

Trip Organizer's Guide to Cultural Immersion Ecotours to San Ramón, Nicaragua

Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua

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General information

First of all, a big thank you to you, the Trip Organizer! Give yourself credit for the important contribution that you, as trip organizer, are making. You play a vital role in stimulating the local economy of San Ramón and providing an educational, eye-opening experience for visitors. Ecotours also help the Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua (SCSRN, a 501 C-3 non-profit) support community-driven projects in San Ramón.

We know there is a lot of information here – don't feel overwhelmed! This guide is meant to help you feel informed and prepared to answer questions, but remember that the SCSRN staff will be there for you every step of the way. Most of your job is to recruit visitors and to make sure they are prepared. A trip organizer does NOT have to speak Spanish; there will be an interpreter in San Ramón. Once in San Ramón, our Nicaraguan staff takes over most of the work so that you can enjoy the trip. A trip organizer who recruits at least 10 other tourists receives a free trip and \$600 towards his or her airfare. If you recruit between six and nine participants, you will receive a pro-rated stipend.

Setting expectations for the trip

Your group should have realistic expectations about the trip. Nicaragua is a very poor country. It helps if the tourists have cultural humility, a willingness to be open to new experiences, and the capacity to “rough it” (e.g., cold showers, no A/C). They also need to be aware that they will be spending lots of time in a group, and though wi-fi is now readily accessible now almost everywhere in Nicaragua, the purpose of cultural immersion is human interaction!

Regarding the expectations for young people, the minimum age for children on adult trips is 10. Those less than 18 years old may never be left unsupervised; they must always be with either a parent or another adult specified by the parent, the tour organizer, or one of the guides.

Recruiting tasks

- Pick trip dates that will be most convenient for your target group and check with the SCSRN staff to make sure those dates are available. Ecotours typically begin and end on a Saturday or a Sunday, but we can accommodate the dates that best fit your and your group's schedule. **Please note: the rainy season begins at the end of May and lasts through November. The school year begins around February 1 and ends around November 30.**
- Familiarize yourself with the SCSRN web site and other SCSRN materials available. Put together a list of your friends, family, and students. Set a deadline 6-9 months before your trip departure for signing up the minimum of six travelers (including yourself), in order to reserve the dates for your trip. A time goal is helpful to everyone and allows the group to buy early, less expensive plane tickets. No one should buy plane tickets until at least six people are committed to join the trip. (Note: If your group is smaller than six people, SCSRN can assist you to some degree in your trip planning, but we cannot offer you a complete ecotour.)
- A trip deposit of \$200, the reservation form, and the liability waiver are due for each participant at least 4 months prior to your departure date. The balance of the trip cost is due at least two months prior to your departure date. The supplemental information form is also due 60 days prior to departure. Participants will receive confirmation and receipts when all of the pertinent forms and payments have been received.
- Consider organizing a fun activity that will bring prospective travelers together. At this event or meeting, you can show the video “Discover San Ramón,” which is available on YouTube. You can also invite someone who has made the trip, especially someone known to the group, to talk about their experience. SCSRN can provide

you with the names of folks who have been on the trip and who would be glad to talk to your group. Go over the basic outlines of the trip. Hand out the ecotour brochure and an info sheet for your trip with the dates, some idea of the itinerary, the costs, and the procedure to sign up. The cost includes all in-country costs for your ecotour. It does not include airfare, vaccinations/medications, trip insurance, extra excursions and extra hotel stays. (Trip insurance is required). Digital versions of the reservation form, liability waiver form, supplemental information form and contract with visiting groups form will be provided to trip organizers, who will then make them available to trip participants. Trip participants will need to download the forms and turn in signed hard copies to the trip organizer. Discuss the policy on cancellations, which is strictly enforced. A participant is considered to have canceled as per the date of an email to the trip organizer.

- Once people have committed to going, send them info regarding air travel (see below) and travel insurance, and remind them that if their passport expires within 6 months of the end of the trip, they must renew it before leaving. Also, let them know that they should meet with a medical professional at least 6 weeks prior to the departure date to get their immunizations and meds in order. You may want to provide the group with suggestions for travel clinics (e.g., for travelers living in the Raleigh-Durham area, Passport Health and the Duke Travel Clinic are good choices).
- Collect trip deposits (\$200) and the reservation and liability waiver forms. Check the forms to verify that the airline flights selected meet the time requirements for the trip and that all passport expiration dates are at least 6 months after the date of return. Also check that an emergency contact has been listed. Make a copy of the reservation forms for yourself, because they contain important contact and health information you will need to know. Send out reminder emails before the rest of the trip fee is due. All checks for trip fees should be made out to Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua (or SCSRN), and have the name of the ecotour organizer on the memo line. Deliver all checks received to SCSRN within 2 weeks of receipt. Mail them to PO Box 766, Durham, NC 27702.

