

Frequently Asked Questions

Volunteering, Interning, and/or Studying Abroad at The Cloud Forest School



The following questions are of concern for nearly every applicant. If you have a question that is not in this document, please feel free to contact the Program Coordinator at any time. Email: opportunities@cloudforestschool.org.

1. **[I really want to learn Spanish during my stay. How much of a chance will I have to speak Spanish during my internship/volunteer placement?](#)**
2. **[How does Environmental Education manifest itself into daily life at the CFS/CEC?](#)**
3. **[What is the difference between the volunteer, internship, and study abroad programs?](#)**
4. **[Why aren't volunteers allowed to have classroom access? I just want to help!](#)**
5. **[What kind of visa do I need for my trip?](#)**
6. **[Will I be able to make Costa Rican \(Tico\) friends?](#)**
7. **[How do Costa Ricans \(Ticos\) feel about Americans?](#)**
8. **[What kind of access will I have to internet?](#)**
9. **[Should I bring my laptop?](#)**
10. **[Should I bring my cell phone?/Can I purchase a cell phone to use in Costa Rica?](#)**
11. **[How hard is it to get around once I'm in Monteverde?](#)**
12. **[What is there to do at night and on weekends in Monteverde?](#)**
13. **[What is the weather really like?](#)**
14. **[Is Monteverde safe? Do I have to worry about theft? Can I walk alone? What kind of health care is available?](#)**

1. **I really want to learn Spanish during my stay. How much of a chance will I have to speak Spanish during my internship/volunteer placement?**

In our experience, people who really want to learn the language and are willing to put themselves into situations where they are forced to speak it are able to learn a lot of Spanish here. However, the primary language of instruction at the Cloud Forest School is English, not Spanish. We actually require that volunteers and interns speak only English with students—for their own benefit! Class time should not be thought of as Spanish time. Volunteers work with Tico supervisors and thus have more exposure to Spanish than interns do. Anyone is welcome to take Spanish classes after school and may request a host family that speaks little English. Again, even if your host family resolves to speak only Spanish with you, it is up to *you* to engage in conversation! Since Monteverde and the CFS are very bilingual environments, applicants whose main personal goal is to have a true Spanish immersion experience should know that this may not be the right opportunity for them. [\[Top of page\]](#)

2. **How does Environmental Education manifest itself into daily life at the CFS/CEC?**

Environmental Education manifests itself in academics, school policy, and school culture at the CFS. At the elementary level, academics are divided into 6-week environmental themes that serve as a medium for integrating curriculum from many different subjects. (For example: the first theme for the 4th grade is water. During language arts, they read stories about oceans, rivers and lakes. For math, they made a rain gauge.) Environmental Education classes are given once per week to every grade level, and may encompass a variety of formal lessons or activities with Land Stewardship. We also promote Nature Appreciation by asking our teachers to take their students out into our 106-acre campus often to explore and learn. As school policy, all students are also taught to be conscious of their solid waste through composting, recycling, and reduction of garbage. We also have a food policy on campus that prohibits junk foods (and their packaging, which creates a lot of non-recyclable waste). While it would be unfair to say that every single aspect of school at the CFS has an environmentalist edge, we try to be as green as possible and teach our students to love, appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment. [\[Top of page\]](#)

3. **What is the difference between the volunteer, internship, and study abroad programs?**

These programs differ according to time commitment and responsibilities. Volunteers are required to commit to 3 weeks and they work outside on campus/building maintenance and with Environmental Education classes. Their access to the classroom is restricted and they work mostly alone or with other volunteers. Interns must commit to a minimum of 3 months and work full-time as a teacher's assistant in one or occasionally two classrooms. They work with their lead teacher and the students in that class. Our study abroad program lasts for 4 months and includes 1 month of intensive Spanish classes (off-campus) and 3 months as a teacher's assistant intern. [\[Top of page\]](#)

