



## Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation Tropical Conservation Experience Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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### **What do I do when I arrive at to 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 a “12-8 Visa de Intercambio Cultural.” 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 Ceiba representative and the USFQ program coordinator will meet you just outside 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 USFQ or Ceiba sign. You will then be transported to your host family’s home.

### **What if my plane is early or late?**

Most flights from the U.S. arrive in the evening or at night. If you don't arrive as scheduled, or for any reason do not encounter our representative at the airport, go to the information desk in the airport and ask them to call the Ceiba program coordinator or professors. A driver will be sent immediately to pick you up outside the international terminal. 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.

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

You will have no problem finding access to email while in Quito. There is wireless access at USFQ and internet cafés are abundant and cheap in Quito and in many other cities and towns in Ecuador. International calls can be made from many internet cafés or one of many Andinatel offices that have public phone cabins. The cost of calls to the U.S. is approximately 8¢ per minute from these places. Although your host family will have a telephone, international calls from private phones are more expensive. If you want to be able to call home from your host family’s house it would be best to purchase a pre-paid international phone card in the U.S. to bring to Ecuador with you. Make sure that the pre-paid company you choose includes service from Ecuador, as some do not. For communication in Ecuador, many students decide to purchase a cell phone there. Pre-paid calling plans are the norm in Ecuador, and phones can be purchased fairly cheaply. Most U.S. cell phones will not work in Ecuador, except those that use GSM a signal.

### **How can my family and friends communicate with me?**

Once you are settled with your host family in Quito, your friends and family in the US are welcome to call you. You may encourage them to utilize voice-over-internet software such as Skype, which allows one to make very inexpensive overseas calls using a high-speed internet connection. Otherwise, pre-paid calling cards normally are the cheapest option.

### **How can I send and receive mail while in Ecuador?**

Receiving postal mail in Ecuador is unreliable at best, and especially so for packages. In the past students have waited over 4 months for a box of jeans to be delivered! The only dependable method is to use DHL or Federal Express, although this can be rather expensive. Letters and postcards sent from Ecuador usually reach the US within 2 weeks, but again package delivery ranges is untrustworthy.

### **When would it be best for my friends or relatives to visit me?**

The TCE program involves a great deal of time spent at remote research stations, so careful scheduling of visitors is important. Please consult updated program schedules to determine when your mid-semester break will occur (this varies from year to year, mostly due to limited availability on Galapagos tours). Friends and relatives may be able to join the program during our visits to field sites, but arrangements will need to be made in advance with Ceiba staff. Of course, you will have ample time after the program concludes to welcome visitors; many students take the opportunity to visit other sites in Ecuador, or journey to Peru or other South American countries after the end of the semester.

### **How much money should I bring?**

It depends on how frugal you are and how much shopping you do! At minimum, you'll need to bring enough for riding the bus to and from campus, obtaining your censo (a few dollars), purchase of personal items, the \$31 departure tax and some emergency money in case you need medical care. Most students also allocate some funds for entertainment (cinema, sightseeing, etc.), a cell phone, snacks and other beverages purchased outside of meal times, gifts, and any additional travel during the various holidays and Easter break. Many students underestimate their personal spending and have subsequent difficulty obtaining cash (see below). It is better to overestimate your cash needs. Based on information from previous students, the average amount students spend over the course of the semester is about \$1200.

### **Should I bring cash or travelers checks? What about credit and ATM cards?**

Although traveler's checks are a relatively secure way to store your extra money, you can only cash them in banks in Quito and other major cities, and you will wait in long lines and be charged a fee for the service. Traveler's checks are not accepted by most stores and vendors. Credit cards are accepted by large stores in big cities, but cash is the only thing accepted at artisan markets both in and out of Quito, and anywhere in the countryside. We recommend carrying small bills, since often times taxis, buses and even shops are not able to provide change for bills over \$5. ATM cards can be used to obtain money in Quito, but beware that most banks charge an additional fee for international withdrawals.

### **When and where should I change money?**

Ecuador adopted the US dollar as their official 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, there will be a weekend trip to the cloud forest during which we hike approximately 2 ½ hours to our two-day campsite. A backpack suitable for such a 2-day trip is recommended for this trip. 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 as your bag to carry books back and forth to classes. A waist pack can also be useful for carrying around your daily essentials. For the longer trips to Tiputini and the Galapagos, a medium size duffel or similar bag should serve you well. Keep in mind that there is a weight limit of 25 lbs. for flights to the Amazon! Me, I usually travel with a large duffel bag; a large daypack (that can hold your 25 lbs. of gear) for overnight hikes, Tiputini and my carry-on; and a decent-size waist pack for use in the field.

