



Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation

Tropical Conservation Semester

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

We are so excited you will be joining a Ceiba Foundation expedition to the tropics! Below you will find answers to many of the most commonly asked questions. More information and up-to-date details can always be found on our website, ceiba.org/tcs.

When should I arrive?

You will receive from Ceiba the recommended date for arrival in Ecuador. If you arrive on this date will be met at the airport by your host family and staff from the international programs office at the University of San Francisco de Quito (USFQ). If you must travel on a different date, please contact Ceiba to make arrangements for your arrival and meeting your host family.

What if my plane is early or late?

Most flights from the U.S. arrive in the evening or at night. We routinely check with all airlines before meeting students at the airport, so most likely we will know about your schedule changes by the time you arrive. If for any reason you do not encounter someone at the airport to meet you, go to the information desk in the airport and ask them to call the Ceiba program teaching assistant or instructors using the Emergency Contact card you will receive prior to travel.

What do I do when I arrive at the airport in Quito?

The airport in Quito is small and straightforward. After deplaning, you will go through passport control (migración) where you should indicate that you are visiting on tourist visa (consult pre-departure visa instructions for more details on this process). Proceed to the baggage carousel to retrieve your luggage. You will then go through customs, where agents will check your baggage tags and may search your belongings. A USFQ program coordinator, most likely with a member of your host family, will meet you just inside the exit of the international terminal (there is only one exit). Since many international flights tend to arrive at the same time, the exit is usually crowded and bustling. Look for the person holding a sign with your name or USFQ or Ceiba on it. You will then be transported to your host family's home.

How do I get to orientation?

You will receive a detailed orientation schedule and instructions about getting to orientation sometime before your arrival. Your host family will instruct you on the best way to get to USFQ (by bus, taxi, trolley and/or walking); often host families will bring you to USFQ themselves on the first day. It is your responsibility to arrive on time to orientation, so leave plenty of time for navigating the public transportation system on the first day!

How can I communicate with my family and friends while away?

Host families, the USFQ campus, and most restaurants and cafes will have wi-fi access. You can communicate using messaging or other apps such as Whatsapp, Skype, Snapchat, etc., and through email. You will have no problem finding access to email while in Cumbaya (the town where USFQ, and many host families, are located). You or your family in the US may also consider an international calling card for making calls back and forth, there are many providers of this service.

Should I purchase a cell phone in Ecuador?

USFQ will distribute local cell phone SIM cards to all students, which you can use on an inexpensive prepaid plan, as long as you bring a cell phone unlocked for international use. Some host families may also be able to loan you a phone for local use, and you can buy a phone in Ecuador (though they can be more expensive than at home). Talk to your cellular provider to make sure you can use an international carrier's SIM card (Claro and Movistar are the biggest providers in Ecuador).

Should I bring my laptop?

It is not required to have a personal computer for this program. That said, many students enjoy the added flexibility and convenience of having their laptop, especially while in Cumbaya. You must balance the convenience with the risk of damage or theft. Some course assignments require you to use a computer, and there are computer labs on the USFQ and GAIAS campuses that you may use for this purpose. Alternatively, there are many inexpensive internet cafés with computers very close to campus. At the Tiputini Biodiversity Station in the Amazon, occasionally students will choose to bring their own laptop due to limited computer availability there. If you bring your own laptop to the Amazon, you have to take extra care to protect it from the high humidity and heat. Likewise, heat, humidity and salt water all pose risks for your computer in Galapagos. The GAIAS station on Galapagos has a large computer lab that is open on weekdays, and there also are internet cafés in town. In short, if you have a laptop, it probably is a good idea to bring it as long as you are willing to accept the risks; if you don't own a laptop, there are plenty of other alternatives for obtaining access to computers.

Will my electronic devices work in Ecuador?

Ecuador's national electric grid is 110 volts, just as in the US and Canada. Thus, chargers for your camera, music player, computer, and other electronic devices will work just fine.

How much money should I bring?

