

COSTA RICA

Spanish Immersion

PARENT MANUAL





CommonGround INTERNATIONAL

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Thanks for taking the time to read through this information. The purpose of this manual is to answer many, hopefully the majority of your questions. Take a look and reach out if you have any additional questions. While you are reading this, your son / daughter is diving deeper into this content in their online pre-departure course.

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¡BIENVENIDOS!

Pura vida as they say in Costa Rica! Welcome to the Costa Rica high school Spanish immersion program! We are honored you chose Common Ground International to help your student gain Spanish proficiency and cultural awareness, and step out of their comfort zone to be challenged! We are highly committed to the learning, fun and safety of your high school students. Thank you for the opportunity!

Common Ground International is a small, family run business based out of Denver, Colorado. Year round we work with professionals and students, preparing them for their current or future bilingual work environments. Since 2001, we have run Spanish immersion programs in Costa Rica for those students and professionals that are ready to take their Spanish communication skills to the next level and gain cultural understanding. Spanish is a practical and necessary tool in order to compete in our current global market and workplace.

Common Ground has a long history of helping high school students become more proficient in Spanish. Our Costa Rica trips are more than just educational travel and Spanish summer camps. Our programs were designed by Spanish teachers with four primary components to maximize language and cultural learning.

- Small & intensive Spanish classes
- Exceptional host family experience
- Meaningful, sustainable, language-rich volunteer opportunities
- Adventure travel

Our goal is that Common Ground participants end their program with higher Spanish proficiency, important cultural observations and personal growth. Most often this experience is the stepping-stone to many more international experiences in their lifetime.

In addition to language growth, our participants walk away from this experience having had numerous opportunities to reflect on their host and home cultures and partake in conversations comparing and contrasting the two. They take with them experiences that open their mind to new ways of living, adventures as well as daily occurrences that push them to test their limits and step outside of their personal comfort zones.

Our participants tend to leave Costa Rica with a new sense of self, a newfound confidence in their Spanish language skills, and appreciation for their lives back in the United States. We pride ourselves on this unique experience we offer students; to grow academically, physically and mentally, while being immersed in the Spanish language and culture

Common Ground Mission Statement, Goals and Objectives

Common Ground International aims to provide its Spanish Immersion participants with varied experiences that will help them acquire the Spanish language and learn about the culture and country.

The opportunities that we provide will help participants develop their oral and intercultural communication skills, and genuinely experience the culture such that they may effectively communicate with native Spanish speakers in a variety of settings.

We also believe that an immersion experience can be a life-changing opportunity that challenges comfort zones, preconceived ideas and stereotypes, breaks down barriers and can result in tremendous personal growth.

Our mission is to help participants meet their language goals and cultural understanding as well as experience personal growth in areas of their life through a combination of: pre-departure preparation, exceptional host family stay, small and intensive Spanish classes, language rich service learning projects and adventure.

Realities of a Language Immersion Program

What does immersion mean to you?

We believe that just traveling or studying abroad isn't necessarily immersion. Immersion is an experience, intentionally designed, to fully expose you to the host language and culture by exposing you to it as much as possible, with the goal of improving your language.

What are the results of this?

Participants are given the chance, through immersion, to learn and put to use language skills, all while observing and living the culture. It gives them opportunities to reflect on your own reality, and make comparisons between your host and home cultures.

Our trip leaders also take the time to talk with and check in with the students on a regular, day to day basis during their immersion experience, to give the students a space to share their observations and digest what they are learning, on a personal, language and also on a cultural level. This is also done through intentional reflection activities, alone and in the group settin

EMERGENCY CONTACTS AND COMMUNICATION WHILE IN COSTA RICA

UNITED STATES:

Common Ground International
PO Box 174
Lafayette, CO 80026
*Tel: (303) 684-5557
Fax. (303) 684-5558
info@commongroundinternational.com
*This number also rings to Costa Rica – you are welcome to leave a message at this number and we will check it each evening.

COSTA RICA:

While on the program, the easiest way to get a hold of us is on our phone numbers through WhatsApp. If you do not have this smartphone application, please download it today. A few days before our departure to Costa Rica, we will start a parent WhatsApp chat group where you can get program updates, etc. Our cell phone numbers are the best way to get a hold of us, however there will be times when we will not have cell service. If that is the case, please call the Common Ground office first and leave a message.

