

MINI SEMESTER



Costa Rica Mini Semester Program

HOMESTAYS, SPANISH & ANIMAL VOLUNTEERING

www.pacificdiscovery.org





Overview

Join us for an epic gap year adventure in the heart of Costa Rica—where you'll help care for rescued wildlife, catch waves on world-class beaches, and soak up the pura vida lifestyle in one of the most biodiverse places on Earth!

Step into Costa Rica and it's like entering a living, breathing rainforest wonderland—thick with misty canopies, hidden waterfalls, and wildlife calling from every direction. Here, environmental magic is part of everyday life, with lush permaculture farms and tight-knit communities deeply connected to the land.

You'll dive into unforgettable eco-adventures: ziplining through cloud forests, hiking jungle trails, and joining night walks to spot creatures like kinkajous and owls. At a wildlife rescue center, you'll help care for animals like sloths and howler monkeys, and later contribute to reforestation projects on a carbon-neutral spice farm.

Staying with local families and living on sustainable farms, you'll experience pura vida up close—getting your hands dirty, sharing meals straight from the garden, and making real connections. Whether surfing Pacific waves or kayaking through mangroves, this leg of your journey blends outdoor thrills with meaningful purpose—something solo travel just can't match.





Safety

With our 20 years of operation and more than 100,000 student days in the field, we have an excellent safety record.

We even got voted as one of the Top Gap Year Providers for Safety by students on Go Overseas! Safety is something we pride ourselves on at Pacific Discovery, so it feels amazing to be recognized for the efforts we go through.



Accreditations

We have had our safety management systems assessed and accredited by the Gap Year Association (USA), Year Out Group (UK), and OutdoorsMark (New Zealand). Assessors have commented that our systems are among the best they have observed.



Who We Are

We are an accredited gap year provider that offers experiential gap semester and summer programs to some of the most amazing places on earth. Our programs are deliberate overland journeys, blending authentic immersion in diverse cultures, meaningful service-learning projects, rewarding adventures, wilderness exploration, and personal development.



Our Programs

Our programs are more than simply a travel, time-out or study abroad experience. Each is instead an overland journey of discovery, where students are immersed in a facilitated learning environment, designed to maximize the educational and life-skills potential.



Our Philosophy

We want to make the world a better place by providing extraordinary learning adventures that assist students in gaining the skills, confidence and insight to realize their potential in an increasingly global society; developing empathy for other cultures; furthering understanding of international issues; and heightening appreciation for the earth's wilderness and diversity.

Core Educational Components

Our programs are as much a journey of personal development as they are a physical journey, and participants are supported in reflecting together and thinking about their values, goals and what they wish to gain from the program experience.

PRE-PROGRAM

Prior to program start, participants are asked to create some goals for the program – this is personal and unique to each individual group member. Participants are given a suggested outline of skills and competencies that they can choose to focus upon.

DURING PROGRAM

At program orientation, goals participants have identified are discussed in a meeting with the program leaders. Throughout the program, ideas, tools and strategies are discussed that can be useful to help participants achieve their goals both on the program and for the rest of their lives. Participants are encouraged to journal during the program to assist them in clarifying their thoughts and define what they are learning.

TRANSFER AND FOLLOW UP

At the conclusion of the program, participants give a presentation to their group and leaders, summarizing how they've been challenged, what they've learned, how they've grown and how they intend to apply what they've learned to their lives after the program.

Towards the end of the program participants are also asked to write a letter to themselves imagining where they want to be in 6 months' time and identifying behaviors, habits and changes they wish to put in place. These letters are sent to them 6 months after program conclusion, helping reinforce the learning that has occurred.



Program Design

Each of our programs incorporate the following six core program components. These six interdependent components, provide immense opportunity for students to learn about themselves, to push their boundaries, question their assumptions, to stimulate problem solving and inquiry skills.



EDUCATIONAL FOCUS

Our programs are experiential education programs, meaning that learning is hands-on and tangible. For example, students will learn about a country's history and culture by immersing themselves in it, meeting local people and hearing life stories.



