



PANAMA

FIELD GUIDE

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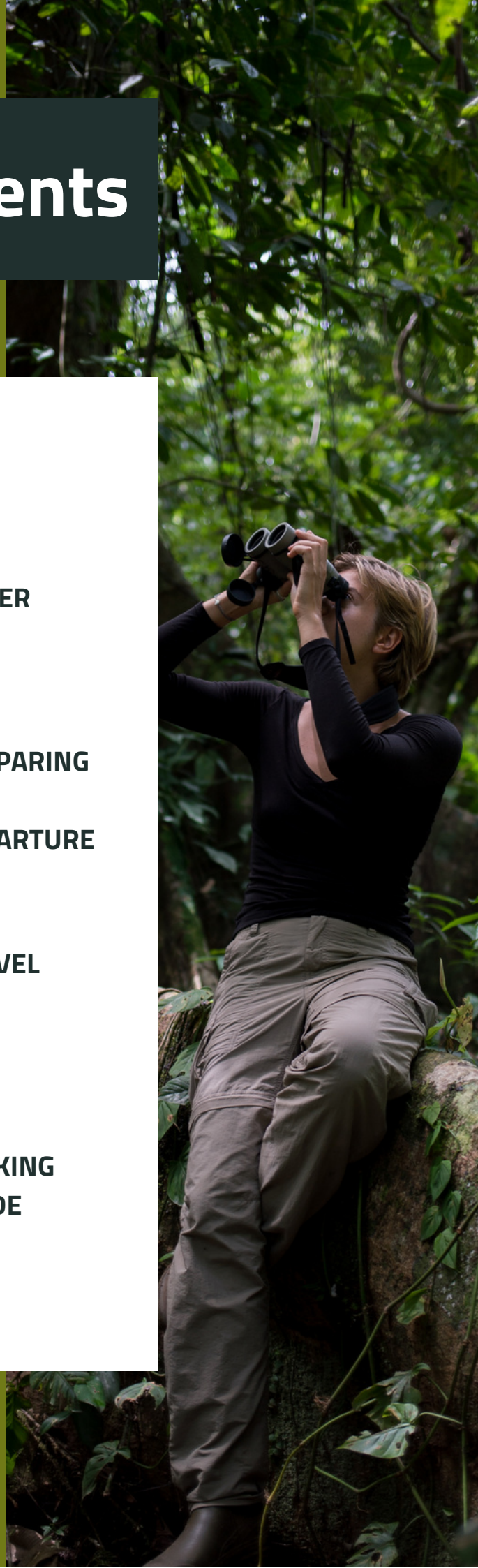
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LIFE IN THE FIELD



The Center



Academic Foci

- The center is located on a Caribbean archipelago covered in mangrove forests and coral reefs.
- Panama connects North America and Central America to South America. This creates an astounding density of species and ecosystem richness that few places in the world can compete with.
- Climate change and increased tourism on the islands have led to ecosystem and natural resource degradation which in turn is threatening Islanders' traditional livelihoods.
- Panama is home to sloths, dolphins, poison dart frogs, hummingbirds, howler monkeys, stingrays, and much more!

SEMESTER:

TROPICAL ISLAND BIODIVERSITY STUDIES

Rainforest and marine ecology. Marine protected areas. Indigenous tourism and sustainability. Tourism impacts on ecosystems and human populations. Conservation and natural resource management. Ecosystem health assessments.

SUMMER 1:

TROPICAL ISLAND ECOSYSTEMS: THE HUMAN IMPACT

Rainforest and marine ecology. Marine protected areas. Indigenous tourism and sustainability. Tourism impacts on ecosystems and human populations. Conservation and natural resource management. Ecosystem health assessments.



Community Engagement

You will live at a field station as a cohort, rather than in a homestay, local apartment, or university dorm. This means that you will not necessarily be eating local cuisine, speaking a local language, or navigating the local culture every day. However, we fundamentally believe that meaningful research is only possible with the input of local people and in consideration of cultural history, so community engagement may vary each term to reflect the requests of our partners.



