Important Names & Addresses

In the United States

University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center
230 Heller Hall
271 19th Avenue South Minneapolis, MN 55455-0430
Phone: 612.626.9000
Toll Free: 888.700.UOFM
Fax: 612.626.8009
Email: UMabroad@umn.edu Website: UMabroad.umn.edu

Whitney Westley, Enrollment Specialist
Phone: 612.625.6076
Email: westl104@umn.edu

Molly Micheels, Associate Program Director
Email: mollym@umn.edu
612.624.3949

Holly Zimmerman LeVoir, Program Director
Email: zimme001@umn.edu
612.625.9888

Emergencies

In case of emergency, contact the Learning Abroad Center at 612.626.9000 at any time. If it is after business hours, there will be a recording giving you a number to call. The Learning Abroad Center has someone on call to deal with emergencies and can contact the on-site administrators if needed.

In Venezuela

VENUSA College
49-49 Avenida Urdaneta Edificio Guilam
Mérida, Venezuela
Phone: 58.274.263.7631
Fax: 58.274.263.3525

Francy González, On-site Coordinator
Note: Please direct pre-departure questions to the Learning Abroad Center, not to the on-site staff.

Telephone Codes

011 International access code from the US. The code from other countries will be different.

58 Venezuela country code used for dialing from outside Venezuela

Time Differences

Venezuela is 1.5 hours ahead of Minneapolis during the winter and 30 minutes ahead when the US is on daylight saving time.

Program Health & Safety

Program health and safety information is available at global.umn.edu/gosafe/index.html.
Introduction

Purpose of This Handbook

Before you leave the country, make sure that you have read and understood the information in your Confirmation Checklist, the Health & Safety Online Orientation (available in your confirmation checklist), and the information outlined in this handbook. These materials will guide you on a safe and successful learning abroad experience.

Valuable resources for your friends and family members can be found at UMabroad.umn.edu/parents. It discusses topics such as health and safety, program prices, logistics, and travel.

Overview of the Program

Study Abroad in Venezuela will provide you the opportunity to experience Venezuelan culture while learning in an academic setting. Classes with other US students are specifically designed to best benefit from your experience in another culture. Classes will take place at VENUSA, not on the Universidad de Los Andes campus, allowing for an uninterrupted semester or summer term, regardless of the
political situation at the university. The curriculum includes beginning, intermediate, and advanced Spanish language; Latin American studies; culture and history; and Caribbean and Spanish-American literature. Living with a family will greatly enhance your experience while abroad, and the cultural and social activities organized by the program will help you experience the country and socialize with Venezuelan students.

There are many similarities between Venezuela and the US, but in many ways Venezuelan society is not like our own. Although some differences may seem obvious, it is important to prepare yourself for your upcoming experience by reading the enclosed information carefully and by preparing for unexpected differences in the new culture. While the program can provide support for you on site, the ultimate success of your experience abroad depends on your ability and commitment to make the most of your time abroad and to successfully adjust to the differences you will encounter.

While you will receive much information directly from VENUSA, this guide is intended to acquaint you with certain customs and aspects of Venezuelan life. It also addresses academic issues and considerations that will be useful before, during, and after your stay in Mérida. This handbook is not comprehensive; you are encouraged to read other sources of information available concerning Venezuela and Mérida to prepare for study abroad.

The Learning Abroad Center provides a full range of services from preliminary program advising to assistance with re-entry. As you read through this handbook, feel free to contact the Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota or your study abroad adviser with questions.

¡Buena Suerte!

Preparation & Planning

Documents

Passport

A valid passport is required to enter Venezuela. If you don’t have a passport, you should apply for one right away. Passports can take 4–6 weeks to process, so it’s important to begin this process early. In addition, you must have a passport before applying for your visa. More information is available at travel.state.gov/passport/ passport_1738.html.

If you currently have a passport, ensure that it will be valid for at least six months from the date you enter Venezuela, as this is required by Venezuelan immigration officials. If not, you will need to renew your passport prior to departure.

Embassy Contact Info

Always keep your passport in a safe place. If your passport is lost or stolen, contact the local police, the American Consulate or Embassy, and the on-site staff. To identify the consulate or embassy nearest you, consult usembassy.gov.

Visa/Immigration Documents

A student visa is required for both summer and semester students entering Venezuela. All students who are US citizens must appear in person at the Venezuelan Consulate in Chicago as part of the visa application process.

The Venezuela visa application is time-consuming. You will need to collect several pieces of documentation as part of your application—including a medical certificate and a police report. So, it’s important to start this process early because you will not be able to enter Venezuela without a visa.

Detailed information about the visa process is available on the “Visa Information Sheet” on your confirmation checklist. You can also view visa requirements on the Venezuelan Consulate in Chicago’s website: tramites.embavenezus.org/preguntas/10/student-visitor-visa. Please note that visa regulations are subject to change without prior notification, depending on current Venezuela immigration policies. So, students are advised to double-check the Venezuelan consulate’s website for the most up-to-date information.

The Learning Abroad Center has a visa specialist to assist you with the visa process for your time in Venezuela. Please contact Janet Stewart at stewa5589@umn.edu if you have questions.

Non-US Passport Holders

Students who are not traveling under a US passport may have to follow different visa procedures in order to enter Venezuela. Contact Janet Stewart at stewa5589@umn.edu for assistance in determining the correct visa process.

Power of Attorney

We encourage you to consider designating someone as your Power of Attorney while you are abroad. Your Power of Attorney can act as your legal representative in a number of situations, including banking and tax issues. For more information, review the information at UMbroad.umn.edu/students/policies/finances/powerofattorney.

Safekeeping Important Documents

Copy all of your important documents and store the copies separately from the originals. Leave an additional copy with someone in the US and keep an electronic copy in a secure location.

Coordinated Group Travel

VENUSA is the Learning Abroad Center’s partner organization for this program. Rosa Corley in VENUSA’s
Miami office assists all students in booking their travel to and from Venezuela. Students initiate this process by completing the Travel Request Form on their confirmation checklist.

Typically, students first fly to Miami and spend the night with other program participants at a hotel near the airport. Early the next morning, they fly as a group to Caracas and then on to either Mérida or El Vigía, a neighboring town. For safety purposes, a representative from VENUSA meets the group either in Miami or in Caracas and travels with them on to Mérida. The Travel Information Form on your confirmation checklist contains additional details.

The coordinated flight cost is designed to be competitive, but priority is placed on services such as routing, ticketing flexibility, and the ability to make group reservations and reserve specific travel dates. Travel can be arranged from any location in the US or internationally and every attempt will be made to connect with the coordinated flight. While you are not required to choose this group flight, it is designed to offer travel in the comfort of other participants in the program.

**Round-Trip Airline Tickets**

Round-trip tickets are the best option, since many countries require travelers to purchase a round-trip ticket as part of the visa process. In addition, one-way tickets can be expensive, and it is extremely difficult to find a return flight to the US.

**Packing**

**Packing Principles**

Remember to pack light and to take clothing that needs minimum care. While Mérida does have spring-like weather year round, nights can be quite cool, and many homes may not be heated. Keep in mind that some of the tours that VENUSA plans may be to higher altitudes, and warm clothing for these trips is suggested. Students at the university dress similarly to students in the US, though possibly not as casual. Plan on layering clothing, since temperatures can change noticeably through the day. Venezuelans do not generally wear shorts in public, and you may receive unwanted attention (especially females) if you do so. Bring one semi-formal outfit for special events. Proper attire is required in the VENUSA building common areas.

See the packing list at the end of this handbook for additional information.

**Important Policies**

Policies of the University of Minnesota and the Learning Abroad Center exist primarily for the protection and safety of LAC study abroad participants. The LAC expects all participants to read, understand, and adhere to the University of Minnesota and LAC policies, guidelines, and contractual documents. These include academic policies, finance and cancellation policies, health and safety policies, and student rights and responsibilities: [UMabroad.umn.edu/students/policies](http://UMabroad.umn.edu/students/policies).

**FERPA**

Under Federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), Minnesota Government Data Practices Act, and University policy, college students are considered responsible adults and are allowed to determine who will receive information about them. As a result, the LAC does not share academic, personal, or financial information with a third party (including parents, spouse, guardians, etc.) without the student’s written permission. As part of their application, all students designate two emergency contacts that will receive information only in the case of an emergency.

**Official Communications**

Your UofM email address is the official means of communication. Learning Abroad Center messages will be sent to your UofM email address.

