

# UW Spanish Language in San Jose, Costa Rica Program

## IAP Program Handbook – Winter 2024

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The UW Spanish Language in San José, Costa Rica Program is offered by International Academic Programs (IAP) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in conjunction with the Costa Rica Spanish Institute Maximo Nivel for summer and winter intersession terms. This IAP Program Handbook supplements the IAP Study Abroad Handbook and provides you with the most up-to-date information and advice available at the time of printing. Changes may occur before your departure or while you are abroad.

Questions about your program abroad (housing options, facilities abroad, etc.) as well as questions relating to your relationship with Maximo Nivel or academics (e.g. course credit and equivalents, registration deadlines, etc.) should be directed to International Academic Programs at UW-Madison.

This program handbook contains the following information:

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

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### ON-SITE PROGRAM INFORMATION

#### **Máximo Nivel**

San Pedro, De la Farmacia La Bomba 75 sur  
Diagonal a la Plaza Roosevelt  
San Pedro – Montes de Oca  
San José, Costa Rica

Phone: (506) 2253-9220

Toll Free: (800)-866-6358 (9am-5pm EST)

E-mail: [international@maximonivel.com](mailto:international@maximonivel.com)

#### **UW-MADISON INFORMATION**

International Academic Programs (IAP)  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Red Gym, 716 Langdon Street  
Madison, WI 53706  
Tel: 608-265-6329  
Web: [www.studyabroad.wisc.edu](http://www.studyabroad.wisc.edu)

#### **EMERGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION**

In case of an emergency, call the main IAP number **(608) 265-6329** between 8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; after-hours or on weekends call the IAP staff on call at **(608) 516-9440**. While in country, you will have the phone numbers of the Maximo Nivel staff for emergencies; you will call them directly if you need immediate assistance while abroad.

#### **EMBASSY REGISTRATION**

All program participants who are U.S. citizens are required to enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). This is a free service provided by the U.S. government to U.S. citizens who are traveling to, or living in, a foreign country.

STEP allows you to enter information about your upcoming trip abroad so that the U.S. Department of State can better assist you in an emergency. STEP also allows Americans residing abroad to get routine information from the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate, as well as updates on demonstration, emergency messages, and other breaking events. Register online before your departure. The Travel & Visa Tab in your MySA account also has a link to this registration page. If you are not a U.S. citizen, check with your home country's embassy for comparable services.

### **U.S. Embassy in San José**

In front of Centro Comercial del Oeste Pavas

Calle 98 Via 104

Pavas, San José, Costa Rica

TEL: (506) 2519-2000 From the U.S.- 011-506-2519-2000

Fax: (506) 2519-2305

Web: <http://costarica.usembassy.gov/>

## **PROGRAM DATES**

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See the 'Travel, Passport & Visa' section of your MyStudyAbroad account for program dates.

## **TRAVEL AND ARRIVAL**

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You are responsible for making your own flight arrangements to and from San José. **It is recommended that you plan to arrive to San Jose between 7:30AM-4:00PM on the official arrival date of the program.** However, Maximo Nivel will pick students up outside of this suggested arrival window. A late or early arrival might be exhausting, and there could be delays, so it is recommended to make arrangements for a flight in the suggested arrival window.

Students arriving on the official arrival date will be met at the airport by Maximo Nivel staff and transported either to the school or to your local host, depending on time of arrival. You may be waiting at the airport for up to an hour before departing as they will wait for a group of students to arrive to fill up the vehicle. You will receive arrival instructions from Maximo Nivel 1-2 weeks before the start of the program.

### **Early arrivals**

If you choose to arrive earlier than the start date of the program you will be responsible for your arrival transport from the airport to the school, and for any accommodations (hotel or homestay) for nights outside of the program dates. If you plan to arrive 1-2 days prior to the start of the program, you may be able to stay with your local host (for an added fee) if they are ready to receive you; otherwise you will need to arrange for a hotel. You should work directly with Maximo Nivel to make your arrangements for homestay accommodations before the program start. Email [international@maximonivel.com](mailto:international@maximonivel.com) to make arrangements.

### **Entry Requirements**

As of January 2023, the entry requirements for Costa Rica are below. Entry requirements can change without notice. Please check [travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov) to confirm your entry requirements prior to departure.

**1)** You must have an outbound ticket leaving Costa Rica within 90 days of your entry. You can always extend your stay later and you can purchase a refundable ticket if you intend to spend more time in Costa Rica. Proof of onward travel is required at the time you check-in for your flight at your home airport. Print out proof of your outbound ticket and carry

it with you while traveling. If asked by immigration for the address where you are staying in Costa Rica provide the following: ***Calle 1 de La Farmacia La Bomba 75m Sur, San Pedro-Montes de Oca, San Jose***

**2)** Your passport must be valid for at least 6 months beyond the date you enter Costa Rica.

### **Navigating San José airport:**

The airport in San José, named Juan Santamaria International Airport, is located just outside the city in Alajuela. Upon arrival in San José airport, you will go through immigration. Follow the signs that indicate where you should go. After proceeding through the immigration process, you will proceed to baggage claim and customs, where luggage is screened. After clearing customs, you may proceed towards the exit of the airport. When you exit the Customs area, you will walk to an outside arrivals area where a staff or driver from Maximo Nivel will be waiting. Follow your arrival instructions from Maximo Nivel to know where to look for your airport greeter. The airport is around a 30-40 minute drive from the neighborhoods where you will live.