ETHICAL TRAVEL & SUSTAINABILITY

Students show respect for local customs, develop meaningful cross-cultural relationships, learn minimum-impact grassroots travel techniques and come to understand social and ecological issues on a deeper level.



OUTDOOR EXPLORATION

Immersion in the wilderness is an opportunity for students to become grounded, teaches appreciation for wild places and provides us the opportunity to explore local environmental issues and relate these issues to global environmental themes



SERVICE LEARNING

Volunteer elements built into our programs allow students to really immerse themselves in a place and share an experience with local people, bridging the gap that often exists between visitor and host.



CULTURAL IMMERSION

We immerse students in the local culture, through homestays, volunteer projects and language study. Students learn empathy for other cultures and build bridges of shared understanding.



PERSONAL & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Throughout the program, students are given leadership opportunities from facilitating reflection to coordinating the daily schedule.



Sample Itinerary

***This is a guide to what you can expect to do on program.
The order in which the activities occur might vary***

WEEK 1 | MONTEVERDE CLOUD FOREST



You've just landed in Costa Rica—welcome to one of the most adventure-packed, eco-rich, and vibrant countries on Earth! We kick things off in Monteverde, a misty mountain town tucked into the famous Cloud Forest. This place is pure magic: cool air, lush jungle, and wildlife sounds echoing all around. It's the perfect setting to bond with your crew, dive into orientation, and get a feel for the laid-back "Pura Vida" lifestyle that Costa Ricans (Ticos) live by.

Your days here will be filled with both adrenaline and awe. You'll zipline high above the forest canopy, cross hanging bridges with unbelievable views, and explore the trails of the Santa Elena Reserve—home to some of the most mind-blowing biodiversity on the planet. One of the best hikes? El Tigre Waterfalls, where you'll trek through thick forest and discover cascading falls hidden deep in the jungle. When the sun goes down, grab your flashlight for a night walk to spot the elusive creatures of the forest—kinkajous, tree frogs, and more.

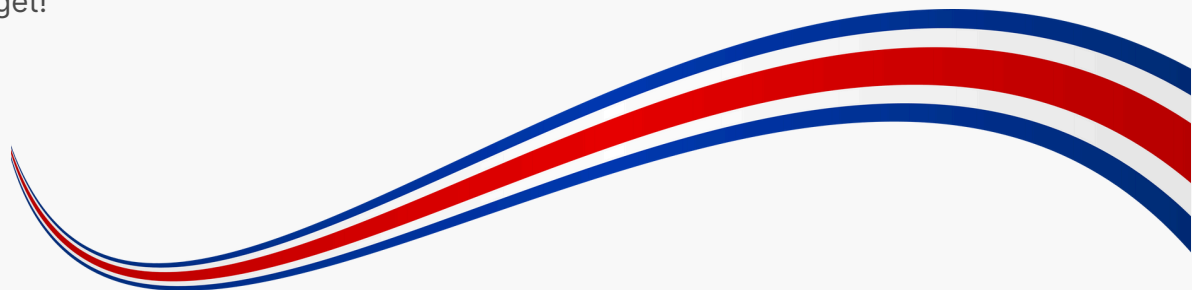
Along the way, you'll get your first deep dive into Costa Rican culture with a local coffee tour and community welcome. And after these first unforgettable days, we'll transfer to our next stop: a wildlife rescue center, where the real hands-on work begins.

WEEK 2 | ANIMAL RESCUE CENTRE AND FINCA

Get ready for an unforgettable week volunteering at a wildlife rescue center that's home to a wild mix of animals — from sloths and spider monkeys to toucans, iguanas, and colorful parrots. You'll join passionate volunteers from around the world, helping out with everything from preparing food to supporting animal care efforts. It's hands-on, rewarding, and a rite of passage for travelers heading to hang out in Costa Rica.

