



**Programas  
Interculturales**  
*Costa Rica*

# Welcome to Costa Rica

Useful guide for your exchange experience

Updated: January 2018

*Conectando Vidas, Compartiendo Culturas*

**This booklet is a summary of recommendations and observations made by AFS students who have been in Costa Rica before you. It is full of advice that is based on their own experiences as well as valuable general information, so you may use it as a source of reference throughout your stay in Costa Rica.**

**IMPORTANT: Please read this document and present us your doubts, questions and comments at your Arrival Orientation in Costa Rica.**

## ***First Days in Costa Rica***

We (the AFS students) arrived in Costa Rica on a warm day of lovely weather and were taken to a training center for our first orientation. However, it is important to notice that Costa Rica enjoys a wide range of temperatures and climate zones, depending on the geographical area, the altitude and the time of the year, so even if the weather is great when you arrive in the country, it might be raining the following day. The temperature also varies depending on the area, in the Central Valley from 16.3°C up to 28°C, and in the low lands from 21°C to 35°C. There are two distinct seasons in Costa Rica: the dry season, which goes from November to April and the rainy season, which goes from May to October.

After the first orientation, AFS students may be picked up by their host families at the National Office or at the orientation site, but in most cases participants will travel by bus to their host community, usually accompanied by an AFS volunteer. Meeting your host family is always a very exciting experience. It will be the first time you see them, so you can imagine how it feels (I know you actually don't – you can only know it after you have lived it). Anyway, one of the things that caught my attention was to see the whole family there: even grandpa came. As you probably have already heard, in Costa Rica families tend to be large and they are usually very close.

When I first met my host family I didn't know what to do. Many of us AFSers were surprised because Costa Ricans are very expressive people. Physical contact is important for them. Perhaps at the beginning you could be embarrassed having all those people around hugging and kissing you on the cheek, but you'll become used to it.

At home, everybody kept talking to me even if I didn't understand a thing. My host mom offered me lunch, but I was so tired that I preferred to go to sleep. She didn't like it very much, now I realize that offering me food was her way of welcoming me, and that it is very important for Costa Ricans to share what they have. They are very sensitive, and if you turn down an invitation to share their food they would probably think you don't like it, or even worse, that you don't like the company. Nevertheless, if you try to explain to them that you need to rest or to be on your own they will understand. Of course the first days can be difficult to communicate because of the language barrier (most Costa Ricans only speak Spanish), but you try and do your best.

## ***A few words about Costa Rican culture and families***

Costa Ricans consider the family the basic element of society. A majority of young people stay living with their parents even after entering college or becoming financially independent. They usually will not leave the home until they get married, and even then they will try to remain close to their parents.

Masculine and feminine roles are clearly defined in the society and in the family, which sometimes includes "machismo" (the idea that men have more authority than women). This reality has been gradually diminishing in recent years, when more and more women have integrated to the economic and political life of the country and also have become "breadwinners." Still, in practice, the men of the family are granted certain privileges women do not fully enjoy, such as minor participation in the household chores, and fewer restrictions regarding social life, going out, permissions, curfews, sexual freedom, etc.

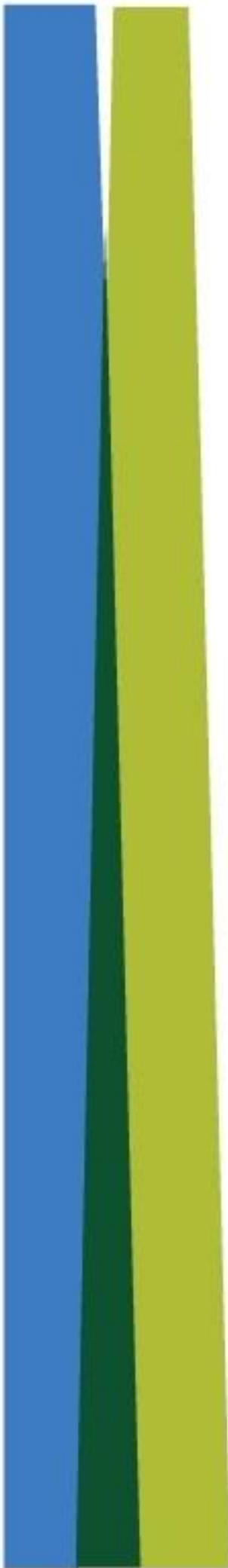
Let me tell you some characteristics I found in the Costa Ricans' way of being.

The TICOS [pronounced *teekos*] -as Costa Ricans are informally called- have a strong self-image, as reflected in frequent comments that something is "muy tico" (very Costa Rican). Democracy, peace and political freedom, are often mentioned as their greatest blessings.

They are very nationalistic and proud of their country, but not in an aggressive way. Ticos dislike arrogance very much, and expect people to act humble. They like to talk about politics and to openly criticize their Government, but will usually find that same criticism to be somewhat offensive if it comes from a foreigner.

The strongest social control among Costa Ricans is fear of what others will say. Due to the small size of the country, in communities and small towns everybody knows everyone and everything, so there is often a considerable amount of gossip. For a foreigner this is worse because you "stand out" in the crowd. Many Ticos are quick to gossip and ridicule others, often labeling a person as "gordo" (fatsome), "flaco" (skinny), "chino" (chinese/chinese looking), etc. However, they are afraid to become the object of ridicule or gossip. Ticos seldom tell jokes on themselves as individuals. Ticos are "delicados"--easily offended- by comments or criticism from others. It is important to "save face" in front of others as well as oneself.

