San José, Costa Rica Academic Program – Summer 2013
IAP Program Handbook

The San José, Costa Rica Academic Program is offered by International Academic Programs (IAP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in conjunction with the Costa Rica Spanish Institute (COSI). This IAP Program Handbook supplements the IAP Study Abroad Handbook and provides you with the most up-to-date information and advice available at the time of printing. Changes may occur before your departure or while you are abroad.

Questions about your program abroad (housing options, facilities abroad, etc.) as well as questions relating to your relationship with COSI or academics (e.g. course credit and equivalents, registration deadlines, etc.) should be directed to International Academic Programs at UW-Madison.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

ON-SITE PROGRAM INFORMATION
Your primary contact in San José, Costa Rica will be Renata Komarova.

Costa Rica Spanish Institute (COSI) Phone: (506) 2234-1001
PO Box 1366-2050 Fax: (506) 2253-2117
San Pedro, San José, Costa Rica E-mail: office@cosi.co.cr
Website: http://www.cosi.co.cr/

UW-MADISON INFORMATION
International Academic Programs (IAP)
University of Wisconsin-Madison
106 Red Gym, 716 Langdon Street
Madison, WI 53706
Tel: 608-265-6329 Fax: 608-262-6998
Web: www.studyabroad.wisc.edu

Angela McNutt
Study Abroad Advisor
Phone: (608)265-6329
E-mail : amcnutt@studyabroad.wisc.edu
EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION
In case of an emergency, call the main IAP number (608) 265-6329 between 8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; after-hours or on weekends call the IAP staff on call at (608) 516-9440.

EMBASSY REGISTRATION
All program participants who are U.S. citizens must register at the U.S. Embassy before departure as this will help in case of a lost passport or other mishap. You can register on-line at https://travelregistration.state.gov. If you are not a U.S. citizen, register at your home country’s embassy or consulate.

U.S. Embassy in San José
Calle 120 Avenida 0
Pavas, San José
Costa Rica
TEL: +506 25 19 20 00
After Hours/Emergency Tel: (506) 2519-2280, (506) 2519-2279
Fax: (506) 2519-2305
Web: http://costarica.usembassy.gov/

PROGRAM DATES

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<th>6-Week Session: June 2 – July 13</th>
<th>8-Week Session: June 2 – July 27</th>
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<tr>
<td>June 2 – Arrive in San José</td>
<td>June 2 – Arrive in San José</td>
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<td>June 3 – Orientation and first day of classes</td>
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<td>July 26 – Last day of class for 8-week session</td>
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<td>July 13 – 6-week session students depart</td>
<td>July 27 – 8-week session students depart</td>
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PREPARATION BEFORE LEAVING

IMMIGRATION DOCUMENTS

Passport
A passport is needed to travel to Costa Rica. Apply immediately for a passport if you do not already have one. Passport information and application forms can be found on the U.S. State Department website (http://travel.state.gov/passport). If you already have your passport, make sure it will be valid for at least 6 months beyond the length of your stay abroad.

Visa
U.S. citizens do not need a student visa to study in Costa Rica. You will receive a 90 day tourist visa when you arrive in Costa Rica. Immigration now also requires that travelers be able to demonstrate financial capacity of at least $100 per month while they are in Costa Rica as tourists. When you leave Costa Rica, you will have to pay a departure tax of $28 USD.
HANDLING MONEY ABROAD
Your personal spending habits, the cost of living in your host country/city, and fluctuating exchange rates should all be taken into consideration when figuring out your study abroad budget. The official currency of Costa Rica is the Colon (CRC). Current exchange rates can be found online: www.oanda.com/converter/classic or www.xe.com/ucc/.

ATM/Debit Cards
You can easily get money from a cajeros automáticos (ATMs) in San José. Make sure to check with your bank about details on how to access your account in San José and getting an international 4-digit PIN if you don’t have one. Inform your financial institution of your expected time abroad so they do not stop processing any of your ATM/debit card transactions due to belief that your card has been stolen. Also confirm with your bank any fees that you will be charged for withdrawing money internationally. Remember to bring the toll free phone number of your bank or credit card company to use in the case of an emergency (lost or stolen ATM or credit card).

Budgeting
You may spend more money than accustomed to in the United States for reasons such as traveling, going out more, buying souvenirs, etc. The money suggested on your cost sheet will see most students through, unless you are planning on purchasing gifts, like to go out, or want to travel frequently. Keep a record of purchases to help get through customs on your return.