Air travel arrangements

As trip organizer, your recruiting will be easier if you research airline booking and have information ready to give to prospective travelers. It is necessary that all members of the group be in the Managua airport no later than 2:00 pm on day 1 of the ecotour, and the return flight reservations should be no earlier than 1:00 pm on the day of departure.

The price of the ticket will fluctuate, depending on various factors, including the cost of fuel. Buying tickets early eliminates the uncertainty about the cost of the ticket and is generally cheaper. Expecting everyone to make his or her own plane reservation GREATLY facilitates your job as trip organizer. To make this affordable and convenient option work, you need to line up your group early.

You are also welcome to ask the airlines or travel agents about group rates and reserving a block of tickets. If your group prefers to be on the same flight, and especially for student group trips, it is crucial that you book your flight as soon as possible. If the only available flight arrives in Managua in the evening, you should plan to arrive the evening before the tour begins and stay at a hotel. SCSRN can help you make arrangements in advance to stay at a hotel near the airport.

Extended stay options: Travelers (and trip organizers) may want to plan to arrive early or stay longer in Nicaragua. Our staff will be glad to make suggestions for fun places to explore in Nicaragua.

Trip Organizer tasks to do after the trip is committed

Two to three months prior to the trip, have an orientation session. Before the orientation, send each traveler the link to the online Study Guide supplied by SCSRN, which covers Nicaraguan history, culture and social justice issues. Reading this material will greatly enhance everyone's experience and understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the people you will meet. A more in-depth Study Packet is available on the SCSRN website. Things to discuss in the orientation session include: bringing only carry-on luggage, the

packing list, appropriate dress in San Ramón, bringing a gift for your host family (and good ideas for gifts), and a number of other recommendations discussed in the Study Guide.

Four weeks before departure send this information by email to all travelers

General travel issues:

- Each visitor is responsible for being on time at the boarding gate for all flights.
- It is extremely inconvenient if checked luggage does not arrive in Managua when it should. Therefore, we recommend only taking carry-on baggage. This is one bag the size you can place under the seat in front of you and one approximately 22x14x8 that will fit in the overhead bin. (Trip organizers should expect travelers to be aware of the limitations for liquids in carry-on luggage.)
- Customs forms distributed on the airplane should be filled out with nothing declared. The immigration form requires name, address and passport information. Also requested is a phone number and in-country address. Use this address in San Ramón as the in-country address and distribute it to your group: San Ramón, Matagalpa. Phone Number: 505-8444-3930. There is also a health form to complete before entering customs. It asks questions such as whether you recently had a cold, cough, or fatigue. As this is a standard extra precaution and could potentially lead to complications and delays, we advise that you mark “no” to all the symptoms listed.
- Give all group members the following phone numbers in case of emergencies that may arise while traveling, such as missed or delayed flights: for Anjie Price, Executive Director: from the US, dial 011-505-8444-3930 (in Nicaragua, omit 011, which is for dialing out of the country in the US). For Larry Gomez, who will meet the group at the airport in Managua, dial 011-505-5709-4541.
- In the Managua airport you will first go to passport control and pay \$10 for an entrance visa (new bills are more easily accepted). Be sure to save the small entry/exit form for your departure. Take this opportunity to use the very clean bathrooms located at the other end of the room from the exit. Collect checked bags, if your group has any, from the luggage carousel (there are free baggage carts) and go through customs line (all tourists have nothing to declare if they enter with less than \$500 of personal items). SCSRN staff will be waving at you through the glass windows outside the arrival area!
- Outside the airport, SCSRN staff will collect bags, and everyone will get on the rented tour bus. It is very important that everyone stays together. Water and snacks will be offered during the bus trip, and there will be one brief rest room stop about an hour away, if needed. (As we like visitors to arrive at FEV in time to enjoy the beautiful sunset, trip organizers should make sure that the rest stop is very brief.)