Chores

Students are expected to take responsibility for their space during their stay. Students will help clean up after meals about once a week. Specific chore responsibilities and schedules will be shared during orientation



Climate

“Dry” season runs from January to May and August to November. Despite it being the “dry season”, rain is still extremely common. Rainy season runs from May through August and November to January. Multi-day torrential downpours are common. Temperatures in Bocas Town range from 75-85°F with high humidity. Hurricanes are not common in the area.



Identity

Every country is shaped by its history, and therefore attitudes towards gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion can differ greatly. Keep in mind that what seems like discrimination may simply be curiosity. Additionally, most students expect to encounter differences between themselves and their host country but don’t realize the most significant differences may be between themselves and their student group. Students should research how different aspects of their identity might be perceived in a new context, in specific political and societal issues, racial, ethnic, and religious composition, LGBTQIA+ climate (Resources [1](#) and [2](#)), and cultural norms and local laws. Reflecting on one’s own culture and identity before studying abroad can help students better navigate their experience abroad.

It is a privilege to study in another country and be welcomed into these communities. It is not our students' place to try and change its culture or values. While students will be learning about the country and its people, they will be ambassadors of their own country and culture. SFS campuses are permanent fixtures, and these communities are home to our staff members year-round. Behavior that is disrespectful, illegal, or contrary to cultural norms can degrade the relationship with the community and can impede meaningful interactions for peers, SFS staff members, and future students.



Setting and Facilities

A former hotel in the tourist hotspot of Bocas del Toro.

RURAL ← —————→ **URBAN**

BOCAS TOWN

10-minute drive

Population ~13,000

Nearest town. Hotels, restaurants, bars, markets, a bank and ATMs.

PANAMA CITY

4-hour flight

Population ~1,940,000

Capital city. International airport and advanced medical care. The Panama canal.

HOUSING

Six rooms, 3-5 people per room in twin bunk beds. Shared closet and storage cubbies. Each room has AC and fan.

En-suite bathroom with shower (hot water) and western-style toilet.

OTHER FACILITIES

Student lounge with TV and games.

Lab and library space, outdoor student kitchen, open-air classroom, kitchen and dining room, and pool.

Laundry washed once per week by SFS staff (detergent provided). A sink is available for students wanting to wash delicates or handwash their clothes more frequently.



Food

SFS can accommodate most dietary needs, but the variety of food may be limited due to local availability and cost. SFS cannot accommodate life-threatening gluten allergies or strict Halal or Kosher diets. Due to limited dietary variety, SFS always recommends bringing vitamins, protein bars, nuts, favorite snacks, etc. Students are expected to provide their own meals on Sundays.

Meals may consist of rice, beans, vegetables, plantains, and fresh fruit. Snacks may include tea, coffee, toast with jam or other spreads, and pastries.



Exercise

In town, students can choose to kayak, paddleboard, swim, run, or do yoga.



Time-off

Semester students will have a mid-semester break. Summer students will not be given time off to travel independently.

Students are responsible for their own food and accommodations during non-program time. Students are not allowed to stay at the center during the mid-semester break or during the interim between Summer 1 and Summer 2 sessions. See page 11 for estimated costs.



Money

The local currency is the Panamanian Balboa (PAB) and the U.S. Dollar (USD).

Both cash and debit/credit cards are widely accepted. All students are required to bring a credit/debit card with at least \$3,000 in funds in case of emergencies. Mastercard and Visa are the most commonly accepted cards internationally. Be sure to notify your bank that you will be traveling internationally.

You should bring at least \$500 USD (bills no larger than \$20 USD) with you to start. \$160 USD of this will be used as a room/medical deposit and will be returned in full at the end of the program if there are no damages or medical visits. It is beneficial to have \$50-100 USD of this in \$1 and \$5 USD bills. You will have access to ATMs in Bocas to replenish your cash supply, but you must have a PIN less than 4 numbers to withdraw money. ATMs on the island are frequently closed or out of money.



