



Safety Policy

Safety when traveling abroad encompasses many different areas for participants, including water, food, homestay families, staff members, transportation, emergency medical situations, natural disasters, and theft, to mention a few. Central America is a beautiful place and the people are gentle and kind. Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Guatemala are wonderful places to travel in and around, due to their political stability and level of police supervision. Tourism is a strong part of the economy in each of these countries.

Safety is the number one priority for our groups of participants who have come to donate their time and skills to those in need. We provide an orientation in which staff members review Vida policies regarding the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. Evening activities, dinners, etc are supervised and accompanied by Vida staff. A curfew will be enforced in some locations. During orientation students are also instructed on “common sense safety practices” such as locking belongings in your luggage or hotel safe, not carrying around large amounts of money, passport, or camera.

We encourage students from the United States to enroll in the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#). This is a free service that will keep you up to date with the latest safety and security information for your destination country. It also helps the U.S. Embassy contact you in an emergency, whether natural disaster, civil unrest, or family emergency.

If you are coming from Canada, you can enroll in the [Registration of Canadians Abroad](#), this is a free service that allows the Government of Canada to notify you in case of an emergency abroad or a personal emergency at home. The service also enables you to receive important information before or during a natural disaster or civil unrest.

General Rules:

Participants will have a curfew of 12 midnight on the evenings prior to clinic (all participants need to be back to the hotel). Participants will be accompanied by Vida staff in the evenings. Participants need to engage in responsible behavior and if their behavior is deemed a risk to themselves or others then the participant will be issued a warning prior to expulsion from the program. If a participant is expelled from the program, then he/she needs to return home at his/her own expense. Please refer to participant’s Code of Conduct for more specific information.

Food safety:

Staff members review policies during orientation regarding eating raw fruits and vegetables and drinking only boiled/bottled water during the trip. Participants are asked to eat only cooked vegetables. Participants should also avoid consuming the skin of fresh fruits as well as natural fruit drinks made with tap water. Vida provides bottled water during the entire trip. Vida meal providers follow strict safety and food handling protocols. Vida staff will also suggest restaurant(s) where you can eat.

Emergency Medical situations:

All Vida teams travel with an emergency first aid kit, local emergency numbers, as well as the telephone numbers for the host country U.S. and Canadian embassies. All groups travel with an experienced bilingual guide and most groups travel with licensed bilingual physicians during their entire experience. Other groups travel with licensed bilingual veterinarians who are familiar with basic first aid for humans as well. Vida staff physicians will intervene in emergency medical situations as needed to assess and stabilize patient, and assist with the transfer to a local private hospital if necessary. A Vida staff physician or bilingual staff member will remain with the injured or sick participant and communicate with the participant’s emergency contact to relay information about the participant’s status. Participants are also advised to bring an international credit card in case of an unexpected medical expense.

Transportation:

Vida contracts only reputable and well known transportation providers in Central America. All transportation is private, safe and reliable. The buses are typically air conditioned “coasters” or mini-buses that seat 25 passengers. All drivers or guides have cell phones with them at all times.

Homestays:

Homestay families are contracted through reputable non-profit partner organizations that have a history of working with families, or through local churches. All families are screened and in-home visits and assessments are performed periodically to ensure a high quality homestay experience.

Homestay families have been educated regarding food and water precautions. All participants will have their own bed and room. In the case of housing 2 participants at the same home, the participants may share a room, but have 2 separate beds. All participants are given emergency numbers to call should a concern or problem arise during a homestay. Most homestay families are usually within a very short walking distance from one another, therefore the bilingual guides and bilingual physicians are nearby.

Vida Staff:

All Vida staff members have been screened and approved by Vida’s HR department and Directors. All physicians, dentists, and veterinarians have current licenses to practice health care in his/her country of origin. Staff members are required to sign an agreement regarding his/her professional behavior. Vida Staff and staff contracted by Vida (including bus drivers, clinic coordinators, community participants, etc.) are prohibited from any romantic relationships with participants. Vida Staff members and staff contracted by Vida are subject to immediate dismissal in these situations.

