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# LEARNING ABOUT COSTA RICA

## Costa Rica, the Country

Costa Rica is known throughout Latin America as a safe, literate and democratic country, with a welfare system that has led to the creation of good schools, health care systems and other benefits. It is perhaps most famous for the fact that it has not had an army since 1949. It has traditionally been a haven for refugees from other countries in the area, and even from the rest of the world. In addition to its original population – a mix of indigenous peoples and Spaniards we must add a substantial mixture of Europeans, Africans, Chinese, Italians and Germans. Costa Rica became very popular as a retirement site for many North Americans thanks to government incentives. Most visitors find the country to be easy going and low stress.

Costa Rica gained its independence from Spain in 1821. Costa Ricans are proud of their pre-Columbian heritage, as a visit to its Gold Museum and Jade Museum will attest. You will note that many Costa Ricans, or “ticos” are avid collectors of artifacts, masks and other remnants of its pre-Columbian past and current emphasis on preservation of its heritage.

What makes the country particularly special is its emphasis on conservation and preservation of the environment. Its system of national parks began in the 1960’s and the country now possesses about 36 national parks, wildlife areas, refuges, biological reserves so that the total amount of protected lands comes to about 27% of the total land. You will have ample opportunity to learn about specific parks and reserves once you are in Costa Rica. “Ecotourism” is a flourishing business in the country – it accounts for the great majority of tourists who visit Costa Rica. Excursions, both those provided by the programs and those you will undertake on your own, provide you with opportunities to see the great variety of flora and fauna, tropical birds, butterflies, turtles, sloths, monkeys, and even jaguars!

## San Joaquín de Flores

San Joaquín is located within the “canton” or municipality of Flores. The town provides the advantages of a small community (population 6838 in San Joaquín proper, 16,000 in the district) where it is easy to get around, with most things within walking distance and friendly neighbors, while only being only a 15 minute bus ride from the town of Heredia, a larger university area with busy, congested streets, restaurants

and stores, and an additional 9 miles (which on a bus could take 45 minutes in the local traffic) to the capital of San José. The town itself is approximately 7.61 square kilometers and was founded in 1915. As with other parts of the central plateau (or central valley as it is called in English for some reason!) of Costa Rica, it was originally inhabited by Indian tribes. Traces of them can be found throughout the canton. In the 18th century, settlers began to move into Flores, attracted by the quality of the land they found there. The town is typically Spanish in its design, laid out in squares with a central plaza, with a church, the school and the municipal buildings. The residential areas lie just beyond the plaza. New residential areas are being developed, one right alongside the old colonial home of former President Oscar Arias. From any point in the canton you can see the mountains that surround the central valley. The towns that grew up outside of San José focused on coffee growing, and San Joaquín is no exception. The climate is cool and fresh, and there are still many coffee growing areas right next to the town.

You will find San Joaquín to be a safe and friendly place to live and an ideal place to immerse yourself in a community which has not yet been discovered by tourists or large groups of “gringos.”

**Because of Costa Rica’s location in an area prone to tremors, periodically these can be expected. In 2009 there was a tremor that reached the category of an earthquake, although San Joaquin was not affected. Climatic issues, such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes that can touch Central America, will be covered in the orientation.**

## Preparation

An important part of your personal preparation is familiarizing yourself with your host country - its people, geography, language, political and educational systems, and other elements. When U.S. students arrive overseas, many realize to their embarrassment that they know very little about either the host country or their own country. Taking advantage of the wealth of information available from sources available here goes a long way in preparing you for your trip.

You can become informed about current events by reading Costa Rican newspapers or magazines. These are often available at your college or university library. In terms of U.S. papers, "Christian Science Monitor" is generally regarded as having excellent coverage of international news. You should come prepared to

discuss United States history and current politics; these are areas of compelling interest to many Latin Americans and your inside perspective will be greatly appreciated. If you take the time now to learn about current events in Costa Rica, you'll be able to enter into conversations right away.

No matter what your interests or hobbies, you can often find information about how people in your new country pursue them. Do not forget visual sources as well. Watch for television programs which focus on international issues; they can provide insights into how people feel and think in your host country and in countries in which you will be traveling.

## Gender Relations in Costa Rican Culture

US students may be exposed to the stereotypical view of traditional gender roles in Latin America, whereby the male is dominant and the woman is subject to “*machismo*” and must take a back seat to men. In Costa Rica this is changing; women have active professional lives, and if it may seem that they adhere to the wishes of the man, in fact the women rule the roost in most cases. In traditional towns such as San Joaquín you will observe a variety of patterns of male-female behavior. One aspect of the culture which can be annoying at the beginning is the fact that men will stare at women in the street. They can also make a woman feel indignant at first with some of the *piropos* – compliments or expressions of flattery that men say to you as you pass. Some US women feel that this is sexual harassment. But be calm, and tell yourself that a flattering remark once in a while does no harm. The advice from Costa Rican women is to ignore the nasty ones and listen to the nice ones! And just keep walking! Typical *piropos* aimed at women are:

Negrita Linda, Mamacita, Bruta, Bárbara, Qué belleza!, Con una machita de estas hoy mismo me caso, Buenos Días, Linda, adonde va tan seria?, Si no sabe el camino, con mucho gusto la llevo

For men some typical ones are:

Rico, Parece un angel, Qué ojos más bellos, Precioso, Lindo, Psssssst...me lleva con usted!