Electricity

The electrical voltage in Panama is 110 (the U.S. uses 120). You will not need a voltage converter. Panama uses plug type A (the U.S. uses A and B). All students should bring B to A plug adaptors.

There are frequent power outages in town. During that time, there will be no internet, hot water, air-conditioning, charging, etc.



Internet

Wireless internet is available at the center, but it is slow and intermittent. SFS reserves the right to limit internet activities occurring on our servers including, but not limited to, streaming or downloading audio/video content (Facetime, Netflix, etc.).



Computers

Students need to bring laptops with Microsoft Office (or the ability to open Microsoft files offline) and a USB port. Electronic devices are subjected to a much harsher environment than normal. In particular, Apple products do not fare well in high humidity and are more difficult to repair or replace locally. Please take precautions to protect your device.



Phones

Students are provided with local phones and/or local sim cards. Students are responsible for maintaining credit on their phone to communicate with staff and peers. Unlimited plans costs approximately ~ \$20 USD per month or students can pay for credit as needed.



Mail

No mail is permitted to be sent directly to the center. Students can choose to register with Bocas Island Express and receive mail for ~\$5 USD / lb. The average one-way travel time for mail from Miami to Panama is 3-4 business days. Therefore, no mail can be sent during the last week of programs, as students will not receive it! Mail will not be forwarded.





Health & Safety in the Field



24-Hour Emergency Hotline

SFS maintains a 24-hour emergency hotline. If you need to urgently contact a student in the field, call 978.219.5113.



Student Health & Wellness Manager

The Student Health & Wellness Manager is a full-time primary medical responder and student support personnel on campus. They are certified in Wilderness First Response, or equivalent certification, and trained in sexual assault first response. They also counsel students on adjusting to life abroad, conduct risk assessments, and help coordinate program logistics and community outreach.



Orientation

Upon arrival to campus, students receive an orientation about the local community and culture, center operations, and relevant risks and hazards. Prior to arriving on program, students should research the inherent risks associated with traveling abroad.



Medical Care

SFS maintains a detailed risk assessment and management plan outlining risks and response protocols, including nearby medical facilities and their treatment capabilities. These plans ensure that staff are always aware of the best route for appropriate medical care.

If a visit to a medical care facility is needed, an SFS staff member will accompany the student to the appointment. Be aware that there may be times when access to medical care is delayed, such as on expedition. Students are responsible for all medical costs and all incidental expenses including transportation, accommodations, etc., incurred by all parties involved. This may include costs related to COVID-19 quarantining. Some medical emergencies or conditions may necessitate medical withdrawal from the program. Final decisions on medical withdrawal are made by SFS.



Mental Health Support

Adjusting to new routines, relationships, and cultural environments while away from your usual support systems can be challenging. The ways you manage stress, take care of yourself, or find joy may not be available to you while you are abroad. Many students also struggle with the rigorous schedule that is inherent to the nature of SFS programs. Understand that you may have decreased communication with home, limited privacy and alone time, and infrequent or modified opportunities for exercise.

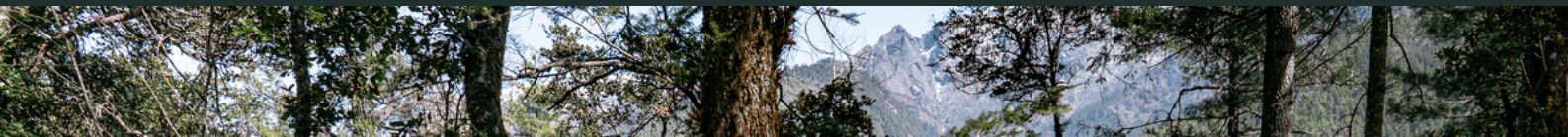
SFS is partnered with Morneau Shepell to provide students with access to free, mental health and wellness support by chat, phone, and video that can be accessed whenever connected to wifi. Students should download My Student Support Program (My SSP) in the app store or on the [My SSP website](#). My SSP is a supplemental resource, and students should work with their mental health provider to create a primary support plan. Students who undergo regular counseling should verify that their mental health provider is available while they are abroad.