An orientation to Maximo Nivel and San José will be provided for you on-site.

## **PREPARATION BEFORE LEAVING**

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### **IMMIGRATION DOCUMENTS**

Refer to the Pre-Departure Checklist in the IAP Study Abroad Handbook for essential information.

#### **Passport**

A passport is needed to travel to Costa Rica. Apply immediately for a passport if you do not already have one. Passport information can be found on the U.S. State Department website: <http://travel.state.gov>. If you already have your passport, make sure it will be valid for at least 6 months beyond the length of your stay abroad.

#### **Visa**

U.S. citizens do not need a student visa to study in Costa Rica. You will receive a 90 day tourist entrance when you arrive in Costa Rica. If you are not a U.S. citizen contact your Study Abroad Advisor for guidance.

### **HANDLING MONEY ABROAD**

Your personal spending habits, the cost of living in your host country/city, and fluctuating exchange rates should all be taken into consideration when figuring out your study abroad budget. The official currency of Costa Rica is the Colon (CRC). Current exchange rates can be found online: [www.oanda.com/converter/classic](http://www.oanda.com/converter/classic). This website may give you an idea of cost of living: <http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/>.

#### **ATM/Debit Cards**

You can easily get money from a *cajeros automáticos* (ATMs) in San José. Make sure to check with your bank about getting an international 4-digit PIN and details on how to access your account in San José. Inform your financial institution of your expected time abroad so they do not stop processing any of your ATM/debit card transactions due to belief that your card has been stolen. Also confirm with your bank any fees that you will be charged for withdrawing money internationally. Remember to bring the toll free phone number of your bank or credit card company to use in the case of an emergency (lost or stolen ATM or credit card).

There are also banks nearby the school where you can exchange cash. The staff at Maximo Nivel can direct you.

#### **Budgeting / Departure Tax**

You may spend more money than accustomed to in the United States for reasons such as traveling, going out more, buying souvenirs, etc. The money suggested on your cost sheet will see most students through, unless you are planning on purchasing gifts, like to go out, or want to travel frequently. Keep a record of purchases to help get through customs on your return.

Remember to save enough money to get out of Costa Rica. Your return transportation is not included in the program cost. You will need possible fare for the taxi or bus to the airport, and money for the departure tax. When you leave Costa Rica you will have to pay a departure tax at the airport of approximately \$29 USD, payable in Colones, US Dollars, or by credit card. Maximo Nivel is able to advise you of the exact cost before you leave Costa Rica.

### **Safety with Money**

Use the same precautions with money abroad that you would when traveling in any large city in the United States. Be aware of pickpockets in crowded areas and on public transportation. Carry your money and other documents in a money pouch or pocket inside your clothing. Use the same precautions you take at home when using an ATM; keep your pin number separate from your ATM/debit card and use machines inside banks or other buildings. Maintain a copy of all credit card numbers and any PIN numbers in a safe place, and do not carry these with you at any time. Leave a copy of these documents with your Financial Representative in the United States.

### **PACKING**

Important documents (passport, emergency contact information, insurance card, ATM card, money, etc.) should be in your carry-on luggage. Also, make sure that you make a copy of important documents and leave them with a friend or family member back home to access in the case of an emergency.

Take enough prescription medication to last the duration of the program. Keep prescription medication in their original packaging and carry a letter/prescription from your doctor explaining your condition and use of medication. Prescriptions should be packed in your carry-on luggage.

Valuable items, expensive jewelry, and items that cannot be replaced should be left at home.

### **Climate and Attire**

As a tropical country, Costa Rica has two major seasons: wet and dry. The dry season (verano) runs from late December until April. The rest of the year has plentiful rainfall and is generally considered to be the invierno, which helps keep the country beautifully green. The temperature does not change much between the seasons, but the range can vary greatly from 50 degrees in the highlands to 90 degrees on the beaches on the coast.

San José is in a tropical rainforest; however, its elevation gives it a mild climate that borders subtropical highland. Temperatures can range between 63 and 86 °F. The rainy season is from May to mid-November, but cloudiness and rainfall can occur during the dry season as well. During the day it can be warm; but at night a jacket might be needed for cooler temperatures.

When you are traveling in Costa Rica avoid revealing clothing. Away from the touristy beach resorts of Costa Rica, clothing tends to be more conservative. Jeans, t-shirts, and casual clothing are fine. People do wear shorts, but it is less common in the city and you will probably only see them when you are traveling in other areas or at the beach.

In general, Costa Rican men wear long pants from day-to-day and the only time they might wear shorts is at the beach or at home. Many Costa Rican men also prefer to wear long sleeved shirts despite the warm weather, although there is nothing out of the ordinary in wearing a t-shirt.

Clothing for women in Costa Rica is similarly conservative in that it's unusual to see a Tican woman walking around town in a mini skirt or wearing a blouse with a very low cleavage. Generally, knee length skirts are worn although wearing pants is also quite typical for Costa Rican women in the cities. Short shorts are not recommended. Tank tops or nice t-shirts/tops are typical. Check out these two websites for [suggestions](#) and [typical clothing in Costa Rica](#).