After that, dive into sustainable living with a tour of a local spice farm and join a tree planting project that helps protect the rainforest and combat climate change. There's plenty of adventure too — hike scenic trails from Brisas del Nara to Los Campesinos Ecolodge, go horseback riding through lush landscapes, and play soccer with friendly locals to really soak up the culture.

To top it off, explore the incredible biodiversity of Manuel Antonio National Park, where you'll spot squirrel monkeys swinging through the trees, curious coatimundis, vibrant toucans, and other amazing wildlife, all while enjoying stunning beaches and coastal views. It's the perfect mix of volunteering, adventure, and nature — a true Costa Rican experience you won't forget!



WEEK 3 | RANCHO TINAMU AND SPANISH IMMERSION

Kick off the week with a community service project, where you'll work alongside locals on meaningful projects that help improve the area—whether that's building, painting, or other hands-on tasks. Then, it's off to Rancho Tinamu, a beautiful eco-lodge deep in the rainforest that you actually hike into—a unique way to arrive and start connecting with nature right away. At the ranch, get your hands dirty milking cows, collecting fresh eggs, and helping out with sustainable farming. Alongside this, you'll explore stunning hiking trails that showcase Costa Rica's incredible biodiversity. Back in Herradura, settle into a homestay with a local family, join lively Spanish classes, and relax by swimming in natural hot springs or playing soccer with locals. This week blends real community work, immersive cultural experiences, and outdoor adventure for an unforgettable taste of authentic Costa Rica.

WEEK 4 | GOLFO DULCE KAYAKING EXPEDITION

After wrapping up Spanish classes in the Herradura community, it's time for one of the most unforgettable parts of your trip — a multi-day kayaking expedition through the breathtaking Golfo Dulce. You'll have your own professional guides who'll teach you everything you need to know and keep you safe and comfortable throughout the adventure. Paddle through pristine waters, snorkel among colorful fish and coral, and keep an eye out for dolphins playing nearby. With hammocks strung up on the beach and palm trees stretching as far as the eye can see, this hidden gem in southwest Costa Rica feels like paradise — and we bet none of your friends have even heard about it!

After the kayaking adventure, you'll head deep into the rainforest to stay at amazing eco-lodges like Albergue La Laguna de Corcovado and La Palma, where you'll get hands-on with sustainable farming projects. Here, you'll work alongside locals to support conservation efforts and help maintain the lush environment that makes Costa Rica so special. It's the perfect mix of chill beach vibes, thrilling adventure, and meaningful volunteering — a combo you won't find traveling alone.

WEEK 5 | SURF AND SOAK UP UVITA

After wrapping up your Sustainable Farm Service Project at the breathtaking Albergue La Laguna de Corcovado, it's time to shift gears and dive into the ultimate coastal adventure.



You'll transfer to the laid-back town of Uvita, making a quick stop at Playa Ventanas—a beautiful, less-crowded beach famous for its natural sea caves and stunning rock formations—before settling into El Tecal, your home for the next three days of surf camp.

This isn't your typical crash course. The surf camp here is perfectly spread out over three days to give your body plenty of time to rest between lessons, so you can avoid burnout and really absorb every bit of expert instruction. Whether you're a total beginner or looking to sharpen your skills, you'll be guided by professional instructors who know the waves inside and out. Feel the thrill of catching your first wave or mastering new techniques while soaking up the vibrant energy of Uvita's coastal vibes.

When you're not on the water, there's plenty to keep you moving and exploring. Take an afternoon to visit the nearby Dominical town—a surf hotspot known for its lively streets, local eateries, and colorful culture. Then, lace up your hiking boots for the famous Cola de la Ballena (Whale's Tail) hike, a must-see natural wonder offering sweeping views over the Pacific Ocean and the Marino Ballena National Park. It's the perfect way to connect with the incredible nature around you.

After three days of surfing, your body will need a good stretch—and that's exactly where you're headed next.



WEEK 6 | RETREAT AND RAFT

This week strikes the perfect balance between adventure and chill time. We'll start with a relaxing yoga and meditation retreat in the peaceful Sarapiquí region, led by our own personal yoga and personal development teacher. Always wanted to learn more about breathwork in a guided, supportive space? This is your chance. No experience needed — just come as you are to unwind, reset, and reflect on the insane trip you've had so far.