Remember to save enough money to get out of Costa Rica: possible fare for the taxi or bus to the airport, and the exit tax. When you leave Costa Rica, U.S. passport holders will have to pay a departure tax of $28. You will need to have this money in US dollars. Also, DO NOT FORGET that you may be charged for excess baggage if the weight exceeds airline limitations (varies by airline).

Safety with Money
Use the same precautions with money abroad that you would when traveling in any large city in the United States. Be aware of pickpockets in crowded areas and on public transportation. Carry your money and other documents in a money pouch worn inside your clothing. Use the same precautions you take at home when using an ATM; keep your pin number separate from your ATM/debit card and use machines inside banks or other buildings. Maintain a copy of all credit card numbers, traveler check numbers, and any PIN numbers in a safe place, and do not carry these with you at any time. Leave a copy of these documents with your Financial Representative in the United States.

PACKING
Important documents (passport, emergency contact information, insurance card, ATM card, money, etc.) should be in your carry-on luggage. Also, make sure that you make a copy of important documents and leave them with a friend or family member back home to access in the case of an emergency.

Take enough prescription medication to last the duration of the program. Keep prescription medication in their original packaging and carry a letter/prescription from your doctor explaining your condition and use of medication. Prescriptions should be packed in your carry-on luggage.

Valuable items, expensive jewelry, and items that cannot be replaced should be left at home.
Attire
When you are traveling in Costa Rica avoid revealing clothing. Away from the touristy beach resorts of Costa Rica, clothing tends to be more conservative. This is not because Costa Rican people are particularly religious, though they do have strong Catholic roots, which is perhaps an indication to why Costa Ricans tend to dress conservatively.

In general, Costa Rican men wear long pants from day-to-day and the only time they might wear shorts is at the beach or at home. Many Costa Rican men also prefer to wear long sleeved shirts despite the warm weather, although there is nothing out of the ordinary in wearing a t-shirt.

Clothing for women in Costa Rica is similarly conservative in that it’s unusual to see a Tican woman walking around town in a mini skirt or wearing a blouse with a very low cleavage. Generally, knee length skirts are worn although wearing pants is also quite typical for Costa Rican women in the cities. You can wear shorts, but not too short. [http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/articles/costarica/Typical-Clothing-Costa-Rica/782](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/articles/costarica/Typical-Clothing-Costa-Rica/782) and [http://www.journeywoman.com/ccc/ccc-c2.html](http://www.journeywoman.com/ccc/ccc-c2.html)

Suggested items students have found helpful

- Towel(s) for beach
- Insect repellent
- Sun screen
- Camera
- Flashlight
- Sandals
- Swimsuit
- Extra shoes
- Rain coat/jacket
- Umbrella
- Long sleeve shirt or light sweater as it can get a little cold
- Copy of your passport
- Ear plugs
- Cosmetics/Toiletries (these can be expensive in Costa Rica)

Electronics
The voltage in Costa Rica is the same as in the United States and Canada. However, some houses may not have updated wiring, which means that grounded plugs (two prongs, but one is slightly larger) will not fit. You may want to take an adapter or purchase one in San José. It is best to bring a number of batteries, or rechargeable batteries since electricity may not be entirely reliable.

TRAVEL AND ARRIVAL

Participants are responsible for making their own flight arrangements to and from San José. Participants will be met on the day of arrival at the airport by COSI staff and transported to your host family.

Navigating San José airport:
The airport in San José, named Juan Santamaria International Airport, is located just outside the city. Upon arrival in San José airport, you need to clear immigration. Follow the signs that indicate where you should go.

After proceeding through the immigration process, you can gather your luggage along the left side of the departure area. Afterwards, you are directed towards one of two lines, one being for passengers with two or less bags, the other for those with three or more pieces of luggage. For those with two or less, you are required to press a button which selects passengers for inspection; this selection process is random and cannot be predicted. A percentage of those passengers will be required to open their luggage for further inspection, while those not selected will be free to exit the airport. Those traveling with three or more items are directed to a different area, and will more than likely be required to confront customs inspectors; and perhaps, asked to open your luggage. Immediately after clearing customs, you proceed up a flight of stairs towards the exit of the airport. If you are unsure where to go, ask an official airport worker who can help you. When you exit the Customs area, you will be met by a driver from COSI.

