



# Organization for Tropical Studies



## **Tropical Biology on a Changing Planet in Costa Rica**

*Undergraduate Semester Study Abroad Program  
Orientation Packet*

***¡BIENVENIDOS!***

*Bienvenido al programa de pregrado del OET  
(OTS in Spanish is **Organización para Estudios Tropicales**)*

This semester will be one of the most challenging and fulfilling experiences of your college career. You'll work in some of the world's premier tropical research sites, encounter beautiful animals and plants, meet friendly people, work hard, learn a lot, and have fun. Your group consists of about 15 students plus OTS staff. The group is diverse, and we expect that, with sensitivity to other people's backgrounds and perspectives, you will learn a tremendous amount and develop strong and lasting friendships. During the semester, three to four invited professors will also spend time with the group, and various guests will visit for lectures and field exercises. You'll also have the opportunity to plan, develop, present, and write your own independent field project.

This Orientation Packet contains very important information to help you prepare for your semester in Costa Rica. Please read it carefully, follow the recommendations and suggestions we provide, and bring it with you to Costa Rica. If you have any questions, please let us know! Contact information for OTS Undergraduate Program staff and faculty is provided in this packet.

We are very much looking forward to having you in our program. ***¡HASTA PRONTO!***

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# Map of OTS Field Stations



## OTS Education Staff for the Semester Program

### Resident Faculty:



**Sofia Rodríguez-Brenes**

OTS Director of Academics – Costa Rica

[sofia.rodriguez@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:sofia.rodriguez@tropicalstudies.org)

*Ph.D. Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior, The University of Texas at Austin*

Sofía studied biology at the University of Costa Rica and earned a doctorate in ecology, evolution, and behavior at The University of Texas at Austin. At UT Austin, she studied the spread of a devastating fungal pathogen (better known as chytrid or Bd) in populations of the túngara frog in Panamá, and how infections with this pathogen affect the frog’s behaviors and reproductive success. Her continuing research interests are at the intersection of animal behavior, sexual selection, and disease ecology, especially changes in behavior caused by disease. Sofia is also passionate about teaching, especially in the field. Throughout her career, she has taught at high school and university levels, in Spanish and English, and with organizations from Costa Rica, Mexico, and the United States.

### Relevant OTS Staff in Costa Rica:



**Pablo Muñoz Cambroner**

Education Coordinator

[pablo.munoz@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:pablo.munoz@tropicalstudies.org)

Pablo is a tropical biologist that works at the OTS Costa Rica Office in San Jose. He focuses on scholarships, fellowships, course logistics, and instructing some courses, mainly in the field of Science Communication (SciComm). As a researcher, he focuses mainly on avian ecology and their social interactions.



**Kattia Méndez**

Administrative Assistant

[kattia.mendez@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:kattia.mendez@tropicalstudies.org)

Ms. Méndez should be contacted for logistical issues during your stay in Costa Rica. She is also a great resource for questions about Visas. Call Kattia at +011 (506) 2524-0607.

### Relevant OTS Staff at the North American Office (NAO):



**Brooks Bonner**

Director of Community Engagement & Enrollment Management

[brooks.bonner@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:brooks.bonner@tropicalstudies.org)

Brooks brings a wealth of knowledge and experience in community-based conservation and sustainable development projects, primarily in Latin America to OTS. Passionate about conservation issues, he bridges the gap between the science community and the public. He leads undergraduate recruitment efforts and is always eager to exchange stories from the field, either abroad or domestically. Brooks, along with the Enrollment Management Department at OTS’ North American Office oversees preparing you for your time in Costa Rica.

**Ian Crowell**



Admissions Counselor

[ian.crowell@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:ian.crowell@tropicalstudies.org)

Ian focuses on the recruitment and preparation of students heading abroad. You have most likely communicated with him during the application and enrollment process. Ian also manages our Alumni Ambassador program as well as any students on scholarship.

**Juliet Jensen**

Admissions Specialist

[juliet.jensen@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:juliet.jensen@tropicalstudies.org)

Juliet assists in the management of the application process for undergraduate students. She assures that all documents, waivers, and student information is completed correctly and accurately, prior to your study abroad experience with OTS.

## Overview of the program

### Sites to Be Visited

We will visit a large diversity of forests and ecosystems, ranging from classic lowland tropical rain forests to the endangered tropical dry forests, to chilly montane oak forests, and paramo. Most of our time will be devoted to the three field stations owned and operated by OTS: Las Cruces, Palo Verde, and La Selva. Accommodations range from large rooms of bunk beds at some sites to smaller rooms for four to six people at others. Sites are subject to change.

### *Las Cruces Biological Station*



Las Cruces Biological Station is located on the south Pacific slope of Costa Rica near San Vito, only a few kilometers from the Panamanian border. At 1,100 meters, (3,608 feet) Las Cruces is the site of the world-famous Wilson Botanical Garden, which houses 10 hectares of native and non-native tropical plants, including bromeliads, palms, heliconias, and orchids. The site also protects 256 hectares of forest, with a rich diversity of plants, mammals, birds, and other important groups. Near the station is a collection of forest patches that have been an important site for research on

the biological dynamics of fragments. This is a very important site for research in restoration ecology. Las Cruces has been formally incorporated into the international Amistad Biosphere Reserve. The closest town, San Vito was founded in the 1950s by Italian immigrants. The primary economic activity of the region is coffee cultivation, so there is plenty of high-quality coffee! Las Cruces is one of our most comfortable field sites. Available services include phone, fax, WiFi, laundry, and hot water.

[Cuerici / Cerro de la Muerte](#)



Cuerici is located at an altitude of 2,900 meters, (9,514 feet) near Cerro de la Muerte in the Talamanca Mountain Range. This small farm and biological station include about 200 hectares of primary forest bordering the Rio Macho Forest Reserve and Chirripo National Park. Both of these protected areas mark the northwestern edge of La Amistad Conservation Area. Ancient, tall oaks dominate the forest at this altitude (primarily *Quercus costarricensis* and *Q. copeyensis*). Some of these trees are estimated to be nearly 1,000 years old.



Near Cerro de la Muerte, at 3,200 meters, the trees give way to high-altitude Páramo, a unique tropical ecosystem specially adapted to temperatures that fluctuate rapidly between warm sunny days and nights below freezing. The Páramo is dominated by shrubs where drainage is adequate, and also bogs where drainage is poor. The station at Cuerici is a large, rustic cabin complete with a large fireplace and a wood-burning stove to keep visitors warm during exceptionally chilly nights. The surrounding oak forests, which were heavily exploited for charcoal, are an important habitat for the resplendent quetzal (see photo). The region produces organic blackberries, much of which are exported to the United States. Students are housed together in a large dorm. Internet is not available at Cerro de la Muerte, and phone access is available only for emergencies. Luckily, warm water is usually available because Cuerici is cold, so don't forget to bring warm clothes!

### *Palo Verde Biological Station*



Through an agreement with the Costa Rica National Park Service, OTS maintains this field station within the Palo Verde National Park. This reserve, located in the northwestern region of the country, lies on the boundary between an extensive marsh and seasonally dry forest, underlain with limestone. It protects part of the lower Tempisque River Basin, the largest river drainage of the historic province of Guanacaste. Palo Verde is recognized internationally as one of the most important wetland habitats for nesting waterfowl. It is also a great place to see monkeys, deer, lizards, and crocodiles. Several trails lead to lookout points with incredible scenic vistas and some great spots for watching incredible sunsets. The park is currently impacted by rice and sugar cane cultivation in surrounding wetlands. It is also unique among Costa Rican parks because cattle have been incorporated into its management program; a somewhat controversial decision that will be analyzed while you are there. The field station is rustic. Services available at Palo Verde include phone, WiFi, and laundry.

Palo Verde is the buggiest of our sites, particularly in the wet season, so be prepared for lots of mosquitoes!