Medical considerations (also included in the Study Guide)

- As trip organizer, it is your responsibility to know the health considerations of everyone joining your group. The team in Nicaragua also needs to have access to this information in order to be able to deal with needs that may arise. In a resource-limited setting, it is of the utmost importance that people exercise good judgment and accept personal responsibility for managing their needs, including bringing any needed medication. If you are concerned about some of the health challenges your group may have, do not hesitate to ask SCSRN staff in the US during the planning stages. (Travelers who use ventilators or other electrical equipment needed for health reasons should bring battery-powered devices, as there are no electrical outlets in the accommodations at FEV.)
- Mosquito-borne illness: The group should be encouraged to use insect repellent on skin and clothing, as well as closed shoes and long pants, because there are a variety of insect-borne illnesses. Two mosquito-borne diseases that are present in Nicaragua are dengue, Zika, and chikungunya, especially during the rainy season (May through November). While malaria has largely been eradicated in Nicaragua, there are still isolated incidences of it, so some visitors may choose to take a malaria prophylactic that needs to be started prior to arriving in Nicaragua. The trip organizer should not feel obligated to provide medical information to the group

(other than the CDC.GOV link). If the trip is for a group of young people, and there are a lot of questions from concerned parents, feel free to refer the parents to the SCSRN staff.

- **Lead time for medical consultation:** Stress to the group to allow 6 weeks prior to departure to consult with either their primary health care provider or a travel clinic to obtain recommendations for travel. Provide the link to the CDC web site that contains information specific to Nicaragua.
- **Food and drink:** Hydration is extremely important when traveling. Drink only bottled or filtered water and only canned or bottled beverages. There will be access to safe water at both FEV and the guest houses. It is not necessary to buy multiple bottles of water; please reuse and recycle. At the accommodations that SCSRN arranges, the food will be well-prepared and well-cooked. Dietary restrictions can be accommodated. It is recommended to avoid street food. Should you experience GI symptoms, OTC medications such as Pepto Bismol are readily available.
- **Sunburn:** Nicaragua is at 15 degrees north latitude, and the sun is directly overhead. Most travelers leave home in our winter and are surprised to arrive in San Ramón in summer time. Take plenty of sunscreen.
- **Hand washing:** Hand washing is recommended to avoid the spread of illness. It is recommended to carry hand sanitizer, as soap is not always available. Soap is available at FEV and in the guest houses.
- **Insects, scorpions, and spiders:** These are present in San Ramón. Always shake out your clothes and shoes before you put them on. In the event of exposure, the recommendation is to seek health care (See SCSRN Emergency Plan). It is a good idea to take a picture of the insect, and the bite, if possible, for use by medical personnel.
- **Hiking and excursions –** Know the level of difficulty of hikes and excursions beforehand. Always carry water and a hat. Bring sturdy walking shoes. There are rubber boots available in all sizes at FEV for walks when the trails are muddy, so it is not necessary for your group to bring their own boots. Also recommended are shorts/pants made out of quick dry material and waterproof socks. A lightweight rain jacket is recommended.
- **Dietary preferences and allergies:** Information about this is collected on the registration forms. SCSRN staff scans and forwards the information to the manager at FEV and to our in-country director, who informs the relevant host families. Hard copies of the forms also travel down with the trip organizer or someone traveling before the group.
- **Emergencies:** In the case of a medical emergency, our in-country staff has been trained in how to respond. Trip organizers will receive a copy of the recently updated Emergency Plan prepared by the staff in San Ramon. There is a basic health clinic in San Ramón town, as well as a hospital 15 min away in Matagalpa. In the event of a problem that needs more specific attention, you, as the trip organizer, will be expected to accompany the traveler along with one SCSRN staff member to a facility that is able to handle more complex medical issues. At the Hospital Metropolitano (<http://www.metropolitano.com.ni/>) in Managua, the staff speaks English, and US State Dept. web site says that they accept Blue Cross / Blue Shield and Tricare. Also, all visitors will be registered with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) through the U.S. embassy once SCSRN staff has all the registration forms. This program registers each visitor with the U.S. embassy in Nicaragua to facilitate communication in the case of an emergency.

One week before departure

- SCSRN staff will be arranging all of your accommodations, so it's important to let them know any special requests about sleeping arrangements if there are any. At FEV, there are 2 large cabins with bunk beds, one that sleeps 6 and one that sleeps 8. There are also 3 double cabins with 2 single beds in each. There are two additional cabins near the organic garden that each sleep 4 in bunk beds. In total FEV sleeps 26. Each cabin has a bathroom with toilet and shower (cold water only, but hot showers are available at the shower cabin). The

beds in the double rooms may be pushed together to form a king size bed. Let the SCSRN director know whether you want the bed made up as a king prior to your arrival. If you do not communicate about this the beds will be made up as single beds.

