

# **BOSIA**

## **Student Delegation Manual**

(Revised 2024)

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the Bainbridge Ometepe Sister Islands Association is to encourage mutual understanding, education, friendship, and cultural and peaceful exchanges between the people of Bainbridge Island and Ometepe Island, and between the peoples of the United States and Nicaragua.

### **Philosophy**

The Bainbridge Ometepe Sister Islands Association (BOSIA) is devoted to cultural exchange, education, and humanitarian efforts. We believe that the peoples of Ometepe, Nicaragua, and the Puget Sound area can learn from each other while building a lasting friendship. Our relationship is based on mutual respect and trust. We help with projects that are initiated by groups on Ometepe and which are important to the community rather than to individuals or one family. We are non-partisan and non-sectarian. Working together we learn about each other and derive mutual benefit. Keeping this process in place helps prevent us from seeing ourselves as "do-gooders," and helps our partners on Ometepe not to see us as "patrones." When we travel to Ometepe as a part of BOSIA, we are not on a personal vacation, but become citizen diplomats who represent our community. We extend and nurture the relationships that have been carefully built by previous delegations. The people on Ometepe see the actions and the commitment we make as actions and commitments of BOSIA.

### **Description and History**

BOSIA is a non-profit educational organization founded in 1987 by Bainbridge Islanders who had been concerned with the long history of poor relations between the U.S. and Nicaragua. The charter of the organization is to educate residents of both islands about each other's cultures, and to establish person-to-person ties between the islands. The Association also provides material aid to Ometepe, particularly to support education and health outcomes.

BOSIA is a membership organization, with dues helping to fund on-going work. Membership is open to anyone sympathetic with the goals of the group, and residency on either island is not a requirement. Contributions to BOSIA are tax-deductible under Section 501(c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

BOSIA celebrates its 37th anniversary in 2024. Over the decades the focus of BOSIA has remained on building relationships between the two islands. Since 1991, student delegations have traveled to Ometepe and lived with host families while working on community projects all over the island. In addition to Student Delegation trips, groups from the Health, Library, Coffee and Special Needs Committees have visited Ometepe to build connections with the many different groups BOSIA works with. More information about the history of BOSIA can be found on the website: [www.bainbridgeometepe.org](http://www.bainbridgeometepe.org).

### **What the Student Delegation Does**

Student Delegations make friends, learn first-hand about life on Ometepe, strengthen the bonds between Bainbridge and Ometepe, and have fun. Some groups work with communities to paint schools, construct facilities for schools, or work on projects for the community.

Each Town Group usually takes one checked suitcase with materials for their project, over-sized liquids, materials for the Special Olympics games, and materials for activities with children on Ometepe.

Being well-prepared for your trip will increase the success of your delegation and your own personal satisfaction. Attending all delegation meetings, town meetings, and the Retreat is key to being prepared for the trip; therefore, attendance is mandatory. Working together as a part of team building contributes to strong relationships before the delegation begins. When delegates return home they report back to the Sister Islands Association and to the community.

### **Role of Chaperones**

The chaperones accompanying the student delegation have been selected because of their many qualifications: experience with BOSIA, knowledge of Ometepe, ability to relate well to people, maturity and ability to lead. The medical chaperone is screened for medical experience and understanding of medical issues on Ometepe. The chaperones attend trainings before the trip and prepare students through monthly Town Meetings.

The most important work of the chaperones occurs on the ground on Ometepe. They get to know the host families, interface with the community on the work project, and conduct daily check-ins with the students in order to be well acquainted with their daily experiences.

## **Cultural Preparation and Awareness**

We are guests on Ometepe, and our actions should reflect our understanding of and respect for our hosts, their culture, and their values. While working as a team is important for us, it is also important to work, interact, and play with our friends on Ometepe as much as possible. We are primarily a cultural exchange organization. Homestays with families are an important component of our trips because they allow an opportunity to get to know individuals on Ometepe and give them a chance to get to know us.

It is challenging and worthwhile at times to set aside your opinions and feelings to listen to Nicaraguans. It is also useful to express your own ideas. The homestay and working on your project provide a wonderful opportunity for cross-cultural exchanges of ideas.

Here are a few of the cultural issues and experiences that may await you during your stay on Ometepe:

### **Concept of time**

On Ometepe one's concept of time is closely linked to the experience of living with uncertainty. Transportation, electricity, water, and other resources we may rely on without much thought are in short supply or involve a more time-consuming process on Ometepe. If you set up a meeting with some Nicaraguans, they may be late. The bus may have broken down; the power may have gone out; or they may not own a clock. The list of possibilities is endless! Please be on time and be patient. The cogs turn at a slower pace on Ometepe.