An orientation to COSI and San José will be provided for you on-site.

THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM

General Information
The Costa Rica Spanish Institute (COSI) was founded in 1994 and strives to be one of the best language schools in Latin America. COSI is dedicated to offering high-quality, personalized courses in an exciting, efficient, and relaxed environment with a highly professional staff. Classes are taught in groups of a maximum of eight students by teachers who are experts at teaching Spanish language to students of all skill levels. Enhancing the language experience with cultural activity, COSI offers opportunities such as dance and cooking classes.

COSI is located between San Pedro and Zapote, a safe, quiet suburb of San José, about a ten minute bus ride from downtown. COSI facilities are open from 7:30am-5:30pm in June and July. Around COSI, there are cafeterias, shopping centers, movie theaters, and other social opportunities. During June and July, there will be activities arranged by COSI almost every afternoon.

COURSE INFORMATION

Classes will meet Monday through Friday in the morning for four hours (8:00-12:00) with two 10 minute breaks.

Course Selection
All courses at COSI are taught in Spanish by experienced, native Spanish-speaking instructors. COSI classes are limited to a maximum of 8 students each. During the six-week session, students take 2-3 courses. Each course lasts for two weeks and students will take one course at a time. Students taking 2 courses will complete a conversation course for the final two weeks to keep up with the material studied the first two weeks. No credit is given for this conversation course. Students in the eight-week session will take two courses the first four weeks and then complete a four-week internship for academic credit.
Course options for the summer session include:

- Spanish 101: First Year Spanish
- Spanish 102: First Year Spanish
- Spanish 203: Third Semester Spanish
- Spanish 204: Fourth Semester Spanish
- Spanish 224: Introduction to Hispanic Literatures
- Spanish 226: Intermediate Language Practice with Emphasis on Writing & Grammar
- Spanish 325: Advanced Conversation
- Spanish 311: Advanced Language Practice
- Spanish 460: Topics in Literature
- Spanish 468: Topics in Culture

Books
Most books will be provided for you. Be sure to allow a reasonable amount in your budget for book purchases and/or photocopying.

Past participants of language programs have strongly suggested that you take grammar and verb books from your previous semesters of Spanish. It is strongly recommended that you review your grammar and vocabulary prior to your arrival in San José.
- grammar books
- Spanish/English dictionary
- 501 Spanish Verbs book

Spanish Majors
UW-Madison students majoring in Spanish must keep the following information in mind:

1) You must take at least 15 credits of the upper level work in the Spanish major “in residence” (that means, here on campus or in programs sponsored by UW-Madison). All Spanish courses numbered 300 or above count toward this requirement.

2) You must take at least 6 credits of Spanish at the 300 level or above while physically present at UW-Madison.

If you would like more information or clarification on the Spanish major, please speak with Karen Thompson, Undergraduate Spanish Advisor.

Registration
Students submit a course preference form to IAP prior to the beginning of the program listing the courses they want to register for at COSI. Course equivalents earned for the course taken in San José will be based on your previous Spanish language studies.

IAP will register you for the summer program at UW. There are no additional registration procedures you must take.

Credits
Conversions
You will receive three or four credits for each of the Spanish language courses you take in San José, depending on the course you choose.

**Limits and Load**
Students are required to take 2-3 courses on the six-week session, and 2 courses plus the internship on the eight-week session.

**Pass/Fail/Drop/Audit**
Participants on this program are not permitted to take courses pass/fail.

**Grades and Grade Conversions**
Although the grading criteria will be different for each course, you will receive a syllabus on the first day that will clearly outline the course expectations. This program is an intensive language course; students must realize that several hours a day will be spent studying and any unexcused absence will affect your grade.

All courses will use the following UW-Madison grade scale:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>92-100</td>
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<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>89-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-88</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>80-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>71-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>65-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Below 65</td>
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**CULTURAL ACTIVITIES**
In addition to the courses you will take, COSI offers a unique opportunity for students to learn local skills through *talleres* or (cultural) workshops, such as dancing and cooking classes. There are regular extracurricular activities on Wednesdays. COSI will provide details about talleres times and locations upon arrival in San José.

**VOLUNTEER**
There will be volunteer opportunities for students during the afternoons. There is a $150 placement fee for the volunteer program. Interested students will pay that fee directly to COSI.

