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Congratulations on being accepted to the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire study abroad program with USAC to Heredia or San Ramón, Costa Rica. Living and studying in a foreign culture is both an exciting and a challenging experience. Past participants of study abroad report that the many advantages of international study include:

- Gaining new perspectives on a chosen academic field
- Increasing understanding of different cultures
- Enhancing personal development
- Developing different perspectives on U.S. culture
- Gaining self-confidence and independence
- Learning skills for the future international job market

It is up to you to determine how you can best benefit from these possible advantages. This is your adventure!

Use this program-specific guide with the more general resources in your BlugoldsAbroad account. While this guide contains the information available at the time of publication, it is impossible for any single resource to answer all of your questions. Your peer advisor will email information throughout the semester, and we encourage you to do your own research, also, using the web resources listed towards the end of this guide, as well as others that you find. Contact the Center for International Education (CIE) staff or your peer advisor with your specific questions.

Questions only you can answer include:
1) What are YOUR goals for this experience? Advancement in a future profession, desire to expand personal and academic horizons, need for a change, and wish to challenge yourself in a new environment?

2) How can you best prepare to meet your goals within the context of this program? For example, if one of your goals is truly being immersed in Costa Rican culture, yet you are going with a group of UW-Eau Claire students, how can you insure that you do not spend too much time with other U.S. Americans?

The information in this guide was current at the time of publication, though changes may occur at any time.
ACADEMICS
Additional information on topics such as maintaining program eligibility, registration at UW-Eau Claire, class attendance, course equivalencies, grades, transcripts and service learning is in the Academics section of your Study Abroad Handbook.

Pre-departure Planning
Please see the UWEC-Heredia, Costa Rica Academics page or the UWEC-San Ramón, Costa Rica Academics page for details on how to plan your courses in Costa Rica.

As part of the USAC admissions process, you completed a preliminary course registration, indicating your course and tour selections, along with two alternative courses in case any courses become unavailable. You can see the form, Course and Tour Registration Form, in your USAC Gateway account. Your courses and/or level of Spanish may change once you arrive at your host university.

Credits and Course load
**Summer:** You can enroll in Session I; Session II, or both Sessions. At least one, 3-credit course is required in each session in which you enroll.

**Heredia:** You can take three-six credits in Session 1 and three-four credits in Session II, plus one additional credit if you enroll in the optional Cuba Field Study. If you are abroad for both sessions, you will earn 6-10 credits.

**San Ramón:** You can take three-six credits in Session 1 and three-five credits in Session II. If you are abroad for both sessions, you will earn 6-11 credits.

To receive summer financial aid, you must take at least six credits.

**Semester:** You must enroll in a minimum of 12 credits and can take a maximum of 18.

For all terms:
- The credits you earn abroad are considered UW-Eau Claire resident credits.
- The classes you take abroad will count towards the total credits needed for graduation.
- Dropping below full-time status may result in loss of financial aid and/or insurance coverage and must be approved in advance by the CIE and USAC.

Registration in Costa Rica
Once you arrive in Costa Rica, you will take a placement test and your registration is adjusted accordingly. Your Resident Director in Costa Rica will make every effort to avoid class conflicts; however, there may be scheduling conflicts, and you may need to adjust your class selection. Please be flexible and prepared for course changes. You will receive your final course schedule during the on-site orientation.

Add/Drop Courses
**Summer:** You will have three days after the class begins to add/drop courses on site.

**Semester:** You will have 10 class days after the class begins to add/drop courses on site.

For all terms: Written permission is required from both the Resident Director and instructors in order to add/drop/change a course once it has begun.

Withdrawing from USAC Courses
Your Resident Director in Costa Rica will establish a course withdrawal deadline (typically about two-thirds of the way into the term). If you must drop a course after the drop deadline, but before the withdrawal deadline, a grade of “W” will be reported on your USAC grade report. If you stop attending a class
without officially withdrawing from it, the grade will be reported as an “F.”

**Class/Activity Attendance**
USAC generally allows students one excused absence. Each tardy is considered one half of an absence. If you fail to attend class, this will affect your grade in the course. All exams must be taken as scheduled.

**Grades**
Courses in the program are graded on the U.S. A-F grading scale. The grades reported on your USAC grade report are the same grades that will appear on your UW-Eau Claire transcript.

**Note:** UWEC students abroad are not allowed to take classes pass/fail. USAC grades are figured into your UWEC GPA and posted to your UWEC transcript. No exceptions will be made.

**USAC Grade Report/UWEC Transcript**
*Please see the Academics section of the Study Abroad Handbook for important information if you are graduating, transferring or applying for a competitive major such as Nursing or Education at the end of your term abroad.*

At the end of the program, USAC prepares a grade report, which is sent to UWEC. USAC will also update your grades on your Gateway account for you to review. Courses, credits, and grades are incorporated into your UWEC transcript.

**Summer:** Grade reports are not available until a few weeks after the summer program ends.

**Semester:** Grade reports are not available until a few months after the program ends.

**For all terms:** Due to this delay, you will initially receive a grade report with “NR” (not reported) for all courses. This will be changed once your grade report arrives.

**Language Immersion Requirement**

**Summer:** If you are a Spanish or LAS major or minor, and:
- You participate in BOTH Session I AND II, this program will fulfill your language immersion requirement.
- You participate in only Session I OR II, this program will partially fulfill your language immersion requirement. You will need to work with your Spanish or LAS advisor to determine how you will complete the requirement. It is up to you to discuss with the appropriate department and get permissions.
- You participate in only Session I OR II and decide you will stay in Costa Rica extra weeks to fulfill the immersion requirement, YOU must identify/develop an independent project, meet with the appropriate academic department to get permission for it to fulfill the rest of your requirements, and make all arrangements for your additional time in Costa Rica. The CIE and USAC do NOT arrange additional support/activities so that you can complete this.