### **Flexibility**

It is important to realize that plans are often changed. Flexibility, better known as "going with the flow," is essential to your enjoyment and to the success of the delegation. When your own plans change or your family lets you know of a new plan, it is important to communicate with your chaperones so they are aware of the change.

### **Language and Communication**

Sometimes students who are preparing for Ometepe feel frustrated by their lack of speaking/understanding ability. Student delegation after student delegation has proven that the level of Spanish you have is sufficient to have strong, meaningful relationships with your families. This does not mean that it will be easy. Be sure to brush up on common phrases, greetings, and important verbs. Do not worry about conjugating everything perfectly. Homestay families are very understanding and enjoy helping with your Spanish.

Regardless of your language ability, it is important to express your appreciation for your host family's efforts. There are many effective forms of communication that are not spoken. Smiles will relax you and your Nicaraguan friends. People understand body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions, even if you are not trying to communicate with them.

## **Food**

Rice, beans, plátanos, and fruit are the staple foods of the people of Ometepe. As guests you will probably be given large portions, often including meat. Some Nicaraguans do not eat meat because they cannot afford the luxury. They may make a special effort to prepare a dish with meat for you because you are a guest in their home.

Delegates with dietary restrictions or allergies should explain to their families (with the help of their chaperones) what their dietary needs are. This is a great thing to communicate ahead of time in a letter, and reiterate when you arrive. Vegetarianism is not common on Ometepe, although there is more familiarity with the idea in towns that see higher numbers of foreign tourists. Many Nicaraguans do not understand why one would choose not to eat meat because they view it as a special food and treat. It may be necessary to explain if you do not eat any animal products or meats, as chicken and seafood is not viewed as "meat" (with the literal term carne referring mostly to beef or pork) in Nicaragua.

Much of the food on Ometepe is naturally gluten-free as wheat is not a common product. Tortillas are made from corn masa, but bread is sometimes served with breakfast or traditional dishes like nacatamales.

Be aware of differences in diet and that this may very well cause problems in your digestion. At first you may find yourself eating less food than normal as you adjust to the different food and preparation of it. Do not turn all food away and quit eating, but do be aware of food that could harbor bacteria (eating raw vegetables is a common worry), and avoid it if you feel uncomfortable or are worried about your health.

## **Role in family**

Sometimes students feel awkward at first with their family. They want to help their Nicaraguan family wash clothes, cook, clean the house, and feed the animals. The Nicaraguans are sometimes unsure how to treat their guests as well. If you offer to help wash the clothes, for example, your host may insist on doing it for you. If you phrase the question slightly differently, "Could you teach me to wash my clothes Nicaraguan style?" you may have better luck.

To ease into communication you might plan to teach your family some simple games and ask them to teach you some. Games are good icebreakers that allow a lot of interaction without requiring an extensive vocabulary. Sharing pictures you have brought of your family and life on Bainbridge can also be a great way to break the ice and get discussions going about the similarities and differences between our two islands.

### **Formality**

It is important to appreciate the concept of formality on Ometepe. As a guest from the Sister Islands, you may be invited to an event and given special recognition. To show appreciation of this honor, there are several small things you can do -- wear "formal" clothing to events (skirt or dress, dress shirt, chino style slacks are all acceptable); interact with your hosts during the events; ask questions; make a statement of gratitude. These actions show interest and respect.

### **Culture Shock**

If you feel frustrated, depressed, alone, or "peopled-out," chances are you are experiencing culture shock. Each person deals with culture shock differently, but the following is a brief list of suggestions to help you:

- Keep a journal. Write out your frustrations and emotions. Find a quiet place to write and reflect on your experience.
- Do something you are familiar with. Play a sport, speak in English, have a town hangout afternoon, read a book, listen to music.
- Speak to your chaperone if you are struggling and not sure how to feel better.

### **Machismo**

Some people are very offended by the machismo aspect of Nicaraguan culture. Machismo in a culture is commonly interpreted to mean a sense of superiority held by males over females that is overtly expressed through enforcing domestic roles, an elevated sense of male sexual superiority and desirability, and the objectification of women. While the exact experiences of machismo in Nicaragua may be distinct, there are parallels to patriarchal systems and sexism in the United States.

