



**Programas
Interculturales**
Costa Rica

Guidelines for Participants Safety

AFS Programs in Costa Rica

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Conectando Vidas, Compartiendo Culturas

Introduction

A primary objective of experiential learning programs such as those offered by AFS is to help the participant learn through observation, question, dialogue, discussion and experience.

From experience, AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn is great, but it is not necessarily easy. Participants encounter complex situations along the way and there is potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. If students were left to their own devices, the consequences could be very distressing.

For these reasons with the help of host families, local community AFS contacts and school personnel, AFS has devised the system of "program support" for all participants providing a wide range of supportive activities and services. The purpose is to provide a "safety net", a consistently supportive environment in which participants can ask questions, obtain advice and help.

AFS cannot supply all the possible answers, but through our support systems, we can help to guide participants towards asking appropriate questions.

It is not possible to try to anticipate all possible situations pertaining to individual safety concerns. Many of these issues are specific to individual countries or parts of a single country. In general, AFS recommends talking with the host family, AFS local committee members and staff from the host school soon after the student arrives into the host family home about any of the information in this guidebook and about any questions students may have about specific personal issues.

AFS suggests that students ask their host family about specific situations about which they are concerned or worried, recognizing that most of the information about the host country is prevalent in movies and in media publications and that it may not be accurate for the country or the specific area of the country in which the family lives.

Within this context, what follows are some topics and general suggestions.





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In or around the house

According to international data, Costa Rica is one of the safest countries of Latin America; however the perception of insecurity among most Costa Ricans is very high (especially in the main cities). You must understand that even when Costa Rica is a peaceful country, there are many risks you may encounter. That is why it is so important for you to talk to your host family and to follow their advice regarding safety precautions.

In Costa Rica most houses and buildings have certain type of protection against theft. This includes bars on the windows, on the doors and around the house. It doesn't look very pretty, but these are ways of making the home safe for the family. Some other homes and buildings have some kind of alarm. In various neighborhoods there is organized private security that can vary from city blocks with a single security officer to communities with very complex security systems.

Most host families do not give house keys to the student, as usually someone will always be at home. If this is your case, your family will tell you what to do. If you get a house key you must be very careful not to lose it!

In Costa Rica we must lock doors and windows at all times. If for some reason you arrive at your home without keys and there is no one there, try to call your host family or wait for them at a neighbor's home. Do not attempt to enter the house by climbing a wall or thru the window, anyone might confuse with a burglar and potentially this can be very dangerous. Additionally, if your host family has given you a set of house keys and for any reason you lose them; you should notify them about this immediately. Do not hide this information from them. Being very safety-conscious, they might want to change the house locks right away.

We strongly recommend you not to leave any jewelry items (and other valuables) lying around in the house or elsewhere. It is likely that a number of different persons visit the house in addition to host family members and domestic help. Therefore, in the event of loss of valuable belongings, it would be very difficult to find out if you lost them, if you or somebody else misplaced them, or if somebody actually took them. To avoid problems, take care of your money and valuables.

We recommend you not to leave any of your valuable personal belongings lying around the house, especially if you have brother or sisters. The concept of privacy in Costa Rica may differ to a certain extent from the standards you may be used to in your own country – remember that the concept of privacy is culturally defined and therefore varies from culture to culture. People of your family here could possibly use your things just because “they are there”. They probably will not have bad intentions, but something could potentially be lost or damaged.





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At the beginning of your experience we do not recommend you to answer the home phone. After you feel more confident with your Spanish abilities, ask your family what to say if you have to answer a phone call. On the other hand, you should ask your host family from the very beginning how to use the home phone and how to contact anyone in case of an emergency; for example, how to reach a relative, the fire department, police, ambulance, etc.

Ask your host family about their telephone manners. For example, what information should not be given out and to whom. Normally host families do not like to give their telephone number or home address to a person they do not know.

In Costa Rica the residential voltage is mostly 110V. All electric appliances should be handled with extreme care to avoid dangerous electric shocks. Many people use gas for cooking and you should be very careful when using such appliances (don't leave them on when you are not home or when you go to sleep, etc....)

