The San José, Costa Rica Academic FIG 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.

This program handbook contains the following information:

- Contact Information
- Program Dates
- Preparation Before Leaving
- Travel and Arrival Information
- The Academic Program
- Living Abroad
- Student Experience

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

**ON-SITE PROGRAM INFORMATION**

Main Contacts On-site:
Montserrat Hernández Obregón – COSI Director  
Renata Komarovova, Office Coordinator – renata@cosi.co.cr  
Professor Ksenija Bilbija, UW Resident Director – kbilbija@wisc.edu

Costa Rica Spanish Institute (COSI)  
De la Farmacia La Bomba 75 metros sur  
San Pedro – Montes de Oca, San José  
Costa Rica  

Phone: (506) 2234-1001  
Toll Free: (800)-866-6358 (9am-5pm EST)  
Fax: (506) 2253-2117  
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
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.

While in country, you will have the phone numbers of the COSI staff; you will call them directly if you need immediate assistance while abroad.

EMBASSY REGISTRATION
All program participants who are U.S. citizens are required to enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). This is a free service provided by the U.S. government to U.S. citizens who are traveling to, or living in, a foreign country. STEP allows you to enter information about your upcoming trip abroad so that the U.S. Department of State can better assist you in an emergency. STEP also allows Americans residing abroad to get routine information from the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate, as well as updates on demonstration, emergency messages, and other breaking events. Register online before your departure. The Travel & Visa Tab in your MySA account also has a link to this registration page. If you are not a U.S. citizen, check with your home country's embassy for comparable services.

U.S. Embassy in San José
In front of Centro Comercial del Oeste Pavas
Calle 98 Via 104
Pavas, San José
Costa Rica
TEL: (506) 2519-2000 From the U.S.- 011-506-2519-2000
Fax: (506) 2519-2305
Web: http://costarica.usembassy.gov/

PROGRAM DATES

January 5, 2014 – Arrive in San José
January 6, 2014 – Orientation and first day of class
January 17, 2014 – Last day of class
January 18, 2014 – Students depart

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.

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. This website may give you an idea of cost of living: http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/

ATM/Debit Cards
You can easily get money from a cajeros automáticos (ATMs) in San José. Make sure to check with your bank about getting an international 4-digit PIN and details on how to access your checking account in San José. 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).

There are also banks nearby the school where you can exchange cash. The staff at COSI can direct you.

Budgeting / Departure Tax
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. You will need money for the departure tax. As of October 2013, when you leave Costa Rica, U.S. passport holders will have to pay a departure tax of $29. You will need to have this money in US dollars.

Also, don’t forget that you may be charged for excess baggage if the weight exceeds airline limitations.

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.

**Climate and Attire**

As a tropical country, Costa Rica has two major seasons: wet and dry. The dry season (verano) runs from late December until April. The rest of the year has plentiful rainfall and is generally considered to be the invierno, which helps keep the country beautifully green. The temperature does not change much between the seasons, but the range can vary greatly from 50 degrees in the highlands to 90 degrees on the beaches on the coast.

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.

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. Jeans, t-shirts, and casual clothing are fine. It is typical for women to wear pants and tank tops, or nice t-shirts. Skirts are also common. People do wear shorts, but it is less common and you will probably only see them when you are traveling in other areas.

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. Short shorts are not recommended. [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 specifically for Costa Rica

- Towel(s) for beach (Your host family may not provide you with an extra)
- Insect repellent
- Sun screen (this can be expensive in Costa Rica)
- 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 the program site. COSI will also provide return transportation to the airport on the day the program ends.

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 will proceed to customs. After clearing customs, you may proceed 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 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. In August 2013, COSI became partners with Máximo Nivel, another educational institute in San José. COSI moved their language school to join the facilities at Máximo Nivel in the San Pedro area.