There is no prescribed way of dealing with the frustrations that we feel when thrust into this culture. It is an issue that Nicaraguan women are often willing to talk about. Dialogue seems to be a very effective way to understand and better cope with cultural differences.

If you are feeling uncomfortable due to machismo or specifically someone's actions towards you, talk to your chaperone. They are there to help you deal with your situation.

If the person who is making you feel uncomfortable is a member of your family DO NOT HESITATE to talk to your chaperone.

## **Nicaraguan History**

We recommend that you read about Nicaraguan history and culture before your trip. If you want to read some novels, several great books to look for are *The Country Under My Skin* by Gioconda Belli and *The Jaguar Smile* by Salman Rushdie. For non-fiction, you could read *Blood of Brothers: Life and War in Nicaragua* by Stephen Kinzer, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle* by Thomas Walker, *Unfinished Revolution: Daniel Ortega and Nicaragua's Struggle for Liberation* by Kenneth Morris, or *Nicaragua in Focus: a Guide to the People, Politics and Culture* by Nick Castor. The Nicaragua page in Wikipedia has an excellent overview of Nicaraguan history.

## **Recent Political Events and Student Delegations**

In 2018 the government initiated social security reforms that would significantly reduce benefits for people reaching retirement age. The initiative was stridently opposed by many people, including students and senior groups. This resulted in sustained street protests in cities; even peaceful Ometepe had protests.

Because of the unpredictability of the unrest and disruption to the transportation links, the BOSIA board canceled the 2018 and 2019 high school delegations. The level of unrest did not warrant cancellation of other BOSIA adult delegations, such as Coffee, Special Needs, and Student Delegation Committee trips. By the fall of 2019, the Board, informed by Nicaraguan friends and office staff, concluded that civic life had returned to a new normal and that it would be safe to resume the student trips

Delegations in 2020 and 2021 were canceled because of the pandemic. However, given the current climate on Ometepe, student delegations have resumed, and students traveled to Ometepe in the summer of 2023.

BOSIA is a non-profit whose goal is to foster relationships between people on Bainbridge and our sister island. We are non-political and avoid taking sides in political discussions. We are aware of the current political climate and understand that taking part in any political discussion requires much more trust and can have greater day-to-day ramifications on families and the association.

## What to Bring

### Gifts

You will be staying with a host family. By sharing the joys and struggles of daily life on Ometepe, very special friendships can emerge. Islanders from both communities gain a deeper understanding of a foreign culture and an appreciation of the different challenges each face. As we leave to return to our homes in the North, we often want to leave a "recuerdo" with our friends and "family" on Ometepe.

Gift giving is a sensitive issue in both cultures. It is essential to show one's appreciation for Nicaraguan hospitality while also respecting the Nicaraguans' sense of dignity and pride. Although it may be tempting to leave lavish gifts with one's host family, it is important to remember that our relationship is based on community cooperation and a growing sense of international awareness and understanding. Gifts should reflect these principles. Lavish gifts can also set up competition among families.

### Some Suggested Gifts and "Recuerdos"

- A little photo album of your family
- Postcards of Bainbridge
- Calendars with scenes of the U.S.
- Headlamps or flashlights that are rechargeable or solar Powered
  - Luci Lights are very much appreciated
- Books in Spanish
- Spanish-English dictionary
- Hair accessories, bandanas, baseball caps, particularly American baseball teams
- T-shirts
- Kazoos or harmonicas
- Colored pens or pencils, crayons
- Canvas tote bags, paracord
- Small balls, jacks sets, playing cards, UNO cards
- Kitchen Supplies
  - Tupperware, long wooden spoons, and other cooking utensils, kitchen towels
- Solar charger
- Art supplies for children—colored pencils, paper—not markers
- Canvas tote bags
- Paracord
- Small balls
- Uno cards

## Annotated Packing List

### Clothes

It is important to pack clothing appropriate for all activities on Ometepe - including working in the heat, hiking or walking, playing sports with kids, and town celebrations. As delegates, you will have increased attention on you from people in the community. This attention can feel both positive (people are excited to know you!) and uncomfortable (people may stare or speak to you when you don't know them). For this reason, more modest dressing is often recommended to delegates. Ultimately, you should think about **your** comfort and choose clothing that you will feel comfortable in and be able to participate in all parts of the delegation. Cat-calling, stares, and other attention that delegates may experience from (mostly) men is **not** a direct result of what you are wearing and you are not responsible for their behavior, but you may feel more comfortable if/when these situations arise if your clothing is not directly drawing attention to your body or skin.

