamorous, so please be prepared for some monotonous or unpleasant tasks. Plugged toilets, for example, are a daily reality.

What skills and experience is OTGI looking for in volunteers?

The most important attributes of an OTGI volunteer are a positive attitude and strong work ethic. Volunteers need to be able to be flexible and work hard in a rapidly changing and sometimes stressful environment, as well as be willing to step up when needs change. Often needs will arise that are not in your job description, but must be addressed.

Specific skills that we look for include medical training, construction/maintenance experience, food handling and cooking experience, and experience with children. Speaking Spanish is a huge advantage, but not required.

Is Colombia safe?

Twenty years ago, Colombia was entrenched in a drug war, and many places were controlled by warring drug lords, which threatened the local people and tourists' safety. The Colombian government has done an incredible job of cracking down on these crime rings, and Colombia is now one of the safest and most economically advanced countries in South America. Travel advisory websites still have warnings that were applicable in the 90s, but are not accurate today. Yes, be careful with wallets or cell phones or computers, and perhaps be careful going out alone at night to unknown areas, but Colombia is not a dangerous place to visit or live. Pamplona, where OTGI operates, is particularly known for being a safe and tranquil little town.

How do I get to Pamplona?

If flying in from another country, the cheapest option is usually to buy a flight to Bogota (or Medellin), and then buy a second hopper flight into Cucuta. (There are buses, but the bus ride from Bogota to Pamplona is about 16 hours, and costs about the same as a flight.) From Cucuta you can take the two-hour bus to Pamplona (about 6 USD), or ask us to arrange a private car for you (about 32USD).

Do I need a visa to enter Colombia?

Citizens of the US, Canada, and most European countries are granted a 90-day visa upon arrival. There is nothing you need to do in advance, other than have a current passport.

Do I need any shots or vaccinations?

If you are current on normal vaccinations, you will not need any additional. Some travel websites advise Yellow Fever vaccine, but the last case of Yellow Fever in Colombia was over 30 years ago. Malaria pills are also unnecessary.

What does it cost to volunteer?

Donations received by OTGI are directed 100% to refugee needs. As such, volunteers need to cover all of their own expenses. Good news, though - by North American or European standards, life in Colombia is very inexpensive.

Transportation: OTGI volunteers are responsible for their own transportation expenses, including airfare and transportation from the airport to the service location. Once in town, volunteers cover their own taxi or bus expenses. The local bus costs 1.1 mil (35 cents) and a taxi to anywhere in town costs 3.7 mil, or 1 USD.

Lodging: OTGI has rented a volunteer house in Pamplona, and can offer shared accommodation to our volunteers for 20 mil per night - approximately 6 USD. This helps us cover the cost of rent, utilities, and house necessities such as soap and toilet paper. It is important to note that this is shared accommodation, with the possibility of up to four people per bedroom. Volunteers are welcome to procure their own lodging outside of the volunteer house if they would like more privacy. Hotels in town range from 10-35 USD per night.

Food: Volunteers in the volunteer house pitch in 40 mil per week (about 10 USD) for shared food items - things like fruit, beans, rice, milk, etc. This does not cover all food expenses though, volunteers purchase personal food at the local markets, or there are many restaurants in town that charge 3-5 USD for a meal.

Cell Phone: Some US cell phone carriers offer data plans that are free in Colombia, for example, T-Mobile. Others charge a daily international fee, or charge per data usage. If your mobile carrier does not offer data or you choose not to pay the international fees, OTGI *requires* that you buy a SIM card for your phone when you arrive in the country - this costs around \$3 USD - and load it with a basic data plan, around \$7 USD for two weeks. Being able to communicate with volunteers when they are out on a project or at a different shelter is very important not only for completion of tasks, but for the safety of the volunteers.

Is OTGI a religious organization? Do I have to be a Christian to volunteer?

While OTGI is a faith-based organization, we welcome volunteers of all backgrounds and beliefs, and our priority within our projects is an excellent standard of humanitarian care. As an organization we do not specifically seek evangelism opportunities, but if an individual volunteer wishes to pray with a refugee or offer similar spiritual support, they are welcome to do so. Venezuela and Colombia are both strongly Catholic/Christian countries, and most of the locals and walkers are religious. We ask that our volunteers be sensitive and respectful to the religious beliefs of the locals and refugees, regardless of personal religious beliefs.

Is fluency in Spanish required?

Fluency in Spanish is not a prerequisite, however some volunteer work will be restricted with limited language ability. We recommend that volunteers take advantage of any learning opportunity offered online or in-person before arriving in country - even knowing the basics will help you feel more comfortable in navigating simple tasks and conversations. We recommend Duolingo, a free app or website, as a great place to practice Spanish before and during your time in Colombia.

What should I bring?

Weather in Pamplona can be chilly. Bring warmer layers, including a rain jacket. Bedding is provided in the volunteer house - sheets, blankets, pillow and towel. Outlets in Colombia are two-pronged. If you have three-pronged electronics, you will need to bring an adaptor, or buy one once you've arrived.

As far as bringing items to donate, OTGI tries to buy as many things in-country as possible, both to support the local economy and because often things are cheaper here than abroad. There are a few items, however, that are either not available in Colombia, or very expensive. Check in with an OTGI coordinator on possible items that might be useful to bring or fundraise for.

Can I access the internet?

The volunteer house in Pamplona does have wifi, but as it is shared among many volunteers, so we ask that you not use it for streaming. In the larger cities, it is possible to find internet cafes or restaurants with wifi, but there are no such places in Pamplona.

What about Covid-19?

OTGI is committed to minimizing risk to refugees and volunteers as much as possible. However, the population we work with is much more at risk to starvation than to Covid-19. We are doing everything we can to reach the most vulnerable people. OTGI monitors national and local guidelines, as they are often changing, and adheres to all safety mandates. Volunteers are responsible for researching Covid-19 policies in regard to their personal travel to and from Colombia, and are expected to be familiar with current guidelines within Colombia.