COSI is located in the San Pedro area, a safe, quiet suburb of San José. COSI facilities are open to students seven days a week. There are common areas, access to internet, an onsite café, and staff to assist students. Enhancing the language experience with cultural activity, COSI offers opportunities such as dance and cooking classes. Around COSI, there is access to banks, public transportation, shopping, movie cinemas, and restaurants.

COURSE INFORMATION
Classes will meet Monday through Friday in the morning for four hours (9:00am-1:00pm) with two 10 minute breaks.

Course Option
Courses at COSI are taught in Spanish by experienced, native Spanish-speaking instructors. COSI classes are limited to a maximum of 8 students each.

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

You will take Spanish 325: Advanced Conversation during the two-week winter intersession.

Credits
You will receive two credits for the Spanish language course you take in San José. The third credit is earned through a directed study during the spring semester with Professor Bilbija. The course and credits will be posted to your spring semester grade report. IAP will authorize you for a credit overload for the semester, however, if you have any problems registering for spring semester credits, contact Angela McNutt in IAP.
Tutoring
COSI can provide private tutoring for an added cost. If you are interested in receiving tutoring for your course, consult COSI staff.

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

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

Pass/Fail
Participants on the San José winter FIG program are not permitted to take the course 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 grade scale to convert grades from COSI to UW-Madison:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92-100</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>89-91</td>
<td>AB</td>
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<tr>
<td>83-88</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>80-82</td>
<td>BC</td>
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<td>71-79</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>65-70</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 65</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Communication with the UW-Madison Spanish Department
UW-Madison students who are studying (or have studied) in Costa Rica should communicate with Professor Ksenija Bilbija (kbilbija@wisc.edu) concerning Spanish credit and equivalents. You may also communicate with Professor Bilbija if you have questions about a particular equivalent while abroad. You should include in your e-mail the following information:

- Name, UW ID number, major(s), expected date of graduation
- Your phone number (if you are in Madison)
- Hours that you may be reached (if you are in Madison)
- Most advanced Spanish language and literature classes you have taken at UW-Madison
- Reference to the particular program you are (were) on and how long you are (have studied) abroad

Make sure to forward confirmation to International Academic Programs of any course equivalencies approved by the Spanish Department.

Spanish Majors on the UW-Madison campus
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 this, please contact Karen Thompson, Undergraduate Spanish Advisor (klthompson3@wisc.edu).

For academic and course equivalent issues please contact Professor Ksenija Bilbija (kbilbija@wisc.edu).

For questions about this program contact Angela McNutt (amcnutt@studyabroad.wisc.edu).

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES
In addition to the course 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. Two dance classes and one cooking class are included in your program fee. There are regular extracurricular activities during the week. COSI will provide details about talleres times and locations upon arrival in San José.

PROGRAM EXCURSIONS
During your stay in San José you will participate on some excursions included in your program fee. You will have a city tour of San José soon after arrival. You will also take an overnight excursion to Arenal Volcano, and take a coffee plantation tour during your program.

LIVING ABROAD
Costa Rica is known throughout Latin America as a safe, literate, and democratic country with a welfare system that has led to the creation of good schools, health care systems, and other benefits. It is perhaps most famous for the fact that it has not had an army since 1949. Costa Rica gained its independence from Spain in 1821. Costa Ricans, or “ticos,” are proud of their pre-Columbian heritage.

Costa Rica has traditionally been a haven for refugees from other countries in the area, and even for the rest of the world. In addition to its original population – a mix of indigenous peoples and Spaniards – there are a mixture of Europeans, Africans, Chinese, Italians, and Germans who call Costa Rica home. Costa Rica became very popular as a retirement site for many North Americans thanks to government incentives. Most visitors find the country to be easy going and low stress. Pura vida, as they say.

