

South America  
General Travel Information

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Planning: Plan way in advance and then don't expect anything to go as planned.

Language: Personally I would avoid the word fluent when referring to language skills obtained on a 2-month rotation. I know many people who, with a little background in Spanish, became much more competent and confident in the language during a stay at language school, but I have met few truly fluent people without a stay of multiple years. I actually know many people who have gone to schools with one on one instruction in Spanish (most Guatemalan schools work on that model, and been very happy with the experience). My parents love the 5 hours of one on one teaching so much they went back the next year for more. One on one with an understanding instructor can be a great way to build confidence in your own ability to get your point across even if it does take a while. I would recommend one on one.

Culture: If travelling in South America, women need to bring make-up. Even if you don't use it in the US there are places where a woman is not considered fully dressed if she has not put on make-up. Don't be afraid to make cultural mistakes – you will, just try not to repeat them. Be willing to laugh at yourself and your mistakes. Most people I have met are very understanding of foreigner's mistakes as long as you do your best to be appropriate and obviously don't intend to be offensive. While admitting that you are American try to get involved with the people you are living with. One friend barely spoke Spanish and was having a hard time getting involved with his host family until they saw him trying to wash his clothes the way they do. They laughed since men don't do their own laundry. The next thing I know he was on the town's soccer team for a game against the neighboring town.

Currency Exchange: I would strongly advise exchanging money before arriving at your destination. Do not plan on being able to exchange if you arrive after 5pm. I know of people stranded in the airport for 10-12 hours without food/water because they had no money. Credit cards – these are a great way to get cash in emergencies, although it can take a lot of explaining in the bank to actually obtain the money. "Expensive" tourist places take credit cards, but there was no place within walking distance of one of my homes that did. ATM Cards – make sure that they are associated with MasterCard or Visa – most are now, but the connections through Cirrus etc. can be unreliable. NEVER put an ATM card into a machine if the card is going to leave your hand (or be prepared to lose the card). Sometimes they work, but usually they are not worth the risk. I was in the most expensive mall in Caracas and put my ATM card in the machine of Venezuela's national bank because the sign said they accepted MasterCard, etc. After my card was eaten I went into the bank for an explanation and the teller told me that "it's not actually connected to the external systems, we just have the sign up".

Theft: Most Venezuelans and Guatemalans advise handing over what they want if you are being mugged. I know of some who were shot or killed because they didn't hand over the items. Carry a disposable camera if you are going to a dangerous area.

Passport: I laminated a color copy of the front page of my passport and visa and then had key local contact information on the back. I carried that instead of my passport and was fine for anything except official business (i.e. changing travelers' checks, going to the embassy)

Taxi: Always use a company taxi if possible. Look for matching taxis or an official counter at the airport. This reduces the risk of getting robbed by the driver.

Packing List: Feminine products – if you have room, pack the tampons you need. They may cost up to \$2 each. Pads are easier to come by as more South American women use them.

Toilets: Ask what can go down them. Most remote South American toilets can't handle toilet paper, and if they are not used to Americans they may not mention that. A rule of thumb is that if there is a garbage can within easy reach of the toilet use it for paper until you have a chance to ask.

Kidnapping/Crime: Avoid nighttime long distance travel on the roads. It is tempting because it is a good way to not have to pay for hotels, but many of the bus kidnappings I heard about happened at night. It may be worth the extra fare to fly if the roads really are not safe.