Everyone, particularly women, has a reputation and it is supposed to stay clean. Reputation is a valuable part of the identity of every Costa Rican family. That is why families pay a lot of attention to what is said about them. As you are going to be part of the family, they are going to be very attentive to what people say about you and they will expect you to act (and seem) responsible and earn a good reputation in school and in your community.



Conservatism and caution are deeply rooted values. Changes are accepted only "poco a poco"--little by little-. This is reflected in many ways: an initiative will be criticized if it is very out of the ordinary; a person could be suspicious if he/she looks "just too different," for example, if he/she dresses very different or has an unconventional hair style.

Catholic religion has a lot of importance in this society, but there is absolute freedom of religion, and Protestant churches are found in many cities. Many people actively practice their religion and attend church regularly, but many others go to church only occasionally, or are Catholics only by name. AFS host families are tolerant and respectful about the students' religious beliefs, and this is rarely a cause of difficulties.

Above all, Ticos are happy and easy going people, always ready to have fun or laugh at a good joke. They place a great importance on friendship and loyalty towards their family and friends. People are usually very willing to help others, even if this means going out of their ways. Selfishness and strong individualism are frowned upon. Foreigners are always an attraction, Ticos are generally friendly and helpful towards them, and show a lot of patience if the visitor has limitations in communicating in their language (Spanish).

There are several things that are common to all Costa Rican AFS host families and it is very important that you always keep them in mind:

- **Your host family is not being paid.** They are a volunteer family and they receive no money for hosting you in their home.
- Your host family wants you to live with them. They want to learn about your country and they want to teach you about theirs and about their way of life.
- Your host family wants to help you while you are in Costa Rica.
- Your host family wants you to be a true family member, which means you will share their daily life, their work, responsibilities, happy and sometimes not so happy moments. Follow family rules and take the family into account when you make any kind of personal plans.
- The best way to establish a good relationship with your host family is by communicating openly, talking as much as possible, making them aware of your feelings, telling them about your moments of enjoyment as well as discomfort, always saying thank you for the small and big things they do for you, talking to them about your doubts, your ideas, your plans.

Anyway, you will make your own conclusions when you get to know Costa Ricans. But remember, you have chose to live an intercultural learning experience, so you have to be open to very different lifestyles, habits and ways to see the world that might seem odd or incorrect to you... and you will need to make your best effort to understand these and respect the differences.

## **Useful for your Costa Rican experience**

### **Greetings**

When greeting, men shake hands, pad shoulders, and sometimes hug, but never kiss each other. Women, as well as friends and relatives of the opposite sex, will often greet each other by kissing on the cheek once (kissing on the cheek is not usual when meeting a person by the first time). Then, they will ask about one's general information. When greeting any Costa Rican, it is always good and appropriate to smile.

### **Be polite**

"Por favor"--please-, and "Muchas gracias"--Thank you- are constantly used expressions here. Saying "Sí señor"--Yes sir-, or "No señora"--No madam-, to your parents IS NOT a sign of lack of confidence/closeness, but a nice courtesy that should always be paid to them. Monosyllabic answers (a plain "no" or "sí") could sometimes be considered rude when other person expects an answer from you.

### **Food and eating**

The basic Costa Rican diet is formed by rice and beans, which most people eat every day; a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, fruit juices, potatoes, eggs, milk, corn (prepared in several ways), cheese and other dairy products are also common. Meat, chicken, pork and fish are also part of the Costa Rican diet, but in many families these are not everyday products, because of their price.

Host families tend to think that if a student eats a lot, he/she is happy. At the table, Costa Ricans always enjoy active conversation on a variety of subjects. Mealtime is a time to be enjoyed and usually lasts longer than in other countries. A light breakfast (except during weekends), lunch at midday, coffee break during the afternoon and dinner at night will help you forget your diet. In most Costa Rican homes lunch is the big meal of the day, but if the family members work and go to school, dinner is usually the time to share the comments of the day.

### **Punctuality**

The Costa Rican perception of time is quite relaxed. In general they are not very punctual. "Hora Tica"--Costa Rican time-, means that the person will arrive 20 or 30 minutes later. Being on time for a party or social gathering usually means that you'll have to wait a while for the other guests to start arriving! Keep in mind, though, that this rarely applies to appointments and class/work schedules. It neither applies to curfews and AFS activities.

### **Home chores**

Costa Ricans are very house-proud; the house is cleaned regularly, and is kept in order. Remember that the weather here is very humid during the rainy season and that in the dry season there is A LOT of dust, so cleanliness is very important. As a minimum, kids are expected to keep their own rooms clean. Although some families have full or part-time maids, in many other cases the whole family shares the house chores. Usually women have more responsibilities around the house than men, but host mothers and sisters will greatly appreciate an AFS student (no matter the gender!) who is cooperative and willing to do his/her share of house work.





## **Privacy**

When trying to fit into the Costa Rican culture and into my host family, the concept of privacy was one of the most difficult things for me to handle. Individual privacy is quite differently understood by Ticos... As explained before, the idea of the family sharing their possessions (and in many times their activities) is sometimes difficult to accept when one comes from a different culture.

Ticos are very curious and want to know many things about you and your daily life. That is not entirely bad, but it takes time and openness to get used to.