**PROGRAM EXCURSIONS**
During your stay in San José you will participate on several different excursions which are included in your program fee. You will have a city tour of San José soon after arrival. You will also visit Poas Volcano and a coffee plantation during your program.
LIVING ABROAD

Costa Rica is in Central America, bordering both the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean between Nicaragua and Panama. It has a population around 4,509,290. The country is slightly smaller than West Virginia. Costa Rica is both tropical and subtropical with a dry season from December to April and a rainy season from May to November. While the country has only about 0.1% of the world's landmass, it contains 5% of the world's biodiversity. Historically, Costa Rica has generally enjoyed greater peace and more consistent political stability compared with many of its fellow Latin American nations.

San José
San José is the capital of Costa Rica and is the nation's largest city. Located in the Central Valley, the city is a major transportation hub in Central America. The population comprises a third of the country's population. The city is divided into 11 districts (distritos). The districts are further divided into neighborhoods (barrios).

Culturally, San José has European influences, partly because of Spanish immigration soon after Costa Rica's discovery by Christopher Columbus, and the privileged classes which generally studied in Europe during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These influences can be seen in the architecture of the city, museums, and houses in the city center.

Costa Rican cuisine is not spicy and in San José, it is easy to find. The most popular food throughout San José is gallo pinto, the national dish, which is a mixture of fried rice and black beans. Sodas are Costa Rican restaurants serving traditional food at an affordable price, usually offering casados for lunch and dinner. A casado consists of rice, beans, and meat, and normally comes with cabbage-and-tomato salad, fried plantains, and/or tortillas.

Climate
San José is in a tropical rainforest. However, its elevation gives it a mild climate that borders subtropical highland. Temperatures can range between 63 and 86 °F. The rainy season is from May to mid-November, but cloudiness and rainfall can occur during the dry season as well. During the day it can be warm; but at night a jacket might be needed for cooler temperatures.

HOMESTAY
Students are assigned to homes where they will feel secure and well-protected from the moment of their arrival. All houses are within walking distance to COSI. Students also agree to residential rules and follow a code of conduct regarding home stays. If at any time the student feels that, everything considered, he/she is not being treated fairly, COSI will gladly look into the matter. Please keep in mind as well, that it can take time to adapt to the household and that you should try to be as flexible as is comfortable and possible for you. Students should communicate to COSI any concern they have regarding their housing situations. COSI will provide an opportunity for students to give written feedback on their host family experience. COSI maintains close contact with all the host families throughout the duration of the program.

Living in a homestay requires a lot of respect and tolerance. Because you will be living by the rules of a new culture, it is your responsibility to adapt to the family, and not the other way around. In a dorm you
come and go as you please, without letting anyone know of your whereabouts; if you wish, you can go
for weeks without cleaning your room; you can bring friends to your room. In a Costa Rican home,
however, these things may not be considered acceptable. The respect and politeness that you show
while sharing the home will to a large degree determine how much you gain from your experience in
Costa Rica.

**Gifts**

You may wish to take some kind of gift with you for the Costa Rican family that will be welcoming you to
their home. Do not try sending them a mailed gift later. Save your gift until departure time. A sure
winner with families is something personal - local to Wisconsin (or your home state or town) or from
UW-Madison.

**Conduct with host family**

You are expected to inform both COSI and the host family if you plan to stay away from home overnight
or travel outside San José. This is necessary in case of accidents or the need to reach you for any reason.
Failure to do so could jeopardize your situation in the program.

You are reminded that habitual late hours may upset the working of the home in which you are a guest
as well as the fact that such hours are not compatible with study. You will receive a key to your house,
although you need to respect your host family’s schedule.

COSI will dismiss, at any time, a student whose conduct renders his or her presence in the program
undesirable.

All homes have been carefully chosen for comfort and convenience; however, no two houses are alike.
Unless a request is made well in advance for special housing requirements (access, allergies, diet, etc.),
there is little chance that such needs can be met. Having internet/wifi is not a guarantee in all
homestays.

Once a student has been assigned to a home, that assignment cannot be changed without the
permission of COSI. A violation of this principle will certainly cause the student extra expense.

Be sure to check with the host family about any guests you may wish to receive in the home. Students
should not expect anything but a very negative reaction if they receive guests of the opposite sex in
their rooms at anytime.

**COSI Residential Rules and Code of Conduct – Home stays:**

1. Respect should be shown to all COSI students and staff as well as to all those residing within the home stay
   and its neighborhood during the program.

