

Honduras Immersion Experience - May 2013

Background and Security Report

December 6, 2012

The Country

Honduras is a beautiful and mountainous Central American country with lush forests. Once part of Spain's vast empire in the New World, Honduras became an independent nation in 1821. After two and a half decades of mostly military rule, a freely-elected civilian government came to power in 1982.

Honduras is one of the 10 poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere with GDP per capita at U.S. \$4,200 per year (2010). The economy has continued to grow slowly but the distribution of wealth remains very polarized with average wages remaining low. Sixty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Although the official rate of unemployment stands at 5.1% (2010), it is estimated that at least one-third of the country is underemployed and struggling to meet their daily needs. The country was devastated by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which killed over 5,600 people and caused approximately \$2 billion in damages.



Community Partner

Sociedad Amigos de los Niños was founded in 1966 by Sister Maria Rosa Leggol of the School Sisters of Saint Francis. The Mission of Sociedad Amigos de los Niños (SAN) is to provide a nurturing environment for the neglected and impoverished children of Honduras. Sociedad provides shelter, health care, education, training, and the opportunity for children and families ravaged by extreme poverty to live with dignity. SAN addresses their basic needs and at the same time creates the opportunities for each child and young person to

acquire the necessary skills to enjoy a productive and meaningful life. From her own experience as an orphan, Sister Maria Rosa has always been concerned with the needs of the poor and has rescued and educated over 35,000 children who today are productive citizens of Honduras.

Perhaps the biggest project of Sociedad, and our host for the week, is the Nuevo Paraiso Community, which is a small village about two hours from Tegucigalpa. This tiny village of 60 homes is a safe haven for those who are victims of extreme poverty and neglect. It is here that Sociedad helps them build their dreams one step at a time. Nuevo Paraiso offers a kindergarten for 60 children, an elementary



school for 230, and a high school for 350 students. The Santa Rosa de Lima Medical Clinic attends to 40,000 patients per year. In addition there is a training center, soccer field, Cielos de Honduras brick factory, a plantain chip factory, and the beginnings of other micro-businesses.

Safety

In recent years, there have been increased concerns about the safety and security of Honduras. Generating this concern are several media stories which have branded Honduras as the “murder capital of the world” ([The Washington Post, December 26, 2011](#)). Indeed, recent statistics show that Honduras has an annual murder rate of 91.6 per 100,000. For the sake of comparison, here is a short list of other countries with their corresponding annual homicide rates per 100,000 people: Jamaica – 52.2, South Africa – 31.8, Mexico – 16.9, United States – 4.2 (New Orleans – 72.8, Cleveland 19.0).

In addition to this concern, in January of 2012, the Peace Corps pulled all of its volunteers from the country to conduct a full safety and security assessment. As a result of that assessment, the Peace Corps decided to suspend its operations until safety could be insured for its volunteers. The basic concerns of the Peace Corps seem to be establishing safer modes of travel and reducing the geographic area of its program so that volunteers will not be isolated.

Security Analysis

It is important, however, to look for balance in the media stories, the crime data, and insights from recent visitors to Honduras. In order to determine the actual security situation for those visiting Honduras as tourists and volunteers, the following points should be considered:

- The location of Nuevo Paraiso is a rural area more than 150 miles away from San Pedro Sula and a 1.5 hour drive from Tegucigalpa. The violence in Honduras occurs primarily in these urban centers. The murder rate in these two cities greatly skews the statistics for the entire country. In fact, San Pedro Sula is currently considered the most dangerous city in the world and it is recommended that visitors avoid the northern regions of the country. Thankfully, Nuevo Paraiso is far removed from this area and it would take 6 hours to drive to San Pedro Sula.



