

Costa Rica 4-H Exchange

By: Jeff Ladderud

My first piece of advice to those considering an exchange to Costa Rica is to know Spanish. I cannot emphasize enough how much more enriched my experience was because I didn't have to worry about a language barrier. I definitely wasn't fluent when I left for the exchange, but I did know enough to effectively communicate. I had very few problems with life in Costa Rica. I didn't get very frustrated or annoyed with the way life was conducted down there. I do not hesitate to attribute a good portion of this success to my knowledge of Spanish. This became especially evident while at camp. While the environment was challenging culturally, it did not leave a negative impression upon me. However, my fellow Americans struggled quite a bit those three days and I'm not sure what they would have done if I wasn't able to translate (I was the only person at camp who was somewhat bilingual).

Second, don't expect this to be a tourist trip. I was very excited to go to Costa Rica and see monkeys and crocodiles, volcanoes and waterfalls. While some host families have the resources to entertain delegates in a tourist-like manner, others are not so well off financially. You will never be in need of food, water and shelter, but don't take anything else for granted. My only regret of my exchange was that I didn't get to see all of Costa Rica's eco-tourist sites; a regret that stemmed from expectation. Learn to enjoy everyday life while in Costa Rica and don't feel entitled to very much. That way, everything you receive is a treat.

The quicker you tune into your host family's way of life and adapt to it, the better. Be your own person, but remember, you are a part of their family. They shouldn't have to change too much for you. For example, my family lived rather simply. I was conscious of this and was careful not to ask for very much because I knew that they likely couldn't afford it. When I wanted something, I paid for it myself. I even bought my family stuff at times. My family and I never had any problems centering around this issue, but I'm certain we would have if I wasn't aware of their situation.

This being said, don't be afraid to ask if you want or need anything, just be prepared to finance and/or plan it yourself. Often times your host parents and siblings will keep themselves busy and won't know what you want to do. Make an effort to get out of the house and explore. Sometimes your family will offer you the opportunity to go on an outing; be sure to seize it. Other times, you may need to request permission to get out and do something. It's a lot easier just to sit around the house, but hopefully you aren't going to Costa Rica just to email your friends back home. Try to fully immerse yourself in Costa Rican life, keeping dealings with America to a bare minimum. I'd estimate I wrote to my parents about once a week, and I never called anyone in America.

Answers to Questions I Had Before Going to Costa Rica

I had tons of questions before I went down to Costa Rica. Here are a few of them, with answers. Hopefully you find them helpful.

Do I need to know Spanish?

No. But you'll have a much better time if you do. Many of the host families have at least one member who speaks English. This was not the case with my family, but my fellow delegates (none of whom spoke Spanish very well) were all able to communicate, albeit difficultly.

What are the living conditions like?

Living conditions vary tremendously based on the family. I stayed in a small house with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a living room/kitchen. Some of my friends lived in more modern, two-story houses. Either way you will have a bed to sleep on. There are usually no screens on the windows so I slept with a fan and bug repellent to keep from being bitten (although try as I might, I always had some bug bites). You will have internet access, either at home (but be careful as this might cost your family money) or at an internet café. All houses and businesses have bars on the windows and there are several locks to protect during the night. That's not to say that there is a lot of crime, just that there would be if precautions weren't taken. While you still need to be cautious and use street smarts, Costa Rica is the safest country in Central America.

What's the food like?

Rice and beans, known as gallo pinto, are eaten a lot (I'm pretty sure some days I ate it at all three meals). I also had a lot of eggs and ham and cheese sandwiches. I also had a lot of pan dulce (sweet bread) which I bought fresh everyday from the panadaría (bread store). My friends went out to eat but I never did (except when I wasn't with my family). There are both Costa Rican and American restaurants.

Is there a risk of malaria?

I did a lot of research in order to make sure I was protected against diseases. Although the information from my local health department said that Costa Rica did have malaria, it said that in the central plateau (which includes Alajuela where I stayed) has no risk because of the elevation. There was supposedly a risk in the lower coastlands, but my host mom said there hasn't been a case of malaria in 30 years. I got a prescription for chloroquine pills to protect against malaria, but I didn't bother to take them because I didn't perceive a risk. I had friends who did take them. The choice is yours. I also got vaccinations for Hepatitis A and B, as well as for typhoid.

Do I need to worry about laundry?

My host mom was more than willing to do all of my laundry whenever I needed it done.

Does it rain much?

When they say it's the rainy season, they're telling the truth. I'd estimate that it rained six out of seven days a week. Sometimes the rain lasted only a couple hours, other times it lasted all day. Regardless, when it rained, it rained hard. Obtaining an umbrella should be a priority upon your arrival.