- Via e-mail, make sure travelers have consulted the packing list in their orientation packet and have packed what they need. In the past, guests have forgotten their bathing suits, flashlights, presents for guesthouse families, and batteries. (FEV is powered by solar and mini-hydroelectric systems. There is one electric outlet in the kitchen area. Recharging digital camera or other types of batteries is inconvenient.) Also, suggest that the travelers dress in layers for the trip itself, so there is no need to change clothes before arriving in San Ramon.
- Check to see if a meal is served on the plane. If not, it is a good idea to bring something substantial to eat on the plane. Fresh fruit cannot be taken off the plane.
- All tourists should have an emergency contact listed on the reservation form. At least two weeks before your departure date, send an email to all emergency contacts saying that if they need to get in touch with a tourist, to contact Anjie Price. Ask them to verify receipt of your message. This provides a check that the emergency email addresses are legible and accurate. (Include Anjie's email address in this email – anjie@san-ramon.org.) Send the verified list to Larry Gomez at larry@san-ramon.org with subject "safe arrival e-mail addresses" followed by your trip dates. We will send an e-mail to the emergency contact e-mail listed on each traveler's reservation form to confirm that they arrived in San Ramón safely.
- Let your travelers know that during the group's stay in town, there are several cyber cafes they may patronize. Also, there is free wi-fi in the park and the public library. Even some of the guest houses have wi-fi, though not all. In FEV, there is wi-fi access in the dining area.

Considerations for your stay at FEV (All this will be explained by staff upon arrival at FEV)

- Try to keep the lodge and cabins clean by wiping your feet on the mats before entering.
- Toilet etiquette - Because plumbing in Nicaragua is rudimentary, it is necessary to put used toilet paper in the trash can provided next to the toilet everywhere in the country, including the airport.
- Lights – Be sure to turn off the lights when not in use. Electricity at the farm is solar photovoltaic (PV) and mini-hydro and is stored in batteries. In the town of San Ramón electricity is expensive.
- Keep the doors to the cabins closed so as to keep out wildlife.
- Daily schedule at the farm will be communicated each day at breakfast in the lodge by the trip organizer or FEV staff. Treks to see howler monkeys are not planned in advance, but when monkeys are sighted, those interested will go quickly to find them. The trip organizer is to notify every one of schedule changes.
- Times are planned each day for R and R. However, if group members do not want to participate in an activity or want to go off on their own, they must let the trip leader know where they are going and when they will return. Those less than 18 years old may never be left unsupervised; they must always be with either a parent or another adult specified by the parent, the trip organizer, or one of the guides.
- Cloth napkins at FEV - Everyone will get their own napkin and clothes pin to identify their napkin. The napkins are used for several days.
- Hot showers. The hot shower cabin is available all day.

- Drinking water – Everywhere in Nicaragua, DRINK ONLY BOTTLED WATER, WATER FROM A FILTRON WATER FILTER, or OTHER CERTIFIED FILTER. However, the spring water at FEV is tested regularly and has always been pure.

- Food at FEV is excellent and prepared with gringo stomachs in mind. However, start out by taking it easy on papaya and mangoes. Kitchen staff wants to be helpful, but please avoid making special food requests. Allergies and special diets should be noted on the trip reservation form. This information will be sent to the FEV manager so that the kitchen staff are aware of these issues.

- Alcohol consumption by FEV and SCSRN staff is not permitted on the job. Alcoholism is common in San Ramón, and we want to do what we can to discourage it and to find treatment for those who choose recovery. If guests want to offer any of the staff a drink, please ask them to offer a soda.

Considerations for the San Ramón/Guest House stays

- The trip organizer should pair up the travelers, with two per house unless there is a pressing need to have three per house (e.g. if there are an odd number of guests) With respect to pairing travelers who have come alone, consider pairing non-Spanish speakers with Spanish speakers, and vegetarians with other vegetarians. SCSRN staff will assign the pairs to the guest houses.