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**Health, Wellness, & Safety**

**Health**

**Health Information Form**

The purpose of the form is to help the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center (LAC) to assist you in preparing for your time abroad. It is critical to disclose fully any health conditions or accommodation needs you may have on the LAC’s Health Information Form. If your condition changes after completing this form or you realize you forgot to fully disclose anything, contact the LAC and provide the updated information as soon as possible.

Timely disclosure allows the LAC to support your overseas experience effectively. The information provided will remain confidential and will be shared with program staff, faculty, or appropriate professionals only as pertinent to your own well-being.

For more information, visit: [UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/healthinfo](http://UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/healthinfo).

**Mandatory Health & Safety Online Orientation**

The mandatory Learning Abroad Center Health & Safety Online Orientation contains important information on health precautions, taking prescriptions overseas, and the mandatory insurance policy in which you will be enrolled as a program participant. Refer to your online acceptance checklist for the link to this orientation information and contact the LAC with questions.
Health Insurance

US Health Insurance

All students enrolled at the University of Minnesota are required to have US health insurance. This includes students registered for education abroad.

The travel, health, and security insurance coverage through CISI is specifically exempt from the requirements of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and was not intended to and does not satisfy a person’s obligation to secure minimum essential coverage beginning in 2014 under the ACA. The University encourages travelers to consult with their legal counsel or tax adviser for information on their obligations under the ACA.

For more details and specific process information for students with University of Minnesota Student Health Insurance through the Student Health Benefits Office, visit the LAC’s US insurance webpage: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/intlhealthinsurance/

US Health Insurance

CISI Insurance

In addition to your US health insurance, the University of Minnesota has contracted with Cultural Insurance Services International (CISI) to provide comprehensive international travel, health, and security insurance. This coverage is mandatory for all students and included in the program fee. You are covered by CISI only for the dates of the program and a few days to allow for travel to and from the US. If you plan to travel before or after your program, you should extend your CISI coverage or purchase your own insurance.

CISI does not include any preventive care, and individuals are advised to consult their medical providers for any checkups or preventive care prior to departure. Your CISI card and insurance policy will be emailed directly to you. Carry the card with you at all times. If you have any questions or need additional information about CISI, visit the LAC’s insurance webpage: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/intlhealthinsurance/

Medication Overseas

Bring all necessary medication (including such items as birth control), for the entire term of your program, with you to your study abroad site. It is often illegal to ship medication overseas, and even where shipping medication is allowed it is not reliable and could result in high import taxes.

Consult with your LAC program contact if you have not already discussed your medical needs, including prescription and non-prescription medications. Some medications, including those that are commonly available over the counter in the US, are controlled or banned substances abroad. The LAC, in consultation with CISI, will assist you in determining if you can travel with your medications or if alternative solutions must be explored.

Vaccinations, Immunizations, & Travel Medicine

The LAC recommends that all students visit a travel clinic before their program abroad. Make an appointment as soon as possible so that you can get a scheduled appointment in time to complete any required and recommended immunization series. Many travel clinics often book far in advance (especially around the holidays), and some immunizations need to be started months in advance of your departure. For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/prepplanning.

Review the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cdc.gov/travel and US Department of State travel.state.gov websites for general vaccination, immunization, and other travel medical information for the countries you will visit. However, only a travel clinic will be able to make a recommendation tailored for your specific travel plans and health history.

Malaria & Dengue Prevention

Consult with your travel clinic regarding malaria and dengue risks and prevention.

Your travel health clinic will most likely recommend that you take a prophylactic (preventive) drug for malaria. It is essential that you purchase and take the medication as recommended by your healthcare provider. Depending on your insurance coverage, malaria medication may be very expensive but it is well worth its benefits. If you get malaria, you will become very ill very quickly, may need hospitalization, and may suffer lifelong consequences.

Students in the past have inquired about purchasing malaria preventive medication in their study abroad country. The LAC strongly advises against this approach for two reasons. First, in order to be protected, you must take the medication prior to your departure. Second, exposure to malaria-carrying mosquitoes could occur as soon as you arrive in country. While the medication cannot prevent you from contracting malaria, it significantly reduces the symptoms, allows you time to seek medical attention at a clinic in country, and facilitates a more speedy recovery.

Speak with your US travel clinic about possible side effects and alternative anti-malarials if a change needs to be made overseas. Not all overseas physicians are aware of the different types of medications available, so inform yourself before you leave. Should you experience side effects once overseas, speak with the on-site staff and your US travel clinic about next steps.

Your travel clinic will also likely suggest that you purchase insect repellent with at least 21% DEET to help ward against malaria-carrying mosquitoes as well as those carrying other illnesses. Ultrathon, manufactured by 3M, contains 30% DEET and has been recommended by health professionals. You should use insect repellent during the day and especially at dusk and in the evenings. Mosquitoes
carrying dengue fever are active in the day, and malaria-carrying mosquitoes are active at night. There is currently no vaccine or medicine to prevent dengue. Travelers can protect themselves by preventing mosquito bites.

For more information, visit: wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/diseases/malaria and wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/diseases/dengue.

**Rabies Vaccination**
Consult with your travel clinic regarding rabies vaccination. The rabies vaccine is often recommended for travelers who may come into contact with wild or domestic animals. Keep in mind that it is not possible to initiate the vaccinations in the US and then complete them overseas. Dosage and type of vaccinations differ from country to country. For more information, visit: wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/diseases/rabies.

**Yellow Fever**
Travelers to certain parts of South America and Africa are at risk for yellow fever. Some countries require all travelers to show proof of yellow fever vaccination before they can enter the country. Other countries require proof of vaccination only if travelers have been in a risk area, so if you are visiting multiple countries, the order of travel may be important.

Proof of vaccination is not valid until 10 days after you get the vaccine, so plan to get the vaccine early if you need it. Not all travel clinics carry the yellow fever vaccination, so search for a yellow fever travel clinic at wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellow-fever-vaccination-clinics/search.

**Wellness and Study Abroad**
In addition to any medications and required vaccinations, it is important to plan proactively for how you will maintain healthy habits abroad, both mentally and physically. Consider the following guidelines for your time abroad:

**Physical self-care:** be physically active for 30–60 minutes daily, sleep enough to have energy through the day, spend at least an hour outdoors, and eat a balanced and moderate diet mostly of wholesome, minimally processed foods.

**Emotional self-care:** talk to your medical provider prior to departure about effective ways to cope with the stress than can arise from experiencing unfamiliar surroundings, lack of family and friend support, and how to identify new ways of centering and embracing change and new experiences. This is a valuable lifelong skill.

**Stress reduction practice:** participate in at least one practice to quiet your mind and body. Examples include deep breathing, time in nature, prayer, journaling, sensory grounding, meditation, yoga, tai chi, qi qong, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, biofeedback, imagery work.

**Hydration:** be certain to drink sufficient water and nutritious fluids as your body adjusts to a new climate and daily rhythm.

**Making adjustments:** monitor your stress levels while abroad and adjust your daily routine (sleep patterns, exercise, food balance, hydration) to meet the needs of your new location.

**Positive attitude:** try to keep perspective on the challenges that you may encounter and work towards your long-term study abroad goals.

**Support structures:** identify who in country is available to provide support and guidance when you feel confused or challenged.

**Finding resilience:** the ability to recover and grow from adversity and to navigate difficult challenges with awareness, intention, and skill through healthy connections to others; balanced self-care; an open, engaged mind; and addressing manageable challenges with patience and intention.

The following web site provides additional suggestions: globaled.us/peacecorps/maintaining-strong-mental-and-emotional-health.asp

**Mental Health**
Learning abroad can be both fulfilling and challenging for all students and may present some additional challenges for those with mental health conditions. Even if you have no history of a mental health condition, it is possible that the impact of cultural adjustment or being in a foreign environment can influence your well being.

The Health Information Form requires you to disclose any past and current mental health issues, family history of mental health, indications of mental health concerns, and current prescription medicines. It is imperative for Learning Abroad Center staff to receive this information before you study abroad to best support you and provide reasonable accommodations.

Past or current treatment for psychiatric and mental health conditions does not preclude you from studying abroad. However, if a healthcare professional recommends no travel or travel under certain conditions that cannot be met at a certain study location, you may be encouraged to focus on your health first and postpone program participation until a later time.

