



**Programas
Interculturales**
Costa Rica

Bienvenidos a Costa Rica

Welcome Booklet

AFS Intensive Intercultural Learning Program in Costa Rica

IPstNH17

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¡Hola!

Welcome To Costa Rica

On behalf of all the volunteers and staff of AFS Programas Interculturales Costa Rica we want to welcome you to the AFS Intensive Intercultural Learning Program.

Your wait is almost over and you will soon be in Costa Rica. For that reason we want to share with you some information about our country, our culture and the program. We are sure we cannot answer all the questions you have right now, but we hope this booklet is the beginning of a learning process that will become far more intense and fun once you arrive in the country.

Please read this document with attention. If you have questions before your departure, contact your AFS advisor in your country and we will try to clarify any information needed.

For now, have fun diving into this experience!

Meeting AFS



AFS: Mission and history

AFS is an international, voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit organization that provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding to create a more just and peaceful world.



The three letters stand for “American Field Service”. It all started a century ago, when a young group of volunteers organized an ambulance service during World War I and later during World War II.

During this time, AFS drivers transported millions of wounded people.

Finally, after all the cruelty had ended, the idea of exchanges for peace occurred and the ambulance drivers developed an idea of creating tolerance and understanding through exchanges of a new generation.

Today AFS connects people from all over the world. For almost 70 years young people have been experiencing other cultures. They go to school or work in community service projects. They live in host families, who share their home for pure motivation. Their contribution to a just and peaceful world is building a net of friendships across the globe.



AFS Intercultural Programs in Costa Rica

AFS Intercultural Programs Costa Rica is one of the most prestigious intercultural education organizations in the country, with more than 60 years of service and member of the AFS Intercultural Programs network, a worldwide, non-profit, volunteer based organization.

AFS started operations in Costa Rica in 1955. Most of the early activities were related to the traditional Year School Program; but in time the organization has diversified the programs and educational activities aimed at diverse people at local and national levels.



The organization has a strong, community-based volunteer structure supported by a National Office with specialized staff. Every year more than 350 international students are hosted in Costa Rica and 130 Costa Ricans travel abroad for intercultural experiences.

Our programs have different cycles, meaning that people come and leave Costa Rica in

different times of the year, usually at the beginning of each semester.

The organization has 35 local volunteer chapters distributed in the seven provinces of Costa Rica and three national volunteer commissions dedicated to improve the educational impact of the activities of the organization.



AFS Intensive Intercultural Learning Programs

AFS Costa Rica has hosted the “AFS Intensive Intercultural Learning Program” for many years. Hundreds of students from five different continents have been part of this program and communities and schools in the seven provinces of Costa Rica have been hosts to these learning experiences.

The program has, off course, evolved through all these years. In its current form, the program involves a group of three consecutive modules. It is important to notice that your specific program includes the final two modules (Homestay & School Experience + Recreational Bus Trip) but not first one (Spanish language course).

A very important detail is that **you cannot change your program’s components (add or reduce modules) once your enrolment has been completed.**

The basic structure of the program is this:



Option 1	Full Intensive Program (8 weeks)		
	2 weeks of Spanish Language Camp	5 weeks of High School Experience	1 week of Recreational Bus Trip
Option 2	Language + High School Intensive Program (7 weeks)		
	2 weeks of Spanish Language Camp	5 weeks of High School Experience	
	Option 3	High School + Bus Trip Intensive Program (6 weeks)	
		5 weeks of High School Experience	1 week of Recreational Bus Trip

School & Homestay + Recreational Bus Trip Program

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The School & Homestay Experience + Recreational Bus Trip intensive program of AFS Costa Rica is a combination of High School experience with Costa Rican classmates, integration with a local volunteer host family and, just before the end of the program, a recreational bus trip with other international students to two natural attractions of Costa Rica. Here you have a step-by-step quick look at the program.



Arrival in Costa Rica: the AFS volunteers will be waiting for you at the airport and then take you (by private bus) to a training facility a few minutes away. There you will stay overnight with students arriving from different countries.

Arrival Orientation: the experience in Costa Rica starts with a short orientation where the AFS volunteers will explain you some basic characteristics of the Costa Rican culture and the program. Here you will receive additional tips to better adapt into your host family life and your school experience. This is an opportunity for you to ask all the questions in your mind, but also to meet other AFS students from around the world.