4. **Why aren't volunteers allowed to have classroom access? I just want to help!**

We know that you just want to help—and thank you for offering your assistance! However, we must restrict access to classrooms to only those interns who can commit to be here for a long period of time (3 months minimum). Classroom community and a sense of permanence are extremely important to the development of a healthy classroom culture. We have found that allowing a pattern of highly transitory adult role models to come and go frequently is detrimental to the class. The CFS already has a high staff turnover, and over 285 volunteers, interns, and visitors passed through our campus in the 2008-2009 school year alone. Thus, for the benefit of our students, we do not allow short-term volunteers and visitors to work with our students. [\[Top of page\]](#)

5. **What kind of visa do I need for my trip?**

US citizens may enter Costa Rica on a tourist visa. You do not need to apply for a tourist visa—you will receive a dated stamp in your passport upon going through CR customs and this is your "visa." It is valid for 90 days, at which point you must leave the country for a minimum of 72 hours. (You may either go home or take a trip to Nicaragua or Panama. We do a trip to Nicaragua once per semester for volunteers and interns to a

language school in Laguna de Apoyo. Ask the Program Coordinator if you are interested in participating in this trip.) **Important:** when you leave the United States you will likely have to present a “proof of departure” to show that you will not exceed your 90 day tourist visa. For most people, this is a return flight that leaves within 90 days of your entry. If your return flight exceeds 90 days but you plan to go on the Nicaragua trip with the school, ask the Program Coordinator for a letter which states your obligation to leave Costa Rica—this will help you get through customs. [\[Top of page\]](#)

6. Will I be able to make Costa Rican (Tico) friends?

This is highly dependent on your personality. If you are outgoing and persistent then you may have luck making Tico friends. If you like to go out at night, dance, explore, and chat with strangers back home, you’re more likely to meet locals here as well. Speaking Spanish is also a big help. Remember, though, that Monteverde is a tourism town and that many locals may not distinguish you from a regular tourist at first glance. For this reason, most international residents have found that making Tico friends in Monteverde takes far longer than just a few months. [\[Top of page\]](#)

7. How do Costa Ricans (Ticos) feel about Americans?

There is very little anti-US sentiment in Costa Rica, and even less in Monteverde due to the positive influence of the Quaker population. In general, US citizens are viewed as wealthy and thus are subject to getting scammed on prices. US women in particular tend to be viewed as flirtatious and “easy,” which attracts lots of attention from Tico men and can cause resentment among Tica women. For the most part, however, Costa Ricans are friendly and welcoming to US citizens. [\[Top of page\]](#)

8. What kind of access will I have to internet?

In general, internet is harder to come by and much slower as compared to that which is available in the United States—Costa Rica is still a developing nation! The chances of having internet access at your homestay are slim to none. However, we have wireless access at the school as well as a computer lab which you are welcome to use. School internet is for email and web-based research only—no uploading or downloading. There are several restaurants and cafes in Santa Elena with free or low-fee wi-fi, as well as many Internet Cafes which you can pay to use. [\[Top of page\]](#)

9. Should I bring my laptop?

You may, and many people do. It comes in handy when you have access to a wi-fi signal. Bringing your laptop, however, means that you must be vigilant for rain and theft. Theft is rare in Monteverde ([see question 14](#)), but is much more common in bus stations and at public places in other parts of Costa Rica. Rain is a constant concern—if you plan to bring a computer, be sure to back up your hard drive before you leave home and bring your computer in a waterproof case. Another option is to invest in a “mini-laptop,” most of which have wi-fi capabilities and can be purchased for less than \$300.00 (used—Amazon.com). [\[Top of page\]](#)

10. Should I bring my cell phone?/Can I purchase a cell phone to use in Costa Rica?

Monteverde is located up in the mountains—cell phone service is pretty good in town and at the school, but it's not available everywhere and might not be available at your homestay. Check with your cell phone provider to see if they will support an international plan on "ICE," the Costa Rican cell service company. Don't plan on purchasing a phone once you're here—only Costa Rican citizens and legal residents may register for a cell phone plan. [\[Top of page\]](#)