Program Leaders - Cell Numbers

- Program Director - Leslie Foster: WhatsApp #: 303-638-9270
- Trip Leader - WhatsApp #:

*In case of an emergency, please try to reach us on WhatsApp

COSTA RICAN EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Emergency number in CR: 911
Local coordinator name and number: Dani Leon 506-8326-9371

Name	Location	Phone	Notes
US Embassy in CR	WVRG+W84, C. 98, San José, Favorita Sur, Costa Rica	US Citizens with emergencies call 506-2519-2000.	https://cr.usembassy.gov/ Medical Practitioners List
Emergencies Police	Santo Domingo, Costa Rica: +506 2244-0114 Avenida 13 y Calle 2 Félix A Montero	911	
Fire	Santo Domingo, Costa Rica: +506 2244 0158 – Avenida 1 y Calle 1 Ignacio Bolaños		
Hospital Clínica Biblica: Private Hospital San Jose, best hospital when in Santo Domingo & Central Valley	At: Avenida 1 & Central, Calles 14 & 16, downtown San José	2522 1000 2522 1030 (emergencies)	https://www.clinicabiblica.com/index.php/es/
Hospital Max Terán Valls Closest Hospital to Manuel Antonio, about 30 minutes	La Managua de Quepos, 200 south from the airport, Quepos.	Tel: (506) 2777-3221 (506) 2242-6680 Email: fguerrerom@ccss.sa.cr	
Clínica Medicenter La Fortuna **All major injuries or accidents have to be transferred 50 minutes by car/ambulance to the public hospital in Ciudad Quesada.	150m oeste de Iglesia católica de La de, La Fortuna de San Carlos, Costa Rica	**+506 2479 8990**	

Pre-Program Action Steps

- For US citizens: Enroll in STEP: Smart Travelers Enrollment Program
- For Canadians: Canadian travel advisory system
- Overseas Advisory Council
- Read and be familiar with country specific CDC health recommendations

ACTION STEPS TO DO NOW!

Pre-departure Paperwork:

In order to best prepare for your child's trip there are a variety of steps that should be taken. Your program has a landing page HERE. Use this page for a detailed timeline of steps to take as you prepare and submit required paperwork.
Please sit down with your participant and read, sign, and submit the following documents:

STEP 1: Complete **Online Registration** Form

STEP 2: Submit a copy of your teen's **passport**

STEP 3: Download, sign & submit your **Pre-departure Paperwork**, which include:

- Travel Contract
- Liability Waiver
- Behavior Contract
- Smartphone Contract
- Submit one Character Recommendation Form
- Notarized Authorization of Foreign Travel with a Minor
- Media Consent and Release
- Doctor's letter if participant has a prescription for medication

These documents are located on our website here. Your student will not travel with us if we do not have your documents on file at least a month before departure. Submit these important documents in one of the following two ways:

1. Scan and email them back to us at support@commongroundinternational.com
2. Mail them to our office at:
   Common Ground International
   PO Box 174
   Lafayette, CO 80026

STEP 4: Participants must complete their **pre-departure course online** as well as attend 3 pre-departure meetings (currently via Zoom). Parents need to read the entirety of this manual.

It is essential your teen prepares for their trip before they embark on this adventure! Your trip leader and Common Ground International offer you intentional pre-departure preparation activities so that you can hit the ground running when you arrive in Costa Rica. Those activities include:

- 3 pre-departure virtual meetings with Trip leaders and participants
- Pre-Departure Online Course

Objectives Pre-Departure Preparation:

Student will learn of program expectations specifically relating to:

- Passport requirements & Center for Disease Control Recommendations
- Host Family Expectations & tips for communicating with them
- Language School Expectations & how to maximize your learning
- Background information about Costa Rica
- 5 Stages of Cultural Adjustment and how it might affect YOU - Get prepared
- Safety Tips and Precautions

MUST HAVE TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

PASSPORT:

Does the participant have a valid passport?

A valid passport is a passport that does not expire during their stay in Costa Rica. Please check the passport expiration date today!

- If your participant doesn't have his or her passport already, it takes four to six weeks to process it after the application is submitted. Apply or renew passport today!
- If it is expired or will expire either on or within 90 days after the trip – you must get it renewed. This is a CR country requirement.
- Please check travel requirements into Costa Rica for country-specific passport requirements and other pertinent information.
- If your participant has a passport from a country other than the United States, let us know as soon as possible to help you look into if Costa Rica has specific requirements for a given country.

SECONDARY TRAVEL INSURANCE:

The program fee includes a secondary travel insurance policy. You will receive an email with your Travel Policy Number and information 2 weeks before departure. The email will come from iNext Travel. This document has all of your Coverage details. You will need to:

- Print out two copies, keep one at home, and the other in your suitcase, wallet or carry-on bag.
- Print out and tape the luggage tags provided on your travel bags

FLIGHT ITINERARY:

Print out one copy of your child's flight itinerary into and out of Costa Rica to show at customs upon arrival in Costa Rica. This is very important in order to enter the country and to determine the length of their tourist visa.

HEALTH & CDC VACCINATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Please read thoroughly the information on the CDC website to learn more about the Center for Disease Control's health concerns and vaccinations for Costa Rica.

1. Visit the Center for Disease Control website and get up to date on current health precautions and vaccinations in Costa Rica.
    a. The CDC recommends that your routine vaccinations are up to date, including hepatitis A and tetanus. Speak to your health care provider at least 6 to 8 weeks before you travel.
2. Pay particular attention to the "Traveling with Children" information on the CDC website.
3. Check out CDC Healthy Travel Packing List which includes ideas for medications that are hard to find in Costa Rica and some preventative items to pack.

