



## Focus on COSTA RICA School Program

*“It’s funny how people, or ways of thinking, can change; how at the beginning I didn’t like the very tight relationships between all the people here, but right now that is what I adore here. I enjoyed every moment I could, because time goes by really quickly. I also learned to see things in other perspectives, more open perspectives. Costa Rica is the best: the people, nature, the beaches, I love everything here.... I hope that I can come back because I will always have a second family here... and a lot of friendships.”*

*Jürgen, participant from Germany, 2002*

Costa Rica is one of the most politically stable and prosperous of Latin American nations—in part because it has no army. Instead, the government spends much of its tax income on health care and education. The country’s famously rich bio-diversity fills national parks and nature preserves that protect nearly one-third of the land and inspired the idea of eco-tourism. Today, travelers who head into the cloud forests, down jungle rivers and up active volcanoes account for the country’s No. 1 industry. Even so, half of Costa Rica’s citizens live not in the wild but in modern cities. Roughly 95% of them are of European descent, and nearly everyone is well-educated, hospitable and notably laid-back.

### ***AFS & Your Experience***

AFS Costa Rica has been in existence since 1955. AFS volunteers in 25 communities across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the year, AFS Costa Rica hosts about 350 students from 19 countries.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

### ***Landing in Costa Rica***

#### **Your Program Begins**

When you arrive in San José, the capital of Costa Rica, you and your fellow AFSers will collect your baggage, pass through customs and be met by AFS Costa Rica staff and volunteers.

#### **Arrival Orientation**

A two-day arrival orientation organized by staff and run by volunteers will give you a chance to meet other AFSers from around the world, ask questions and learn about AFS in Costa Rica, as well as Costa Rican culture. A second arrival orientation will be held five to six weeks later.

## *Living in Costa Rica*

### **Lifestyle and Family Living**

The people of Costa Rica are known as *Ticos*. Most Costa Ricans have a European heritage with some indigenous mixture, and there is a small indigenous minority. Ticos have a strong self-image, they are very nationalistic and proud of their country, but not in an aggressive way. They expect people to act humble and value, as they do, democracy, peace and political freedom.

Families in Costa Rica are close. The responsibility of managing the house and supervising the children typically belongs to the wife, even if she has an outside job, while the husband is usually engaged in work outside the home. Costa Rican teenagers usually do not have any part-time work during the school year. They help around the house when their studies permit, but the chores are not considered their responsibility.

Parents are protective of their children, especially young women. For example, teenage young men have much more liberal curfews than their sisters do. Parents expect to know when their children are going out and where they are going, and parents usually know their children's friends well, too. Costa Rican children gain maturity through their participation in family matters and discussions.

Within the family, sharing is a given. The sense of strictly personal belongings is not as strong as in some other countries. Siblings often use each other's clothes and personal effects without asking permission first. Private life is shared within the family, but generally not outside it. It is very common for girls to kiss each other or friends/relatives of the opposite sex on the cheek as hello and good-bye greetings, while boys shake hands, pat shoulders and sometimes embrace.

Costa Rican host families, like AFS host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to students in order to share their community and culture as well as to enrich their own family lives. They invite AFS students to participate actively in family and other social activities, too.

Many placements are in small rural towns. Most AFS host families are middle-class by Costa Rican standards. Participants should be prepared for a modest lifestyle and relatively small living space.

### **Dress and Appearance**

Bring neat casual clothing appropriate to Costa Rica's warm climate: jeans, T-shirts, knee-length shorts and a swimsuit. Students are encouraged to bring one or two nice outfits (dress shirts and ties for men, dresses or skirts and blouses for women) for special occasions. Also, bring a sweatshirt or sweater for cooler weather, as well as a raincoat and umbrella.

