

**For Faculty, Students and Staff**

**Visiting the Soltis Center for Research and Education Center in Costa Rica.**

*This document contains **important information for the safety and security for you and your students** during your stay in Costa Rica. Please read it carefully and follow the instructions therein. Doing so will help ensure that you have a safe, enjoyable and productive semester or course. In addition to this document, you will receive an orientation to risk management as part of your visit.*

**Contents:**

- I. Introduction
  - 1. Orientation to Risk Management
  - 2. Enforcement of Risk Management
  - 3. Emergency Response at the Center
  - 4. Communication in the Event of an Emergency
  
- II. General Categories of Risk
  - 1. Crime and Theft
  - 2. Risk in the Field
  - 3. Health Risks
    - 3.1. Physical health and wellbeing
    - 3.2. Emotional health and wellbeing
  - 4. Alcohol and Illegal Drugs
  - 5. Gender and Race
    - 5.1. Women Travelers
    - 5.2. Sexual Harassment
    - 5.3. Racism and Racial Stereotypes
  
- III. U.S. Embassy Support
  
- IV. Important Names and Phone Numbers

## I. Introduction

Although Costa Rica has a well-deserved reputation for being a relatively secure place for foreign travelers, safety issues are just as relevant here as they are anywhere else in the world. As researcher, student or staff member or visiting faculty, you share certain responsibilities in managing the risks inherent in running a field-based study abroad program. These responsibilities run through multiple levels of program operation, including responsibilities toward yourself, your team members, your students, and visiting professors. This document is meant as a basic introduction to some of the most common or important risks faced by visitors, and to provide strategies that may be used to manage those risks. Please review this information carefully and follow the suggestions therein. If you have any questions at any time about risk and risk management in Costa Rica, please do not hesitate to bring this to the attention of the Study Abroad Program Director or the Center Director.

### 1. Orientation to Risk Management

For students, risk management orientation should begin the first day of the program with an overview of important risks the students may encounter (for example, theft, vehicles, snakebite, etc.); and continue throughout their visit to different parts of the country (for example, swimming rules when visiting beaches, Africanized bees, among others), as well as occasional reminders regarding risks the students may be tempted to ignore (e.g., over consumption of alcohol, leaving computers unattended).

All visiting faculty should be debriefed on risk management policy before working with students in the field. Teaching staff is expected to accompany visiting faculty while working with students in the field to ensure that risk management policy is understood and enforced.

### 2. Enforcement of Risk Management

Faculty and teaching staff have the primary responsibility for enforcing risk management policy in the field. Students who engage in risky behavior and put themselves or other members of the program in danger are subject to sanctions. Sanctions may be manifested as a verbal warning (in the case of minor, first-time offenses), a written probation (in the case of more severe or second-time offenses), and/or dismissal from the program (in the case of third-time offenses or very severe first-time violations, such as drug use). A written probation must be issued by the Study Abroad Program Director or TAMU Academic Director. Dismissal of a student from the

## INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

program is subject to approval by the Academic Director and Study Abroad. It is very important to inform the Program Director if a student engages in risky behavior, even if that behavior – in your judgment – merits only a verbal warning.

In the event that a visiting faculty or academic staff member engages in risky behavior, please inform the Program Director or the Study Abroad Program Director of TAMU to determine the best course of action. Risky or inappropriate behavior on the part of Center staff members may also be reported to the Director or Manager of the Center.

### 3. Emergency Response at the Center

The Center has emergency response plans that should be reviewed before arriving. If you have any questions about the emergency response plan, please contact the appropriate member of the staff or ask the Center Director. In the event of an emergency at the Center, please follow the procedures outlined in the corresponding emergency response plan.

### 4. Communication in the Event of an Emergency

The following are examples of events considered emergencies:

- Going to the hospital (in-patient or out-patient).
- Psychological problems.
- Changed political, social, and/or natural circumstances that affect the program (such as unrest, strikes, floods, etc.).
- Physical assault, robbery, and rape.
- Death or disappearance of a student.

