

# Sojourn in the Clouds

Reflections from the Cloud Forest School



*The Cloud Forest School sits upon a 100+acre campus of converted pastureland and rainforest, nestled at the top of Costa Rica's northwest Tilaran mountain range.*

*This view is from the kiosco, an open-air classroom built alongside one of many miles of hiking trails in our school forest. The buildings seen in the photo are part of our colegio.*

## so·journ

Pronunciation: \ˈsō-,jərn\

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English *sojorn*, from Anglo-French *sujur*, *sujurn*, from *sujurner*

Date: 13th century

: a temporary stay

Dear Prospective Visiting Families and Exchange Students,

An authentic world classroom comes to life at the Cloud Forest School in Monteverde, Costa Rica. For families and high school exchange students who possess interest in exploring and *living* a new culture, the Cloud Forest School provides both an academic framework and a community in which to base an unforgettable lifetime adventure.

Monteverde is renowned for its unique biodiversity, surrounded by tens of thousands of acres of conserved tropical cloud forest. Our town of 5,000 people is comprised of local Costa Ricans and North/South American and European nationals who have made Costa Rica their home. Art, music, yoga, dance, hiking, birdwatching, organic farming, fair trade coffee and the nation's best ice cream all converge within a magnificent natural ecosystem, making Monteverde a dynamic and safe place to live.

The Cloud Forest School, locally known as the Centro de Educacion Creativa, is a bilingual Pre-K through 11th grade independent school that offers education to 200 students annually. While 90% of our students are local Costa Ricans, the Cloud Forest School has long welcomed visiting families and high school exchange students to our mountaintop campus.

As you consider embarking upon a semester or a year abroad, we invite you to read *Sojourn In the Clouds*, writings and reflections from past visitors who have called Monteverde - and the Cloud Forest School - home. We warmly welcome you to contact us at any point along your journey so that we may be of further assistance.

Office of Admissions and International Education

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## A One Year Investment Lasts a Lifetime

Page-Salisbury family (2004)

Seattle, WA

USA

People often ask why we wanted to live in Central America with our three kids for a year, and my initial response is always, “As a parent I hate lecturing, and Monteverde saved me a lot of it. Instead of endlessly talking about cultural differences and the many ways to live a life...we lived it!”

While my initial, glib response is true, our family’s year in Costa Rica was also much more than that. That year continues to form who we are, in the world and with each other. Having spent ten months making wonderful friends who differ from us (economically, culturally, politically) much more than our friends do back home, we now think differently about what makes people happy, and who might be authentic “friend material”. Having faced the challenges of learning a whole new world together, we became and remain closer as a family because of it. We rely on each other better now because we had to learn creative ways to do so as we navigated Central American culture. (One late, exhausted that year, traveling to Panama at the beginning of a school break, there was a problem with the kids’ passports. We were about to be turned back at the border, hours from a place to sleep, when our daughter, then 13 and having acquired more Spanish than her parents, picked up her sleepy little sister and approached the desk. Shamelessly using a 5-year-old as a prop, Hannah talked us through immigration, and into the country.)

Our youngest started Kindergarten at the CEC, our middle 5<sup>th</sup> grade and our eldest, High School. For one golden year, all three of our kids attended the same school...walked to school together, knew each other’s friends, and had opportunities to take care of each other that are simply harder to come by in our urban life in the States. We as parents (on sabbatical!) stood back and marveled at the genuine work our children had to put into their year abroad- we witnessed their challenges, their stunning successes, and always, their constant growth.

We often talk about how the 1-year investment we made as a family abroad continues to provide us with returns. We arrived knowing no one, but the CEC was our gateway to the Monteverde community - both *Tico* and International. We weren’t tourists - we were residents. Best of all, the relationships remain. Six years later, our son is back in Monteverde in 2010 as a High School Sophomore, living with his best friend from the CEC for an entire semester. His weekly reports show us he is absolutely at home - in his *Tico* family, in the language he now speaks and reads fluently, and in himself in this wide world.



## A Cohesiveness and Peace

Spradlin Family (2005)

Athens, GA

USA

Days begin early in Costa Rica, and our family was no exception. Our boys arose with the sun (and often with the howler monkeys) and from there we began our everyday quest to ensure everyone had clean teeth, clean clothes, and food for the day. Unlike our lives in the United States, where we all go separate ways to three respective schools, 2005 was a family affair. Our three boys walked down a quiet dirt road admiring a towering fig tree or toucanettes on their way to catch the bus. The bus rides were filled with conversations in English and Spanish, and we often considered with amazement at how those vehicles functioned in a mountainous area of Central America. Our children loved sharing their school with us, and we loved experiencing it through their eyes. We saw them climb guava trees with the *Tico* children, scurry up strangler figs, and take us to see their nature art projects in the school's forest.