- Lightweight long pants. Pants protect from sun and mosquitoes. Think about keeping cool yet covered at all times. Capris are fine.
- Quick-drying (lightweight cotton or synthetic) shorts - think athletic, hiking, or soccer-style shorts.
- Skirt or slacks. Bring one item for "events"- understated fun "summer" wear that gives a good impression.
- Lightweight, quick-drying shirts. These are cooler than cotton T-shirts. Synthetics, wool, linen or thin-woven cotton. Tank tops with wider straps are a good option too.
- Cotton T-shirts, including your Sister Island T-shirt. If your project involves painting, it's a good idea to have one shirt that you are ok getting paint on since splatters happen.
- Socks, underwear. Pack smart. You don't need a new pair of socks or underwear every day. We recommend that underwear be full coverage; pack what you would be comfortable having hung in the yard to dry.
- Closed shoes for hiking and working outdoors. Scorpions, rocks, and thorns abound, so it is important to keep feet healthy— athletic shoes or light hikers.
- Sandals for beach/swimming/bathing. Chacos, Tevas, Keens best for beach and walking, flip-flops best in shower or evening visits to the latrine.
- Lightweight rain jacket is optional. It will rain, but it's a warm rain.
- Sleepwear. Think about having to go to the bathroom at night and maybe sharing a room with someone in your family.
- Swimwear. In most cases, swimming will mean wearing lightweight shorts, shirts and sports bras. This is typical for Nicaraguans. In some tourist



locations like Ojo de Agua, wearing a swimsuit without shorts or a shirt over it is fine.

- Sun hat - floppy fabric or baseball cap. Not required, but recommended for additional sun protection.
- Bandanas
- Work gloves

You want to think about how you look overall. We want to be ourselves; we don't want to show up wearing grubby clothes, and we also don't want to show up wearing the newest and nicest "travel" gear. Dress *smart*.

### **Toiletries (all travel-size, liquids must fit in 1-quart Ziploc bag)**

- Hand sanitizer
- Toothbrush/toothpaste/floss. Don't bring electronic toothbrushes.
- Contact lens supplies. Also bring your glasses.
- Soap Liquid or bar soap; Dr. Bronner's (cut in ½) or other biodegradable.
- Shampoo—should be biodegradable.
- Deodorant
- Razor
- Brush/comb
- Headbands, hair bands. You will probably wear your hair up a lot if it's long
- Towel. Microfiber if you have it. Don't pack your heaviest towel; a smaller old towel works great.
- Toilet Paper (2 full rolls)
- Tampons/Pads/etc.
- Laundry bar soap/liquid detergent. Your Dr. Bronner's can double for this, or other biodegradable. Your host family will also have laundry soap.
- Sunscreen. High protection for tropical sun. (Combination products with insect repellent are not recommended).
- Insect repellent—either with Picaridin (20%) or DEET (34%, as 100% is not necessary). *Required*, as this prevents insect-borne diseases. Consider Natrapel, Ben's repellent wipes or 3M's Ultrathon repellent, available at REI or Wildernest; Ultrathon can last the majority of the day (8 hrs.) if you don't swim. Do not go "natural;" the risk of tropical illnesses is too high. Insect repellent also helps prevent other bug bites such as flea bites.
- Eye drops. If your eyes dry out often, or just for soothing relief after a long day in the sun. Lubricant eye drops are best.

## Miscellaneous

- 2-3 Water bottles. Nalgene or metal 1-liter size.
- Water Purification. Steri-Pen or pump recommended, iodine or chlorine tablets as back-up.
- Headlamp/Flashlight. Headlamps are probably the most practical.
- Batteries. Bring extras.
- Money belt
- Camera. Inexpensive is generally better; waterproof bag is a good idea. Many students use their phones for cameras.
- Sunglasses. Very important, tropical sun is strong.
- Ballpoint Pens and/or pencils
- Notebook/Journal
- Prescription glasses (even if you wear contacts)
- Work gloves
- Ziplock bags, to organize things in your pack
- Spanish/English Dictionary, pocket-sized
- Energy bars or equivalent American snack items
- Book for reading
- Large black garbage bags. To protect backpack from rain during transit.
- Sleeping sheet or sleeping bag liner
- Mosquito net. Nice to keep all sorts of bugs away, not just mosquitoes.
- Sea sickness bands or medicine (non-drowsy). Optional, but consider bringing if you are prone to seasickness for the 1 hr ferry ride.