Young people usually share rooms in Costa Rican families; so, many times, exchange students have to accept that they are going to have less privacy. Also, parents – especially mothers- are considered to have the right to enter any room of the house (their house), and that means you have to try to explain your family how you are used to live, but you also have to understand that you are the one who has to adapt. In a large portion of the cases, foreign students have to accommodate to smaller living spaces than what they were used to back in their home countries.

## **Sharing and personal property**

It is often common in Costa Rican homes for siblings to share their things, such as special foods or candy, clothing, music, small electrical appliances, etc. For example, if you get a box of goodies (chocolates, candy, cookies, etc.) from home, it is quite likely that your host family will expect you to share with them some of the special treats you have received from your country. On the other hand, if the family buys or prepares any kind of special food, it is with the idea that everyone will be able to have some. No one has the right to eat it all or finish it simply because that person is too hungry or likes that special food too much. In general, the family perceives itself as a unit, where affection, time, care, food and material things are to be shared.

Nevertheless, it is entirely up to you to decide if you want to share your personal belongings with them. If you decide to lend them something take note that things can be damaged, very often involuntarily. Be clear with them about your personal do's and don'ts in regard to the use of your personal items. Your family should be able to understand and respect your sense of personal property.

As a general advice, don't leave around large amounts of money and keep your valuables in a locked box or container. NEVER let anyone enter with you into an ATM machine nor let anyone know about your passwords or credit/debit card's PIN number.

And, just in case, our advice is to never lend money to family members or friends.

## **Currency**

The national currency is called "Colon". The exchange rate is fixed against the U.S. dollar and it changes almost daily –little by little, up or down-. The current exchange rate for US\$1 is approximately 570 colones (January 2018). So, I suggest that you keep track of the exchange rate throughout your stay, and that you don't exchange all your foreign currency to colones at once.

## **Telephones: cell-phones and land-lines**

Access to telephones is easy in Costa Rica. There are various service providers and most host families have a telephone "land-line" at home and different members in the family might have cell-phones. Land-lines' fees are paid depending on how much they have been used. Long distance and overseas calls are generally very expensive, and even local calls are charged by the minute. In the case of cell-phones, the most common options are "contracts", "post-pay" and "pre-pay". With the contracts, you have to pay a fix rate per month and that gives you access to a determined number of "minutes" (calls), texts (SMS) and internet connection. With post-pay cell-phones you receive a bill at the end of each month with the amount you should pay to the telephone company (based on how much you used it). With the pre-pay cell-phones you buy "minutes" in advanced and you can call and text as much as the amount paid allows you.

If you are planning to bring your own cell-phone to Costa Rica, have in mind that not all cell-phones can be used in the country. The main systems used right now are 3G – 4G and with some of those phones you just need to change a chip and they will work here. However, some cell-phones can not be adapted (fully or partially) to the local service networks (if you bring a cell phone, make sure it is "unlocked").

The recommendation for people who want to have a cell-phone in Costa Rica is to find a model that is low-priced (not too flashy) and then buy a pre-paid service. In that way, you can keep communication open, without the risk of spending way too much money without realizing and then having to pay it.

An important note about the use of the telephone is that you should avoid to be "glued" to it. To keep permanent or too frequent contact with the people back at your home country can be very disruptive for your adjustment and learning process in Costa Rica. Remember that you are choosing to be away from home for a reason, so be careful not to let communication technologies to become an obstacle for your exchange experience.

## **Access to Internet**

Electronic communications are common in Costa Rica, but you probably won't have the same access to Internet as in your home country. Most Costa Rican families do not have internet access at home and schools have a limited number of computers for student's use. For you, it would probably be easier to have Internet in your cell-phone or through a data card (a flash drive with internet access).

However, we recommend you to use e-mail and social networks (such as Facebook, Tweeter, WhatsApp, Instagram and others) in a limited way to communicate with your friends at home. Every year, some exchange students lose very good opportunities because they are "still at home" by spending long hours on the Internet, and forget to live their new Costa Rican experience at its fullest. Your adaptation process requires for you to make an effort and to "distance" yourself from your home culture. Contact with your friends and family is good, dependence is bad.

### **Laptop or no laptop**

The next question off course will be if you can/should bring your laptop computer. AFS Costa Rica does not have a specific policy about it, so this is basically your decision. More important than deciding if you bring it or not, you need to consider how this might work in your favor or against you in terms of your adjustment process. The same applies for tablets and other electronic devices.

You already read the recommendations regarding cell-phones and Internet and the same basic concept applies here: even if you are physically in Costa Rica, if you are still “@home” in terms of your social contacts and communication patterns, then it is very possible that you will end up missing a lot of opportunities in your host country. Don't get me wrong, to have a laptop, tablet, an iPad or cool phone is a great thing, but if you “refuge” yourself in the permanent e-world that electronics offer, then it might not be such a good idea.

Also consider that you would be fully responsible for the safety of your own devices and in Costa Rica can be unsafe to be carrying around electronic equipment. If you bring your laptop, tablet or other with you, please be aware that the use of it (and its portability) will be significantly reduced in comparison to your home country.