Sexual Health & Wellness

When it comes to sexual health and wellness during your program, please consider:

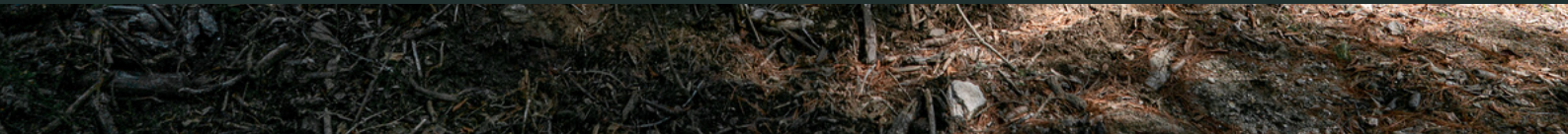
- The ramifications that a short-term relationship may have on a small residential campus or within the local community.
- Access to protection, medication for sexually transmitted infections, and emergency contraception may not be available.
- The current dialogue and understanding of consent in the U.S. does not always apply in other cultures.
- If you feel subjected to sexual harassment, you should walk away from any situation that makes you uncomfortable without concern for being culturally inappropriate. You can report harassment or assault to any SFS staff member.
- In the case of a sexual assault, SFS will make every effort to support you. This includes access to medical care, the option to report to local law enforcement, and identifying additional support resources. Local laws, definitions, and legal implications often differ from those in the U.S. Different laws and limited availability of resources such as rape kits can be complicating factors in responding to a report of sexual harassment or sexual assault in foreign countries.



LGBTQIA+

SFS is welcoming of all students at our centers. However, when traveling throughout the country, please be aware of the following:

- Laws and social customs may differ from your home country, and countries that criminalize same-sex partnerships may also use the law to criminalize gender identities and gender expressions.
- Cultural practices may not support freedom of expression and travelers may experience discrimination and harassment.
- Some cultural practices are based on traditional gender roles and gender expressions. As a result, those who do not identify as they physically present may sometimes be misgendered or misidentified.
- Some languages are gendered, resulting in a lack of terms that encompass non-binary and gender-neutral identities.
- Health services specific to transgender people may be limited or unavailable. You may also be denied services in your affirmed gender while you are traveling abroad.
- It is not always possible to use preferred names or gender identities (visa paperwork, plane tickets, hotel reservations, and government sites). Gender X is not recognized worldwide, and you may need to provide binary sex information.



Social Drinking & Drugs

There is no consumption or possession of alcohol allowed on campus. If you choose to consume alcohol on your days off in which you are off campus, please do so in moderation and maintain respectful behavior toward others.

Possession of marijuana and cannabis-infused products, including some cannabidiol (CBD) oils, is currently illegal under U.S. federal law. SFS does not allow possession or use of any drugs or medications that are illegal for the full duration of SFS programs including free time and weekends away. Check local laws before possessing, purchasing, or using electronic cigarettes or vaping devices on program.



PREPARING FOR DEPARTURE



Program Costs

The relationship SFS has with your school will determine your billing process. Within a week of acceptance, you or your school will be required to pay a non-refundable deposit to reserve your spot. Afterward, our finance department will reach out to you or your school to collect tuition payments. Up-to-date costs and refund policies can be found [here](#).

Included in SFS program costs are program advising and orientations, tuition and research fees, airport transfers, housing, meals 6 days a week during program time, field excursions and cultural activities, emergency evacuation and 24/7 support, and official transcript processing.

