

ECUADOR HOMESTAY HANDBOOK

The Tandana Foundation 2026

One of the most exciting things about getting to know a new country and a local culture can be living with a local host family. The great advantage of living with a local host family is that you will get the opportunity to experience and witness on a daily basis the practices of their culture, their traditions, the local language, and beyond a doubt, homestay experiences can give you a better idea of how the locals live. These are all things that most tourists will never experience or get to see and feel from the luxuries of their backpacker hostels.

Beyond the fact that you will be immersed in daily life with a host family, staying with a local family will also give you the perfect opportunity to practice your new language skills on a daily basis and to taste some of the local specialties. Nonetheless, although homestays are a wonderful experience, they can also sometimes offer challenging situations, especially if we don't know what to expect. It is precisely for that reason that Tandana interns have put together this Homestay Handbook, so that you feel you have some more insight and are a little bit more prepared going into a homestay when you arrive in our beautiful Ecuador.

The Handbook has been structured in different chapters and subchapters that delve into specific topics or items that might come up during the period that you are here in Ecuador or during your homestay. Please remember and be aware that each individual has his or her own experiences and therefore how things are felt and interpreted by individuals will differ from person to person. Your personal experiences cannot be compared to someone else's experiences. Nevertheless, we do find it important to share some basic and common topics with you so that you can give them some thought and maybe find some recognition in them. What we have attempted is to write short paragraphs around items that seemed to be recurring topics of conversations between interns and fellows.

Different Daily Routines

It is important to recognize that all over the world people have different daily routines. Where you may wake up every morning at 8:00 am, your host family here in Ecuador, might expect you to wake up much earlier to eat breakfast with them. If this is completely impossible for you and you are not at all a morning person, try having a conversation with them about your sleep schedule. Otherwise, it would be great for you to assimilate yourself into the local culture as much as possible, including your family's daily routine. You might consider waking up with your family every morning to eat breakfast and afterwards, go back to sleep for a few hours.

Your family may also expect you to be home at a certain time, so it is important to call them and tell them where you are and if you will be home late for dinner. Sometimes you may want to eat dinner with friends in Otavalo. That is perfectly fine as long as you remember to make sure you are always communicating with your family so that they are not waiting for you, worried about where you are and wondering when you will be home.

There may also be some other daily routines that you not accustomed with. For example, in a Christian household, families may pray before meals or take turns reading aloud from the Bible

after dinner. Try to take part in these activities even if it doesn't go with your own beliefs—this is a good way to understand the culture more deeply and show your respects for other people's ways of living. But if something just doesn't feel right, it's important that you communicate this openly with your host family. Let them know that you respect their beliefs and practices, and you appreciate their efforts to include you in their activities, but since your religious background is different, you feel uncomfortable doing this specific practice. If you are unsure about how to say this in a culturally sensitive way, talk with your peers, mentor, or Tandana staff.

Different Rules of the House

Remember, you will be staying with a real family in their home, not in a hotel. Don't expect that your needs will always be catered to or that you will receive special treatment as a guest in their home. Also, do not expect that your family will change their rules and norms of the household in order to accommodate you. It is important that during your first few days in the house that you discuss the house rules with your family. Ask them what time you should be home for dinner, if there are any restrictions when using water or bathing, if you can make your own meals in the kitchen, etc. This way, right off the bat you will know what to expect in your homestay and your family will know what to expect from you.

Also, don't be afraid to help out around the house. After all, you are not a long-term guest, rather a new family member. Help out with the dishes, offer to cook dinner one night, help with the grocery shopping, and with the general cleaning of the house. Spending time with your family is equally important. Try not to stay cooped up in your room or your family may think you don't want to spend time with them. Participate in family activities as much as possible, but do take personal time when you need it.