The following steps for managing mental health are important, regardless of where you will be traveling:

- Meet with your mental health professional prior to departure to discuss; learning abroad and implications of learning abroad, your plan to manage your health while abroad, and access to alternative support networks.
- Discuss a realistic communication plan for your time abroad with your support networks (e.g., family and friends).
• Understand that ups and downs are normal during study abroad. Check in with yourself often and seek support if you are feeling more intense ups and downs than expected.
• Connect with an LAC staff member prior to departure to set up on-site care with a mental health care professional, if required.
• Plan to bring sufficient amounts of prescriptions with you for the entire duration of your program. Work with LAC staff to ensure you can safely bring all necessary prescriptions abroad.

Safety

Travel & Safety Considerations

State Department Travel website
Consult the United States State Department Country Information sheets, travel advisories and travel warnings at travel.state.gov for up-to-date information on travel precautions for the country where you will be studying or traveling.

CDC Information
Review the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cdc.gov/travel and US Department of State travel.state.gov websites for travel and safety information.

Program-Specific Safety Considerations

ITRAAC
This program has been approved by the University of Minnesota’s International Travel Risk Assessment and Advisory Committee (ITRAAC) in light of the current travel warning issued by the US Department of State. For more information, visit: travel.state.gov.

Approval was granted based upon the following conditions and restrictions. Students on this program are expected to abide by these guidelines. All students on the program must:

• Follow all U.S. State Department Warden Updates and Travel Warning notices as well as University of Minnesota, on-site partner, and local government recommendations including, but not limited to, those indicating Americans should avoid areas of the city and/or country generally or on specific dates and during specific times;
• Never travel to Caracas and within 50 miles of the entire Venezuela/Colombia border;
• Never travel to Colombia within the program dates without ITRAAC approval;
• Submit an independent travel form outlining their travel plans, dates and contact details and confirm their emergency plans with the on-site staff prior to out-of-town travel;
• Be vigilant of their surrounds at all times and in all locations, especially when entering or exiting their homes, hotels, host family cars, garages, and schools;
• Practice good personal security when moving about and adhere to local cultural expectations of behavior and dress;
• Never walk or travel alone under any circumstance (around the Merida, outside of Merida, on beaches, historic ruins, and trails etc.) but especially after dark
• Avoid carrying large sums of cash or wearing jewelry and expensive-looking watches, and keep valuables such as mobile phones, credit and ATM cards out sight;
• Use ATMs inside safer locations such as banks, and be aware of their surroundings when withdrawing money;
• Never drive motor vehicles;
• Use only legitimate radio-dispatched taxis at designated taxi stands or have a host family or on-site staff call a reputable taxi company directly;
• Never participate in political marches and demonstrations and avoid any locations where demonstrations are forming. Even peaceful protests may suddenly turn violent.

Embassy STEP Registration
The LAC will register you with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), which makes your presence in Venezuela known to the US Department of State. Once you are enrolled in this program, you will receive the travel updates and information directly as they are issued. Please carefully review these messages and contact the LAC or on-site staff with questions. For more information, visit: step.state.gov/step.

In addition, the local embassy can be a source of assistance and information in the case of an emergency. Each of our programs has information about the local embassy, and you might even have an embassy visitor at your orientation. For more information, visit the Country Information sheet at travel.state.gov for the countries you will visit and study in.

In order to ensure that all official communication from the US Department of State is sent to the correct address while you are abroad, check your official contact information prior to departure. Visit www.onestop.umn.edu to verify that the information is correct. If your contact information changes, you must notify the LAC.

Sexual Harassment & Sexual Assault
The University of Minnesota and Learning Abroad Center take the risk of sexual harassment and assault very seriously. This topic will be covered in orientations in more depth, and LAC staff and our colleagues on site are trained and prepared to provide support to victim survivors.

Anyone who experiences sexual harassment or sexual assault while abroad must deal with the stress of this unwanted event in a place and culture that is unfamiliar. Being away from the support and comfort of home can exacerbate feelings of hurt, confusion, anger, and loss of control. This is normal.

Do not tolerate behavior that feels threatening or disrespectful by staff in country, faculty members, or homestay family members. When in any doubt, consult with someone with whom you feel comfortable.

Report any incidents of sexual harassment or sexual assault to in-country or LAC staff so that we can help
you understand your options and supports available. The Aurora Center is a fully confidential resource for all students on LAC programs, even if you don't normally attend the University of Minnesota.

For more information on resources, including the Aurora Center, visit: [global.umn.edu/travel/assault/index.html](http://global.umn.edu/travel/assault/index.html).

The University of Minnesota prohibits sexual harassment and retaliation. In compliance with Title IX, the LAC will work with the University’s Title IX coordinator on any related inquiries and complaints. For more information, please contact the LAC or visit [diversity.umn.edu/eoaa/titleix](http://diversity.umn.edu/eoaa/titleix).

### Alcohol & Drug Use

The University of Minnesota Code of Conduct and Code of Conduct for Education Abroad allow for responsible drinking if you are legally allowed to drink in your host country. Illegal, irresponsible drinking and/or misbehaving while drinking are violations of the University's policy.

The University of Minnesota has a no-tolerance approach to drug use while abroad. Students using drugs abroad may immediately be removed from the program at their own cost. You are subject to the laws of the host country while abroad, and penalties for foreigners using or possessing drugs abroad are often very strict.

For more information, visit: [UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/alcoholdrugs](http://UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/alcoholdrugs).

### Personal Safety

When traveling overseas, there are a number of precautions you should follow in order to travel safely. Consult the US State Department’s resources and your orientation materials for up-to-date information on travel precautions for the country where you will be studying or traveling.

For more information on women travelers: [travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/Women.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/Women.html)

For more information on students abroad: [travel.state.gov/content/studentsabroad/en.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/studentsabroad/en.html).

As in most cities, safety should always be a concern for students. During the on-site orientation, the staff at VENUSA will give you a rundown of the city and advise you on where and where not to go.

Petty theft is very common in Mérida and Venezuela. Many past participants have had digital cameras stolen. If you go out at night, leave your digital camera at home and bring a disposable one with you. IPods are also a hot commodity in Venezuela. Use caution when walking around with expensive items in hand. Always carry your laptop in your backpack.

The Learning Abroad Center prohibits students from traveling to Caracas due to safety concerns. Recently political unrest in Caracas, Venezuela, has intensified and been reported in the US and international media. Venezuela has a long tradition of active political participation; but the current activity is more violent and widespread than it has been in the past. While Mérida has experienced protests, the most violent protests have occurred in Caracas. Our program is located in the middle of the mountains, a 10- to 12-hour bus ride away. Students report feeling safe and comfortable in Venezuela and in the city of Mérida, in particular. In addition, we are closely monitoring the situation in Venezuela and are in contact with our on-site Venezuelan partners, the Venezuelan Consulate, and the US State Department to ensure a safe experience for students.

For more information on staying safe while abroad: [UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/safetyabroad](http://UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/safetyabroad).

### Emergency Procedures

All students are required to carry a cell phone for use in an emergency. On-site staff will contact you on your cell phone, and you will utilize your phone to contact on-site staff and/or emergency services. In a life-threatening emergency, please seek immediate emergency care; otherwise, please contact on-site staff for assistance and recommendations. On-site staff are trained and have resources available to respond to all types of emergencies including, but not limited to, civil disturbance, natural disaster, illness or injury, hospitalization, robbery or pickpocketing, sexual assault/harassment, hate crimes, and mental health.

The LAC will utilize on-site resources as well as insurance and security resources, including CISI. See more details above on insurance.

For more information, visit: [UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/emergency](http://UMabroad.umn.edu/students/healthsafety/emergency).
Independent Travel

Independent Travel Notification
You are encouraged to travel during official program break periods, over holidays, or after the program is completed. During the program, travel on the weekends should be limited to nearby locations to ensure that you are able to maintain good rest, health, and timely completion of all coursework. Students are not permitted to travel during the program dates, including on weekends or vacations, to countries currently under a US State Department Travel Warning. See travel.state.gov for the most up-to-date list.

Consult with the on-site staff, well in advance of your planned travel, to understand if there are other locations, beyond the Travel Warning locations, that you are not permitted to visit within your host country or region. These limitations are put in place for your safety and security and apply within the program dates. If you choose to visit a Travel Warning or other banned location before or after your program, you do so at your own risk.

All LAC program participants must notify the on-site staff of any independent travel that leaves the program location overnight. The required independent travel form is provided in the appendix of this handbook. Some sites will collect this form and others will have a slightly different way of collecting the same information, so refer to your on-site orientation for more specifics.

Travel Restrictions

During the Program
Students are not allowed to visit any country currently under a US Department of State Travel warning as a part of personal travel. Please visit travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/alertswarnings.html for up-to-date information about travel warning countries. If you have questions about travel restrictions please contact your study abroad adviser.