**Semester:** This program fulfills the full immersion requirement.

**The Academic System**
Heredia USAC courses are located at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma (UNA); San Ramón classes are at the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR). In both locations, they are taught by local and visiting faculty. Your classmates will be other USAC or international students, as local students are already fluent in Spanish and typically their English is not proficient enough to join you in courses taught in English. There will
be plenty of chances for you to interact with local students.

**Courses meet Monday through Friday.** You will have plenty of time to explore Costa Rica on weekends. It is not recommended to plan any weekend travel until after you arrive.

**The teaching methodology differs from that in the U.S.** Computers are used in the classroom when researching assignments only. Homework and written essays are normally completed outside the classroom. Computers are not to be used during a class, or while the professor or invited guests lecture.

**The professor’s role is classroom facilitator,** not the lecturer, as is usually the case in the U.S. **You, as students, are expected to be active participants in the learning process.** If you do not come to class prepared to critically discuss whatever reading has been assigned for that class period, very little will happen in class!

**Syllabi** may also be different than those used in the U.S. They have less detail and are less explicit about dates things are due, what percentage each assignment counts toward your grade, etc. Some of your professors have taught or studied in the U.S. system and will use a U.S. style syllabus. Don’t expect that from everyone: part of your experience abroad is learning how to operate in a different academic system.

You may also be required to do **more independent research** than you typically do in the U.S. Doing research will present its own challenges. Again, although you may take some courses in English, don’t forget that you are taking them in a Spanish-speaking country. **Ninety five percent of all library resources will, of course, be in Spanish.** Most of your "textbooks" may actually be photocopies of books, due to the high cost and lack of availability of actual books.

**Keep in mind the privilege you enjoy in terms of academic resources in the U.S.** Costa Rica is a developing country with less wealth to invest in this area. Library resources are not centralized. In other words, you cannot go to the library, find the book you want listed at another library, and request it through inter-library loan. As explained in the Academics section of the UW-Eau Claire Study Abroad Handbook, you still have access to the UW-Eau Claire library resources. You will also be relying on other resources found on the Internet.

**Internships**

**Summer San Ramón:** If you are enrolled in both Sessions I and II, USAC San Ramón offers the opportunity to enroll in an unpaid internship for up to two credits. Summer internships are not currently available in Heredia.

**Semester students:** USAC offers the opportunity to enroll in an unpaid internship for up to two credits at both semester locations.

**For all terms:**
You need to have a 3.0 GPA and be at junior standing by the time of the internship. There is also a $200 fee, which is refundable if USAC is not able to find you an internship placement.

After you arrive, you will complete the internship application and interview with a potential sponsor site. Placements are geared towards the participant’s interest. Past placements have included: local schools, teaching English within the community, local non-profits, local companies, etc. **Placement is not guaranteed by USAC, but they will do their best to arrange a placement.**

**Service-Learning Requirement**
Depending on the volunteer activity, you may be able to fulfill part or all of your UW-Eau
Claire service-learning requirement. If you are interested in this option, please contact Cheryl Lochner-Wright, the coordinator for the Costa Rica program, at lochnecb@uwec.edu, for details.

**MONEY MATTERS**

**UWEC information about making payments, when they are due, withdrawal and refund deadlines, financial aid, general scholarships, budgeting and ways to bring money abroad is in the Money Matters section of your Study Abroad Handbook.**

**Cost Estimate**

You can find the most current cost estimate for your program, in easily printable format, on the CIE Costa Rica, Heredia (USAC) webpage, or the CIE Costa Rica, San Ramón webpage. Be sure you are looking at the correct term. The cost estimate includes what you pay to UWEC, what you pay to USAC, and what you pay directly to other vendors.

**USAC Payments & Refund Policy**

For questions about paying your USAC fees, please contact the USAC accounting person listed in your Gateway account. You can pay with credit card, check, or money order.

In addition to the UWEC refund policy outlined in the "Money Matters" section of the Study Abroad Handbook, USAC has its own financial policies related to payment, cancellations, and changes. Information about the withdrawal deadlines and penalties are in the USAC Program Agreement and USAC Financial Agreement in your Gateway account.

**Currency Exchange**

The currency of Costa Rica is the Colon. There are 5, 10, 20, 25, 50, 100 and 500 colones coins, and 1,000, 2,000, 5,000 and 10,000 colones bills. Past participants note that it can be hard to use 10,000 colones bills for small purchases, such as in cafes, in taxis, etc.

You can find current exchange rates at http://www.oanda.com/currency/converter/.

**Cost of Living**

For an idea of what everyday costs you may encounter, check out this website: https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Costa+ Rica

**ATMs**

Use caution when withdrawing money from an ATM. Visit ATMs that are inside a bank or part of another building and in well-lit areas. Take a friend with you when withdrawing money.

**Credit/Debit Cards/Pre-Paid Cards**

If you are going to take a card (recommended by past participants as a back-up or for making large purchases), Visa and MasterCard are accepted within Costa Rica; American Express is generally not.

Most stores will not accept credit/debit cards for small purchases. Past participants typically only used credit/debit cards to make online reservations for hostels, etc., instead of using them for everyday purchases.

**USAC Scholarships**

USAC Scholarships: USAC offers a variety of scholarships. For information, visit USAC’s Scholarship website. You will see optional scholarship applications on your USAC Gateway account when they open. You can apply for all scholarships you are eligible for and can be awarded more than one scholarship.

Scholarships for UWEC students on USAC Programs: USAC also offers an Affiliate Scholarship just for UWEC students on a USAC
program. You will be considered for this scholarship when you complete the UWEC Study Abroad Foundation Scholarship application. The number of awards varies by term. Amounts vary between $200 - $500.

**HEALTH & SAFETY**

*General information on these issues, as well as information on CISI insurance, is included in the Health & Insurance and Safety Abroad sections of your Study Abroad Handbook.*

**CDC Recommended Vaccines**
The Centers for Disease Control recommend Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines for most travelers to Costa Rica, and additional vaccines depending on the type of travel you plan to do. See complete information here: [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/costa-rica](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/costa-rica) and discuss these recommendations with your medical professional.