Dating patterns tend to be in groups, as opposed to in pairs.

## Family and Community Structure

Just as there is a period of adjustment living in Costa Rica, there will be a period of adjustment living with your family. As a rule, U.S. students “go away” to college, living either in a dorm or in their own

apartments. In contrast, most Costa Rican students live at home or with relatives. Be prepared to give up a little of the independence that you are used to at college so that you can better integrate into your family. Remember, your family may worry if you are out late, so be conscious of their feelings; this is especially true for young women. Also remember that each student's family will be different; do not try and compare your family situation to others on the program. There can be advantages and disadvantages to every living situation.

A major difference between Costa Rican and U.S. culture is the difference in family structure. In Costa Rica, the family is extended rather than nuclear in form. In other words, people have close relationships with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins -- even second and third cousins. In general, children grow up experiencing a broader network of family members than do children in the United States. A high value is placed on kinship, and a special relationship, even responsibility, is acknowledged among extended family members.

There is much more open display of affection among “*ticos*” than in the United States. A kiss on the cheek is the usual form of greeting, even when you first meet! In fact, we have been told that until you know the person you really just kiss the air near the cheek. This will be explained to you in your orientation. Traditional culture values traditions, and many forms of polite, considerate behavior are considered intrusive by U.S. students who do not want to have to explain where they have been and what they have been doing. This is a typical example of polite behavior in a Costa Rican home. To say “hello” before going to your room when you come home at the end of the day is another expected form of behavior

## Making Costa Rican Friends

Ticos are, in general, very warm and open. It is easy to make friends if you take initiative to talk to them. You must remember, however, that Costa Rican college students will be studying and working as they would in any given semester. You are the one in a new place and experience. So whereas they will most likely be receptive if you approach them or make suggestions about getting together, it will often need to be your idea and efforts to make it happen.

## Discrimination

Discrimination against minorities is illegal in most countries, nevertheless as is the case in many countries, discrimination still occurs. This discrimination is built on negative racial stereotypes which are influenced by a variety of factors including the media. If you believe you are being discriminated against, please discuss it with

Instituto staff. You should also feel free to contact Dr. Joan Soláun at [jsolaun@uiuc.edu](mailto:jsolaun@uiuc.edu).

Despite what the law says there is discrimination in Costa Rica. Discrimination is often based on economic differences.

## Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment, as defined by US law, is any unwanted sexual gesture, physical contact, or statement which is offensive, humiliating, or an interference with required tasks or career opportunities. You will be entering a different culture and must realize that in some instances the foreign methods of communication may be uncomfortable for you. For example, in Costa Rican culture, people tend to touch more openly and frequently and the sense of personal space is much smaller. Regardless of the mode of communication, within the cultural context this is not viewed as harassment. If the communication becomes uncomfortable, even after acknowledging the cultural differences, we would encourage you to sit down and talk to the individual. This provides the individual the opportunity to explain the culture and affords the same for you. If you do not feel comfortable talking directly to this person, please discuss the matter with Instituto staff.

You are **encouraged** to live with a Costa Rican family for the **duration** of the program because of the cultural and linguistic benefits this adds to your academic program. Every effort will be made to select a family that matches with the information you have provided on the housing application. Nevertheless, we might not be able to accommodate all of your preferences and some adjustment will be necessary. If you have returned your housing preference form, you will receive your housing assignment before departure. Housing assignments are normally received about a week before the beginning of the program. Upon receipt of your address, and when all your documents have been turned in, you will be e-mailed with the information.

You will be living with a Costa Rican family of middle to upper middle class in San Joaquín. Do not expect to be treated like a guest...you will be part of the family and part of your experience in Costa Rica is to find out what it is to try to fit in to the culture of the family, the most important aspect of the local culture. If you do not feel comfortable with your family, please let the program staff know. You will be able to make a change. There are many study abroad programs that tell students that they

must wait for the dust to settle...which can take a full two weeks, and then see if they still want to change. This is good advice. Part of your discomfort is probably related to the newness of it all and the different culture.

Many homes here do not have hot water at all, and some only have hot water sometimes. Be prepared for the possibility. Also, sometimes there is no water and a pump has to be turned on in your house.

Do not flush anything down the toilet that doesn't come directly from your body. The plumbing and sewage systems in Costa Rica can't handle much volume, and you don't want to deal with a toilet problem.