Arrival in your Host Community: immediately after the arrival orientation you will travel with a group of international students to your host community, where you will meet the local AFS volunteers and your host family. This will be a short ride and then... you go to your new home.



Family life and school experience: and then you start a five-week home stay with a volunteer host family and integration in regular high school lessons in a local school with Costa Rican classmates. This is the chance to experience the life and culture of the people of Costa Rica from within. It is a full immersion into the living of the local people.

The selection of the host families is made in accordance with AFS international quality standards and procedures, and AFS representatives coordinate the high school enrolment and follow up. During this section of the program, the students have the support and guidance of their host family, the hosting school staff and the AFS volunteers in the local chapter.



In the AFS programs, all host families are volunteers (they do not receive a payment to have you at home). That is one of basic principles of this program and because of that you will not be a guest, but a member of the family, with various responsibilities and you need to follow their rules like other sons or daughters in the family.

It is important to understand that, even when the program takes place during the sending countries' vacations period, this is not a vacation program and attendance to all school lessons is mandatory. You will be part of the normal school experience of your Costa Rican classmates and your effort to integrate and learn is expected.

Be prepared because, at some moment during your stay in the school, **it will be expected from you to prepare a short presentation about your country and your culture.** Bring a flag or other representative things... and (if possible) learn to prepare some easy but representative dish from your country.





End of Stay Orientation: at the end of your home-stay and school time, the different groups of international students will meet again for a final AFS orientation. The encounter is an opportunity to share your experiences and reflect on the different things you have learned about Costa Rica, the culture and the people. It is a transitional activity before returning home.

Recreational bus trip: the last part of the program is a five-day recreational bus trip with the other international students and AFS supervision to two touristic attractions. One of the destinations is in the northern mountain cord in the middle of Costa Rica, near the world-famous Arenal volcano. The other destination is the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, where you will have the chance to relax and enjoy the waters of the topical ocean.



Return to your home country: and then will be time to say good bye to your new international friends and take back home all the learning and memories of your unique experience in Costa Rica.

Rules of the Program

All AFS programs have rules you must follow. Most rules exist for your own protection, but they also seek to offer a clear framework and a satisfactory experience to all parts involved in this experience (families, schools, AFS volunteers and students). Here are the rules of the AFS Intensive Intercultural Learning Program.

International AFS rules:

- No use, possession or relation with non-prescribed drugs.
- No hitchhiking.
- No driving any kind of motor vehicle.

Breaking any of these rules means the immediate dismissal from the program and the return to your home country.

AFS Costa Rica rules:

It is NOT allowed to buy or drink alcoholic beverages:

- It is not allowed for any participant on the Intensive Program of AFS Costa Rica to buy or drink alcoholic beverages (including beer). To buy this kind of products for any person under 18 years old is against the law in the country.

Host family rules must be respected:

- This program includes a component of home-stay and host family integration. Each family can have different rules in their home and they can determine the rules that their exchange son/daughter must follow as part of their family. It is the responsibility of the AFS student to respect and follow all the rules that his/her host family has for him/her (even if those rules are different or stricter than the rules of other students' host families)

Attendance and good behavior in all School lessons is mandatory:

- This program is a study program and as such requires the active participation of the students in all lessons and complementary activities (including regular school lessons). Any absence to class must be informed and justified to the teacher. Good and responsible behavior in class is also expected. Repeated absences, lack of effort or bad behavior in class can be reasons for early program termination.

Attendance and good behavior in AFS activities is mandatory:

- This program includes different complementary activities prepared by AFS at a local and national level. The participation in these activities is mandatory if informed so. Good behavior is expected during these activities.

AFS staff and volunteers must be respected:

- AFS in Costa Rica will give you guidance and support through a network of staff and volunteers in the country and specifically in your local community. Their main objectives are your safety, your responsible enjoyment of the program and the satisfaction of your host family. You must treat these staff and volunteers with respect and follow their indications.

Overnight travel or stay (without your host family) is not allowed while on the program:

- For safety reasons, AFS Costa Rica does not allow the students of this programs to travel outside their host community (individually or in group) if the activity requires to travel or to stay overnight. Any travel outside the host community (that does not require traveling or staying overnight) must be approved in advance by the host family and the AFS local volunteer. To travel or to stay overnight outside the host community is only allowed if the student is accompanied by an adult member of his/her own host family (over 21 years old).