Program-Specific Restrictions
As mentioned previously, students on the Venezuela program must abide by the following travel restrictions:

• Never travel to Caracas and within 50 miles of the entire Venezuela/Colombia border
• Never travel to Colombia within the program dates without ITRAAC approval

Driving and Renting Vehicles Abroad
It is against University and Learning Abroad Center policy to drive or rent motor vehicles (including motor scooters or motorcycles) while a participant on an LAC program. These limitations extend from the start date to the end date of your program and are put in place for your safety and security. Traffic accidents are the leading cause of injury and death of students abroad.

Arrival Logistics

Arriving at the Program Site

Coordinated Arrival
There will be a group flight arranged through VENUSA. The Learning Abroad Center recommends that all students fly all the way to Mérida with the group. A representative from VENUSA will meet the group in Caracas and fly with them to Mérida. Contact VENUSA directly for more information about group travel.

From most parts of the US, flying to Mérida requires two days. The most convenient and safest way to make this trip is to stay overnight in Miami the first night and fly to Caracas and then on to Mérida the next day. You can book your hotel room in Miami through VENUSA. This tends to be cheaper than booking your own flight arrangements because there will be other VENUSA students staying at the hotel and you can request one of them as a roommate and therefore split the cost of the room. There is also an airport shuttle bus that takes guests back and forth to the airport for free.

You are allowed one checked bag (not to exceed 65 lbs.), one carry-on bag (not to exceed 17 lbs.), and one small personal item (e.g. purse or backpack) on the flight from Caracas to Mérida. If you do not have locks on your bag, have your bag wrapped in cellophane. This service is available in the Miami airport, near the SERVIVENSA check-in counter, for approximately $10 per bag. If you do not wrap or lock your suitcase, you may have things stolen from your suitcase.

Mérida’s location high in the Andes Mountains often makes it difficult for planes to land due to fog. Because of frequent heavy fog, you will be landing in the neighboring town of El Vigía. VENUSA will have a bus at El Vigía and will drive all participants to Mérida, which is about an hour drive. Upon arrival in Mérida, you will be taken to VENUSA where your host families will be waiting to take you “home.” You will receive more information on the trip to Mérida from VENUSA.

Independent Arrival
Due to safety concerns, students are strongly discouraged from arriving independently. If you are unable to fly with the group, please consult with the Learning Abroad Center prior to making flight arrangements.

Initial Arrival Housing
Students typically arrive into Mérida in the evening and meet their host families that first night.
Program Information

Orientation in Country
Orientation for the program begins the day after arrival. You will typically have orientation in the morning, followed by a walking tour of Merida in the afternoon. VENUSA also offers several additional cultural adjustment sessions throughout the semester and summer programs to help students with transition to life in Venezuela.

Program Excursions
Tours and excursions in the city of Mérida and at least two day trips to nearby mountain lakes, national parks, theme parks, or other local sites of interest are included in the program. During your time in Venezuela, tours and excursions are planned for you around the city of Mérida and the surrounding Andes mountains. Common excursions include hiking in the Andes mountains, horseback riding with the locals of Los Llanos, and visiting Mérida’s botanical gardens. Students also frequently arrange independent trips over the long weekends to nearby Caribbean locations.

In-Country Staff
Francy Gonzales is the student coordinator in Mérida. She will help orient you when you arrive and is the person who you can turn to for any academic, housing, programmatic, or personal concerns.

VENUSA’s classes are taught by experienced, qualified professors. The faculty are primarily Venezuelan, and most have international backgrounds. All professors teach at other institutions, including the Universidad de Los Andes.

Program Center
VENUSA, our partner organization in Venezuela, is located in a multi-story building off of a main street in Mérida. All classes are held here. The building is also home to staff offices, a library, workout space, small café, and common spaces where students can study and relax.

Housing Considerations

Housing Options
The program cost includes room and board with a Venezuelan host family. Staying with a family can be the highlight of your trip to Venezuela. The housing coordinator makes a point of choosing families who display friendliness and helpfulness toward students. Your family will be just as interested in learning about you as you are in learning about them, and they will introduce you to their friends and relatives. This is a wonderful opportunity to get to know Venezuela and its people. Make the most of it!

Notification of Placement
VENUSA will notify you of your homestay placement via email approximately one week prior to departure.

Housing Concerns
For most students, living with a homestay family is one of the highlights of their experience abroad. However, not every placement is a perfect match. If you are having any kind of issue with your host family, please notify the staff at VENUSA promptly. Often times students are reluctant to report any issue or problem for fear that it will reflect poorly on their host family.

However, in many cases, host family issues are the result of a miscommunication or cultural difference, and can be resolved. The staff at VENUSA can act as a liaison between you and your family, but only if they are aware of the issue.

In the case of any serious or unresolvable issue, you would be assigned to live with a different homestay family.

Homestay Families

The Placement Process
You will be placed with a family according to the information on your Homestay Placement Preference form. So, please be thoughtful when completing this form.

Homestay Conditions

Laundry
You will need to make arrangements to do your laundry. You should be able to find a local laundromat with very reasonable rates. Laundromats are not self-wash like those in the United States. You will drop off your clothing to be washed and pick it up several days later. You may also want to wash some hand-washables in your home. It is possible that your family will offer to wash your things. If this is the case, you are expected to buy your own laundry soap, available in most convenient stores throughout Mérida.

Keys
Your family will provide you with keys to the house. If you lose them, you will be charged for changing the locks and making extra keys. Remember to return the keys when you depart.

Guests
It is recommended that you not take guests to your home, since it infringes on the family’s privacy. However, each family varies, and your host family may encourage you to invite guests. Your best bet is to play it by ear and make sure you discuss any plans for inviting guests with your family ahead of time. Overnight guests are not permitted.
Absence
While you are living with your Venezuelan family, observe the same rules of courtesy that you would when visiting any home. If you will not be home for a meal, please let your host mother know (you will not be refunded for individual meals missed.) Inform your host family if you will not be returning home at night, since your family is concerned about your well-being and safety and may worry about you.

Meals
Breakfast and dinner will be provided by your Venezuelan host family daily. You will be responsible for your own lunch. Lunches can be purchased inexpensively at the cafeteria at VENUSA or in a nearby cafe. A good rule of thumb regarding meals is to watch the way your family does things and follow suit; you will soon feel comfortable. It may be a good idea to take a small portion of food for the first serving to make sure it goes all the way around the table and to make sure you can eat what you take. If the head of the table is serving each person, wait until everyone is served before beginning to eat. Some families say grace before eating.

You should coordinate your meal schedule with your host family. For most Venezuelans, breakfast, or desayuno, is served between 8 and 10 a.m. and consists of toast and coffee. Lunch, or almuerzo, usually served between 12 and 1 p.m., is the big meal of the day. Lunch normally consists of soup, salad, rice, a main course of meat or fish, and fruit for dessert. The evening meal, la cena, is late, often around 9 p.m., and usually consists of sandwiches or something light.

Snacks, soft drinks, and beer are not expected to be provided by your host family and should be purchased on your own. You may be able to store breakfast foods at your house. There are also many panaderías or bakeries throughout the city, including at VENUSA, where you can buy a cheap breakfast.

Tips for a Successful Homestay
The rules of the house will be explained to you upon arrival by your host family. These will include meal times, laundry, how to lock up, and other items addressed below which vary from house to house. Always remember that you are in a home and not a hotel. Courtesy and common sense should be your guide. Always ask your hostess when you have a question. Open communication with your host family can help to prevent misunderstanding and improve your overall experience.

Liability Insurance
Regardless of your housing arrangement, you should consider your insurance coverage and needs. Does your renter’s or homeowner’s insurance cover your items if they are lost or stolen abroad? You may also wish to buy additional insurance in case you accidentally damage your accommodations, since any damages will be yours to pay.

For more information, visit: global.umn.edu/travel/resources/insurance_other.html.

Visitors
Program Housing
Students’ personal guests (e.g. friends, family, etc.) are not allowed to stay overnight in program housing, including apartments, dorms, and homestays.

During Program Period
Friends or relatives may visit during official program breaks or before or after the program, but not while classes are in session. Visits during this time interfere with your ability to focus on the program and host culture. Visitors are not allowed to stay with you in your official program housing.

Academics

Policies

Students are responsible for understanding and adhering to the academic policies for study abroad as published on the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center (LAC)’s website: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/policies/academic-policies.

