

Thinking About Going? A Toolkit for Perspective Participants

Saludos prospective participants and families of participants. Thanks for considering a trip with Una Vida. This kit invites you to our table, says *buen provecho*, meaning *good appetite*, and serves you a few things to chew on as you consider a full-immersion journey to the Dominican Republic (the DR). This toolkit lays out what we do and how we're different, what you'll do day to day, what it costs, why it's worth it (spoiler: because it will change your life!), and why mom shouldn't worry.

Program overview –What we do.

Our work breaks down into four program areas, each firmly rooted in a small town called La Descubierta, meaning *discovery*. They are: (1) The Homes, building decent shelter, (2) The Kids, enriching and engaging youth, (3) The Mothers, empowering impoverished women through entrepreneurship, and (4) The Future, providing opportunity through university scholarships.

In our fifteen years of service, our DR community has benefited tremendously. But that's just half the picture; the other half is the perspective afforded our participants for having participated. The vision of Una Vida is that each person who joins our program engages in a life of service and generosity, and recognizes our collective responsibility to learn from the world's poor rather than ignore them.

How we're different—3 things that make Una Vida Una Vida.

Homestays and Commitment to a Community: at the core of the Una Vida experience are the relationships participants build with our host-families, in many ways the backbone of our program. Participants are encouraged to engage fully in their family's activities: cooking and sharing meals, stick ball, porch gossip, bean harvesting, homework and more. Living the nuances of daily life opens doors to lasting friendships, personal growth, and deeper cultural understanding. This rich interpersonal exchange is the fruit of Una Vida's long standing commitment to La Descubierta and surrounding communities dating back to 1990.

Balancing Immersion with Reflection: grappling with new language, new culture, and new ideas is both exhausting and transformative. Our trips are led by experienced alumni who facilitate a smoother immersion rooted in the pursuit of empathy and cultural understanding. We emphasize discussion with the larger group and reflection through journaling, our tools to contextualize and understand our experience.

Post Trip Follow-up: emerging from full immersion is often more shocking than the immersion itself. Some of Una Vida's most important work is mentoring and supporting participants as they return home, readjust to life in the United States, and put into action lessons learned in the DR. Una Vida staff is committed to supporting participants through their post-trip journey.

Safety –why not to worry.

It's common for volunteers and their families to feel anxiety about traveling to a developing country for the first time. Here are three reasons not to worry.

(a) The staff. Una Vida has been leading successful trips to the DR for 16 years. The small staff is comprised of passionate professionals well-versed in the do's and don'ts of Dominican travel.

(b) Our beloved host-families. Our host families are beautiful people that grace our program with incredible hospitality. Veterans of host-hood, they know all about food allergies and preferences, sanitation, and clean water. They will show you photos of former participants—their extended family—with great pride, and you will become one of them.

(c) Good preparation. Una Vida emphasizes the importance of preparation, emotionally and physically. The next Toolkit—"Planning your trip"—contains golden nuggets of information (check lists, blurbs on Dominican culture, even a reading list) to help you pack your bag, know what to expect, and feel ready.

Prices and Itineraries—what a typical trip looks like.

Prices vary depending on the theme and length of your trip. Many participants fundraise the entire cost of their trip through tax-deductible donations from family, friends, and local businesses. For fundraising resources, open the next toolkit: "Planning your trip" and scroll down to "Fundraising Resources." Another note: if you, the organizer, bring together ten people for a trip, you pay airfare, we'll cover the rest!

The cost includes everything except airfare and spending money. And by everything we mean travel insurance, all transportation expenses in country, meals and accommodations in country, supplies needed to build within the community of La Descubierta, Dominican and Haitian contractors and laborers, and excursions.

Una Vida shapes each trip according to each group's vision. Most trips are between one and two weeks long. Here is a sample itinerary:

Day 1 – Depart for Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Day 2 – Arrive in Santo Domingo in the afternoon. Travel by bus approximately 5 ½ hours to La Descubierta, arriving in the evening. Meet host families and settle in for the night.

Day 3 – La Descubierta. Become acquainted with the town through a walking tour. Meet with the locals, swim, and play with the kids. Reconvene in the evening. Debrief. Team Building. Questions, comments, concerns.

Days 4 through 12 – La Descubierta. Projects and excursions related to our four program areas may include: building latrines, constructing a house, making crafts with local children, visiting a nearby orphanage, pouring a cement floor, or aiding Madres, a jewelry collective for struggling mothers. Excursions could take you into nearby Haiti, the village of Los Pinos, swimming holes, or Lake Enriquillo.

Days 13, 14 – Travel. Return and briefly explore Santo Domingo. Destinations could include Plaza de Cultura (museums), Parque Independencia, Shopping on El Conde, the oldest cathedral in the new world. Spend the night at a quaint hotel. Board flight home.

Testimonial of Alumnus—Why it’s worth going.

“The trip to the Dominican Republic has given me a spiritual home base to come back to time and time again. Whenever my life gets too chaotic, materialistic, selfish, frustrating or depressing, I just look through my DR photo album and regain my sense of hope.” Amelia T.

“Since visiting the Dominican Republic, I still think about it daily. I feel an intense love for a culture other than my own; and learning to embrace diversity at such a young age is what I value most in my life.” Tricia S.

“I felt really comfortable with the culture and it allowed me to make deep friendships, not just use simple Spanish. I had a great family and loved them. The work was really amazing and I learned different skills like setting up cement, putting in cinder blocks and hammering in windows. Coming back here you see the world in a different way. It makes me grateful to have water, food, and electricity and also makes me want to live more simply. I mean, we have what we have and I shouldn’t feel guilty, but it makes me want to be more generous and loving.” Allie I.

“I have traveled outside the United States three times now and each one was an amazing experience in a different way. When I look back on my trip to the DR what stands out most are the people there. They’re the most open and friendly people you will ever meet. My first day in Duverge I managed to make a friend with one of the local kids who ended up taking me on a tour of the town lasting over an hour. By the end of the trip I felt I knew him as well as I knew some of my best friends back

home and that's with a language barrier. You hear people talk about life changing experiences; this is the real deal. I went on the trip to help others but I ended up the one indebted to them." Ryan C.

"I cherished the opportunity to share such a meaningful experience with my teenage daughter. She encouraged me to join the trip after her first summer as a volunteer, and throughout the year she educated me about what to expect in the Dominican Republic. I was amazed at the demanding physical labor the kids accomplished with an optimistic spirit. The trip allowed me to move out of my middle-class comfort zone, and participate in a profoundly important community service experience." Janet P.

"Two of my children (and I) have enjoyed the privilege of participating in these trips. The experience deepened their understanding of world cultures and made them into more mature, caring human beings... Dominicans are some of the happiest people on earth. They take time for you, they're wonderful hosts...It always pays to be careful when you're traveling, of course, but in the Dominican Republic I feel very safe." John S.