### **What kind of clothing should I bring?**

You'll need clothing for a wide range of temperatures. In Quito (10,000 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 an umbrella is useful.

When we visit the páramo and Cotopaxi volcano we will reach 14,000 feet, 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 knitted sweaters, hats and gloves in Quito, or bring your own.

In the lowlands (coast and Amazon), it is very warm (80's) and, in the Amazon, extremely humid. Loose, lightweight 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. 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 hiking boots or 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.

**Should I bring a laptop computer?**

There are several computer labs at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito campus, and inexpensive internet cafes are abundant throughout Quito. Thus you certainly do not need to bring a computer. However, past students have occasionally felt that having their own computer makes scheduling homework and other projects easier. Please be aware that security is an important point to consider, and take care to protect yourself against petty theft while traveling with a expensive computer.

**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.

**What other gear should I bring?**

Please consult the required and recommended gear list that is in the program information packet.

### **Should I bring my laptop?**

There are advantages and disadvantages to bringing a laptop. The advantage is that you can work on course projects, store photos, and use wireless internet freely while in Quito. The disadvantage is that you will have to worry constantly that it will be stolen, and you will have to find a safe place to keep it during trips to the field when it is inadvisable to bring it along (due to higher risk of damage from humidity, rain, heat and higher risk of theft from your cabin, tent or bus). Even walking around Quito with a laptop can be a bit disconcerting. In short, if you are diligent about backing up your files, willing to take the risk of losing it, and don't mind leaving it behind while we travel, then you might consider bringing it. On the other hand, if you are satisfied with having access to the two course laptops, using small "flash" drives to store and transfer files, and using computers at internet cafes and the university when necessary, then you really don't need to bring your own.

### **Can I drink the water in Ecuador?**

You should never drink the tap water while in Ecuador, even while in Quito. Always have bottled water on hand, even for brushing my teeth. Hotels and restaurants usually provide bottled water to their guests. If you are ever uncertain about the water served to you, just ask them if it is purified ("Está purificado?"). At program field sites, 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 (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 still uncommon in Ecuador and they may need gentle reminders on what you will/will not eat. We can request vegetarian or other meals from cooks at the various field stations, including Tiputini, 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 prescreened, 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 friendship. 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.

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

The risk of contracting a serious illness while traveling in Ecuador is very low, but it's wise to take some precautions. Developing countries in the tropics have a reputation for all sorts of nasty illnesses, but virtually all of these are caused by unsanitary living conditions (e.g., cholera, hepatitis, giardia) or contact with disease bearing insect vectors (malaria, yellow fever). 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. 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, though generally they tend to be overcautious. It is not required, but is recommended that you take anti-malarial pills for your trip to Ecuador. These are more cheaply purchased in Ecuador, but keep in mind that only Lariam (Mefloquin) is available there: the newest anti-malarial drug (Malarone) was not yet available in Ecuador as of August 2006.

### **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 very 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, the most consistently peaceful country in South America, and is certainly far safer than the U.S. overall, when it comes to “random” violent crime. The biggest concern for all travelers is theft. Ecuador is a very poor country and if you leave valuable items unattended there is a good chance they will disappear. Minimize the risk of theft by not bringing valuable items, keeping your valuables concealed when walking through populated areas, locking up valuables whenever possible, and keeping your money hidden in a variety of different places. Also, in markets and other crowded places (buses, trolley) keep money and valuables safely tucked away as pickpockets often target unwary foreigners. Some areas of Quito, as in other big cities, are not safe to walk in, especially at night. Never walk alone after dark. Be alert and stay on lit streets where other people are around. Always call a friend or a taxi to take you home at night, even if it is only a block or two. Carry your emergency phone numbers and, if possible, a cell phone with you at all times. In general, always use common sense, much as you would back at home!

### **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 everyday, 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 I recommend a poncho. A poncho is cooler and can be bought rather cheaply. Full latex or gore-tex raingear is uncomfortably hot, and lightweight nylon, though cooler, is not sufficiently waterproof in a tropical downpour. Also, in a raincoat your legs get wet, while 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 the station 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.

### **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. 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 sleeves 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 often rocky and slippery terrain.

We'll be doing quite a bit of snorkeling, and the Humboldt Current keeps ocean temperatures rather cool. If you're prone to getting cold, like I am, a thin “shorty” wetsuit or a t-shirt can allow you to stay more comfortable in the water for longer periods. 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, 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 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 trinkets. 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.

**Feel free to contact us by email if you have any other questions, at [courses@ceiba.org](mailto:courses@ceiba.org)!  
Have fun in all your preparations, and we'll see you in Ecuador!**

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