It depends on how frugal you are, what your entertainment budget is, and how much shopping you do! Consult the UW Study Abroad program page Cost Sheet for their estimate of post-departure, based on the experiences of prior students. At minimum, you'll need to bring enough for riding the bus to and from campus (\$1.00 round trip), eating snacks and lunch on campus during the periods that we hold class there, and purchase of personal items. There may be a fee to extend your visa (this requirement varies from year to year, and even student to student, welcome to Ecuador!), typically around \$120. Most students also allocate

some funds for entertainment (cinema, sightseeing, etc.), cell phone minutes, snacks and other beverages purchased outside of meal times, gifts, and any additional travel during free weekends, and Spring break.

Should I bring cash, credit, or debit cards?

The best way to access funds in Ecuador is with debit cards issued from a major bank. These can readily be used to obtain money in Cumbaya and other major cities, but beware that most banks charge an additional fee for international ATM withdrawals (from \$1-\$5). Be sure to advise your bank of your travel plans. Cash is the only thing accepted at artisan markets both in and out of Quito, and anywhere once you are in more remote rural locations. We recommend bringing plenty of small bills, since often times taxis, buses and even shops are not able to provide change for bills over \$5. Credit and debit cards are accepted in more expensive shops and restaurants, although their use is increasingly widespread. Ecuador adopted the dollar as their currency in 2001, so you do not need to exchange money. No more Sucres!

What sort of luggage is best?

Avoid over-packing. You can bring your clothing and personal items in whatever luggage is most convenient for you. However, since we will be doing a lot of traveling around Ecuador, on trips that vary in length from 3 nights to 3 weeks, we strongly recommend that you bring luggage of varying sizes that allow for flexibility in packing. For example, during a weekend trip to the cloud forest we hike approximately 2 ½ hours to our two-day campsite. A backpack suitable for such a 2-day trip is recommended, but it doesn't need to be a great big hiking backpack. Rather, you can get by using a large-ish daypack. There will also be various day trips for which a day pack that can hold your lunch, raingear, notebook, binoculars, water bottle, and any extra clothing or personal items would be most suitable. Consider bringing a backpack that can be used for both purposes, as well as serve to carry books back and forth to classes. For the longer trips to Tiputini and the Galapagos, a medium size duffel, suitcase or similar bag should serve you well. Keep in mind that there is a weight limit of 25 lbs. for flights to the Amazon! I usually travel with 1) a large rolling duffel bag; 2) a large daypack (that can hold 25 lbs. of gear) for hikes in Tiputini and my carry-on; and 3) a string bag or decent-size waist pack for use in the field. Larger luggage can be left in Cumbaya during multi day field trips to locations around Ecuador.

What kind of clothing should I bring?

You'll need clothing for a wide range of temperatures. Consult the TCS Program Information Packet for descriptions of the sites we visit, and for a detailed packing list (also included in your orientation materials). In Cumbaya (8,500 feet), you'll be fine in pants and a t-shirt during the day, but be prepared to put on extra layers including a sweater or jacket in the evening or on cloudy days. In general, young people in Quito dress more fashionably than in the U.S., especially when going out. Shorts are rarely if ever worn in the city, and some businesses will not admit you in shorts. You will want to bring a couple of dressier outfits for wearing out to restaurants or other events in the city. Quito is usually in the 70's during the day but gets down to as low as 45°F at night. The climate is generally dry, but scattered rain is not uncommon so a compact umbrella can be useful.

When we visit the páramo and high elevation volcanoes we will reach 14,000 feet or more, where temperatures fall below freezing nightly -- previous courses have had snowball fights! However, the weather in the mountains is unpredictable, and we could see anything from 70° and sunny to 25° and snowing! Layering is thus the best bet. You can buy lovely, inexpensive wool sweaters, hats and gloves in Quito or Otavalo markets, or bring your own.

In the lowlands (coast and Amazon), it is very warm (80's) and, in the Amazon, extremely humid. Loose, lightweight long pants (cotton is coolest) and a t-shirt and/or long-sleeve shirt (a thin, blousy button-down is what I use) are best when you're in the field. You will need two or three pairs of 'field pants,' often best bought at second-hand stores, for our outdoor activities: these protect your legs against thorns, fuzzy caterpillars, and the occasional stinging plant! On the coast, in the Galapagos, and when relaxing on a warm day, shorts are fine but they should not be worn in the field. In the early morning and evening, make sure you have a long-sleeve shirt to put on against mosquitoes! Also bring a swimsuit and towel. When on field trips you won't need to worry about fashion -- there'll be nothing but the forest or the ocean around you, and we'll be getting sweaty and dirty! As far as footwear goes, rubber boots are best for rainforest (buy them in Ecuador unless you wear >10 ½ mens), and sturdy trail shoes are fine otherwise. Rubber sandals or flip-flops are nice for wandering around camp, on the boat, and on the beach. Finally, a hat is essential for protecting your head against sun and insects.