Courses

Overview of Program Courses
VENUSA offers a wide variety of courses in several disciplines to suit a range of academic needs, including Spanish, literature, Latin American studies, international business, cross-cultural communications, film criticism, and more.

Most courses engage the city, people, and surroundings as a living laboratory. The course offerings will vary from term to term as they do in the US. Final course offerings will depend on student interest and are determined after arrival in Mérida. Although some courses are guaranteed, a minimum enrollment of three participants is required for certain classes.

A language pre-requisite is not required for the program; however, most of the Latin American studies courses are only taught in Spanish. Students with less than two years of Spanish will have a course selection limited to intensive Spanish and courses taught in English. Students with two or more years of Spanish will be able to choose from all course offerings.

Students on the fall or spring semester program take 15 credits, generally five classes. Summer session participants with less than two years of Spanish may take intensive Spanish for up to five credits per 3-week session. Summer
session participants with more than two years of Spanish will take one or two courses per term for a total of 3-6 credits per term.

To view a complete list of course offerings, visit: UMabroad. umn.edu/programs/americas/venezuela/academics/full-course-list

**Language of Instruction**

The majority of courses offered at VENUSA are taught in Spanish. A limited number of courses are also available in English. Visit the link above to view a complete list of course offerings.

Courses listed with only one designator (e.g. VENZ 3521) are only available in Spanish, whereas courses that list two course numbers (e.g. VENZ 3040, VENZ 3030) also have an English-taught section.

**Global Identity**

**Global Identity: Connecting Your International Experience to Your Future**

This optional, one-credit course will provide opportunities for you to “make meaning” of your learning abroad experience and prepare you to communicate your intercultural competence to future employers, graduate schools, or law schools. As global connectivity becomes increasingly important, you are asked to think beyond the borders of your own perception and better understand the world based on the new ideas and experiences to which you are exposed. Your ability to work in a multicultural setting and succeed in different cultural contexts is vital to your future. This course will help you apply these skills to your post-graduation plans.

For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/academics/globalidentity.

**Volunteering**

Students have the opportunity to volunteer while at VENUSA. Placements are available in a number of fields, including:

- Healthcare—volunteering at a public or private clinic
- Elementary Education—working with students ages 4-6
- Environment—volunteering at a local botanical garden
- Music—volunteering with “El Sistema”; a national music program for youth
- TEFL—volunteering with VENUSA’s English language classes (certification/experience and additional application required)

To apply, students must complete a volunteer application (available upon request) and pay a $100 deposit. The deposit is refundable upon completion of the volunteer commitment. We encourage students to think realistically about their availability before committing to a volunteer placement.

**Registration**

**Registration through the UofM**

*University of Minnesota Twin Cities Students*

Before registering, you should meet with your academic adviser(s) to discuss the courses you plan to take and complete the Academic Planning form. All University of Minnesota Twin Cities students will be responsible for registering themselves using the University of Minnesota online registration system. Prior to departure, you will receive an email with all the necessary information for registration. Do not look for your class number to appear on the class schedule on the MyU website. The numbers required for registration can only be obtained from the LAC. If you register for a course that is listed online, you have registered for the wrong course and may be subject to tuition charges. Complete your registration by the stated deadline in the registration instruction email from the LAC. Check online for holds or required registration approvals that would prevent you from registering for classes and clear them before the registration deadline. The LAC cannot remove holds on student accounts. Failure to complete registration may result in late registration fees and may delay or prevent financial aid disbursement. If you do not register for study abroad, your grades cannot be processed. Failure to register before departing for study abroad may result in no credit for your study abroad program.

*UMN System Students*

Students from the University of Minnesota—Morris, Crookston, Rochester, or Duluth will be set up as a multi-U student by their home campus. Please contact your study abroad office to verify that your multi-U status has been set up. You can then register as a UMTC student (see above).

*Non-University of Minnesota Students*

Students from other institutions will be registered by the Learning Abroad Center and do not need to register themselves through the MyU website.

**Maintaining Full-Time Status**

Students are required to maintain full-time registration status as defined by their individual program throughout the duration of their study abroad program. Dropping or withdrawing from a class will not be allowed if it will bring a student below the required full-time enrollment.

**Post-Program Registration**

While abroad, University of Minnesota students and most other students will need to register for classes for the following term on their home campus. You must make any necessary arrangements prior to departure so that you are able to register while overseas. In many cases, students are able to register online.
Course Drop/Add/Withdrawal

Course Changes
These must be made in consultation with the on-site staff and per the deadlines as outlined on the LAC’s Academic Policies website.

UMN 13-Credit Policy
University of Minnesota students are required to maintain a minimum enrollment of 13 credits per semester or maintain the minimum credit enrollment determined by their study abroad program, whichever is greater. For certain semester programs, 12 credits is considered a full-time course load.

Academic Culture

Academic Rigor
The program is designed to be academically rigorous, and it is each student’s responsibility to maintain good study habits and complete assignments on time.

Grades & Transcripts
Grades will be posted to the University of Minnesota transcript 6–8 weeks after the LAC has received them from the program. Grades will be converted into US equivalents, if necessary, prior to being posted on the University of Minnesota transcript. The LAC will provide one free transcript to the home institution of all non-University of Minnesota students. Additional transcripts can be ordered separately on the One Stop Student Services website: www.onestop.umn.edu.

Incompletes
Students are generally expected to complete all course requirements by the end of the term. In very rare circumstances, students can arrange an “Incomplete” in consultation with the instructor, the on-site staff, and the LAC, whereby the remaining work can be finished shortly after returning to the US.

Grade Appeals
If you wish to question a grade issued for a particular course after the program is completed, you must provide evidence that the professor made an error in his/her grade calculation. The following are not reasonable grounds for grade appeal:

• Differences between US and host country educational systems
• Personal disappointment in the grade outcome
• Comparison with one’s own prior academic record/GPA
• Failure to complete one or more assignments
• Minimum grade requirement of college/department or home university
• Health concerns/missed classes

Consult with your program contact in the LAC if you believe an error has occurred and you wish to complete the Grade Petition Form.

Student Grievances
Academic grievances are complaints brought by students regarding the provision of education and academic support services affecting their role as students. For grievances concerning University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center or affiliated programs offered through the LAC, students should make inquiries and appeals to the appropriate University officials, in the following order: the program representative in the LAC, the Assistant Dean for Learning Abroad, the Student Conflict Resolution Center, and the Office of the General Counsel. For complaints concerning non-University of Minnesota programs, students should make appeals to the program sponsor.

Living in the Host Country

History of Venezuela

From CIA World Factbook
Venezuela was one of three countries that emerged from the collapse of Gran Colombia in 1830 (the others being
Ecuador and New Granada, which became Colombia). For most of the first half of the 20th century, Venezuela was ruled by generally benevolent military strongmen, who promoted the oil industry and allowed for some social reforms.

Democraticaly elected governments have held sway since 1959. Hugo Chavez, president from 1999 to 2013, sought to implement his “21st Century Socialism,” which purported to alleviate social ills while at the same time attacking capitalist globalization and existing democratic institutions. His hand-picked successor, President Nicolas Maduro, continues Chavez’s socialist programs.

Resources:
- BBC News – A chronology of key events in Venezuela’s history: news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1229348.stm
- Lonely Planet – a detailed history of Venezuela: www.lonelyplanet.com/venezuela/history
- US Department of State – entry on Venezuela: travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country/venezuela.html

Geography & Climate

Located on the northern coast of South America, Venezuela is a large country with a population of approximately 28 million. The land is larger than that of California, Oregon, and Washington combined (over 352,000 square miles). It is divided into 20 states, the Federal District around Caracas, two territories, and 72 islands. Its borders are the Atlantic Ocean and Guyana on the east, Brazil to the south, Colombia in the west, and the Caribbean to the north. The geography varies from the coastal region, to the Andean region of snow-capped peaks and temperate forests, to the tropical Maracaibo region, to the southern “Guyana Shield” and area of savanna and rainforest. The rainforests shelter Venezuela’s most exotic animals as well as some untouched tribes.

The coastal capital city of Caracas, with a population of almost four million, has a higher standard of living than any other Latin American city. Mérida is a much smaller city of approximately 350,000 people, built on a plateau at the base of the Andes Mountains.

Venezuela is quite demographically diverse, with about 58% of mixed race, 29% of European descent, 11% of African descent, and 2% native Indians. Approximately 75,000 Americans currently live in Venezuela.

