

Contenido

Travel Light.....	2
Climate and Dress	2
Toiletry Articles	4
Health and Fitness	4
Managing your Money	4
Personal expenses.....	5
Safety	5
Independent Travel	5
Health	5
U.S. Customs	6
COMMENTS FROM PREVIOUS STUDENTS	6

Travel Light

You should know by now that the bottom line is to travel light. One rule of thumb is to set out the minimum that you want to take, then pack half. Do not plan to take more luggage than you can handle by yourself. Take a small bag to use for overnight excursions. For international travel, you are generally allowed two checked pieces of luggage; check with the specific airline on which you plan to travel to determine the size and weights of bags they will accept. As airline regulations are now changing and many are charging even for the first shipped piece of luggage, you should check with your airlines before heading to the airport. You may carry on the plane one smaller piece plus a purse, camera gear, umbrella, or coat. You will be charged for extra pieces or weight. The temptation is to take as much as the airline allows; don't do it. You'll be miserable dragging your luggage around and will go out of your mind as you prepare to return home, trying to pack everything you brought with you plus everything you've gotten in your travels. Remember you'll want room to bring back gifts when you return home.

You will need to make luggage tags to identify all of your luggage items, and in the case these fall off, you should also stick identification labels on the inside of your suitcases. Do not pack your passport, travel documents, tickets, or valuables in your suitcase. If at all possible, keep these items on your person in a money belt, an inside jacket pocket, or a bag or pack that you can wear slung across your chest. Do not ever put important papers or money in a backpack—you have no control over what you cannot see.

Keep track of your documents. At the very least, record the number, place of issue, and date of expiration for both your passport and other documents as well the serial numbers of traveler's checks; also you may find it useful to have Xeroxes of your important documents to take to the embassy and immigration with you. It also makes sense to leave copies of your important documents and your birth certificate as well as the serial numbers of your travelers checks with trusted family members or friends at home. These can be faxed or express mailed in cases of real emergency. Access to these copies may facilitate the process if you lose everything at the same time.

Climate and Dress

As a tropical country, Costa Rica has two major seasons: a wet season and a dry season. The dry season (or *verano*) runs from late December until April; the rest of the year has plentiful rainfall and is generally considered to be the *invierno*. Costa Ricans attribute their beautiful green countryside to the rainfall and rarely complain! The temperature does not change much between seasons, but the range of temperatures varies greatly between 50 degrees in the highlands and 90 degrees at sea level at the beaches on the coast. The climate in San Joaquín de Flores is temperate, around 72 degrees. You will need sweaters and heavier sweatshirts for the evening. During the winter season, rain is frequent and can be heavy. Be sure to pack a poncho, umbrella and good walking shoes. In contrast to this are the opportunities to swim in the oceans – both Atlantic and Pacific, lagoons and swimming pools. So bring your bathing suit!

Women: It is typical to wear pants and tank tops or nice t-shirts. Skirts are also very common. People do wear shorts, however, it is less common and you will probably only wear them when you are traveling to other areas on the weekends because the heat and humidity in San Joaquín is not as intense as it is in other areas of the country.

The following checklist is a list of items you might consider bringing:

Women

- Two skirts
- One nice dress

- Two dressy blouses
- Two pairs of jeans or slacks
- Light jacket or windbreaker
- Socks and underwear (enough for a week)
- One lightweight sweater
- One pair sturdy walking shoes
- One pair dressy shoes
- Sandals for the beach
- Light cotton robe and pajamas
- Swimsuit
- Beach towel
- Hiking clothes

Men

- Two long-sleeved dress shirts
- Two casual short-sleeved shirts
- One tie
- Four pairs of jeans and slacks
- Three T-shirts
- Light jacket or windbreaker
- Socks and underwear (enough for a week)
- One lightweight sweater
- One pair sturdy walking shoes
- Sandals for the beach
- Light cotton robe and pajamas
- Swimsuit
- Beach towel
- Hiking clothes