In the event of an emergency, you may need to take immediate, local action to stabilize the situation. As soon as possible, you should contact administrative support personnel in the Center. (For example, in the case of a snake bite, the student should be evacuated immediately to the hospital in accordance with the Center's emergency plan. This will often involve contact the administrative support personnel of the Center, but you may not have a chance to contact the Study Abroad Program Director until the student has been hospitalized).

Emergencies demand prompt, effective, professional, and often confidential avenues of communication. For example, it is generally not professional to communicate the details of a students' emotional breakdown or medical illness to a

## INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

wide audience via email. The student should be respected and supported, and often this involves some measure of discretion in the communication process. In general, the Center Director or Manager will serve as primary contact and support for the student undergoing an emergency situation. The Director of the Center will maintain direct communication with the Study Abroad Program Director, who in turn will communicate with parents and the home university, as deemed necessary and prudent.

## II. General Categories of Risk

### 1. Crime and Theft

Pickpockets and petty theft are very common in Costa Rica. Faculty, students and staff may lose money, passports, backpacks, laptop computers and other possessions of both monetary and sentimental value to pickpockets, break-ins, unregistered taxis and street robbers. Historically, the incidence of violent crime in Costa Rica has been low, but unfortunately has begun to rise in recent years.

Theft is a common reality of Costa Rican life, and foreigners tend to be a target for this type of activity. You should therefore always take basic actions to manage risk of crime and theft. Here are some suggestions:

- Encourage students to travel with photocopies of their passports (not the originals), and keep a photocopy of your own passport on hand. In general, original passports can be kept in a safe deposit box at the Center. In the event that the group must carry the original passports, it is generally a good idea to keep the passports in a single, carrying case under the direct responsibility of Faculty or Academic staff.
- Pedestrians do NOT have the right of way in Costa Rica. Please be careful when crossing the street with students, and insist on crossing at intersections with stoplights to avoid accidents. Cars will NOT slow down for you!
- Change money only in banks or at your hotel. Do not change money in the streets.
- The Center is not responsible for managing course funds. At the Center, keep these funds well-hidden or in a safe deposit box. Count the funds regularly and compare with collected receipts to make sure they are complete. Avoid displaying large amounts of cash in public.
- Facilitate strategies for keep a tight eye (and--even better--a tight hold) on luggage, backpacks and other belongings at all times in public areas. Loading and unloading course buses are particularly risky moments; designate an staff member or a couple of students to simply stand on the curb and keep

## INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

an eye on the luggage while things are being moved around. Also, designate an staff member or a couple of students to search the passenger area of the bus to make sure nobody has left anything behind.

- On free days and evenings, set and enforce appropriate rules for students. Provide a signout sheet and require students to record where they are going and when they plan to be back. Make sure students report their planned destinations.
- Always take *registered* taxis, especially after dark. Registered taxis are red with yellow triangles on the doors, and all have working meters (*marías*) and a two-way radio. Do not be too trusting of your taxi drivers. Always note the number and license plate of the taxi, in case a problem should come up.
- Do not engage in reckless or risky behavior, and sanction students who do.
- Study Abroad Program and the Center will provide you with an emergency phone list; carry this with you everywhere, and memorize 2 to 3 of the key numbers.

Please remember that *faculty and students are just as much at risk in rural areas as in urban areas*. In the United States, crime is mostly associated with urbanization; but in Costa Rica, many rural towns, particularly along the coast, are also targets for petty and violent crime. This is especially true in tourist hubs, where thieves and pickpockets will target foreigners for a quick buck. Also, *do not assume that hotels or academic centers are theft-free*.

All incidents of crime or theft should be reported to the appropriate Office of Judicial Investigation (OIJ) in Costa Rica. If theft occurs at the Center, coordinate with staff to file police reports.