What other gear should I bring?

Please consult the required and recommended gear list that is in the TCS Program Information Packet, which can be found on our website on the [Preparing To Go page](#).

Any other packing recommendations?

Cumbaya is a small but very cosmopolitan town, so most essentials can be purchased there. You do not need to pack a whole semester's supply of toothpaste, for example! You can also get run-of-the-mill school supplies like notebooks and pens in Ecuador. You can purchase lovely local arts and crafts, including jewelry, nice woven bags, sweaters, gloves, and hats, as well as leather bags and purses in Ecuador. There are a few things, however, that are much more expensive there than in the U.S., particularly imported items such as *sunscreen* and *contact lens solution*. You *can* get them there, but they will cost 2-3X more. Also, any specialty items, outdoor gear, books, and clothing (esp. socks!) are best brought with you from the U.S.

Can I drink the water in Ecuador?

You should never drink the tap water while in Ecuador, even while in Cumbaya. This may be a struggle with your host family, as Quiteños have built up resistance and often do drink the tap water. Host families are all required to supply drinking water, whether in large bottles (quite common in most Ecuadorian households) or through advanced filtration. If you suspect the water is not filtered (for example, if it comes out of a refrigerator with only a simple charcoal filter), then please advise program staff immediately; your intestinal health is our top concern! Always have bottled water on hand, even for brushing your teeth. Hotels and restaurants usually provide bottled water to their guests. If you ever are uncertain about the water served to you, just ask them if it is purified ("Es purificada?"). At program field sites and during travel, purified water will always be available for drinking.

What if I have special dietary restrictions?

First of all, please notify us of any special dietary preferences or food allergies (including lactose intolerance, etc.) in the space provided on your enrollment form. Your host family will do their best to accommodate your needs, but please be understanding as vegetarianism is not as common in Ecuador as it is here, and they may need gentle reminders of what you will and won't eat. We will request vegetarian or other meals for you from the cooks at the various field stations, including Tiptutini, El Pahuma and the Galapagos.

What if I don't like my host family?

The program coordinator at USFQ will do their best to place you with a host family that matches your interests. All our host families are pre-screened and are used to hosting international students. Although some students feel apprehensive about staying with a host family, most find it a fun and rewarding experience that can lead to lifelong friendships. Nevertheless, interpersonal relationships sometimes are simply a matter of chemistry and are hard to predict. Of course, we hope you will exhibit maximum adaptability, flexibility, patience and courtesy with your new host family, and that you will be able to adjust to your new, and rather short-term living situation. If, however, you find you are having difficult personal problems or conflicts with your host family that can't be worked out, do not hesitate to discuss your problem with the program coordinator and she will work with you to resolve the problem or find another host family. You will receive the name and contact information for your host family prior to departure, and we encourage you to contact your host family directly to introduce yourself before you arrive. Some students have brought small gifts from the U.S. as an icebreaker for meeting their new hosts, but this is by no means required.

Do I need to be concerned about contracting a weird disease?