Everyone

- Hygiene kit: Comb, brush, toothbrush and toothpaste, shampoo, shaving gear, washcloth. Women might want to bring enough feminine products for their time abroad. Past students have suggested that the local varieties are not of good quality.
- Sunscreen
- Prescription medicine in their labeled containers and a written copy of the prescription
- Contact lens solution and extra contacts and extra pair of glasses
- Clock radio with battery backup
- Umbrella and rain gear
- Camera and film. Film is expensive in Costa Rica so bring plenty.
- Address book with addresses and phone numbers of family and friends
- Photos of your family and friends to share with your host family
- A small first-aid kit
- Spanish/English dictionary and grammar book
- Flashlight and batteries
- Money belt or pouch to wear around your neck to hold passport, money, etc.
- Books. Plenty of reading time on those long bus rides!
- Swiss Army knife. Must be packed in checked baggage

- Memento or small gift for your host family (This should be something small and inexpensive; it can be one gift for the whole family or a very small gift for each person in the family. Common gifts are those that are special to your family or hometown, something like a tee shirt with the name of your school or town, a kind of food like locally-made candy, or something that can be used by the whole family such as a table decoration or paper notepad.)
- A change purse, as much of the money is coins and sometimes you will have a huge load to carry around
- Extra photocopy of your credit cards and the photo page of your passport.

Toiletry Articles

Although a full range of toiletry articles and cosmetics are available in Costa Rica, you should bring enough of your own to last at least two weeks. This will save you the trouble of having to look for these items until you are familiar with the city. In Costa Rica, American brands are expensive, so consider buying the local equivalent.

Health and Fitness

There are two gyms in San Joaquín. It is about \$40 per month for membership. Running on the streets is a little difficult because cars don't always yield to runners, and sidewalks are random and a luxury when you find them. There is a nice pool in Heredia at the Palacio de Deportes that costs 1000 *colones* to enter. This is a nice spot to study in between classes. You can also run or play soccer in the parks or plazas.

Managing your Money

A combination of cash, credit cards and traveler's checks are recommended. The currency in Costa Rica is the *colón*, and at the current writing the exchange rate is about 540 *colones* to the U.S. dollar. You may exchange your money at the local bank in San Joaquín, and there are ATM machines as well. ATM machines can be eccentric, and may not accept your card. Check with your bank to make sure you have an international pin number, and look on the back of your card to make sure it is part of the Cirrus, nexus, MasterCard or Visa networks. It is also possible for the magnetic strips to become damaged or your card lost. For all these reasons we recommend that you take at least \$500 in traveler's checks to have as an emergency fund. Traveler's checks are a pain to cash in Costa Rica, but because they can be replaced if lost or stolen, they are the safest form of money to carry.

Because most small towns you may travel through around the country may have difficulty in changing traveler's checks, we advise you to plan ahead when you travel and have enough *cash* for your expenses. As seasoned travelers know, credit cards, especially American Express, are often only accepted at high-end businesses and hotels. Visa seems more easily accepted in San José.

The Banco Nacional de Costa Rica in San Joaquín has an ATM machine that accepts VISA cards only. To use any other type of credit card, you will have to do the transaction inside. Bank hours are 8:30-3:45. Otherwise, you can use ATM machines in Heredia or San José.

Be sure to have cash on you when you arrive in Costa Rica. It is fine to carry it in dollars; you can change your money during orientation. Any emergency you might have during your first day there can be paid for in dollars. Note that banks are different in Costa Rica; they tend to be a central place of business, where local bills are paid, and where they can visit with friends. It can be a rich cultural experience but will consume a great deal of time, especially at peak hours.