Suggested items students have found helpful specifically for Costa Rica:

- Towel(s) for beach (Your host family may not provide you with an extra)
- Insect repellent
- Sun screen (this can be expensive in Costa Rica)
- Camera
- Small flashlight (streets can be dark – not as many streetlights)
- Sandals
- Swimsuit
- Extra shoes
- Rain coat/jacket
- Umbrella
- Long sleeve shirt or light sweater as it can get a little cold
- Ear plugs
- Cosmetics/Toiletries (these can be expensive in Costa Rica)

For further packing suggestions, contact a returned student of the program using the [IAP Returned Student Network](#).

### Electronics

The voltage in Costa Rica is the same as in the United States and Canada. However, some houses may not have updated wiring, which means that grounded plugs (two prongs, but one is slightly larger) will not fit. You may want to take an adapter or purchase one in San José. It is best to bring a number of batteries, or rechargeable batteries since electricity may not be entirely reliable.

## THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM

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### General Information

The Costa Rica Spanish Institute (COSI) was founded in 1994 and strives to be one of the best language schools in Latin America. COSI is dedicated to offering high-quality, personalized courses in an exciting, efficient, and relaxed environment with a highly professional staff. In August 2013, COSI became partners with Maximo Nivel, another language educational institute in San José. COSI moved their language school to join the facilities at Maximo Nivel in the San Pedro area, which is also the area where the University of Costa Rica is located.

Maximo Nivel facilities are open to students seven days a week, generally from 7:00AM-9:00PM Monday-Friday, and 9:00AM-6:00PM Saturday-Sunday. There are common areas with tables, WI-FI access, an onsite café, and staffed front desk to assist students. Enhancing the language experience with cultural activity, Maximo Nivel offers opportunities such as dance and cooking classes. Around Maximo Nivel, there is access to banks, public transportation, shopping, movie cinemas, and restaurants.

### COURSE INFORMATION

Classes will meet Monday through Friday for four-five hours per day (depending on course level). You will have classes in a block of time, for example, 9:00AM-1:00PM or 2:00PM-6:00PM. There will be opportunities for breaks throughout your class time. You will be provided with a course schedule upon arrival. Because you are earning a semester's worth of credit in a short duration, you can expect your classes and the contact hours to be intensive learning.

### Course Selection

All courses at Maximo Nivel are taught in Spanish by experienced, native Spanish-speaking instructors. Class sizes vary between 1-8 students, depending on enrollment. You are generally placed in class with other UW students.

You will submit a course enrollment form to IAP prior to the beginning of the program. Prerequisites must be completed before studying more advanced levels as the UW course equivalents earned for the course taken in San Jose will be based on your previous Spanish language studies on your UW Student Record.

### Available Courses for Each Session

The following courses are offered in Costa Rica. Some are term specific as noted. All courses are 3 credits unless otherwise specified.

- Spanish 101: First Semester Spanish (*4 credits*)
- Spanish 102: Second Semester Spanish (*4 credits*)
- Spanish 203: Third Semester Spanish (*4 credits*)
- Spanish 204: Fourth Semester Spanish (*4 credits*)
- Spanish 224: Introduction to Hispanic Literatures
- Spanish 226: Intermediate Language Practice with Emphasis on Writing & Grammar
- Spanish 325: Advanced Conversation
- Spanish 311: Advanced Language Practice (*Summer ONLY*)
- Spanish 319: Medical Spanish
- Spanish 329: Spanish for Business
- Spanish 460: Topics in Literature (*Summer ONLY*)
- Spanish 468: Topics in Culture (*Summer ONLY*)

### Winter Intersession 3-Week

You will take one course for the winter program.

### Summer Language 6-Week

Each course is on a two-week cycle where you will progress to the next language level after two weeks.

- Students taking 101-203 may enroll in two courses. Your third course will be a no-credit conversation course to practice and refine the learned skills.
- Students taking 204 and above may enroll in two or three courses. If you choose to enroll in two courses, your third course will be a no-credit conversation course to practice and refine the learned skills.

### Registration

IAP will register you for your summer or winter term. You will see a study abroad placeholder course on your UW Record after we have registered you. These credits will convert to the actual credit and grades earned after completing the program.

- **Winter Intersession Credits and Registration**

Grades and credit post to your spring term so IAP will authorize you for a credit overload for the spring semester; however, if you have any problems registering for spring semester credits, contact your IAP Enrollment Specialist Advisor listed in your MyStudyAbroad.

### Tutoring

Maximo Nivel can provide private tutoring. If you are interested in receiving tutoring for your course, consult Maximo Nivel staff.

### Books

Most books will be provided for you. Be sure to allow a reasonable amount in your budget for book purchases and/or photocopying in case it is needed.

Past participants of language programs have strongly suggested that you take grammar and verb books from your previous semesters of Spanish and a Spanish/English dictionary. It is strongly recommended that you review your grammar and vocabulary prior to your arrival in San José.

### Grades and Grade Conversions

Although the grading criteria will be different for each course, you will receive a syllabus on the first day that will clearly outline the course expectations. This program is an intensive language course; students must realize that several hours a day will be spent studying and any unexcused absence will affect your grade.

All courses will use the following grade scale to convert grades from Maximo Nivel to UW-Madison.

