



Costa Rica Handbook



CLIMATE

- Costa Rica has a tropical climate. The climate is very diverse and can change frequently throughout the day. It ranges anywhere from hot and sunny, to humid, cloudy, cool or rainy.
- The rainy season is generally from May to November, and the dry season is from December to April. It can still rain in the dry season, just as the sun will still typically shine in the morning during the rainy season. If you are in the rainforest, regardless of dry or rainy season, rain is common.
- In Costa Rica, the average temperature is between 70-80F. The coolest months of the year are November, December and January. March through May are the hottest months of the year.
- Be sure to apply sunscreen regularly, especially on the coast, as the sun is stronger in Costa Rica than it is in the United States.

CLOTHING

- Reference the Xperitas Costa Rica packing list for advice on what to bring.
- Dress in layers to accommodate the changes in weather, and always bring your raincoat with you in your day pack regardless of when you travel.
- In Costa Rica, the dress is casual. If you are going to visit a school or church, you should wear more formal clothing, such as dress pants, a collared shirt, long skirt/dress, blouse, etc. People tend to wear pants, even when it's hot.
- As it rains frequently, pack clothing and shoes/sandals that are water resistant or that dry quickly.
- Be sure to wear comfortable shoes that are already broken in prior to travel, as you will do a lot of walking each day.

CULTURAL TIPS

Personal space is viewed differently by Costa Ricans. They are comfortable standing close to one another. Touch and affection are very common.

In Costa Rica air conditioning is not as common as in the US. Don't be surprised if your host family doesn't have AC. The best way to cool down is to wear lightweight clothing and try to stay out of the sun!

ELECTRICITY

- You will not need a converter or an adapter, as the outlets are similar to those in the United States.

MONEY

- The currency in Costa Rica is called the *colón* (plural: *colones*).
- Contact your bank to alert them of upcoming travel plans and ask about international fees.
- Bring a combination of cash (about \$100-\$200) and cards. Be sure to bring a debit card with a 4-digit numerical pin number to be able to take out cash from ATM machines.
- Exchange your dollars for colones upon arrival in the country or use your dollars at almost any store and receive change in colones. If necessary, your guide will bring the group to a bank on the first full day of travel so that you can exchange or take out money. Some hotels also can exchange money at a good rate. Though you can exchange money at the airport, the exchange rate is higher there than at local banks.
- Be sure to carry your cards and most of your money in your money belt or neck pouch!
- Try to use small bills as oftentimes large bills are not accepted at small shops or in markets. Credit cards are accepted in hotels and larger restaurants and stores.
- There may not be many places to take out money in your family stay community. Plan to arrive with enough cash to get you through the week (at least \$50 USD).
- While in country, only walk around with the money that you need and a copy of your passport. The rest can be left in your hotel safe.
- A backup, emergency card is a good idea in case one card is lost or stolen.

CULTURAL TIP

Electricity and gas are expensive in Costa Rica. Be conscious of how long your showers are and make sure to turn off the lights behind you.

In some places in Costa Rica you will need to dispose of toilet paper in the garbage. Check with your host family, hostel or hotel to see what their process is.

TIPPING

Tipping is very important as many in the tourism industry depend on tips as a part of their regular income. Here is a guide to tipping in Costa Rica:

Restaurants are required by law to add a 13% tax and 10% tip to each bill. You do not need to add an additional tip.

Taxis: Cab drivers are not usually tipped unless extra service is provided (you will probably not ride in any taxis over the course of the program).

Hotel Staff: If hotel staff helps you carry your luggage in to or out of the hotel, it is customary to tip them \$1 USD for each bag that they carry for you. Please leave \$1-\$3 USD per night for the maid if you think they have done a nice job cleaning your room. It is nice to leave the tip on a daily basis rather than at the end of your stay, as it might not be the same person cleaning your room each day.

Local Guides (zip lining, rafting, kayaking, chocolate tour, etc.): \$8-10 USD total per guide on behalf of the entire group.

Guides that accompany the group throughout the program: \$4-\$6 USD per person, per day.

Drivers: \$2-\$3 USD per person, per day. You may have a different guide and driver for airport transfer days. If so, you can tip \$3-\$5 USD each on behalf of the group.

If you have any other questions about tipping, ask your guide!

FOOD

- Breakfast is included daily, and all meals are included during the family stay. Any other included meals are noted on your itinerary.
- Mealtimes are similar to the U.S. Generally, all meals are hearty. The most common breakfast is the national dish called *gallo pinto*.
- Lunches and dinners in Costa Rica are very similar and quite well-balanced meal. The most common lunch is called a *casado*, which you can find at small local restaurants called *sodas*. A *casado* includes some type of meat such as beef, chicken, pork, fish, a side salad, rice, black beans, fried plantains, served with some natural fruit drink. Usually, lunch is followed by a coffee break in the afternoon with bread and/or something sweet.
- Though the water is safe in most large cities, we recommend that you drink bottled water to avoid sickness.
- Visit local *sodas*! A *casado* or other typical dishes range in price from \$4 to \$8 USD. It is not only a great deal but is an excellent way to sample delicious, typical Costa Rican food.
- Travelers can find food for every budget! Most restaurants are comparable in price to the U.S., though there are smaller, more typical restaurants and cafeterias that are more economical. Buying snacks at *kioskos*, *pulperías*, or the grocery store is usually the cheapest way to go!

