

Servas Information for travellers

Please read this before you start travelling

Servas aims

Servas is an Esperanto word meaning 'serve'. It is a world-wide, non-profit, non-governmental co-operative network of hosts and travellers, set up with the purpose of helping to build world peace, goodwill, understanding and mutual tolerance. It seeks to realize these aims by providing opportunities for personal contacts between individuals of diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Servas history

In 1949 some young pacifists from several countries attending a folk high school in Denmark started a movement called Peacebuilders. Inspired by Bob Luitweiler, an American conscientious objector, they established a code of work –study –travel, opening their homes to like-minded people from other countries, in order to work actively for peace. In 1972 Servas International was registered in Switzerland, and the year after it was included in the United Nations' list of non-governmental organisations.

Servas how it works

You fill in a "Letter of Introduction", giving some information about yourself. You are interviewed, your Letter of Introduction is

stamped and signed, and you pay a small fee. Now you are an approved Servas traveller. Personal background on your Letter of Introduction is not meant to be a life story or a list of qualities which make you suited to be a Servas traveller. Include a few personal details, especially things you are interested in and would like people to ask you about. But your interviewer may ask you why you think you would like to be a Servas traveller, and how you feel about peace building.

You receive lists of hosts in the countries to which you are travelling. You contact hosts in advance, and they may agree to host you for two nights (some may consider shorter or longer stays, and some may offer just to meet and talk, not give you accommodation). You do not pay anything to the hosts. Remember however that Servas is a voluntary peace organisation: it does not guarantee that you will find hosts, and it does not commit hosts to accepting you. The lists remain the property of Servas, and should always be returned after use. This saves paper environmentally sensible and money for Servas.

== Servas what to do as a traveller ??

Before arriving

- Learn in advance about the places you are going to, but do not fall into the trap of believing that you know more than the people who live there. Interviewers may be able to help you.
- Give hosts the advance notice that they ask for. They are not there to provide a service: they are seeking contact with people from other places and with other experiences. They have a reason for asking for the notice specified on the list, and it is disrespectful to ignore that.
- If you would like a reply to a letter, include enough international postal coupons (often two, sometimes more) for air mail, and allow time for a reply. From some countries, even air mail may take more than 30 days. If you do not enclose reply coupons or stamps, you have no reason to expect a reply.

- You get a more complete picture of a country if you do not stay in major centres only. Hosts outside city centres often have more time and enthusiasm for travellers.
- In most countries, it is normal for travellers to contact hosts directly. If you are writing to a co-ordinator to arrange your Servas visits (this is suggested in some host lists to avoid language difficulties), describe yourself, your approximate arrival dates, any special considerations such as allergies or disabilities, and include a copy of your Letter of Introduction.
- Always contact hosts at least one day before arrival unless npnr (no prior notice required) is specified. %Don't phone—or arrive—too early or too late (what this means may be different from country to country—between 0900 and 2100 is usually OK, but some countries have a mid-day break too). %If you have written, it is considerate to phone hosts one or two days before you are expected, whether you have received a reply or not, and particularly if you will not be arriving as arranged after all. If your hosts have not replied, they may still expect you. %If you have arranged to visit a host and you change your plans or are delayed, it is important to inform the host. Some hosts change their own plans because of travellers, and they may be upset if you just don't turn up, or arrive late without letting them know. Some may worry for your safety, and even contact the police or your embassy. If there is no phone, you can still send a card to apologise—afterwards is better than not at all. This is one of the most common complaints about travellers—please be considerate about it.
- Never pressure hosts to accept you. They always have the right to say no without telling you why. %It is considerate to take a sheet bag or sleeping bag, and to offer to use it, and to use your own towels. %Read the instructions to travellers in the list of each country you visit. It may annoy some hosts to be asked about

matters which are covered on the list. It will most likely annoy hosts if you ignore specific instructions or requests which are dealt with on the list.

- Do not expect hosts to fetch you, even if the list says they can. You may of course accept an offer. It is a good idea to

ask your hosts for clear instructions to their home when you contact them.

