

LIVING WITH A HOST FAMILY: CULTURAL & PRACTICAL ADVICE

CENTERS FOR INTERAMERICAN STUDIES (CEDEI)

So you're going to live with a host family? For many students, this thought evokes both **exhilaration** and **anxiety**. On the one hand, it's exciting to meet new people and to learn firsthand about their culture. But it can also be frightening—questions such as *What will they be like?*, *What will they feed me?* and so on may be racing through your head. The advice below is intended to assist you in making the most of your homestay by building on that excitement and by easing the anxiety you may be feeling.

Before we proceed further, rest assured that there is nothing abnormal or unusual about feeling anxious or nervous before meeting your host family. To some degree, every student before you has been apprehensive in one way or another. As well, your host family may be just as scared to meet you—after all, they are inviting you—a complete stranger—into their home. Together, you will overcome that anxiety and learn from each other. We are confident that your experience in Cuenca will be enjoyable and filled with lasting memories. Like many of our alumni, you may keep in touch with your host family over the years, and you may even have the opportunity to visit each other—either in Cuenca or in your own home!

EACH HOST FAMILY IS UNIQUE

As in your own country, families in Cuenca may share common characteristics, but each one has its own distinct structure, habits, etc. Some families may be single parent households. Some families have children, while others do not. Your host siblings may be your age, or they may younger or older. Your host family's home may be a small house or a large one, or it could be an apartment. Keep in mind that **every family is unique**; consequently, every student's experience also will be unique. Resist temptations you might feel to compare your host family with those of other students you meet at CEDEI (particularly those comparisons involving judgments). Such comparisons are unfair and may be detrimental to your experience.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is the key to building a successful relationship with your host family and to helping you adapt more quickly to Ecuadorian culture. It is natural that, at first, you may not be able to understand everything that your family is saying (even advanced students may require an adjustment period before becoming comfortable with the accent). However, it is important to try to communicate with your host parents and siblings as much as possible. Your family will appreciate your efforts.

Your host family wants to get to know you. They want to know if you are doing okay, if you are comfortable, if you need something, how your classes are going, what you notice is different in Ecuador, etc. **Talk to them!**

Remember that you are here to learn Spanish and about Ecuadorian culture. Time will fly by faster than you can imagine! Therefore, take advantage of every moment you are here and build a friendship with your family.

If there is anything you do not understand, something you are not sure of, or if you have any doubts, questions or problems, please do not hesitate to ask your family. By communicating with them, you can avoid misunderstandings later on.

GREETINGS AND FAREWELLS

In Ecuador, it is very important that you always **greet every person** when you enter a room and acknowledge each person again before you leave. We cannot emphasize how important these greetings are; they will go a long way toward **being accepted into the culture**. Greetings are not made verbally nor with an impersonal wave of the hand (as are common in the USA), *even to a large group*. Men typically shake hands with each other. Between a man and a woman, and between two women, a light "kiss" on the person's right cheek is customary (more accurately, this involves touching right cheeks and making a brief kissing sound in the air).

EMOTIONS AND PERSONAL SPACE

In general, **Ecuadorians are expressive**. When conversing, they use lots of gestures and facial expressions to display feelings and to emphasize a point. You may also notice that they make eye contact with each other to a greater degree than you may be accustomed.

When having a conversation with an Ecuadorian, you may feel that your personal space is being invaded—Ecuadorians tend to stand very close to each other (this will be especially noticeable to students from the USA, where personal space extends outward about 2-3 feet). As well, it is common for Ecuadorians to place a hand on the shoulder or arm of the person with whom they are speaking.

When standing in line or walking down a crowded street, do not be surprised if people brush past you without apologizing or excusing themselves. This should not be considered rudeness; rather, it **exemplifies a concept of personal space that may be very different** from your own.

FAMILIES IN CUENCA ARE CONSERVATIVE

Catholicism is a major influence in Ecuador. You may notice certain Catholic rituals and prayer recitations in which your family participates. Most families also attend *misa* (mass) on the weekend. You should respect these religious customs, but you should also feel free to participate with your family (in fact, your family may even invite you to go with them to mass, though you do not need to feel obligated to do so).

