

At the end of their AFS exchange in Costa Rica, we asked some recent AFSers from the USA to answer two questions:

- ❑ What elements of your host culture, compared to US culture, did you find most difficult to adjust to in the areas of family, school and/or social life?
- ❑ Please note any advice you would like to share with AFSers destined for your host country.

Here are some of their responses:

I learned a lot about First World/Third World relations, and how the US economy has become important in many aspects of life for most people around the world. I have also created strong working relationships with many people from every corner of the world. I had some issues with two of my brothers, and I was lazy at first around doing my assigned chores. I had a lot of trouble finding and meeting people my age who were not AFSers from other countries.

John, Semester, 2009

It was hard for me to adjust to the amount of American products (food, toys, TV, music) that my family had. At first I felt like I had just moved in with the family next door to me in the US. But as I adapted, I realized that although they had many of the same products, they did not use them in the same ways, and placed higher value on different items. They also placed an incredible amount of importance on appearance. Do not go in with the stereotype of living in some isolated village in the middle of the jungle. Although some students did live in small towns, much of the country has been exposed to American products and is becoming increasingly modernized...Also, it takes time to make friendships, and kids do not do as much together as we do in the US. The main after school activity is watching TV. Don't get frustrated when you don't do a lot with your friends—it's just not how they do it there. And finally, keep an open mind and never give up on learning; there is an opportunity to learn more about the country and yourself in every activity, no matter how trivial.

Dawn, Semester, 2008

You actually have to care what you look like when you go to the store or something, because where I live, people go in their PJ's, but in my host community, you have to wear makeup, do your hair, and put on heels, the whole 9 yards. Don't use the internet every night. You need to live in your host country, not back in your home country.

Catherine, Semester, 2010

Changing families will be difficult no matter what culture you are in. It's an exciting experience but it takes a few days or weeks to see how they do things differently. School there was so long, and at first it was so overwhelming: tons of new people, a new language, and new social customs. Eventually I learned to like it more, and it was really a good experience to see how their school is different from schools in the US. I was only in Costa Rica for six weeks, so it was hard to really make friends. However, there were four houses filled with members of my family, all next door to each other. Everyone goes into everyone else's house and knows all of their business. I didn't realize this at first, but I learned to love it because there was always someone to talk to and I really connected with my family.

Sarah, Summer, 2008

There is a huge gap between how free time is used between Costa Rica and the United States. For the terminal multi-tasker, this can be a frustrating adjustment. Don't worry. You will eventually learn to love the laid-back approach to life. "Ticos" [Costa Ricans] value simply time to gossip over coffee, watch television and sit around with the family. School was a more difficult setting in which to appreciate these differences. The school at which I worked had nap time for seniors. As a teacher, I was often frustrated at the lack of thirst for knowledge and a general indifference to learning. Compared to the frantic US school system, the inattention and inefficiency was constant and always bothered me. Love the Ticos for their hospitality, good humor, kindness and time for what they value in life. It's okay to be annoyed at the lack of efficiency, dependability and sense in facets of Costa Rican culture, but these annoyances are the price for spending time with the nicest people on Earth.

Elaine, Semester, 2008



Living alone in a foreign country really helped me figure out more about myself as an individual. I also learned how to be more self-confident and self-reliant. School was extremely different for me, much more laid back. The teacher-student relationship was also a lot more relaxed, and the teachers were more like friends to their students.

Callie, Semester, 2009

I only had trouble showering in cold water and eating rice and beans everyday. My host family welcomed me as if I was always part of their family and made me feel like their house was my house. I know it's a common expression of, "mi casa es su casa," but they really put that expression into action. The elements I found most difficult to adjust in the areas of social life are not wearing certain clothes because it is viewed differently in Costa Rica. Don't be afraid to meet your host family because they welcome you quickly with open arms. Host families create a big impact in your life and you will find it amazing to feel like you have two families from two different countries. You will never forget your host family because they literally become a part of your life. Take advantage [of] everything thrown at you!

