



## TRAVELING & SERVING INTERNATIONALLY

It seems almost impossible to turn on the evening news or scroll through a news website without being confronted by the things happening in our world. Whether it's crime in our own community, political debates, disease outbreaks, natural disasters or terrorist attacks—it begins to feel very hopeless.

Each of us may have different reactions. We may choose to tune it out, ignoring the harsh realities with the hope that they'll simply go away. We may choose to indulge in the chaos and negative reports, allowing fear to take over. Or we may choose to find a balance—staying up-to-date about what is happening in the world and making informed decisions about our response.

As an IMMERSION applicant considering international travel, we know you may have some real fears or questions about safety. Our hope is that you will consider the precautions that Experience Mission is taking, continue to do your own research, and then make a decision when you are comfortable.

Any organization that tells you they have eliminated all risk related to international travel is either intentionally misleading or simply uninformed. Experience Mission can neither promise complete safety nor predict when an unforeseen issue will happen.

### **But safety is a big priority for us.**

This year, over 4,000 short-term volunteers and 120 IMMERSION team members will trust Experience Mission to lead them into communities around the world—everywhere from rural Appalachia to the inner city of New York to the remote corners of Costa Rica. We take our responsibility very seriously. Not only do we want each of these participants to have a great experience, but we want them to feel safe and cared for, too.

Although Experience Mission cannot eliminate all risk, there are some key things that we do as an organization to help protect IMMERSION team members.

- ▶ Experience Mission follows international travel guidelines set by the U.S. Department of State. Warnings and alerts are posted for countries—allowing us to make good decisions if any of our IMMERSION locations are effected.

**TRAVEL WARNINGS:** <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings.html>

- ▶ Experience Mission enrolls all IMMERSION teams in the Safe Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) through the U.S. Department of State so that we continue to stay informed on any potential issues while teams are living in the country.
- ▶ Experience Mission builds long-term relationships with pastors, teachers, and well-respected community leaders. This gives us a sense of stability and security knowing that these leaders are on our side and care about our team members, too. It also allows us to get their perspective on issues from the ground level.

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## TRAVELING & SERVING INTERNATIONALLY (cont.)

- ▶ Experience Mission outlines rules and safety guidelines upon arrival in each new community, helping team members understand the issues or risks specific to that place. We expect that team members will respect these guidelines and make mature decisions.
- ▶ Experience Mission will not hesitate to postpone, cancel or change a trip if there is a legitimate concern from either an official source (U.S. Department of State) or a personal contact (staff or partners in the community). In the past, we have encountered several issues, demonstrating our ability to take the appropriate precautions and make adjustments. Here are several examples:
  - ▶ **HAITI 2011:** Due to rioting and political unrest in the capital of Port-au-Prince, we made the decision to move the team from the community of Carrefour (just outside the city) to a rural farming community several hours away. Although the team was not in danger, we felt they would have a more positive experience and more freedom if removed from the activity happening in the city. Ultimately, it was a great decision and allowed us to deepen relationships as well as get the team members more involved with host families and several local schools—we continue to send IMMERSION teams there each year.
  - ▶ **SOUTH AFRICA 2013:** On December 5, 2013, while one of our IMMERSION teams was living near the capital of Pretoria, Nelson Mandela died. Because of his status as former president of South Africa and a beloved figure for the anti-apartheid revolution, the world waited to see how the country would react to his passing. Our staff made the decision to break from the normal schedule for several days and find other opportunities for the team to ensure their safety. It was a historic moment as the team was able to talk with South Africans and watch the funeral together on TV. Thankfully, the country responded peacefully and there were never any cautions released to U.S. citizens. The team was able to confidently resume their normal schedule within a few days.
  - ▶ **LESOTHO 2015:** In February 2015, the U.S. Department of State issued a travel alert for Lesotho due to the approaching election and concerns about riots surrounding the newly elected officials. Several months before this alert, we had already begun conversations with our staff and partners in Lesotho to keep a pulse on the election season and talk about an alternative scheduled, if needed. The election took place on February 28th and was very peaceful. The official travel alert expired on March 21st after sufficient time to gauge the reaction and we allowed our team to transition from South Africa to Lesotho several days later.

We hope that this information has been helpful as you continue to move forward with the application process! Please feel free to contact us if you have additional questions. We would be happy to talk.

All the best,

**EXPERIENCE MISSION IMMERSION STAFF**

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