Maximo Nivel Grade	UW-Madison Grade
92-100	A
89-91	AB
83-88	B
80-82	BC
71-79	C
65-70	D
64 and below	F

### Spanish Major Notes

Specific questions concerning Spanish credit and equivalents, and requests for assistance with the Spanish Major Advising Worksheet should be directed to the appropriate [faculty study abroad liaison](#) in the Spanish Department.

UW-Madison students majoring in Spanish should keep the following information in mind:

- 1) You must take at least 15 credits of the upper level work in the Spanish major "in residence" (that means, here on campus or in programs sponsored by UW-Madison). All Spanish courses numbered 300 or above count toward this requirement.
- 2) You must take at least 6 credits of Spanish at or above the 400 level while physically present on the UW-Madison campus.

If you would like more information or clarification on the Spanish major, contact Karen Francis, Undergraduate Spanish Advisor, [karen.francis@wisc.edu](mailto:karen.francis@wisc.edu).

### TANDEM CONVERSATION PROGRAM

Maximo Nivel arranges a free conversation partner program. You are encouraged to start this program within the first week of your arrival in order to maximize your participation. Conversation partners are students of the Maximo Nivel English language program. Students range in age from 20-35 years old.

### CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to the courses you will take, Maximo Nivel offers a unique opportunity for students to learn local skills through *talleres* or (cultural) workshops, such as dancing and cooking classes. There are regular extracurricular activities during the week. Maximo Nivel will provide details about talleres times and locations upon arrival in San José. Some talleres will be included in your program. All others are either free or minimal cost (under \$10) to participate.

### VOLUNTEER (Summer only)

There may be volunteer opportunities for students during the summer program with a minimum of a 1 week commitment to volunteer. Fees for the volunteer program vary and range from \$400 (1 week) to \$700 (6 weeks), depending on the length of time volunteering and the project that you will be doing. Students wanting to add the volunteer program to their time abroad will pay that fee directly to Maximo Nivel. Volunteers will have the support and guidance of an experienced Field Manager and in-country coordinators. Interested students can email [international@maximonivel.com](mailto:international@maximonivel.com) for more information.

It is recommended that you wait until you are on-site and understand your daily schedule before arranging volunteer opportunities so you know what level of commitment you may be able to give.

## PROGRAM EXCURSIONS

During your stay in San José you will participate on some excursions included in your program fee. You will have a city tour of San José during your first week. You will also visit Poas Volcano and a coffee plantation as part of your program.

## LIVING ABROAD

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Costa Rica is known throughout Latin America as a safe, literate, and democratic country with a welfare system that has led to the creation of good schools, health care systems, and other benefits. It is perhaps most famous for the fact that it has not had an army since 1949. Costa Rica gained its independence from Spain in 1821. Costa Ricans, or “ticos,” are proud of their pre-Columbian heritage.

Costa Rica has traditionally been a haven for refugees from other countries in the area, and even for the rest of the world. In addition to its original population – a mix of indigenous peoples and Spaniards – there are a mixture of Europeans, Africans, Chinese, Italians, and Germans who call Costa Rica home. Costa Rica became very popular as a retirement site for many North Americans thanks to government incentives. Most visitors find the country to be easy going and low stress. *Pura vida*, as they say.

A special aspect of Costa Rica is its emphasis on conservation and preservation of the environment. While the country has only about 0.1% of the world's landmass, it contains 5% of the world's biodiversity. Its system of national parks began in the 1960s. The country now has about 36 national parks, wildlife areas, refuges, and biological reserves amounting to 27% of total land is protected. Ecotourism is a flourishing business in Costa Rica and provides for the great majority of tourists who visit there. Costa Rica is both tropical and subtropical with a dry season from December to April and a rainy season from May to November. There are opportunities to see a variety of flora and fauna, tropical birds, butterflies, turtles, sloths, and monkeys.

Costa Rica is in Central America, bordering both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, between Nicaragua and Panama. It has a population of roughly 4.2 million. The country is slightly smaller than West Virginia.

### San José

San José is the capital of Costa Rica and is the nation's largest city. Located in the Central Valley, the city is a major transportation hub in Central America. The population comprises a third of the country's population. The city is divided into 11 districts (*distritos*). The districts are further divided into neighborhoods (*barrios*).

Culturally, San José has European influences, partly because of Spanish immigration soon after Costa Rica's discovery by Christopher Columbus, and the privileged classes which generally studied in Europe during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These influences can be seen in the architecture of the city, museums, and houses in the city center.

San Jose perhaps unjustly receives a bad rap among visitors, perpetuated by tourists that briefly stop in San José on their way to beach and rainforest vacations. 1.5 million people live in the greater metro area meaning that San José has a lot to offer. While other areas of Costa Rica cater to tourists and provide usual comforts to vacationers, you'll find true Costa Rican culture in San José.

Massive urban migration has forced more people to move to the capital in search of increased economic opportunities. Shantytowns, poverty, and increased crime are all issues that are part of their modern day problems. The total picture is complex. While petty crime may be prevalent, and you must be vigilant just as you are in any city in the U.S., violent crime however is a lot less than the U.S.



## **Gender Relations in Costa Rican Culture**

You may be exposed to the stereotypical view of traditional gender roles in Latin America where the male is dominant and the woman is subject to “machismo.” In Costa Rica, this is changing. Women have active, professional lives, and if it seems they adhere to the wishes of men, it’s generally the opposite and women rule the roost in most cases. In traditional towns or settings, you may observe a variety of male-female behavior patterns.