Personal expenses

The amount you should estimate for your weekly personal expenses is a moving target and depends upon your life style. We hear everything from \$50 to \$100 but again, it depends on what you plan to do in your free time and over weekends. Because electric voltage can be unreliable, and a surge can blow out your equipment, you may end up purchasing local hair dryers, curling irons, CD players. (The current is 110, the same as in the US.) Most students walk or take the bus. Bus fares are around c200, and you could spend around \$13.00 per week if you go into Heredia or San José for the evening.

Safety

In terms of protecting your belongings, valuables and cash, you should take the same precautions that you would in any major U.S. city, only more so. Petty theft, as we have said above, is common. Violent crime – rape and armed robbery, for example, is not. Leave your best jewelry at home in the States. Don't travel with anything that you are not prepared to lose. This is particularly true in downtown San José, on buses and on the beach where robberies can more easily occur. Money belts are key.

Independent Travel

Costa Rica offers you many travel opportunities and the program expects that you will want to take advantage of these. More information on dos and don'ts of independent travel, travel within Costa Rica and to neighboring countries will be provided during the orientation. And again, it is always both wise and courteous to advise your host family of plans to travel, overnight stays, etc. We strongly discourage hitchhiking in Costa Rica. You may be tempted, especially around the countryside, and Costa Ricans may tell you that it is safe in some areas. But it is no more safe in Costa Rica than in the United States. Most students travel by bus, as it is the least expensive way to see the country. You can expect to pay about 3000 *colones* for most trips of more than three hours; and it would be unusual to pay more than 4500 *colones*. Driving in Costa Rica can be challenging, has different laws than the U.S., and the country has a high accident rate; therefore, we discourage you from considering driving yourself.

Before you leave for Costa Rica, be sure to purchase a good guide book, such as *the Lonely Planet Guide to Costa Rica* or *Costa Rica: A Natural Destination*. Also, talk to returnees about their favorite locations.

Health

The Instituto cannot make health recommendations in terms of inoculations, medicines, etc. and it is important to check with your own physician. You may be referred to the CDC web page.

There are good clinics in Heredia and San José. You must bring your own health insurance. With most health insurance policies from the United States you will need to pay up front and be reimbursed upon presentation of your receipts. Please check with your insurance provider to see if your policy has emergency coverage and whether if you are involved in an accident or suffer a sudden illness and adequate medical facilities are not available, your policy will arrange for emergency medical evacuation to the nearest facility capable of providing appropriate care. There are also many short-term health policies for international travel which you may want to look into.

Many of the so-called tropical illnesses occur as the result of poor hygiene, mosquitoes and foods bought from street vendors. *Turista*, the traveler's diarrhea, and related symptoms happen to most people at some point in Central America. The remedies include drinking lots of fluids such as ginger ale, bottled water or fat-free salty broth. You might want to bring with you some over the counter remedies such as Immodium. To avoid *turista*, drink bottled water, peel the fruit before you eat it and be careful of uncooked fish and vegetables. Specific health issues in Costa Rica include outbreaks of dengue fever in the

last few years. This is a virus transmitted by mosquitoes. The illness usually runs its course in about ten days, but it can take up to four weeks to recover. There is no vaccine for dengue fever, so the CDC recommends that you avoid mosquitoes by using insect repellents and using long sleeves and other covering in areas with mosquitoes, staying in well screened and air-conditioned areas.

U.S. Customs

When you reenter the U.S., Customs require you to declare all items purchased abroad that you are bringing home with you. It is wise to keep an account of the costs of purchases and the sales slips. U.S. custom officials have the right to see them. You must check on the amount of goods that can be brought in to the US duty free as this may change. Your airlines carrier can advise you. After the basic amount that is free of duty, you are required to pay a straight 10% duty on the next \$600 worth of foreign goods, providing they accompany you into the U.S. Some states are now charging a tax on items that you bring into the country.