- The night before you leave the farm for the town of San Ramón, talk about the guest house experience. Travelers might feel anxious about staying with a family. Reassure everyone that guest house families are trained and ready to make your stay comfortable and rewarding. Most guest house families do not speak English, but they are very used to having guests who speak limited or no Spanish. All guest houses have electricity, running water, indoor toilets, and mosquito nets. Food is different than at the farm, and there are differences in the food each home provides. It is a good idea to check with each of the travelers after the first day in town to ensure that everything is OK. If someone is not happy with the food, please decide whether the problem can be resolved. If so, a member of our SCSRN staff will visit the family to express concern. The SCSRN staff can help travelers who have issues with their home stay accommodations. Constantly remind visitors about the importance of using only bottled water and keeping it with you at all times. Fill your bottle as often as you need from the guest house's large bottle or Filtron water filter. Even rinse your toothbrush and brush teeth only with bottled water. A small gift for the hostess is appreciated. Some gifts ideas are: decorative candle, a cloth shopping bag, hand lotion, small kitchen utensils, a small piece of pottery, small calculator, box of tea bags, or flashlight. Host families enjoy seeing pictures of your family. Some families have VCRs and DVD players and enjoy seeing home movies as a way to learn more about their guests.

- Money and changing it: On the morning of your arrival in San Ramón you will have the opportunity to change \$20 into cordobas. There are opportunities in San Ramón and the airport to buy crafts. There will not be an opportunity in San Ramon to change the cordobas back into dollars; however, you may do this at the airport, if necessary.

- Schedules in town - Make sure travelers read their printed schedules. Let your family know when you will return if you go out at night. San Ramon shuts down around 9 pm, so it is a good idea as well as a courtesy to your family to return by 9 pm.

- Guides – In town, Anjie Price will introduce the guides for your stay in SR. The guides will escort you to the guest homes and around town. The guides are San Ramón young adults who have learned about the town's history, politics, flora and fauna. They earn significant income while they work with your group. Some of them speak a little English.

- Personal safety – All tourists should exercise common sense precautions. Don't flash dollars, don't walk around with expensive equipment (e.g., iPhone, iPad, large digital camera) or jewelry. Before photographing someone, always ask permission and be discreet.

Tipping suggestions and requests for aid, pan handling and begging

Traditionally, tipping is not as common in Latin American culture as it is in U.S. culture. However, the folks in San Ramon have been working with foreign visitors for many years, and most appreciate receiving tips as a thanks for excellent service. If you feel like a service provider has gone above and beyond what was expected of them, we suggest giving a tip of between \$5.00 and \$10.00. Your tip will indicate that the level of service offered was appreciated for its quality and professionalism. (At FEV, all the tips given by members of a group will be divided equally among the staff. In town, tips should be given directly to the host mother or the guide whose service you wish to recognize at the end of your visit.)

Below are a list of service providers that we suggest tipping and under what circumstances:

Service provider	You may want to tip if.....
Host family	The food was excellent, the accommodations were exceptionally clean and comfortable, the family was friendly and made significant efforts to communicate with you and make you feel at home. We suggest NOT tipping based on the elegance or special amenities of their home (e.g., if they have wi-fi or cable tv), simply because not all families have the same economic situation.
Tour guides	The information was accurate and interesting, the guide was engaging and attentive, the guide attempted to use English, the guide made significant efforts to communicate with you and answer your questions.
Staff at FEV	The food was excellent, the accommodations were exceptionally clean and comfortable, the staff was friendly and made significant efforts to satisfy requests.

We ask you NOT to tip any SCSRN staff or drivers.

Apart from the aforementioned tipping situations, giving money to people is strongly discouraged. We do not want to encourage begging or hassling of tourists. Your visit and trip fee is funding important projects for all the people of San Ramon. There have been moments when travelers have been approached and asked to help a person or family. It is impossible to help all the worthy and disadvantaged people of Nicaragua. SCSRN solicits requests for funding from organized groups for projects concerning education and community development but does not respond to requests for help for individuals. If asked, visitors can say that SCSRN only helps groups and communities, not individuals.

Leaving San Ramón / Returning to the US

Clean dirt off your boots and shoes before leaving San Ramón to avoid delays in the US port of entry airport. If your shoes are clean, you can avoid possible dunking of your shoes in bleach to prevent the spread of anything from San Ramón to the USA.

Discuss what to expect in Miami, Houston and Atlanta (long line for passport control/immigration, then retrieving bags, going through customs and giving bags back to the airlines). If tourists are carrying home personal items or items for SCSRN, discuss the relevant logistics.

Typically, all tourists will depart from San Ramón together and then go their own ways at the Managua airport. The trip organizer's job ends with making sure all travelers leaving that day get to the Managua airport.