## **Students say... I want to meet college-age Costa Ricans! OR I want to experience more of the culture in San Jose!**

Maximo Nivel provides a great start for you to explore Costa Rican culture. The rest is up to you. Take charge of your experience. If there is something that you are interested in doing, ASK! The staff at Maximo Nivel are knowledgeable about the area and are happy to assist.

Like the U.S., university is not in full session over the winter and summer breaks. While there may be students around, there are likely not as many. Hang out at the university, or talk with Maximo Nivel staff about places where students might hangout. Just going out is not recommended. Don’t forget that there is an English language program at Maximo Nivel and they are a student body population you can get to know through a Tandem Conversation!

And keep in mind; it’s also a cultural thing. Costa Ricans tend to spend time with their families, at home, around town, or at parks – even college-aged ticos/ticas.

## **HOMESTAY**

Housing on this program is provided through a local host in a homestay environment arranged through Maximo Nivel. You will receive information on your homestay from Maximo Nivel about a week before departure. You will be placed with a local host where you are the sole native English speaker/foreign student. In cases where enrollment is high, you may be placed with another student but the attempt will be made that the other student is not from the U.S. or not from the UW program.

You are assigned to homes where you will feel secure and well-protected from the moment of your arrival. If at any time you feel that, everything considered, you are not being treated fairly, Maximo Nivel will gladly look into the matter. Please keep in mind as well that it can take time to adapt to the household and that you should try to be as flexible as is comfortable and possible for you. Security bars on homes in Costa Rica are common to the Spanish/Latin culture, but they are also to protect windows and doors as a security feature. You should communicate to Maximo Nivel any concern you have regarding your housing situations. Maximo Nivel will provide an opportunity for you to give written feedback on your homestay experience. Maximo Nivel maintains close contact with all local hosts throughout the duration of the program.

Living in a homestay requires a lot of respect and tolerance. Because you will be living by the rules of a new culture, it is your responsibility to adapt to the home, and not the other way around. In a dorm you come and go as you please, without letting anyone know of your whereabouts; if you wish, you can go for weeks without cleaning your room; you can bring friends to your room. In a Costa Rican home, however, these things may not be considered acceptable. The respect and politeness that you show while sharing the home will to a large degree determine how much you gain from your experience in Costa Rica. Each host will be different; do not try and compare your host situation to others. There can be advantages and disadvantages to every living situation.

All homes have been carefully chosen for comfort and convenience; however, no two houses are alike. Unless a request is made well in advance for special housing requirements (access, allergies, diet, etc.), there is little chance that such needs can be met. Once you have been assigned to a home, that assignment cannot be changed without the permission of Maximo Nivel.

All homestays are within walking or bus distance to Maximo Nivel, about 15-30 minutes. Your local host will show you the best way to get to and from your home to school. If you wish, you can also arrange for private transportation to/from the institute through Maximo Nivel (at an added cost, about \$50 per person, per week).

## **Family Structure/Relationships**

A major difference between Costa Rican and U.S. culture is the difference in family structure. In Costa Rica, the family is extended rather than nuclear in form. People have close relationships with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins – even second and third cousins. Children grow up experiencing a broader family network than most children in the U.S. Homestays can vary in family structure. For example, it's possible you could live with a single woman whose children no longer live at home but visit often, or you could live with a family where the grandparents or other extended family also have a place in the home.

## **Conduct with local hosts**

You also agree to residential rules and follow a code of conduct regarding home stays. Maximo Nivel will dismiss, at any time, a student whose conduct renders his or her presence in the program undesirable. You are expected to inform both Maximo Nivel and the local host if you plan to stay away from home overnight or travel outside San José. This is necessary in case of accidents or the need to reach you for any reason. Failure to do so could jeopardize your situation in the program.

You are reminded that habitual late hours may upset the working of the home in which you are a guest as well as the fact that such hours are not compatible with study. You will receive a key to your house, although you need to respect your local host's schedule.

Be sure to check with your host about any guests you may wish to receive in the home. Students should not expect anything but a very negative reaction if they receive guests of the opposite sex in their rooms at any time.

## **Meals**

Regular hours for meals are established in each home. You will be provided breakfast and dinner at your homestay. Lunch will be on your own. Host families are not obliged to serve any meals outside those provided. Snacks and "extras" are to be obtained outside the home unless offered by the host family. No refunds are made for meals not taken in the home, but forewarning of an absence would be welcome. If you wish to invite guests for meals you must arrange this with the host family in advance and make proper financial arrangements with them. You should try your best to adapt to the family's eating style rather than impose your own habits. If you have peculiar eating habits you should discuss these with IAP prior to departure, and also notify Maximo Nivel so they may seek a homestay that may be suitable for you.

Costa Ricans eat a very light breakfast, often coffee with milk, juice and tostadas. Lunch is the main meal of the day. You can expect to have rice and black beans (gallo pinto) a lot, even for breakfast. Meat, fruits, and vegetables are also served. Dinner may be light.

## **Lunch**

Lunch options around Maximo Nivel range from \$2-\$10, or more, depending on your choices. The school café has a refrigerator and a microwave you can use if you wish to bring your own lunch for the day instead of eating out.