Educators by profession, it was amazing for us to watch the birth of a second language in our children. Our oldest, who was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and equally relaxed as outgoing, had a relatively seamless transition from Georgia to Monteverde. He entered into a class where the *Tico* 3<sup>rd</sup> graders already spoke a basic level of English, and he began to learn as much Spanish on the playground as from his Spanish teacher. Our twins, a little more reticent by nature, entered into 1<sup>st</sup> grade and were a bit shocked that their classmates were just learning to speak English and that many still preferred to speak Spanish. It took them a full semester to reach a comfort level with their classmates and the bilingual education that was a part of their daily lives. In fact, they all began to boast they knew much more Spanish than we did during the second semester and were not hesitant to use it when needed in the community.

As any family can recognize, daily living plus a new school is energy-intensive; adjustment to a new culture and learning to live without conveniences was certainly challenging at first. The historic 5 weeks of rain in Sept-Oct. 2006 made us all somewhat irritable - but even when that got bad, we headed to the beach for a much needed respite and partook in play in the salty Pacific. Our year abroad gave our family a cohesiveness and peace, in that we slowed down our lives and learned about the ins and outs of a new culture and language together. The smaller community of our family and the larger and supportive community of the Cloud Forest School helped to make our sojourn abroad an unforgettable time in our lives.

**A Community Asset**  
Shannon family (2006)  
Cazenovia, NY  
USA

In the summer of 2002, I first visited Monteverde as a visiting landscape architecture professor at the Monteverde Institute (MVI), where I helped teach a course in sustainable design and community planning. As it happened, one of our projects centered on assisting the Cloud Forest School/Centro de Educación (CFS/CEC) to develop a master plan for the build out of their central campus. Immediately, the school captured both our students' and my imagination - this was a place that didn't just foster a unique learning environment, it aspired to model a brighter and greener future for the community and all the families touched by it.

2006 brought an entirely different exposure to the CFS/CEC, however, one that continues to shape our commitment to both the school and the people who are a part of it. I took a sabbatical leave from my position with the State University of New York, and moved my family to the cloud forest for a year while I worked on projects with MVI. My son, then 8, attended third grade at the CFS/CEC, and it remains the year he uses as a benchmark for his "ideal" school experience. The combination of a superb young teacher, and the comparative freedom afforded a "kid in the cloud forest" was perfect for my son. He still chafes at the teachers here in upstate New York who, while well meaning, cannot tolerate his love for climbing trees, cultivated by practically living in them during recess at the CFS/CEC! In addition to gaining an appreciation for all things arboreal, our son picked up a practical knowledge of Spanish, a deep appreciation for nature, and a love of reading that will each serve him a lifetime. He arrived reading little more than Dr. Suess, and he left reading Harry Potter and National Geographic. Academically, it was a great year for our son, but culturally, it was every bit as formative. He struggled at first with making friends, in that we lived in a predominantly *Tico* neighborhood in Santa Elena, and his developing Spanish skills left him uncomfortable with the kids near our home. However, by the time we left a year later, he spent almost every afternoon out exploring with two local CFS/CEC classmates. Seeing the CFS/CEC working up close, participating in school events- all these things have reinforced my initial impressions of this unique school.

Over the years, I keep seeing how valuable the CFS/CEC is to everyone it touches - the teachers, their families, the people who work in the office and on the grounds, and particularly, the kids who get an education that isn't just unusual, it is really quite unique. It certainly isn't perfect - the CFS/CEC suffers all the little crises and dramas that any school does, and sometimes even more, in that finances in this nonprofit school are always seemingly hanging on a shoestring and a prayer. But in the end, it remains a remarkable part of a remarkable place, and an unbelievably important community asset.

**On Exchange**  
High School Junior (2007)  
Saint Andrews-Sewanee School, TN  
USA

It has been 8 months since my arrival here in Costa Rica, and although the time has flown by, I feel like I belong here. As I stepped on the airplane, leaving the face of my mom behind, my veins were pumping full of adrenalin and nervousness but those feelings were short-lived. I found myself surrounded by newfound friends everywhere I went in my first month in Monteverde. Begin surrounded by a lush tropical forest was a huge change from the colorful deciduous trees surrounding my home in Sewanee, TN. I was mesmerized by the fact that I could walk down the road and sometimes see a sloth hanging on a branch over my head, or hear a howler monkey howling in the forest next to me.