PROGRAM	BILLING DEADLINE
Spring	November 1st
Summer 1 or 1+2	April 1st
Summer 2	May 1st
Fall	June 1st

BASIC COSTS (BILLED BY SFS)	SEMESTER	SUMMER 1
Tuition	\$20,450	\$5,200
Room & Board	\$4,950	\$1,650
BASIC PROGRAM COST	\$25,400	\$6,850
ADDITIONAL COSTS (ESTIMATED, ACTUAL COSTS MAY VARY)		
Airfare	\$700	\$700
Passport	\$200	\$200
Visa fees (if applicable)	N/A	N/A
Immunizations/Medications	\$800	\$800
Personal Expenses	\$2,500	\$1,400
Program Breaks	\$1,000	\$300
ESTIMATED ADDITIONAL PROGRAM COSTS	\$5,200	\$3,400
TOTAL PROGRAM COSTS (BASIC + ADDITIONAL COSTS)		
ESTIMATED TOTAL PROGRAM COST	\$30,600	\$10,250



Financial Aid

All students are welcome to apply for SFS financial aid. Financial aid applications are reviewed on a rolling basis starting in February for summer programs, April for fall programs, and September for spring programs. Early submissions are encouraged. Students who submit an SFS financial aid application by the payment deadline will be considered for our full range of aid options. Learn more [here](#).



TRAVEL



PASSPORT

You must have a passport in hand four months prior to departure that is valid for at least 3 months after arrival or the entire length of stay in Panama, whichever is longer.



VISA

Students will enter Panama using a tourist visa. Students' Panamanian visas will be granted upon arrival to Panama and last for 180 days. Nothing needs to be done for the visa pre-arrival. Tourist visas are currently free to obtain, but visa costs are the responsibility of students, and prices are subject to change.

Non-U.S. citizens may require a different visa process and are responsible for applying for, obtaining, and paying for their own visa valid for the duration of their stay.

If traveling before or after the program, make sure that your visa will remain valid for the entirety of your stay.



FLIGHTS

Students are responsible for the cost of flights to and from Panama City. Students will receive travel instructions at least 2 months prior to the start of their program. Do not book flights before receiving these instructions. SFS will book and pay for flights to and from Bocas del Toro from Panama City, if you will be traveling post-program please staff know.

SFS staff will meet students at the airport on the date and time specified in the airport instructions and transport them to the center. Students will receive airport instructions 1-2 weeks prior to the start of their program. If traveling before the program, you are responsible for meeting the group at the airport at the designated date and time. Additionally, SFS is not responsible for transporting or storing luggage before or after the program.

SFS is not responsible for reimbursing travel expenses for programs canceled or rescheduled due to acts of war or civil unrest, strikes, weather, quarantine/epidemics/sickness, government regulations, or failure of equipment, power, or communications.





Medical Requirements



Medical Approval Process

Students are required to complete the SFS medical approval process using our HIPPA-compliant portal to inform SFS staff of their medical and mental health needs and accommodations. The review is not meant to exclude, but to inform and allow support systems to be put in place. No student may enter the field until medical approval is granted by SFS. [More information.](#)



Vaccinations & Medications

Required

- At least 1 COVID-19 vaccine within 1 year of the program start date, but no less than 2 weeks before departure.

Recommended

- [Centers for Disease Control](#), travel clinics, or medical providers can provide further recommendations.



Accommodating Disabilities

SFS will work with students, schools, and physicians to determine the required accommodations and whether it can be safely and reasonably maintained on program. While SFS strives to meet students needs, due to the remote nature of the programs, there are varying levels of accessibility, services, and accommodations. Students with questions regarding physical or mental health accommodations should contact the Office of Student Affairs and learning accommodations should contact the Office of Academic Affairs.



Insurance

Students are required to buy health insurance. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that their coverage is valid in their program country(s) for the full duration of their program and covers basic medical care, including non-urgent illness or injury, laboratory tests, and pharmaceutical needs. SFS does not provide company recommendations. Keep in mind:

- Most domestic health insurance plans do not provide comprehensive coverage for out-of-country medical expenses.
- Schools may provide international health insurance or have their own insurance requirements for studying abroad.
- Most insurance companies provide coverage on a reimbursable basis. Therefore, students need to bring a credit card to pay for medical expenses and then request reimbursement later on.

