

## VISITING CASA BUGAMBILIA What Should I Expect?

When you visit Casa Bugambilia as a volunteer, there are many opportunities for you to help transform the Matamoros colonias into communities of physical and spiritual wholeness.

The colonias Casa Bugambilia serves as the home of people who moved from the interior of Mexico to the border hoping to find work and a better life for their children and themselves. Because the work often wasn't there, nor was affordable housing, they built houses on land no one else wanted - a former landfill near an industrial canal. The houses were makeshift, constructed out of whatever material could be scavenged. Slowly, as the community matured and with the assistance of volunteers like you, conditions in the colonias improved. Still, access to clean water, sewers and electricity is unreliable. Recently established colonias have no utilities, and the shelter is often little more than discarded plywood nailed together. Air quality is poor. Quality healthcare is often unavailable. The schools are poor. In short, the colonias are areas of great need - physically and spiritually.

The efforts of residents to build and improve their community are complicated by geography. The main avenue of illegal drugs into the United States is through the border towns of Mexico, including Matamoros. You probably have heard about dramatically increased violence along the Mexico - United States border. Matamoros has not seen the same level of drug violence as border cities further north and west, but there is an increased level of uncertainty, and the situation is unpredictable.

While these conditions may sound formidable, we have found great spiritual fulfillment in ministering to the members of our community and, while the colonias are more than likely very different than what you are used to, we believe it is likely that you will have a meaningful and safe volunteer experience if you thoughtfully consider our volunteer guidelines.

Casa Bugambilia is a welcoming community, but because of the nature of the volunteer opportunities we have available, as well as our location along the US - Mexico border, the volunteer experience is better suited to some than others. But if it is the right fit for you, you will connect with the people who live here on a

personal level - tutoring children, building a home, helping give medical care, or simply kicking a soccer ball around and sharing yourself with community members.

We look forward to being with you in Mexico and appreciate the gift of sharing your heart for the people of the colonias we serve together.

### **Age, Maturity and Ability**

- Children and young persons under the age of 18 must be accompanied by at least one parent at all times.
- We welcome volunteers of all abilities. However, the conditions in the colonias can be rough, with no sidewalks or paved streets. Even walking around can be strenuous, as are volunteer activities such as home construction. If you have mobility challenges or are restricted in your physical activities, we want to make sure that volunteer activities meet your abilities. To do this, you or your mission leader should discuss your situation with our Mission Director before you arrive.

### **Border Crossing and Security**

- The United States Department of State monitors conditions - violence, public health and other risks -- in foreign countries, including Mexico, on a day to day basis and issues and modifies warnings for American travelers as changing conditions warrant. Over the past several years, warnings have been issued and modified for the border areas of Mexico. We urge you to visit the travel page at the United States Department of State website (<http://travel.state.gov>) before you leave on your visit to Casa Bugambilia to check the latest information travel warnings (as well as health and other information) to assure that the level of risk is something you are comfortable assuming.
- Whether you are arriving by air or driving, a Casa Bugambilia community member will meet you on the US side of the border when you arrive and will accompany you back to the border when you leave. If you have never crossed the border at Matamoros before, you may be taken aback by the armed security forces. Crossing the border is a serious affair, but if you use good judgment it should be straightforward and worry free.

- The rules for bringing goods into Mexico are being stringently enforced. When entering Mexico, you are not allowed to bring more than \$75 worth of new, recently purchased, goods (excluding basic personal items). While we deeply appreciate the generosity of our volunteers, it is critical that you not bring goods into Mexico for distribution in the colonias without discussing it with our Mission Director before you leave your home. He may prefer that the goods be delivered to warehouse space on the US side for later distribution.
- Whether crossing into Mexico or returning to the United States, always speak to border agents with concise, polite answers. Give them your full attention. Turn off your mobile phone.
- Don't joke. They've heard them all, don't think they're funny and the jokes may result in you being subject to much more rigorous procedures.
- A passport is required to re-enter the United States. Have it ready to show the border agent before you get to the border station.
- You are not allowed to bring produce, animal meat, and certain other items back into the United States. These will be posted at the border, but it's mostly common sense things.
- Border crossing times, particularly back into the United States, vary considerably and may be quite lengthy. Casa Bugambilia community members have access to sites that monitor border crossing times, but this is another reason that it is critical that we know where you are at all times. If border traffic is heavy, it may be necessary to adjust your group's departure time.

### **Safety While At Casa Bugambilia**

- The colonias are poor, urban neighborhoods. Just like in any other large city, there is always the risk of street crime and the possibility that a volatile situation may get out of hand or impact innocent bystanders. In case a potentially dangerous situation develops, we may want to return you to your lodging or even across the border quickly. We won't be able to do that if you have wandered away from the group or a project team has left its designated work site without our knowledge. You must stay with your group and with a Casa Bugambilia community member at all times.