In many houses, families do not use a water-heater tank, so you will only find hot water in the shower. In these houses, there is usually a "thermo-shower", an appliance that heats the water directly when the water is running. These devices are normally very secure, but if they are new for you or if you feel you want to know more about them, ask your family. Also take into consideration that some families may not have hot water at home, not even in the shower.

A few questions you may need to ask your host family

1. Do you keep the house's doors locked at all times? If not, when should the doors be locked?
2. If a stranger comes to the door, is it safe to open the door? What should I do if I am alone in the house?
3. Will I have my own house key?
4. If I don't have my key or arrive home unexpectedly and the door is locked, what should I do?
5. If there is a problem while I am alone at home, who should I contact?
6. Where are the emergency phone numbers listed?
7. What should I say when answering the phone?
8. How much information can I give over the phone? What information should I not give?
9. Are there any appliances in the house that could cause a problem and that I should be aware of?





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Outside the house

As stated before, Costa Rica is a safe country if you are cautious and follow the security instructions given to you. Like in any other country, there may be some parts of your host city you should avoid going to, you should always dress in an appropriate manner, you should always be careful about your belongings (cameras, bags, books, etc). A good way to do this is to watch carefully what the other members of your family do, how they dress, what kinds of jewelry they use and when. Find out some of the local security habits by talking to them.

In general, participants should ask their host family, friends, or AFS volunteers what kind of personal safety concerns exist outside the home, in and outside of the host community; which areas of the city/town are dangerous and at what time of the day. Participants are expected to follow advice about places or activities which they should avoid.

It would be best not to explore too far the places around you until you can ask for directions in Spanish. If you get lost you will find Costa Ricans can be very kind and helpful if you ask them for directions. When you are lost the best place to ask for directions will be a "pulpería" (small corner grocery store), a supermarket or a gas station. Another suggestion is to call your host family or close relative, a friend, your local AFS contact person or, ultimately, the AFS National Office or the AFS 24-hour emergency service.

Whether male or female, in the main cities or elsewhere, you should avoid being alone at night in certain areas. You shouldn't walk alone on the streets late at night. Your host family would not like the idea of you getting home late at night by yourself. You should always ask someone you know well and trust (not someone you just met at a party or some you have talked a couple of times) to accompany you home. If such a person is not around, call your family and ask them to come and get you. If you by any unavoidable circumstance you are walking alone at night (and please keep in mind that in Costa Rica it gets dark around 6 p.m. all year around) try to walk on streets that are well lit and with some activity in them.

When walking in crowded areas you should take care of your valuables because pick pocketing is more common in crowded areas, bus stops and inside the buses (that many times can be very crowded, with people standing).

In general, Costa Ricans perceive downtown San Jose as a place where special precautions need to be taken with respect to safety. In the capital city there are places such as "Calle de La Amargura" in San Pedro, Calle 8, and crowded bus stops, such as the "Coca Cola" bus terminal, which can be dangerous, particularly at night. These kinds of precautions are convenient to follow in any other major city.





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There is one difference between male and female when it comes to safety, and women should particularly take note of this. If you are a girl, there may be some places and areas you should avoid going to. Always follow your host family's advice in this respect.

The "street reality" in Costa Rica can be difficult to most foreign young women because of some very unpleasant situations. When walking any street, males can make nasty remarks to you out loud or in worse cases, especially in crowded places (like bus stops, buses, stadiums and others), some persons could try to touch your body or your hair.

The general advices if this happens to you are to ask for help and to walk to the first safe place you can identify (a mini-market, an office, a store – anywhere where there are more people who could help you in case of need). You should avoid eye contact with any men who say unpleasant things to you. Keeping eye contact with them might actually be interpreted as an invitation to approach you.

You can read more about this latter in this booklet, on the section of "Sex and sexual harassment".





Public transportation

In general terms, public transportation is safe but you must always watch your money and belongings. If you take a bus or a taxi, do not wear any fancy jewelry; take it off or hide it under your clothes. If you have to ride a public bus and you have a bag or purse with you, protect it by wearing it against your chest. Never leave your belongings unattended and always be alert about them. Bags can easily be opened or cut open by experienced hands when you are distracted.