Emergency Evacuation and Repatriation Insurance

All students are automatically enrolled in an emergency evacuation and repatriation insurance plan through American International Group, Inc. (AIG) for the duration of their program only. This plan covers the cost of transportation, accommodations, and medical care associated with medically or politically necessary evacuations (e.g. life-saving support during air evacuation). It includes up to \$350,000 for emergency medical evacuation, \$100,000 for emergency security evacuation, and \$20,000 for repatriation of remains. The coverage provided does not cover basic medical care, laboratory tests, or pharmacy needs. Students on SFS programs are required to supply their own comprehensive health insurance as outlined above.



PACKING GUIDE



Packing Considerations



Luggage

SFS does not have a specific policy regarding how much or what type of luggage students bring, so pack according to your needs. Make sure you bring only what you can maneuver yourself, and check with all airlines for luggage restrictions and fees.



Culture & Climate

Many students bring old clothes to wear in the field and leave behind at the end of the program. Additionally, all laundry is washed together, rather than separated by color, which leads to occasional staining. Do not bring anything that you would not want damaged!

Travelers with type 3 or type 4 curls and/or hair that is damaged easily by chlorine, sun, and saltwater may want to consider packing extra products and practicing preventative care. Quality hair care products vary greatly by region, so it is recommended you bring your preferred products with you in a quantity that will last for your entire program. Some items you may consider are coconut oil, deep conditioner, leave-in conditioner, hair masks, clarifying shampoo, a microfiber towel, a swim cap, and/or wide headbands.

As you pack, please consider the impact of the products that you bring with you to your program, both the ingredients and packaging. Plastic can be difficult for waste management in remote environments. Think about bringing reusable totes, metal straw, cloth napkins, and other items. We also highly encourage biodegradable soaps, shampoos, and conditioners.





Required Packing

- **Pants** Lightweight blends that dry quickly. 2+ for field work and 2+ normal/flowy pants for day to day .
- **Shorts** Runners may want a few pairs of athletic shorts.
- **T-shirts and Tank tops** Enough for 10 days.
- **Long-sleeved shirts** 2+ for field work. A mix of synthetic fabrics and cotton.
- **Casual/nice clothes** for town. Nothing you don't want ruined.
- **Lightweight jacket or sweatshirt and sweatpants**
- **Waterproof jacket with a hood or Poncho** Water resistant is not sufficient.
- **Underwear and Socks** including light wool or synthetic (not cotton) hiking socks and some knee-high socks for use with rainboots. Enough for 2 weeks.
- **Pajamas** appropriate for shared spaces.
- **Swimsuit** 3-4 sets. If applicable, at least one one-piece.
- **Sun hat and sunglasses** Hat should have brim, and it is recommended to use polarized sunglasses.
- **Bandana, buff, or scarf**
- **Sneakers** or other casual shoes.
- **Rain boots** The center has several pairs of rain boots that you can use, but if you have an especially large or small foot it is recommended you bring your own. If you want your own pair, lightweight, shin-high boots with good tread are best.
- **Sandals** with heel straps.
- **Flip flops** for showering.
- Sheets, a pillow, and mosquito net will be provided at the center.
- **Towels** 1 large shower towel, 1 face/hand towel, and 1 beach towel. Quick dry towels are best!
- **Toiletries** Basic items can be purchased in town, but you should plan to bring enough with you for at least a week. Preferably biodegradable.
- **Masks and COVID tests** Bring enough masks to last the duration of the program and 5+ home rapid tests
- **Record of immunizations and Health history**



