



Advice for **IHCAI FOUNDATION** participants

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Note: added information to the original document are highlighted in BLUE FONT

First of all, congratulations on setting up this rotation or any other IHCAI FOUNDATION program! It takes initiative, organization and persistence, and you are about to be rewarded with an incredible experience you WILL come back a different person, and a better doctor. Not only is Costa Rica a country rich in natural beauty and human warmth, it also has a very interesting medical system – so there are lots to see and do, and its important to be comfortable and safe while you do it! This guide is designed to make preparing for your trip a little easier by complementing the tons of advice you have probably already gathered from helpful friends, family and guidebooks. It contains information specifically for IHCAI FOUNDATION travelers based on my own experience and talking with others I met on my trip in February, 2001. I plan to update it, so if you come up with additional questions or comments, or want to recommend changes to any of the information presented here, please email me at amarmor@earthlink.net

To start off with, one piece of advice on getting the most out of this experience:

For those doing a Clinical Rotation things will happen that you did not plan, and things that you planned will not happen. Enjoy and appreciate this process, take advantage of everything that does happen, and don't dwell too much on what doesn't. ***Pura vida!***

I. What to bring:

A. Clothing

General tips:

Keep in mind that you will be able to do laundry regularly, since you will be staying with a family. Therefore, you do NOT need to bring 36 pairs of underwear, as I did. That said, you WILL need to be prepared for a number of different situations, from working in the hospital or clinic, ***those doing the Medical Spanish Program will need more casual clothing but be prepared for working in a clinic or hospital, your time there is based on your medical Spanish improvement***, but also to hiking in the rainforest, to sunning at the beach. Following is a list of the basics, covering work attire as well as clothing for the usual array of activities. Of course you will need to adjust for your personal sense of style and for any specific activities you plan on enjoying (ie: surfing, rafting, camping out, etc)

1. For work:

Men

Cool, comfortable pants (khakis are fine, shorts and jeans are not for

Clinics and hospitals work)

Short sleeved button down or polo-style shirts

Women

Casual, cool pants, skirts or dresses

Lights shirts/tops (you will be wearing a white coat, so sleeveless is OK!)

A couple of ties (generally not needed day-to-day, One or two fun outfits for dancing or going out but may want to use on occasion)

Comfortable casual shoes

Comfortable, cool shoes, or sandals (open-toed generally OK)

White coat

White coat

Stethoscope

Stethoscope

2. For travel/touring:

Walking sandals (ie: Tevas) good for light hiking, touring

Flip-flops or sandals for the beach

Sneakers or hiking shoes

Several pairs of socks (enough to last for 3 days, they will get wet on trips)

2 bathing suits (for when one is wet!)

Several pairs of shorts, tees, tanks for hiking and athletics

One pair of jeans or sturdy long pants for more vigorous hikes/horseback riding, etc

A light waterproof jacket or poncho with hood

One sweatshirt, fleece pullover or light sweater

Cap or hat for rain/sun

Sunglasses (a cheap pair or two)

A medium-sized backpack or duffel for weekend trips

B. ID/Security

Before you leave, make two photocopies of EVERY piece of identification that you bring on this trip, store one in a safe place at home, bring the second with you and store it separately from your actual documents. Second, dig up any old student ID's you have lying around, they will be useful to you and to others when entering certain parks and museums.

These are the basic pieces of ID you will need:

1. Passport (Visa not needed, unless traveling outside of Central America on the same trip) – you will be able to leave the actual passport in the house most of the time, but carry a photocopy with you at all times. The actual document is needed only for leaving the country and for bank transactions.
2. Driver's license – only if planning to drive/rent a car.
3. Student ID - of any kind, good for discounts at some parks and museums but IHCAI will help you to get good discounts when traveling in the country.

C. Medical supplies

You will be covered for any urgent medical needs or emergencies while you are with IHCAI FOUNDATION. *This coverage is very limited and hospitalization and severe injuries as well as evacuation are not covered included IHCAI advice to all participants to get a Health traveler insurance. IHCAI FOUNDATION has an agreement with a US /Lloyds insurance company based in USA*

You get a quotation at this web site <https://www.worldtrips.com/quotes/default.asp?referid=99690>

There are specific immunizations recommended for traveling to Costa Rica according to WHO regulations for any health Care worker, but you may wish to consider getting the Hepatitis A vaccine if you haven't already. Anti-malarial prophylaxis is not generally recommended. (Clinical Evidence, 2003, BMJ, WHO 2003) CDC recommends Drug Prophylaxis however this is not based in the current Costa Rica Malaria Epidemiology.

Following is a list of basic supplies and medicines that you should consider bringing along with you. Most of these things can also be easily purchased at a well-stocked pharmacy once you arrive, should you forget anything. Also, before you leave, stock up on any daily prescription medicines that you take so you have enough for your entire trip.