Food

Food is a very important part of Ecuadorian culture, and it is equally important that we try all food that is put in front of us. Some of this food may look strange to us, but you never know until you try it! Be sure to always say thank you for the food that you receive. Be culturally sensitive and mindful with the food that is presented to you. Even though you are sometimes presented with excessive portions of carbohydrates (potatoes, rice, pasta) try to understand why these staples are a big part of the diet. Also, you might be presented with meat cuts you are perhaps not familiar with. At your own discretion and in a polite way, try to interact with that situation in a way that will not offend your host family. That meat that you have on your plate might not look like too much to you, but for your host family it might be a significant portion of meat.

It is good to be prepared for the fact that unfortunately, sometimes we may be put in a difficult situation when we are presented with food that may not have been properly prepared in relation to our standards and frames of reference. Perhaps the meat has not been refrigerated since it was brought home from the store, or perhaps fruits and vegetables have been washed with tap water that may upset stomachs that are not accustomed to the water source. It is important to recognize that if you feel uncomfortable, it is perfectly okay to explain to your host family that volunteers can get sick easily because our stomachs haven't adapted. Again, if you are unsure about how to

discuss this in a culturally sensitive way, get suggestions from your peers, mentor, or Tandana staff.

Similarly, if you have any food allergies or dietary restrictions, please let your family know immediately and explain to them the seriousness of the situation. It is important to assimilate yourself into the local culture, but it is also important for you to take care of your health.

Also, you will have the opportunity to go grocery shopping for your family and with your family with a designated amount of money each week. This is a great opportunity to learn about the types of foods that are most common to eat in the household, and also an opportunity for you to buy a few things that you would like. Coordinate with your family on how to contribute to their shopping. Maybe you can set a day in the week and accompany your host mom to the market, or you can ask your host mom to make you a list and you can go get this for her at the market. It's up to you, but make it something that is done in coordination with your host family. Also, it is never a bad idea either to prepare food for your family sometimes. This could be a local dish or a dish from home that would give you an opportunity to share your culture with your host family.

Culture

When living with a host family in a new environment, you will experience a culture that may be somewhat different from your own. You will have the opportunity to participate in many cultural activities that are important to your host family and your community, and we recommend that if you feel comfortable doing so, go ahead and take part in these activities. If your family invites you to a wedding, go and learn to dance to traditional music, share food, and see how a wedding in your new home may be different from the weddings at home. Also, you never know until you try, and although you may feel uncomfortable at first putting on an anaco or dancing, these uncomfortable situations help us grow and help us to understand the new culture we are living in.

In terms of language, while all of the families can speak Spanish, many of them mostly speak the indigenous language, Kichwa, among themselves. You may also find that some of the older members of the family only speak Kichwa. Don't get frustrated if they are always speaking Kichwa while you are around. You can politely ask them to speak in Spanish so you can understand, or try to learn a few phrases and words to participate a bit in the conversation. While you probably won't leave Ecuador speaking Kichwa fluently, you'd be surprised what you can pick up in such a short amount of time, and your host family will love it!

Cleanliness

In some households, there is a different perception of cleanliness as compared to what we may be used to in the US. Due to economic limitations people do not always have the same comforts you might be used to at home and also cultural standards for cleanliness differ. For example, the majority of houses will not have hot water, so dishes are washed with cold water from the tap. Bleach and strong household cleaners are generally not used at homes, and you may find that the bathroom and kitchen are not up to your cleanliness standards. However, look at the impeccable white shirts and white pants that are worn by the indigenous population that are all so tidy and

neat. Unfortunately, there is not much that we can do about the cultural conceptions of cleanliness of the home stay, nevertheless, we can and must watch out for ourselves to take care of our own hygiene.

We can be sure to always wash our hands and to only drink boiled or purified water. We can also make sure that our own spaces are clean, meaning our rooms and the bathrooms we use. In most cases, we can get used to the different ideas about cleanliness, perhaps realizing that the US may go in the opposite extreme of over-sanitization. But if something is bothering you, don't be afraid to have an open conversation with your family. It may be awkward and hard, but that is what a homestay experience is about. If after this conversation things don't seem to get better and you have concerns for your health, talk with Tandana staff about possible solutions.