IMPORTANTE! You CAN drink the water in most places in Costa Rica from the tap. The water is potable at the host family homes, the excursions we take and the hotels we stay in.

In general, MOSQUITOS are the main problem, not the water, not the food, but those pesky little bugs!

In Costa Rica, there is a low risk for malaria in the provinces of Alajuela and Limón. Two and three week participants will travel to the town of La Fortuna which is in Alajuela and three week participants will be travelling to Limón during our excursion to Tortuguero. We will follow a long sleeve/long pants with repellant protocol while on excursion. Please consult your local travel clinic on advice concerning anti-malarial precautions. Two other mosquito borne illnesses are occasionally present: Zika, Dengue. In Costa Rica, Dengue outbreaks are not unheard of, but are also not a huge risk. In general, your child will want to do all possible to prevent insect bites. There is a slightly bigger risk of dengue in low-lying beach and jungle areas; while the majority of the program takes place in the Central Valley, in the Greater Metropolitan Area, we will be visiting beaches and jungles as well.

There are no vaccinations currently for these three diseases. Here is what we recommend to protect yourself:

- Wear long sleeves and pants at dawn and dusk
- Use appropriate insect repellent. You will discover heavy-duty repellents with DEET as well as good alternatives to DEET. I usually pack 2/3 types; some natural, others heavy duty and depending on the location and bugs, I will decide what to use.
- If staying at a place without air-conditioning and windows are open or not sealed very well, spray bed covers and around the room before going to sleep.

THE CDC RECOMMENDS BEING UP TO DATE ON ROUTINE VACCINES:

- Hep-A & Hep-B Shots
- Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Tetanus, Diphtheria, etc

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOUR CHILD GETS SICK?

- Traveler's diarrhea with vomiting and/or diarrhea does happen occasionally. It usually passes quickly. It is helpful to send your child prepared with the medication they may use at home if this were to happen (Pepto-Bismol, Imodium, etc.) as well as your preferred medication to lower and control fevers.
- If your child needs medical attention, we will visit a local private clinic
- It usually costs about $50-$70 up front to see a doctor and they walk away with a prescription
- Participants will need to save the receipt in order to get reimbursed by insurance. The reimbursement will happen when they return to the US.
- If it's more serious, we will take the participant to a hospital
- That payment could range up to $300
- Again, participants will need to save the receipt in order to get reimbursed by insurance. The reimbursement will happen when they return to the US.
- We will also always be in touch with parents / guardians with updates if your child is not feeling well during the trip. This will happen immediately, and via phone call, with follow up emails/texts.

MONEY, DINERO, PLATA!

THE LOCAL CURRENCY: COLONES

- There are bills (billetes) and coins (monedas)
- The Costa Rican currency is called *Colones*
- Exchange rate: ~510 colones to 1 dollar
- To carry money, we suggest a money wallet that can be hidden under your clothes (also carry your passport or any other important documents/cards with you in this wallet).
- An AirTag is also recommended for wallets, fannypacks, backpacks.
- The best way to use/access money in Costa Rica:
- It is not necessary to exchange money in the US, nor in the airport in Costa Rica
- Bring $50-$100 cash in US dollars to get started and we will go to an ATM in the first day or two
- Do not bring traveler's checks!
- Bring a credit/debit card that you can use at an ATM to withdraw money. This is the easiest way and you get the best exchange rate. (Be sure you know your PIN number!)
- Visa is the most accepted card in Costa Rica
- Be sure to **call your bank ahead of time** and let them know you will be using your card in Costa Rica during this certain time period avoid international use blockages on your card
- Parents often choose to preload a visa debit card with a predetermined amount that the participants can use at ATM machines in Costa Rica. ***Make sure these are debit cards and not ATM cards!***

BUDGETING FOR ADDITIONAL EXPENSES

How much extra money should your child need? Your student is responsible for the following:

- Meals on travel days to and from Costa Rica (in airports)
- 14-24 lunches (estimate between $10-$15 a lunch). Your host family provides breakfast and dinner while on the program.
- 2 week participants: 6 dinners when we are on our excursions. (between $15-$20 per meal)
- 3 & 4-week participants: 9 dinners when we are on our excursions (between $15-$20 per meal)
- SNACKS — teenagers get HUNGRY! Hangry teenagers are not fun!
- Your souvenirs: Beautiful wood products, coasters, cutting boards, also coffee, chocolate, special salsas to bring back as gifts. These all range in price.
- Any additional rental of boogie boards, banana boat (~$20/hr)
- You will not be responsible for tipping in cash, it is included in the price, and you are absolutely not expected to tip any Common Ground Trip Leader
- Generally, most participants report spending $100 - $150 per week while on immersion.

HOST FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

WHO ARE THE HOST FAMILIES?