- Read what the list tells you about your host (and family). It tells you what the hosts consider most important or attractive

about themselves. Memorize at least how many children there are, even if you find the names impossible to pronounce.

When you arrive

- When you first meet hosts, give them your Letter of Introduction—the original, not a copy. Some may want to keep it until you leave; some may read it and give it back immediately; and some may not even want to look at it. Some may like to be given a copy to keep. In all cases, it shows you are a genuine Servas traveller.
- In contact with your host, be sensitive. Use your awareness of others' reactions and behaviour to judge what is acceptable behaviour. Some people are formal, others informal. Some have a highly ordered life, others are free and easy. Some wish to treat you as an honoured guest, others as a member of the family, and others as a casual acquaintance. Some have plenty of time for you, others make a small space in a

busy schedule. Some are deeply involved in active peace work, others see their peace role mostly on a personal level. Respect their differences, and their right to behave as they choose.

- Make sure you have time to spend with your hosts. Remember that they want to find out about you, your background, and your country. Don't let sightseeing keep you from spending time with your hosts.
- Even if your hosts offer you a house key, ask when you should leave for the day. Some hosts may expect you to leave the house when they do.
- You are in someone else's home, so be considerate. Clean up after yourself; don't expect to be waited on; if you want food, ask—don't just help yourself; follow house rules and schedules; help with chores and small jobs if your host would like you to. Water or hot water may be scarce, so do not shower or wash clothes without asking.
- Never stay longer than two nights unless your host sincerely invites you to do so. Never ask to stay longer unless the host specifies longer stays in the host list. One-night stays are discouraged because they often give too little time for meaningful visits, but they may be considered if convenient for both host and traveller.
- You must be willing to accept the sleeping arrangements offered by hosts—mattresses on the floor, and separate beds or even separate rooms for couples may be what they choose to give you, and you should respect that.
- It is foolish to openly criticize your host's country even things like the weather or the quality of the roads.
- Do not offer your hosts money, but be considerate of their financial situation. Do not borrow money from or exchange money with hosts. Many hosts appreciate small gifts, though they should not expect them.
- Be sure to have enough money for transport and phone calls to reach hosts, and for alternative accommodation if you do not get a Servas stay. Be prepared to go out for your meals if you are not offered food.
- Ask sensitively about meals. Many hosts will give you food, but they do not have to. If you go out with your hosts, you should expect to pay at least for your own food and entertainment. You may choose to pay for your hosts too, but they have no right to expect this, and you should not expect them to pay for you.
- Ideally use pay phones (it may be worth buying a phone card). Never use a host's phone without asking first, and always pay for your call. Do not assume that certain calls are free (local, information etc.) just because they are in your country. In some countries, directory enquiries are very expensive, for example!
- If you are travelling with a small child in your care, you should be sure to carry with you a little food which you know the child likes. This applies to yourself too if you have special dietary needs, restrictions or preferences. It is not your host's responsibility to pacify a child who is tired from travelling or to tend to medical needs, though many will be willing to help you do so.
- Servas expects all travellers to have a valid Letter of Introduction. A good Servas traveller will not ask a host to accept someone who is not a Servas traveller. Try to arrange an interview for your travelling companion first.
- Be sensitive to hosts' values and customs. If you think your host is behaving offensively, remember that good behaviour is not necessarily the same in all countries and cultures. Perhaps the same host thinks you are behaving offensively too—and neither of you mean to! You could try talking—sensitively—about your differences.

- If you have a serious problem, contact a Servas co-ordinator. Remember however that Servas is not a travel bureau and does not guarantee problem-free personal relationships. That is your role in peace-building.

After you leave

- You might like to send your hosts a card, thanking them for their hospitality.
- If you are asked to, send a report to your national secretary. This is specially relevant in certain countries (your interviewer will tell you if so).
- Remember to return used lists to your national secretary or host list co-ordinator as soon as possible, so that they may be

used again by other travellers.

- If you like writing, you could write a travel report for publication in your national newsletter, or in SI News.
- Consider becoming a Servas host, day host or volunteer. Servas survives because of its volunteers.

If you received this sheet before your interview, please bring it with you.