I am lucky to have found myself in such a loving host family; my host sisters have acted as any sisters would and my two host brothers have given me the new experience of having to live with two younger brothers. I am almost as comfortable with my family here as I am with my family back home. Exploring Monteverde with my friends and family has opened my eyes to many cultural differences, but similarities as well. I am glad that I was offered this chance to study abroad, and feel like I have benefitted from it greatly. It will be hard to go home.



**A Rich Place to Live**  
St.Clair family (2008-2010)  
Great Britain, by way of Granada, Spain

The Monteverde/Santa Elena area is a rich place to live. It is rare to find such a small community that is so vibrant with people from all walks of life and with such a variety of passions, from biology to farming, politics or the arts.

One feels close to the elements in Monteverde. Rain tends to be torrential and wind is such a permanent feature that it is hard, on the rare, still, silent mornings when the sunshine warms the ground, not to feel a sense of intense calm. People here walk a lot, at any time of day or night. One of the consequences of this is an acute awareness of the cycles of the moon.

The CEC itself has been quite an experience, from the idyllic representations and imaginings from a distance, to the more inchoate reality on the ground. The campus is indeed truly "magical". The teaching approach has tended to be open-minded and flexible. Compared to the more rigid school system my children left in Spain, the preschool and elementary school has offered them the freedom to explore education in their own individual ways, whether in the classroom or outside. It is not uncommon for my daughter to return home wearing her spare set of clothes, with a dirt-encrusted outfit stuffed inside her backpack. The transition from the daily morning ritual of tearing myself away from crying children, to have my daughter complain that there is no school on the weekend, has been a boon.

The main problems of the school could be said to stem from the high employee turnover, both among the teaching and administrative staff. A high percentage of teachers stay only for a year or two, which endows the CEC with much enthusiasm and plenty of fresh talent but unfortunately, little continuity. The small body of long-term teaching staff are truly gifted and dedicated but arguably, far too few in number.

As a consequence, my children have had to learn to be adaptable, to establish meaningful relationships and then let go. They have learned that the upside of this constant movement is that as old friends and teachers leave, new ones invariably arrive. In some ways this constant stream of people can feel like one is enjoying the social life of a city whilst soaking up the thirst-quenching tranquility of the forest.

**A Degree of Freedom**  
Carpenter-Koch family (2008)  
Washington State  
USA

When our family started planning a year abroad, my boss advised me to wait a few years until I was eligible for a sabbatical. But a friend of mine insisted that we leave while our daughters were relatively young (five and twelve). Actually, what she said was, “Go while they still like you.”

We had heard good things about Monteverde, and all that remained was to choose which school our children would attend. I was leaning towards the Monteverde Friends School, founded by the original Quakers in the area, but my husband voted for the Cloud Forest School. I decided to appeal to my twelve-year-old’s sense of logic and reason. “Which would you rather have”, I asked her innocently, “a tranquil, orderly, peaceful school...or chaos?” My daughter didn’t hesitate, “Total chaos.” Total chaos is certainly an exaggeration; there are plenty of rules, procedures, and routines at the Cloud Forest School, especially in the younger grades. The *Colegio* (7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> grade) students consistently pass the *Bachillerato*, a battery of rigorous high school exit exams required by the Costa Rican government . However, there is a degree of freedom at the Cloud Forest School that, while not everyone’s cup of tea, has been beneficial to our children.

Our kindergartener has plenty of structured and unstructured play time with her Costa Rican classmates. Recess takes place not in a sterile, paved play area with OSHA-approved wood chips below a lawsuit-proof jungle gym, but on a rough, grassy slope with not only play equipment but trees to climb and mud to dig in. Our little one, who used to go into hysterics every time she saw an ant, clamored to hold the large, creepy-looking katydid at her class visit to the local Insectarium. At about the 5 month mark, her Spanish really began taking off and at year’s end is chattering and shouting to her friends like any native speaker.

Our seventh-grader is in the *Colegio* and while hers is less of a Spanish immersion experience, as most of her classes are in English, I have it on good authority that her Spanish is excellent (though never within our earshot; that would currently be “too embarrassing”). After school, she and her friends can often be found climbing a strangler fig in the nearby woods—the tree is hollow in the middle, and bigger kids can tunnel up the inside to emerge in the canopy fifty feet above the forest floor. During the school day, I often hike, study Spanish, or volunteer at the school. My husband has spent countless hours with his “own” machete, clearing overgrown trails way above campus, some of which extend miles over to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve.