Alcohol

The drinking culture in Ecuador may be somewhat different from that which you have experienced in the US. Unfortunately, drinking may be less casual and more of a means to become intoxicated quickly. It is not uncommon to see men drinking in the morning or the middle of the day or to encounter many intoxicated individuals at celebrations. It is also important to know that if you are invited to a party with your family, you may be asked if not pressured into drinking. If you do not drink or do not want to, tell your family as respectfully as you can. If they continue to pressure you and you are unsure of what to do, contact Tandana staff so they may help you with further advice on how to leave the situation.

A good trick is to tell a "white lie" and say that you are taking antibiotics because you are having stomach problems. Most people will understand this and not pressure you further. One last thing you can do is accept the cup of beer that was offered to you, say cheers to the person who served you the cup, touch your lips to the cup in the act of taking a sip even if you don't do so and then hand the cup back to the person who served you. They will then drink the cup and go on to the next person. This way you formally accepted the cup and thanked the server but did not drink any. The server will not feel disrespected and you didn't have to drink or turn them down awkwardly.

If you are around people that are intoxicated, please be aware of your surroundings and your own safety. If you feel uncomfortable, do your best to distance yourself from the situation or find someone who is sober that you can confide in. These situations can sometimes become uncomfortable or risky due to the consumption of alcohol. If this occurs in your homestay and it makes you uneasy, please communicate immediately about the situation with your host family and Tandana staff.

Gender Relations

Gender relations vary across different cultures, and you may notice that the gender relations in your homestay differ from those within your own family in the US. That being said, gender relations often differ from one family to another within one single country too. Generalizing to a great extent, one can say that the women in Ecuador are often the ones who cook and clean and take care of the children while men are usually those who work during the day so that they can

support the family. This is especially common in the communities that are located further away from Otavalo. However, there are also exceptions to the cause and you will find that there are mothers who have formal jobs and contribute to the family income with a monthly paycheck and that there are also some fathers who help cook, clean, and take care of the children, we can't over generalize.

Unfortunately, sometimes we may hear sexist remarks or we may witness violence against women and children in the household. This is rare in the homestays that Tandana chooses for their volunteers, but if it does occur in your direct or indirect vicinity, we want you to be prepared. If you do witness violence within your household, please communicate immediately with Tandana staff. Be aware and mindful that you might also find it difficult sometimes seeing the gaps between gender equality in your homestay and in Otavalo. Although we are not advocating for this type of behavior, try to remember that you are immersing yourself in a traditionally "machista" (male chauvinist) culture and that as much as we would like to change the behavior of others, it may take more than a few conversations (or even more than a few generations...) to create a gender equal society. Equally from the perspective of people here it is strange that in other cultures people get divorced and sometimes they even get divorced three or four times. Everything is relative and the way you see things depends on the frame of reference of the beholder.

It is important to make a side note here for female volunteers. Due to the nature of "machista" culture you may sometimes get cat-called in the street or be approached by men that you don't know. Although these cat-calls can be annoying and disrespectful, try your best to ignore them. The men who make these cat-calls are often just searching for attention, so if you do reply to them you are giving them exactly what they want. During the day, Otavalo is a very safe place. We mostly only have to be aware of pick-pocketers and petty crime. However, it is advised that during the night in Otavalo, you always walk with a friend or you take a taxi home. This does not mean that Otavalo is unsafe during the night, only that we want to take precautionary measures.