11. How hard is it to get around once I'm in Monteverde?

Not hard at all if you're a fan of walking! Honestly, most people who live in Monteverde are used to walking 20-40 minutes to get just about anywhere—their job, the store, the internet café, a friend's house, etc. The roads are unpaved and rocky (not to mention muddy at times) and the terrain is often steep and hilly. Taxis are available and reliable, but the fees can add up. The school bus route comes within 10 minutes' walk of all homestays for trips to and from school and there is a shuttle from Santa Elena to the Monteverde Reserve that runs every 2 hours, but there are no other regularly used public transportation options in the Monteverde zone. [\[Top of page\]](#)

12. What is there to do at night and on weekends in Monteverde?

Monteverde is a small town, but we know how to have fun! There are a few bars downtown (four to be exact), all of which have drinks, music, and lots of Latino dancing. National and international soccer games are usually shown on big screen TVs here and the entire town attends. But don't be surprised if you see school parents and even high school students out at the bars with you!

There's a lot to do in Monteverde for folks who like to be active and spend time outdoors. Hiking, bird-watching, horseback riding, soccer, Frisbee, yoga, dancing, and exploring are all great ways to spend a Saturday. You can take classes at an art, pottery, yoga, or dance studio, go on guided hikes in the Reserve and explore the local tourist attractions (Frog Pond, Insect World, Waterfall, Coffee Tours, Snake House, Butterfly Garden, etc.). Plus, there always seems to be something going on in the way of live music or drama performances. Keep an ear out and check bulletin boards and telephone poles for flyers. [\[Top of page\]](#)

13. What is the weather really like?

Honestly, it depends on when you're here. It would be wrong to say that the "dry" season and the "rainy" season are well-defined and absolute. They blend seamlessly into one another such that the daily rains get longer and longer from June through August, reaching a peak in September and October where it may literally rain—**hard**—*for days on end without stopping*. Then the rains will get shorter and shorter until dry season reaches a peak in March and April. The streets will be choked with dust, and you will want sunglasses and sunscreen every day. Then the cycle begins again. Either way, rainy season or dry season, it is humid year-round and remember that you will have to walk everywhere; so don't skimp on appropriate clothing and gear. [\[Top of page\]](#)

14. Is Monteverde safe? Do I have to worry about theft? Can I walk alone? What kind of health care is available?

Monteverde is a very safe place. There have been isolated incidences of home robbery, mostly targeted at transient foreigners who are assumed to be rich and may be on a predictable schedule (such as the CFS's). Local homes, however, are very rarely broken into and this makes homestays a safe place to live and keep your personal belongings. If you plan to travel during a school vacation, the Program Coordinator can lock your valuables up at the main office where they will be protected by an alarm and a 24-hour guard.

Incidences of violent crime are extremely rare and are generally crimes of passion. Thankfully, there is virtually no mugging or pick-pocketing in Monteverde either—though the same cannot be said about many other parts of Costa Rica. You should be far more vigilant of your personal belongings when you travel!

You should feel safe walking alone in Monteverde in any neighborhood, even during the evenings. (There is no “bad part of town.”) Late at night, however, you may want to either find a walking buddy or pay extra for a late-night taxi.

There is excellent health care available in Monteverde. “Emergencias Monteverde” is a 24-hour private clinic with English-speaking doctors. They can conduct lab work and write prescriptions to the local pharmacy in Santa Elena, and also have EMTs and an ambulance available for serious injuries or illnesses that require treatment in San Jose. Most health insurance companies will reimburse their clients for a trip to this clinic, which costs roughly \$65.00. There are also 3 professional dentists and a private gynecologist/obstetrician practice in Monteverde. [\[Top of page\]](#)