Aside from the *Tico* culture, what we most enjoy in Monteverde is that one can be outside almost all the time with its mild climate. In a short walk from our *Tico* neighborhood, we are able to find weird bugs, exotic birds, and if we were patient, mammals. We need to steel ourselves for our return - and learn how to bring back and nurture this piece of paradise inside of us. Our two daughters have experienced the return of the Resplendant Quetzals in March, and know what it is like to receive 8 feet of rain rather than 8 inches in one year. This discrepancy in these two numbers represents just how different this last year has been for us. It was a good change. We are glad to have had it.



## Imagine

Garcia family (2009)

Espanola, NM

USA

Imagine a school in the cool, misty world of the cloud forest. Imagine a school whose outdoor hallways are shared with the occasional capuchin monkey or looking outside your classroom window at a lazy three toed sloth that is sleeping in a tree. Imagine science class in the cloud forest where toucans and thousands of species of insects, birds, and plant species surround you...a school where hummingbirds hover over the brilliantly colored flowers and where organic gardens, composting and recycling are common place. Imagine a school where giant trees are filled with orchids, mosses, ferns, and whose well-marked trails lead you through forests to streams and meadows.

My three teenage sons, aged 16 (twins) and 17 and I didn't need to imagine this school - we were a part of it! In need of a great adventure, my sons and I decided to spend a year in Costa Rica, or the Centro de Educacion Creativa (CEC) as it is known locally in Monteverde. What an adventure it was!

We lived in the town of Santa Elena among the locals, and my sons and I easily integrated into the simple living of the area. We lived without a car, TV, microwave, cell phone, and sometimes hot water, and we never missed any of them. The gentle, caring, warm-hearted people we came to call our neighbors quickly became our family abroad. They not only shared their culture with us, they also shared their hearts. My sons studied at the CFS/CEC and they learned to speak Spanish, played soccer, danced, hiked, and made lifelong friends.

Our year abroad experience changed us. We came to appreciate the simple but "light" life that is led in Monteverde, and all throughout Costa Rica. We learned here people here work for a living, not for always for "things". They are happy, healthy, and educated. We have come home knowing that the most important things in life are not material, but are people and experiences. We learned about social harmony, about tolerance, and mostly about ourselves.

## The Simple Details in Life

Hatch family (2009)

Colorado Springs, CO

USA

When my husband proposed that we spend his sabbatical in Monteverde, Costa Rica in 2009, I worried that five months would be too long for our daughters, ages 8 and 6, to be away from home. By December, the month we needed to return to the U.S., none of us wanted to leave the Centro de Educacion Creativa (CEC) or Monteverde.

Our adventure began on the internet when my husband, stumbled upon the website for the CFS/CEC, a school that emphasizes bilingual and environmental education in the cloud forest of Monteverde. If we were to leave the comforts of our life in Colorado, this was a place seemingly worthy of any risk involved. During our short time in Monteverde, we gained more than we ever could have imagined from our experience.

We grew to appreciate the simple details in life as we let go of the unnecessary. Without a car, we walked two miles to the *feria* every Saturday morning for fresh fruits and vegetables; we have yet to taste sweeter watermelon or better mangoes. Living close to the *fabrica*, we watched the milk delivered every morning via ox cart or horseback that we then purchased as fresh milk and ice-cream. When we needed a cab ride, we all learned how to give directions in Spanish. We listened to the chirping crickets as we drifted into a deep sleep at night, and awoke early to the guttural calls of howler monkeys or the trills of exotic birds. We always thrilled at seeing a resplendent quetzal hidden in a tree canopy or a toucan fly past our kitchen window.

From the first day at the CFS/CEC, both girls felt welcomed to the 100-plus acres of cloud forest that would become their classroom for the semester. Our daughters enjoyed planting seeds and saplings in the school greenhouse and gardens, though both regret we weren't there for the spring harvest that sends produce home with the children; however, they did get to climb the numerous fruit trees on campus and routinely picked fresh guavas for snack time, preferring the bitter fruit to their prepared lunches. Both our girls eagerly learned the *bastonera* routine for the Independence Day parade on September 15, and proudly twirled their batons from Cerro Plano to Santa Elena with fellow Costa Rican students.

While neither girl spoke Spanish upon our arrival to Monteverde, both cherished their daily time with their Spanish as a Second Language teacher. Using games and conversation, she enabled both girls to comprehend and speak conversational Spanish within four months; our 8 year old was writing paragraphs using both future and past tenses when she left! We appreciated that many of the young Costa Rican children spoke Spanish on the playground, providing a practical context for the Spanish our daughters were learning in class.

Now that we are back in Colorado, not a day goes by without one of our children asking when we can return to Monteverde, or wondering if they can attend school there again soon. Our time on the "Green Mountain" was truly a gift, and every picture we look at or Spanish word we speak or hear transports us back to our magical time made special by the incredibly kind people we had the privilege to meet and call our friends.