**Common Health Concerns**
The most common health problem for U.S. Americans in Costa Rica is intestinal upset. The change in diet, the different meal schedule, and organisms unfamiliar to your system are possible causes.

A very common ailment is traveler’s diarrhea. Prevention includes being careful about where and what you eat and avoiding dairy products if they are not pasteurized. If you do get it, the following suggestions can help speed recovery and guide your decision to seek formal care:

1. It will usually run its course in three to five days. The worst symptoms usually occur the first day. Bed rest may help relieve cramps.

2. The main risk is dehydration. Maintain fluid intake. An excellent source of fluid replacement is ORS or Oraltyle, a prepackaged liquid sold in many countries. If unavailable, the following recipe provides similar value: one-liter carbonated water, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/2 teaspoon baking soda (not baking powder), 4 tbsps. sugar.

3. An over-the-counter medicine like Pepto Bismol may help relieve nausea and vomiting.

If nausea and vomiting persist for more than 24 hours, if you develop a fever over 101 degrees F, or if you develop severe abdominal pain, contact a physician immediately.

**Water**
The water in Heredia/San José and in San Ramón is potable (drinkable). The general recommendation from the CDC for water is to drink bottled or boiled water any time you are outside of these areas. By making sure that you are drinking uncontaminated water, you can reduce your exposure to many diseases such as infectious hepatitis, cholera, diarrhea and dysentery. Additional considerations:

| Brush your teeth with bottled or boiled water. |
| Carbonated bottled water, soft drinks, beer, wine, hot tea, and coffee are usually safe. |
| Wipe off the top of a bottle before drinking out of it or ask for a straw ("popote" in Spanish). |
| Where water is contaminated, ice is also contaminated—you may wish to order drinks "sin hielo" (without ice). |

If you are traveling outside of Heredia/San José, avoid fruits that cannot be peeled, fruit juices diluted with water, raw vegetables, and salads that have not been washed with disinfected water. If buying food from street vendors, stick to breads or fruits that you peel yourself.
When you are not in control of your water supply or cannot purchase bottled water, consider bringing a portable water purifier, available at most outdoor stores, boil water vigorously for at least 10 minutes, or use water purification tablets (one tablet per quart of clear water, or two tablets if water is cloudy).


**Insect Bites**
Insect borne diseases, particularly mosquito, such as Zika, malaria and dengue fever, are present in parts of Costa Rica. Discuss malaria prevention with your physician.

There is no vaccine for zika virus or dengue fever, so prevention of insect bites is the best prevention. See the CDC recommendations on avoiding bug bites for detailed information.

**Dengue Fever**
Per the CDC, "Dengue fever is the most common cause of fever in travelers returning from the Caribbean, Central America, and South-Central Asia. This disease is spread through the bites of infected mosquitoes and cannot be spread person to person."

Severe dengue can be fatal, but with good treatment, less than 1% of patients die from dengue. See a doctor immediately if you develop dengue symptoms during or after your time abroad:

Symptoms of dengue include:
- Fever
- Headache
- Pain behind the eyes
- Joint and muscle pain
- Rash
- Nausea/vomiting
- Mild bleeding, such as nose or gum bleeding or easy bruising

**Zika Virus**
The CDC does warn that there is a risk for the Zika virus in Costa Rica. The Zika infection, in pregnant women, can cause serious birth defects so the CDC does not recommend travel to Costa Rica for women who are pregnant. If you have concerns over this, please consult with your doctor.

**Healthcare**
If you need health care while in Heredia, there are local medical facilities with different levels of service. The USAC staff in Heredia or your host families will direct you to the appropriate one if you do get sick.

**CISI Insurance in Costa Rica**
If you have an accident or become ill while studying in Costa Rica, you must pay the price of the medical service up front. You will then file a claim through CISI, the insurance provided through the UW System for partial or full reimbursement in accordance with plan coverages.

**Services for Students with Disabilities**
If you will need any disability accommodations when abroad, it is important to complete your USAC Disability and Health Accommodation Request Form on your USAC Gateway account. While USAC cannot guarantee services, they will do their best to accommodate your needs. When you complete that form, USAC will be in contact with you regarding services they can/cannot provide.

It is also important to look at the level of accessibility in Costa Rica in general. To find more information on the topic, please see the “Laws and Special Circumstances” tab on the
Safety in Costa Rica
For important information on crime, drug penalties and other topics, please see the Safety & Security section of the U.S. State Department Costa Rica Country Information Sheet.

During orientation in Costa Rica, you will hear about specific places and behaviors to avoid, particularly in San José. For example, the Coca-Cola bus station in downtown San José is not a place to hang around: if you need to transfer through to catch a bus, go in a group, and time your arrival very close to your departure. Keep all bags in your hands.

Beach Safety: Swimming areas at some popular beaches can have dangerous rip currents. Most beaches lack lifeguards or warnings of unsafe conditions. U.S. citizens have died in Costa Rica due to these dangers. Check the Costa Rica Tourism Institute (ICT) website, or with your hotel or relevant tour operator to request current information on local swimming and surf conditions.
- Do not dive into water of unknown depths.
- Do not swim alone, especially at isolated beaches.
- Avoid the consumption of alcohol while swimming.

Adventure Sports: Some tour operators take risks, and government regulation and oversight of firms that organize sporting activities may not always adhere to international standards and best practices. Tourists have died in Costa Rica while participating in adventure sports.
- Use caution and common sense if engaging in ALL adventure sports, and remember that they are NOT covered by CISI insurance, such as bungee jumping, sky diving, hiking, rappelling, climbing, whitewater rafting, kayaking, etc.
- Never participate in adventure sports alone. Always carry identification and let others know where you are at all times.
- When hiking, rappelling, or climbing, carry a first aid kit and know the location of the nearest rescue center.
- Observe all local or park regulations and exercise caution in unfamiliar surroundings.

Emergency Contacts
General emergency procedures are described in the Study Abroad Handbook, and the USAC staff is available if difficulties arise. You will receive an emergency contact card with USAC staff information at the Orientation 2; be sure to keep it in your wallet at all times. The information is also on the Contact Names & Addresses page of this guide.