AFS participants should ask their host families about bus schedules and specific precautions to consider when using public transportation; these might be different depending on where you live.

Most urban buses stop running at around 10:30 or 11 p.m. Taxis usually run 24 hours a day.

If you are going to take a taxi, make sure it is a red colored taxi with a light on the roof showing the name of the company, and with a yellow triangle with the taxi's number painted on each of the front doors of the car. These are registered taxis with an appropriate license. Other cars might offer the same kind of service, but actually are unregistered taxis with no insurance or supervision. They are usually called "pirates" by our people, and you should avoid them.

In Costa Rica cars are driven on the right hand side of the street. The traffic is known to be rather chaotic and you will need to pay special and careful attention when you walk or cross the streets.

Bicycles are widely used in some parts of the country, particularly in the flat coastal areas of the provinces of Guanacaste, Puntarenas and Limón. Our recommendations: wear appropriate protection and bright clothing, always be on the defensive and never ride your bike on main roads or highways!





Money and acquaintances

Some people in Costa Rica, as is the case in other developing countries, assume that all foreigners are wealthy. A consequence of this perception is that, with the significant increase in tourism that Costa Rica has experienced during the past several years, there has also been an increase in the number of thefts directed to foreigners.

Although not all thefts can be prevented, there are things that foreigners can do to minimize the possibility of being the subject of theft, e.g. taking care of personal belongings, avoiding ostentatious display of expensive personal items or equipment, and avoiding excessive spending in public.

Be careful about people wanting to take monetary advantage of you. Given the fact that you are a foreigner, some people may be "very friendly" with you if they want something from you. Use your common sense, don't let people play you.

In general, it would be very wise for you to put your money in a local bank account (you can open a savings account here in U.S. dollars or in our local currency) and to be moderate about your spending. Later on you might regret the fact that you spent so much money during your first weeks here.

You will find automatic cash machines in many places around the country. If you are going to use one to withdraw cash from your debit or credit card, make sure that no one has access to your pin number (**not even your host family**).

If you need help from someone else understanding the instructions in Spanish, make sure the person assisting you looks the other way at the time you punch your pin number. Always ask the other person to do it, even if you feel you're being a bit rude. If you suspect someone else knows your card's pin number, change it immediately.

Remember that you will probably look different than most Costa Ricans, so people will probably stare at you. Relax and be friendly, this will enable you to become friends with people in town.

On the other hand, stay away from strangers who aggressively want to talk to you, who invite you on the spot to go somewhere or who insist on accompanying you somewhere. Be firm and calm in those cases. If a stranger demands you to surrender your money and/or personal belongings on the street, please stay calm and give them what they want. Never try to oppose resistance or use any kind of weapon to defend yourself, as this might trigger an immediate aggression to you from the other person(s). Your personal safety is much more important than any material things you might lose in such a situation.





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In the school

You will probably attend a public high school in Costa Rica. Most schools have disciplinary and safety regulations that you must learn and to follow at all time.

Some high schools use the system in which the students move from classroom to classroom according to the subject; and others have the teachers move from class to class. That means that you should be very careful with you personal belongings, because many people can use the same classrooms at different times.

During classes and breaks, do not leave your personal belongings around expecting that everyone else is going to look after them. When going out of the classroom for recess or any other activity, take your purse, wallet or anything valuable with you. Avoid taking jewelry, electronic appliances (your iPod, tablet, smartphone, etc.) or substantial amounts of money, to school.

Skipping classes or leaving the school to go out with some classmates or friends is not only to break school rules, but also it can put you in dangerous situations. We recommend you to respect school rules and if you do not have a specific class and want to do something outside school, to call your host family and ask them for permission first and inform them where you are going to be and with whom.

It is important to know that it is strictly forbidden to smoke or drink at school, and anywhere else outside of the school while wearing a school uniform.

Drugs sometimes circulate in Costa Rican high schools, and this is a growing concern in our society. Our advice is not only to strictly adhere to the AFS rule in this respect, but also to protect your personal well-being and your good standing in the community by staying away from people who are identified with drug consumption/handling. These people might try to attract you to their group simply because you are "the new kid in town."