2. Quiet Hours are to be enforced from 10:00 pm to 7:00 am seven days per week. Care is required when
   returning home to avoid disturbing your hosts. Also, your neighbors do not appreciate loud drunken behavior, and
   they are not shy about calling the police or the local government authority to complain about loud noises.

3. Guests during the day are not allowed unless you have prior permission from your hosts. Do not arrange
   meetings with your friends or classmates at your host family’s home. If you are dating, do not invite your
   boyfriend/girlfriend to go to your room. Do not invite guests to stay for meals.
4. There is a strict NO OVERNIGHT GUEST policy in all COSI home stays. Even if you have permission from your hosts to have guests in the house during the day, they must not ever spend the night. Do not ask your hosts for permission for guests to spend the night – in no cases is this acceptable.

5. Although there is no specific curfew, simple courtesy requires you to notify your host family when you will be home late. They feel responsible for your welfare and will worry if they do not know what time you plan to return.

6. If you are going to be away overnight or for the weekend, you must inform your family in advance. In the event you fail to notify your host family that you are not going to sleep at their home, we will initiate proceedings to report you as a missing person to your university, parents, the police and the American Embassy (or your country’s embassy).

7. You are responsible for all guests, actions and activities that occur in your room. Therefore, it is your responsibility to help remind guests of these rules and to always adhere to COSI’s code of conduct.

8. Possessing or using ANY illegal drug is STRICTLY prohibited, and all staff, home stay families and faculty are required to call the police and report any suspicion of such illegal activity. Please do not underestimate the seriousness of such an offence. In addition to being bound by local laws and methods of prosecution, any violator of COSI’s NO DRUG policy will be dismissed from the home stay and from the program at his/her own expense.

9. You are expected to keep your bedroom tidy and presentable.

10. You must abide by the individual “house rules” set by your home stay – these rules apply to such things as the use of the television, phone, bathroom, washing machine, kitchen, shower water heater, as well as locking up at night.

11. You will be held accountable for all damages you or your guests cause and any missing items from your room/home stay. If necessary, final grades will be held until payment is made.

12. All home campus codes and rules of behavior still apply while you are studying abroad.

13. Costa Rican host families are carefully screened, interviewed and regularly visited. The home stay coordinator has a personal relationship with all of the families and selects them with great care. At COSI San José, home stays are no more than 20 minutes walking distance.

14. Meals and Services. The family will provide you with breakfast, dinner and laundry service. Please note that lunch is not included.

15. Use of phone. Phone calls are expensive to the average Costa Rican. You can buy phone cards from reception which you can use from any telephone. Please, note that 1-800 numbers are charged in Costa Rica as an international phone call. If you are using the phone without a calling card (WE DO NOT RECOMMEND IT), please pay the family 15 colones per minute for calls in the San José area and 20 for places further away or calls to a cell phone. It is common courtesy to ask your family when you need to use the phone. Also, try to not use the phone for very long calls; otherwise the family will not have access to their phone.

16. Keys to the house. You will be responsible for keeping your keys safe. If for any reason you lose your keys, you will have to pay for their replacement. If you lose a key or your COSI’s ID, you will have to pay to change the keys and outside locks, which in some cases can be two or three locks. We suggest keeping your house keys and COSI’s ID in safe, separate places.

17. Sweating. People in the tropics sweat much more than in other climates. To avoid odors which might offend your friends, we recommend that you use a strong anti-perspirant/deodorant.
18. Behavior. Burping and “passing gas” (farts), are considered very disrespectful in Latin culture. Please avoid this behavior.

Meals
Regular hours for meals are established in each home. You will be provided breakfast and dinner at your homestay. Host families are not obliged to serve any meals outside these hours. Snacks and “extras” are to be obtained outside the home unless offered by the host family. No refunds are made for meals not taken in the home, but forewarning of an absence would be welcome. Students who wish to invite guests for meals must arrange this with the host family in advance and make proper financial arrangements with them. Students should try their best to adapt to the family’s eating style rather than impose their own habits. If you have peculiar eating habits you should discuss these with IAP prior to departure.

Laundry
Laundry is included and provided by the host family. Take easy wash/dry clothes and be flexible, as your situation will vary by family, and you will not know until your arrival.