## What NOT to bring

- Jeans or heavy clothing that does not breathe well or dry in humidity
- Crop tops or revealing clothing (see note at top of clothing list)
- Heels
- Expensive jewelry/clothing
- Things you have to plug in (Exception: camera battery or cell phone)

Your personal belongings need to fit in a carry-on backpack. We will be flying on American, United or Delta, and all limit carry-ons to 22"x14"x9".

When packing, and while on Ometepe, please be aware of packaging and containers. Recycling does not exist in Nicaragua, and plastics (especially bags and bottles), will be burned or thrown aside. Please think about minimizing this impact before heading down and bringing used plastics back to Bainbridge with you. This includes plastic bottles from drinks that are bought on Ometepe, such as juices or sodas.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **I want to help my family after I leave. What is the best way to help?**

It is natural to want to help a family whose members have opened their home to you and who have many material and financial needs. We think that the best thing you can offer your family is your friendship. Stay connected with them by sending letters with future delegations and through social media. Tell them about your life in the United States. Stay interested and in touch over the years. Whenever delegations from Bainbridge travel down to Ometepe, it's easy to send a letter to your host family.

There are ways you can help your family indirectly. You and your family can sponsor a scholarship student selected by the committees on Ometepe (though this won't necessarily help your particular family or town).

Some people have chosen to send direct financial aid to their Ometepe families. This is very understandable; however, it does create difficulties in the long run because it creates expectations of financial gain and long-term support. Other families may choose to host in the future for the money rather than for the friendship connection. **We've heard many times regarding other exchange programs that home stays that are financial transactions have a very different quality than homes that are opened out of generosity and friendship.**

We strongly urge you to resist the desire to send money to your host family after you return to Bainbridge. They hosted you for the pleasure of getting to know an American. Sending money reinforces the divides that the Student Delegation is attempting to break down.

### **What if people ask me directly for material or financial aid?**

It is possible that someone in your host family will ask for help with the cost of a prescription, school supplies or other needs. Or, a community leader may show you partially completed schools, roads, or clinics and ask for help. **A simple answer is that delegates are not in a position to offer any personal financial support or make decisions about requests, then direct them to talk to the BOSIA office staff in Altagracia.**

If you want to add more information you can say that the Sister Islands Association partners with communities through a variety of programs – scholarships, projects, health, water – and that the Association requests that visitors direct their contributions through these programs rather than to individuals. The reason is that groups on Ometepe (scholarship committees, Padres de Familia, etc.) direct where the money

goes for the greatest benefit to the community. Since you are a delegate of the Association, you want to honor the relationship that has been established with the committees on Ometepe and the decision-making authority those committees have.

You might want to practice saying something like this in Spanish before your trip. If you aren't sure of your Spanish being sufficient to explain this, direct them to your chaperone.

### **Can I go off on my own to explore when I am on a delegation?**

The student delegation's purpose is not to play tourist on Ometepe. We will have opportunities to explore areas around your town in great detail, an experience few tourists on Ometepe get to have. There will be a town trip with your host families to a local beach or location as a thank you trip, and your town may take other small trips to get to know the island. But you should not be leaving your town on your own because you want to see the island. As a representative of BOSIA, you are carrying out some of the organization's cultural bridge-building by remaining in your town and interacting with your families and other individuals in the town.

Unless ill, it is imperative to attend meetings or community events that have been set up especially for the delegation. Your attendance shows respect for the community and the scarce resources they have used for the event. Failing to attend would be insulting. For the same reason, it is imperative to go to meals with your host family.

There will probably be free time other than these events and meals during which you can explore your town as a group or for your town to take a trip or two to get to know more about what BOSIA does on Ometepe.

### **How do I communicate my respectfulness?**

Some simple things that may not be evident to a delegate are:

- Don't speak English in front of Nicaraguans; if you must speak English, have everything you say in English translated for them. It is especially important not to use names of people when talking in English around Nicaraguans.
- Be attentive during group welcomes and goodbyes even if you don't understand what is being said. Try your hardest to understand what is being said; it will help you in the long run as you adjust to Nicaraguan accents and the speed of fluent Spanish speakers.
- Remember, say goodbye to everyone in a group when you leave.
- Treat the food you are being fed as the precious resource it is.

### **Why am I being fed separately from the rest of the family?**

This is quite common on Ometepe so it is not a cause for concern. It could have to do with the scarcity of chairs, plates, silverware, etc. in the family. It could be because the cook needs to see how much food is required for the guest before feeding the rest of the family. Or it could be seen as a sign of honor for the guest that you sit in the kitchen at the table while the rest of the family sits in the living room. If you feel uncomfortable you can move your food into the area where the family is eating or ask to be served where they are eating because you enjoy being with them. Talk to your chaperone for help with this.