Malissa, Summer, 2009

The mother wanted to do everything for [me] all the time and didn't want [me] doing it alone. Rice every morning was difficult too. Have an open mind and be ready for anything.

Sabina, Summer, 2009

The lack of freedom that I had with my second host family was a huge adjustment to get used to. Also, the difference in religions was a hard thing to cope with. Costa Rica is such a Catholic country...I am not Catholic [and] my second host family wasn't very understanding. The schooling was a bit different than that of the United States. The schedule varies every day and it is very strict. Learn as much as you can about your future destination!!! Make sure it is some place that you where you will be happy no matter where you are placed throughout the country. Learn about the people, culture, and customs. Family life is very important in the Costa Rican culture. Be prepared to open up with your new family and friends!

Koral, Year, 2008

I have a new perspective on life, language, and family. The relationships with girls are very different! Bring an umbrella, be prepared for cold showers, and live every day to the fullest.

Carter, Semester, 2009

I found it hard to adjust when it came to my independence. My host culture was so family-oriented. In my home country I was used to going out with my friends a lot and in my host country, being with your friends a lot was frowned upon. I was also denied permission to do a lot of household chores that I was expected to do in my home country. It's ok to be homesick. You're homesick because you miss your culture and it means that you have great friends, family and life back at home.

Nicole, Summer, 2009

I gained a language and a sense of self-reliance and independence, a loving family that I think I will always have contact with, and always love. At first I had a hard time adjusting to not having a rigorous academic schedule, and that was challenging. But like everything else, you get used to it. Costa Rica was a wonderful country, where the people were truly fun loving, caring, and passionate. I would love to raise my own family there some day.

Rebecca, Semester, 2010

[I gained] friends from all over the world! And my appreciation of home. The "machita rica!" cat calls were really hard to get used to. Men in Central America treat women as objects or meat products which bothered me.

Victoria, Semester, 2009

The most important thing I gained was a great family and amazing friends. Apart from them I gained many skills that will help me in the future such as independence, leadership, fluency in another language. Curfew was something very hard to adjust to, as [were] the long hours at school. If you are a girl going to Costa Rica, be prepared for an early curfew. Costa Rican parents are very protective of their daughters.

Shayna, Semester, 2010

I had most difficulty adjusting to my host family at first, but towards the end they really started to grow on me. If you are doing the community service program make sure that you bring all items that were recommended. Also make sure to make friends as soon as possible, you won't regret it, just be yourself.

Jessica, summer, 2009

The most difficult element that I had was my host country's language, Spanish. I went to Costa Rica knowing no Spanish. But other than that everything was easy to adjust to. Know how to speak Spanish, be ready for a tropical climate, don't bring clothes you

don't want to ruin because you're going there to work, not to look good, and be open to new things like food and living with a host family.

Jason, Summer, 2009

The lack of a personal space [was difficult]. Be open to the culture, but don't let the locals try to take advantage of you. (Girls, especially, the strong sense of machismo can be a little scary. It's up to you to tell the difference between intense flirting and a line being crossed.) It's a gorgeous and welcoming country... Enjoy!

Kathleen, Summer, 2009

Be yourself! Don't make any false promises—Costa Ricans take assurances very seriously. Have fun, but be responsible. Don't do anything that might tarnish the reputation of your host family. They also take their reputation very seriously.

Hannah, Summer, 2009

Have fun!!! Costa Rica is a beautiful country and you will love it. The families are really close so beware you might not have as much personal space as you are used to but know they mean well. Also be prepared to take buses everywhere. They eat a lot as well, they will keep offering you food. My advice is to take a little of everything so not to offend and get to try all the new food. Also family name means a lot down there; don't go disrespecting your family's name, they always know.

Allison, Summer, 2008

Enjoy your time there. You are new and fresh. Step out of your box. Meet someone new and smile. Make your memories worth the time there.

Rina, Summer, 2008

The language experience was great, and I certainly learned how to be a more independent person... Take risks, be flexible, be understanding, and be patient. Give yourself time to adjust, and you'll fall in love with the culture.