### *San Pedro, San José*

San Pedro is located next to San José, the capital city of Costa Rica. San Pedro is a densely populated, urban center. It is also the location of the University of Costa Rica, where OTS' Costa Rican offices are located. As a university town, San Pedro provides many resources for undergraduate students, including cafés, restaurants, libraries, and bookstores. San Pedro will be your home during three weeks of Spanish at the Costa Rican Language Academy (CRLA). CRLA houses students with Costa Ricans



(one student per family). In many cases, students quickly become part of the warm and vibrant social life that characterizes the Costa Rican family. During the week, while classes are in session, student activities revolve around San Pedro. On weekends, however, students are free to travel and may take advantage of hiking and camping opportunities in the surrounding hills or may venture further from the Central Valley to enjoy the nearby beaches of Jaco and Manuel Antonio. Services available in San Pedro include telephone, WiFi, laundry, and hot water.

### *Bocas del Toro, Panama*



Bocas del Toro is an island archipelago just over the border from Costa Rica on the Caribbean coast of Panama. We will reside at the Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation field station, which is a rustic beachfront site on the north side of Colon Island that gives us access to low and mid-impact coral reefs as well as a sandy intertidal zone. Laundry, phone, fax, and internet are not available here. In case of a family or other emergency, students can be contacted through the OTS office or staff (even after hours).



## *Monteverde*

Monteverde is a classic site for viewing and learning about tropical cloud forests. We will be staying at the rustic San Gerardo station, approximately an hour's hike from the nearest road. The station is managed by the Monteverde Conservation League and protects 21,000 hectares of forest. It is the biggest private reserve in Costa Rica. The station is a large cabin-style residence; students are housed in dormitories on the second floor. San Gerardo Biological Station has no internet access, and limited electricity, and laundry must be washed by hand and dried on a line. Telephone access is available only in the event of an emergency.



## *La Selva Biological Station*

Located in the Caribbean lowlands, La Selva is OTS's largest field station and is one of the best-known tropical research sites in the world. The station protects approximately 1,600 hectares of primary and secondary tropical rainforest. It averages 4,000 millimeters (over 13 feet) of rainfall a year. This lush environment facilitates the existence of thousands of species of plants and



animals, making La Selva a great place to see all kinds of wildlife, including toucans, monkeys, ocelots, agoutis, peccaries, and the endangered green macaw. Two major rivers, the Sarapiquí and the Puerto Viejo border la Selva. These rivers form part of the San Juan River Basin. La Selva is connected via a biological corridor with Braulio Carrillo National Park, which contains 46,000 hectares of forestland and ascends almost 3,000 meters in elevation to Volcán (volcano) Barva, which

overlooks the town of Heredia in the Central Valley. La Selva has an extensive trail system, lots of lab space, and is, in general, a pretty busy place. (The station can sleep over 100 people.) Important crops grown in the area surrounding La Selva include banana and heart of palm. Services available at La Selva include laundry and internet access. Telephone and fax are available in special circumstances. Showers may or may not have hot water. Housing consists of small dorm rooms with up to six students each.

## Academic and Student Life

It is important to recognize that the OTS program differs from your typical on-campus life in at least four very important ways.

*First, you will be living in a foreign country.* You will be a guest in Costa Rica, and consequently, you will need to be sensitive to and respectful of Costa Rican customs and culture. In general, Costa Ricans (“Ticos” and “Ticas”) are warm, friendly, and courteous. We encourage you to interact with many Ticos, and we hope you will develop some good friendships. It is important to remember that certain behaviors that are acceptable among fellow classmates at an OTS site may not be acceptable when dealing with non-course participants. For example, Costa Ricans tend to be conservative in their attitudes toward nudity and sex. Thus, states of undress that are acceptable and inevitable in field station dormitories might be offensive in public. Also, nudity on beaches, no matter how apparently deserted, could seriously jeopardize future program use of non-OTS sites. Costa Ricans tend to be much more tolerant of noise (say, the loud music coming from the neighbor’s house, or the children shouting and running in the living room) than many of us are in the U.S. While we ask that you be respectful of Costa Rican ways and customs, we also understand that cultural norms can often be subtle, complex, and even counter-intuitive. Please feel free to ask OTS staff any questions you have regarding cultural differences and norms at any time.

*Second, you will spend far more time in course-related activities this semester than you do on campus.* Our program is intensive. Though we do give campus-like instruction (assigned readings, lectures, discussion groups, etc.), we also take orientation walks to learn about important plants and animals, perform field projects with long hours, and make field trips to banana plantations, logging sites, etc. In the field, your typical daily schedule may look like this:

- 6:30 am Breakfast. Rice and beans are a staple diet for Costa Ricans, and this is true even at breakfast. Most mornings will begin with *gallo pinto*, or rice and beans cooked together with onions, garlic, and other spices. This will often be accompanied by eggs, toast, fruit and coffee, juice, or tea.
- 7:30 am Field activity. Most field activities take all morning, or in some cases will go into the afternoon. If we plan to be out in the field until, for instance, 2 or 3pm, we will take a bag lunch (usually a sandwich of your choice, fruit, cookies, and juice; and yes—bean sandwiches are an option). For field activities, you will often need to wear rubber boots, and always take water and your field notebook with you. This is the best part of the day—be prepared to get wet and muddy!
- 12:00 pm Lunch back at the station. Whatever we have for lunch, it will almost certainly be accompanied by rice and beans.
- 1:00 pm Rest/shower time.
- 2:00 pm Lectures and/or discussion sections. We schedule classroom activities in the afternoon to minimize our chances of getting caught in the field in the rain. Our

lectures generally last 1- 1.5 hours each; discussions last an hour—sometimes longer if the topic is really interesting.

- 5:00 pm Free time. Most students use this space to go running, play soccer, rest, catch up on correspondence, etc.
- 6:00 pm Dinner. (You guessed it, among other offerings, rice and beans!)
- 7:00 pm Often we will have evening lectures. Otherwise, this time can be used for study time or relaxation.

As you can see, most days are pretty well-packed with course-related work. The good news is that we are aware of the need for downtime and arrange the program to include one free day approximately every 10 days while we are in the field. Also, much of your work is done in beautiful natural settings. The experience of actually working in a lush tropical forest is incomparable to the experience of simply reading about the rainforest in a campus library. Because the program is so time-intensive, students in previous semesters have found that there is little opportunity for individual travel while the course is in session. This is compensated by the fact that we visit a large variety of sites with the group during the program. However, if you want to explore Costa Rica some more on your own, you should plan on taking full advantage of the one-week mid-term break or plan to arrive early or stay later.

*Third, you will have limited personal space this semester.* Though you may have one or two roommates on campus, in Costa Rica you will be living closely with 12-25 other students and two to five professors or field assistants. This means communication and respect will be crucial. Everyone needs to be as open, honest, and cooperative as possible. You also need to have sincere respect for one another, regardless of different opinions and lifestyles. This includes respect for privacy, respect for rules and regulations, and even respect for the fact that unpredictability is an inherent feature of field-based programs such as ours. Indeed, next to communication and cooperation, flexibility, and a good sense of humor are the most important characteristics of a successful student in our program. By living and working with the same people for 15 weeks, you will undoubtedly develop a number of very close friendships. The combination of uncomfortable (being wet, muddy, and tired) and wonderful (watching iguanas sunning on the bridge at La Selva) situations creates great images and memories. You will, for sure, share these with your fellow participants well beyond the end of the semester.

*Fourth, you will be expected to take a more active role in your own learning process.* As OTS students, you must not only be proactive in asking the questions (and finding the answers) that are important to you; but you must also be ready to share your own knowledge and experience with the rest of the group. Each one of you was asked to participate in the OTS Undergraduate Semester Abroad Program because we believe you have a unique background and special enthusiasm that will not only allow you to get the most from the program but will also greatly enrich the experience for your classmates and professors. So don't be afraid to give everything you have to these 15 weeks.