Do not befriend with people related to drugs (consumers or handlers), even if they seem nice to you. Remember that AFS rules include the immediate dismissal from the program for anyone related to drugs (that includes being in company of people using or in possession of drugs).

Beyond the AFS rule, to befriend or contact people related with drugs (consumers or dealers) can put you in very dangerous situations. Violence in schools is quite rare, but recent incidents reported by the media are often connected with drugs. **If at any moment you feel threatened or insecure regarding something out of the ordinary happening in your school be sure to inform your host family and your AFS contact person immediately.**





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Cultural and social context

Remember all that you know, but be prepared to find that you are now in a new culture and many things will work different than in your country. You may have an idea of how different the new country is but you only will begin to understand the deep and important differences once you are living in your new context.

In general, knowing the culture is usually the best preparation for knowing how to handle uncomfortable social situations. That will not happen immediately and it can be confusing for several months.

Host family, friends, classmates, teachers and AFS volunteers can help you to begin your learning process, but you must be open to ask, to analyze and to accept that living a different country is a challenge and implies facing risks similar and different than the ones you face at home.

We recommend you to read very carefully the next recommendations and try to follow the advices. Some might seem obvious, but remember that living these situations in a new context puts a different spin in the way you, or the people around you, may act.

All AFS participants should carry their identification at all times. AFS Costa Rica will provide you with an identification card at the beginning of the program. We also recommend to make a photocopy of your passport (including the page that has the stamp with the date you entered the country), as immigration or other police might request your identification. You should always carry with you these two pieces of identification. If you are detained because you are not carrying your identification, contact your host family, the AFS office or the AFS emergency service immediately. **No authority is entitled to take your passport away from you.**

All AFS participants on Year and Semester school programs will request a visa called "student temporary residence permit" to stay in the country for the duration of the program. This visa will be obtained for you by AFS after you arrive in the country and it does not allow you to hold a paid job of any kind. Be extremely careful with your passport, in some cases it is very difficult, bureaucratic and expensive to get another one.

We recommend to always carry with you the name, complete address and telephone number of your host family and close relatives. When traveling out of town take note of the name, address and telephone number of the family or friends you will be visiting.

Regarding law breaking and/or law enforcement, AFS participants are subject to the law of the hosting country. Neither AFS nor the national government of the students' home country has the ability to protect the participant from punishment with respect to drugs, thefts and other legal offenses.

Participants and their natural parents are fully responsible for damages caused by the participants to third parties, and any cost involved in connection with such claims. AFS does NOT assume any legal liability for the participants.





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The international “Gold Rules”

It is forbidden for AFS participants to **use, posses or be related to drugs**, except those specifically prescribed to him/her for medical purposes. Violation of this rule is cause for dismissal from the program and immediate return to the home country. It is most important that you remember this, should you find yourself in a situation where illegal substances are present or are being used.

Be smart. Do not lose the opportunity of completing your exchange program because of peer pressure or for relating with the wrong people. In the end, no matter the context, the decision to stay away from drugs and people related to them is only yours.

AFS participants must **not drive any motor vehicle**. That includes automobiles, motorcycles, motor boats, ATVs (quad-bike), and any other.

In Costa Rica a person must be 18 years old to get a driver's license, but as an AFS participant you are not permitted to drive. We suggest you to never get into a motor vehicle with a younger driver, with someone without a license or with a driver that has consumed alcohol. If you find yourself in this kind of situation, you should contact immediately your host family, a relative or someone from AFS, and they will let you know what to do.

You must never, under any circumstances, request or accept **hitchhiking**. It is not only forbidden for AFS participants, but can actually be very dangerous and potentially disastrous in some situations.

Never accept a ride from anyone you do not know very well, not even if he/she is someone you have met before or someone who knows your family. Never accept to travel in a vehicle if you do not trust the driver or other passenger. We recommend you to be very careful accepting to go with groups of friends in a car if you are not accompanied by a responsible adult that you trust.

These rules exist **for your own security**. Take them very seriously and always respect them.





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Alcohol consumption

Very few things can make you more vulnerable to dangerous or potentially fatal situations than alcohol abuse. This statement is not a joke or an exaggeration, it is the truth.