Rachel, Semester, 2010

The attention I got from men felt awkward. If volunteering: pack [sneakers], cargo pants and some more clothes for after work stuff (like going dancing) that you do with your host family.

Hannah, Summer, 2009

Be prepared to be a little thrown off balance by the overall mood of the family and the closed-mindedness of a lot of the people—it just comes with the territory. It's not what you expect at first, and you think that they're going to be just like we are in America, but believe me--

they aren't! Love and be as open with your family as possible but always be sensitive and sensible. Don't ask for fights, even when you get annoyed or frustrated. And most importantly: make as many friends as possible and don't allow yourself to be sensitive or easily offended. Most of the time the things that come out wrong are just jokes--when in doubt, laugh... Same with trying out Spanish. Don't worry about being wrong, chances are Ticos don't care anyway. They're very laid back and friendly (even when it seems like they're all ignoring you, believe me, they're watching!), so just go with the flow... Don't be put off if they don't show you as much attention as they do other Americans who are more out-going or you'll miss out on actually making great friends. Be willing to try and be sociable.

Amanda, Summer, 2008

I gained a fluency in Spanish, a new understanding of culture, and responsibility. The social standing of women compared to men is most different. Be open minded.

Lauren, Semester, 2010

Bring your own sunscreen it is really expensive in Costa Rica. Don't put your thumb in between your first two fingers. It means something dirty in Costa Rica.

Gregory, Semester, 2008

I think that the most difficult part of the experience to get adjusted to was the time difference. When I first began the program and I stayed with my host family I was going to bed really early because of the jet lag. When I look back now I think the most difficult thing that I had to get adjusted to when I was back in the US was the fact that I wasn't in Costa Rica anymore and trust me, I miss my friends and host family and my AFS group so much!

Ciara, Summer, 2008

The language was the most difficult because I was really rusty when I first arrived in Costa Rica. Make the most of trip because it goes by so fast. Spend more time with residents in the host country, [like your] host family. Guarantee it will be the best summer you had if you truly apply yourself and not hold back.

Dorian, Summer, 2009

I learned a lot about a different way of life. Much more free time was spent with the family. The Ticos also lived much more simply (smaller houses, less spare money). It will be tough at times but it really flies by so enjoy and live every minute.

Elsie, Semester, 2010

I found that social life was very limited beyond the family, which was so much different than what I'm used to. After school each day my brother and I would come home, and my brother and his friends didn't hang out more than twice in the 6 weeks I was there. I didn't really find any problems with my family, except it was strange how I had to do very little chores because I was male and considered a "guest" to my family. I would always offer, and only rarely would they accept. On the contrary, I found it interesting that my host brother would almost never offer to do chores, or help anyone with what they needed to do despite my family's dedication to his education and well-being.

Michael, Summer, 2008

At first learning to speak Spanish was a challenge that often got me very frustrated. But as the time went on I learned that I was not only gaining a second language, but I was growing personally. Privacy in this country is not as relevant as in the US. People often use your things and go into your room...It is their culture, get used to it. Learn patience. Before I went to Costa Rica I was really independent with my own car, time frame, and control of my life. Don't expect it to be like that. You are now dependent on others and get to live accordingly. Get use to accepting help.

Stephanie, Semester, 2007

Use your AFS local resources in Costa Rica! Don't let yourself get bored because that's when you become depressed and homesick. When you feel like you are going to explode, listen to some of your favorite music or write in your diary...something to help you express yourself. Do your best to integrate yourself into your school. Your classmates will really appreciate it and you will have a stronger connection with them. Although you might not have many opportunities to travel, take advantage of any chance you have because Costa Rica is beautiful....Try all the different native dishes and drinks and whatever unique food you can get your hands on in the country. My favorite typical dish was "gallo pinto." Never give up on yourself! I thought I was going to come back to the States halfway through my program, but I stuck it out and my experience was unforgettable.

McKenna, Semester, 2008