CULTURAL TIPS

*In general, the lifestyle in Costa Rica is slower and more relaxed. **Pura vida**, meaning “pure life” is Costa Rica’s unofficial slogan, and you will hear ticos use this phrase to express peace, thanks, satisfaction, and happiness.*

Be ready to try new foods and always offer to help in the kitchen during your family stay.

In-Country Transportation & Lodging

- Greet the driver.
- Keep buses clean and loud noises to a minimum.
- Remember that smells intensify in small places.
- Be on time and don't make the buses wait for you.
- Student hotel sleeping arrangements may involve sharing beds, as some hotels utilize a single large bed for their double rooms or two large beds for their triple/quadruple rooms. During the family stay, students may share a room with a host sibling (if applicable), but they will have their own bed.
- If your program has a guide, you will find they are a wonderful support and source of information for the program. That said, as the group leaders, you are still responsible for your students during travel. We ask that you partner with the guide as you travel and work to support them in their efforts or guidelines set for the group. We encourage you to work as a team with your guide!

Health & Safety

- Be sure to keep your passport (and other visas, green cards, or documentation), most of your money, and your cards in your money belt or neck pouch!
- If there is a safe in your hotel room, lock your valuables in it while you are out. If there is not a safe, hide money and valuables in your suitcase. **Don't forget to check the safe before you leave the hotel!**
- Pickpocketing is common in large cities, and they are very good at what they do. Pay extra close attention to your belongings and be sure to keep your valuables close to you at all times, especially when in crowds of people or walking on the street.
- If you have a purse/bag, bring a cross-body purse/bag that zips shut. If you are carrying a backpack, be sure that valuables are not located in easily-accessible pockets. We also recommend wearing your backpack in front of you versus on your back as you may normally do.
- Always travel in groups of three or more.
- Remember, the Xperitas emergency line is available 24 hours a day, but please only call it when you are experiencing a true emergency.
- Review the travel and vaccine recommendations for travelers provided by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). See Current Health and Safety Updates for information about current world events and illnesses.
- Keep printed insurance card on you at all times.

Communication

- Check with your cell phone provider regarding any international fees. At least one leader needs to have an international phone plan in order to be in touch with Xperitas if needed.
- For students, we advise using WiFi. There is often WiFi (or a computer for public use) available in your hotel, but keep in mind that the connection is often weak. You can download messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, to communicate with people at home for free while connected to WiFi.
- Ask your leader(s) about their policy around technology use while on the program.
- A great way for the entire group to stay in communication with parents/guardians back home is via a blog, WhatsApp group chat, private Facebook group, or group email.
- During the family stay, you may or may not have access to internet. You will have the contact information of both the local Family Stay Coordinator, as well as your group leader(s). If you do have internet, please be mindful of the time spent on your phone and try to focus on engaging with your host family.

COMMUNICATION TIPS

Costa Ricans greet each other with a beso, or a kiss on the cheek. Males greet each other with a handshake.

Costa Ricans are socially engaged people and are open to political discussions. Don't feel offended if they start a conversation about a topic that you may otherwise avoid in the U.S. They are just curious!

*When entering a room or a store, it is very common to greet the other people around with a **buenos días**, **buenas tardes** or **pura vida**. When leaving, don't forget to say **hasta luego**, **ciao**, or **adiós**.*

Ticos tend to place more emphasis on people and relationships than they do on a strict adherence to a set schedule. "Tico Time" is commonly referred to as being 15 minutes late.

Xperitas-Arranged Family Stay Experience®

- Your family is excited to meet you! The family stay is a great learning experience. Be sure to keep an open mind, do your best at practicing your Spanish language skills, and have fun getting to know your family.
- Try to be proactive and engage with your host family, such as asking to help cook a meal, offering to go with them to the local market or grocery store, playing a game of cards (Spot-it or Phase 10 are good options), bringing a scrapbook of your family at home), asking to go explore a nearby park, etc. These simple actions can go a long way in breaking the ice, helping with the language barrier/facilitating conversation, and learning about the local culture.
- Try to disconnect during the family stay by not using your phone all the time, and embrace the time to connect with your host family. Disconnecting and truly being present for the experience will allow you to notice more about your surroundings and be more intentional in your observations. We encourage parents/guardians to allow space for their children to disconnect as well.
- If you have any questions or concerns while staying with your host family, please contact your group leader(s) as they can best assist you and work with the local Family Stay Coordinator and Xperitas as applicable.
- If you submitted your family stay applications by the deadline, you should receive your host family's information about 2 weeks prior to departure.
- Respond as soon as possible when your host family contacts you. Keep your social media profiles clean and try not to judge your host by their profiles – better to get to know your host family through talking to them.
- It is nice to bring your host family a gift from your home state and/or a scrapbook or photos to show them what life is like where you live.
- In Costa Rica, toilet paper is usually thrown in the trash can to avoid causing problems with the plumbing. If you have any questions about this, please ask your host family.
- Electricity and gas are much more expensive in Costa Rica than in the United States. Be conscious of how long your showers are and make sure to turn off the lights behind you.
- Leave a thank you note for your hosts at your house on the last day of the family stay, as sending it via mail can be complicated.