In many countries it is perfectly normal for people your age to drink with moderation. However, the legal drinking age in Costa Rica is 18 years old and even if you turn 18 during your exchange in the country, AFS requests you not to drink alcoholic beverages if you are a student on the school program.

This rule might be confusing to you once you arrive in Costa Rica, mostly because underage drinking is quite common in many teenage social situations, even if there is a law that prohibits teenagers to buy liquor or consume it in public places.

It is also possible that in some families, they may offer you some kind of alcoholic drink (beer or local liquors) if you are "almost 18". Our recommendation is for you to decline any such invitation and to explain that you are not allowed to do it under the rules of your program.

Although the bar and liquor store owners do not always comply to and respect this law, you should be aware that policemen can suddenly arrive at these places, and detain any teenagers that are caught drinking and take them to the police station.

Participants should be careful not to compromise their own set of values. The fact that many Costa Ricans have what seems to be a relaxed attitude toward alcohol consumption and that many teens tend to drink alcohol in some situations, does not mean that you have to do so too.

Always use your best judgment; don't let others influence you into drinking, and also pay attention to the fact that habits and tolerance in respect to drinking might vary greatly from one family to another. While some families might allow their children to drink alcohol, most others have very strict rules against it.

You should also remember that being 18 or turning 18 while in Costa Rica will not change your host family's perceptions and rules about alcohol consumption or abuse, nor change or make more flexible AFS rules and policies about this same subject.

Drinking and excessive drinking will always make you much more vulnerable to situations of crime, accident or abuse. Even people you trust can be very different and harm you when alcohol consumption is involved. You have to be very careful regarding this issue.

Breaking this rule, even if you are of legal drinking age in your home country, is reason for dismissal from the program and return to your home country.





Sex and sexual harassment

Costa Rican society can usually be described as quite conservative when it comes to sex, sexual education, and sexual conducts in general. While this is the case, we are also a society with evolving values and a lot of external influences, so attitudes and opinions on sex are changing and sometimes they might actually seem quite ambiguous to you.

For generations the generally accepted rule has been no sex before marriage (especially for girls). Reality is that sex among adolescents and premarital sex are common. Nevertheless, this situation is still considered by most adults as unacceptable.

For example, while courtship involves frequent home visits, boys and girls will never have sex in their parents' house. We strongly advise you to never bring someone to your host family's house to have sexual relations. If you plan to bring a friend over to visit, always ask for permission first, and if you are allowed to go to your room don't lock the door.

We strongly discourage you from involving yourself in casual sex or visiting prostitute houses; that can put you at greater risk of contracting venereal diseases (including AIDS). Also, you could face other dangerous situations on these places, such as robberies, aggressions, etc.

For sexually active people the use of condoms is a MUST. Always be aware that being sexually active may have unwanted consequences and AIDS may be a very tragic one. Other consequences might include the psychological damage to yourself if submitting to friends' or boyfriend/girlfriend's pressure.

Pregnancy is also a risk for sexually active people. It is possible that you are not ready yet to fully assume the responsibility of parenthood. Probably you have plans for the future and want to enjoy some parts of your life before having children. So you must be very cautious.

Two important things you must know about Costa Rican laws: A) abortion is illegal and severely punished (also, most people have a strong opinion against it); B) there is a Responsible Paternity Law that says that a woman can identify the father of her child and that person must take a DNA test to prove paternity. If the test is positive (or if the subpoenaed person refuses to take the test) the law forces the father to give his surname and financial support to the child.

While condoms can be easily bought in pharmacies and supermarkets, boys and girls should not go around showing theirs to their siblings or host parents at home, or leaving them in places where any family member can easily see them. For girls that use contraceptive pills, it is important to keep them in a private place and not to leave them where your host family will see them. In general, contraceptives are a private matter that is to be handled accordingly in our society.





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Preventing sexual harassment and/or abuse

You may be uncertain in some situations if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behavior would be considered as normal or just friendly, since in Costa Rica people tend to be more affectionate and use more physical contact than in other countries.