911 Equivalent in Costa Rica
Just like in the U.S., Costa Rica uses 911 for local police, fire, or ambulance services.

The U.S. State Department also provides a list of 911 numbers abroad. Please note that in some countries there are different numbers for fire, police, and ambulance. Plan ahead and research numbers before you go.

Marijuana and other Illegal Drugs
Although marijuana is relatively easy to obtain in Costa Rica, the possession and use of marijuana is illegal. Even carrying it on your person can be considered drug trafficking. Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking in illegal drugs in Costa Rica are severe, and convicted offenders can expect long jail sentences and heavy fines. U.S. citizenship offers no protection if you break a Costa Rican law. There is NOTHING the CIE, USAC, or the U.S. government can do if you are found in violation of Costa Rican laws.
In addition to legal penalties, you are putting yourself at risk of robbery or assault, or you may get a much more dangerous combination of drugs than you thought you were buying.

**REQUIRED DOCUMENTS**

*Passport information is included in the Travel Resources section of your Study Abroad Handbook.*

If you are not a U.S. citizen, please contact the CIE for more information about the following topics.

**Visa**

A visa is official permission to temporarily reside in another country and is granted by the government of that country. Please see the USAC visa information in your Gateway account. **It is your responsibility to keep up-to-date about student visa requirements for Costa Rica, and if required, to apply for and receive a visa from a Costa Rican consulate or embassy in a timely manner.** Please read the “Visa” section of your Study Abroad Handbook for more information about what you should do to keep up-to-date on visa requirements.

**Visas for Travel to Other Countries**

If you plan to travel outside Costa Rica while abroad, you should verify visa requirements for each country you will visit by contacting the nearest consulate for that country, or your travel agency.

**PACKING TIPS**

There is general packing information in the Travel Resources section of your Study Abroad Handbook, you will get a suggested packing list for Costa Rica at Orientation 2, and USAC will post a packing list to your Gateway account. In addition, you should know the following:

**Weather**

Costa Rica has two seasons: the dry season from December to April, and the rainy season, from May to November.

During the rainy season, weather will be mostly warm and humid, with a strong possibility of rain some mornings and most afternoons.

Due to the higher elevation, it may be cold/cooler in the evenings than you expect.

**Packing Less is More**

When packing your bags for Costa Rica, please keep in mind that it is vital that you pack light, less stuff is easier to carry and less costly.

Students in the past have found that they have brought with them too many unnecessary items and too much clothing. Bringing along too many pairs of shoes, clothes for evening events, formal attire, etc. is not a good idea.

**Clothing**

Most of the clothes you will be wearing in Costa Rica will be casual: summer outfits, such as t-shirts and shorts, cargo pants, skirts and informal blouses.

Costa Rican female students are more likely to wear jeans or skirts (often quite short skirts) than shorts or dresses, and usually wear them with dressier shoes than U.S. women might. Male students will usually wear shorts (although athletic shorts are generally reserved for athletic activity) or jeans, with neat t-shirts or short-sleeved shirts.

Cotton t-shirts/sweatshirts with logos are less common than on a U.S. campus, particularly among women, but can be seen.

That said, past students have commented on many Costa Ricans wearing longer sleeves or pants (not shorts), so you may want to bring some with you in order to fit in better.
Gifts
You may want to pack some small items that you could use as gifts. It is suggested, but not obligatory, to offer a small gift for your host-family. A small memento from Wisconsin, like a UWEC mug, might be nice. If you are unsure what to bring for your host family, ask your Peer Advisor for suggestions.

Do Not Bring
Do not bring expensive cell phones, jewelry, or other luxury items that can be lost or stolen. If you do decide to bring items that are expensive to replace, you may want to consider personal property insurance for your time in Costa Rica.

Converters and Adapters
Costa Rica uses the same 110 volt electric current as the U.S. and most outlets/plug types are the same also.

Getting to Costa Rica
There is information on student-oriented travel agencies, instructions for booking a flight, and other travel information in the Travel Resources section of the Study Abroad Handbook.

USAC will also posted a detailed “Flight Guide” in the 5-6 Months Before Program Start section of your Gateway account.

Travel Arrangements
It is your responsibility to make and pay for travel arrangements to Costa Rica. Airline tickets are not included in your USAC program fees. An optional group flight is available for this program through a travel agency recommended by USAC. This information will be posted to your USAC Gateway account.

If you choose not to book the group flight, you will need to book your own flight and arrive prior to the mandatory orientation. There is a $200 fee for students who miss orientation!

USAC Group Flight
Benefits to booking with the optional group flight:

- Flexible tickets that are refundable and changeable for a fee.
- Flexible payment plan (pay a deposit to hold your seat, then pay the balance 2 weeks prior to departure)
- Select the group return date or select your own date for the same price
- Frosch Student Travel can help book connecting flights to merge with the group flight departure cities.
- Airport pick-up in Costa Rica (there is no USAC staff to chaperone the flight, but group flight participants will be met at the airport by USAC staff, unless you arrive late).

USAC will be in contact with you and information will be on your USAC Gateway account on how to sign up for the group flight.

Early Arrivals
USAC strongly discourages students from arriving early. If you decide to arrive early, you will need to find and pay for your own accommodations. You should not expect to have much or any assistance upon arrival and should be prepared to deal with any issues on your own.

Airport Pick-Up Service
Heredia: Please fill out the Flight Form in your Gateway account after you have booked your flight. Airport pick-up service is only available for students arriving on the official arrival day before 11pm.

If you are arriving on the group flight, USAC staff will be at the airport to pick you up and bring you to your host family’s house. If you choose not to book the group flight but you are
arriving on the official arrival day before 11pm, you will get picked up by your host family.

**San Ramón:** There is only one airport pick-up service in San Ramón, and it is planned around students arriving on the group flight.

Students not on the group flight are generally responsible for arranging and paying for their transfer from the airport to San Ramón. Instructions on how to do this will be provided in your Gateway account approximately one month before the program start date.