These families live in the small Central Valley town of Santo Domingo de Heredia, within walking distance of the language school. These families are considered middle class by Costa Rican standards. That means:

- The bed may be smaller and less comfortable than your child may be used to
- There may or may not be hot water for showers
- Power outages are common
- Houses are clean and well kept, probably smaller than what you are used to

HOW IS YOUR STUDENT MATCHED WITH THEIR HOST FAMILY?

How Host Families Are Selected

● Host families are carefully chosen by our local partners based on their interest in cultural exchange, safety, and ability to provide a welcoming environment.
● Selection includes interviews, home visits, and background checks to ensure participants' well-being.
● Families are briefed on the goals of the immersion program and agree to support participants' learning and adjustment.

How Your Child is Matched with A Host Family

We carefully match participants with host families based on the following considerations:
● Mobility & Health Needs: We consider any health conditions or mobility requirements to ensure accessibility and appropriate support.
● LGBTQ+ Inclusivity: Participants who identify as LGBTQ+ are matched with families who are open and supportive.
● Dietary Restrictions & Allergies: All dietary needs and allergies are taken into account to ensure safe and comfortable meals.
● Preferences (Children, Pets): Where possible we match preferences regarding children or pets in the home.
● Proximity to School: Once the above factors are considered, we assign participants to families closest to the school.

GENERAL EXPECTATIONS:

- Most families do not speak any English, and many live right next door to extended family.
- You will have your own bedroom and share a bathroom with other members of the family (most houses only have 1 bathroom)
- It is normal to have insects in the house (typical in tropical

climates); it does not reflect unclean living

- The host family will provide breakfast and dinner and do laundry one time per week (keep in mind that laundry is hung out to dry on clotheslines)
- The dietary staples are rice, beans, corn tortillas, vegetables and fruit.
- It is customary to give the host family a small gift. Good gift ideas are things that represent your child's home state or interests. Also books, games, pictures, or anything that is a conversation starter.
- You can expect to receive the host family assignment 1 week before the program begins.

CLASS & LANGUAGE SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS

DAILY SPANISH CLASSES:

A CGI student is committed



- We stick to Spanish as much as possible, all the time.
- Because this program is made up of participants at various levels of language proficiency, it is your right and your responsibility to find conversation partners at a similar level as you so that you can practice at a level that benefits you. This is how you
  are going to maximize your language learning even when you are not in class.
- We honor the fact that everyone is a learner, and needs to learn via the method that best suits them. Class will include lessons and activities that are oral, visual, kinesthetic and tactile. You may or may not appreciate each of these modalities for your personal learning style, but recognize that others may need them.

Daily Spanish Classes

- Interactive Spanish classes with native Spanish teachers
- Small class sizes: 4-6 students
- Classes held Monday through Friday, 3 hours a day
- Brief oral and written placement test to evaluate and place students in correct level
- All instructors are native Spanish speakers from Costa Rica with training / certification on how to teach Spanish as a second language
- Focus of class is oral communication
- Classes are fun, dynamic, engaging and interacting!

- At the end of the studies, students will receive a certificate of completion to turn into their Spanish teacher or school.

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to Spanish classes there are cultural classes that happen 2 to 3 times per week either at the language school or around the small town. Such activities include:

- Going to the Feria (market)
- Dancing classes
- Cooking classes
- Tropical Fruit Tasting
- Soccer games with local high school players

COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING

COMMUNITY SERVICE – IN SPANISH



Service learning projects are a great way for your son or daughter to lend a hand to those in need and to make them speak Spanish to meet real objectives. It is both a language and humanitarian activity, and a central piece to our Spanish immersion programs.

OUR VOLUNTEER WORK ALWAYS MEETS THE FOLLOWING REQUIREMENTS: *The type of work we do varies year to year, but the primary components of our service work remain the same:*



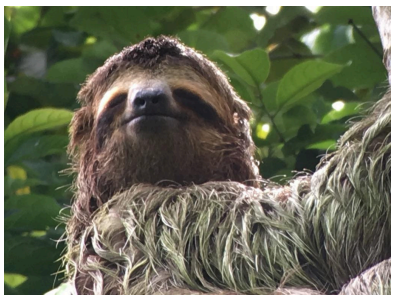
- We work with local organizations that have identified real needs within the target community.
- We participate in projects that are sustainable – part of a larger project that is ongoing throughout the year even when we're not present.
- The service learning work we do (in conjunction with High School students from Costa Rica) is "language rich" – which means that you hav to be using Spanish to complete the community service tasks.

Our immersion programs log anywhere from 20-30 hours of service.

Our activities also meet several IB CAS objectives and other requirements for service learning projects, not to mention they also look great on college applications!