When they speak, Costa Ricans tend to use hand gestures to the extent of touching the person they are speaking with. It is not unusual for friends to touch one another on the hand, the arm, or the shoulder when they are talking. It is normal for a woman to be greeted with a kiss on the cheek by her male or female friends or family. Many times this is a display of genuine affection; other times it is more ritual and less spontaneous.

An important source of information about what to do is your own instinct. However, you must understand that you are in a different cultural and social context and, because of that, your normal perceptions may need an adjustment period. If you have any doubts about this, you should ask a member of your host family, your AFS contact person –in your community– or the support coordinators at the AFS National Office.

Do not keep these doubts to yourself. You may feel uncomfortable talking about this, but it is definitely better to avoid confusions on this subject, first of all because your own security depends on it and, in other cases, because you may be feeling bad about something that is a cultural characteristic of Costa Ricans.

You are never going to be reprimanded by AFS for asking about this. If you have doubts, do not let anybody intimidate you about not asking AFS for clarification or advice.

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome or unwanted conduct of a sexual or sexist nature.

This could happen in any country and under very different circumstances. In some cases the harassment may come from a known authority figure (a parent, a teacher, a coach) and in other cases it can come from a relative, an acquaintance, a classmate or a total stranger.

It is important to point out that statistically **most of the harassment situations and sexual assaults involve someone the victim knows and trusts**: a friend or a family friend, a teacher, a neighbor or a family member. You should always be very careful.

The use of drugs, alcohol consumption and traveling with people you don't know well, could be factors that put you in a very vulnerable position and at great risk. This advice probably is not new to you but we ask you to take it very seriously during your exchange experience. To ignore these warnings is the kind of decision you could regret your entire life.

Females must be especially cautious about harassment and sexual assault. It is of the outmost importance to avoid situations where they could be more vulnerable.





For example, if a car pulls over alongside a girl who walks on the side of the road, she should continue walking and never should she get into the car. She must look for a safe location. Or if a guy or group of guys whistle at a female student, she should avoid contact with them; she should ignore them

But if it comes from someone that frequently does this to her or it comes from someone she feels afraid of, then she should tell her host family or someone she trusts and then alert her contact person or AFS staff at the National Office about it.

People who harass or abuse other usually try to intimidate. They don't want to be exposed so they will try to manipulate the harassed person to feel guilt, to think that if she talks there would be consequences against her. They use the feelings of embarrassment and fear the victim is experiencing and take advantage of it. If at any point you feel you are in a similar situation, inform AFS and help will be provided immediately to help you feel in a secure environment.

Sexual abuse is a reproachable fact of life in any society. It is more common than most people realize. Sexual abuse is reported many times, but the number of unreported instances is far greater, because the victim is afraid to tell anyone what has happened or because the legal procedure for validating an episode is difficult.

The problem should be identified, the abuse stopped, and the victim should receive professional help. The long-term emotional and psychological damage of sexual abuse can be devastating to the person.

In the event of an actual assault, the student should notify the host parents or the AFS contact person. Subsequently the AFS National Office or the AFS emergency service should be notified. AFS will assist and arrange for medical assistance and check-up and will give appropriate advice regarding other important issues.

Examples of situation in which participants could put themselves in danger and could lead to assaults or other kind of abuse:

- Young people might be the subject of sexually oriented touching or assault in crowded places (such as bus stops, narrow sidewalks, dancehalls, stadiums and others). Try to avoid this by moving away from the person or by loudly yelling at the person to intimidate him or her.
- Under no circumstances, should you go to isolated places with people that you don't know well. That includes friends of your family, classmates and others.
- If someone is following you, go to a public place (a shop, a restaurant) and ask someone for help.
- Avoid night outings, alone or with friends, to places that are potentially risky to your personal and physical integrity. Those risky places could be parks, the beach or any other isolated place from where you have no concrete and immediate way of leaving.