If there is space available, and with approval from their USAC Program Advisor, students not on the group flight may be able to take advantage of the group transportation from the airport. Students will find out if they've been approved for the group pick-up approximately one week before the program start date. If not, you are responsible for paying and arranging your own transportation to San Ramón.

**Airlines Special Situation**

**Semester/Year-Long only:** Please read the USAC Gateway item called “Flight Guide” as soon as it is released. This document contains important information. Pay close attention to the area in the guide called “Semester/Yearlong only: Airlines – Special Situation”. Here is an excerpt:

- **Costa Rica requires proof of a return ticket in order to enter the country.** As a result, certain airlines have a policy that you cannot board your flight without a visa if your return ticket is after 90 days (US citizens are granted a 90-day tourist visa).
- Semester and yearlong students need an estancia or “permission to stay” to study abroad in Costa Rica. However, you **do not** apply for it in the US. You are required to apply for your estancia once you are in Costa Rica. Since you do not apply for this in the US, in advance, **you will enter Costa Rica on a tourist visa.** During on-site orientation, USAC staff will explain how to extend the 90-day tourist visa to an estancia for the full length of your program.
- As students do not apply for their student visa or estancia prior to departure, airline policy sometimes conflicts with Costa Rica immigration procedures, which causes some students to experience issues when boarding their flights.
- There is no way for USAC to predict which airlines will enforce this policy. Every semester USAC sends more than 150 students to Costa Rica, and this happens to approximately four to six students, all flying with different airlines.

**Solution:**

- Remain calm and don’t argue or try to reason with the airline ticket person. You will not change their mind.
- Purchase an additional return ticket for a date before the 90-day tourist visa expires. Cancel the additional return ticket immediately upon arrival in Costa Rica.
- Most airlines have a 24-hour cancellation policy that refunds the full ticket amount. If you purchase an additional return ticket, it is your responsibility to understand the airline’s cancellation policy and how long it will take the money to be refunded. Each airline’s cancellation policy will differ.

USAC and the CIE are not responsible for any fees incurred should you be forced to purchase an additional return ticket or change your flight.

**Immigration & Customs**

**Inflight Forms:** Flight attendants will give out two different kinds of forms that need to be filled out, a form with your personal information and
another form is the Costa Rica Customs Declaration form. You do not need to declare anything because you will only be bringing items for personal use.

You will receive a tourist visa upon exiting your flight in Costa Rica. USAC will take you to change your tourist visa to the visa de estancia.

Immigration: There is a short walk from your arriving gate to the immigration lines. You should be able to get through the line fairly quickly. You will get in line to have your passport stamped, and the personal information form is collected at that point. The estimated time for clearing immigration is about 20 minutes, but unexpected delays tend to happen.

Customs: After clearing immigration, you will pick up your luggage and go through customs. Here you turn in your Costa Rica Customs Declaration form, with nothing to declare.

Leaving the Airport: you will head to the exit (street level), which is in the same main area of the airport.

As you walk out to the exit, you will have the choice of going either to the right or to the left; please go to your LEFT. Immediately outside you’ll find a lot of people waiting: people offering taxi services, holding signs with people’s names and just a general bit of confusion. You should watch for people wearing USAC shirts and holding a USAC sign or flag. If your host family is picking you up, they will have a sign with your name on it.

Late Arrivals—Expected and Unexpected
If you do not arrive as scheduled for any reason, you will be responsible for arranging and paying for your transfer from the airport. If you arrive after 11pm, you will need to arrange your own lodging for the night and make your way to campus in time for orientation. There will be a detailed Arrival Guide posted to your Gateway account about a month prior to the program start with instructions for late arrivals.

Important reminder: Write down your host family’s address on a piece of paper so you can give it to the airport driver.

Leaving Costa Rica
Return airport transportation is included in the program cost if you leave on the official program end date. If you stay in Costa Rica longer than the official program end date, it is your responsibility to make arrangements to get to your airport of departure and to pay for the cost of whatever type of transportation you use. Neither your host family nor USAC staff are obliged to take you to the airport.

SETTLING IN
Orientation
When you first arrive in Costa Rica, you will be taken to your host family’s house. The next day will be the mandatory orientation where topics will include: living with host families, cultural differences, appropriate behavior, Costa Rica in general, and safety & emergency procedures. This is also a great chance to get to know the USAC staff.

On-Site Support
USAC provides a resident director and staff to assist students with the transition to Costa Rica. They will also be coordinating various excursions and activities throughout the summer. If any questions or concerns arise, over anything, you are strongly encouraged to reach out to the onsite staff. It could be anything from how to say something in Spanish
to needing to go to the doctor. The USAC staff is there to assist you so please use them as a resource.

**Getting Involved**
The host universities offer clubs and organizations that USAC students can join. (Most clubs are not active during the summer.) In addition, the USAC staff may arrange unofficial field trips or visits to local happenings. You may also get to participate in holiday meals or festivals that occur in the city. USAC staff may also invite you to play soccer with other locals.

**Volunteering**
Volunteering is a wonderful way to get involved in the local community, make meaningful relationships, and improve your Spanish-language skills.

Volunteer projects will be available based on current need in the community. You will find out about opportunities once you’re in Heredia.

Hosting a volunteer requires time on the part of the organization to plan projects for and supervise that volunteer, so please take your commitment seriously. Otherwise, community partners may not be willing to host volunteers in the future. Also, volunteering requires you to take initiative. The more you are willing to invest in the experience the more rewarding it will be!

**HOUSING**
See the USAC Housing Guide in your Gateway account for additional general information on housing, as well as cancellation policies.

**Living Situation**
To encourage the maximum use of newly acquired Spanish language skills, all students live with Spanish-speaking families.

Living with a host family offers you a more authentic way to interact with Costa Rican culture and society. Each family has characteristics that make it unique: composition, activities, religion, and cultural habits, among others. The family agrees to receive you as the student and integrate you into their activities as if you were a member of the family. Therefore, you should make an effort to participate in family gatherings, outings, and celebrations.