## Your role in the Household

You need to make an effort to fit in with the household schedules and rules such as meal times, using the hot water for showers, using the telephone, and all other family activities. Your family will probably want you to accompany them on certain visits, activities or excursions. These provide great opportunities to learn about the culture first-hand and you should take advantage of such occasions whenever possible.

As with the use of the telephone, be on the safe side in terms of manners and always ask first if you want something, including food and drinks. Eventually you will settle into a comfortable routine and how to do these things will take care of themselves.

Keep your room neat. In Costa Rican terms, a messy room reflects poorly on you and your upbringing! There may be a maid, but you are expected to make your own bed and straighten up your room.

Most Costa Ricans take a shower every morning. Water, especially hot water, is precious so do not stay too long in the shower, even if no one is waiting.

Finally, life in a Costa Rican family does mean that your hours may have to be adjusted. The family starts to stir around 6 AM and goes to bed early. Not much happens in San Joaquín, Heredia or even San José after 9:00 PM anyway!

## Meals

Costa Ricans eat a very light breakfast, often just coffee with milk, juice and *tostadas*. Lunch is the main meal of the day. You can expect to have rice and black beans (*gallo pinto*) a lot, often for breakfast!! Meat is also served, and fruits and vegetables. Dinner may be light. Learning the taste of new foods is always part of the

challenge of study abroad. Be sure to try everything, don't wrinkle your nose, and maybe you will like it!! The program provides three meals per day with your family unless you are traveling. In that case, you are on your own. You need to discuss the meal arrangement with your own family and make sure it is clear when you are expected to have the meals with them. The water in San Joaquín is potable.

### Laundry

You will have access to a washing machine in your home. However, usage may vary from family to family. For example, your family may suggest that you put your clothes with theirs to be washed at the same time. If there is a maid in the house, part of her duties may include washing and ironing for the family, or the family may have a separate laundress. Keep in mind that most houses do not have clothes dryers. This means that the turn-around time for getting your laundry back can be from one to five days as clothes must dry and be ironed before their return. You can expect to do laundry about once a week.

### Visitors

Please do not invite someone to your home without prior permission. Doing so can be a source of great embarrassment and unnecessary hard feelings. If you cannot make arrangements with your family, invite your friends to a restaurant, club, or disco.

You are not permitted to have overnight guests at your host family. This is a regulation of the Instituto and is only common courtesy. The **only** exception is for family members visiting you from the US; they will be permitted to stay overnight **only** with the host family's permission. You should be prepared to pay the equivalent of approximately US\$14 per night if a family member is staying with you. There is a good hostel nearby which can accommodate your visitors with enough notice (it is small).

### House Key

You should discuss family house key policy with your family as soon as possible so that you may come and go without disturbing the family. Be conscientious in your care of the key, however, as most families are security conscious and would probably want to replace the lock/s if you lose the key. Also, be sure to ask if there is a security system on the house that you should know about; this is common in Costa Rica.

### Local Telephone Calls

When staying with your family you may receive all the incoming local or overseas calls that are made to you. However, you should be aware of common courtesies when you use the phone to call out. In Costa Rica, the telephone charges on local calls are measured in minutes per call and they are expensive. This can make use of the family telephone a sensitive subject; keep your local calls brief, keep a record of them (including the approximate length of time of each call) and expect to pay the family for calls made. Abuse of the telephone (by Costa Rican standards) can result in dismissal from the program.

### Long Distance Telephone Calls

You are allowed to make long-distance calls from your home **ONLY** by calling collect or using your international calling card. The following are the different options you have for calling long distance. They are in order from the cheapest to the most expensive. NOTE: AT&T calling cards do not work from Costa Rica.

1). **Having your friends and relatives call you.** It is much cheaper to call from the United States than to call from Costa Rica to the U.S so we recommend that you arrange a day and time for your friends or family back home to call you so that you can be by the phone waiting for the call. One option is to consider enrolling in AT&T Country Calling Plan where callers can choose one country to call and receive a 15% discount on all direct calls made from the United States to Costa Rica. MCI and Sprint have similar plans.

2). **Calling from Costa Rica using a calling card.** You may call a US operator (such as Sprint or MCI) directly from Costa Rica. From these operators you can either charge the call to your calling card or make it a collect call, the latter being more expensive yet still less expensive than calling direct using the local telephone company. You can look up the access numbers in a travel book or perhaps on the companies' websites. The best option is probably waiting to buy local phone cards once you arrive. (For example, you may get 25 minutes for \$6.)

3). **Calling collect using a Costa Rican operator.** If you use a local operator you must make certain that you make a collect call and not apply the charges to your host family's home phone number. Ask your family how to do this.

4). **Calling direct from your homes.** For obvious reasons this should not be considered unless there is an emergency.

5). **Call from a telephone booth using a calling card, or go to the local telephone company to make a call from their phones.** Ask your host family how to do this.