Generally speaking, **people in Cuenca dress conservatively**. It is rare to see people wearing shorts in the city unless they are doing some form of exercise or participating in an athletic event. Overly revealing or tight-fitting clothing would also not be appropriate to wear.

Be respectful of your family's concerns for your safety and well-being (this is especially relevant for female students). Don't be surprised, therefore, if they ask you questions about your schedule, when you are planning to come home, how late you might be out, if you are hungry/cold/comfortable, etc, or if they remind you to take along your sweater. As well, don't take offense if your host parents give you a curfew. Remember, you are their host child, and they are concerned about your well-being.

ARROZ DE CADA DIA (ie, What to Expect at Mealtime)

It is common for families to eat their meals together, and it is expected that every member of the household (and sometimes extended family members) be home at mealtime. What you may consider as merely an occasion to stuff food in your mouth is considered **family time** in many households. Because of this, the entire family often will wait for every person to come home before they begin to eat. For these reasons, it is of paramount importance to be courteous and arrive home *on time* for every meal. Be sure to communicate delays or changes to your schedule *in advance*. One of the most common frustrations expressed by host families is that their host child has not let them know if s/he is running late or simply not coming home for a meal, and the family has been left waiting (not to mention concerned about the child's safety).

In Cuenca, **lunch is the largest and most important meal** of the day. Again, it is crucial to call your host family *ahead of time* to let them know if you will not be making it home for a meal.

In general, the kind of food you may expect at each meal may consist of the following:

- Breakfast: continental style with tea or coffee (usually *café con leche*), juice, fruit, bread
- Lunch: creamy soup (eg, *locro de papas*) followed a main dish of meat and vegetables (potatoes, corn and beans are common) served with a generous portion of rice and freshly-made fruit juice
- Dinner: lighter than lunch, generally with the same basic types of food

Water: families have been asked to serve you boiled or purified water. Outside of your home, drink bottled water only (be sure to request *agua sin gas* if you don't want carbonated mineral water).

THE BATHROOM

The sewage system in Cuenca, as in most places in Latin America, is not designed to handle toilet paper or other foreign objects. **Place toilet paper in the trash basket**, which you usually find located conveniently next to the toilet.

Many families have showers that use electricity—there will be a switch on the wall that must be turned on to heat the water. Other showers may rely on a natural gas-powered *calefón* to heat the water. The *calefón* may have a pilot light, or you may need to light it before jumping in the shower. Your family will explain which type of shower they have and how to use it.

THE TELEPHONE

In Ecuador, there is a charge for every outgoing telephone call, even for local calls within the city. You may use your host family's telephone to make quick, local calls within Cuenca only. Please be respectful of the amount of time you spend on the phone, since it can get expensive. **Long distance and international calls may not be made from the host family's home.** Instead, these calls should be made from the Pacifictel office (on Benigno Malo, between Sucre and Córdova). Several Internet cafés offer an inexpensive alternative: Voice-over-IP technology (eg, Net2Phone) that allows you to place a call over the Internet. The quality is reasonable, and the cost is attractive (Cuenca Call Center charges just \$0.15 per minute for calls to the USA).

LAUNDRY

Your host parents will inform you of the laundry schedule, where you should put your dirty clothes, etc. Please note that not all families have washing machines, and very few have dryers. Instead, it is common for the host mother, or a maid, to wash the clothes by hand, after which they will be hung outside to dry and then ironed before being returned to you. Because of this, keep in mind that **it may take a few days to get your clothes back**, so you will need to plan accordingly (in other words, don't wait until all your clothes are dirty before handing over your laundry).

DRESS IN THE HOUSE

In general, it is not acceptable to walk around the house in your pajamas and/or barefeet. Therefore, be sure that you are always dressed outside your bedroom and that you wear shoes or slippers at all times.