## 2. Managing Risk in the Field

As part of ongoing risk management orientation, you should provide (or have the Center staff provide) a risk management orientation to the field site, including an overview of the inherent risks of each site and the strategies for managing those risks. Get to know the Center staff and coordinate with them on all routine logistical matters. Make sure you know who to contact at the Center – and how to reach him or her – in the event of an emergency. Also, make sure the Center staff knows who the course coordinators are, so they can contact the appropriate person in the event of a problem with the students. Teaching staff should always be housed within walking distance from the student dorms, and at least two professors are recommended be in the field at all times with the students. Make sure you tell the students where you are staying, so they can find you in the event of an emergency.

INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

Additional guidelines to follow include:

- All emergencies must be communicated to the Director of the Center or his designee before taking any action.
- To reduce the risk of venomous snakebite, visitors to the Center may not enter the rainforest unless they are wearing rubber or hiking boots, or snake gaiters. In addition, always wear rubber boots and carry a flashlight with you after dark. It will be the responsibility of the group leader to enforce this rule with the students, and sanction students who do not observe this rule.
- Do not, under any circumstances, handle snakes. Do not allow students to handle snakes of any kind, and do not allow students to handle venomous or other dangerous animals, except under the direct supervision of the center staff.
- No one may enter the forest surrounding the center alone. Ideally each group entering the forest will be comprised of at least three people.
- No group can enter the forest without first notifying the group leader and/or center staff member on duty.
- Always pack water, a bit of food, a cell phone or radio, and a flashlight with extra batteries when you go for a hike, even if you plan to come back early. If possible, carry with you a small first aid kit. Be sure the faculty leader or center staff member knows your cell phone number, or how to contact you by radio while you are in the forest
- Provide a sign-out sheet for students to let you know where they are going and when they plan to be back during free days and weekends. Do not allow students to go out alone; encourage them to go out in groups of at least three. This way, if an accident happens, there will be one person to stay with the injured student and one person to go for help.
- Familiarize yourself with the trail or path system, as well as trail markers that can help orient yourself, before going into the forest with students.
- If a student does not return as expected, either from the forest or from a town trip, inform your fellow Professors and the Center staff immediately and work with them to organize a search party. Do not go look for the student(s) alone.
- The Center has a four-wheel drive car that may be used for transport in the event of any emergency. Make sure you know where the Manager-on-duty is and how to reach him/her.

INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

---

### 3. Health Risks

---

#### ***3.1. Physical Health and Wellbeing***

---

Faculty and Academic staff are responsible for obtaining Wilderness First Response (WFR) certification before working in the field

Good medical care is readily available in Costa Rica. There are clinics nearby the Center for immediate medical attention, and excellent hospitals are available in larger towns and cities for situations requiring longer-term attention. Before traveling to the Center with student groups, familiarize yourself with the location of the local clinics and hospitals. Students requiring medical attention while in San José generally go to the Clinica Biblica, considered the best medical center in the country.

As part of the enrollment process, students are to be asked to fill out a medical form. Important information on this form, such as insurance companies, allergies, among others, must be summarized on a single table by the program's Director. This table of student medical information is to be provided to the Center Director or Manager upon arrival to use as a reference in the event of a medical emergency. Student medical information should be kept confidential and in a place that is accessible by Manager-on-duty.

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

- Drink lots of water to avoid dehydration and other medical problems. Water at the Center is safe to drink.
- Use sunscreen. Even on a cloudy day, the tropical sun is very strong and will burn.
- Use insect repellent, protective clothing, and mosquito nets to prevent insect transmitted diseases such as dengue. Dengue has been on the rise in recent years, so students should pay special attention to this advice.
- To reduce risk of bites from vampire bats, do not sleep outdoors unless you are in a tent. Students who are bitten by bats must undergo the post-rabies exposure vaccine series. This series is not always easy to get in Costa Rica, and students may have to return to the United States to receive it.
- Most beaches in Costa Rica have dangerous riptides that have claimed the lives of students, tourists and nationals. *Drowning is the number 1 cause of death among tourists in Costa Rica!* Before getting into the water at a beach,

## INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

students and staff should make sure the area is *not* prone to riptides. No one should swim alone, nor after dark, nor under the influence of alcohol. If caught in a riptide, do not panic and swim with the current. It may take an hour or so, but the current will eventually carry the swimmer back to shore. If the program includes a group beach trip, take a throw rope with you for use in the event of a swimming accident or emergency.