Most schools require uniforms (which cost about US\$100). Most uniforms consist of dark blue pants and light blue shirts for boys; dark blue skirts or pants and light blue shirts for girls. All students wear black leather shoes and blue socks. High schools tend to be rather strict regarding uniform rules. It is not proper to wear excessive make-up, colorful jewelry, short skirts or eccentric hairstyles. Boys might not be allowed to wear long hair or an earring.

### **Diet and Meals**

The basic Costa Rican diet is rice, beans, corn, vegetables, meat, chicken or fish and is usually served with corn tortillas. The diet also includes fresh fruit, milk, fruit juices, dairy products and eggs. Therefore, vegetarians are difficult to place.

The most popular breakfast is *gallo pinto*, a mixture of black beans and rice cooked together, usually served with a fried egg and coffee. It can be accompanied by tropical fruit such as papaya, watermelon, pineapple, banana, mango or cantaloupe.

For lunch, Ticos enjoy *casados*—large plates of white rice, beans, fried plantain, salad, cheese, diced vegetables and a choice of meat, chicken or fish.

*Olla de carne* is a popular traditional dish for dinner: a beef stew soup with potatoes and vegetables. Many meals are finished with desserts. Caribbean flavor is known for coconut, caramel, fresh fruit drinks and for the special heavy fruity bread *panbon*.

Especially during weekends, it is customary for the whole family to eat the same foods at meals together. On working days, this is often more difficult, especially for families where both parents work. It is considered inappropriate for individuals to request special foods, to prepare separate food for themselves or to raid the refrigerator. At the table, Costa Ricans enjoy active conversation on a variety of subjects. It is a time to be enjoyed together and spent as a family.

### **School Life**

The school year is divided into trimesters. It starts in mid-February and ends in late November/early December. There is a one-week recess at Easter and a two-week break early in July. Almost all AFS students attend public school. The school day runs from 7 a.m. until 1 p.m. or until 4 p.m., depending on the school.

Classes consist of lectures and discussions in which students are expected to participate. Students up to grade 10 or 11 are generally restricted to required courses. Older students may choose among such courses as intensive math, biology, chemistry, physics, physical education, informatics, musical education, social studies (including history and geography), civics, foreign language and Spanish.

Attending school is an integral part of this program and is the best way to make friends and experience everyday life as a Costa Rican teen. Doing well in school is also very important to host families. A school uniform is worn.

Students usually create study groups that often meet after school in students' houses, especially before exams. In addition to studying, they also organize outings together.

You will be able to obtain a participation letter signed by the school principal. However, this document is not the same as a transcript of grades. Official diploma/transcript can be obtained only by students who pass all required courses and rigorous final exams.

### **Teen Life**

Costa Rican teens go out together in groups; they enjoy movies, dancing, parties at friends' homes and sports. Soccer is the most popular sport, although it is played almost exclusively by men. Many people enjoy basketball, volleyball, swimming, tennis or fitness training. Local carnivals and festivals are popular.

Because schools are academically oriented and do not offer many extracurricular activities, you may wish to become involved in community sports and music clubs and other organizations.

### **AFS Activities**

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Costa Rica will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) to talk about

expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions usually provide new information and ways of looking at things while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

AFS Costa Rican volunteers will organize interesting trips for you during your stay: for instance, a trip to Panamá or to *Chirripó* Mountain. Every year in October, there is a nationally organized *Tarde Internacional* (International Afternoon), where participants can represent their countries to the host families, volunteers and friends.

AFS Costa Rica may also help students become involved in optional volunteer projects such as working with the elderly or children.

Before you return home, you will get together with other AFSers for the so-called End-of-Stay orientation. The End-of-Stay (usually held overnight at a beach resort) provides an opportunity to look back at your exchange experience and share memories with other AFSers. It is also for thinking of the future.

### **Travel**

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Costa Rica, AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have many opportunities to travel with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Costa Rica. We strongly discourage traveling on your own or with friends.

### **Spending Money**

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do such things as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the expenses are your responsibility.

AFS suggests that US\$1,500 in traveler's checks or credit cards should cover a year's worth of spending needs.