Costa Rican Culture



About Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a small country in Latin America, famous for being one of the most stable democracies in the world and a country without army.

It is the country on Earth with the larger percentage of its total area set aside in parks and natural reserves, and according to the World Database of Happiness, the happiest country on the planet.

The total population of the country is about 4,6 million people. The country's official language is Spanish and the official currency is the "Colón" (US\$ 1 = 565 colones).

The ecological and cultural history of Costa Rica is based in the fact that this land was the place of encounter of North America and South America. That means that the vegetal and animal species (as well as the people) from the north and the south of the American continent got together in Costa Rica thousands of years ago. This is also the reason why Costa Rica is one of the most bio-diverse countries on Earth.



Costa Rica was colonized by the Spaniards in the 16th Century and became an independent, democratic republic in 1821. Now the country has various characteristics recognized around the world, like very good health indicators and a high rate of alphabetization.

The country has a mountain cord that goes from north to south-east and the main cities are settled in the valleys of those mountains (in the middle of the country). There are coasts to the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea and a person could drive from coast to coast in four hours.

History and Culture

The territory known today as Costa Rica was originally populated by various indigenous groups who were reduced and displaced by the Spanish “conquistadores” since the early 16th Century. The local indigenous populations were smaller and less lavish than the big empires in the north (Aztecs, Mayans) and the south (Incas) of the continent, and that was one reason why the colony process in Costa Rica was a bit different than in other parts of America.

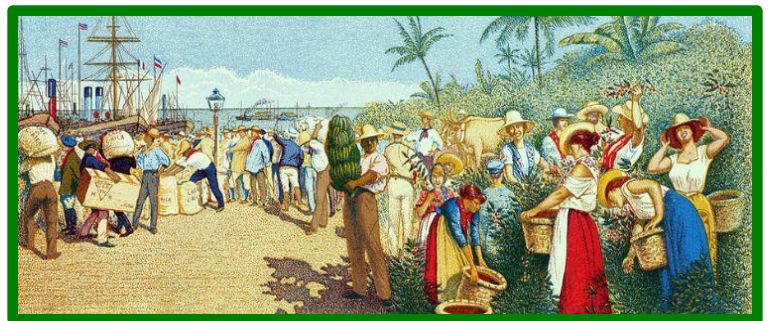


The population of “criollos” (local descendants of Europeans) and “mestizos” (mix of Europeans and indigenous) grew slowly in this land, with an economy based primarily in agriculture.

After the independence from Spain (1821) Costa Rica started moving forward, developing new economic activities and commercial relationships with countries in different parts of world. The family-based economical activities and the interest in collective progress marked the model of development followed for more than a century, with milestones such as the public education system, the universal health care through social security, the abolition of the army, and the national parks system, among others.

Other cultural groups have enriched Costa Rica over time. The afro-Caribbean population, Asian descendants, Europe descendants and many more have been integrated into the cultural fabric of the country.

The model of development favored a stable democracy and a general wellbeing of the population, although far from the riches of industrialized countries. But the model has shifted in recent decades.



The start of the 21st Century has brought new challenges for the country, as in any other part of the world, regarding how to maintain our cultural identity as the same time that we integrate effectively in the global economy. There also many challenges in different areas of our development model. But that is something you will find out yourself.

Regarding the people, Costa Ricans are called Ticos because of their liking of using the diminutive form for adjectives. They say for example “chiquitico” for “very small”, or “poquitico” for “a little”.

Ticos are diverse, not only in their cultural background but in many other ways. Although the country is small in territory, there are cultural and everyday-life differences from one region to the other.

The main cities of the country are located in the Central Valley, where the provinces of San José, Alajuela, Heredia and Cartago converge. These small cities are located within a radius of 30km (with San José, the capital city, in the center).

Many towns are close to these cities and, going away from the Central Valley, the towns become smaller and the rural settings prevail. The three coastal provinces (Puntarenas and Guanacaste –in the Pacific– and Limón –in the Caribbean–) have all small cities, but are mainly composed by small towns and natural settings. Ticos in the cities have more hectic lives, while people in small towns and rural places move at a different pace.



In general Costa Ricans are very friendly, and they have great interest in family life and curiosity towards other people. This curiosity can be reflected in positive aspects (like solidarity and closeness) and in negative aspects (like gossip).

There are many other characteristic that can be attributed to Ticos, and you will learn about them once you are in Costa Rica.