ADVENTURE EXCURSIONS

We have fantastic adventures planned that allow participants to experience the biodiversity of Costa Rica. We are led by local guides on hikes, down waterfalls, to volcanoes, over hanging bridges, swimming in the ocean, all the while teaching us about the flora and fauna in Spanish. Participants are encouraged to continue to speak in Spanish, be inquisitive and ask the guides questions in Spanish. We will be visiting:



- Playa y Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (Pacific beach)
- La Fortuna / Arenal Volcano (North, Central)
- Tortuguero National Park (Carribean)
- Optional Excursions: Surf lesson, Toucan Rescue Ranch, Rancho Arizona Coffee Tour)

INCLUDED EXCURSION #1: PLAYA Y PARQUE MANUEL ANTONIO

- Located on the pacific side of Costa Rica
- One of the first National parks established in Costa Rica
- Known for its beautiful landscapes, beaches, and diverse wildlife
- We will hike, look for wildlife and spend time on the beach AND of course speak Spanish
- We will spend the first weekend at this beach town
- Common wildlife: monkeys, birds, snakes, unique insects, etc.
- Travel tip- pack a small pair of binoculars!

INCLUDED EXCURSION #2: LA FORTUNA



- We will travel here after the first full week of classes, volunteer work and living two weeks with host families
- Located in North Central Costa Rica (North of the capital San José)
- We will visit a hot spring with the group
- We will hike a waterfall with the group
- The students and leaders will stay in a hotel with a pool in the lush forest
- 3-in-one zip-line, hanging bridge and canopy tour

OPTIONAL EXCURSIONS AND ACTIVITIES: *These tours are not included in overall price as not everyone is able to or wants to participate. Your participation is highly encouraged, however if you do not participate there will be an alternate activity with a trip leader*

- Toucan Rescue Ranch
    - All participants 2, 3- and 4 week participants can participate in this tour
    - 2-3 hour tour around the Toucan Rescue ranch where you'll get to see birds, owls, sloths and many other animals.
    - See pricing and sign up here

If you want to participate in these excursions please sign up at the links above by May 1st.



IMMERSION TRIP EXPECTATIONS

What is an immersion program?

By definition, an immersion program is an experience designed to expose your child fully to the host language and culture by having them live within it. The completeness of this exposure is aptly illustrated by the metaphor of submerging oneself in water; for better or worse, no part of your child remains untouched by the new environment.

By having to complete everything from the most basic daily activities to more complex educational objectives within this context, they realize quickly that language and culture affect every aspect of our lives, and determine many of our reference points of "normal" and "right." Living and working within someone else's reference points is at once exciting and disorienting, eye-opening and challenging.

Immersion is uncomfortable at times, and it is by allowing yourself to fully "be" in those difficult moments, as much as the enjoyable moments, that your child can bring depth to their experience and learning. As they face personal challenges, it is useful to reflect on why a given situation is stressing them out or rubbing them the wrong way. What part of them is being offended or frustrated? Perhaps it's their sense of what's right, what's logical, what's safe, what's important, what's humane, what's healthy, what's funny or what's fair.

The gift that cultural immersion gives participants is the chance to examine their own assumptions and begin to understand their own perspective by clashing with the parts of them that are so deeply ingrained that they're not even aware of them. If one can begin to see that their own perspective, judgments, and assumptions are just as arbitrary and culturally bound as those of your hosts, they will take the first step in being able to interact with people who are different from them in a way that is respectful, objective and free of judgment. This is because, bit by bit, your child will be less inclined to use their own cultural norms as an unconscious measuring stick of the "right" way to live, but instead see them as just one of an infinite number of ways to live life. This is the learning that we hope will take place.

What this program IS:

- An educational experience for your child.
- First and foremost, a language / leadership program. It's a chance to grow as a Spanish speaker by pushing oneself to think and speak in Spanish at all times and grow as a leader in various foreign contexts.
- A chance for your child to move outside their comfort zone and understand their own perspective by observing how they react to the host country, culture and language.
- An opportunity for them to share their stories and culture.

What this program IS NOT:

- An exotic vacation.
- A charity mission, in which they will "save" the underserved by offering short-term volunteer work in a vacuum.

Realities of a Language Immersion Program

What is language immersion?

- An experience intentionally designed to fully expose the participant to the host language and culture by inserting them into it as much as possible.
- It allows for little, if any, escape from the host language and culture.
- The deeper they go, the more uncomfortable it can

get… What does immersion do to your child?

- Gives them an amazing chance to learn the language and experience the culture
- Gives them ample opportunities to reflect on their own culture and what they value
- Throws them off guard - even mundane tasks can become challenging
- Can make them tired or frustrated with their own abilities
- Might trigger their fight/flight instincts
- Makes one second-guess themselves
- It's all part of the growth opportunity

.What can they do to SACAR el JUGO ?

- Recognize the urgency and focus of what they are doing
    - Don't let opportunity pass them by
    - Resist the urge to escape
    - Keep smiling (even when it hurts)
- Remember that immersion truly is the best way to improve your Spanish
- Tell us what they're going through and ask us for help

WHAT IS CULTURE SHOCK?

What is Cultural adjustment?