## Family Visits

In general, visits from friends and family will not be possible while classes are in session. If your family or friends would like to visit you in Costa Rica, please coordinate with them so that the dates of their visit coincide with the mid-term break. Alternatively, friends and family may visit either *before* or *after* the program. If visits are scheduled for after the program end date, you may have to renew your tourist visa by leaving the country for 72 hours. See the section on passports and visas in logistics below. If you have any questions about coordinating visits from friends and family, please contact us.

## Mid-Semester Break

During mid-semester break, you are free to travel/stay where you wish, but note that **expenses incurred during this vacation period are your personal responsibility and are not included in the programmatic costs to OTS**. In other words, during the mid-term break, you must pick up the tab for all your travel, food, lodging, etc. The good news is that transportation by bus is inexpensive, and reasonable accommodations and food can be found for pretty low prices.

## Logistics

### Passport and Visa Information

If you have not already obtained your passport, you should do so immediately! If you have not provided this information to the Costa Rican or North American Offices on your registration form, please e-mail or call Kattia Mendez or [undergraduate@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:undergraduate@tropicalstudies.org) with the information. **If you are NOT a citizen of a North American or European country, you will probably need a special visa to get into Costa Rica. Contact The OTS Costa Rica Office immediately to begin the necessary steps.** If you plan to travel elsewhere in Latin America after the semester, you may find it cheaper to schedule a plane ticket with San José as a stopover. Remember to check about visa requirements for any other country that you plan to visit.

If you are a U.S. citizen, upon arrival in Costa Rica you will be granted an automatic tourist visa for 90 days. If you are not a U.S. citizen, please contact OTS immediately to determine your visa requirements. OTS will assist you with paperwork for all necessary visas. When we leave the country to visit Panama in the middle of the course, your tourist visa will be automatically renewed for another 90 days, and it should not be necessary for you to request an extension. Contact OTS if you have questions or would like more information.

Please consider that if you enter Costa Rica from a yellow fever endemic country, you *must* provide proof of vaccination when you enter the country.

## Airline Reservations

You must arrange for travel to and from Costa Rica on your own; the group will not meet in the U.S. prior to departure. **You will need to purchase a round-trip ticket. Please know if you do not do so you will not be allowed to enter the country.** We will first meet in San José, where an OTS staff member will be waiting for you at the airport. **Please wear your OTS T-shirt so you can be easily identified by staff at the airport.** Plan to arrive at Juan Santamaria International Airport in San José by 5 pm, on the date listed on your Acceptance Letter. The last day of the program is the earliest departure date for all students. Please note that you will have to pay a \$29 departure tax at Juan Santamaria International Airport when you leave Costa Rica. Some of the flight tickets already include this tax; please confirm this information with your airline. *OTS will not be responsible for your travel or stay before nor after arrival and departure dates.*

## Money

In addition to airport and exit taxes, plan to have enough money for personal expenses. You will be required to pay for health care, personal effects, mail, sodas, snacks, and souvenirs. Batteries (e.g., for flashlights) are expensive in Costa Rica, so you may want to bring them with you unless you have rechargeable batteries. It is hard to set a standard for a semester budget for personal expenses, but unless you plan to do additional traveling after the program or buy lots of souvenirs, \$600–\$750 for personal expenses should be adequate. The unit of currency in Costa Rica is the colón (plural: colones), and as of this writing (November 2022), the exchange rate is about 609 colones to the dollar.

There are various options for accessing money in Costa Rica. Generally, debit and ATM cards are the most convenient for obtaining cash. The most widely available ATM machines are Cirus and Plus systems. Most of these will issue money only in colones, but some will also issue dollars. Cash advances on credit cards can also be obtained in banks, though a service charge may be imposed. You might consider having at least some cash available (\$50–\$100) for immediate exchange upon arrival, but dollars also are accepted almost everywhere in Costa Rica.

## Laptop Computers

Our program will use PC-based laptop computers, and some will be available for student use. However, there is limited availability of laptops for student use, so we strongly suggest you bring your own. Students who have brought their own computers in the past have generally appreciated having them on hand, especially during crunch times when everyone has a paper due at 5 pm.

If you bring your own laptop, make sure you have Microsoft Word and Excel programs. At OTS stations, the Internet can generally be accessed through a WiFi connection.

Do not leave your computer out in the open and unattended in public places. OTS will assume no responsibility in case of loss or theft. We strongly recommend that you insure your computer before bringing it to Costa Rica. Consider bringing a lock that allows you to secure your computer to the table where you are working.

## Health care

### Medical Services

If you do not already have health insurance, you need to arrange immediately for international coverage during the semester. Make sure that your health policy covers medical expenses while you are overseas. If your health policy is based on reimbursement after medical treatment, you must bring a credit card with you to use in the event of an emergency. Please note that you will be responsible for all of your medical expenses. Contact the OTS North American Office in Durham, NC if you have questions or need any assistance in finding a policy.

Before coming to Costa Rica, make sure you are up to date on all your regular immunizations, this includes being current on Covid-19 vaccinations and boosters. In addition, you may wish to get additional immunizations for common diseases in the tropics. Check with professional travel health consultants at your college, university, or physician for current recommendations.

The OTS program travels with an extensive first-aid kit. However, you must bring adequate supplies of any prescription drugs that you need. If your doctor advises against taking a large supply of medication with you, they should provide a diagnosis and the suggested prescription to facilitate proper treatment by a Costa Rican physician. In addition, bring supplies of pain relievers or medication that you normally use if you are prone to headaches, ear aches, allergies, cramps, intestinal disorders, yeast infections, etc. Antifungal/athlete's foot cream and hydrocortisone cream (for itchy bug bites) are recommended. Although most drugs are available in Costa Rica, do not count on finding your usual name brand. Traveler's diarrhea is a very common ailment. If you are susceptible to changes in "gut flora," you should bring something to combat diarrhea or relieve discomfort (e.g., Pepto Bismol). In addition, Costa Rica has lots of curvy, mountainous roads. If you are susceptible to motion sickness you should bring appropriate medication, such as Dramamine.

In the event of a serious illness or injury, good medical care is readily available in Costa Rica. All of the OTS field stations have clinics nearby for immediate medical attention. Students requiring medical attention while in San José generally go to the Clínica Bíblica, considered the best medical center in the country. If you have any medical problems or questions about medical care in Costa Rica, please talk to a member of the OTS staff.



## Counseling Services

Being in a new country on a new program inevitably exposes a student to unexpected stress that can detract from the overall experience. In Costa Rica, many types of support are available for dealing with stress and emotional issues within the context of studying abroad. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the different options, please talk to a member of the OTS staff.

Please be aware that, in general, professional counseling services are available on a very limited basis while the program is in session. Because the program spends most of its time in the field, attending counseling sessions may involve two-to-three day absences from the program at a time, as most counselors have their offices located in San José. Virtual or Zoom sessions may also be possible, depending on the location of the program.

If you receive counseling services while in Costa Rica, you will be responsible for all associated expenses, including transportation, lodging (where applicable), and professional fees. If you have any history of mental health issues or believe you may need counseling support while the program is in session, OTS strongly recommends that you consult with a mental health professional to assess your counseling needs before coming to Costa Rica. It is also important that you contact the OTS to determine whether the semester schedule, location of field sites, and your counseling needs are compatible or present logistical difficulties.

## Immunizations

At least four to six weeks before coming to Costa Rica, you must check with your personal physician, Student Health Service, or a travel health consultant, for professional advice regarding immunizations. In addition, you should check the [Centers for Disease Control's Traveler's Health](#) website for the latest updates on diseases and vaccinations in Costa Rica and Central America. The following information may help orient you to some of the immunizations you might consider. *This is only an abbreviated list and cannot substitute for direct consultation with a qualified travel health physician.*

**Booster Shots.** Make sure you are up-to-date on all of your regular immunizations, including the following:

### Covid-19

All students are required to be vaccinated and boosted against Covid-19 or Coronavirus. If you show symptoms or have confirmed exposure to someone with Covid-19, you may be required to isolate for several days, depending on local public health guidelines.