The climate varies little, with an average temperature around 80 degrees. While Mérida is only 8 degrees north of the equator, its tropical climate is moderated by its high elevation, so temperatures in Mérida average around 70 degrees year-round. The only seasonal variations are a rainy season and a dry season. It rains almost every evening during the rainy season. People of Mérida call their climate “eternal spring.”

Language

Spanish is the language of Venezuela, but in some outlying areas ancient Indian languages are still spoken. You may be able to use English in the markets and airports, but communicating in English may be more of a challenge in bus terminals and train stations. Generally, non-native speakers are well received in Venezuela if they attempt to speak Spanish.

Useful Phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good morning/day</td>
<td>Buenos días</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you?</td>
<td>¿Cómo está usted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My name is</td>
<td>Me llamo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
<td>Por favor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you speak English?</td>
<td>¿Habla usted inglés?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have been very kind</td>
<td>Ha sido muy amable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Gracias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much</td>
<td>Demasiado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’re welcome</td>
<td>De nada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I beg your pardon</td>
<td>Perdón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good-bye</td>
<td>Adiós/Chau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t understand</td>
<td>No entiendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Chamo/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hey/Hello</td>
<td>Epa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool</td>
<td>Chevere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Venezuelans are very patient with foreigners who try to speak their language. They appreciate an attempt at the language and would never correct your pronunciation or grammar unless you specifically asked them to, or if they cannot understand what you want to say. Always use the usted verb form when speaking with Venezuelans. The tú form is rarely used.

Cultural Considerations

Any anti-Americanism is impersonal and directed at the foreign policy of the US government. As an individual you will be judged as such, and how you act and react will determine your acceptance by the Venezuelans. Cultural differences can enrich our lives by confronting us with a different worldview and new approaches to solving problems, or they can lead to misunderstandings and irritation.

You may notice that the people of Venezuela use their social space differently than most people of the US. For
example, while carrying on a conversation, it is common to stand a little closer. Handshaking, kisses on cheeks, and other physical contact are common between relatives, friends, and new acquaintances, regardless of age or sex. Handshaking may be done with the same person more than once a day. The abrazo is a hug exchanged between friends, both male and female, and signifies friendship, not passion. When meeting, greeting or saying goodbye to anyone in Venezuela, always give a kiss on the cheek and say buenos dias, buenas tardes, or buenas noches, depending on the situation.

Actions by some Venezuelan men may be irritating to some US women. Whistling, tongue-clicking, and other sounds or comments may be heard when a young woman walks by. The best policy is to ignore such sounds or comments.

Political strikes are common in Venezuela, particularly at the Universidad de Los Andes in Mérida. Provisions have been made to ensure that your courses through the University of Minnesota/VENUSA will not be interrupted by strike activity.

In general, this activity is non-violent in nature and does not target Americans in any way. If you encounter any strike activity, you should just turn around and walk the other way. This is the easiest and safest way to assure that you are not affected.

The Venezuelan sense of courtesy leads to some of the most frustrating experiences students have in Venezuela. Typically a Venezuelan will respond politely to any request for directions, even if he or she has not the slightest idea of the correct route, simply because it would be rude not to help a stranger.

Be prepared to wait for an appointment, and do not be surprised or insulted if you are stood up. The Venezuelan concept of time is vastly different from ours. Since Venezuelans do not want to refuse anyone, they will often agree to appointments they cannot keep. This disregard for schedules does not apply to your classes.

Venezuelans regard family relationships and friendships as a top priority. An individual’s actions are often governed by the family’s attitudes and reputation. To students accustomed to a great deal of personal freedom and privacy, this closeness and concern for family reputation can be claustrophobic. It is not uncommon for a family member to come into your room and help you unpack, carefully looking at each item in your suitcase. This is not considered rude, but rather as a sign of interest in you; our idea of “personal space” may be completely foreign to your host family.

Your Venezuelan hosts will not expect you to behave exactly as they do, but they will appreciate your attempts to communicate with them in their own language, as well as your interest in their country and culture. Find out as much as you can about Venezuelan history and current affairs before you go so that you can discuss issues intelligently.

The Venezuelan population is predominantly Catholic.

**Meals**

Venezuela has its own style and flavor of food with many regional specialties. Most traditional dishes have been adapted from Spanish foods with tangy sauces that are generally not as hot as Mexican cuisine. Typical Venezuelan dishes you can expect to find include tequeños, a small bite-size appetizer made of white cheese wrapped in dough and deep-fried; and hallacas, a kind of boiled tamale with ground corn, filled with beef or chicken, and wrapped in banana leaves. To eat an hallaca, just unwrap it and discard the leaves. Two dishes made with corn are bolos de maíz, spiced corn puffs (deep fried); and arepas, fried white corn flour pancakes filled with butter, meat, or cheese.

The Venezuelan national dish is called *pabellon criollo*. It is served in three separate dishes: black beans with white rice; shredded beef mixed with tomatoes, onions and green peppers; and fried plantanos (plantains, or cooking bananas).

Note: Venezuelans do not eat peanut butter, and it is very difficult to find peanut butter in any Venezuelan store. It is possible to find it but is often very expensive and sometimes has been on the shelf for a long time. If you think you might miss peanut butter, bring your own.

**Safe Food & Water**

Venezuela is a modern, semi-industrialized nation, and food in restaurants and homestays in Mérida and other cities is perfectly safe to eat. You should not eat food sold from street vendors. North Americans should be sure that the water they are drinking is either bottled or has been boiled. If you notice that your homestay family is serving water directly from the tap, you should either politely tell someone that you need boiled water or ask someone in VENUSA to talk with the family. Although VENUSA tells families that it is necessary to boil water, they sometimes forget, since it is not necessary for Venezuelans who are accustomed to the water.

**Utility Usage**

**Electricity**

The electric current in Venezuela is similar to that found in the US (110 volts, 60-cycle alternating current, single phase), so you do not need to bring converters for your hair dryers, electric razors, etc. The outlets are also the same as in the US. It is not unusual for the electricity to go out in Venezuela.

This is especially true when there is a lot of rain. Planned power outages and blackouts to save energy are common.
It is a good idea to bring a flashlight with batteries to prepare for these circumstances.

**Water**

Because of the climate, many homes do not have a large quantity of hot water. Some families may use an electric water heater, which will not heat the large volume you are probably used to. Showers and baths, therefore, should be taken sparingly. Boiled drinking water will be provided by the family.

**Relationships**

For many of you, your stay in Venezuela will be your first time out of the US. Some of you may have the opportunity to make some very good Venezuelan friends. Venezuelans are typically hospitable, open, willing to talk, and not shy about striking up a conversation with a stranger. You are unlikely to ever be alone or feel isolated, especially if you can speak a little Spanish. Nevertheless, keep a few words of caution in mind.

Meet people in public places during the day, preferably with a friend or two of yours. Do not give out your host family’s phone number or address freely because this can lead to problems for not only you but your host family as well. Agree to meet the person at a specific time and place. Americans in Venezuela are easy to identify. We look and dress differently from Venezuelans, speak loudly in groups, carry backpacks, wear tennis shoes, and have an accent.

Consequently, an occasion might arise where someone wants to become friends with you in order to obtain your money or your passport. This has happened in the past and is a serious problem. Use common sense and be cautious.

Entering into a relationship overseas should be approached with the same precautions as at home. The idea of a Latin romance can be tempting, but you should consider any relationship carefully, particularly when you are overseas. There are different cultural values and rules regarding dating and relationships. Proceed cautiously, realizing that you are only in the country for a short period of time. If you do enter into a long-term relationship, you should also see how the relationship functions in the US, where you are at home and no longer acting as a guest.

Many female participants are flattered by the masculine attention that they receive in a Hispanic culture. However, any individual should proceed with caution and only enter into a close relationship after knowing the partner for a sustained period of time. US women are often stereotyped as being an easy sexual partner, and each year women find themselves in difficult situations because they were not cautious. Do NOT go to the home or apartment of someone you do not know well, especially if there is drinking involved. The concept of date rape is almost unheard of in Venezuela and the general feeling is that if a woman goes home with a man, she is willing to sleep with him, regardless of her saying “no.” Avoid these types of situations. Most problems are alcohol-related, so be extremely careful when drinking in Venezuela.

There have also been reports in many bars of drinks being drugged, so it would be a good idea to ask to have your drink opened while you are watching and do not accept a drink brought to your table and paid for by “an admirer.”