### **My family just looked at the present I brought and set it aside. Don't they like it?**

In Nicaragua, accepting your gift and immediately setting it aside is standard cultural practice. They will undoubtedly be showing off the present to family and neighbors soon. Not using a present immediately could also be a sign of the high regard they hold for the gift. Precious objects tend to be stored away and only brought out when they want to share them (photo albums, calendars, postcards, and some nice tools would be examples of this).

### **What if I feel overwhelmed and need time alone?**

You will soon discover that individual privacy is not a cultural value on Ometepe. For this reason, spending very much time alone in a room (assuming you can get it!) will probably be interpreted as dislike for your host. If you need time alone, you can sit outside or in a hammock and write in a journal or read a book. It is O.K. to take time for yourself, but do not "hide from your family" every day or every time you are in the house. Making that extra effort to interact even when exhausted is one of the keys to strong connections with your host family and town. The town groups will often have meetings to allow delegates some time to relax in their own language and reflect on their experiences and feelings.

### **What if there is something important I can't communicate with my family?**

Student delegates can ask chaperones to help with communication. And never underestimate the power of charades!

### **What electronic devices are appropriate to take?**

Delegates generally take phones as cameras. Phones have become more common on Ometepe, and your town group will discuss a policy around phone use. However, if you choose to bring a camera, a disposable camera is better than an expensive camera; if an expensive camera is lost or stolen, there is a greater emotional impact on family and community. Think hard about what you really need. You are there to experience life on

Ometepe; don't take things that accentuate our economic differences. DO NOT BRING: computers, gaming devices, earbuds, E-Readers, tablets, etc.

### **What kind of friendships and relationships are appropriate with Ometepinos?**

Culturally, Nicaragua is quite heteronormative, and there is a lot of attention given to dating and “novios,” especially for young people. It is common to be asked if you have a boyfriend/girlfriend, or for people to enjoy teasing about a “crush” that is perceived from a community member toward a delegate. Friendships between different genders outside of familial relationships is less common on Ometepe than on Bainbridge. For this reason, and the assumption of heterosexuality, Ometepinos may very easily misunderstand your overtures of friendship toward someone of a different gender. You may not even think you are flirting but your overtures may be fueling unrealistic hopes for a romantic relationship and the unrealistic expectations for the future and access to the United States that would come with it. You are there for two weeks; it can be an intense experience, but any relationship would be unfair for the Nicaraguan and could affect their reputation in the community.

Amorous relationships between delegates are frowned upon during the duration of the trip. You are there as a team and need to think about the impact your relationship can have on the town dynamics. The relationship will also disrupt your interactions with host families and other Nicaraguans in your town.

All student delegates sign a release pledging to refrain from sexual relations while in Nicaragua. The pledge is meant to help you see that such relationships can be damaging. In signing, you are agreeing to behave in a manner appropriate for Nicaraguan culture and for your town group. You are ambassadors of the Sister Islands Association, and your behavior should reflect that.

## **Health Information** (updated 12.04.2023)

One of the chaperones accompanying the student delegation is a medical professional. However, medical resources on Ometepe are limited. This section of the student manual reviews steps to take before traveling and how to stay healthy once on Ometepe. These recommendations are a starting point. Please contact your personal medical provider if you have questions specific to your own health situation. BOSIA monitors health issues in Nicaragua and will provide updates to delegates as needed.

Travelers' health resources:

- Center for Disease Control Travelers' Health site: <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. This site has extensive general travelers' advice as well as information specific to Nicaragua (enter country name under “Destination”)

- Immunize.org: <https://vaccineinformation.org>. Additional vaccine resource.

### Primary care provider

- Schedule an appointment **now** to complete the “Student Participation Medical Clearance” form and return it by the deadline. Please bring both the Medical Clearance Form and the “BOSIA Health Professional Letter” to your appointment.
- Review “Medication Guidelines for Students and Parents” **before** your appointment.
- All medications will need to be in original, labelled containers (preferably childproof) and will be carried on the plane.
- Clearly document to any allergic conditions

### Immunizations

Vaccinations help a person build immunity to specific diseases. This immunity protects that individual from serious disease and reduces the chance that the vaccinated individual will transmit the disease to others who may be more vulnerable or live in an isolated community, such as Ometepe.

This information is only a guide. Please check with your primary care provider for the most current recommendations.