### Tetanus/Diphtheria/Pertussis

Adequate primary series plus booster within the last 10 years (Tdap or Td). Those who have not received a previous dose of an acellular pertussis-containing vaccine in adulthood should receive a one-time dose of the Tdap vaccine.

Measles

Make sure you are up to date on your measles vaccine.

Hepatitis B

Since you might be exposed to blood (for example, in medical care facilities).

*Additional Vaccines.* Other vaccines recommended for Costa Rica are as follows:

Typhoid

Two typhoid vaccines are available:

1) Typhoid Inactivated Typhoid Vaccine (Shot):

One dose provides protection. It should be given at least 2 weeks before travel to allow the vaccine time to work. A booster dose is needed every 2 years for people who remain at risk.

2) Live Typhoid Vaccine (Oral): Four doses, given 2 days apart, are needed for protection. The last dose should be given at least 1 week before travel to allow the vaccine time to work. A booster dose is needed every 5 years for people who remain at risk.

Hepatitis A

For travelers, the vaccine series should be started at least one month before traveling to provide the best protection. Two doses of the vaccine are needed for lasting protection. These doses should be given at least 6 months apart.

Influenza

Flu is transmitted throughout the year in the tropics, and all travelers are at increased risk.

*Suggested Additional Vaccines.* The following vaccines are recommended under certain circumstances:

Rabies

There have been only 3 confirmed cases of rabies in Costa Rica since 1970 (WHO statistics): one from a dog bite and 2 caused by cats. However, it is OTS policy that students who wish to handle bats must be vaccinated against rabies and provide proof of the pre-rabies vaccination series. Keep in mind that vaccination does not guarantee that you will be handling bats. Also, a pre-rabies vaccination series does not eliminate the need for post-exposure treatment. It is important to avoid exposure to vampire bats by sleeping indoors or in a tent at night. In the unlikely case that students are bitten by bats, they must undergo the post-rabies exposure vaccine series.

*Other diseases of concern:*

Malaria You may consider taking antimalarial medication if you plan to travel to the Limon province in Costa Rica and/or Panama. There are several different malarial prophylactics available. Consult with your physician about the appropriate prescription for the areas you plan to visit.

Dengue This unpleasant, flu-like disease occurs in Costa Rica, with localized outbreaks in 2020 and 2022. The incidence of dengue can rise dramatically with respect to previous years and can vary widely. Mosquitoes carry the dengue virus, and no vaccine for the disease exists. Prevention consists of using insect repellent, wearing protective clothing, and avoiding being outside at dawn and dusk in risk-prone areas. Treatment consists of resting, drinking fluids, and taking acetaminophen (not aspirin). Dengue is usually not very serious in otherwise strong, healthy people but a rare hemorrhagic form that can develop upon second infection does require medical attention. Consult your doctor for more information.

Chikungunya Chikungunya is a viral disease transmitted to humans by infected mosquitoes. It causes fever and severe joint pain. Other symptoms include muscle pain, headache, nausea, fatigue, and rash. The disease shares some clinical signs with dengue and can be misdiagnosed in areas where dengue is common. There is no cure for it, and treatment is focused on relieving the symptoms. For protection during outbreaks of chikungunya, clothing which minimizes skin exposure to the day-biting vectors is advised. Repellents can be applied to exposed skin or to clothing in strict accordance with product label instructions. Repellents should contain DEET (N, N-diethyl-3-methylbenzamide), IR3535 (3-[N-acetyl-N-butyl]-amino propionic acid ethyl ester), or icaridin (1-piperidinecarboxylic acid, 2-(2-hydroxyethyl)-1-methylpropylester). For those who sleep during the daytime, insecticide-treated mosquito nets afford good protection.

Zika Zika virus infection is caused by the bite of an infected Aedes mosquito, usually causing mild fever, rash, conjunctivitis, muscle or joint pain, and general malaise that begins 2-7 days after the bite of an infected mosquito. One out of four infected people develops symptoms of the disease. Among those who do, the disease is usually mild and can last 2-7 days. Symptoms are similar to those of dengue or chikungunya, which are transmitted by the same type of mosquito. Neurological and autoimmune complications are infrequent but have been described in the outbreaks. Zika virus is transmitted to people by the same mosquito that transmits dengue and chikungunya. Treatment consists of relieving pain, fever, and any other symptom that inconveniences the patient. To prevent dehydration, it is recommended to control the fever, rest, and drink plenty of water. There is no vaccine or specific drug for this virus.

#### Traveler's diarrhea

This can be caused by viruses, bacteria, or parasites that are found throughout the region and can contaminate food or water. Infections may cause diarrhea and vomiting. The most common form of traveler's diarrhea is caused by strains of *E. coli*. There is no vaccine, and treatment generally consists of resting and drinking fluids.

Yellow fever Yellow fever is currently not present in Costa Rica but check with your local health department. If you enter Costa Rica from a yellow fever-endemic country, you will need to provide proof of vaccination when you enter the country.

Cholera Several years ago there was a small outbreak of cholera in Costa Rica. In general, be careful of what and where you eat when you are on your own in Costa Rica. Specifically, avoid unwashed vegetables and fruits from street vendors. Food and water at all of the stations we visit are clean and safe.

## Communications

### Important Names and Numbers

The Organization for Tropical Studies has two primary administrative centers as it relates to this program:

<b>OTS North American Office (NAO)</b>	<b>OTS Costa Rican Office (CRO)</b>
	University of Costa Rica, San Pedro, Costa Rica
Organization for Tropical Studies Box 90630 Durham, NC 27708-0630 USA Tel. (919) 684-5155 Fax (919) 684-5661 <a href="mailto:undergraduate@tropicalstudies.org">undergraduate@tropicalstudies.org</a>	Organización para Estudios Tropicales Apartado 676-2050 San Pedro, San José 2050 COSTA RICA Tel. 011 (506) 2524-0607 Fax. 011 (506) 2524-0608 <a href="mailto:kattia.mendez@tropicalstudies.org">kattia.mendez@tropicalstudies.org</a>

OTS also operates three field stations in Costa Rica: Las Cruces, Palo Verde, and La Selva. We will be visiting all of them; as well as sites not administered by OTS. Both your incoming and outgoing mail will pass through the OTS Costa Rican Office. Find information about communication services at other sites to be visited in the section titled “Description of Sites to Be Visited” in this packet or contact OTS Undergraduate Program staff.

Phone and fax numbers for OTS Field Stations:

Field Station	Phone	Fax
<b>Las Cruces</b>	011 (506) 2773-4004	011 (506) 2773-3665
<b>Palo Verde</b>	011 (506) 2661-4717	011 (506) 2661-4712

People answering OTS numbers during office hours are usually bilingual. After office hours, phones may be answered by Spanish speakers only.

### Telephone

Communication with the United States from Costa Rica will be greatly simplified if you rely on a computer calling program such as Zoom or WhatsApp. International prepaid phone cards are also available in Costa Rica, but usually are good for only 10 minutes. You can call home collect, but this is expensive and may not be possible from all phones.

If you arrive in Costa Rica with an unlocked cell phone, you can purchase a prepaid SIM chip for your cell phone (from the national company “Claro” at the airport or countless locations around the country), which can be used at a very affordable rate for calls in-country. You might consider purchasing a prepaid chip for your safety and convenience while you are in the country but are not traveling with the group, such as on free days, during your Spanish homestay, or during your midterm break.

Landline phone access varies from site to site. Palo Verde, Las Cruces, and La Selva have a shared phone where students can make calls. Incoming calls can be received during mealtimes or at prescheduled times at these stations.