The risk of contracting a serious illness while traveling in Ecuador is low, but it's wise to take some precautions. Developing countries in the tropics have a reputation for all sorts of illnesses, but virtually all of these are caused by unsanitary living conditions (e.g., cholera, hepatitis, giardia) or contact with disease bearing insect vectors (e.g., malaria, dengue). Although some stomach upset is normal when traveling to any foreign country just because the food is different, you will minimize your chances of food-borne illness by washing and peeling fresh fruits, cooking vegetables, drinking only bottled water, and avoiding food sold by carts on the street or in sketchy-looking restaurants. Insect borne diseases are found mostly in the lowland tropics; wearing long sleeves and pants at times when insects are most active, and wearing insect repellent, are the most effective preventive measures you can take. In areas where specific diseases are not uncommon, your best protection is to get vaccinated or, in the case of malaria, take anti-malarial pills. The Center for Disease Control will be able to make recommendations regarding what vaccines you need, and you may also consult with your on-campus travel clinic. It is not required but is recommended that you take anti-malarial pills for your trip to the Amazon, and during your internship if it takes place in regions where malaria is found. Malaria pills are no longer readily available in Ecuador, nor do they supply the most up-to-date prophylaxis, so it is strongly recommended that you bring a full course of medication with you from your home country. In our experience, doctors frequently prescribe large doses of Doxycycline, but students with that medication very frequently suffer from nausea, so consider an alternative. Note that for purposes of visiting the Tiptutini Biodiversity Station in the Amazon rainforest, you are required to be vaccinated against yellow fever. This disease is extremely uncommon in the Ecuadorian Amazon, but the vaccination is mandatory for travel to that region, so make sure to obtain the vaccine in your home country and bring official proof of your vaccination date with you to Ecuador.

Is it bad for me to get so many vaccines?

Not at all, in fact it is very good for you if it means you avoid contracting a potentially serious illness! Some vaccines produce mild side effects in some people for a day or so after you get the vaccine (I've never noticed any). Some anti-malarial pills can have mildly unpleasant side effects, especially the day or so after you take your weekly dose. These include difficulty sleeping, vivid dreams, and sometimes moodiness. Again, these effects are transient.

How safe is Ecuador?

Ecuador is a relatively safe country, filled with friendly, family-oriented people. The country has enjoyed increasing economic and political stability over the past 20 years. As in the rest of the world however, cities are not as safe as the countryside, and unaware travelers make easier targets. The biggest concern for all travelers is theft. Ecuador is a poor country and if you leave valuable items unattended, or flaunt them, there is a good chance they will disappear. Minimize the risk of theft by not bringing valuable items, keeping your valuables concealed or firmly attached to you when walking through populated areas or on public transportation, locking up valuables whenever possible, and keeping your money hidden in a variety of different places. In markets and other crowded places (buses, trolley) keep money and valuables safely tucked away as pickpockets can target unwary foreigners. Some areas of Quito, in particular the south neighborhoods and the "Mariscal", are simply not safe, especially at night. *Never* walk alone after dark. Even in groups, be alert and stay on lit streets where other people are around. Always *call* a taxi or have a friend take you home at night, even if it is only a block or two. Carry your emergency phone numbers, host family address and contact information and, if possible, a cell phone with you at all times. Carry only copies of your passport. In general, always be alert, use common sense, much as you would in any big city back home! Always heed the safety recommendations given to you during program orientation. We recommend you inform yourself on the latest safety and crime data for Ecuador that is available on the U.S. State Department website.

How much does it rain in the rainforest, and what type of raingear should I bring?

Although the rainforest gets a lot of rain, there tends to be sunshine every day, interspersed with short hard downpours, usually in the afternoon and evening. It's a good idea to take raingear along when you set out into the forest, even if it looks like a gorgeous cloudless day. There are many options for raingear but do consider a poncho. A poncho is cooler and can be bought rather cheaply. Full latex or plastic raingear can be uncomfortably hot, and a raincoat allows your legs to get wet. A poncho protects your legs, and you can easily carry your backpack, binoculars and notebook under it. Ponchos come in many forms, and I suggest avoiding the very thin plastic ones that will tear easily when you walk through vegetation. Get a heavier rubberized plastic one at your local camping or outdoor equipment store. A small folding umbrella can be useful for getting around both city and field in the rain.

Aren't there a lot of bugs in the rainforest?

There are many very fascinating insects in the rainforest, but most of them won't bother you. In fact, there are far fewer mosquitoes and other biting insects in the rainforest than there are on an August day in Minnesota! Nevertheless, mosquitoes can be vectors of lowland diseases like malaria and dengue, so you should come prepared with repellent (see below). Perhaps the bugs to be most cautious of are ants ... they can pack a painful bite before you realize you're standing in them! Bring some hydrocortisone or insect bite relief to get some relief from annoying bites or stings, and make sure you let program staff know if you are allergic to any insect stings.

What kind of insect repellent is best?