- Once arriving at Casa Bugambilia for the day, volunteers must remain on mission project sites under the supervision of Casa Bugambilia community members. You must not wander off the job site or walk through the colonias alone.
- All travel inside Mexico must be with a Casa Bugambilia community member. Volunteers must not leave unaccompanied to purchase supplies, meals or re-cross the border except with the knowledge and presence of a Casa Bugambilia community member.
- The colonias served by Casa Bugambilia stand on ground that was once a landfill. Living conditions can be crude compared to even poor communities in the United States. Volunteers should be aware of their physical surroundings at all times, and watch out for barbed wire, exposed metal, open fires, feral dogs and cats and other hazards. You should have a current tetanus shot before you cross the border into Mexico.
- Use the buddy system. This means that you are watching out for one or two other people and they are watching out for you. It's best if these are set up before you cross the border.
- If you take prescription medicine, make sure you bring an adequate supply for your personal use with you. The medicine you require may not be readily available in Mexico.
- Because of the humidity, it's easy to become dehydrated. Pace yourself. And please drink enough water. If you bring a water bottle with you, you can fill it with drinkable water available at Casa Bugambilia. Wear a hat. If you feel dizzy or lightheaded, stop. Rest. Let your project team leader or a Casa Bugambilia community member know.

### **Being a Good Neighbor While At Casa Bugambilia**

While you are visiting Casa Bugambilia as a volunteer, you are a member of our community. We look out for each other, listen to each other and respect each other. If you are uncertain how to behave or whether something is appropriate, ask.

- If you have been asked to carry out an activity in a particular way by a local member of the Casa Bugambilia community, please follow their instructions. If you are unsure or have a different idea, ask. Although you may think there is a better way of doing something, there is often a reason things are done the way they are.
- We encourage our volunteers to share meals with the local members of the Casa Bugambilia community - patients staying at the medical shelter, community members who take their meals with us, and sometimes strangers in need of good food. It is a very special opportunity to get to know the members of our community. If you would like to do this, your mission team leader should coordinate with our Mission Director. We do ask for a small fee to cover expenses.
- We are answering the invitation of the community to assist them in transforming their community. We are, in very important ways, their guests. Please be courteous and aware of who you are with. Limit mobile phone use. Don't be shy. Even if you don't speak Spanish, please acknowledge patients, the students and local staff and community members with a smile and even a greeting in English, although an effort to use even limited Spanish, spoken with a smile, will be appreciated.
- While the living conditions you witness may tug at your heart, please do not distribute toys, food, candy, electronic games, or other items without the knowledge of our Mission Director and, in the case of children, with the permission of their parents. If you think this is something you will want to do, please discuss it with our Mission Director in advance of arriving at Casa Bugambilia.
- While we have several ongoing programs and projects, and may have arranged volunteer projects in advance of your arrival, we also respond to the immediate needs of the day. Projects or priorities shift on the spot, and sometimes it takes us a little while to sort them out. Dr. Nancy Rodriguez and Larry Cox have been working in this style for many years, but it may surprise volunteers who are used to a more structured experience.

In the spirit of Casa Bugambilia, please bring an attitude of flexibility, understanding and service in order to provide the greatest assistance on any given day. Keep in mind that we are committed to facilitating the most meaningful experience for you, while serving the people of the colonias. Casa

Bugambilia's overriding mission is to relieve suffering and to remove barriers to physical and spiritual growth, no matter what form the suffering or barriers take.

- Healthcare, education and care for the most vulnerable members of the community - the ill and abandoned, usually elderly, and young children with special needs - are the primary focus areas of the Casa Bugambilia mission. Casa Bugambilia is a working medical shelter for the ill and abandoned, many of whom suffer from serious, debilitating conditions such as Huntington's disease, paralysis and cancer. These conditions often distort the body and mind and may require medical treatment on the spot in view of volunteers. Some who witness this find it disturbing. If you need to discretely excuse yourself, please do so. But you may be surprised at the comfort and assistance you are capable of giving if you allow yourself the opportunity.

## OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- *Do I need pesos or will dollars work in Mexico?*

Most of the time dollars are accepted in Matamoros. However, expect your change to be in pesos.

- *What should I wear?*

Located on the Gulf of Mexico, Matamoros has a sub-tropical climate. January is the coolest month, with an average high of 69 degrees and low of 50 degrees. August is the warmest month, with an average high of 93 degrees and a low of 75 degrees. Matamoros is generally dry in the summer, and is wetter in the winter and spring, but it's almost always humid.

Light colors and clothing that breathes are preferable for summer, and layers are recommended for the colder months of November through February. Some volunteer activities, such as construction, require jeans or other sturdy attire. Men in the colonias generally do not wear shorts. Women will feel more comfortable wearing long pants or capris and modest shirts. Closed-toed shoes are a must for everyone.

You should check the weather before you leave home. If rain is predicted, bring a poncho and shoes or boots that can withstand mud and that you're not too

attached to. Many of the streets in the colonias are unpaved and become a quagmire when it rains.