### E-mail and Internet

Students will take three weeks of Spanish instruction at Costa Rican Language Academy (CRLA) in San Pedro, near San José. In addition, there are several Internet cafés located throughout San Pedro. At Palo Verde, Las Cruces, and La Selva you will have access to the Internet, but you should anticipate that you will not be able to check your e-mail daily. Tell your friends and family that they should not be surprised if you don’t respond to their messages right away!

### Letters and Packages

You can send or receive mail two main ways: via the Costa Rican mail system or via a postal service called Interlink. Packages or boxes mailed to you must be sent through Interlink. Be aware, however, that **OTS strongly discourages mailing or receiving packages**. Packages are subject to heavy import taxes. Chocolate, candy, clothes new or used, stuffed animals, etc. are all considered taxable items. Even small packages will cost you \$2 to \$50 to receive. In addition, all packages sent to the country must pass through customs, where they will often be held for several weeks or months.

You must pay for the mail you send. Note that Interlink is more costly than the Costa Rican postal system. On first-class letters (40 cents), Interlink will charge you 40 cents (so, both the sender and you pay 40 cents). OTS staff will keep track of your postal service expenses and charge you at the end of the semester.

If all this seems complicated, don't worry! We will re-visit this topic when you arrive here.

For purposes of receiving mail, your addresses here in Costa Rica are:

<b><i>For Costa Rican Postal System:</i></b>	<b><i>For Interlink Postal Service:</i></b>
<b><i>Your name</i></b> Organización para Estudios Tropicales Undergraduate Program Apartado 676-2050 San Pedro 2050 Costa Rica	<b><i>Your name</i></b> Organization for Tropical Studies Undergraduate Program CRC341 7801 NW 37th Street Doral , FL 33195-6503

### **Risk management in Costa Rica**

Whenever you travel in a foreign country, you are bound to encounter certain risks. In order to have an enjoyable and productive travel experience, it is important to continually take precautions to minimize risks to you and your classmates. Although Costa Rica has a well-deserved reputation for being a secure place for foreign travelers, safety issues are just as relevant here as they are anywhere else in the world. We urge you to review this document carefully and to follow the suggestions to minimize risks to you and your possessions. Please note that this document focuses on risks from people. Information on other risks in natural areas will be addressed in detail at each station we visit. If you have any questions at any time about risk and risk management in Costa Rica, please do not hesitate to talk with a member of the OTS staff and faculty.

In San Pedro, while you are studying Spanish, you will stay with host families, who will take a personal and direct interest in ensuring your safety in the Central Valley. And of course, OTS staff can be contacted 24 hours a day.

#### **Managing the Risk of Crime and Theft**



Pickpockets and petty theft are as common in Costa Rica as they are anywhere in the world. Your style of dress and hair/eye color will likely mark you as a foreigner, and foreigners are often the targets of theft because it is assumed that they carry more valuables with them. In the past, OTS students have lost money, passports, backpacks, and other possessions of both monetary and sentimental value because of pickpockets, break-ins, unregistered taxis, and street robbers. Historically, the incidence of violent crime in Costa Rica has been low, but unfortunately, it has begun to rise in recent years.

Here are some suggestions for reducing risk to yourself and your property:

- Carry a photocopy of your passport. (Do not carry the original unless absolutely necessary)
- Change money only in banks or at your hotel. Do not change money in the streets.
- Do not carry more cash on you than necessary. Do not display large amounts of cash in public.
- Keep a close watch (and even better, a tight hold) on your belongings at all times in public areas. Use pocketbooks with a secure closure, and do not carry your wallet in a rear trouser pocket. Put a lock on your backpack zippers, or carry your backpack in front of you when you walk. Never entrust your belongings to a stranger, even for a moment.
- Be alert to possible staged distractions by pickpockets.
- Always travel in a group, even if you are just going out for the evening. If you decide to stay out late, do not stay out alone.
- Always take registered taxis, especially after dark. Registered taxis are red with yellow triangles on the doors, and all have working meters (*marías*) and a two-way radio. Do not be too trusting of your taxi drivers. Always note the number and license plate of the taxi, in case a problem should come up. You can also take an Uber or use a ridesharing app.
- Do not engage in reckless or risky behavior (e.g., getting drunk, getting a ride home from strangers, swimming while under the influence of alcohol, using illegal drugs, etc.)
- Carry the phone numbers of OTS staff wherever you go. Memorize at least two to three of these numbers.
- Always inform your host family or OTS staff where you will be during free time, rest days, and mid-term break. If you change your plans while traveling, inform Kattia Méndez at the OTS office during office hours at +011 (506) 2524-0607, ext. 1521.
- Inform OTS staff immediately of any situation or person that causes you to feel in any way uncomfortable.

Please remember you are just as much at risk in rural areas as in urban areas. In the United States, we are accustomed to associating crime with urbanization; but in Costa Rica, many rural towns, particularly along the coast, are also targets for petty and violent crime. This is especially true in tourist hubs, where thieves and pickpockets will target foreigners for a quick buck.

For your safety, also note that

- Pedestrians do NOT have the right of way in Costa Rica. Always check carefully both ways before crossing. Cars will NOT slow down for you!

### **Managing Risk in the Field**

As part of the regular semester program, you will receive a risk-management orientation to each field site we visit, including an overview of the inherent risks of each site and the procedures to manage those risks. At each field site, you will meet and learn the names of two to three key people who are in the support staff, such as the station manager, director, office manager, resident biologist, guards, etc., within the first day or so. In case of any emergency, these people are available to help you, along with any other OTS staff. Teaching staff will always be housed within walking distance of the student housing. Make sure you know where the teaching staff is staying, so you can find them in the event of an emergency. In the case of an emergency, there is a booklet of Emergency Protocols in each station building and student housing room.

In general, please follow the guidelines below at *all* of our field stations, as well as in places that you may visit during free days:

- To reduce the risk of a venomous snakebite, always wear rubber boots in the forest. In addition, always wear rubber boots and carry a flashlight with you after dark.
- **Do not**, under any circumstances, catch snakes of any kind. Do not handle any animals that are potentially dangerous or venomous.
- Do not handle any animals, no matter how apparently docile, without the supervision of an OTS staff member.
- To reduce the risk of bites from vampire bats, do not sleep outdoors unless you are in a tent. Students who are bitten by bats must undergo the post-rabies exposure vaccine series. This series can be difficult to locate in Costa Rica, so students may have to return to the United States to receive it.
- Always pack water, a bit of food, and a flashlight with extra batteries when you go for a hike, even if you plan to come back early.
- Always inform the on-site teaching staff where you are going and when you plan to be back.
- Familiarize yourself with the trail system as well as trail markers that can help you orient yourself in the forest.

- If you get lost in the forest, stay where you are and wait. We will come to find you.

## Managing Health Risks

### *Physical Health and Well-being*

In the event of illness or injury, please notify the OTS teaching staff. We are not medical technicians, but we can facilitate adequate medical attention for most issues that come up in the field. Good medical care is readily available in Costa Rica. All of the OTS field stations have clinics nearby for immediate medical attention, and excellent hospitals are available in larger towns and cities for situations requiring longer-term attention. Students requiring medical attention while in San José generally go to the Clínica Bíblica, considered the best medical center in the country.

While Costa Rica has excellent medical services, it is always best to take a few preventive measures to avoid getting sick in the first place. Some of these include:

- Drink lots of safe water to avoid dehydration and other medical problems. Water at all of our field sites is safe to drink.
- Use sunscreen, even on a cloudy day, as the tropical sun is very strong and will burn you.
- Use insect repellent, protective clothing, and mosquito nets to prevent insect-transmitted diseases such as dengue. In recent years, dengue fever has been on the rise in Costa Rica.
- Most beaches in Costa Rica have dangerous rip currents that have claimed the lives of students, tourists, and nationals. Before getting into the water at a beach, make sure the area is not prone to rip currents. Do not swim alone. Do not swim after dark or under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- If you get caught in a rip current, do not panic. Please take a moment to watch these videos and be better prepared in case you face one:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe26ZbFulno>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le3v8G5Z5Qc>
- Inform a member of the OTS staff if you have diarrhea that is severe or that lasts for more than 48 hours.
- Inform a member of the OTS staff if you have a cut or wound that is not healing.
- Do not get drunk. Do not use illegal drugs.
- Sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, are just as much a risk in Costa Rica as they are in the United States. If you choose to engage in sexual relations, always use condoms. These are inexpensive and can be purchased at many stores and all pharmacies. If your partner does not like to use condoms, insist.