### **Traditional mail**

Actually it is pretty inexpensive to mail letters from here. For example, a letter to Europe can cost about US\$0.50 and \$0.35 to USA and Canada. Mail service in Costa Rica is not one of the best in the world but it is not that bad either. If receiving packages from home, remember that (usually very high) taxes will have to be paid for things contained in parcels received from another country. Also, as a general practice packages are opened and checked by Customs, so it is best to send nothing of value. It is recommended as well that packages be sent through registered mail, to prevent robbery as much as possible. We strongly advise you to ask your natural family or friends in your home country to send only small things such as books, used clothes or very inexpensive presents and, in general, to do this as little as possible.

### **Transportation**

The most common form of public transportation is the public bus. Most students catch a bus or walk to school. In San José there are buses that come and go from the surroundings of the capital and also buses that go around downtown (during rush hours, you must take into account the possibility of traffic jams). There are buses that go from San José to practically any place in the country, even the farthest-away communities. To go to Cartago, Heredia and/or Alajuela, there are buses leaving every 10-20 minutes. To travel from San Jose to communities in Puntarenas, Limón or Guanacaste, it is necessary to buy a bus ticket one or two days ahead of time, particularly during the holidays.

The second more common way of transportation is Taxi, but it is more expensive and you should be careful about it. I do not recommend you to take a taxi if you are traveling alone, especially at night or when you are not entirely sure of the route or don't have the exact address of the place you are going to.





## **Shopping**

Shopping hours are usually 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Saturday and in some cases until 12:30 p.m. on Sundays. You can find extended shopping hours at night and on weekends at the malls in largest cities (they usually close at 9:00 p.m.).

## **Banks and money**

Private and public banks will exchange U.S. dollars (cash or travelers' checks) into colones, and to do this you will only need to present your passport. Increasingly banks are exchanging Euros as well, but it's definitely better to bring your money in U.S. dollars.

Whatever amount of money you are bringing with you, we strongly recommend you to put it in the bank as soon as possible, by opening a savings account in your name at a bank office in your host community. This kind of account can be opened in colones or in U.S. dollars. To open the account usually you will only have to present your passport and the amount of money you want to deposit. Never keep large amounts of money in your home or in your suitcase, and never go out with large amounts of money in your pocket!

## **Getting money from home**

There are different ways to get money from your home country, but currently the most common is to bring with you an international debit card, so money can be deposited in a bank account in your home country and you can withdraw it in a local bank or in an ATM (automated teller machine).

If you choose this method for your money transfer, please take into consideration that a fee is always charged by the banks involved in the transactions. You must also make sure with your bank back at home that your card will work in Costa Rica (usually Visa and Master Card are accepted in most places).

Other ways of getting money from home are "money orders" (money deposited in a bank in your country that can be withdraw in an specific bank here) or money-transfer companies (like Western Union). However the fees for these services are usually quite high, so use them only for emergencies.

AFS will not be able to lend or advance money to you, so the best advice I can give is to be careful with the way you administer and use your money. Be careful especially in the first months of your stay; don't spend all your money at once!

## Some pocket expenses

Talking about money, I made a list of some average costs that may be useful for you.

### Fast Food Restaurants

|                                                  |            |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------|
| McDonalds: 1 Meal (BigMac, fries and soda)       | US \$ 8.00 |
| Quizno's Subs: 1 Meal (Sandwich, fries and soda) | US \$ 9.50 |
| Pizza Hut: 1 medium pizza with 2 cokes           | US \$20.00 |

### Middle-class Restaurants

|                                                      |             |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Small popular restaurant: 1 person (lunch or dinner) | US \$ 6.00  |
| Medium restaurant: 1 person (lunch or dinner)        | US \$ 12.00 |

\*\*\* Take note that at restaurants taxes are usually not included in the price quoted in the menu, but they will be included in the bill (so be careful with what you order, because an additional 13% sales tax plus a 10% service fee will always be added to the price of your food). This service fee is used instead of tipping, and you are not expected to tip over it.

### Transportation

|                         |                      |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Taxis - first kilometer | US \$ 1.30           |
| Additional kilometer    | US \$ 1.10 each      |
| Urban buses             | US \$ 0.50 - \$ 1.00 |

### Entertainment

|         |                                   |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| Movies  | US \$5.00 - \$ 8.00               |
| Theater | US \$10.00 (depends on each show) |

Obviously, you would prefer to go out with people of your age. So, let's talk about them now.

## Young people

Teenagers in Costa Rica are probably not much different than anywhere else. They like school sometimes; they don't like it some other times. They love their parents but want to have more independence and be treated as adults. Above all, they want to grow, to learn and to enjoy life.

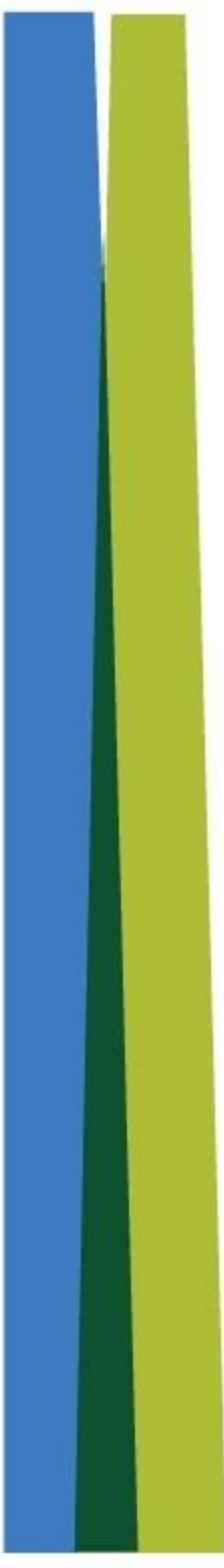
In most Costa Rican towns, teenagers' life consists of school, team sports, TV, social activities and strong friendships. Cultural and artistic activities are only occasional in most places, and usually they can be found on a permanent basis only in the Metropolitan Areas –big cities.

