



Focus on COSTA RICA Community Service Program Adult 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.

Community Service Programs

AFS’s Community Service program gives you the opportunity to share in and contribute to the life of a community in Costa Rica by living and working alongside its members in a community-based service organization. At the organization, you will be asked to pitch in and offer assistance in whatever capacity might be needed and to share the knowledge and experience you have gained from your home culture in the process. No one expects you to be an expert with all the answers to local problems or the ability to change local conditions. Rather, you are expected to be a willing participant in a process of mutual discovery. This experience will present you with innumerable learning opportunities both personally and professionally.

Worldwide, AFS Community Service program participants contribute their talents and energies to a variety of social programs that range from protecting the environment to teaching children or adults, from assisting the elderly and the disabled to defending human rights, from enhancing public health to helping local businesses become established.

Past participants in Costa Rica have worked on projects concerned with animals in their environment, with childcare and with community health centers. However, all specifics—

including assignments, orientations, logistics and activities—vary depending on the program cycle.

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 participants from 19 countries in several programs.

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.

Arrival orientation

After arrival at Juan Santamaria International Airport in San José, you will be met by AFS staff members who will escort you to a two-day arrival orientation in a camp outside the city. This will be followed by 10 days of Spanish instruction. Upon completion of the language training, you will be driven by bus to your host community.

Additional orientations

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Costa Rica will provide you with several others. AFS orientations offer participants a chance to meet for several days and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions also 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 people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experiences while preparing them to handle their community service assignments.

At the end of the program, participants attend a two-night End-of-Stay orientation, held at a beach or in a rainforest, which emphasizes reflections on everyone's experiences and their preparations for returning home.

Living in Costa Rica

Living arrangements

Most participants in AFS Community Service programs live with local families, sharing their daily lives, their meals. Other participants live where their community service organization conducts its business. Still others live in rooms provided elsewhere by their local service organizations. Most placements are made in rural communities; few are in San José. Note that host families typically request non-smokers, and most families have pets.

Food

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 juice, dairy products and eggs. 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. In addition, 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 families 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.

Clothing

The clothes you will wear will depend on where you work. For example, if you work for an environmental organization, you may wear jeans, light pants, shorts, T-shirt and cap. We would also recommend hiking shoes. If you work in a social organization, you should wear casual, comfortable clothes, especially if you work with children.

Activities

Some local chapters offer monthly reunions in which you can share your experiences with other participants. Chapters also organize trips to the mountains, beaches and even neighboring countries, but AFS Costa Rica selects participants for these trips who seem most adjusted to our culture.

Health

AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Costa Rica (which you can get from your government or find easily on the Internet) with your doctor at home, 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.

Safety

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.

Travel

AFS's Community Service programs allow participants to travel on their own through their host countries to explore and absorb each country's cultural diversity.

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 community; travel from your host community to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host family or other placement arrangement; 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 are: 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 hot, humid, tropical climate, but temperatures can 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

Eighty-five percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Evangelical Protestantism is also represented.

Before You Go

Looking Forward

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that if you prepare prior to leaving, you will have the best experience.

Make every effort to improve your Spanish language skills before departure. Then, to familiarize yourself with life in Costa Rica, visit your local library or search the Internet. AFS International's website, AFS.org, provides links to websites for each participating country.

Although every participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Costa Rica. This veteran will be an excellent resource regarding living and working there. If you do not know a veteran, please contact your local AFS volunteer or your country's AFS office.

In addition, AFS will provide you with essential information about your host country to prepare you for immersion in a new and exciting culture.

Finally, Costa Ricans will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised how much they already know about your country's history and politics. Therefore, you will find it helpful to be informed about current events in your home community and country.

Documents

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

How to Apply

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

Country data	Size	51,100 km ² , 19,559.mi ²
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	Population	4.2 million
	Official language	Spanish
	Government	Democratic republic
Currency	Colon, divided into 100 centavos	
Useful websites	http://www.nacion.co.cr/netinc/costarica/parques/parquesnac.html http://www.tourism-costarica.com http://www.infocostarica.com http://www.avenidacentral.com http://www.infoweb.co.cr	
AFS Costa Rica website	http://www.afs.or.cr	

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>