- **Personal first-aid kit** including Anti-itch creams, Neosporin, Bacitracin, Tylenol, Ibuprofen, Pepto Bismol, Band-Aids, Tape, Tweezers, Nail clippers, Antihistamines, Pro-biotics, Antidiarrheals, Vitamin C, Cold medicines, Hydration salts, etc.
- **Prescriptions** Note that overseas prescriptions are not always accepted. You should bring adequate supplies of prescription medications with you to last the duration of your program alongside your doctor's prescription to avoid customs delays. Think about inhalers, allergy medication, contacts/glasses, etc.
- **Motion sickness medication/ Dramamine/ Ginger chews** if you experience motion sickness.
- **Period care** You can purchase basic period products in town. We encourage you to use a menstrual cup or environmentally friendly, biodegradable options.
- **Flash drives and/or External hard drive** At least 16 GB recommended.
- **Computer** that can open Microsoft Office documents offline and has a USB port.
- **Surge protector and Plug adaptors**
- **Wristwatch** Waterproof for snorkeling.
- **Headlamp or Flashlight**
- **Dry bag or Waterproof daypack cover** You can also consider several smaller dry bags or sturdy plastic bags. Gallon-sized Ziploc bags work well.
- **Day pack** Suitable for taking gear into the field. 15-30L recommended.
- **Notebooks and Pencils** Can buy locally.
- **Water bottles** 2 bottles with at least 1L capacity each.
- **Sunscreen** 1+ bottles. Reef-safe.
- **Insect Repellent** 1+ bottles.
- **University ID card**
- **Dive Mask and Extra strap** Check for good fit and solid strap construction. Full-face masks and masks with prescription lenses are not recommended (use disposable contacts instead). ScubaPro, TUSA, Cressi, Mares, and Aqualung are reputable companies.
- **Snorkel** Full-sized adult snorkel.
- **Diving Booties or Wading/diving shoes** Hard or soft soled. Make sure they fit your fins.
- **Full sized Fins and Replacement straps and clips** that fit over your diving booties. Do not opt for "travel size."
- **Long-sleeved rash guard** 2+ to be used for all snorkel excursions.



Optional Packing

- **Hiking boots** Over-the-ankle recommended.
- **Rain pants**
- **Purse/tote bag** for town.
- **Small clothing repair kit**
- **Umbrella** can buy locally
- **Neoprene mask strap cover**
- **Additional swimwear** such as swim leggings, wetsuits, or dive skins (2-3mm).
- **Mosquito net** if traveling pre- or post-program.
- **Pocketknife** Checked luggage only.
- **Hammock**
- **Tupperware and travel mugs** for packing snacks.
- **Waterproof notebook** DuraRite, 4x6 or 4x7.
- **Journal**
- **Games, Movies, and Books**

- **Swimmer's ear drops**
- **Hair oil and/or detangling conditioner**
- **Tiger balm, and/or Lotion/aloe vera**
- **Earplugs and Eye mask**
- **Baby wipes and Hand sanitizer** Can purchase in town.
- **Snacks, Drink powders, and Dietary supplements** Any favorites.
- **Camera**
- **Headphones and/or Bluetooth speaker**
- **Waterproof cases for electronics and silicone packets** (or some water-absorbing equivalent).
- **Binoculars** Preferably 8 x 40 but anything in the 6 x 30 to 10 x 40 range is fine.
- **Extra batteries and External battery packs**
- **Underwater camera** You can borrow SFS equipment, but any damages are student's responsibility to pay for.



Contact Us

Keep up with SFS follow us on Instagram [@theSFS](#)/[@theSFS_panamá](#), read [news from the field](#), and find the [full list of the SFS team bios here!](#)

Questions about billing? Billing@fieldstudies.org

Deposit payments, invoices, charges to your account, financial aid packages, billing deadlines, and loan paperwork.

Questions about health and safety? StudentLife@fieldstudies.org

Medical paperwork, Immunizations, managing medical conditions during your program, and dietary needs and preferences.

Questions about academics? Academics@fieldstudies.org

Learning accommodations, syllabi, and directed research.

Questions about admissions or enrollment? Admissions@fieldstudies.org

Which program is the best fit for you, application materials, travel and visa logistics, and other program-specific questions.