Many teenagers have a "novio"--boyfriend-, or a "novia"--girlfriend-. A lot of importance is given to this, as demonstrated by the long hours dedicated to talk about "who is going out with whom." This is a **formal** and **informal** relationship at the same time. Formal in the way that it may involve personal attraction and some initial romantic declaration, and in many cases, requires the boy to visit the girl at her house and take her out with her parents' authorization. Parents are frequently more careful when allowing girls to have a "novio" than they are when allowing a boy to have a "novia". These relationships are informal in the sense that they can last few days or several years.

Few children receive an allowance, they usually must ask for money when they need it. Part-time jobs during school years are rather unusual, but some people take them during the Christmas season (mainly those older than 18). Of course sometimes older children will work, when it is necessary to pitch in to help the family's economy. In general, it is expected of teenagers only to take responsibility of their studies and to help in the house. Sharing time and activities with the family is a self-understood fact.

Teenagers often go out together as a group. On these occasions they go out to a dance, to play sports, to a picnic, to the movies, to take a walk, or simply they sit together in the park and talk for a while. These mixed groups allow for a much more informal social interaction. Parties at friends' homes are very common. They usually consist of 3-4 hours of dancing and chatting between boys and girls. Usually the kids have the permission to go to a party or to school dances as late as 10, 11 or 12 p.m. and sometimes the parents go to pick them up. Many families (often depending on the community too) don't allow their kids to go to discos or to befriend some people they do not know or do not approve.

**Be respectful of your host parents' rules and personal views about you going out. It is very likely that you will be given much stricter rules -especially in regards to curfew- than what you are used to have back in your home country.**



There is something else that is kind of difficult to accept, but that is part of the AFS rules. Students of the AFS school program in Costa Rica should not drink alcohol beverages. Yes, I know what you are thinking. In many of our countries it is normal for people our age to drink in moderation. It is pretty much the same with Costa Rican teenagers (many of them drink during parties), but the reality is that underage drinking (under 18 years old) is illegal in Costa Rica. Also, even if you turn 18 during the program, AFS request you not to drink alcohol. The reason is simple: **this is for your own safety.**

Alcohol consumption can lead to very dangerous situations and put you in a vulnerable position, especially when you are in a foreign country and you do not fully understand the culture and the reactions you can receive from some people. We usually think we are mature and smart enough to avoid dangerous situations, but the reality is that under the effect of alcohol AFS participants can make mistakes they might regret for the rest of their lives. I recommend you to be smart enough to avoid the situations that can cause your dismissal from the program (and immediate return home) or worse, that could put you in situations where you (and others) can be seriously harmed.

But let's move on to more topics about youth. Young people wear jeans and T-shirts a lot, but as a rule they should look neat. For girls, personal appearance is very important (**most** girls here are quite fond of such things as make-up, hair styles, perfume, nail polish, etc.) Female foreign students should bring nice skirts and dresses, and boys should bring some formal shirts and pants, and perhaps a dressy jacket. This is a good idea because very often, and soon after arrival, you may accompany your host family to some formal party where you would not like to stand out among well-dressed people, by being the only one wearing a T-shirt. In these occasions it's better to be prepared and follow the host family's advice about what to wear.

Personal cleanliness is also very important, **everybody showers (and is expected to take a shower) every day –generally first thing in the morning.** Looking clean and smelling nice is very important for everyone, young and old, and body odors are very much frowned upon. People who live in the coastal areas, where hot temperatures are the norm, often take more than one shower a day. You must bring deodorant and use it everyday, put clean clothes on after every shower and take the laundry for washing as soon as possible and according to what is usual in the host family. Don't keep your laundry on a corner pile or under the bed!

Yes, I know, I know I haven't told you about an important part of this experience... school.

## School

Well, let me tell you that my first day at school was... "strange".

Costa Rica has one of the best educational systems in Latin America, although it is far from being completely efficient. Most school buildings are not nice looking and they are not always well maintained. For me it was a little bit of a shock to sit on a tiny chair and to be in a small classroom with other thirty people. However, I rapidly remembered that I was here to learn and to experience life in a different way than the one I was used to. I was here to experience Costa Rican way of life and this was one of the most important parts of it.

An important first detail... I had to wear a school uniform. The most common school uniform is dark blue pants and light blue shirt (some schools allow or request dark blue skirts for girls). All wear black leather shoes and blue socks. On the other hand, many high schools have a distinctive uniform, which is unique to that school. **All foreign students coming to Costa Rica on the Year or Semester school programs should bring US\$ 250.00 to buy their own school uniforms.**

All high schools ban the use of what they consider to be excessive make-up, colorful jewelry, short-length skirts and eccentric hairstyles. Boys might not be allowed to use long hair or an earring. It is not unusual that, once in a while, a school official will stand at the school entrance checking the incoming students' adherence to the school's dress code.