- Encourage students to inform the Program Director or the Center staff member if they are feeling sick, have had an accident, or have an unusual bite or rash.
- Promiscuous and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, are just as much a risk in Costa Rica as they are in the United States. Students should be reminded to always use condoms if they choose to engage in sexual relations. These are inexpensive and can be purchased at many stores and all pharmacies.
- Students should carry a credit card and their health insurance information with them for use in case of a medical emergency. Most hospitals require a credit card deposit as a guarantee for payment for emergency attention. If the student does not have a credit card.

Students or staff who receive medical attention while in Costa Rica are responsible for all associated expenses, including transportation, lodging (where applicable) and professional fees.

### 3.2. Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Issues in emotional health also come up during a study abroad experience. Being in a new country can push students outside of their comfort zone, resulting in emotions that run the full gamut from excitement and enthusiasm to loneliness and depression. In addition, the Programs are generally intensive and require students and professors to live in close quarters under sometimes uncomfortable conditions for days. Given the logistical constraints of the program, it is impossible to meet the personal needs and living preferences of everyone. This can lead to high levels of stress and make the program less enjoyable for both students and staff.

One of the simplest ways to manage stress and avoid negative group dynamics is to provide sufficient downtime in the program schedule. For a Semester Program, schedule at least one free day per week, and make sure it is *truly* free. (For example, it doesn't count to have a 'free day' with an evening lecture, or a 'free day' in which students feel pressured to prepare for independent projects!). Group bonding (such as rafting) or social activities (such as birthday parties or *parrilladas*) also help students



## INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

(and staff!) relax and blow off some steam. Encourage students to organize their own social activities, such as movie nights, and allow time for these events.

Should emotional issues arise that go beyond the ordinary stresses of study abroad, professional support is available in Costa Rica. Inform the Center Director if a student (or a staff member) is in need of counseling. In most cases, counseling support should be coordinated directly by the Program Director. Names and numbers of professional counselors are provided on the emergency phone number list at the back of this document, and additional references can be obtained upon request.

Please be aware that in general, professional counseling services are available on a very limited basis while the program is in session. Because the program spends most of its time in the field, attending counseling sessions may involve 2-3 day absences from the program at a time, as most counselors have their offices located in San Jose.

Students or staff who receive counseling services while in Costa Rica are responsible for all associated expenses, including transportation, lodging (where applicable) and professional fees.

---

### 4. Alcohol and Illegal Drugs

Alcohol abuse (i.e., getting drunk) and use of illegal drugs is strictly forbidden while the program is in session. The Center simply cannot assume responsibility for students or staff who engage in this type of risky behavior. Jokes or comments alluding to alcohol abuse or illegal drug use will be taken as an indication that you are engaging in substance abuse. If substance abuse appears to be interfering with your performance, with the safety and well-being of other students, or with the safety and reputation of the program, you will be sanctioned after the first offense. In the case of alcohol abuse, first-time offenders will receive a written warning; and second-time offenders are subject to dismissal. Use or possession of illegal drugs while the program is in session is grounds for immediate dismissal from the program.

---

### 5. Gender and Race

---

#### 5.1. Women Travelers

The most frequent complaint of young women travelers in Costa Rica has to do with “*piropos*,” or catcalls, from Costa Rican men in the streets. Historically, *piropos* were short, spontaneous poems directed by men at passing women. Nowadays, *piropos*

## INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

are much simpler, and generally harmless comments, ranging from a simple hiss to an “Hola, macha” to somewhat more elaborate declarations. Some men may also try out their English skills with an occasional, “Hey, baby, where you go? I luv you! Good-bye.” However, *piropos* can occasionally be vulgar and inappropriate, and sometimes with limited Spanish ability it’s difficult to tell the difference. Moreover, since U.S. women are not accustomed to this type of attention and often find it offensive, piropos can make a woman traveler feel uncomfortable and at risk.

