

Societal & Cross-Cultural Reflections

Tip 1 – Tico Culture

One of the biggest adjustments for students coming to Costa Rica will be the culture, though a lot of it can be positive! I imagine most students who jump through all the hoops required to land such a position will generally be quite on the ball. Punctual, diligent, and invested. Some of that will translate well, and some will lead to frustration. There is a concept called “Tico Time”, where everyone will be *at least* 5 minutes late. One time while waiting to be picked up for a day trip, my whole group of interns was waiting on the side of the road for 30 minutes. People here are very easy going, informal, and friendly. Expect locals to greet you with “Buenas” as you pass them, and shops you frequent to remember you. People here are generally quite liberal by American standards, even if they’re Catholic and rural. Peace and nonviolence are important cultural values amongst most Ticos. Of course, it’s never wise to extrapolate this to the entire population, just consider it as a baseline.

Tip 2 – Rain is Real

Expect rain every day. It’s a cloud rainforest after all, so everything will always be wet. On my very first day here I wasn’t prepared, and I was soaking wet head to toe by the end of the day. You walk a lot as a student here, so you can’t shelter in a car either. A rain jacket won’t do, you need a *suite* of gear to handle the moisture here. I recommend a poncho over a rain jacket, because a jacket will get soaked by sweat from the inside. An umbrella is commonly used when you don’t need hands (*i.e. just walking around*) but is difficult to use when it’s windy. A wide brimmed hat will be useful for light rain and sun. Prioritize fast drying clothing made from polyester, nylon, or merino wool as well. You can buy thinly knitted merino wool socks that dry quickly and don’t make your feet hot, they’ve been a life saver. Your shoes will get wet, so bring multiple pairs. It’s possible you’ll need some disinfectant spray and baking soda to clear out the smell if they get wet repeatedly. The institute does have rubber boots you can borrow, but there’s no guarantee for sizing. Bring bag covers or dry bags to keep your stuff dry. Remember also that the best way to dry out clothing is with your own body heat, though it does get cold at night so get dry by then.

Tip 3 – Chaos

The institute is extremely chaotic. This probably relates to Tico culture as mentioned above, but specifically about the institute. When I got here I was stapled to another group of interns who were in turn stapled to another group of interns for a few days,

because my advisor was in San Jose. We never receive written instructions, just verbal chats about what's going to happen in the coming days. To be completely fair to the institute, this is the first year of them doing group style internships so it's all a bit new to everyone. When I was bounced into my permanent group, it was on them to brief me on our projects as the reforestation director was off doing field work. On top of all of that, the Monteverde Institute buzzes with activity due to all the different projects going on. Professors will bring their students here with grants, national geographic groups will come for a few days, and of course all the different interns running around. But sometimes, like as I write this, the institute is actually quite quiet because there are only 26 permanent employees here. It's important to just take it as it comes, be open to meeting new people, and enjoying the experience.

Tip 4 – Finances

Do not expect Costa Rica to be much cheaper than America. The first tip is how to convert to Colones, which is by chopping off 3 zeroes and doubling the number. So, 3,000 colones will be \$6. Also, always choose Colones when they ask you to choose between currencies, because they'll likely charge you for any conversion. Meals here will be slightly cheaper than in the US, but can easily surpass it if you go to a nicer place. Expect to spend \$10-15 dollars whenever eating out. You can save a lot of money by just eating at home and the institute, but there are so many good restaurants around you will likely be tempted. The bus is a great way to get around, specifically Transmonteverde if you're going to Puntarenas or San Jose. Otherwise, an interbus can cost between \$60-200. Another travel expense is for the nature experiences. Many trails, waterfalls, or natural areas charge to get in. Some are cheap, as low as 1,000 colones, while others were as expensive as \$20. Bring your own medications if you can, because while healthcare is free the pharmacy is expensive. I paid 3,000 colones for 6 cough drops. Then of course, there's almost no upper limit for gifts and souvenirs.

Tip 5 – Daily Life

Get ready to walk. As a student here, you cannot drive because of liability mostly. Also, the institute would be slammed by cars if all the students could drive. I've had 24,000 step days when I'm working at the institute then going places afterward. Depending on your homestay expect 15-30 minute walks to work every day, but some students walk as little as 5 minutes or as much as an hour. It's a balancing act though, because being close to the institute means you're far from Santa Elena and all its services!

Hope this helps. Monteverde is amazing, you will love it.