Costa Rican cuisine is not spicy and in San José, it is easy to find. The most popular food throughout San José is *gallo pinto*, the national dish, which is a mixture of fried rice and black beans. You can expect to eat this quite often throughout your time in country. *Sodas* are Costa Rican restaurants serving traditional food at an affordable price, usually offering *casados* for lunch and dinner. A *casado* consists of rice, beans, and meat, and normally comes with cabbage-and-tomato salad, fried plantains, and/or tortillas.

There are also a wide variety of ethnic cuisines in San Jose – Peruvian, Argentinian, Japanese, and Italian, to name a few.

## **Laundry**

Laundry is included and provided by your local host. Take easy-to-wash/dry clothes and be flexible, as your situation will vary by host, and you will not know until your arrival. For women, they generally do not wash another's undergarments. It is better if you wash your own.

## **Water/Plumbing**

Some homes have water availability similar to what you are used to. Others may not have hot water all the time. Be prepared for all possibilities. In some homes you may not be able to flush anything down the toilet that doesn't come directly from your body. Toilet paper and feminine products are generally not flushed down the toilet but thrown in a wastepaper basket. Because the pipes are smaller, flushing toilet paper and feminine products can lead to clogged sewer pipes. While most Americans are understandably uncomfortable throwing toilet paper away, the practice is a necessity in Costa Rica.

## **Gifts**

You may wish to take some kind of gift with you for the Costa Rican host that will be welcoming you to their home. A sure winner with hosts is something personal - local to Wisconsin (or your home state or town) or from UW-Madison.

## **TRAVEL AND TRANSPORTATION**

You are strongly encouraged not to travel to any areas designed as hazardous or unsafe by the U.S. State Department. Make sure to check with the U.S. State Department, Embassy or Consulate regarding the safety of any areas which you are planning traveling to or through before you make any travel plans. You will be expected to leave a travel itinerary with Maximo Nivel and your local host, as well as a family member or friend in the United States in case someone needs to get hold of you as well as for your own safety.

## **Buses/Taxis**

Public transportation such as buses and taxis are inexpensive and easily accessible in San José. You may consult Maximo Nivel staff with questions on how to navigate the buses. Official taxis are red and have a yellow triangle on the front doors. It is customary in Costa Rica and Latin America to sit in the back seat of the taxi. This is especially true if you are a female alone, as otherwise this will be perceived as an open invitation to the driver. The one exception is if the taxi is full, and it is best to ask permission of the driver first.

Directions in Costa Rica tend to be given in terms of landmarks and distances rather than a street name and number, though this is slowly changing. See Maximo Nivel's address on page 1 as an example.

## **Personal Excursions**

There is a local tour operator next door to the school that is frequently used for students arranging personal travel. Costa Rica is known for its ecotourism. Be aware that some activities are higher in risk. It is recommended that you check with your personal insurance about engaging in these activities abroad before proceeding.

## **HEALTH and SAFETY**

It is recommended that you read through the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations for travel to Costa Rica <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/costa-rica.aspx> as well as meet with your doctor or a travel doctor prior to departure. Your health-care provider can determine what you will need, depending on factors such as your health and immunization history, areas of the country you will be visiting, and planned activities. If you need medical attention while in Costa Rica, talk with a staff member at Maximo Nivel and they will assist in directing you.

Diseases from food and water are the leading cause of illness in travelers. Follow these tips for safe eating and drinking:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially before eating. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Be cautious of your drinking water source. It's a good idea to ask first if you may drink water from the tap at your homestay. If traveling around the country, consider drinking only bottled or boiled water, or drinks from cans or bottles.
- Be cautious of food or drink beverages purchased from street vendors. This is not recommended in some areas.
- Make sure food is fully cooked. Peel skin from fruit before you eat it.
- Avoid dairy products, unless you know they have been pasteurized.

- Diseases from food and water often cause vomiting and diarrhea. Make sure to bring over-the-counter remedies with you so that you can treat mild cases yourself.

### **Alcohol and drug use**

Cross-cultural differences exist in the consumption of alcohol. Depending on your host country, you may find the availability and public consumption of alcohol greatly increased or decreased. Often, rules about the acceptability of alcohol use in certain situations or contexts are very different than in the United States. Excessive drinking can impact your health during the program, impair judgment, lead to risk or harm to yourself or others and have an effect on your academic performance.

Penalties for use or possession of illegal drugs can include jail terms, hard labor, and even the death penalty. Neither the U.S. Embassy nor the program offices are able to exercise effective pressure to moderate these penalties. If you are arrested, you are subject to the host country's laws and neither the UW-Madison's IAP office nor the U.S. Embassy can protect you from the local legal consequences. While on an IAP study abroad program, you are responsible for obeying all local laws. If IAP learns that program participants are using drugs or breaking other local laws, participants will be confronted and may be asked to leave the program.

## **SAFETY**

IAP is dedicated to maintaining the personal safety and security for each of our study abroad participants. Our office takes necessary precautions, remains in close contact with program staff and works with them in case of an emergency. You are encouraged to contact your IAP Study Abroad Advisor if you are concerned about your safety or welfare.