Sunscreen (at least SPF 30, the tropical sun is STRONG)

Bug repellent (***This is the Nature of Bugs and insects of Tropical Country. There are bugs in the rain forest but most of them are NOT seriously hazardous for your health but a little uncomfortable sometimes. However if you have a previous medical history of allergies please contact us before your arrival When officially traveling with IHCAI Foundation programs Hotels provide fans air conditioned or screen protected windows.***)

Anti-itch cream (like hydrocortisone) for the bugs you miss

Acetaminophen or ibuprofen

Dramamine (or other motion sickness medicine)

Benadryl or other antihistamine

Pepto bismol – liquid or tablets

Anti-diarrheal (ie: Immodium) (***we at IHCAI recommend when traveling to have oral re-hydrations salts and bottled water instead, it is better than anti-diarrheal)***)

Band-Aids

Vitamins

Tampons/feminine supplies (can also be purchased, but if you have a special brand or type you like, bring it)

Contact lens cleaner and eye drops for lens wearers. You may also want to bring an extra pair or two of lenses!

Ciprofloxacin or other broad spectrum “traveler’s antibiotic” is optional.

D. Books

1. Travel guidebook on Costa Rica (***Now IHCAI has prepared a Travel Guide with specific recommendation for different areas including discounts in the most frequent places, IHCAI offers services as booking and buying bus travel tickets and hotel booking and other new services)***)

2. A compact Spanish-English dictionary – I recommend a real dictionary (such as University of Chicago) not a medical one. You will spend a lot of your time talking about non-medical things!

3. Medical books – The best thing to bring is a general reference handbooks like the Washington Manual (medicine) or Harriet Lane (pediatrics) for reading up on the things you see. Whatever you bring, smaller is better, I DON'T recommend carting a major textbook like Harrison's along with you. However, if you have any older editions of textbooks or handbooks that you don't need any more, bring them, you will be able to give them to students or doctors you meet, most of whom read English.

4. Paperback novels for beach/bedtime - they can also be traded with other travelers when finished.

E. Money

You do a unique payment to IHCAI FOUNDATION at your arrival. You can stay longer with the same family, but you need to contact the IHCAI staff for making the extra payment arrangements. If you are traveling with partner who is not one student or resident and you will stay in the same room the cost for him or she is fine you can negotiate with IHCAI FOUNDATION staff and not directly with the family about this. – Accommodation is arranged by IHCAI with a local middle class family and IHCAI pays directly to the family you don't have to worry about it. You can bring Travelers checks or use your ATM card to get cash or to use your credit card. IHCAI staff takes you to the bank to do only one transactions and the money is deposit within the same bank into the IHCAI bank account. It is safer for you to avoid carrying a large amount of money, we avoid confusion to the families of getting travelers checks cashed, and we avoid other problems. The accommodation includes room, breakfast, dinner, laundry, and moderate local telephone calls. ***IHCAI DOES NOT ACCEPT personal checks or cashier***

Checks the banks in Costa Rica DO NOT accept Personal checks and Cashier Checks need 30 to 45 days to be cleared. IHCAI FOUNDATION does not accept Credit cards. You better bring travelers' checks and you cash them in the bank into the local currency and make a deposit in the IHCAI bank account of course with the assistance of the IHCAI staff.

Family provides good food, laundry and cleaning.

So you can live fairly economically during the week. If you are planning to be away for significant periods of time and do not wish to pay for the time you are not staying in the house, you should bring it up early on to the IHCAI staff they will make all the arrangements with the family and of course you should tell to the family about it. Basic needs such as food and lodging are usually slightly less expensive in CR than they are in the states, while things that are imported from the US, like clothing and CD's, are more expensive. Trips will vary in cost depending on where you stay and how you travel, consult your guidebook or the IHCAI office on where to go and stay.

1. Cash

Thanks to the worldwide invasion of the ATM machine, you no longer need to bring ALL the cash you need for the trip with you. Be sure to bring your ATM card, which can be used to obtain dollars or colones directly from ATM machines or banks. Most of the ATM's in CR accepts cards with a "PLUS" symbol, but you can usually find one that will accept other cards as well. Your US bank will charge a fee per transaction for the use of the foreign ATM (1-3\$) but there should be no commission for the exchange from dollars to colones. Alternatively, many banks will give you a cash advance on your credit card, for a small commission, in addition to whatever is charged by your credit card company. Banks will also cash traveler's checks, for a commission, or change dollars to colones. There is no need to change any money before you leave, dollars can be changed to colones in the airport when you arrive for the best rate.

2. Credit cards

May be used on trips to pay for meals and hotels, but generally not useful in small stores in rural town. Alternatively, may be used to obtain cash from a bank as above.

3. Traveler's checks

Generally not accepted to pay for merchandise, their main advantage is as an emergency source of cash that can't be stolen. But they are accepted and cash in some banks and IHCAI staff will help you to use them when paying the unique payment.