Then get ready for the big adventure: a fun 3-day white-water rafting trip down the Pacuare River, one of the best rafting spots in the world. You'll ride exciting rapids, explore lush rainforest, spot wildlife, and cool off under waterfalls.

Along the way, we'll visit an Indigenous village to learn about local traditions and join a tree planting project, giving back to the incredible environment around us.

As the week wraps up, we'll head back to San José with amazing memories and a fresh perspective — relaxed, inspired, and ready for whatever's next, whether that's heading back to studies, work, or more gap year travel.

Costa Rica leaves its mark—wild, beautiful, and full of heart. Between the rainforest adventures, meaningful community connections, and the deep dive into nature and yourself, this journey isn't just a trip... it's a life-changer you'll carry with you forever.

Each week there will be some designated free time so that you can catch up on email, do laundry, rest, and explore independently with others in the group.

***Pacific Discovery reserves the right to alter and/or change the order of the itinerary, the focus of the projects, or the activities themselves due to dates, availability, and safety precautions.*

Program Highlights

- Catch waves on Costa Rica's Pacific coast with expert surf instructors in Uvita.
- Raft thrilling rapids and splash through waterfalls on a 3-day Pacuare River expedition.
- Paddle through secret islets and lush rainforest on a multi-day kayaking adventure in Golfo Dulce.
- Volunteer at an animal rescue center and care for sloths, monkeys, toucans, and more.
- Live with local families in Herradura and experience real Costa Rican culture.
- Zipline the Monteverde Cloud Forest and go on a night walk to spot nocturnal wildlife.





Program Highlights

- Hike into the misty highlands of La Zona de Los Santos and discover hidden jungle trails.
- Volunteer on a sustainable farm—milk cows, collect eggs, and plant trees for the future.
- Support a rural school in Tinamu with hands-on community service.
- Learn conversational Spanish in interactive lessons to deepen your local connection.
- Soak in jungle hot springs and hike to waterfalls around Herradura.
- Ride horseback through mountain trails and play soccer with local Costa Rican youth.
- Relax, reflect, and learn breathwork with your own personal yoga instructor in Sarapiquí.
- Tour coffee plantations and spice farms to understand Costa Rica's eco-conscious agriculture.





COUNTRY INFORMATION

Costa Rica is located in Central America, bordered by Nicaragua in the north and Panama in the south. It has a population of just 5 million people with approximately 2 million people living in the capital city of San Jose. Known for its rugged rainforests, dual coastlines and rich Spanish heritage, there is something for every traveler.



CLIMATE

Costa Rica has a tropical climate year-round. December-April is the “summer” season and May-November their “winter” season. June and July is the country’s green season and you catch the seasons in transition when the national parks are quieter.

Day time average 70-88°F; night time average 70-75°F.



MEALS

‘Gallo Pinto’ is the national dish of Costa Rica, and is eaten for breakfast, lunch or dinner, sometimes along with eggs. Also keep in mind that the variety of foods you’re used to eating at home might not be available in some of the areas we visit, so you might often be eating the same kinds of foods. We understand this can get tiring and our instructors will try to mix things up, but in some places this is simply a restriction of food sourcing in the area, so it’s good to come in with an expectation that you won’t get all of the foods you’re used to at home! Any snacks are at an additional cost, which we recommend budgeting for around \$10 per day.

Regular food to expect:

- Breakfast: gallo pinto, which is rice, beans, plantains, and eggs
 - Lunch & dinner: casado, which is rice, beans, steamed veggies, protein, plantains, salad, and sometimes a kind of macaroni salad.
 - Local Central American cuisine notes: Rice/beans/protein/plantains combos are the traditional local food in Costa Rica. Other popular food includes beans and rice, Gallo Pinto, meat soups and stews, salads, ceviche, tamales (corn dough stuffed with meat, beans, or cheese), tropical fruits and fruit juices, tres leches cake (Milk cake).
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TRANSPORT

The itinerary has been designed to maximize comfort and safety whilst also giving you the opportunity to experience local transport and take part in daily life. We will mainly be utilizing minivans on this program, with lots of self-propelled expeditions along the way!

