

Consul General

CARMEN MARIA MARTINEZ

CONSULATE GENERAL SAO PAULO, BRAZIL



Carmen Martinez will tell you she's got one of the best jobs around. "There's a lot of autonomy, a wide variety of issues to deal with, and the consul general sets the tone." Most people know that ambassadors run U.S. embassies, but not so many understand the key role of the consuls general, also known as principal officers, who manage U.S. consulates, the U.S. offices located outside of capital cities in countries around the world.

Carmen Martinez runs U.S. Consulate General Sao Paulo, one of the largest U.S. consulates in the world. She has returned to the post of her first Foreign Service assignment 22 years ago. The consulate is staffed by 70 Americans and over 180 Foreign Service Nationals.

Sao Paulo is the fourth largest city in the world and the commercial and cultural center of Brazil. The embassy and the Foreign Ministry may be in the capital, Brasilia, but it's clear that much of the action is in the cosmopolitan, sophisticated, bustling, traffic-jammed, crime-ridden city of Sao Paulo. The city is home to extreme wealth as well as extreme poverty. Crime and security are among the biggest problems affecting both official and unofficial Americans in the consular district, and Carmen estimates she spends as much as 30 percent of her time dealing with those issues.

The consul general "runs the show" at a consulate, but always supports the ambassador's policy and operational objectives by coordinating closely with the embassy. Carmen describes a key part of her job as showing the face of America in an accurate and sympathetic way. She is a strong advocate of public diplomacy efforts such as speaking engagements, television appearances, videoconferences, and other media outreach. "I keep on telling the staff to seek out opportunities for public outreach — get out there and be an active and visible representative of the United States." And her other message is to have fun. "A lot of laughter helps," she says. "Be willing to let your personality and values show in your leadership style."

For the principal officer in a huge cosmopolitan center like Sao Paulo, the representational responsibilities are heavy because the city draws so many official visitors, especially those interested in trade and culture. Carmen hosts an event at least once or twice a week in honor of trade missions in town seeking business opportunities, congressional visitors, or cultural happenings. She sees representational events as critical morale builders, and tries to include as many different members of the consulate community as she can, including local employees, junior officers, and family members.

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During a typical day, Carmen will check in with the embassy in Brasília; talk with consular officers or visit the consular section (Sao Paulo has one of the busiest non-immigrant visa sections in the world, and the American citizens services unit has 17,000 Americans registered in the consular district); read and clear outgoing cables/reports; sign numerous official papers; make personnel and budget decisions; meet with American Chamber of Commerce representatives; give a speech at a seminar; and host or attend a representational function.

Carmen is especially proud of the excellent interagency cooperation between State and Commerce (which has its third largest commercial office in the world in Sao Paulo) as well as between State and the numerous other agencies present at the mission, including the Department of Agriculture, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Customs Service, and the Defense Department. "We have great people here who never forget we are all working for the same government."

Her enthusiasm for her job and for the Foreign Service is contagious, and an obvious motivator for her staff. "I've been in the Foreign Service almost 22 years and I'm still having a good time," Carmen says. She sees mentoring junior officers as a rewarding part of her job and is always glad to discuss future assignments with JOs, guide them through the bidding process, and stay in touch with them even after they leave post. "I take pride in their success and it feels good to think I played a part in it," she says.



Making opening remarks at the 2001 international seminar "Gender in the World Labour Market."

The principal officer is the highest-ranking U.S. official in the host city, so she must always be working to implement and advance U.S. policy. However, being a good manager is an equally important part of being a good principal officer. "If people feel valued, they will do a good job," Carmen believes. "Give your people the tools to do their job, whether it's the person who delivers the mail or the one who delivers the political demarche. Everyone is important."

Carmen joined the Foreign Service in 1980. Her first post was Sao Paulo. She has served as deputy chief of mission in Maputo, Mozambique; and as consul general at the U.S. consulate in Barranquilla, Colombia, before it was closed for security reasons. She has also served in Quito, Ecuador; Bangkok, Thailand; Caracas, Venezuela, and Washington, D.C. Carmen has a B.A. in liberal arts, an M.A. in medieval history, and an M.S. in national security and strategic resources. She speaks Portuguese, Spanish and Thai. She and her husband, Victor Reimer, have one son. Her next assignment is as chargé d'affaires to Burma.