In any type of relationship, whether heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual, you could end up with a sexually transmitted disease, AIDS, and/or pregnancy. This is not meant as a scare tactic, but rather for you to realize that it can and has happened. Know the person very well before developing a more intimate relationship and always demand that you both take necessary precautions.

**Living in Mérida**

**Entertainment**

Mérida is known for its many parks, mountain peaks, and statues. The Andean Club in Mérida organizes different trips and excursions to the mountains and peaks around the city. The University in Mérida offers cultural activities and events for their students and the public. There is also the Colonial Art Museum, which is three blocks from Plaza Bolívar, as well as the Archeological Museum on the main square. For poetry reading and art shows, there is the Museum of Modern Art. In addition, Mérida offers a significant variety of restaurants and is a famous center for bull fights. Movies in Mérida are inexpensive and provide a relaxing way to practice listening skills. There are also frequent film festivals and concerts to attend. Soccer is popular in Venezuela, and tickets, hotels, and travel are often sold out far in advance for major games (usually in Caracas). Baseball is by far the most popular sport, and there are local and regional baseball games that you can attend, as well as larger national games in Caracas.

Discos do not admit students under 18. There is no drinking age in Venezuela, and drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation is an accepted part of Venezuelan life. However, drinking excessively is severely criticized and there are rather harsh penalties for such things as drunk and disorderly behavior (in public, while driving, etc.). Be very careful if you choose to have a drink. Due to the high altitude, alcohol will affect you much more.

**Travel**

There are several ways you can choose to travel within Venezuela. Ask about the availability of student discounts before buying tickets. Local transportation is not included in the cost of the program; however, it is relatively inexpensive compared to the US.

Mini-buses are very popular among students, and the cost is approximately 25–30 cents. Mini-buses are usually plain, unmarked vans that are privately owned; van owners
contract to service particular routes. You may also want to share a taxi with friends when going out, since this turns out to be rather inexpensive.

For travel over greater distances, you can choose bus, air travel, or make arrangements to hire a taxi with a group of students. Bus travel to Caracas from Mérida takes approximately 15 hours due to the mountainous terrain, while air travel takes less than an hour. Renting cars in Venezuela is strongly discouraged. The accident rate in Venezuela is very high, and after you have been there for a while you will understand why.

Communication

Internet & Computer Access
VENUSA offers computer access to you on the program. The computer lab provides you with Internet and a study area. You are permitted to print class assignments only—internet pages are not to be printed. Keep in mind that Internet services and connections in general are slower in Venezuela. In addition to the VENUSA computer lab, Internet service is offered at numerous local cyber cafes.

VENUSA has wireless Internet access throughout the school. Students are encouraged to bring laptops. Storage lockers are available at the school for your computer while you are at home or traveling. Bring your own lock. You will not have any internet access in your homestays even if you bring your own laptop.

For ease in printing VENUSA also recommends that you bring a flash drive. Bring a USB cord if you plan to upload any digital photos.

Social Media
Not all countries share the same laws about freedom of expression that we have in the US. Keep in mind that derogatory comments, especially on social media, can result in legal claims and have extended legal implications even after you have returned to the United States.

Telephone
Most people in Venezuela have cell phones. They have become the most affordable and popular way to make calls to the United States. VENUSA will soon be allowing students to rent Venezuelan cell phones for the duration of their study abroad. The cost will be less than $100 per term for phone rental and minutes depending on your calling habits. Most Venezuelans text message because a text message costs much less than a phone call. In Venezuela, you pay to rent the phone and then buy minutes for your phone. You only pay for your outgoing calls so you can receive calls and texts even if you do not have minutes left on your phone. Cell phones are also handy when you are traveling because they will work in most places throughout Venezuela and South America.

Contact VENUSA for more information if you are interested in purchasing or renting a phone prior to departure. You may also get a phone when you arrive.

You may give your host family’s number to friends and family in the US and have them call you. You will only be able to make long-distance phone calls from your host family’s home if you use a phone card. Long-distance, direct-dial calls are prohibited. If you use the host family’s phone for long-distance calls, grades will not be released until the phone bill is paid. Venezuelan phone bills are not itemized as in the US and you may be over charged.

Mail
Your mailing address while in Venezuela is:
Your Name VENUSA C.P.S.A.
Edificio Guilam #49-49 Avenida Urdaneta Mérida, Venezuela

It takes anywhere from 10 to 30 days for airmail between the US and Venezuela. Mail that arrives after the end of the program will be returned to the sender because the post office does not forward international mail. Many returned students suggest that you don’t have packages sent to you in Venezuela.

There will either be a high duty to be paid upon arrival or it may not arrive at all. Never send money or medication through the mail.

Money Matters
The monetary unit in Venezuela is the bolívar fuerte; the exchange rate in March 2016 was approximately 6.3 bolívares fuertes to the US dollar. Check out www.xe.com for the latest information on exchange rates.

It is very difficult to obtain Venezuelan bolívares fuertes in the US, so the Learning Abroad Center suggests that you bring about $1,000–$1,500 US to have money on hand. When you arrive, you can use a debit card to withdraw bolívares fuertes from the ATMs.

An easy, safe, and cheap way to deal with finances in Venezuela would be to bring or have access to:
- US $1,000–$1,500 in cash
- A debit card for regular use
- A credit card for larger purchases and in case of emergency

Personal spending habits vary too greatly to state exactly how much it will cost to live in Venezuela. The amount you spend will be determined by your lifestyle and budget. In general, you should find that the cost of living is much lower in Venezuela than in the US. Past participants suggest that you bring $1,000–$3,000 per semester and $500–$1,500 per summer session.

A Special Note about Venezuelan Currency
Venezuelans cannot access US currency without approval from their government, which can be difficult to obtain.
Therefore, many Venezuelans who want dollars in order to travel are willing to pay a premium for them, setting up a parallel market for US dollars. As a result, the rate you can obtain by exchanging your dollars informally with your host family or another trusted person is better than the rate you can obtain if you exchange your dollars at a bank or withdraw money at an ATM.

While the official currency exchange rate is approximately 6.3 bolivares for each US dollar, the “unofficial” rate is 1,100 bolivares per dollar—175 times the value. However, you must bring US dollars with you to Venezuela in order to take advantage of the unofficial rate. The downside to doing this, obviously, is that carrying cash can be risky. If you lose it or have it stolen, there is no recourse to get it back. That being said, past participants have felt strongly that we should let students know about this parallel market so that they can decide on their own if they are willing to take that risk in order to get an exchange rate that is so much better.

VENUSA is licensed by the government and, as such, is required to use the official exchange rate for all monetary transactions. No exchange of money at the parallel rate may take place on VENUSA property at any time.

**Safeguarding Your Money**

Be careful with your money, especially in bus and train stations and when riding public transportation. A money belt worn inside your clothing or a pouch worn around your neck is recommended for safekeeping. In public places, purses should be tucked up under your arm or carried in front of your hip, and wallets should be carried in your front pocket.

**Credit Cards**

A credit card is a good resource for emergency situations and for obtaining cash advances, including cash for emergency situations, as long as you have a personal PIN. It is important to know your PIN in both letters and numbers. Please note that some ATMs require that the card have a metal “chip” visible on the front for added security. Many US credit cards now have this chip, but it is wise to ask your credit card company whether they can issue you a “chip credit card” if you do not yet have one.

Keep in mind that you may incur fees for using your credit card abroad. Be sure to notify your bank and credit card company that you will be traveling abroad for the semester/summer. If you do not, they may assume your foreign transactions are fraudulent and may deny further transactions.

**Financial Planning**

Personal spending habits vary too greatly to state exactly how much it will cost to live in Argentina. The amount of money that is generally spent during one semester, including moderate travel, varies anywhere from $1,000 to $3,000. This amount depends on your personal spending habits, the amount of traveling you plan to do, and the value of the dollar. You should also keep in mind the amount of money you plan to spend on gifts for yourself, family, and friends. Many former students state that their one regret was not taking enough money with them to take advantage of the opportunities that came up. Most students should figure that they would be spending more than they would if they stayed on their home campus. Take as much as you are able, combining cash, a debit card, and a credit card. You can always bring back what you don't spend.

Be careful with your money. Pickpockets do exist in Argentina and generally hit when you are in a crowd. Backpacks are a popular target for pickpockets. Another common place to lose money to thieves is on trains or buses when traveling at night.

In this case, be careful to sleep with valuables close at hand. A money belt is a good idea when traveling. You should not carry your passport with you unless you are planning to be staying overnight in a hotel. In most cases, carrying a copy of your passport will be sufficient.