SUITABILITY

Gap programs are intended for students aged 17 - 22. This program is suitable for anyone of average fitness with an enthusiasm for conservation and new experiences. There is always a volunteering component in our programs, so we can give back to the places that give so much to us. You need to be prepared for some physical work during this volunteering portion of the program; i.e. trail building, tree planting or painting. You don't need to have had previous experience with travel or any of the activities offered.

ATTITUDE

The program is a shared group experience. We would like you to join the program with an open mind and a willingness to work together with your group mates to make the program an amazing experience. The programs focus on group cohesion. We appreciate you for being open to learning and challenging your ideas and assumptions in order to get the most from this summer abroad experience.

GROUP SIZE

Group sizes vary per program and are generally 12-14 students, accompanied by two experienced and qualified Pacific Discovery program instructors. Local guides assist with interpretation of some historical sites, cultural experiences, and activities.

PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

We have selected a dynamic team of inspiring, supportive, resourceful, and highly experienced instructors to lead our programs. Our program instructors are committed to putting your welfare and safety first. They are people in whom you can trust and confide, who remain objective whatever the circumstances, and who take a genuine interest in your well-being. They implicitly understand the importance of balancing the needs of individuals with group objectives, facilitating a high level of group cohesion, inspiring a genuine appreciation for the areas visited and an awareness of minimum impact travel ethics. All of our instructors have Wilderness First Responder (WFR) first aid certification, and extensive group leadership and risk assessment/management training.

ACCOMMODATION

Our accommodation will be a mixture of comfortable and clean hostels, lodges and campsites. Accommodation is diverse, comfortable and carefully chosen to fit our needs and varies per program.



FREE TIME

Programs are heavily scheduled so that we are always on the move and having lots of structured fun; but we highly value rest and reflection. There will be some designated free time in a town or city each week so that you can catch up on email and laundry and rest.



HEALTH

One component of all of our programs is outdoor adventures like hiking, biking and kayaking, so while you don't need to have done any of these before, you will need to be prepared and have the fitness level to give them a go. If you have any queries regarding health recommendations for travel, please contact your doctor, or a travel doctor, to discuss this. For further information refer to: [http:// wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/) We also recommend you be up to date on specific vaccinations that are required to travel in this region.

We recommend that you carry a personal first-aid kit as well as any personal medication. Please be aware that for legal reasons, our program instructors are prohibited from administering any type of drug. Please ensure that you are adequately prepared.



SPENDING MONEY

Spending money usually goes towards drinks and snacks, personal shopping, laundry, email, entertainment, and optional activities. We recommend you budget approximately \$100 a week for this, but this varies per student and per program. The amount of spending money you bring depends on your budget and shopping habits. You need to bring this money yourself.

Optional activities are available on many programs that can add to this cost, such as skydiving, bungee jumping, extra surfing lessons, etc.



KEEPING IN TOUCH

Our students value the opportunity to wind down, immerse in their surroundings and talk to each other. We encourage students to self manage their phone use, and we strongly encourage flight mode. This allows students to still take photos and send updates to family when in wifi, but allows them to be fully connected to the locals, service work and community when they're out and about. You are able to purchase a SIM or use international roaming plans if you wish. The easiest option is to use the WIFI available at places we stay in main cities and towns. Family and friends will also be able to keep in touch and follow your adventures through Pacific Discovery's social media pages, and through an online Facebook album for your group (which your instructors will upload photos to each week).



PASSPORTS AND VISAS

Travel abroad requires a passport. If you don't have one, you need to apply for one as soon as you apply for this program.

US Government Passport website: <http://travel.state.gov/passport/>

If you already have a passport, it must be valid for more than 6 months after program end, otherwise you need to get a new one issued before joining the program. Pacific Discovery will contact you regarding visa requirements and arrangements after you apply for the program.