- Adapting to a new environment takes time and the pace of transition varies from person to person.
- The typical pattern of cultural adjustment often consists of distinct phases:
    - Stage 1: Honeymoon
    - Stage 2: Culture Shock
    - Stage 3: Gradual Adjustment
    - Stage 4: "Feeling at Home"
- This cycle is then often repeated upon re-entry to one's home country or culture of origin.

Please note….

- It is not very likely that participants on a 2 or 3 week immersion are going to experience all stages of culture shock. Actually, they may not get out of the honeymoon stage. However, it is still good to be aware of this process and acknowledge that if they do feel frustrated at times, homesick, anxious, these feelings are all normal and a natural part of being immersed in a foreign language and culture.

Common Stages of Cultural Adjustment

Everyone deals with immersion in a new culture differently. However, there are four very common stages of cultural adjustment that many people experience (in their own time). You may experience a few or none of these stages during your time in Costa Rica, but it's helpful to be aware of them:

Stage 1: Honeymoon

- The Honeymoon- Initial euphoria and excitement; you feel able to handle anything!
- Excited about new sights, sounds, smells
- Intrigued by similarities and differences in culture
- Motivated to learn
- Eager to please
- Can last a few days to several weeks

Stage 2: Culture Shock

- Culture Shock- Irritation and hostility; the novelty of the new culture has worn off
- Focus on differences (and find them annoying!)
- Stereotypes and prejudices surface
- Small problems/differences--> BIG problems/differences
- Homesickness

Stage 3: Gradual Adjustment

- Gradual Adjustment- finding humor and perspective; making the most of your experience
- Increased familiarity
- More highs than lows
- Laughs at mistakes
- Appreciate parts of host culture
- Deeper learning

Stage 4: "Feeling at Home"

- "Feeling at Home"- Adaptation and Biculturalism; you now appreciate certain aspects of foreign culture and critique others more objectively
- Become a part of both worlds
- No longer negatively affected by differences between cultures
- May hit students as the trip is coming to an end

It is important to be aware of all these stages and know that your child may or may not experience each of them at various times throughout the trip. And it is OK and normal to experience these stages!

HOW IS YOUR CHILD GOING TO COPE?

- Ways of thinking and feeling
    - Understand the stages of cultural adjustment
    - Analyze the situations and reactions
    - Identify what helps them manage stress
    - Think positively!
    - Investigate real facts
    - Journal
- Physical supports:
    - Eat healthy foods and get lots of rest
    - Get fresh air and exercise
    - Identify any physical weakness and make plans to manage them
- In our experience, the best way to deal with these difficulties is to recognize them for what they are- an expected and important part of immersion- and take the most positive approach to either resolving or accepting each situation.
- Our trip leaders plan weekly discussion about these stages and check in with everyone
- If we notice that a participant is having a hard time, we sit down and talk through the challenges. Together, we create a support plan. Most times, just acknowledging the issue helps resolve the frustration.

We always remind our students of our mantra, "Sacar el jugo", this expression figuratively means, "to make the most of every experience" and literally means to extract every last bit of juice out of the fruit and pulp! We encourage our students to do this on every aspect of this trip, stepping many times out of comfort zones or in uncomfortable situations that test their limits – live in the moment and make the most of it!

PERSONAL SAFETY

Nothing ruins a travel experience like an unfortunate event that could have been prevented.

Personal safety is extremely important for your child to be intentional about. We run Spanish immersion programs in Latin America several times a year for adults and high school students and we often see a disconnect between “street smarts” in Central and South America and “street smarts” in the USA. It’s definitely not hard to stay safe during your travels, but it does require a little extra effort and a drastic perspective shift to make sure that you don’t open any doors for someone to commit a crime against them.

Our high school immersion participants will never go anywhere alone during the day or night. They will always be with group leaders, other participants, or their host families.

Street Smarts in Latin America

It’s your responsibility to limit the ”opportunities” for a crime to happen against you. It’s important to know how the locals think about safety and street smarts. Here are some general views of crime through the eyes of someone living in Latin America

- No one can be trusted until they prove their trustworthiness
- Petty theft happens because person don’t guard their belongings well enough
- It is inherently more dangerous after dark, when there’s more isolation, or distraction
- “North Americans” are wealthy, and have the means to replace whatever they lose - it’s not really that big of a deal to steal from them.

In order to limit petty theft from happening, it is necessary to sacrifice some freedoms that you might take for granted in the United States:

- Participants will not have as much independence as they are used to in their home communities
- Participants will always walk in groups and never at night
- Wear conservative clothing
- Exercise without earbuds
- Don't’ be distracted by phone calls or texting while walking through towns/ cities
- Keep a firm grip on your tech when you have it out
- Leave things of value at home
- Do not travel with large amounts of cash. (over $50 is considered large)

Discern cultural norms vs inappropriateness

Speaking in general terms, the personal bubble or space that Latin Americans are accustomed to is much smaller than what North Americans are used to and sometimes comfortable with. For example, when I'm in the US and am standing next to a friend, we might have 18 inches to 2 feet between us. The bubble shrinks considerably when I'm next to my Costa Rican friends - maybe 8 to 12 inches 😃. In general, people tend to be more "touchy" and "huggy" - but what are the lines that you and others shouldn't cross?