A special aspect of Costa Rica is its emphasis on conservation and preservation of the environment. While the country has only about 0.1% of the world's landmass, it contains 5% of the world's biodiversity. Its system of national parks began in the 1960s. The country now has about 36 national parks, wildlife areas, refuges, and biological reserves amounting to 27% of total land is protected. Ecotourism is a flourishing business in Costa Rica and provides for the great majority of tourists who visit there. Costa Rica is both tropical and subtropical with a dry season from December to April and a rainy season from May to November. There are opportunities to see a variety of flora and fauna, tropical birds, butterflies, turtles, sloths, and monkeys.

Costa Rica is in Central America, bordering both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, between Nicaragua and Panama. It was a population of roughly 4.2 million. The country is slightly smaller than West Virginia.
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.

San José perhaps unjustly receives a bad rap among visitors, perpetuated by tourists that briefly stop in San José on their way to beach and rainforest vacations. 1.5 million people live in the greater metro area meaning that San José has a lot to offer. While other areas of Costa Rica cater to tourists and provide usual comforts to vacationers, you’ll find true Costa Rican culture in San José.

Massive urban migration has forced more people to move to the capital in search of increased economic opportunities. Shantytowns, poverty, and increased crime are all issues that are part of their modern day problems. The total picture is complex. While petty crime may be prevalent, and you must be vigilant just as you are in any city in the U.S., violent crime however is a lot less than the U.S.

Cuisine
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. You can expect to eat this quite often throughout your time in country. *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.

Gender Relations in Costa Rican Culture
You may be exposed to the stereotypical view of traditional gender roles in Latin America where the male is dominant and the woman is subject to "machismo." In Costa Rica, this is changing. Women have active, professional lives, and if it seems they adhere to the wishes of men, it’s generally the opposite and women rule the roost in most cases. In traditional towns or settings, you may observe a variety of male-female behavior patterns.

**HOMESTAY**
Housing on this program is provided in a homestay arranged through COSI. You will receive information on your host family from COSI about a week before departure.

You are assigned to homes where you will feel secure and well-protected from the moment of your arrival. All homestays are within walking distance to COSI, about 15-20 minutes. It is also possible to take public transportation or a taxi ($2-3). You can also arrange for private transportation to/from the institute through COSI (at an added cost, about $50 per person, per week).

Students also agree to residential rules and follow a code of conduct regarding home stays. If at any time you feel that, everything considered, you are 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. Security bars on homes in Costa Rica are common to the Spanish/Latin culture, but they are also to protect windows and doors as a security feature. You should communicate to COSI any concern you have regarding your housing situations. COSI will provide an opportunity for you to give
written feedback on your 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. Each family will be different; do not try and compare your family situation to others. There can be advantages and disadvantages to every living situation.

**Family Structure/Relationships**
A major difference between Costa Rican and U.S. culture is the difference in family structure. In Costa Rica, the family is extended rather than nuclear in form. People have close relationships with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins – even second and third cousins. Children grow up experiencing a broader family network than most children in the U.S.

There is much more open display of affection among ticos than in the U.S. A kiss on the cheek is the usual form of greeting, even when you first meet.

**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.

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.

**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 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 consider 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. Lunch will be on your own. 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. If you wish to invite guests for meals you must arrange this with the host family in advance and make proper financial arrangements with them. You should try your best to adapt to the family’s eating style rather than impose your own habits. If you have peculiar eating habits you should discuss these with IAP prior to departure, and also notify COSI so they may seek a homestay that may be suitable for you.
Costa Ricans eat a very light breakfast, often coffee with milk, juice and tostadas. Lunch is the main meal of the day. You can expect to have rice and black beans (gallo pinto) a lot, even for breakfast. Meat, fruits, and vegetables are also served. Dinner may be light.

**Laundry**

Laundry is included and provided by the host family. Take easy to wash/dry clothes and be flexible, as your situation will vary by family, and you will not know until your arrival. For women, they generally do not wash another’s undergarments. It is better if you wash your own.