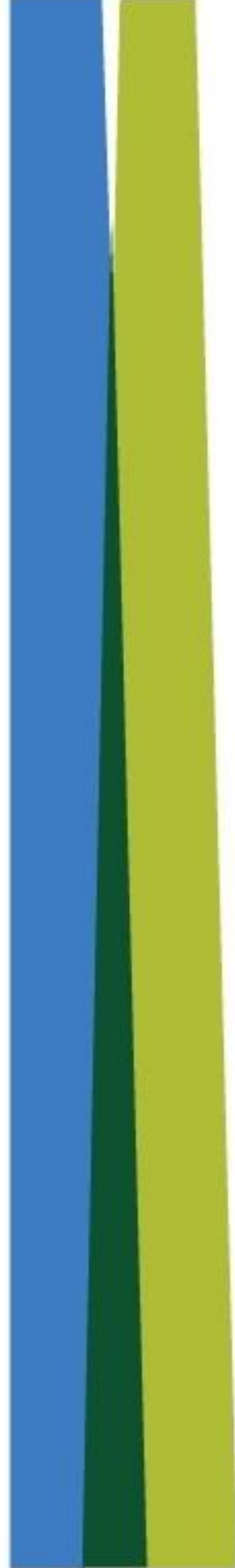
AFS students are usually placed in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and this last one is the graduating class in most Costa Rican schools. For that reason, when I started school I found out that my classmates were younger than me, and I found many of them to be immature. In spite of these apparent differences, I got used to my class very soon, and I found my closest friends at school.

The school year starts in mid-February, and finishes in early-December. However the last weeks (or the last couple of months for the 11<sup>th</sup> graders) are dedicated to prepare and complete the end-of-the-year examinations. There are no classes the week of Easter and there is a two-week vacation in early July. The school year is divided, and the students are graded, in three trimesters.

School starts around 7:00 a.m.; with a couple of short breaks and a longer recess around noon which is used to buy and eat some snack inside the school grounds. Depending on the school, the end of the day may be anywhere between 1:00 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

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. Most foreign students attend public schools (only 5% of them go to private schools); and most schools are coed (for boys and girls).





Most schools will not accommodate specific needs or schedule changes in order to meet the desires of the foreign student. This means that most classes and subjects are mandatory for everyone in the same class group.

There is not a wide variety of extracurricular activities, as compared to what there might be in a high school in some developed countries. The emphasis here is on academic work, as very often there are not enough funds to provide for lavish facilities and activities. But foreign students with a particular talent or interest can find alternatives such as sport tournaments with the high school or in the community, music groups, clubs, etc.

Classmates usually form study groups that often meet after school in the students' houses, especially before exams. These groups, besides studying, also organize outings together. You can easily be invited to join one of these groups if you seem interested on school work and try to make an effort in class, doing homework and taking tests. If you don't take school work seriously enough you probably won't have the chance to be a part of one of these groups, because you probably will be perceived as a distraction or a negative influence, which could have a bad effect on the grades that the others get.

As in any other part of the world, you will find people in your school who are focused on the academic part, others who have a good balance between classes and fun and others who are not exactly interested in school. In the end, it's your decision who you want to be friends with, but this will certainly have an impact on your experience.

Costa Rican social realities put a lot of pressure on young people to do well in school. There is an extremely wide margin between the minimum salary and the amount of money that can be earned by a professional. There are no unemployment benefits and the social standing in the community has much to do with the educational background of the person. Approximately 20% of the country's population lives under the poverty line, and this is a constant reminder that the only way to get ahead in life is through education and hard work.

Host families act according to these realities toward their foreign students. They expect them to do homework, to do their best at studying and to be involved in school life. The choices you make regarding your friends at school take a lot of importance here. If you choose poorly, your family will feel that to be a reflection of who you are and how that affects the family dynamics and reputation. If you choose wisely, your family will probably will have a lot more trust in you.

To have a really productive experience it is important for you to participate in school life, become involved and be good friends with your classmates, and to assume the responsibility school implies.

Participate in any sporting or artistic activity that is available. It will definitely be difficult to do all this at the beginning, because of the language barrier; but it is also true that language abilities do not happen overnight. Instead, they develop through a slow learning process that can be helped tremendously by studying the language, doing school work and **getting involved as much as possible.**

## School grades

AFS Costa Rica cannot guarantee that you will receive a transcript of grades. Not for any student.

There are some important details regarding this.

- 1) As mentioned before, school year runs from mid-February to early-December and it's graded on a trimester basis. If you come to Costa Rica on the year program beginning in February you could probably complete a full school year and, if you make a good effort, approve it and possibly receive your grade records.
- 2) If you come on the semester program beginning in February, you could possibly receive the grades of your first trimester; however these grades are not always great because you are only getting used to a new school system and learning Spanish.
- 3) For students who arrive in July for the year program is impossible to have the grades of a full school year. In the best case scenario, you will receive the grades of the final trimester of one year and the grades of the first trimester of the following school year.
- 4) Students who come on the semester program arriving on July, could possibly receive the grades of the last trimester; however you have to consider that this would be your first school experience in Costa Rica, just learning Spanish and arriving in the middle of the year.

AFS does not require students to have outstanding school grades, but it will always expect your best effort and your full commitment to attend all classes, to do homework and to be an honorable representative of your country, your culture and the legacy of peace and respect of AFS. Your host family, on the other hand, will probably also expect for you to achieve the best grades possible.