Costa Rica is a relatively safe country. Maximo Nivel will provide a safety orientation upon arrival. Nevertheless, here are a few recommendations:

- It is recommended that you do not walk alone at night, especially if you are female. Travel in groups or with another person at all times, even during the day, if possible. San José is a large city, and like cities in the U.S. there are precautions to consider when visiting different areas. Be aware of your surroundings and know where you are going.
- It is advisable to take extra precaution with your passport, money, and valuables, including cell phones. Cell phones are easily stolen at all times of day, and you make yourself a target by having it out in the open. Normally, one should not carry their passport and large sums of cash on their person. Use the same precautions that you would in any major U.S. city, or more so. Use a money belt or pocket sewn inside your clothes for the safest way to carry money.
- While violent crime is not common, petty theft is common. Don't travel with anything that you are not prepared to lose.
- Keeping all your money in one place is not advised—guard against possible loss by leaving a small amount of money in your room or buried in your backpack, with a record credit card information and passport number. If you leave expensive items in your room, make sure to put them in a spot not easily in sight and to lock the door when you leave.

The U.S. Embassy reminds all U.S. citizens of the following tips to avoid becoming a victim in Costa Rica:

- U.S. citizens are encouraged to exercise the same level of caution they would in major cities or tourist areas throughout the world. Local law enforcement agencies have limited capabilities and do not act according to U.S. standards.
- Travelers should minimize driving at night, especially outside urban areas.
- Avoid public parks at night and other poorly lit areas, and try to avoid going out alone. If and when you are out, please remember to always have a means of communicating with police and emergency services.
- Americans should walk or exercise with a companion, bearing in mind that crowded tourist attractions and resort areas popular with foreign tourists are common venues for criminal activities.

- Travelers should ignore any verbal harassment, and avoid carrying passports, large amounts of cash, jewelry or expensive photographic equipment. A common scam involves one person dropping change in a crowded area, such as on a bus. When the victim tries to assist, a wallet or other item is taken.
- Don't leave any valuables/bags/purses in plain sight.
- Always use the peephole in your residence doors when someone knocks or rings the bell, and never open your doors to anyone who you do not recognize or have not invited.

## COMMUNICATION

Many of your family members/friends will be anxious to hear from you when you arrive. Please make sure they are familiar with your travel details so that they know when they can expect to hear from you. Be sure that your friends/family know that it will take you some time to get through customs, get your luggage, etc and this may delay your ability to get in touch with them about your safe arrival. Just let them know that you'll communicate with them as soon as possible, and in most cases no news is good news.

### Telephone/Cell Phone

Phone calls are expensive to the average Costa Rican. In the homestay, telephone calls, both incoming and outgoing, must be kept to a reasonable minimum. It is recommended that if you are using the host phone, to use a calling card or work out payment with the family. It is common courtesy to ask your host when you need to use the phone. You can buy a telephone card in Costa Rica and call the United States from any public telephone.

If you are considering a cellphone, it is best if you check with your provider in the U.S. whether your cell phone can be used in Costa Rica. Most students tend to access the WI-FI at the school and communicate with family and friends via Skype, social media, and WhatsApp.

When making calls, keep in mind time zone differences [www.timeanddate.com/worldclock](http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock). To make an international call to the United States from Costa Rica, dial "001" followed by the appropriate U.S. area code and local number. To call internationally from the United States, dial "011", the country code (506) and the phone number. The number 2 precedes each land line phone number and the number 8 proceeds each cell phone number. Other country and city codes can be found online [www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/dialing.html](http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/dialing.html). Some of above steps can vary if you are using a calling card.

### Computers and Internet Connections

A laptop is not a requirement for academic purposes, but students may bring one for personal use. There are computers with an internet connection at Maximo Nivel for students. The school has WI-FI. Keep in mind that not all homestays have a wi-fi connection, so you may have to use the computers at Maximo Nivel. San José has many internet cafes around town that can also be used for checking email.

## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

- International Academic Programs (IAP) at UW-Madison:  
[www.studyabroad.wisc.edu](http://www.studyabroad.wisc.edu)
- U.S. State Department:  
[travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov)
- U.S. State Department Students Abroad site:  
<http://www.studentsabroad.state.gov/>
- Center for Disease Control:  
[www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel)
- Current Exchange Rates:  
[www.oanda.com/converter/classic](http://www.oanda.com/converter/classic)
- Cost of Living Calculator:  
<http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/>
- Costa Rica Tourist Website:

<http://www.tourism.co.cr/>

- Exploring San Jose:

[http://gocentralamerica.about.com/od/San-Jose\\_Costa-Rica/tp/San-Jose-Costa-Rice-Budget-Travel.htm](http://gocentralamerica.about.com/od/San-Jose_Costa-Rica/tp/San-Jose-Costa-Rice-Budget-Travel.htm)

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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The comments below are from past participants. They reflect various students' experiences and are included to provide different perspectives. IAP does not endorse any specific view expressed in this section.

### **Preparations Before Leaving**

Try to make your own person budget and plan it in Colones, not US dollars. It's easy to lose track of where your money went when you're paying in Colones because it takes a bit of time to get used to the conversion.

There were ATMs very close to the school and numerous other locations. You get the best exchange rates from those sources. You can also exchange money at the school for a reasonable price. Most places accept cards but I didn't use mine since cash was safer and there were some cases where there was an added fee for paying with a card.

If you exchange money at the airport, exchange a small amount because the exchange rate won't be the best. Use an ATM at the airport, or you'll be able to access one near the school if you have a little money to get you started.