**Family Placement Process**
USAC arranges accommodations with carefully selected host families. In general, only one student is placed per family.

Information about your family (name, address, house telephone [or cell phone], email, ages of family members) will be sent to you about a week before you arrive in Costa Rica. You may want to contact your family via email or social media, or call them, after you receive the information in order to introduce yourself a bit.

**What’s Provided?**
- A single, furnished room
- Sheets & one towel
- Three meals a day provided by the family. You can request a bag lunch to carry on school days
- Laundry twice/week

**Meals and Snacks**
You will be eating typical Costa Rican foods with your host family. Expect lots of beans and rice, fresh fruits and vegetables, and a variety of chicken and red meat. The food is not spicy. Keep the following in mind:
- Unless you have an actual food allergy, it is polite to try whatever you are offered.
- Do not expect your family to prepare special meals for you—remember that
you should expect to be treated as part of the family, not a special guest.

- Meals are considered family time. Some U.S. students are in the habit of taking their meals to their rooms at home; this is not acceptable behavior in Costa Rica.
- If you are going to miss a meal for any reason, please be sure to let your host mother know well in advance.
- The kitchen itself is for the family's use only, and between-meal snacking is less common than it is in the U.S. You may get hungry between meals, especially at the beginning. **Snacks are your own responsibility:** go to the supermarket and buy some snacks or fruit that you can carry with you to school.
- Ask your family where it is acceptable to store your snack food; they often do not want food in the bedrooms as it can attract insects.

**Living with a Family**

Get involved as much as you can with your family. They are an important resource for you to learn from and a great resource to help you experience the culture of Costa Rica! You may have an interest in cooking. By taking some mixes or recipes from home, you may easily gain entry into the kitchen, and your host mom may be thrilled if you show an interest in Costa Rican cuisine.

Conversation is important in Costa Rica culture. You can spend hours after a meal chatting and watching television or learning to play Costa Rican card games.

Remember that you are a guest in your family’s home. Offer to do some things around the house, like helping with meals or dishes. Keep your room and other areas of the house that you use tidy. And be aware of noise levels, particularly if you are coming home later at night.

Keep in mind that any relationship is a two-way street. **It is as much your responsibility to fit into the family as it is their responsibility to include you in their daily life.** The more you put into the relationship, the more you will receive!

If you have questions about what your family expects of you, or you feel they do not understand your behavior, talk with them! Open lines of communication are important in building trust in any relationship.

**Your Costa Rican Parents**

Costa Rican parents are generally more protective, even of university-age students, than their U.S. counterparts. This may feel intrusive to you, particularly if you have been living on your own for a while. Remember that this is a cultural adjustment and respect your host family's wishes. Let them know if you are going out, particularly in the evening, where you are going, with whom, and what time you will be back. Be aware that they will most likely not go to sleep until you have returned. If they ask that you be back by a particular time, be sure that you are. If you will be gone overnight, be sure to inform your family well in advance.

**The House**

In the words of a past participant, "My house was pretty typical. There was a family room, eating room, and kitchen downstairs, then the upstairs had three bedrooms. My room had a twin bed, closet, mirror, and a desk to do homework. I brought pictures of friends and family from home and set those up in my room, which gave it a personal touch to feel like my home”.

**Telephone**

Telephone rates are very high in Costa Rica, and every call, local or long distance, is charged by the minute. Some families forbid the use of the telephone, and all prefer that students use a pay phone rather than the phone at home. See the "Communication" section of this guide for details.
**Water**

Water is a precious resource in Costa Rica. Most Costa Ricans take a shower every morning, and you can, too—but it should be short, both to conserve water and to keep the bathroom as free as possible. Hot water is not always guaranteed! If you can't figure out how to use the hot water, just ask! Water from your host families' homes is safe to drink.

**Toilets**

In Costa Rica, as in many parts of Central and South America, you can’t flush toilet paper down the toilet. Plumbing pipes are typically only one inch in diameter, rather than the standard two inches used in the U.S. There will be a garbage can next to the toilet to be used for toilet paper. **Make sure to throw toilet paper in the garbage can, not in the toilet!** This takes some getting used to, but after a few weeks, it will become habit.

"Your" Room

You will have your own room; however, the concept of a private room is different in Costa Rica than in the U.S. A messy room reflects poorly on you and your upbringing. In addition, it will reflect poorly on your host family, as the messy room is part of their house. Keep your room neat, make your bed every day before leaving home, and you will avoid tensions that could otherwise arise. Just closing the door is not acceptable. In addition, be aware that **it is never proper to entertain guests, regardless of their gender, in your bedroom.**

**Guests**

You should only invite visitors to your house if you have first cleared this with your host family. Visitors should never be invited for meals or to stay overnight without prior family permission.

If you are expecting friends or family members from the U.S., make lodging arrangements for them at a local hostel, apartment or hotel prior to their arrival in Costa Rica. The host family should not be expected to have additional visitors stay in their homes, even for just a few days.

Please be aware that it is not culturally appropriate for you to have your boyfriend or girlfriend spend the night in your room in your host family's house.

**Financial Arrangements**

While USAC screens families carefully to try to ensure that they have cultural interests for participating, **most** households participating do so at least partially for economic reasons. This is only logical, given the disruption that hosting a student causes to family life. It is not easy to welcome a stranger into your home for several weeks or months. The entire family needs to adjust schedules and habits to accommodate a new person. In addition, there are very real costs associated with having another person in the home. Receiving some monetary compensation for this is only fair, and most families would not consider hosting otherwise.

If you stay after the program ends and request to remain at your host family's house, you **must pay** your family for room and board. You should not expect your host family to provide room and board for free. The families need your contribution in order to take care of you.

**COMMUNICATION**

Information on accessing/forwarding your UW-Eau Claire email address and on computer app-based phone services (SKYPE, What’s App, Facetime, etc) is in the Contacts & Communication section of your Study Abroad Handbook.

**Internet**

Internet is a great resource and the program uses it for regular communication with the students as well as for academic research.
Nonetheless, patience is required as the service is not as reliable as it is in the U.S.