TRAVEL AND TRANSPORTATION
You are strongly encouraged not to travel to any areas deemed as hazardous or unsafe by the U.S. State Department. Make sure to check with the U.S. State Department, Embassy or Consulate regarding the safety of any areas which you are planning traveling to or through before you make any travel plans. You will be expected to leave a travel itinerary with COSI and your host family as well as a family member or friend in the United States in case someone needs to get hold of you as well as for your own safety.

COSI is located between San Pedro and Zapote, in a suburb of San José, which is about a ten minute bus ride from the downtown area. It is recommended that you do not walk alone at night, especially if you are female. It is best to stay in groups. Public transportation such as buses and taxis are inexpensive and easily accessible in San José. It is also customary in Costa Rica and Latin America to sit in the back seat of the taxi. This is especially true if you are a female alone, as otherwise this will be perceived as an open invitation to the driver. The one exception is if the taxi is full, and it is best to ask permission of the driver first.

HEALTH
It is recommended that you read through the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations for travel to Costa Rica http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/costa-rica.aspx as well as meet with your doctor or a travel doctor prior to departure. Your doctor or health-care provider will determine what you will need, depending on factors such as your health and immunization history, areas of the country you will be visiting, and planned activities.

Diseases from food and water are the leading cause of illness in travelers. Follow these tips for safe eating and drinking:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially before eating. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand gel (with at least 60% alcohol).
- Drink only bottled or boiled water, or carbonated (bubbly) drinks in cans or bottles. Avoid tap water, fountain drinks, and ice cubes.
• Do not eat food or drink beverages purchased from street vendors.
• Make sure food is fully cooked.
• Avoid dairy products, unless you know they have been pasteurized.
• Do not drink or brush your teeth with water that is not purified. Ask if you are not sure, even at your host family’s house. Keep your mouth closed in the shower. Do not be misled by well-meaning reassurances to the contrary.
• Diseases from food and water often cause vomiting and diarrhea. Make sure to bring diarrhea medicine with you so that you can treat mild cases yourself.

Alcohol and drug use
Cross-cultural differences exist in the consumption of alcohol. Depending on your host country, you may find the availability and public consumption of alcohol greatly increased or decreased. Often, rules about the acceptability of alcohol use in certain situations or contexts are very different than in the United States. Excessive drinking can impact your health during the program, impair judgment, lead to risk or harm to yourself or others and have an effect on your academic performance.

Penalties for use or possession of illegal drugs can include jail terms, hard labor, and even the death penalty. Neither the U.S. Embassy nor the program offices are able to exercise effective pressure to moderate these penalties. If you are arrested, you are subject to the host country’s laws and neither the UW-Madison’s IAP office nor the U.S. Embassy can protect you from the local legal consequences. While on an IAP study abroad program, you are responsible for obeying all local laws. If IAP learns that program participants are using drugs or breaking other local laws, participants will be confronted and may be asked to leave the program.

SAFETY
IAP is dedicated to maintaining the personal safety and security for each of our study abroad participants. Our office takes necessary precautions, remains in close contact with program staff and works with them in case of an emergency. You are encouraged to contact your IAP Study Abroad Advisor if you are concerned about your safety or welfare.

U.S. citizens are encouraged to exercise the same level of caution they would in major cities or tourist areas throughout the world. Local law enforcement agencies have limited capabilities and do not act according to U.S. standards. Travelers should minimize driving at night, especially outside urban areas. Americans should walk or exercise with a companion, bearing in mind that crowded tourist attractions and resort areas popular with foreign tourists are common venues for criminal activities. Travelers should ignore any verbal harassment, and avoid carrying passports, large amounts of cash, jewelry or expensive photographic equipment. A common scam involves one person dropping change in a crowded area, such as on a bus. When the victim tries to assist, a wallet or other item is taken.

Costa Rica is a relatively safe country. Nevertheless, here are a few recommendations while traveling around:

It is advisable to take extra precaution with your passport and money. Normally, one should not carry their passport and large sums of cash on their person. Use a money belt or pocket sewn inside your
clothes for the safest way to carry money. Velcro tabs sewn to seal your pockets shut will also help thwart roving hands.

Keeping all your money in one place is not advised—guard against possible loss by leaving a small amount of money in your room or buried in your backpack, with a record of credit card and passport numbers. If you leave expensive items in your room, make sure to put them in a spot not easily in sight and to lock the door when you leave.

Travel in groups or with another person at all times. San Jose is a large city, and like cities in the U.S. there are precautions to consider when visiting different areas. Be aware of your surroundings and know where you are going.