Bring a set of "nice" clothes in case your family wants to take you somewhere that has a dress code.

Make sure to bring some shorts/t-shirts/flip-flops for the beach, but also some warmer clothes (pants/sweater) because it does get cool out once in a while. Also, bring sunscreen as toiletries and such tend to be quite pricy in Costa Rica.

I brought my cell phone but rarely took it out of the house (by choice). Wi-Fi is common in many restaurants.

I did bring my phone, but had it on airplane mode the whole time. I downloaded a call/text free app which I used when there was Wi-Fi.

I brought my cell phone but only used texting since calling was too expensive. I had a specific texting and data plan that was relatively inexpensive to add on to my regular plan.

My family and the school had WiFi so I kept in touch with others through Facebook.

### **Travel and Arrival Information**

I was picked up by someone from Maximo Nivel and he drove me to my homestay. To depart we had to pay for transportation to the airport. It was really easy to fly out and we didn't have any issues with the airport in Costa Rica.

The program fee included a trip to the Poas Volcano and also to a coffee plantation tour. Manuel Antonio is a 3.5 hour bus ride away. It has one of the most beautiful beaches ever, and a national park filled with jungle, animals, and more beaches. I would recommend going there if given the opportunity.

We got very detailed and accurate travel information from front desk staff.

San José itself has a few attractions worth checking out. There's a decent amount of stuff to do including a market for souvenirs, a nice mall with a movie theater, museums downtown, parks, and the Estadio Nacional which hosts soccer games and concerts.

Getting around San José is pretty simple. Taxis are just about everywhere, and the bus system feels similar to that in Madison as long as you know relatively where you're heading. Buses to other parts of the country (like the beaches) are also pretty cheap by American standards.

### **Academic Program**

The class sizes are very small. There was only one other student in my SPAN 204 class, so I received a lot of personal attention and had plenty of time to practice speaking my Spanish.

It usually took me 1-2 hours to complete the homework. Afterwards I had time to explore the city and practice my Spanish with locals.

In many classes, a written exam was used; however, a few classes required weekly verbal presentations or papers.

Academics were probably my favorite part of this program, actually. All of the staff were extremely friendly and helpful. There were only four students total in my class so we each got enough attention and feedback from the professor.

At first, I was frightened by the idea of just two of us students in a class with a teacher talking for four straight hours a day. But the environment was much more relaxed, and the conversation and class just flowed really smoothly.

The staff are devoted, hard-working, and have a genuine interest to help us.

My Spanish has gotten a lot better from being in class and my reading in Spanish is much faster.

My Spanish has improved more than I could have hoped. I'm able to communicate with everyone I meet and make friends and have a good time with them, all in Spanish. The motivation to learn here is strong because we NEED to learn the language in order to live and converse with the Costa Ricans.

My teachers were amazing and I regularly applied what I was learning in the classroom to my everyday life there.

### **Living Abroad**

Try to shop at supermarkets instead of going out to lunch every day. It saved me a good amount of money. The school has a fridge and a microwave you can use if lunches get expensive.

There is much more open display of affection among ticos than in the U.S. A kiss on the cheek is the usual form of greeting, even when you first meet.

My host mom walked me to school the first day so I'd know where it was, it was about a 15 minute walk.

My host mother did not speak or understand any English. She was very welcoming and helpful. I was the only other person in the house so she gave me a lot of attention.

My host family was rather large in comparison (one mother, father, two sons, a niece, and a grandmother), and they were all extremely wonderful, friendly people. I always had someone to talk to. My mother was a phenomenal cook. Both of my parents were extremely amiable and always had different topics to discuss with me. I got to practice Spanish a lot, which was really fortunate.

My host family is extremely generous. They're all very nice and welcoming. I live less than 10 minutes away from school.

The homestay was great and I built a bond with my family. They didn't make me feel like an outsider at all, so it was very easy to feel comfortable around them.

I stayed with an older woman who lived on her own, so I had a much different experience than those who lived with families. Experiencing family dynamics in another country and getting to see interaction first hand provides students with a great cultural learning opportunity.

My host family was great and provided me with everything I needed including laundry. They were open to talk whenever I was interested. Food was great to me (breakfast and dinner), but I love rice and beans which is basically all Costa Ricans eat.

Most of the streets in Costa Rica do not have names, but are instead organized in districts. We were nicely placed in very close-by neighborhoods. For example, three other students from our program and I were within 3-minute walks from each other. So it was nice to walk to school and back together.

There aren't street signs in San Jose. You start to learn to figure out where you are and where to go by using landmarks. That's how they give directions too, by landmarks and distances (like 50km to the west, 300 to the south).

Use common sense. Be very careful at night and always travel in a group, especially at night.

Cell phones, especially iPhones, are targets. If you are out in public, keep it hidden away, and secured, in a closed bag to help prevent theft.

San Jose can be a slightly dangerous city, especially at night and in the early morning, just like any other big city. Be smart and use common sense (walk in groups, avoid shady looking characters, etc).

Only use official taxis. These are all red with a yellow triangle. Buses are cheap (100-250 colones). Use coins to pay not bills.

Taxis are relatively cheap, but you can walk downtown from Maximo Nivel in about 20 mins. If you are traveling at night, TAKE A TAXI.

Always have money with you. Not everywhere takes a card.