Comparing Wealth, Asking for Favors, Money & Gift Giving

As most of us will be coming from the so called "developed" or "first world" often people will think we are wealthy and have a lot of money. Try to be casual about this assumption and try to let go and stop constantly feeling like you are walking around with a flashing dollar sign stuck to the front of your head. After all, think about it from the perspective of the locals, you were able to fly over here; you have quality shoes, great clothes, a good phone and a lot of things that are perhaps not so common for all the people here. Aside from all of that, even if you don't have these things, you are from another country and that per definition makes you special and fortunate. Try to be humble and moreover be modest about these stereotype assumptions. Try showing people that you are also just a human and nothing exceptional, join in with all types of activities that show that you are not afraid to do something new and something that gets your hands dirty. Small examples are helping to wash the dishes after lunch or adventure into washing your own clothes. People will start to look at you from a different perspective once they see you are doing what they also do.

When it comes down to money and gift giving, you will find that these are boundaries you will have to learn to set for yourself, and that it is different for every individual. Nevertheless, it is important we talk about this in this handbook considering that what you do and how you behave in your host family will most definitively influence the experience of other people that will come to live with this family after you have departed Ecuador and will reflect upon Tandana as an organization.

When you are in your homestay, you may be occasionally asked to lend money to your family members or maybe to purchase items for your family. When your family is asking about food, this is perfectly fine because you will already have a weekly budget specifically for purchasing food for your family. However, sometimes you may be asked directly for a couple dollars or even more, and it can become an awkward situation in some cases.

Considering that you are living with host families who have opened their homes for you to live, and that these host families are in some way related and connected to Tandana, you may feel like you are constantly on the clock and that saying no to your host family when they ask for such favors may somehow affect their relationship with the foundation. While in some instances this may be the case, if you do not feel comfortable lending money to your family, it is important that you tell them so and explain what your feelings are in a polite and sincere way. If they ask why, you can either blame it on the fact that you are a volunteer with little to no income, or you can tell them that the foundation does not allow it. If they continue to pressure you, it may be necessary to sit down and have a talk with your family and be as honest as you can when explaining why you cannot hand out money. You can also turn to your peers, mentor, or Tandana staff for advice on how to approach the situation. Usually, it only takes a couple of instances of telling them you cannot give them money, after a while they will get the point and not be upset.

There also may come a time when you go to visit your family in the US (or abroad) during your vacation time or your family members come to visit you. When your host family hears this, they might ask you to bring them certain things from the US (or abroad) that are less expensive there. This also can become an awkward situation. Your family may offer to pay you back, or they may not. Although this decision is completely up to your discretion, we recommend that you not bring gifts or lend money because it will create a cycle in which each volunteer after you will be expected to do the same. Imagine if the volunteer before you brought shoes, iPhones, and clothes to their family and lent them money from time to time. Although you are not the same person and may not have the same opinions on gift giving and money, your family may now assume that you will do the same as the last volunteer. This in the long run can lead to uncomfortable and unpleasant situations that we would like to avoid. Therefore, it is recommended to be cautious and to be moderate and mindful when you decide bring gifts or lend money so that negative relationships are avoided.

There are some exceptions, however. If you would like to bring your family a thank you gift, or buy them something that is reminiscent of your state or home country, it can be a thoughtful gesture (for example, mugs, caps, or even sweets from your hometown). Also, if you are there to celebrate holidays with your family, you may consider buying flowers for your host mother on Mother's Day or offering to get a cake for your host brother on his birthday. These are small

ways you can give to your family that are less likely to create awkward moments for future volunteers.

Your Experience is Unique

Don't try to compare your experience living in a homestay with your previous experiences doing so or with the experiences of your peers. This experience will be entirely unique to you and your host family. Every experience and relationship is based on the personalities of the people involved (yours and your family members), the amount of time you spend there, and many other factors. It is important that you don't be or feel disappointed if you think you are not immediately best friends with your new family or if you never reach that level of relationship. Sometimes we may find ourselves living as more of a roommate than as a family member. Of course, we would love for you to feel like one of the family, but don't fret if this isn't how your experience turns out. The important thing is to build a good relationship, in which everyone feels safe, valued, considered and supported. Just remember to always be positive and try your best, and your homestay experience should be an unforgettable one.