F. Miscellaneous

Portable CD player if you are a music fan – bring some CD's to trade with other students you meet

Camera – even more important than the camera is plenty of film, which is expensive in CR. If you are planning to bring one of those serious cameras with different lenses and stuff, you may want to also bring along a small, light automatic camera for hiking or beach, or to take to work with you.

A medium sized compact towel – for weekend trips, will come in handy for bathroom and beach

A blank journal – useful to keep track of your adventures, and also jot down new words or phrases you learn along the way

Photos of friends and family to share your life in the US, and remind you of home

Gift for host family - not a requirement but a nice thought. Some ideas include: souvenirs from your University/med school, a photo book on your state or city, chocolates or other treats made in your state, craft or art piece made locally. Flowers, plants or a card can be purchased in CR and make a nice gift too, if you don't want to bring anything with you.

Communication:

Language

The Clinical rotations IHCAI 001 IHCAI 002, IHCAI 003 and IHCAI 008 are not designed to teach

you Spanish. You will have a tough time at the beginning if you don't speak any Spanish at all, which shouldn't discourage you from coming, but it's something to be aware of. The tutorials that are offered as part of the above mentioned programs are dialogues and exercises designed to be performed and discussed in Spanish, not to teach basic grammar. They focus on increasing your understanding of some of the typical cultural and medical issues you will encounter in Central America, and on improving your communication with the Spanish-speaking patient.

Currently Intermediate Spanish proficiency is mandatory for doing programmes IHCAI 001, IHCAI 002, IHCAI 003 and IHCAI 008, *However now it is mandatory to have at least beginner intermediate Spanish proficiency to able to do any of the above mentioned programs.*

Participants doing programs IHCAI 010A o IHCAI 010B (Medical Spanish and Introduction to Evidence Based Tropical Medicine are not required to have a previous Spanish level the course is designed for accepting participants with different level of Spanish proficiency, such a beginner, Intermediate and advance levels) If your Spanish is very poor, use the time you have until your departure to learn as much as you can! Everyone should bring along a compact Spanish-English dictionary, you may also want to consider bringing a basic Spanish textbook so that you can continue to teach yourself during your trip. Some of the Costa Rican families speak some English, but there is no guarantee. However, all of the families are eager to communicate, and will help you to practice and improve.

B. Phone:

Your family will provide local calls, but of course international calls are not included. If you have a calling card that covers international calls, bring it. However, be sure to call your long-distance company and find out the specifics on how you will be charged for international calls before using a calling card, to avoid nasty surprises when you return home.

Just for info, most public phones in CR take special phone cards, not coins, but don't feel like you need to purchase one of these cards right away, if you find yourself needing one you can always get one later. For ATT customers, the operator's number is 0-800-0-114-114.

C. Email:

The greatest invention since the passport for the international traveler. Get to know the Internet café near where you live, they usually charge a dollar or two per hour. The local post office may also offer an Internet connection for a small fee.. *You have free access to Internet at the IHCAI FOUNDATION main facilities from 7:30 AM to 5:30 PM from Monday to Friday. You can use the IHCAI FOUNDATION computers or you can use a wireless personal lap top too.*

Before you leave, make sure your current email can be accessed from the Internet. If not, open a free account with hotmail or another provider with Internet access. You may also be able to have your other email forwarded to an internet-accessible account while you are gone.

D. Mail:

Don't underestimate the value of a handwritten postcard to family and friends; even if you're in touch daily by email. Standard mail takes about 7-14 days to get to the US, and usually needs to be sent from the local post office, mailboxes are hard to find. If you need to have something sent to you in CR, find out the address from your family, which will probably read something like "The pink house 36 meters north from the shell station, 100 meters east at the church, next to the large banana tree". Don't worry; it seems to work just fine. Federal Express can send to or from the US urgent packages or letters fairly reliably.

II. Food

Most of your meals, with the exception of lunch, will be shared with your family in their home. Thus if you have any food allergies or requirements, bring them up right away. The food is always lovingly prepared, and the families truly want you to enjoy what you eat, as well as try new



things. Therefore, although it feels awkward to mention you don't like something, it's also important to establish preferences early. Of utmost importance, if you are served something you don't like or can't eat, DON'T say you love it, or you will eat it every day! Leaving some on the plate is usually enough of a signal, but if pressed you can always say it give you a stomachache, you are allergic, or it just doesn't sit well with you. On the other hand, when you encounter something you love, show your appreciation! It is also important to realize that the host families talk to each other, so avoid criticizing the food or care you are receiving from your family in the company of other host families.

Water safety is a legitimate concern in Central America, and there IS a risk of getting a bit of diarrhea from drinking tap water if you are not accustomed to it. In most of the big cities, local residents drink tap water and have no problems. I recommend sticking to bottled water for drinking early on, (keep in mind that tap water may be used to mix instant soft drinks or juices) and if you feel adventurous, try slowly advancing the amount of tap water you take in and see how you do. Most of the people I traveled with were fine with the tap water by the end of the trip.

Well, that's all I could think of. Hope this is helpful, and have a great trip. Pura vida!