Having said all these, I must let you know that some schools may not give you a transcript of grades even if you attend classes during an entire trimester. That would not depend on you or AFS, but on the decision of the individual school. This can happen when the teachers and the administrative staff of the school feel that the exchange student has not been able to fully integrate to the class work or when some barriers (cultural, linguistic) have prevented for him/her to fully acquire the necessary knowledge to receive a grade. If this happens you could receive a letter of attendance.

If you want to receive a transcript of grades then it is very important for you, personally, to tell this to your teachers and to make your best effort to learn and do well in your tests and homework.

**AFS Costa Rica will not be responsible, while on the program nor after, for any school requirement, transcript of grades or certification a participant might need for any purpose. It is your exclusive responsibility to complete all the necessary steps to get the needed documentation you need, for example, to present to your school back home when you return from your AFS experience. AFS Costa Rica cannot guarantee we can obtain this type of documentation for you afterwards.**



## Diploma

AFS Costa Rica cannot guarantee that you will receive a graduation diploma. The process for an international student to graduate in Costa Rica is complicated, demanding and costly.

First of all, you might only consider the possibility of a diploma if you are part of the year school program that begins in February. For students on any other program graduation is absolutely impossible.

If you are in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, under your own decision you could request to be eligible for graduation. You might receive a diploma, but only if you inform the school officials as soon as you arrive to your host school at the beginning of the year. Then you must complete a good amount of paperwork, and take and approve the November national examinations (see below more information about requirements). In other cases you may obtain a transcript of grades if merited.

### Requirements for students intending to graduate in Costa Rica

- To be registered, attend regularly and pass all classes in 11<sup>th</sup> grade while in Costa Rica,
- To have completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade before arriving in Costa Rica and present an official transcript of grades for his/her last year of schooling, authenticated by a Costa Rican Consulate in the home country, at their own cost.
- To present all these documents to the Ministry of Education within the set deadlines, accompanied by official translations of all documents (must be done in Costa Rica by an official translator), at their own cost.
- To pass the national high school examinations ("Bachillerato") where they will be tested (at the end of the school year) in Spanish Grammar, Spanish Composition and Spelling, Science, Social Studies, English, Civic Education and Math, for the academic contents of the last five years of school.
- In order to receive the diploma, foreign students must also approve two additional exams, on Literature and Social Studies of Costa Rica.

## ***The AFS support system in Costa Rica***

AFS began operations in Costa Rica in 1955. During all this time AFS Costa Rica has been one of the most important organizations of the AFS network in Latin America. Some characteristics of the country have made possible for the organization to be very strong, even when Costa Rica itself has a small population (approx. 5 million people).

AFS has 35 Local Chapters in Costa Rica and two National Volunteer Commissions. Local Chapters are groups of volunteers organized in the different communities of the country. The National Volunteer Commissions are groups of volunteers in charge of national activities. You will meet many volunteers in the country, some of them in your host community and others during orientations and activities.

AFS Costa Rica also has a National Office in San José (the capital of the country). The AFS staff people support the volunteers, so you probably will have less relation with them, but they are available for you if you need support. Most AFS staff work on administrative tasks, and some of them will give various specific services.

**AFS Costa Rica has an Emergency Service (seven days a week - out of office hours) you can contact in case of need. If you have an emergency situation and require AFS assistance you must call the telephone number 8330-6401 and leave a message in the voice mail. Always remember to say your name and the phone number you want to be called back to. An AFS staff person will contact you shortly.**

## ***The AFS Rules***

You know you are coming to Costa Rica on an educational program (not as a tourist), so the experience in this country not only requires for you to adapt to a different culture, a different family and a different school, but also you need to abide by the rules of the program. As I mentioned before, these rules exist for your own safety.

There are three basic international rules for AFS students in any country: **No drugs** (that means no consumption, no possession and no relation whatsoever). **No hitchhiking.** **No driving** motor vehicles of any kind.

There are also other rules that you should follow while on the program. Some of them are about general conduct, other are related to school responsibilities and some of are about travel. I recommend you the carefully read these rules before your arrival on Costa Rica.

**The rules of AFS Costa Rica for participants on the school program are available to you via the AFS Office in your home country.**

You (and your family and friends at home) must be aware that any international visit that you receive while in Costa Rica must be approved by AFS before it is planned. An international visit can be denied by AFS if they feel it is not the right moment for it. Also have in mind that visits from friends, family or relatives must not interfere with your school attendance, AFS mandatory activities or your commitments and relation with your host family.

## **Visa procedures**

You need the sponsorship of an accredited organization (in this case AFS) to obtain and maintain a temporary residency permit as a student in Costa Rica. AFS Costa Rica will be responsible for processing participants' temporary residence visas with the National Immigration Office. As a general rule, and because of the way Costa Rican immigration regulations work, this process will be done in two stages: the first in your country of residence and the second once you arrive in the country. In order to do this all AFS participants (Year and Semester) must follow this procedure:

## **Participants in School Programs (YP & SM)**

**Procedure in country of origin:** The student needs to apply for a provisional student Visa in Costa Rica's Consulate. In order to do this, the participant needs to present to the CRC Consulate:

- Valid Passport
- Birth Certificate
- Letter requesting the provisional student Visa (sample provided by AFS)
- Letter of acceptance from AFS Costa Rica (provided by AFS)
- Parental Consent Form in the case of minors (sample provided by AFS), OR
- Certificate of Criminal Record from country of residence for 18+ participants
- 10 front color Pictures (some must be brought to CRC)
- Any other document required by the Costa Rican Consulate in the country