You should have had *all routine childhood vaccinations*:

- Hepatitis B: 3 doses
- Diphtheria-Tetanus-Pertussis: Tdap booster within 5 years of June 2023
- Polio (IPV): 4 doses
- Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR): 2 doses
- Varicella (chickenpox): 2 doses or verified disease history
- Hepatitis A: 2 doses, 6+ months apart. (This virus is spread through fecal contamination of water. 1 dose will provide adequate protection for this trip but not long-term protection)
- Meningococcal: 1<sup>st</sup> dose age 11-12, booster at 16

In addition to above vaccines, we require:

- Flu (influenza): fall 2023 booster adequate

And recommend:

- Covid-19: most recent booster. As of July 21, 2023, the Nicaraguan government lifted all COVID-19 related travel restrictions. Should guidelines change, delegates will be notified.

Vaccines for international travel:

- Typhoid: we recommend oral (4 capsules – 1 taken every other day; booster every 5 years) or intramuscular injection (1 dose; booster every 2 years)

- Rabies: vaccination is not routinely recommended. It is a series of 3 shots, expensive and only recommended if you plan future work involving potential rabies exposure (veterinary or in global areas with high rates). If bitten by an animal carrying rabies, the treatment is rabies immunoglobulin which is usually not available in under-resourced countries (thus, you would need to decide whether or not to return home). There are many stray dogs in Nicaragua but most travelers are not at risk of being bitten. **We recommend that you do not pet animals - regardless of how cute they might be. Should you get bit, let your chaperone know right away.**

## Travel diseases, not vaccine-preventable

Diseases spread by insect bites:

- Malaria: anti-malarial drugs are not advised for this region of Nicaragua. (There is active malaria surveillance in Nicaragua with recent transmission in Atlantic regions of the country but none in Managua or Rivas/Ometepe regions.)
- Chagas (Trypanosoma parasite), dengue virus, zika virus, chikungunya virus
- **Avoiding insect bites is the best prevention** - wear long sleeves and pants when you can, use insect repellent and mosquito netting. Be aware that mosquitoes bite both during the day and the night.

Diseases spread by contaminated water:

- Travelers' diarrhea: a variety of bacteria and viruses can cause sudden onset diarrhea and vomiting, with or without fever. The best prevention is avoiding contaminated water and food. See "*Stay hydrated with purified water*" and "*Be careful with food and water*" sections below. In addition to staying hydrated with small frequent sips of safe fluids, treatment of diarrhea usually includes:
  - Mild (diarrhea is tolerable, not interfering with activities): May use loperamide or Pepto-Bismol.
  - Moderate (diarrhea is distressing, interferes with activities): Antibiotic may be used. Loperamide may be used unless fever or bloody diarrhea are present.
  - Severe (diarrhea is incapacitating, prevents all planned activities): Antibiotic should be used.
  - If also vomiting, consider taking ondansetron.
- Giardia gastroenteritis: caused by a parasite found in contaminated water, Giardia may cause gastrointestinal symptoms 1-2 weeks after exposure.

If you develop an illness after returning home, be sure to mention your travel history to your medical provider.

## Common health problems while visiting Ometepe

- Dehydration
- Heat Exhaustion
- Fungal Infections



- Diarrhea (vomiting less common)
- Bug bites, rashes, skin infections
- Dust/eye irritation
- Anxiety/homesickness
- Cuts/accidents

## **Staying healthy during your trip**

### **Stay hydrated with purified water**

Drink plenty of purified water - about three quarts/day.

Recommended water purification review:

<https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/water-treatment-international.html>

Visit Wildernest or REI.

Choose the method you prefer:

- UV light (e.g. Steri-Pen). Highly effective, though requires batteries. Bring chlorine dioxide tablets for back up in case of malfunction.
- Grayl Geopress purification bottles. Highly effective. The pressing process takes effort.
- Chlorine dioxide tablets. Almost as effective as UV, takes 30 min to purify, does not kill the parasite cryptosporidium well but does kill giardia.
- Backpacker's pumps/ filters (e.g., LifeStraw). They generally do not remove viruses (better for backpacking than travel, but still helpful as most traveler's diarrhea is not due to viruses.)
- First Need. This pump device has a special filter that does remove viruses.
- MSR Sweetwater Filter system. Also removes viruses, as liquid bleach drops are added at the end. NOTE: TSA may not allow the liquid bleach solution (sodium hypochlorite) in carry-on luggage.
- Iodine tablets. Do not treat parasites (giardia, cryptosporidium), can be used for back-up.