Important advice for everyday life

Costa Rican culture is more informal than formal. However, that informality is something that grows when people are gaining trust and familiarity with each other. That can be seen in different aspects such as:

Language: most Ticos will have an informal approach to others while chatting. It is not common in Costa Rica to refer to others as “tú” –singular– or “vosotros” –plural– (both commonly used in Spain). People will usually refer to others as “usted” or “vos” –both singular– or “ustedes” –plural–.



Greetings: The common way to greet other people is by shaking hands with a male or with a single kiss in the cheek with a known woman. Culturally, men do not kiss each other (except fathers and sons, in some cases). When you don't know someone (or in a work context), you usually just shake hands (no matter if is male or female).

Talking: when you arrive at a place, meet someone or someone comes to your place, it is important to always say hello (hola) and maybe have a quick informal chat (how are you? nice to meet you! or something like that); people usually answer with a polite smile and some positive words. That will usually be sufficient with strangers. Family members (extended family included) will probably expect a little bit more words.

Dress: the Costa Rican weather is tropical and in most parts of the country the temperature will be over 20°C most of the year. That means that most people do not use suits (not even for work), but instead it is common to use jeans, T-shirts, middle-length dresses, and other garments made of light fabrics. Depending on the part of the country where you live, the clothes can vary a little bit.

During school attendance, you should adjust to the school's dress code. They might require the use of specific clothing (uniform) and that must be respected. *Make sure to bring some blue jeans (no shorts, no holes, no colors) in case the school allows the use of those with their school shirt.*



As you will live in an urban Costa Rican community, you can use informal clothes after school and during weekends. The exact details regarding dress code in your community is something you will find out once you are living in CRC; but be sure that most your days you won't be using your flip-flops, short-pants and sleeveless shirt or blouse.

Styles of Communication

In general, Costa Rican people will resort to diplomacy as the best tactic of communication. If something bothers them, they prefer to let it pass, not wanting to make a fuss or to hurt the person's feelings. If the bothersome situation persists they might indirectly try to let you know about it by ignoring you, being cold or limiting themselves to brief sentences in their contact with you. Through these means you will usually pick up quickly that something is wrong.

There is little open confrontation, the preference being for expressing one's views in a diplomatic way. You have to be careful in the way you communicate with others. You may think you are just making a very fair point when conversing with someone, just to realize a few days later that the person felt your attitude was aggressive, disrespectful or extreme.



Most Costa Ricans will think about the way of presenting their ideas without imposition or harm, but that is totally conditioned by cultural perceptions. You may think Costa Ricans go around-and-around before getting to the point, but that is a way of communication.

We recommend you to always be honest and clear, but consider this important difference and try to learn as quickly as possible how to read these cultural clues of communication.

Family Life

The family is considered the very foundation of society and a high value is placed on being close-knit and spending time together. Families expect to share time together with everyone present, usually during dinner or watching TV. Free time is usually shared in the evening on weekdays and on weekends, Sunday being the traditional family day.



Parents in Costa Rica have the final word in many decisions taken. Although some families might consult with their sons and daughters, parents have the last word. If you happen to disagree with a decision, ask for an explanation. The age of a son or daughter is quite irrelevant, as long as a son or daughter lives under the parents' roof – which is not uncommon in Costa Rica for people in their mid- and late twenties.

It is important that you understand this concept, because you will be treated exactly the same way. You might trade a good part of your independence and capability of taking decisions for being accepted as a member of your Costa Rican family – which is the final goal.

Costa Rican teenagers and young adults are much more dependent than in other parts of the world and the amount of freedom they enjoy is restricted. Independence is definitely not valued as strongly as in many of your countries as it goes against the concept of family unity, togetherness, etc.



As part of a Costa Rican family, you need to understand that your privacy will have new limits and your host parents will expect to be consulted regarding your activities and responsibilities and be respected in their rules.

Observing and asking are two basic skills to success in your AFS program. Regarding food each family has their own rules, some might favor you to pick anything from the refrigerator, others might find that very same behavior offensive. It's very important that you offer to help with house chores, such as cleaning, washing plates and laundry, etc. Families don't want to "serve" as a hotel, neither feeling like being treated as one. Therefore your participation in the house chores will be generally perceived positively.

Sense of Time

Costa Rican society in general has a very relaxed notion of time. This however can be really difficult to “get it” right.