- Carry a credit card and your health insurance information with you for use in case of a medical emergency. Most hospitals require a credit card deposit as a guarantee for payment for emergency attention.

If you receive medical attention while in Costa Rica, you will be responsible for all associated expenses, including transportation, lodging (where applicable), and professional fees.

### *Emotional Health and Well-being*

Issues in emotional health also come up during a study abroad experience. Being in a new country can push us outside of our comfort zone, resulting in emotions that run the full gamut from excitement and enthusiasm to loneliness and depression. In addition, the OTS Semester Abroad Program is intensive and requires students and professors to live in close quarters for extended periods of time. Given the logistical constraints of the program, it is impossible to meet the personal needs and living preferences of all of our students. This can lead to high levels of stress and make the program less enjoyable for some. If this happens to you, *please let us know!* We can help you identify and implement strategies to better manage the stress you are experiencing, or we can connect you to professionals who can support you in the personal aspects of your journey through Costa Rica. Please remember we are here to make your stay as enjoyable and productive as possible.

In Costa Rica, many types of professional support are available for dealing with stress and emotional issues within the context of study abroad. If you have any questions or concerns regarding the different options, please talk to a member of the OTS staff.

Please be aware that, in general, professional counseling services are available on a very limited basis while the program is in session. Because the program spends most of its time in the field, attending counseling sessions may involve two to three days of absences from the program at a time, as most counselors have their offices located in San José. Some counselors may offer virtual sessions and this may be possible, depending on the location of the program.

If you receive counseling services while in Costa Rica, you will be responsible for all associated expenses, including transportation, lodging (where applicable), and professional fees.

### *Alcohol and Illegal Drugs*

Alcohol abuse (i.e., getting drunk) is strictly forbidden while the program is in session. Getting drunk in any context is risky, but in the study abroad context, the risks are greatly magnified. Alcohol abuse not only puts you at personal risk, but it can also interfere with your academic performance, with the safety and well-being of other students, and with the safety and reputation of the program. OTS simply cannot assume responsibility for students who engage in risky

behavior. OTS staff will take jokes or comments alluding to alcohol abuse as an indication that you are drinking irresponsibly. First-time offenders will be placed on probation, and second-time offenders are subject to dismissal from the program.

Under no conditions should you consider even for a moment bringing marijuana or any other illegal drugs into Costa Rica or buying any while in the country. If you make jokes or comments alluding to personal drug use, OTS staff will take this as an indication that you are using drugs. Use or possession of illegal drugs, while the program is in session, is grounds for immediate dismissal from the program. Costa Rican drug laws are severe, and an arrest would be a disaster for you and for OTS. By current Costa Rican law, accused drug offenders are held in jail with no hope of bail until their trial date. Do not let this happen to you!

### **Rest Days and Free Time**

The Semester Program schedule is intense. For this reason, OTS schedules rest days and free time throughout the semester. Nonetheless, you will have much LESS time for rest and relaxation than in a typical on-campus semester. Unstructured time falls into three basic categories. First, while you are studying Spanish in San José, you will have free weekends. OTS strongly encourages you to take advantage of these weekends to spend time with your host family. However, you may also travel during this time. If you decide to travel on free weekends, please follow all the guidelines listed in this packet, and realize that you are traveling at your own risk.

While you are in the field, you will have an occasional rest day or free afternoon or evening. On average, one rest day every 10 days. Please keep in mind that both students and staff are entitled to take a break on scheduled rest days. In the past, students have used rest days to sleep, catch up on assignments, write letters, or go for hikes in small groups. Each rest day may have rules of conduct applied to it (for example, where you can go, when you must be back, etc.), and these rules will vary depending on the conditions of the site. Your Resident Professors will inform you of rest day rules in advance of scheduled rest days. If you have any questions about this, please ask!

During the one-week semester break, students are free to travel where they wish, at their own risk. However, we request that you consider traveling in groups. Again, please follow the risk-management guidelines that we give you and always be careful! You must inform OTS where you will be and how to reach you during the mid-term break.

Please be aware that free time, rest days, and the mid-term break rarely coincide with state or religious holidays. If formal program activities are scheduled during a religious holiday that you would like to observe, or if you need to request permission to be absent from program activities for any other reason, please let us know in advance.

All visits from family and friends should be scheduled during the mid-term break, or before or after the Semester Program. OTS cannot assume responsibility for family and friends that visit Costa Rica while the program is in session.

On days off, during the mid-term break, and while on home stays, students are expected to behave responsibly. Please be aware that, as OTS is not involved in the decisions students make while on their own, we are not responsible for your actions.

## **Female Travelers**

Sadly enough, as in many parts of the world, Costa Rica is not free of gender-based violence, and in recent years sexual assaults directed at foreign women have occurred throughout the country, even in seemingly peaceful places. Although we encourage women to feel empowered and be able to do as they wish, we also extend some recommendations to minimize the risk of gender-based violence. Please consider traveling in groups, not walking by yourself at night, and making sure people know of your whereabouts if you do decide to travel alone.

The most frequent complaint of young women travelers in Costa Rica has to do with *piropos* (catcalls). There is an ongoing effort from civil society organizations and the current government to eliminate *piropos* from everyday interaction in Costa Rican streets. At OTS we consider *piropos* an unwelcomed sexual harassment. If you think you are being harassed, the best thing to do is not to engage with the offender and look for a police officer (Fuerza Publica). The Fuerza Publica are now trained to deal with street sexual harassment and will be able to help out.

It also is important to keep in mind that travelers have reported sexual assaults by taxi drivers and other app-based modes of transportation. When using taxis or transport apps, make sure they have working door handles, locks, and if riding a red-taxi, working meters (called “marias”). If using a transport app, it is required by them that you seat in the front seat. However, this is not the case for the red taxis, where you normally will ride in the backseat.

Please keep in mind that body language is, like spoken languages, different everywhere you go. Watch your deportment and apparel in public places. What may pass as non-significant in social situations in the US may have different connotations in Costa Rica. If you at any time feel uncomfortable about a particular person or situation while in Costa Rica, please bring this to the immediate attention of a member of the OTS staff. Remember that we are here to help you make your stay in Costa Rica as enjoyable and educational as possible.

## **Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct Policy**

All students are required to read and sign the OTS Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct Policy, on the first full day of the program. The full policy can be found at the link below.

[OTS Discrimination, Harassment, and Sexual Misconduct Policy for Students](#)



## Sexual Harassment

As part of its commitment to maintaining a healthy and productive work environment, OTS has a strong institutional policy regarding sexual harassment. Both overt and subtle sexual harassment is prohibited at all OTS facilities and during all OTS-sponsored activities. In addition, sexual relations between OTS staff and students are absolutely prohibited. *If you have any questions or complaints or find yourself in need of any other assistance in this context during your stay in Costa Rica, you are strongly urged to contact an OTS staff member with whom you feel comfortable discussing your concerns.* OTS staff can inform you of your rights in the case of sexual harassment and will orient you to the procedures for filing a formal complaint, if necessary. If for any reason you do not feel comfortable discussing these issues with your professors, we ask that you contact the Director of Academics in Costa Rica, Sofia Rodriguez at [sofia.rodriguez@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:sofia.rodriguez@tropicalstudies.org), +506 2511-6238, or the Chief Administrative Officer, Jennifer Kelley, in the North American Office at [jennifer.kelley@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:jennifer.kelley@tropicalstudies.org), +1 919-684-5774.