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- To take a taxi alone or without knowing exactly the address of your destination, not having enough cash to pay, not being clear about how difficult it might be to get another taxi to return home, or sitting on the front seat of the taxi, are all risky situations.
- Accepting rides from people you don't know well, even if they seem nice and friendly is very dangerous. That includes accepting rides from friends of your host brothers or sisters even if you are with them.
- To drink alcohol or the use of drugs can distort your correct judgment of situations and put you under the risk of sexual abuse or rape.
- Be very careful about accepting visits to the house of people you don't know well (professors, study companions, neighbors, other students' and host siblings' friends, etc.). Always inform your host family if you are going to visit someone.
- Appropriate, discreet clothing according to place and situation can be helpful to discourage unwanted sexual overtures.
- To be "fresh", excessively casual or provocative with companions, host siblings, friends and members of the opposite sex could lead to problematic situations. It's important to pay attention to your body language, keep your body distance and respect that of others, and be conscious about the way you dance, as the messages sent this way might be perceived by others as an insinuation on your part.





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Emergencies

In case of an emergency AFS participants should call their host family, relative or close friend first. Then the local AFS contact person, and lastly the AFS National Office.

The telephone number of AFS Costa Rica's National Office is 2234-0909. Our national office is located in San José, and it is open Monday to Friday from 8:30 am to 5:30 p.m.

In the event of an emergency after work hours or during weekends you can contact our emergency service by calling our Duty Officer system. To do that, call **8330-6401** and leave a message in the voicemail, clearly stating your name, phone number to be contacted and the basic information of your emergency. An AFS staff will call you back in short time.

The official emergency contact number for the **police, fire department, ambulance, etc. is 911**. To call the international operator dial **1116**. You will find a listing of emergency phone numbers on the inside cover page of the local telephone book.

In case of a national emergency such as an earthquake, participants should follow the government or local authorities' recommendations. The National AFS office will contact the students to provide any necessary help as soon as possible.





Health precautions

There are some health issues and recommendations participants must pay attention to and follow. This is part of the national (or world) reality, so it's important to take it into consideration.

Dengue Fever

For years, a seasonal illness known as Dengue fever has existed around the country. In recent years, public health measures brought down the reported number of cases, but this definitely doesn't mean that Costa Rica has got rid of this tropical disease. In most cases infected people get over very quickly, but dengue fever could be dangerous if not treated appropriately.

Dengue fever is an infectious disease carried by mosquitoes and caused by any of four related dengue viruses. This disease used to be called "break-bone fever" because it sometimes causes severe joint and muscle pain that feels like bones are breaking, hence the name. Dengue fever is found mostly during and shortly after the rainy season in tropical and subtropical areas.

People get dengue virus infections from the bite of an infected *Aedes aegyptis* mosquito. Mosquitoes become infected when they bite infected humans, and later transmit infection to other people they bite. Dengue is not contagious from person to person.

Symptoms of typical uncomplicated (classic) dengue usually start with fever within 5 to 6 days after you have been bitten by an infected mosquito and include:

- High fever, up to 105 degrees Fahrenheit
- Severe headache
- Retro-orbital (behind the eye) pain
- Severe joint and muscle pain
- Nausea and vomiting
- Rash

Symptoms of dengue hemorrhagic fever include all of the symptoms of classic dengue plus:

- Marked damage to blood and lymph vessels
- Bleeding from the nose, gums, or under the skin, causing purplish bruises. Without proper medical care it might cause death.

People are infected of Dengue Hemorrhagic fever only after being infected of Classic Dengue. This kind of dengue is not common because the person has to be bitten by a different mosquito as the one bitten before and without receiving any medical treatment.

There is no specific treatment for classic dengue fever. Most people recover completely within 2 weeks. To help with recovery, health care experts recommend:

- Getting plenty of bed rest
- Drinking lots of fluids
- Taking medicine to reduce fever





The best way to prevent dengue fever is to take special precautions to avoid contact with mosquitoes. Several dengue vaccines are being developed, but none is likely to be licensed by the Food and Drug Administration of the United States within the next few years.

What to do in case of an earthquake

Due to its geographical location, Costa Rica is likely to experience earthquakes throughout the year. Most of them are not noticed by the general population of the country and when they are felt, usually they are not very strong nor cause important damages –these are called “temblores”-. However –being in a part of the world with seismic and volcanic activity- every few years there is one that is bad – “terremotos”-.

Some of you may be apprehensive about this; some others see this as an “exciting”, exotic experience. Regardless of how you feel about them, earthquakes are part of our reality and it is important to know how to deal with them. Earthquakes are unpredictable, but most Costa Ricans know they must be always prepared in case of emergency.