MAIDS

In Ecuador, where labor is inexpensive, it is common for families to employ a maid to assist with the household chores. She may be a live-in maid, or she may come to the house only on certain days of the week. Her duties might include cleaning the house, washing clothes, cooking, taking care of the younger children, etc. **If you need the maid to do something for you, ask your host mother first.**

INVITING FRIENDS TO YOUR HOME

It is fine to invite your friends to visit you in your home; however, you should **consult your host family in advance** to make sure that the visit is okay (especially with regard to obtaining approval for the day and time). In Cuenca, visits are usually conducted in the living room or sitting room, and guests rarely are allowed into other parts of the house, especially not the bedrooms. If you would like to show your visitor the rest of the house, ask your host parents first if this would be okay.

If a visitor of the opposite sex is in your bedroom, **never close the door** during her/his visit; this would be considered inappropriate by Cuenca families (who, as you read above, tend to be fairly conservative).

SPEAK ONLY SPANISH IN FRONT OF YOUR FAMILY

When you are with friends from your native country, please **refrain from speaking English** or any language other than Spanish in front of your family. This is considered rude since they may not be able to understand what you are saying and likely will presume that you are talking about them.

WHAT TO CALL YOUR HOST PARENTS

You can start out by calling them "*señor*" and "*señora*," which shows respect. However, don't be surprised if they ask you to call them by their first names.

YOUR BEDROOM

Most Ecuadorian mothers take pride in a **neat and clean house**. Be sure to make your bed every day and keep your room neat.

SAFETY AND AWARENESS

Keep your valuables (money, passport, plane ticket, jewelry, etc) at home in a **secure place** (ie, locked in a drawer or suitcase).

When you are outside of your home, **be careful** with your belongings at all times. Keep valuables such as cameras, purses, watches, jewelry, wallets and sunglasses in a secure place on your body (whenever possible, it is advisable to conceal them). Carry backpacks and bags in front of you, especially if you are in a crowded place or riding public transportation. Remember, because you are a foreigner, **you are considered rich** (if you think of yourself as a poor college student); consequently, you are a target for thieves. **Never leave your belongings unattended**, regardless of where you are—thieves can strike quickly.

We do not recommend that you walk around the city at night (this is especially dangerous for women, but men should assume that they are at risk as well). Stay away from markets and other dark or abandoned areas at night. Ask your family to show you on a map of Cuenca where some of the more dangerous areas and neighborhoods are located (we will provide you with a city map that has these areas highlighted).

When moving about the city, it is advisable to take taxis, especially at night. Always travel only in official taxis, which are yellow and bear an official registration number and the name of the taxi cooperative. We recommend calling a **radio-dispatched taxi** to avoid standing in a dark street waiting to hail a cab. Your CEDEI Student Identification Card, which you will receive in Cuenca, contains the name and phone number of a radio taxi company that we recommend (carry your ID card with you at all times, since it contains other important information, such as your host family's address and phone number and CEDEI's emergency contact numbers).

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Keep an **open mind** and be **flexible**.
- Be **sensitive** to cultural differences. Allow yourself time to **adjust** to your family and your host culture.
- **Obey** your family's rules (eg, curfews) and understand the reasons behind these regulations (ie, concern about your safety and well-being).
- If you don't understand something, **ask**. This will help you to avoid misunderstandings later on.
- Let your family know what you **need** and what you **like**.
- Observe and **participate actively** with your family in the culture.

Your host family has received an orientation and is prepared to welcome you into their home. Their top priority is to help you adjust to, and feel comfortable in, your new environment. We have asked the host family to help you with other things you need to know: how to get to CEDEI *and home again*, how to get in *and out* of the house (you should also receive a house key), when meals are served, how the laundry system works, how to operate the hot water in the shower, other household and family rules, etc. If you have any questions about how something works, please ask your family first. If you have any other questions or problems, do not hesitate to contact our Homestay Coordinator. In case of an emergency (after hours), please call the cellular phone number listed on your CEDEI Student Identification Card. We are here to support you and to help you have a successful homestay.