## Racism and Racial Stereotypes

As in many countries, racism and racial stereotypes exist in Costa Rica. The good news is that power divisions between class, race, and gender are less pronounced in Costa Rica than in other Central American countries. Also, Costa Rica takes pride in being a strong advocate for human rights, and many sectors of Costa Rican society are working to eliminate traditions of racism and sexism. Nonetheless, you may confront issues of racism and racial stereotypes during your study abroad experience.

At OTS, we encourage you to be frank and open about your experiences with and perceptions of racism in Costa Rica. If you at any time feel uncomfortable about a particular person or situation while in Costa Rica, please bring this to the attention of a member of the OTS staff. Within OTS, harassment on the basis of race is strictly forbidden, and should you feel uncomfortable because of an OTS employee or student, please report your concerns to the Director of Academics in Costa Rica, Sofia Rodriguez [sofia.rodriguez@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:sofia.rodriguez@tropicalstudies.org), tel +506 2511-6238, or the Chief Administrative Officer, Jennifer Kelley, in the North American Office at [jennifer.kelley@tropicalstudies.org](mailto:jennifer.kelley@tropicalstudies.org), +1 919-684-5774. Remember that we are deeply committed to making your stay as enjoyable and productive as possible.

## U.S. Embassy Support

In addition to the support of OTS staff and faculty, please remember that U.S. citizens traveling in Costa Rica can also find support and assistance on safety issues with the U.S. Embassy, located in Pavas just outside of San José. OTS routinely registers its students at the U.S. Embassy. Important phone numbers at the Embassy include:

- American Citizen Services and U.S. Consul General +011 (506) 2519-2000
- 24-hour Emergency +011 (506) 2220-3127

The U.S. State Department and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) produce regular, updated information sheets on travel and safety in countries all over the world. This information is available on the Internet, and OTS strongly recommends you review the following sites pertinent to travel in Costa Rica:

- <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/International-Travel-Country-Information-Pages/CostaRica.html>
- <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/covid-3/coronavirus-costa-rica>
- <https://cr.usembassy.gov>

In addition, if you plan to travel to other Central American countries, we strongly recommend you review the consular information sheet for that country. All consular information sheets are available at the website <http://travel.state.gov>

### Emergency Information

Each OTS field station has an Emergency Protocol that all visitors must follow in case of an emergency. These can be found in each room and building throughout the station. Included in these protocols, OTS also has a 24-hour emergency line that you can call in the case of an emergency. **For any emergency during the program, when students are not at an OTS field station, call +506 8309 6105.** The person answering this line and any other emergency lines will be bilingual. This information will also be reviewed during the pre-departure and on-site orientations.

#### Emergency Numbers:

La Selva: +506 8682 0830

Las Cruces: +506 8681 9690

Palo Verde: +506 8849 1702

Costa Rica Office - Dept of Education: +506 8849 1702

North American Office: +1 919 684 3226

### What to bring

This section includes two checklists to help you pack for your trip:

- Clothing and Personal Items
- Field Equipment

As a general rule, *travel as light as possible*. It is hard to predict the optimal numbers and kinds of bags you should bring. It is definitely better to bring a few smaller bags (with multiple uses) than

one large suitcase that is hard to haul around. A comfortable backpack for hiking is essential. You will, for example, need to hike into Monteverde with enough gear to last you for up to 2 weeks. It would also be wise to include a daypack and perhaps some sort of nylon duffel bag. *Please expect any bag you bring into the field to get dirty and wet.*

For clothes, use lightweight fabrics such as cotton or wicking synthetics. Label all clothing with waterproof markers, sewn-in labels, or sewn-in distinctive insignia—we have communal laundry, and all socks tend to look alike. Except for your town clothes, most of your clothing will get muddy and receive rough treatment. Plan on keeping some clothes for relaxation, so you can change into something comfortable and dry when you come in, sweaty and muddy, from the field. Do not bring expensive watches or jewelry. OTS provides bed linens but you will need a towel at some sites.

Your own personal habits and research interests should be considered in deciding what to bring. Students from the previous semesters have complained about not having enough of the following: small field notebooks, batteries, zip lock bags, rain pants, aspirin, bandanas, vitamins, alarm clock, warm clothes, city clothes, and access to computers.

If you have any questions about what to bring, please contact us!

**Check List #1:**  
**Clothing and Personal Items**

Essential

- \_\_\_\_\_ Valid **Passport**.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Money, ATM card, and/or credit card:** ATM machines are accessible near most sites. It is a good idea to have at least a little cash on hand when you arrive. Be sure to notify your bank that you will be traveling so they do not place a hold on your account.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Backpack:** You will need to hike into Monteverde with enough clothes and gear for up to 2 weeks. Bring a backpack that will hold your clothes, rain gear, toiletries, books, boots, etc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Shirts:** 3-5 “town” shirts, 1-2 “field” shirts, 3-5 t-shirts. Long-sleeved field shirts are good for bugs; roll them up when too hot. Lightweight cotton or wicking synthetic field shirts are best. You will appreciate having quick-drying clothes. Consider some shirts that are appropriate for “going out” in the city.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Pants:** 2 pairs of town pants, 1 pair of lounge/sweat pants, and 2-3 pairs of field pants. Although blue jeans are good for casual wear or the city, they do not make good field pants. Denim is hot, heavy, and very slow-drying. For the field, we recommend lightweight but sturdy pants. You will appreciate having quick-drying clothes and at least 2 pairs of field pants. We do not recommend rain pants.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Shorts:** 3–4 lightweight shorts, a mix of regular and athletic. Some students prefer “zip-off” field pants.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Swimsuit:** 1-2 suits
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Underwear:** 10-13 pairs, cotton or quick-drying recommended
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Socks:** 7-10 pairs, some athletic and some knee-high for inside rubber boots to prevent blisters (such as thick soccer socks). Often get lost, so consider bringing extras or planning to purchase more in Costa Rica.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Fleece jacket, sweater, sweatshirt, or wool shirt:** If you tend to be cold, bring several so that you can “layer” rather than bringing something too heavy. At night, Cuerici can get close to freezing (4 days) and Monteverde, San Jose, and Las Cruces can be quite chilly (7-8 weeks total at these sites, occasionally at 50-65 degrees at night with no heaters). *Don't forget to pack ENOUGH warm clothes!*
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Rainwear:** Bring a light breathable rain jacket (or poncho). Rain pants are not recommended.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Hiking boots:** Fancy leather hiking boots are *not* recommended. We suggest lightweight and fast-drying hiking boots. Be aware that whatever boots you bring will take quite a beating. Best if they are waterproof.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Sandals:** Keens, Tevas, Chacos, or flip-flops are great for lounging around the cabin area. Flip-flops are also useful for wearing in public showers, to prevent fungal infections on

the feet. *Please be aware that for your own safety you will not be allowed to wear this type of footwear either in the forest or while moving from building to building at the field sites. At our Bocas del Toro site you will need something other than flip flops for tide pooling.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Shoes:** Some students like to bring 1-2 nice pairs of sandals, sneakers, or otherwise comfortable shoes for going out dancing, walking around San Jose, or going running.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Towel:** Towels are available at most sites, but you should bring a thin towel for the sites that do not provide them, and if you will visit the beach during your time away from the program.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Medical supplies:** The program has a first-aid kit, but you should bring a personal supply of Advil/Tylenol, Neosporin-like cream, hydrocortisone cream, antifungal cream and/or powder, Dramamine, lots of Band-Aids, nail clippers, and vitamins if you use them, a four-month supply of **any prescription medication you use (including contraceptives)**. Women who are prone to yeast or urinary tract infections should bring along medication.