TRAVEL INSURANCE

Pacific Discovery requires all students to purchase a comprehensive travel insurance policy for the duration of the program. Travel insurance provides cover in the event of medical expenses due to illness, injury, and emergency medical evacuation. Travel insurance may also include cover for loss of baggage or personal effects, and trip cancellation or trip curtailment.

To arrange your policy, [click here to go to our website](#).



COVID-19

COVID-19 has impacted all of our lives greatly, and Pacific Discovery has developed rigorous policies for safety based on professional advice and endorsement. The health of our students is of the utmost importance at all times. We are working closely and regularly with health professionals on our COVID-19 policy, as the situation continues to develop.

[Read our full COVID-19 policy here.](#)



PEACE OF MIND

Pacific Discovery is an educational travel organization accredited with American Gap Association (USA). Since its inception in 2001, Pacific Discovery has taken several thousand students, graduates, faculty, family and special interest groups, on experiential travel and volunteer programs, utilizing a staff of experienced and qualified program instructors. We have an exemplary safety record, comprehensive Risk Management Systems and a database of alumni, parents, advisors and faculty, who are happy to be contacted for feedback. The program carries public liability insurance, and student funds are held securely until disbursement.

Program Tuition & Costs

A \$500 application fee is due when you apply. Upon acceptance onto program, a deposit is due within 14 days. Balance of program cost to be paid 60 days prior to departure.

Included in Program Tuition

- All in-country travel and transport
- All accommodation
- All meals
- All activities, excursions, entry fees and adventure travel as described in the itinerary
- Informal lectures from resident experts on conservation and sustainability, history, and culture.
- Experienced program Instructors and local guides.

Not Included in Program Tuition

- Travel (international flights) between your home and the program
- Internal flights
- Visas
- Spending money (we suggest allowing \$15 per day for drinks, snacks and personal expenses)
- Travel insurance
- Optional academic credit
- Optional activity costs ie skydiving, bungee jumping, and additional surf lessons.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Students should not book their travel until after they have received the flight confirmation email from Pacific Discovery with the program flight requirements and travel agent details. This is sent out 2-3 months ahead of program departure. This information is also made available in the student portal login section of our website.

Our preferred groups travel agent, [The Travellist Co.](#), can assist you to arrange international flights from your nearest regional airport, and return home. We prefer you to arrange your flights through our group travel agent to simplify arrival logistics, and so that you are traveling to and from the program with others in your group.





College Credit

Our programs are a structured syllabus with clear learning outcomes that offer true personal growth and global awareness. As a reputable gap year provider since 2001, we have developed strong industry connections, including two educational institutions which we offer college credits through for our programs.

Pacific Discovery partners with Seattle Central College to offer college credit, a recognized educational provider who offers exceptional study options for students. We have been running college credit options for students for several years now with this provider, and as long as requirements are completed, the system has been an excellent option for students in regard to continuation of study, deferment and easy transfer to other institutions.

If you're keen to explore this option further, please reach out to us using the contact details provided at the end of this catalogue. We'd love to help you identify what options are available to you and support you throughout the process.

Scholarships & Financial Aid

We want to make our programs as accessible as possible. Although we charge the minimum we can for our programs, we recognize that they can still be difficult to fund for many families. Please note that these scholarships go directly towards the tuition costs for the program and do not include assistance towards the cost of international flights. We expect scholarship recipients to demonstrate their commitment to this opportunity by fundraising for their international flights, personal spending, and the balance of tuition.

Our students supplement the program costs in a variety of ways. We encourage you to get creative! Create a Kickstarter, find a part-time job, fundraise. Think big and small. Each dollar adds up to one amazing adventure abroad.

- Exploration Scholarship
- Diverse Voices Scholarship
- Financial Need Scholarship
- Gap Year Ambassador Fellowship

To apply, please go to pacificdiscovery.org/need-to-know/scholarships-financial-aid



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