- Kisses on cheek and hugs are normal for greetings
- Touches on arms and shoulders are normal
- Touches on legs, abdomen are advances, and someone might be testing their limits with you
    - Respond with words and body language to communicate disapproval
    - These touches are probably not dangerous, but you need to be clear with your disapproval: turn away, create distance
    - Immediately tell your trip leader
- Touches to private areas are definitely not acceptable
    - Use body language and words to communicate your disapproval
    - Immediately tell your trip leader

What is conservative dress?
It's a good idea to dress more conservatively than normal - for example

- Wear capris, longer skirts, modest shorts, no ripped jeans
- Wear blouses instead of spaghetti strap tops
- Keep your midriff covered
- Keep your super short running shorts and exercise shorts at home. They're definitely not appropriate for classes or volunteer work. When exercising, try to use shorts that get to mid-thigh or exercise tights / pants.

Walking around Towns and Cities

- Heighten your awareness. Know who is around you and look behind if you feel someone following closely
- Keep backpacks, purses on the inside shoulder, not the street-side shoulder
- Walk on the building side of sidewalk, not on the street side

What about money and valuables?

- Keep cameras, phones, tablets, etc in bags - especially in crowded areas
- Don't leave valuables out in the open at your hotel, restaurant

- Keep the amount of money you're carrying on you a secret - don't show all your bills out in the open (at ATM, paying for things, etc)
- Keep your flashy jewelry at home (rings, watches, necklaces, etc)
- Don't hang purses, backpacks, bags, etc hanging on the back of the chair at the restaurants - put them on your lap or at your feet under the table

Passport and Credit Cards

- Don't carry around your passport as a general habit, keep it stored in a safe place (out of sight) at your host family. We will always check to be sure your child has their passport before changing locations on excursions.
- You'll want to make sure that you have a legible copy of your passport on you at all times just in case a business needs to see a legitimate ID.
- Take a picture of your passport before leaving home.
- Only carry the money and cards that you need for the day. You'll want enough to cover things like:
    - Meals
    - Bus/taxi fares
    - Little extra

Have fun!
It is important to know how the locals think about securing possessions and staying physically safe.

- It doesn't mean that you're going to a dangerous place - it just means that you need to think and act differently
- You may feel confined by not being able to go out alone after dark, but you should heed local customs and norms
- You might get frustrated by dressing differently, but your goal is to not draw attention more to yourself than you already do

Is it a pet, guard dog or street dog?

- Dogs are seen more as guard dogs than pets
- Big dogs are left outside at night to guard the house
- It is normal to see a lot of dogs on the street - don't pet or touch street dogs

HOW TO PACK FOR THIS TRIP



When packing, it's important to consider the different climates we will be in and the variety of activities we will be doing.

Packing Considerations

- Packing with layers is key! Dynamic clothing, zippers, buttons
- Quick - dry clothing
- Lightweight fleece/puffy jacket for evenings
- In homestays, no air conditioning nor heat, pack warm jammies, house socks or slippers
- No laundry dryers
- Electrical outlets are the same but most are two pronged instead of three

Costa Rica Packing List

Clothing for your trip should accommodate the great diversity in weather and travel environments in Costa Rica. You will be there during the rainy season. Temperatures at the language school will be warm and sunny in the mornings (mid 70's) rainy in the afternoon and at night it will cool down (50's and 60's). While on our excursions, you can expect a hot and humid environment. In the rainforest, you can of course expect rain and cooler temperatures (60's- 70's).

While studying at the language school and doing volunteer work, modest and respectful clothing is necessary. Some examples of Monday-Friday dress are:

- For young ladies: Capri pants, long skirts or shorts, blouse or nice top (no strapless tops, nor spaghetti straps).
- For young men: Nice jeans, shorts or khakis with a polo shirt. Tennis shoes are okay.

A suggested packing list for 2-3 week participants can be found HERE!

Documents and Travel Tips:

- There is no need to change money in the US before your trip; you can exchange it upon arrival.
- Bring at least $100 cash with you for our first couple of days on excursion, souvenirs, etc. Small bills are best.
- ATM's offer the best exchange rate and we will exchange money on day 1.
- Contact your bank and let them know that you will be using your debit/credit card in Costa Rica during the specific dates.
- Bring a valid passport and two photocopies of the photo page of your passport—leave one with someone in the States and bring the other photocopy.
- Proof of health coverage
- Driver's License or other form of identification (school ID is great also)
- Consider placing AirTags in backpacks, fannypacks, luggage

Spanish Immersion Placement Test

Students will take a placement test to streamline their placement into an adequate Spanish class for their trip.

It's important that they do not study for the test or use any materials. They need to show us their raw knowledge so we can get them in the right class. This is one test that is okay to not study for and to fail!