Precautions before an earthquake

First of all, ask your host family to inform you if they have any plan or precautions in case of an earthquake. If they have one, ask them to explain it to you and to include you in it. If they don't have one, ask them what kind of precautions you should take in case of an earthquake.

Identify the safest places in your house, main exits and alternative emergency exits. Depending on the house, you could find some “structural points” that are stronger and safer in case of an earthquake. In other cases, families usually have identified a safe place outside the house.

Most families will have in their home at least a flashlight and usually a first-aid kit and a cell radio. Ask them where those items are and if they have any protocol to use them in case of emergency.

Avoid heavy objects on top of shelves or near your bed. Be cautious about things that could fall and/or break easily (glass, pottery, lamps and others) and try to keep them in very “stable” places.

During an earthquake

Before anything else... stay calm! Remember that in most cases you may be experiencing a tremor (temblor), which is usually a low-intensity and short earth movement that causes very little –if any- damage and not a real earthquake (terremoto). If it happens to be a terremoto, do not scream, cry or run desperately.

If you are outdoors: move away from buildings, as well as from electrical wiring or any objects that may fall/drop.





If you are indoors: look for the safe "structural points" in the building. If you are on a one-floor building, crawl to the side of a strong table or desk, kneel down and cover your head with your arms. Move away from glass and windows. Move away from objects that may fall/drop. Do not use elevators. Don't rush outdoors, remember that most earthquakes last only a few seconds, and that you may fall or get hurt trying to get out.

After an earthquake

After a mild earthquake family and friends will usually contact each other to make sure everything is fine, they will comment about the event and eventually they will go back to their normal routine.

When a real earthquake takes place, we recommend you to follow this advice:

- Do not leave the building unless you are told to do so.
- If you notice fires and/or water or gas leaks, notify it to the appropriate authorities.
- If someone gets hurt, look for help.
- Do not touch loose or broken electrical wires.
- Do not walk barefoot.
- Do not use lighters, candles or matches. Do not operate any electrical appliances.
- Expect more (smaller) quakes.
- Use the phone only for emergency calls.
- Listen to the radio to be informed and collaborate with the authorities.
- Do not eat or drink anything that could be in contact with broken glasses or any kind of contamination.
- In case you are trapped, be calm and try to get in contact with the outside by making any noise or clapping.

In case of evacuation

You may be at home, in school or inside a public building when an earthquake takes place. The most important thing is to be calm and follow the emergency instruction given by the authorities or trained personnel. These are recommendations you should consider:

- Stay calm. Remember that if you become hysterical, you will only contribute to widespread panic and mayhem.
- Move toward the security area that has been previously established, following the instructions of those in charge.
- Should someone fall off on the way out, lift him/her up immediately without yelling and without losing your self-control.
- Beware of the crevices on the ground.
- Stay with your group. Make sure everyone else is with the group as well.
- Do not go back into the building until you are told to do so.





Conectando Vidas, Compartiendo Culturas

If after an earthquake you or anyone related to you is hurt or in danger, try to contact an AFS representative as soon as possible, explain your situation and inform him/her of the best way to contact you. Follow the advice you receive from him/her and stay with your host family and/or with the people you know well around you.





Conclusion

Costa Rica is a relatively safe place, generally far removed from international centers of tension. You should be aware, however, that as in any other country there are always precautions to be taken.

Participants always need to use their common sense just as they would in their own countries or anywhere else in the world, but also take into consideration that they are in a different cultural context and they need to adjust their perceptions and actions.

The best general advice AFS can recommend regarding issues of personal safety are:

- Get to know the host culture well through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers, and the AFS local contacts.
- Take seriously any concerns expressed by your host family, school and AFS volunteers and follow their advice.
- As stated in the Participation Agreement document that you signed prior to leaving home, the National AFS office will make recommendations and give guidelines for physical welfare and security. Take this advice seriously and comply with these guidelines.
- Do not ignore your own "instinct" in any given situation or feel you have to compromise your own personal behavioral values and beliefs. These are valuable resources in making decisions about what to do.