Many people, including Costa Rican women and men, view *piropos* as sexual harassment. For others, *piropos* are part of the tradition and color of Costa Rican society and encourage a “friendly” and lively atmosphere in the street. The debate between these two points of view is unlikely to be settled soon, so the best strategy we can offer with respect to *piropos* at this time is to ignore them.

More serious threats for women travelers do exist in Costa Rica. In recent years sexual assaults directed at U.S. women have occurred at beach resorts on both coasts and in San José. Female students should be advised to travel in a group, preferably of mixed gender, and to avoid going out alone at night. It also is important to keep in mind that travelers have reported sexual assaults by taxi drivers. When using taxis, make sure they have working door handles, locks, and meters (called “*marías*”). *Do not ride in the front seat with the driver*, as such familiarity can be easily misinterpreted.

Please keep in mind that body language is, like spoken languages, different everywhere you go. Watch your deportment and apparel in public places. What may pass as non-significant in social situations in the US may have different connotations in Costa Rica.

Be honest with students about the possibility of sexual harassment in Costa Rica, and encourage them to communicate with you if they at any time feel uncomfortable about a particular person or situation while in Costa Rica.

---

### ***5.2. Sexual Harassment***

As part of its commitment to maintaining a healthy and productive work environment for everybody, in Costa Rica there is a strong policy regarding sexual harassment. Both overt and subtle sexual harassment is prohibited. Students should be informed of this policy and encouraged to contact the Center Staff or Faculty if they experience sexual harassment.

### 5.3. Racism and Racial Stereotypes

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

As in the case of sexual harassment, students should be informed about the existence of racism and racial stereotypes in Costa Rica, and encouraged to communicate with the Center staff if they feel uncomfortable about a particular person or situation while in Costa Rica. Within the Center, harassment on the basis of race is strictly forbidden. Should you perceive harassment on the basis of race because of the Center employee or student, please report this either to Center Director or to the Faculty.

### III. U.S. Embassy Support

In addition to the support of staff of the Study Abroad Program and the Center in Costa Rica, please remember that U.S. Citizens travelling in Costa Rica can also find support and assistance on safety issues with the U.S. Embassy, located in Pavas just outside of San José. Important phone numbers at the Embassy include:

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

The U.S. State Department produces regular, updated information sheets on travel and safety in countries all over the world. This information is available on the Internet, and we strongly recommends you review the following sites pertinent to travel in Costa Rica:

- [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1093.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1093.html)
- [http://travel.state.gov/travel/living/benefits/benefits\\_1242.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/living/benefits/benefits_1242.html)
- <http://usembassy.or.cr/crinfo.html>

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

INTRODUCCION TO RISK MANAGEMENT IN COSTA RICA

**IV. Important Names and Phone Numbers**

Who to call	Name	Phone Number(s)
<b>Director, Study Abroad Program</b>	<b>24 hours response</b>	+1-979-255-6104
Director, Center for Research and Education in Costa Rica	Eugenio Gonzalez	Cell 8325-9898
Manager of the Center in Costa Rica	Johan Rodriguez	Cell 8841-0090
Assistant for Groups, Faculty and Students of the Center	Alberth Rojas	Cell 8930-7424

**Other Important Phone Numbers in Costa Rica:**

All Emergencies 911  
 Local Red Cross Ambulance 2468-0143  
 Local Police Station 2468-0400

United States Embassy  
 American Citizen Services 2220-3050  
 24 Emergency 2220-3127

Clinica Biblica Hospital 2257-5252  
 Dr. Cabezas 2221-3064 or 2221-3922  
 Dr. Longworth 2221-3064 or 2221-3922  
 Dr. Perez Valverde 2221-3922 or 2255-1681

Counseling Services  
 Olga Cristina Redondo, psychologist 2225-4768 (office), 8363-0771 (cell)  
 Luis Carlos Sancho Torres, psychiatrist 2524-0123 (office)