**Water/Plumbing**

Some homes have water availability similar to what you are used to. Others may only have hot water all the time. Be prepared for all possibilities. You may not be able to flush anything down the toilet that doesn’t come directly from your body. Toilet paper and feminine products may be disposed of in the provided receptacle. The plumbing and sewage systems in Costa Rica cannot handle much volume.

**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.

**TRAVEL AND TRANSPORTATION**

You are strongly encouraged not to travel to any areas designed 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.

**Buses/Taxis**

Public transportation such as buses and taxis are inexpensive and easily accessible in San José. You may consult COSI staff with questions on how to navigate the buses. Official taxis are red and have a yellow triangle on the front doors. It is 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.

Directions in Costa Rica tend to be given in terms of landmarks and distances rather than a street name and number, though this is slowly changing. See COSI’s address on page 1 as an example.

**Excursions**

COSI has some tour information at the school. Costa Rica is known for its ecotourism. Be aware that some activities are higher in risk. It is recommended that you check with your personal insurance about engaging in these activities abroad before proceeding.

**HEALTH and SAFETY**

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](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).
- Be cautious of your drinking water source. It’s a good idea to ask first if you may drink water from the tap at your homestay. If traveling around the country, consider drinking only bottled or boiled water, or drinks in cans or bottles.
- Be cautious of food or drink beverages purchased from street vendors. This is not recommended in some areas.
- Make sure food is fully cooked. Peel skin from fruit before you eat it.
- Avoid dairy products, unless you know they have been pasteurized.
- Diseases from food and water often cause vomiting and diarrhea. Make sure to bring over-the-counter remedies 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.

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

It is recommended that you do not walk alone at night, especially if you are female. Travel in groups or with another person at all times, even during the day, if possible. San José 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.

It is advisable to take extra precaution with your passport, money, and valuables, including cell phones. Normally, one should not carry their passport and large sums of cash on their person. Use the same precautions that you would in any major U.S. city, or more so. Use a money belt or pocket sewn inside your clothes for the safest way to carry money. While violent crime is not common, petty theft is common. Don’t travel with anything that you are not prepare to lose.

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 credit card information and passport number.
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.

The U.S. Embassy reminds all U.S. citizens of the following tips to avoid becoming a victim in Costa Rica:

• 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.
• Avoid public parks at night and other poorly lit areas, and try to avoid going out alone. If and when you are out, please remember to always have a means of communicating with police and emergency services.
• 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.
• Don’t leave any valuables/bags/purses in plain sight.
• Always use the peephole in your residence doors when someone knocks or rings the bell, and never open your doors to anyone who you do not recognize or have not invited.

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. In the homestay, telephone calls, both incoming and outgoing, must be kept to a reasonable minimum. 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. 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 (COSI sells them) and call the United States from any public telephone. Phone cards purchased in the United States are more difficult to access and are more expensive. 1-800 numbers are charged as an international phone call.

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.

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.

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](http://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. Skype allows you to call from a computer (with a mic) to another computer or telephone, as well as video call with a webcam.

**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](http://www.studyabroad.wisc.edu)

U.S. State Department: [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov)

U.S. State Department Students Abroad site: [http://www.studentsabroad.state.gov/](http://www.studentsabroad.state.gov/)

Center for Disease Control: [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)

Current Exchange Rates: [www.oanda.com/converter/classic](http://www.oanda.com/converter/classic)


Costa Rica Tourist Website: [http://www.tourism.co.cr/](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**
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.

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.

**Travel and Arrival Information**

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

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 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.

My teachers were amazing and I regularly applied what I was learning in the classroom to my everyday life there.

**Living Abroad**

Try to shop at supermarkets instead of going out to lunch every day. It saved me a good amount of money. COSI has a kitchen you can use and lunches can get expensive.

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.

San Jose can be a slightly dangerous city, especially at night and in the early morning, just like any other big city. Be smart and use common sense (walk in groups, avoid shady looking characters, etc).

Only use official taxis. These are all red with a yellow triangle. Buses 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.

Always have money with you. Not everywhere takes a card.