Save your work frequently, as problems with electricity, Internet failure and others can make it disappear in seconds. Bring a flash drive with you to back up your work. Send yourself a message with your work attached, just to have it in a safe place. You might also want to send it to a friend of yours or to a second address of your own!

Wi-Fi is available on-campus as well as in many restaurants and cafes off-campus. Your host family will also have internet but be aware that it may be slower than what you are used to, or it may go out from time to time.

Internet cafés in Costa Rica are not the same as in the U.S. You mostly have to use the café's computers, and they are typically not a sit-down-and-drink-coffee café where you can use your laptop with wireless.

Be sure to not 'over-use' the Internet! You are in Costa Rica, and it is important to experience what is in front of you!

**Landline Phone Information**

As mentioned previously, phone calls are very expensive in Costa Rica. The telephone is primarily used briefly to set up times/places for meeting with friends. If you find it absolutely necessary to use a phone at home, and your family approves, **limit yourself to ONE 3-minute call per day.**

Never make a long-distance call from your host family's home unless you make it COLLECT. Ask someone in the family to help you do this. Long distance calls are often not billed until two months later, and the bills may not be itemized. It is therefore not practical or polite to offer to pay for a long-distance call.

**Cell Phones**

Most students buy a local cell phone and SIM card once they arrive in Costa Rica (SIM cards only cost about $1.50). More options for cell phones will be explained during your in Costa Rica.

Past participants note that it is easy to Skype from Internet cafes, and, apart from the Internet charge, it is free.

**Calling from the U.S.**

**From the U.S. to Costa Rica.** First dial 011, the international dialing code from the US. Next, dial 506, the country code for Costa Rica, and then the rest of the number to reach a specific city and location. Note that if there is a "0" listed before the main number, drop it when dialing internationally.

**Courteous Communication**

If Skyping/using other communication apps in your room, use headphones, close the door to your room, speak softly, and end the conversation immediately if it is time for a meal.

**Snail Mail**

International airmail takes 2-3 weeks from the U.S. to San José, and about 10 days from days from San José to the U.S. The further you are from San José the longer mail will take in both directions.

**Communicating in Spanish**

Most of you have been studying Spanish for quite a while, and now you are going to apply your language skills in day-to-day life. Here are some things to keep in mind.

**Before You Go:** Start listening to Spanish music, movies, TV shows in Spanish. Get your ear accustomed to it before you get there! Also, start reading it, beyond what is required for class. Consider changing your phone language to Spanish, reading websites from Costa Rica, finding online Costa Rican newspapers.
Fluency: In the words of a past language student, "I am going to warn you right now: you WILL NOT be fluent after only three-five months in another country. I definitely improved in my reading, writing, listening and speaking, but I did not sound like a native. Don't expect to come home fluent, or you will spend your whole time abroad frustrated with yourself. Take things one day at a time and you will be so impressed with yourself. There were days where I would all of a sudden realize that I was participating in classes that were all in Spanish! It's definitely a great feeling to see how much your Spanish speaking is improving."

Speaking: Speak as much as possible. You have SO MANY OPPORTUNITIES to speak Spanish (since you're living in Costa Rica). And there are so many people willing to help you get better:

Professors: It's their job to help you improve, so they will correct you in class and will require you to speak often. They are always willing to help explain things or sit down and talk with you about things you don't understand.

Families: It is very likely that your family has been hosting American students for a number of years. This means that even when you say the wrong thing, chances are they will understand you. Don't be afraid to speak with your family at meals, after meals, during down time, at any possibility.

Other People You Meet: Most Costa Ricans KNOW that you are not a native speaker even before you open your mouth. In most cases, if you make the effort in Spanish, they will be very kind and patient with you. In addition to this, get to know local students. Many of them are studying English and would LOVE to get together and talk. One thing to remember: you need to make the effort to get to know them.

Travel While Abroad
See additional information in the Travel Resources section of your Study Abroad Handbook.

Tours and Field Studies
USAC plans some excursions that are included in the program cost. The trips are carefully planned and budgeted for by the USAC Resident Director, and if you want to go back to visit an area, that is great, but you should plan to do so during a free weekend. Do not ask to stay longer at certain places, or to have the bus driver come back and get members of your group later, because you want to spend some more "free time" exploring.

Optional Excursions
USAC also plans optional tours and field studies at an additional cost. You can select these options on the Course & Tour Registration Form you filled out as part of your USAC application.

Guidebooks
If you are like many students, you may want to travel around a bit on your own. To make the most of this, you’ll want to do some advance planning. Travel guides such as Lonely Planet receive good comments from past participants and are available at any major bookstore. Some guides are written specifically for economy travelers. Christopher Baker's Costa Rica Handbook has good information, also.

Travel to Nicaragua
Nicaragua currently has a Travel Advisory Level 3 – Reconsider Travel, from the U.S. Department of State. (Travel advisories are on a scale of 1-4, 4 being the highest). Due to this, UWEC and the CIE strongly discourage any UWEC student from traveling to Nicaragua. You can read the full advisory here: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/internat
CULTURAL NOTES

Greetings and Addresses
Observe proper greeting and leaving etiquette. Always shake hands when you meet an acquaintance. It is also acceptable for women to kiss friends (men and women) on the cheek; men shake hands. Using titles and addressing people with the “Usted” form is considered polite.

Tico Time
Former students have reported that the concept of time in Costa Rica is different than in the U.S. While buses and tourism agencies are usually very punctual and dependable, departure and returning hours might change due to unexpected circumstances. Traditionally, Ticos tend to be more relaxed about the concept of time and are not driven by the belief that “time is money.” This laid-back attitude has become known as “Tico Time.”

There is a sense that what you are doing at the present is important, particularly if you are spending time with a person, and that things planned for later will be taken care of later. In Costa Rica, it is not uncommon for a friend to show up a half hour after an agreed-upon meeting time, or for a party to begin two hours later than announced. It would be considered rude to arrive on time if invited to a friend’s house for dinner. Relax and try a new style.