While you will often hear the words “ahorita”, “ahora” or “ya casi” (all referring to an undetermined, and possibly prolonged, “soon”) and that could potentially drive you crazy, sometimes people will expect prompt action and punctuality.

Informal plans (with family or friends) will usually be treated in a more loose way, with less planning, less attention to

schedules and in a more relaxed way. In our culture, people and relations are more important than time (but not more important than rules).

When plans to do something are being made, don't be surprised if they don't work out. A friend says he'll phone/come and gets you at eight o'clock, but never calls/shows up. Your family says they are going to the beach/country next weekend but nothing happens. Or, they tell you half an hour before leaving to pack your things as the family will be spending the weekend at a relative's. Basically, people feel that there's always another day and don't feel stressed when something doesn't work out. You have to go with the flow and you will probably end up liking it.



Punctuality is expected for school, language lessons, mealtimes, and curfews, taking planes/buses, having a doctor's appointment (and AFS activities).

The weather and the bugs

Costa Rica has just two seasons - the dry season and the rainy season. This sounds easy – but it's not. Each region of our country has a different climate.



Dry season begins in December and ends on April/May (in most parts of the country). The rest of the year is rainy season, but the most intense rainy period is from August to October. During rainy season you may expect partially clouded skies in the morning and rain in the afternoons – pretty much every day –. Some parts of the country, like the North-Pacific, have less days of rain, but when it rains is very intense.

The combination of rain and “high” temperatures causes a very humid atmosphere. That is what keeps Costa Rican forests green and favours our famous biodiversity. However, the humidity can

be difficult to get used to, especially for people from non-tropical countries.

Temperature change very fast, but it usually is between 16° and 30° Celsius in the Central Valley and 20° to 32° Celsius on the coast and the low lands. It can go up or down a little, but it will never be extreme. The altitude of your community can be a good indicator for the climate you'll encounter and what you should wear.

The climate is not only crucial for the kind of clothes you want to bring, but also for the protective measures that you'll need to enforce. Generally one can say that you'll encounter more insects the lower altitude you get to.



In Central Valley and the mountain towns you won't find as many mosquitoes as in the coast or the low lands. However, protective sprays are used in most parts of the country, but that is a detail you should check with your host family.

Cockroaches, ants and other bugs are part of the reality here. That is not necessarily related to the cleanliness of your new house, but to the fact that bugs are present in most regions of this tropical country. If you have few bugs in your region... you're lucky! If you have many... well, you will be living with them anyways.

Some additional things to consider

If you are bringing electronic appliances, like your laptop, tablet, camera, cellphone, or other “rechargeable”, take into consideration that the usual voltage in Costa Rican homes is 120v.

Different voltages or different power outlets are very difficult to find. If you need it, you better bring an adapter with you.

About cell-phones: there are a various phone and mobile internet companies. You can contract the services very easily according to your needs and budget. The communications networks are 3G and 4G technologies and most phones will work here, but if you bring your own phone make sure it is not blocked to use outside your country or outside your current service provider. However, as you are going to stay for a very short time, maybe you should consider “disconnecting” from your phone for a few weeks.



If you need special medication, make sure to bring enough for the time of your stay (with the appropriate medical prescription). Even when you can find pharmacies in most towns, it might be difficult to find some specific medications or brands.



You can bring your international credit/debit card. Just make sure that it will work in Costa Rica (you can ask your bank). ATM's (cash machines) are found in most towns and in every city. Visa and MasterCard are accepted in many places (restaurants, supermarkets, stores).

If you are bringing cash, we recommend you to bring it in US dollars. We do not recommend you to have considerable sums of money with you, nor to leave much money at your home (minimize the risk). Even if you have your account in dollars, you can make withdrawals in “colones” (our national currency) in any bank.

Without a doubt, you will need many other items while in Costa Rica. We have given you some ideas of things you should bring, but it is in no way a definitive list. We recommend you to read a little bit more about Costa Rica and to use your common sense. Don't let important decisions for the last minute. You don't want to forget something really important for you at home.

Also consider that you can find and buy many every day-use items once in Costa Rica. You will surely need insect-repellent spray, sunscreen, shampoo and more. You will definitively need an umbrella. Be smart; don't pack things that you will easily find in any supermarket in your host community.

Final words

If you have further questions regarding this program, please feel free to contact your AFS advisor in your home country

We are waiting for you in Costa Rica. ¡Pura vida!

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