COMMUNICATION

Many of your family members/friends will be anxious to hear from you when you arrive. Please make sure they are familiar with your travel details so that they know when they can expect to hear from you. Be sure that your friends/family know that it will take you some time to get through customs, get your luggage, etc and this may delay your ability to get in touch with them about your safe arrival. Just let them know that you’ll communicate with them as soon as possible, and in most cases no news is good news.

Telephone/Cell Phone

Phone calls are expensive to the average Costa Rican. You can buy phone cards in Costa Rica. 1-800 numbers are charged as an international phone call. It is recommended that if you are using the host family phone, to use a calling card or work out payment with the family. It is common courtesy to ask your family when you need to use the phone.

In the homestay, telephone calls, both incoming and outgoing, must be kept to a reasonable minimum. Long-distance calls are best made from internet cafes, offices of the telephone company, from special long-distance booths, or by using your credit card. You can buy a telephone card in Costa Rica and call the United States from any public telephone. It is best to purchase phone cards in Costa Rica. Those purchased in the United States are more difficult to access and are more expensive. Your cell phone from the United States may work in Costa Rica, although the per-minute charge can be expensive.

Any extra charges such as telephone bills resulting from use of the telephone in the home to make long distance calls, damage to the building or to furniture, will be billed to the student involved. A considerable surcharge will be added to any bills which must be so collected. Transcripts and grades will be withheld until the amount is collected.

If you are considering a cellphone, it is best if you check with your provider in the U.S. whether your cell phone can be used in Costa Rica.

When making calls, keep in mind time zone differences www.timeanddate.com/worldclock. To make an international call to the United States from Costa Rica, dial “001” followed by the appropriate U.S. area code and local number. To call internationally from the United States, dial “011”, the country code (506) and the phone number. The number 2 precedes each land line phone number and the number 8 proceeds each cell phone number. Other country and city codes can be found online www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/dialing.html. Some of above steps can vary if you are using a calling card.
Skype
Past participants have recommended using Skype, an internet phone software (www.skype.com). Skype allows you to place free calls to anyone else who also has the service as well as low-cost rates to regular phones. To use Skype, you will need to download and install Skype software to your computer.

Email: A laptop is not a requirement for academic purposes, but students may bring one for personal use. There are computers at COSI for student use. It is possible to use the internet at COSI for a small fee (around $2 an hour). Some host families have wi-fi-connection at home. San José has many internet cafes around town that can be used for checking emails.

WEBSITES OF INTEREST
International Academic Programs (IAP) at UW-Madison: www.studyabroad.wisc.edu

General Orientation Information: www.worldwide.edu/travel_planner/index.html (includes topics such as culture shock, international travel, etc.)

U.S. State Department: travel.state.gov

U.S. State Department Students Abroad site: http://www.studentsabroad.state.gov/

Center for Disease Control: www.cdc.gov/travel

Current Exchange Rates: www.oanda.com/converter/classic


Costa Rica Tourist Website: http://www.tourism.co.cr/

STUDENT EXPERIENCE
The comments below are from past participants; they reflect various students’ experiences and are included to provide different perspectives. IAP does not endorse any specific view expressed in this section.

Preparations Before Leaving
The school had a wireless network that you could use for free if you brought a laptop or tablet. I would strongly recommend bringing a laptop to future students.
I brought my cell phone but rarely took it out of the house (by choice). Wi-Fi is common in many restaurants. We had a Facebook group that was the common method of planning activities, meeting times, and locations amongst the members.

I did bring my phone, but had it on airplane mode the whole time. I downloaded a call/text free app which I used when there was Wi-Fi.

I brought my cell phone but only used texting since calling was too expensive. I had a specific texting and data plan that was relatively inexpensive to add on to my regular plan.

My family and COSI had WiFi so I kept in touch with others through Facebook.

Try to make your own person budget and plan it in Colones, not US dollars. It's easy to lose track of where your money went when you're paying in Colones because it takes a bit of time to get used to the conversion.

There were ATMs very close to the school and numerous other locations. You can also exchange money at the school for a reasonable price. Most places accept cards but I didn't use mine since cash was safer and there were some cases where there was an added fee for paying with a card.

I brought along about $300 USD, which I was able to exchange at COSI. This is good method, because COSI will give you the best exchange rate. If you have a debit card you will be fine though; there are plenty of ATMs but they could charge you an international fee.