#### Recommended

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Hat:** The sun is hot and bright when it is out. Could be a baseball hat, an “adventure” hat, or anything that will keep the sun out of your eyes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Umbrella:** Useful in San Jose and between buildings at the stations. Can be purchased in Costa Rica.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Rubber boots:** Rubber boots are available cheaply in Costa Rica so you can purchase them after you arrive (although they may be less comfortable, depending on your feet). If you wear boots smaller than size 7 or larger than size 10 ½ or are prone to blisters or arch support issues, we recommend you bring nice shin-to-knee high rubber boots with you (check an outdoors store or online). Some previous students preferred to bring specialized snake boots or snake guards, but most said this was not necessary or convenient.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **SPF 15+ sunscreen:** Tropical sun is dangerously intense. Can purchase in Costa Rica, but it will be more expensive.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Books:** Be prepared to swap with classmates. Could bring paperbacks or an e-reader. You will have lots of time to read.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Toiletries:** Most items are available in Costa Rica, but if you are attached to a particular brand, you might want to bring a large supply. Tampons can be purchased in-country, but women should bring a supply for emergencies.

## Optional

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Eyeglasses or contact lenses:** Bring extra in case yours get lost, and bring a 4 months of solution for contacts. These are expensive and many types are unavailable in Costa Rica.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Epipen:** If you are allergic to bee stings, bring an emergency adrenaline kit, such as an Anakit or Epipen, available by prescription. *Please inform OTS staff of your allergy.*
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Pocket knife**

## **Check List #2:**

### **Essential Field Equipment**

## Essential

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Flashlight and headlamp:** A good light is an absolute must. A headlamp can be better than a flashlight because your hands are free. In addition to a headlamp or strong and reliable handheld flashlight, bring a small backup flashlight to keep with you at all times. Previous students commented that it is a good idea to invest in a very good quality flashlight or headlamp (many lumens and good distance rating, brands such as Petzl or PrincetonTec).
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Keychain light:** can clip onto the keychain in your backpack as an additional backup
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Wristwatch:** This should be inexpensive and water-resistant
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Daypack:** (e.g., small backpack) for daily field use. Some come with a water bladder, which can be useful if you will drink more water that way than with a water bottle.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Lecture notebooks:** 2-4
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Field notebooks:** 1-3 pocket size. Rite-in-the-Rain books are popular, but any good sturdy field notebook will do.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Pencils/pens:** Sharpie pens and mechanical pencils work best with Rite-in-the-Rain notebooks. Bring a few.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Water bottle:** 1-2 water bottles about 1 liter size. Also consider a camelback in your daypack (to augment, but not replace, your water bottle).
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Snorkel, mask, and (optional) fins:** Unless you are someone who would prefer not to snorkel, you will need these for an underwater research project.

## Recommended



- \_\_\_\_\_ **Laptop computer:** Generally all students bring their laptops to avoid competition for public computers when writing assignments are due. Read the section in this packet on caring for your laptop and be prepared to protect it from humidity.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **USB memory stick:** For storing and moving documents from computer to computer
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Insect repellent:** Chiggers can make your life miserable. Be sure your choice is effective against these. Natural or 5-30% DEET types are recommended. 100% DEET melts plastic and is unnecessary. Also consider extra anti-itch cream.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Plastic folder:** To store handouts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Binoculars:** If you like birds, you will use these extensively.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Spanish/English dictionary:** Some students have noted they generally use the internet for translations, but it can be good to have the book on hand when there is no internet.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Batteries:** If you use rechargeable batteries, bring several sets, along with your own recharger. They are expensive and sometimes unavailable in Costa Rica.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Camera:** SLR cameras will benefit from an extra lens cap and/or skylight filter as well as a waterproof case or other items to protect them from the rain. Past students have mentioned that a waterproof/shockproof camera is a plus.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **“Ziploc” plastic bags:** Useful for electronics and everything, really. Students have said that you’ll never regret bringing too many. Garbage bags could also be useful for your boots.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Hand lens (10X):** The course has some on hand, but if you like plants or insects, you might find it useful to have your own available.

Optional (things some students have regretted bringing but others loved having)

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Sleeping bag:** Might only be used in Cuerici, where it drops near freezing at night. Most students have said this was unnecessary and a waste of packing space because Cuerici provides multiple blankets.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Mosquito net:** The headgear type might be useful at Palo Verde. Some students were happy to have it and others found it to be overkill. Mosquito nets for beds are provided in sites where they are necessary.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Private journal:** Since personal space is minimal during the program, you might consider bringing a journal notebook, in order to record and process important thoughts, feelings, and personal events during your experience. You will discover that your journal will provide an important personal outlet during the semester, as well as a great source of memories in the future!
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Musical instruments:** There is a course guitar, but if you play mandolin, violin, flute, harmonica, or anything else that can be carried around easily, please bring it along!
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Field Guides:** The program library has a full range of Costa Rican Field Guides, but you may want to bring your own if you have a particularly strong interest in birds, plants, or another group. These can also be purchased at OTS field stations.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Travel games:** Cards, Bananagrams, apples-to-apples, or similar games were recommended by past students.

If you have trouble finding any of the above field equipment locally, try looking for them at the following companies or websites: amazon.com, bioquip.com, forestry-suppliers.com, rei.com, and cabelas.com.

### Your arrival in Costa Rica

1. If possible, arrange a flight schedule that allows you at least two hours in the airport from which you will leave the States. You do not want to miss an international flight because of airline delays. ***Send your participant registration form with your flight schedule to the OTS Office in Costa Rica as soon as it is available. We need this information so we can meet you at the airport in Costa Rica.***
2. Arrive at your local airport early to avoid being “bumped” because of overbooking. Reconfirm your international flight 72 hours in advance.
3. Label your baggage, inside and out, with the OTS Costa Rican Office (CRO) address and phone number (included in this orientation packet).
4. Be sure that your baggage claim tickets are correctly labeled as to destination (San José is SJO). You should put a lock on your luggage. If your locks are not TSA standard, then when you go to the airport, leave the locks open so that your luggage can be screened by security, and ask security to lock them again. Be sure to keep the keys to your luggage with you at all times.
5. If your luggage is lost or delayed, report it before you leave the airport in Costa Rica, and give the name of the OTS offices in Costa Rica, tel. 2524-0607. Check your luggage upon arrival at the airport. We highly recommend that you secure your luggage with a small lock and that you carry all items of value (cameras, money, etc.) on the plane with you.
6. Please carry the following phone numbers on you during your flight:  
OTS Costa Rican Office: (506) 2511-6200  
Don't hesitate to call us if you have any problems or delays during your travels.
7. Carry on your passport, money, computer, toothbrush, and a change of clothes, just in case your luggage gets lost, delayed, or misdirected. Keep in mind that airline regulations regarding both checked and carry-on bags may change at any time. Check your airline to confirm what items can be packed in your checked luggage, and what items can be carried on. Do not pack sharp objects in your carry-on luggage. We suggest that you bring a 2-3 day supply of any essential medications in your carry-on bag as well.
8. Your appearance (e.g., dress and grooming) is important upon entry into Costa Rica. It will make dealing with Customs and Immigration a lot smoother if you are clean and well-groomed. **Remember to wear your OTS t-shirt!**

9. Getting off the plane in Costa Rica. Here are the basic steps.
  - a. Upon deplaning, you will first go to *Migración*, where your passport will be checked and stamped.
  - b. Then you will retrieve your baggage at the carousel. (If your gear is bulky or heavy, grab a handcart for getting your stuff to the Customs area).
  - c. At the Aduana or Customs, an official will inform you what to do. Many times, all checked and carry-on bags will be x-rayed in Customs, but follow the instructions of the Customs officials. Costa Rican Customs officials tend to be polite and friendly, so if your bags get checked just be patient and honest about your travel plans.
  - d. An OTS staff member will meet you on the sidewalk just outside of Customs. They will be holding an OTS sign that says “OTS Study Abroad.” **Please wear your OTS t-shirt so you can be easily identified by staff at the airport.** It is possible that you will have to wait a short time for this person. If this happens, don’t go anywhere! Be patient and just wait.
  - e. Please watch your belongings closely when you exit Customs.

***See you in Costa Rica, Pura Vida!***