Let your bank and credit card company know that you will be studying abroad, otherwise they may suspect fraud and freeze your card.

**Extracurricular Activities**

There will be opportunities for you to discover Venezuelan culture through extracurricular activities. VENUSA coordinates several “Nuevos Encuentros” nights throughout the semester to expose you to different aspects of Venezuelan culture and meet local Venezuelan students who are studying English at VENUSA. Some examples of what may be offered are cooking classes, dance lessons/performances, tambores presentation, karaoke, game & movie nights, parties, and special events arranged with native Venezuelans.

Students will also have the opportunity to be matched with a language partner while in Merida. This is normally a native Venezuelan who is taking English courses at VENUSA. Interested students are matched a few days after arrival. Having a language partner is a great informal way to improve your Spanish and interact with locals.

**Social & Cultural Adjustments**

**Student Identity**

As a foreigner in Venezuela you will need to take the initiative to meet people. Don’t be afraid to start a conversation with others. Argentines are friendly and fairly easy to meet. If you want to become friends with the Argentines, don’t be afraid to make the first move. You will be the one to benefit the most from the contact made as it will give you the chance to see what the people are really
like and also enable you to speak the language more fluently.

Race & Ethnicity
You may wish to consult the resources available at the University of Minnesota Learning Abroad Center (LAC) related to students of color and learning abroad. For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/identity.

Sexual Orientation
Attitudes toward sexuality vary greatly from country to country. Some cultures are open about homosexuality, and strong gay communities exist in many cities. However, some cultures and peoples are intolerant of different sexual preferences, and strict taboos or laws against such relationships may exist. For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/identity.

Disabilities
Many of the disability accommodations or services that are provided at US universities may be different or unavailable overseas. Being in a new environment can also be stressful, and accommodations that you may not have needed at home may become necessary in an unfamiliar setting. Participants with any kind of disability, whether hidden or visible, should contact the LAC in advance to discuss their particular needs. For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/identity.

Looking Ahead

Career Information

Linking Undergraduate International Experience to Your Future Career
Learning abroad can help you develop and enhance intercultural competencies that are appealing to potential employers and graduate schools. Think about your academic and career goals before, during, and after your experience abroad. For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/career-info.

Re-Entry
Students often find that it is just as difficult, if not more difficult, to readjust to life in the US after studying abroad. You may find that your perspectives have changed significantly and that you may not connect with friends and family in the same way you did before going abroad. The LAC offers a variety of resources and opportunities to help you readjust to life in the US. For more information, visit: UMabroad.umn.edu/students/process/reentry.
Cultural Adjustment

The On-Site Experience

What happens when you suddenly lose clues and symbols that orient you to situations in everyday life? What happens when facial expressions, gestures, and words are unfamiliar? The psychological discomfort and adjustment period in a foreign country is commonly known as culture shock or cultural adjustment.

You will almost certainly experience some form of culture shock. It might hit you after two days, two weeks, or two months—timing varies widely for different people. Six common phases of cultural adjustment are listed below. These may be out of order for you, one phase may last longer than another, or you may skip a step entirely.

Initial Fascination: On arrival, your surroundings seem glamorous and exotic. You feel like the focus of attention and activity.

Initial Culture Shock: The initial fascination and euphoria fade as you settle in and you enter an emotional decline.

Surface Adjustment: After the initial “down” (a few days to a few weeks for most), you begin to truly adjust and settle into your surroundings. Language skills begin to improve, and you’ll feel less fatigued. Often you’ll be forming a small group of friends at this stage as well.

Feelings of Isolation: Difficulties in your new culture seem to stubbornly remain and you grow frustrated with the process. A sense of isolation sets in. Boredom and a lack of motivation often follow. Unresolved personal issues often surface during this stage.

Integration/Acceptance: After continued effort you find yourself more at ease with language, friends, and professional and academic interests. The culture you are living in is more easily examined. Differences between yourself and the society you live in become understandable and you come to accept both the situation and yourself in it, allowing you to relax and feel at home.

Return Anxiety: Just when you feel at home in the new country it’s time to go. Thoughts of leaving new friends raise anxiety similar to those felt before departure. You sense that you’ve changed as a person, and apprehension grows when you think about people at home who may not understand your new feelings and insights, yet you may feel guilty for wanting to stay.

When in any of the above phases, you may experience changes in sleeping habits, feelings of helplessness or hopelessness, loneliness, depression, unexplainable crying, placing blame for difficulties on the program or host culture, homesickness, getting angry easily, increase in physical ailments or pain, compulsive eating, or lack of appetite. Other symptoms may manifest themselves as well. It is important to understand these are part of a normal process of adjustment; however, if uncomfortable feelings persist for extended periods or seem unbearable, seek assistance from your program’s on-site support staff.

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Cultural Adjustment Curve

Adjusted from Oberg (1960) and Galtichorn (1963)
Appendix

Packing List

Clothing & Shoes

- Shoes (men): water shoes, tevas/chacos, hiking shoes and/or sneakers, flip flops (for beach/shower only), dress shoes
- Shoes (women): sandals (casual & dressy), water shoes, tevas/chacos, hiking shoes and/or sneakers, flip flops (for beach/shower only), dress shoes
- Summer is rainy season, so rain boots are recommended
- Water shoes are very important if you plan on going to the beach. Sea urchins are no fun!
- Sweater, fleece, or sweatshirt (layering for high-altitude trips)
- Light jacket (for higher-altitude trips)
- Sweatshirt & pants
- Jeans, khakis, or lightweight pants
- Leggings
- Shorts & tank tops
- T-shirts
- Beachwear (water shoes, Tevas/Chacos, swimsuit, towel, flip flops, sun-block, hat/visor)
- Cotton shirts
- Dressy shirts/tops for evening attire
- Outfits for evenings out
- 2 summer dresses/skirts
- Bathrobe & pajamas
- Socks & underwear (plenty)

Travel Accessories/Other

- Map of Venezuela/guidebook (important)
- Reusable water bottle
- Travel alarm or watch
- Money pouch
- Rain jacket (important)
- Umbrella
- Two locks
- 1 standard round dial lock for school locker or 1 smaller but sturdy lock for lockbox at homestay
- Laundry bag
- Small sewing kit/safety pins
- Flashlight/headlamp
- Travel towel/sheet
- Small daypack/backpack (for excursions and weekend travel)
- Purse with shoulder strap
- Sun hat/visor
- Sunglasses
- Mosquito net (for use when traveling)
- Water purification tablets
- Toilet paper (8–10 rolls: for use at public bathrooms and when traveling)

Note: There is a shortage of toilet paper & toiletries in Venezuela.

Electronics & Accessories

- Laptop/charger
- USB cable
- Flash drive
- Spare batteries
- Two-prong plug adapter (many outlets only have two prongs)
- Travel hair dryer/straightener
- Camera & accessories (waterproof cover, SD card, charger/batteries)

Note: Voltage converters are not necessary since Venezuela uses the same electrical current as the US.

Health & Personal Care Items

- Deodorant (important)
- Shampoo/conditioner
- Soap
- Makeup
- Lotion
- Toothpaste
- Feminine products (important)
- Razors
- Shaving Cream
- Sunblock (important)
- Bug repellent
- Hand sanitizer
- Baby wipes (for use when traveling)
- Small first aid kit & bandages
- Condoms
- Vitamins/probiotics
- Contacts & contact solution (enough for entire time abroad)
- Extra pair of eye glasses
- Medications
- Prescriptions (enough for full term abroad; pack in carry-on bag)
- Ibuprofen, acetaminophen (fever reducers/ pain relief)
- Allergy medicine/antihistamine o Pepto-Bismol
- Motion sickness pills

Note: You should bring enough prescription medication to last for your full term abroad. It’s often not possible to find these abroad or to ship them from the US.

**School Supplies/Reference**
- English/Spanish dictionary
- 501 Spanish Verbs
- Notebook paper & folders
- Pens/pencils

Note: School supplies are difficult to find in Mérida.

**Homestay Gifts**

Bring a gift (or gifts) for your host family. A host family gift is a nice gesture to say thank you for hosting you. Think of it as a similar gesture you would do if you were invited to someone’s house for dinner and you brought a bottle of wine or a bouquet of flowers. Sometimes it is hard think of an appropriate item.

Below is a list of good options:
- Fancy soaps or lotions
- Baseball hats
- Necklaces or bracelets
- Clothing or items with a University logo
- Jams made from Minnesota berries
- Local interest wall calendars/photo books
- Personal handmade items
- Candy (e.g., salt water taffy)