

FAQ's

What makes our program different from other programs?

Partners of the Americas originated in 1964 under President John F. Kennedy's administration. "Partnering" states in America with Latin American countries enabled the two to form friendships, cultural exchanges, and assistance in various forms. Under this program, Oregon was partnered with Costa Rica. The original exchanges were between businessmen and politicians but then expanded to include senior citizens, teacher and student programs.

In 1966, Mrs. Margaret Byers, a Salem Spanish teacher, took five boys and five girls for a few weeks to stay in Costa Rica. A few years later, the Partners of the Americas Oregon--Costa Rica High School Exchange Program began. It has expanded to two full months and up to 25 students.

Partners of the Americas is a non-profit organization made up of several committees of volunteers: students, teachers, schools, business people, professionals and families--all interested in promoting increased understanding and cooperation between Oregon and Costa Rica.

Because we are a non-profit organization comprised mainly of volunteers we are able to keep the cost of the program relatively low while offering a high quality exchange experience. The volunteers are former travelers, former chaperones, parents of travelers, and others with a passion for Costa Rica and intercultural exchanges.

Screening/vetting of host families

What are the requirements for being a host family? What is the process for selecting and how do you do your best to get it right?

The Costa Rican committee looks for the same qualities in families that we do here - a safe and welcoming family and environment. Each family will have a high school aged Costa Rican student and they also look for common interests to make the best matches they can. The director of the Costa Rican committee has been doing this for many years and his experience helps immensely when choosing families. The committee in Costa Rica visits and interviews each family to ensure we are selecting quality families. Their goal is for all concerned to have the best experience possible. There is no magic formula, but our success rate of satisfied families & students is very high.

Have you encountered situations where you did not feel like a host family met expectations and what process exists for dealing with that?

There have been situations in which the host family and student were not a good match and the student was moved to a different family. The chaperones facilitate this process in conjunction with the Costa Rican committee.

What range of lifestyles should we expect (availability of basic utilities, living situation, privacy, phone, internet)?

This varies greatly across the country. Some students will live with families who are economically well-off, others will be with families of more humble means. Regardless of their SES it is required that students have their own beds (they may share a room with a sibling of the same gender), basic utilities (water, electricity, heat) are a must, in nearly all situations someone in the family will have a phone (often times, as in the US, there are several phones in the household), internet is available in most homes, if not in the home then the school or at an internet cafe.

Can travelers live with a student he/she hosted?

Yes, both the traveler and Costa Rican family must request each other in the application.

Emergencies

What methods are available for travelers to reach help during an emergency or crisis?

The chaperones are always available by phone and travel to the student in case of an emergency. Each student carries a card with the chaperone's phone number, the Costa Rican coordinator's phone number, and "911" equivalent number.

Upon arrival the chaperones will register the students with the US Embassy in Costa Rica. U.S. consular officers assist Americans who encounter serious legal, medical, or financial difficulties. By registering with the embassy, travelers can receive assistance in the case of country-wide emergencies.

What is the process when something goes wrong? What is the protocol when a traveler is the victim of a crime?

We expect the student or their host family to contact the chaperones. The situation will dictate the protocol. For example, if there is a misunderstanding/miscommunication between the traveler and host family the chaperones will mediate the situation. If problems persist, the Costa Rican coordinator will become involved. The US parents will be kept informed as the situation develops.

We cooperate with the police when the crime is of that stature. If the student is injured we get medical care.

Are there cultural differences that present risks we need to be aware of?

There are inevitably cultural differences, but none that present safety risks. In our preparations with the students, we describe, they role play, and hear from former travelers about the cultural differences and how to deal with different situations that may occur while they're in CR.

Health & Safety

What do we need to know about access to health facilities?

Costa Rica has very good private and public health care. Same day care is available and of high quality. There is usually a clinic available within walking distance of most every home. Prior to travel families must check with their insurance providers to ensure medical coverage abroad. If students have severe

medical issues (allergies are the most common that we see on the program) we will make sure they are living in an area with convenient and reliable medical access.

What health related considerations does your organization take into account with travelers (specific health issues, general health issues related to Costa Rica travel, emergency medical information, etc.)?

We require doctor's reports with the application and ask students and parents to reveal medical conditions to us. During the orientations, students will receive detailed information about precautions to take before and during travel.

Does your organization cover things like how to get from point A to point B safely?

Through this experience we expect students to grow and become more independent; however, we require that students travel/are with a member of their host family at all times, unless they are with a committee member (this includes even short distances).

Are there regional practices for drivers or pedestrians that present safety issues that travelers need to be aware of?

Pedestrians must take much greater precautions when around traffic and not assume a driver will stop for a pedestrian. However, most areas have sidewalks which are pedestrian safe.

During the overnight orientation we also coach students to say no to getting into a vehicle if they question the safety of the driver.

Contact with Family

What should we expect about our ability to contact our daughter/son or for her/him to contact us (letter, phone, e-mail, facebook, etc.)?

Parents will be given the traveler's host family's phone numbers. We recommend travelers limit their contact with family/friends in the US because it may increase homesickness and/or remove them from activities with their Costa Rican family. She/he will have email access either at home or near home and may email or facebook, though we strongly recommend travelers limit the amount of time on the internet and engage with their host family as much as possible. The mail system can be very slow so sending letters may not be an effective way to communicate.

Chaperones

How many travelers does each chaperone have and how often do they typically check in?

Two chaperones travel with the group (up to 25 travelers may go) and they check-in with each student by phone at least weekly, more often as necessary. Chaperones will also visit each student at least once.

After 4 weeks all of the travelers and chaperones spend the night together and debrief about the experience thus far.

The chaperones will email the program coordinator weekly updates during the summer, who will forward the messages to parents. The program coordinator in Oregon will be available by phone or email through the duration of the exchange and can contact the chaperones.

What experience do you require of chaperones in handling situations if/when something goes wrong?

The chaperones will address each situation with the student's best interest in mind. Chaperones will work with the student's host family to resolve issues that may arise and will travel to the student if the situation requires. (Generally the chaperones will travel by bus to visit students, but if there is an urgent need to arrive quickly, a member of the Costa Rican committee will assist with the trip or the chaperones will rent a car).

What are the requirements for being a chaperone?

Chaperones must have experience working with students, speak Spanish, have travel experience in Latin America. They are interviewed, references are checked, and they are observed interacting with the students before they are selected as a chaperone. Most often chaperones are educators and have therefore received a background check as well.

Hosting

Who can be a host family?

Any family with a high school aged student may apply to host. Potential host families must complete an application and will be interviewed by a committee member. Host families do not need to speak Spanish; the objective of the Costa Rican travelers is to improve their English.