Country stability:

Vida receives regular updates from the US State department regarding any travel warnings. Vida Directors and Board of Directors live in Central America as well as all Vida staff. Therefore we are aware of any change in the political, social, or environment which may pose a threat to our participants. Vida will suspend travel to countries in which the US State Department has removed official presence. Vida will assess and evaluate all travel advisories and warnings issued by the US State Department regarding countries to be visited by Vida groups.

Natural disasters:

Vida staff members always collaborate with local non-profits and community leaders regarding the best time of the year to visit more rural and isolated communities. All itineraries are reviewed by Vida directors and geographical areas that may be affected by heavy rainfall are avoided in the rainy season. Vida staff members are always aware of the status of the active volcanoes in the region as well as any tropical storm, hurricane, or tornado warnings via local host country coordinators and Vida Directors. If an unexpected natural disaster occurs during one of our trips, participants will be assisted by our local staff members. Vida requires all participants to have international medical coverage. Participants should contact their insurance provider prior to their trip to obtain more information. Some credit card companies offer travel insurance for anyone that purchased their flight using their card.

Theft:

In Central America, the prevalence of pick-pocketing is high in the capital cities, while that of any type of physical assault is low. Vida encourages all participants to use common sense and not to carry around large sums of money, carry only a copy of your passport, and be street smart. Vida requires that students go out in small groups of 3 or more and never alone or in pairs during free time. Most of the work sites where Vida provides services to the communities are small rural areas where these safety concerns will not be issues. However, in any major city, just like in the USA and Canada, caution needs to be taken when participants are out. Vida attempts to house students in only reputable hotels where we have a relationship with the owners, however, a loss can occur at any time. Any

loss of personal belongings will be investigated and documented. A report will be made to the hotel or restaurant where the incident incurs, as well as a report with the local police will be made as necessary. Students are encouraged to always use luggage locks or to use the hotel safe (if one is provided).

Clinic safety:

Vida educates participants regarding using standard precautions, as do most health care facilities in the USA and Canada. Participants will be encouraged to maintain a distance of 3 feet from patient in clinic (standard precautions at hospitals, nursing homes, etc). Health professionals are always supervising the participants to ensure that they comply with standard precautions.

Homevisits:

Interpreters and physicians are in charge of homevisits. Students will never be left alone. If there is a security threat inside the house the students will be taken outside and that house will be reported and not be visited anymore. The coordinator will select the houses to be visited prior to the trip, by doing this we will avoid visiting houses that are not safe.

Immunizations

Vida recommends all vaccinations required to travel to Central America, an updated tetanus shot, etc. Vida encourages participants to get the Hepatitis A & B series as a precaution. There is no Yellow Fever, Typhoid, River Blindness, Cholera, etc in the areas that we work in currently.

Dengue fever, Chikungunya and Zika are always a safety concern in a tropical environment, but use of repellent and appropriate clothing is encouraged. Vida makes an active effort to avoid areas where there's a high incidence reported. Malaria pills are optional. When working with blood products, such as in Dentistry or Veterinary medicine, participants need to wear gloves. Dentistry participants will also wear face masks. Medical participants will need to wear gloves when assisting with urine samples or blood sugar testing. Medical participants will also need to wear gloves while handling any type of infectious skin issue, examining the mouth/throat etc. (all of this is done under the direct supervision of the physician in charge of the clinic). Participants must engage in frequent hand washing, sanitizing of instruments (including BP cuffs, stethoscopes, blood sugar monitors, otoscopes, etc.) Dental instruments and veterinary surgical instruments will be sterilized in a special disinfectant. Veterinary and dental instruments will be sterilized in an autoclave as well.

Family Emergency:

All participants are instructed to provide a copy of their trip itinerary to loved ones and emergency contacts. Should a family emergency occur, relatives may communicate with Vida staff, call directly to the hotel, or call the cellphone of the guide for the trip.