### **Be careful with food and water**

- Diseases from food and water are the leading cause of illness in travelers.
- Wash hands often with soap and water, especially before eating. Use alcohol-based hand gel (e.g., Purell) if soap and water are not available. Bring this with you in bottles that are small enough to keep on your person.
- Drink only water that you have purified yourself, bottled water, or carbonated drinks in cans or bottles.
- Avoid untreated tap water AND avoid drinks made from untreated tap water or with homemade ice cubes (refrescos).
- Use purified water even to brush your teeth.

- Avoid eating food from street vendors – you have no way to assure that it was prepared under sanitary conditions.
- Food should be fully-cooked.
- Fruits and vegetables need to be peeled if eaten raw.
- Beware of potential cross-contamination!
- Avoid dairy unless you are sure it is pasteurized.

### **Prevent insect bites**

- Use insect repellent with 20% Picaridin or 30% DEET and reapply often.
- Oil of Lemon Eucalyptus can be used as repellent but needs to be applied more frequently
- Consider buying clothing that has been treated with permethrin; or treat clothing and sheet/sleeping bag liner yourself prior to travel.
- Consider wearing lightweight long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and a hat.
- Consider taking a mosquito net to sleep under.

### **Avoid injuries**

- Wear closed shoes on hikes and for work projects.
- Break in shoes/sandals before trip.
- Wear flip-flops or sandals at home and in shower/bathroom to avoid parasites, fungi.
- Shake out shoes and clothes before putting them on.
- Wear work gloves when hauling rocks and bricks; not just to protect fingers, but also because of potential bites/stings from creatures that you encounter.

### **For your personal medication kit**

- Bring all of your prescription medications as recommended by your doctor in their original labeled bottles.
- Child-proof medication packaging is strongly recommended since children are often present in host households.

The following medications are recommended but you should notify your town or medical chaperone before using them:

- Loperamide (Imodium) – for diarrhea (Do not use if blood in stool or fever)
- Pepto-Bismol tablets – for diarrhea
- An antibiotic for traveler’s diarrhea (from your health care provider), e.g. azithromycin. (Note: this will not treat viral or parasitic disease)
- Anti-nausea prescription medication if you wish (from your health care provider). We recommend ondansetron oral disintegrating tablets.
- 1% Hydrocortisone cream or ointment for rubbing on bug bites
- Bacitracin or polysporin antibacterial ointment (preferably not Neosporin/triple antibiotic as many people develop allergies to the neomycin) – for minor scratches/cuts

- An antihistamine for itching or nasal allergies, runny nose: loratadine (Claritin), fenofexadine (Allegra) or certirizine (Zyrtec). Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) can also be used but makes many people sleepy.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) AND ibuprofen (or naproxen) for pain or fever. Contact your town or medical chaperone BEFORE using ibuprofen or naproxen for fever (It should not be used if there is any concern of dengue infection. Acetaminophen is OK.)

Other medical supplies:

- Face masks (medical masks, KN 95 and/or N95)
- Adhesive Band-aids
- Hand sanitizer
- Insect repellent (note: some preparations are available as wipes)
- Sunscreen

### **Other precautions**

- Drink plenty of purified water - about three quarts/day.
- Bring any prescription medications that you need WITH YOU.
- If you have asthma, talk to your doctor. Smoke and dust exposure on Ometepe can cause asthma to worsen. Take inhaler(s) with you.
- Wear sunscreen and use a hat.
- Use insect repellent. Remember that mosquito-borne illnesses cannot be prevented by vaccines, and also remember that, even if you don't catch an illness, the insect bites can really itch!
- If you have severe cleanliness or bug compulsions, this isn't the trip for you!
- Sexual relationships during this trip are inappropriate. Sexually transmitted infections are not uncommon on the island, but more importantly, remember that you are citizen-diplomats traveling to Ometepe for a very short time.
- Do not bring cannabis products of any kind.

### **A last word of caution**

Good doctors work on Ometepe but there are few diagnostic tests, little equipment, and no modern ambulances or air evacuation. Medical emergencies are potentially more dangerous.

Delegates often travel standing in the back of old trucks on poorly-maintained roads. Ometepe has earthquakes, two potentially active volcanoes and occasional hurricanes. For other risks see the “*Disclosure of Risks and Dangers*” information on the “Parent Permission Form.”

Following the above precautions will help to make your trip a safe and rewarding experience. However, it is important to realize the risks involved as well as the necessary precautions.