Foreign-made items such as cameras, portable battery-operated cassette tape recorders, transistor radios, etc., which you take with you, should be registered with the U.S. customs prior to departure to avoid difficulties upon returning to the U.S. You may be asked to show the sales slip or other proof of ownership at Customs. Call the office before you go there to make sure you have proper documentation. This should be taken care of prior to the day of departure because the Customs Office may not be open at the time you check in for the flight.

COMMENTS FROM PREVIOUS STUDENTS

- Something to remember: This is a country of *machismo*, and as such, you will gain a lot of attention from the men here because you look foreign. Keep this in mind when deciding what type of clothing to bring along, as the more scantily dressed you are, the more *piropos* you will receive.
- There is a night life here, and you may want to go to the bars, and as you will see, the girls here wear just about anything out at night, but again, keep in mind your foreign status and that sometimes drawing a lot of attention to yourself can be uncomfortable...and sometimes fun. You have to decide your own level of comfort.
- You will want comfortable shoes suitable for hiking trails and mountains as well as nice sandals and shoes to wear daily. I wear Birkenstock sandals just about every day, but on the weekends I take tennis shoes or hiking boots, and sandals with a strap on the back for more security.
- Be sure to bring plenty of sunscreen, aloe, and bug spray with you. Again, these things are available at HiperMax, but are often expensive. It's easier and cheaper to buy ahead of time.
- We all bought Malaria pills and when we arrived here in Costa Rica we were advised not to use them because there apparently is not [much of] a malaria problem in this country, and the side-effects of the malaria pills [can be] worse than the disease itself.
- The Institute will tell you to buy an international student ID card in the US, and while that is advisable, it is not that important. I have not been able to use it for any student discounts. In order to get the student discounts, you have to have a card from your institute in Costa Rica, stating that you are a student, living in Costa Rica for an extended period of time. Ask the resident director about getting a card like this when you arrive if you are looking for discounts.
- Buy the Lonely Planet's guide to Costa Rica. This book has helped me plan amazing and cheap trips every weekend that I have been here. No matter how much money you have, you can travel in this country as long as you look for the cheap ways to go.

- The public bus system is amazing. You can go anywhere in the country from San Jose for under \$8. Don't be afraid to ask people for help on how use it.
- The food in Costa Rica is different than what we are used to in the States as far as how they look, but I have not encountered many strange flavors or things that I couldn't stand. You will eat a lot of beans and rice and fish and vegetables. Remember to communicate with your family. Be sure to try everything at least once, and if you don't like it, politely tell your family. They don't want to feed you things you don't like, so just be courteous and respectful and things will work out.
- If you ever have problems, be sure to talk first to your family. They want to make things as easy for you as possible. If you don't feel comfortable talking to them, the people at the Institute are very friendly and willing to help you make your stay better.
- It is a good idea, if you can, to fit your own pillow in your suitcase. You don't know what your bed will be like here, and although many are very nice, it is always nice to at least have your own pillow to sleep on at night. Many students here have wished they had brought their own along.
- You can easily buy international phone cards here at many stores. They cost 3000 *colones* for 16 minutes. You can also buy international phone cards in the US, but remember the exchange rate will be different and be SURE to read the directions. 800-numbers are NOT free in this country, no matter who you are calling, and if you don't use the free access number, you will magically end up with a \$500 phone bill just for calling an 800 number to call your mom in the states. As long as you pay attention, you will be fine.
- School supplies here can be expensive, so it's a good idea to bring notebooks, pens and pencils with you. There is a photocopy shop that has all sorts of these things in San Joaquín, and you can also get them at HiperMax and other stores, but its sometimes easier to bring your own.
- Be flexible and you will have an amazing trip.
- Bring a CD player and CDs, as you will probably go through withdrawals for them.
- Dress very similar to North Americans on the street but school should be more neat.
- Clothing: You should bring more shorts and other clothes for hot weather, and several pairs of shoes, not just sandals.
- Bring more money for each week. Maybe \$35 more each week for traveling.
- They use "usted" for everybody, they never use "tu" forms of verbs.