Exchange money through COSI or withdraw them from local ATMs (you can get dollars or Costa Rica colones). You get the best exchange rates from those sources. No need to purchase local currency from companies like Travelex before departure, their exchange rates are super high.

Bring a set of "nice" clothes in case your family wants to take you somewhere that has a dress code.

Make sure to bring some shorts/t-shirts/flip-flops for the beach, but also some warmer clothes (pants/sweater) because it does get cool out once in a while. Also, bring sunscreen as toiletries and such tend to be quite pricy in Costa Rica.

**Travel and Arrival Information**

I was picked up by someone from COSI and he drove me to my family. To depart we had to pay for transportation to the airport. It was really easy to fly out and we didn't have any issues with the airport in Costa Rica.

The program fee included a trip to the Poas Volcano and also to a coffee plantation tour. Manuel Antonio is a 3.5 hour bus ride away. It has one of the most beautiful beaches ever, and a national park filled with jungle, animals, and more beaches. I would recommend going there if given the opportunity.

We got very detailed and accurate travel information from COSI front desk staff.

San José itself has a few attractions worth checking out. There's a decent amount of stuff to do including a market for souvenirs, a nice mall with a movie theater, museums downtown, parks, and the Estadio Nacional which hosts soccer games and concerts.
Getting around San José is pretty simple. Taxis are just about everywhere, and the bus system feels similar to that in Madison as long as you know relatively where you’re heading. Buses to other parts of the country (like the beaches) are also pretty cheap by American standards.

Academic Program
The class sizes are very small. There was only one other student in my SPAN 204 class, so I received a lot of personal attention and had plenty of time to practice speaking my Spanish.

It usually took me 1-2 hours to complete the homework. Afterwards I had time to explore the city and practice my Spanish with locals.

In many classes, a written exam was used; however, a few classes required weekly verbal presentations or papers.

Academics were probably my favorite part of this program, actually. All of the staff at COSI were extremely friendly and helpful. There were only four students total in my class so we each got enough attention and feedback from the professor.

At first, I was frightened by the idea of just two of us students in a class with a teacher talking for four straight hours a day. But the environment was much more relaxed, and the conversation and class just flowed really smoothly.

The staff are devoted, hard working, and have a genuine interest to help us.

My Spanish has gotten a lot better from being in class and my reading in Spanish is much faster.

My Spanish has improved more than I could have hoped. I’m able to communicate with everyone I meet and make friends and have a good time with them, all in Spanish. The motivation to learn here is strong because we NEED to learn the language in order to live and converse with the Costa Ricans.

Living Abroad
My host mom walked me to school the first day so I’d know where it was, it was about a 15 minute walk.

My host mother did not speak or understand any English. She was very welcoming and helpful. I was the only other person in the house so she gave me a lot of attention.

My host family was rather large in comparison (one mother, father, two sons, a niece, and a grandmother), and they were all extremely wonderful, friendly people. I always had someone to talk to. My mother was a phenomenal cook. Both of my parents were extremely amiable and always had different topics to discuss with me. I got to practice Spanish a lot, which was really fortunate.

My host family is extremely generous. They’re all very nice and welcoming. I live less than 10 minutes away from school.

The homestay was great and I built a bond with my family. They didn’t make me feel like an outsider at all, so it was very easy to feel comfortable around them.
I stayed with an older woman who lived on her own, so I had a much different experience than those who lived with families. Experiencing family dynamics in another country and getting to see interaction first hand provides students with a great cultural learning opportunity.

My host family was great and provided me with everything I needed including laundry. They were open to talk whenever I was interested. Food was great to me (breakfast and dinner), but I love rice and beans which is basically all Costa Ricans eat.

Most of the streets in Costa Rica do not have names, but are instead organized in districts. We were nicely placed in very close-by neighborhoods. For example, three other students from our program and I were within 3-minute walks from each other. So it was nice to walk to school and back together.

There aren’t street signs in San Jose. You start to learn to figure out where you are and where to go by using landmarks. That’s how they give directions too, by landmarks and distances (like 50km to the west, 300 to the south).

Use common sense. Be very careful at night and always travel in a group, especially at night.

Only use official taxis. These are all red with a yellow triangle. Busses are cheap (100-250 colones). Use coins to pay not bills.

Taxis are relatively cheap, but you can walk downtown from COSI in about 20 mins. If you are traveling at night, TAKE A TAXI.