*Please read carefully (below) the detailed information about each one of these requirements.*

**Upon arrival:** The temporary residence visa process will be completed once the participant arrives in Costa Rica. In order to do that, each participant needs to bring with him/her the original documents that they presented to the Consulate for the temporary Visa application. AFS Costa Rica will complete the required documentation with the following documentation that will be obtained here, after participant's arrival:

- Record of Finger-print Registration (procedure to be done in CRC)
- Record of Consular Registration (procedure to be done in CRC)



## **Detailed information about the requirements:**

### Participant's Passport:

Complete and undamaged passport; valid for at least 6 months after schedule return trip date. Please, make sure your passport is accepted by Costa Rican Immigration authorities and their inbound requirements, if any special one.

### Birth Certificate:

For all participants, document should include both parents' full name (including Mother's maiden name). International forms are accepted as long as it includes Spanish text. The Birth Certificate (and the translation – if necessary), must be validated with the Apostille.

### Letter from the participant requesting the provisional student Visa:

Written according to the sample provided by AFS Costa Rica and signed in front of the Consul by the participant. Although the official procedure states that this letter must be signed in front of the Consul, we advise you to contact the Costa Rican Consulate in your country (or the nearest one) and verify if the document needs to be signed there or if the document can be presented to the Consulate by other means (sent by courier or presented by a representative).

### Letter of acceptance from AFS Costa Rica:

Provided by AFS CRC. This document is required to guarantee to the Consulate that the participant comes to Costa Rica sponsored by a registered educational organization authorized by the CRC National Immigration Office to apply for Student Visas.

### Parental Consent Form (Formerly: Delegation of Parental Authority Form for CRC (for MINORS ONLY):

This document is required to authorize AFS Costa Rica as representative of the minor while in Costa Rica to perform any administrative procedure (school, social security, etc) as well as all migratory procedures (including authorization to exit the country at the end of the AFS program). This document must be in Spanish to be valid in Costa Rica. The document must also be accompanied by a photocopy of both natural parents' official ID's (Passport, drivers' license or other commonly used identification), showing picture, main personal data and off course, their signatures. The Parental Consent Form must be validated with the Apostille.

**Exception:** *If the participant is turning 18 years old within first 3 months of his/her program, the participant must provide the Certificate of Criminal Record instead of the Parental Consent Form.*

Certificate of Criminal Record (for 18 or OLDER):

For all participants taking part in ANY Program, who are already 18, older than 18, or turning 18 years old within first 3 months after arrival in Costa Rica. The Certificate of Criminal Record (and the translation – if necessary), must be validated with the Apostille.

*Exception:* when country of origin does not issue Certificate of Criminal Record for minors and this requirement becomes materially impossible to comply with. In such a case, the participant must provide an official document explaining that situation, along with original Parental Consent Form, both validated with the Apostille.

10 front Color Pictures:

White or gray background, passport size (4 cms. x 5 cms.). NOT PERMITTED: Photocopies, Polaroid type, Scanned NOR Black and White photos. Some of these pictures would be required in the Costa Rican Consulate in the country of residence and others will be required once in Costa Rica.

Finger Print Registration:

This is a mandatory procedure for any foreign citizen requesting a student/volunteer temporary residence visa in Costa Rica. The participant must present him/herself (once in Costa Rica) to an authorized police office to register his/her finger-prints. AFS CRC coordinates this procedure for all its participants.

Consular Registration:

It is mandatory for all foreigners who will request any kind of temporary residence permit to register themselves at the Consulate of his/her country of citizenship. Most Consulates request their citizens to show up and fill forms, some others accept electronic filings. Some Consulates will charge users for this service, others will not. In case any charges apply, they must be paid by the participant. AFS CRC coordinates this procedure for all its participants.

**Important notice:**

Birth Certificate, Parental Consent Form, Certificate of Criminal Record and any other document necessary to explain any particular participant's condition as: Adoption, Change of names, Divorced/Deceased parents, etc., must be validated with the Apostille.

**For more information or clarification (prior to your departure) regarding the Visa procedures and costs, please contact the AFS Office in your country.**



## ***Good luck in Costa Rica!***

Now you have a basic idea of some of the things you may expect once in Costa Rica. Your experience here will definitely be a challenge and a big learning opportunity.

I'm sure you are going to meet some wonderful persons and you will have the opportunity to share your culture and your own ideas. Prepare yourself, read about your own country, bring some things that may help explain your culture and your context to others and, off course... learn as much Spanish as you can before arriving in this beautiful land.

Come, enjoy, learn, be responsible. This experience is going to be what you make of it. We wish you the best of lucks.

## ***How to contact AFS Costa Rica***

### **AFS Costa Rica National Office**

Street address: Costa Rica, San José, Barrio Francisco Peralta. De la Casa Italia 100m Sur y 200m Este.

Mailing address: AFS Costa Rica, Apartado 4507-1000, San José, Costa Rica.

Telephone: 2234-0909

Fax number: 2234-0872

E-mail: [crcinfo@afs.org](mailto:crcinfo@afs.org)

Web site: [www.afs.or.cr](http://www.afs.or.cr)

Office hours:

Monday through Friday, 8:30 am to 5:30 pm

**Emergency Service Number:** 8330-6401

*Conectando Vidas, Compartiendo Culturas*