This is largely a matter of personal preference, but we suggest not bringing anything stronger than about 25% DEET. Sprays are more convenient than lotions because you do not have to get it on your hands. Skintastic and other non-DEET alternatives usually work fairly well. Be careful not to handle frogs (and other animals) if you have DEET on your hands; amphibians are especially vulnerable since the toxic chemical is absorbed directly into their moist skin!

What conditions should I expect in the Galapagos?

Crystal-clear gentle seas, warm tropical sun, and abundant wildlife on land and in water! A visit to the Galapagos is truly an experience you'll remember for life. During your 8-day tour of the islands you will live aboard a motor yacht carrying a total of 16 passengers plus crew. Each day we visit another island, with travel between islands occurring overnight while you are sleeping, so that you wake up in a new place each day! The islands themselves are teeming with wildlife, so you'll always want your camera with you. Conditions on the islands are blazing hot and sunny – there is virtually no shade. Sunburn is nothing to be trifled with and sunscreen, sunglasses, water and a hat are essential items to have with you at all times. Shorts and a t-shirt are fine to wear – until you get sunburned! Many people wear long sleeve or pants for better protection against the tropical sun, and you'll need them during the cooler evenings. As far as footwear goes, supportive light hikers or sport sandals with ankle straps are fine for walking on the islands. Flip-flops do not offer sufficient stability on the sharp, unstable lava rock and sometimes slippery terrain.

What about snorkeling and seasickness?

We'll be doing quite a bit of snorkeling in Galapagos, so bring a mask, snorkel and fins. A good fitting mask will be essential to your underwater experience. We strongly recommend bringing a quality mask from your home country and working with a diving professional to ensure a good fit. You can bring small pool fins instead of full-sized ocean fins if space is more of a priority. The Humboldt current keeps ocean temperatures rather cool: delightful for a swim, but a little chilly after a one-hour snorkel. If you're prone to getting cold, like I am, a thin "shorty" wetsuit, Lycra bodysuit, rash-guard, or even a long sleeve t-shirt can help you be more comfortable in the water. While seas are relatively calm in Galapagos in the spring, we will be traveling across large expanses of open water so waves and swells are to be expected. If you're at all prone to motion sickness, or don't know whether you are or not, it will be most pronounced during the first couple of days. Bring an adequate supply of motion sickness tablets (I recommend the "less drowsy" type).

What kind of binoculars should I bring?

While we don't want you to spend too much money before traveling, the biggest equipment complaint students have had in the past is "my binoculars sucked!" Don't bring grandpa's old Coast Guard pair that weigh twenty pounds and are foggy; don't bring grandma's favorite opera glasses that are tiny and dim. Binoculars are rated by magnification and lens size, so 8x32 is eight-power magnification and 32 mm wide lenses. More magnification is not necessary, and 10x32 binoculars will be heavier and more expensive. The larger the lenses, the more light they admit, giving much better color, sharpness, and vision in dim light (like in a rainforest!). Lenses smaller than about 30 mm will not be satisfying to you. Our favorite size is 8x32, and recommended brands include Nikon Monarchs, Vortex Diamondbacks, and similar. This is one place not to go cheap, you will really enjoy seeing Amazon wildlife in crisp detail and vivid color.

What kinds of gifts & souvenirs can I bring back from Ecuador?

There is a great diversity of beautiful, colorful arts and crafts such as wool sweaters, textiles, Andean musical instruments, masks, hammocks, carvings, pottery, silver jewelry, leather goods, and a multitude of other products. In some shops you may see rainforest products that are illegal to sell, buy and bring back to the U.S., such as animal pelts and bird feathers. It is also illegal to bring any plant or animal material back into the states without special permits, so anything collected during the course must remain in Ecuador. I recommend that you find the time on a weekend or during break to visit Otavalo, a town with a proud indigenous population that runs a famous artisan market. There, you can pick up gifts for friends and family, and maybe a funny wool hat for the small number of cold-weather days we'll have in the Andes.

Don't hesitate to contact us with any other questions you may have.

Have fun in your preparations, and we'll see you in Ecuador!

Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation

301 S. Bedford St. Suite 7A

Madison, WI 53703

Tel: (608) 230-5550

Email: course@ceiba.org