Note: The more relaxed time concept does not apply in academic situations, such as class or a meeting with a professor. In these situations, and other more formal business settings, punctuality is expected.

"Developing World"
Part of U.S. students' frustration with time and schedules in Costa Rica may be that, on the surface, Costa Rica can seem similar to the U.S. There is a McDonald's, Ace Hardware, Gap, Subway, and TCBY in San José. The glaring poverty in many Central American countries is less evident in Costa Rica. People are generally well-educated; the buses are clean and new-looking, and there are ATMs and phone booths in many locations.

Despite the outward appearance however, Costa Rica is a not a wealthy country when compared to the U.S. You may become frustrated when the ATM doesn't work, and when you are forced to stand in line at the bank for two hours to complete a transaction that takes three minutes at home. Keep in mind that this is all part of truly experiencing life in a different culture.

Family
The family plays an important role in Costa Rican culture. The extended family is often a very large, close circle of relatives and friends. It is not unusual for children to live with parents until they marry, or to continue to live with parents if they never marry. Your host family may include several generations in one house.

Traditional family roles, although not as pronounced as in the past, are still apparent to a U.S. observer. The man is still the authority figure and main provider, while the woman, even if she works outside the home, is usually responsible for running the household and caring for the children.

Gender Issues
Women in Costa Rica have made great gains toward equality. They make up 50% of the student body at all educational levels up to the university and are better represented in professional roles than in most other Latin American countries.

Despite the above paragraph, as you interact with Costa Ricans your age, you may become aware that social rules and etiquette are stricter
for women than for men. A woman’s reputation is important. You may notice that Costa Rican women rarely drink very much, and they almost never go to clubs or bars alone.

U.S. females are stereotyped as being “easy,” so flirting openly with local men may send out the wrong signals to them – you could be seen as an easy sexual conquest. You would want to avoid this stereotype. Remember you are an ambassador of your country and of your university while studying abroad.

"Piropos"
Piropos (catcalls) are a fact of life for women in Costa Rica. Although they may be considered "harmless" at one level, they often do not feel that way to U.S. American women. The best way to deal with piropos is to ignore them and continue on your way.

Other Notes
- Pedestrians never have the right of way—be careful when crossing the street!

- Visiting students usually notice that there are no pollution controls for vehicles, buses, industry, etc. With the advent of eco-tourism, Costa Rica is becoming more environmentally conscious.

- Be sure to agree on a price before you get into a cab, or you may be charged a high rate. Also ask if the driver has a taxi meter (known as a Maria)—if not, look for another taxi, as the rate could be set arbitrarily.
CONTACT NAMES & ADDRESSES
General UW-Eau Claire & CISI contact information is in your Study Abroad Handbook.

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*If calling from within Costa Rica, drop “506”; call a few times until you get through. If calling from the US, add 011 before the number.

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# WEB RESOURCES: COSTA RICA

## Cities
- **Heredia:** [https://www.govisitcostarica.com/region/city.asp?cID=222](https://www.govisitcostarica.com/region/city.asp?cID=222)
- **San Ramon:** [https://www.govisitcostarica.com/region/city.asp?cID=101](https://www.govisitcostarica.com/region/city.asp?cID=101)

## Culture
- **Political Resources:** [https://costarica.org/facts/](https://costarica.org/facts/)
- **History/Culture:** [https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Costa-Rica.html](https://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Costa-Rica.html)

## Country
- **Costa Rica by bus:** [https://www.lonelyplanet.com/costa-rica/transport/getting-around/bus](https://www.lonelyplanet.com/costa-rica/transport/getting-around/bus)
- **La Nación news:** [https://www.nacion.com](https://www.nacion.com)
- **Tico Times info:** [http://www.ticotimes.net](http://www.ticotimes.net)
WHAT PAST PARTICIPANTS WISH THEY HAD KNOWN B4 THEY LEFT
When they said it would be cold in winter, they meant cold to the locals. It is still pretty toasty, so I did not need two pairs of jeans, plus sweatpants, leggings and three sweatshirts and cardigans.

In the rainy season it rains – a lot! Bring an umbrella. I also wish I had known how much hiking I would do and have brought better sandals, like chacos. They also wear a lot of long sleeves and pants, so I would have brought more had I known that.

BIGGEST ADJUSTMENTS THEY HAD TO MAKE
My biggest adjustment was living with a host family who served me food, did my laundry, cleaned my room, and expected me to tell them everything I was doing. It was a great experience but was a little hard to adjust to because I’m used to more freedom at home.

My host family: are people from ages 4 to 55 living under one roof. It can be noisy at times, but an advantage is something is always going on and it’s difficult to be bored. My family has been patient with my Spanish learning and is willing to help me.

The catcalling is bad – you will notice it. Try to not pay much attention. Eventually you will notice it less.

I speak Spanish, but it still took me a week or two to adjust – it will take time! It will be overwhelming!

You may not eat dinner at that same time you are used to in the states – be flexible!

Tico time is a hard adjustment for a very scheduled person.

It sometimes felt like people thought I was wealthy because I was from the United States.

SAFETY TIPS FOR FUTURE STUDENTS
Travel in groups – it’s easier to book hostels and provides comfort knowing you’re with others you trust.

Being a woman in Costa Rica has its pluses and minuses. It is a very machismo (masculine) culture, so it is acceptable to catcall women, especially the “gringos” or white ones. However, crossing the crazy streets was easier as a woman because men would stop to let me cross.

Be strong & understand the culture is different. Fighting back against the catcalls won’t change anything.

Pedestrians NEVER have the right of way. The Costa Rican drivers are wild and don’t follow any rules.

Don’t walk alone at night and try to walk with someone during the day.

HOW THEY SUMMED IT UP:
This was such an awesome experience. I was originally scared to leave home and go to a foreign country, but within the first week here, I didn’t know if I’d ever want to leave. I’ve met some of the greatest people while here!

I see everything from a different point of view and I have the travel bug now. The world is an amazing place and this experience is one of the best things I have ever done.

Updated 7/2019, clw