Important things to remember:

- This is just the written portion of their class placement process. Trip leaders will informally assess their oral proficiency the first few days of the program.
- We need to see what they can do with Spanish right now. We want to know what they know. We're not interested in what they're able to research, get translated, answer with help, etc.

Here's the link to the immersion placement test:
https://commongroundinternational.com/spanish-immersion/spanish-immersion-placement-test/

Host Family Assignments

You are probably anxious to find out more about the family who will be hosting you during your upcoming trip! You will get your host family assignment 2 weeks before departure, host family assignments will be uploaded to the pre-departure course and emailed to you.

For pointers on preparing a bit culturally for your homestay experience, take a look at our blog posts Must Know Items when Staying with a Host Family and 8 Surefire Tips to Have an Amazing Host Family Experience in the pre-departure course.

Host Family Tips:

- **Personal hygiene:** Some Costa Rican families may see a towel as a personal item and bringing your own may be a good option, although if you don't bring your own you will of course be provided a towel by your family.
- **Host Family Gifts:** We also suggest bringing a small gift for your family as a token of your appreciation for their hosting you. This does not have to be a big or expensive gift, rather something thoughtful and possibly a conversation starter. For example…
    - Unique gifts from your state or region: if I'm from the Northeastern US, I might like to give a small bottle of maple syrup, chocolates or tea.
    - If I love my hometown sports team, a gift reflecting that could be a great conversation starter.
    - Coloring books for young kids.
    - Interactive family games to play together, card games, etc.
- **Potable Water:** It is safe to drink the water from the tap in Costa Rica
- **Hot Showers??:** Maybe, maybe not?! Prepare yourself for some cold or "warm" showers.
- **Toilet Paper & Feminine Products :** DO NOT FLUSH THEM DOWN THE TOILET!!! There will be a waste basket on the side of the toilet, place your TP and other items in there.

Connect with your host family!

Once you receive your host family assignment (1 week before departure), use this guide to start a conversation with your host family. Download the google document!

How to initiate a conversation with your host family

Process	Stems or Ideas	Example convo
1. Greeting	• Hola • ¿Cómo está? • Buenos días • Buenas tardes • Buenas noches	*¡Buenas tardes! Soy Carly de Washington y tengo 34 años. Me gusta leer y correr. Estoy emocionada de visitar Costa Rica y practicar español. ¿Qué actividades hace su familia? ¡Pura vida!*
2. Tiny bit about yourself	• Soy _____ (your name) • Me llamo _____ (your name) • Soy tu hijo/hija hospedero/a • Es mi familia hospedera en Costa Rica • Tengo _____ años. • Soy de _____ (your state) • Me gusta mucho _____ (favorite activity).	
3. Share Excitement	• Estoy emocionado/a de quedarme con ustedes. • No puedo esperar a conocerle. • Tengo ganas de aprender más español.	
4. Ask a question to get to know them or C.R.	• ¿Tiene una familia grande? • ¿Qué le gusta hacer? • ¿Hay algo que necesito llevar conmigo a Costa Rica? •	
5. Leave-taking	• ¡Hasta pronto! • ¡Pura vida!	

CONCLUSION

Common Ground International thanks you for entrusting us with your teen. While safety, growth, fun and language development are our main priorities, your student will walk away with so much more. This summer you can expect your teen to become more proficient and confident in their Spanish communication skills, gain cultural understanding, experience personal growth and have fun! Here are the 4 major benefits that they will take away from this summer experience:

1. **Increased Spanish proficiency and communication skills, accomplished by:**
    - Interactive, dynamic and fun Spanish classes taught by native Spanish teachers.
    - Host family living
    - Volunteer projects in Spanish
2. **Cultural learning accomplished through truly integrative community connections:**
    - Through their host family stay in a small, typical, non-touristy town.
    - Intentional cultural learning activities
3. **Grow as a global citizen through:**
    - Intentional cultural comparison and analysis activities
    - Reflection activities led by our trip leaders
    - Being stretched outside comfort zones
    - Gaining independence
    - Learning to appreciate where they come from and what they have
4. **Have fun while adventuring and learning Spanish:**
    - On our adventures led by local guides & scientists, keeping these excursions in Spanish.

We created this manual with you, the parent in mind. We have included our own experience over years of travel and coordinating groups on immersion, as well as combined previous parent's own experiences and input to help shape this information to be the most effective for your preparation for this trip.

After this trip, we encourage you to openly give us feedback through the evaluations. Please note any additional information you think we should consider including in this manual in order to help future parents prepare for their teen's trip.

In the meantime, before your teen departs for their adventure, please feel free to reach out with any additional questions you may have, as we understand sending your child abroad is an exciting experience and we are happy to share as much information as we can with you in advance.

While your child is on the trip, be sure to follow us on Facebook to see updates and photos as they are happening!

Adventure on…

Leslie Foster and The Common Ground Team