Costa Rican young people seldom carry or spend large amounts of money. Spending more than your peers may create a distance between you and them. It is wise to learn to spend as they do.

### **Safety and Support**

Costa Rica is a safe country, and you should do well if you follow the normal precautions you would use in your home country.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Costa Rican. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Any student who violates either of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Costa Rica may have additional rules.

### **Health Precautions**

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Costa Rica (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

### **Documents**

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. AFS will help you obtain the visa and provide you with instructions regarding the required documents.

### **Program Prices**

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

## ***Country Information***

### **Geography and Climate**

Costa Rica is about the size of Slovakia or the Dominican Republic. It is located on the Central American isthmus, bordering Panama on the south and Nicaragua on the north. Its western coastline is on the Pacific Ocean; the Caribbean Sea is on the east. National parks and other protected areas make up 32% of the total territory; 60% of the country is forested. The country is lined on both coasts with beautiful beaches.

Costa Rica has a tropical climate, but temperatures may be lower in the higher altitudes. The average national temperature is 75°F/24°C. The rainy season runs from May through November.

### **Population**

The population is 4.2 million. San José, the capital city, has a population of one million.

## Language

Spanish is the official language of Costa Rica; English is widely understood. In the Caribbean province of Limón, a Creole English is spoken, in addition to Spanish.

## Government

Costa Rica has an elected president and two vice presidents in the executive branch. There is a unicameral legislature called the Legislative Assembly whose members are elected every four years. Costa Ricans place a high value on their democratic way of life; they have no army and strive to live in peace.

## Religion

Ninety percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Evangelical Protestantism is also represented.

## ***Launching your AFS Experience***

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Spanish words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language.

To familiarize yourself further with life in Costa Rica, make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about Costa Rica and its culture.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Costa Rica. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living as a Costa Rican. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or national AFS office. In addition, AFS Costa Rica will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information.

Costa Rican people will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

If you have not already received a full AFS application packet, please contact your local AFS volunteer or national office to request one. We wish you a wonderful experience!

## **Curiously Costa Rican**

☉- Costa Rica has 500 resident bird species—four times as many as in the temperate forests of the eastern U.S.—and more than 8,000 plant species, where Great Britain has 1,433.

### *Why Costa Rica?*

☉- It is a democratic country that is very proud of its liberties.

☉- In spite of the fact that Costa Rica has no army, it is one of the safest countries in Latin America, due to a large network of police officers and so-called rural guards.

☉- Costa Rica has one of the largest biodiversities of flora and fauna in its geographical area.

☉- Costa Rica emphasizes conservation of its natural resources through the stimulation of eco-tourism and active protection of the environment (one-third of the country is protected).

☉- Costa Ricans like to share in family activities and enjoy sharing with people from other cultures too.

☉- Public health and education is highly valued. Without an army, a high percentage of what was formerly (before 1948) spent on military infrastructure is now spent on health and education. Public hospitals provide free care and education is of high quality.

## How to Apply

To become a participant in this country's School Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Student age (upon arrival)	15y to 18y	
Country data	Size	51,100 km <sup>2</sup> , 19,559.mi <sup>2</sup>
	Population	4.2 million
	Official Language	Spanish
	Government	Democratic republic
Currency	Costa Rican colón	
Useful websites	<a href="http://www.nacion.co.cr/netinc/costarica/parques/parquesnac.html">http://www.nacion.co.cr/netinc/costarica/parques/parquesnac.html</a> <a href="http://www.tourism-costarica.com">http://www.tourism-costarica.com</a> <a href="http://www.infocostarica.com">http://www.infocostarica.com</a> <a href="http://www.avenidacentral.com">http://www.avenidacentral.com</a> <a href="http://www.infoweb.co.cr">http://www.infoweb.co.cr</a>	
AFS Costa Rica website	<a href="http://www.afs.or.cr">http://www.afs.or.cr</a>	

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>