- Just before Thanksgiving 2012, The U.S. State Department issued a “Travel Warning” for Honduras. According to the State Department website, “Travel Warnings are issued when long-term, protracted conditions that make a country dangerous or unstable lead the State Department to recommend that Americans avoid or consider the risk of travel to that country.” While most State Department warnings recommend that U.S. citizens “avoid non-essential travel” to a country, the recent warning about Honduras DID NOT include this directive. Rather, the State Department recommends that U.S. citizens be aware of the prevalence of crime and think carefully about how to minimize this risk while traveling. (The warning is included at the end of this report.)
- We had conversations over the past two weeks with a Vice Consul in the American Citizens Service Unit in the U.S. Embassy in Honduras as well as a Western Hemisphere Analyst of the Overseas Security Advisory Council in Washington D.C. Both of these government officials repeated similar themes:
 - The travel warning was not triggered by any recent events. Crime in the cities has been pervasive for several years and this warning was a long time in coming.
 - Crime occurs mostly in the urban areas of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.
 - Relationships with local people, group travel, and increased security greatly reduce the risk of crime.
 - The violence that does take place in Honduras is largely a product of drug trafficking from Honduras to the United States. In general, if a traveler stays clear of the areas where the drug cartels are operating, the chance of experiencing violence decreases markedly.
 - Travelers should be aware of the risks and take precautions, but the State Department is not explicitly recommending against travel to the country.
- From the reports we have obtained from those who have visited Nuevo Paraiso in the last year, the security situation has not changed and Nuevo Paraiso continues to be a peaceful place for women and children to live. Safety services have been increased for groups, but there have been no incidents of violence against any visitors to the ministries of Sociedad. Our neighboring Catholic parish continues to send groups to Sociedad (February 2013, June 2013). We are in contact with a variety of institutions that have programs in Honduras and we will continue to discuss these safety issues with them.

Security Precautions

At John Carroll, we want to provide the safest experience possible for our students during immersion experiences. We realize that the media attention given to violence in Honduras can easily cause concern for participants and family members. John Carroll groups travelling to Honduras will follow a number of safety precautions in order to maximize the security of our students. These precautions are as follows:

1. Our group will fly into the Tegucigalpa airport and will be met by the trip facilitators. We will travel immediately to Nuevo Paraiso by chartered bus. There will be no stops or side trips in the capital city.
2. During our stay, we are under the leadership and supervision of Sociedad Amigos de Los Niños which was founded by Sister Maria Rosa Leggol in 1966. We will do no activities apart from their guidance and supervision. In most cases, our group will be in isolated locations and there will not be an opportunity to separate from the group. Exploring the streets or “sightseeing” will not be part of the itinerary.
3. We will be staying in Nuevo Paraiso, a small village commune of women and children. Members of the staff from Nuevo Paraiso will be with us at all times. The compound is fenced and gated and has security personnel on duty 24 hours per day.

4. All of our time will be spent at Nuevo Paraiso and other surrounding communities which are far removed from the urban centers of Honduras. Our activities outside of Nuevo Paraiso will be conducted during daylight hours.
5. We will travel as a group in a chartered mini-bus. Sociedad has used a specific transportation company for the last 10 years that owns its vehicles and has qualified drivers. Public transportation is never used.
6. Sociedad hires a special unit security agent to be with our group when traveling outside of Nuevo Paraiso. This is an armed guard wearing fatigues. For students participating in medical brigades, Sociedad coordinates these events with the Fire Department of Danli. The Fire Department will escort our group and be with us for the entire duration of the brigades.
7. If the security condition of Honduras deteriorates before the immersion experience and/or the US State Department issues a different travel warning recommending against travel, we will reevaluate if the group should travel to Honduras. In addition, if a security situation were to develop during our trip, we would take the appropriate action to remove the group from the country.

Conclusion

We hope that this report will ease fears and give a rationale for our confidence about the safety of the Honduras immersion experience. As with any travel, there are always risks and it is impossible for John Carroll to guarantee absolute safety. Each participant must decide if he/she is comfortable with the level of risk. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions about the program or the security situation.

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FAQ's about interpreting a U.S. State Department Travel Warning:

1. Why does the State Department issue travel warnings?

In their own words, the State Department issues travel warnings because:

"We issue a [Travel Warning](#) when we want you to consider very carefully whether you should go to a country at all. Examples of reasons for issuing a Travel Warning might include unstable government, civil war, or ongoing intense crime or violence, or frequent terrorist attacks. We want you to know the risks of traveling to these places and to strongly consider not going to them at all. Travel Warnings remain in place until the situation changes; some have been in effect for years."

2. Are there different levels of warnings?

According to the State Department's website on Travel Warnings (here is the [link](#)), there is a 3 tiered system of information about countries.

- The first tier is a ***set of information about each country in the world***. Here is where you can find any information about risk in every country of the world.
- The second tier is called a ***Travel Alert*** and this is a notice about a potential high risk situation that is considered short term in nature. So for example, a country-wide labor strike, an immediate danger of a terrorist attack, or an epidemic outbreak could trigger a Travel Alert. Travel Alerts generally have a short duration and are removed once the situation has passed.
- The third tier is the ***Travel Warning*** which is issued for longer term situations. There are no official levels of Travel Warnings, but they do differ dramatically in their language and this is what you need to pay attention to. Travel Warnings generally have a longer duration and are only removed once the country has made substantial changes in policies or actions.

3. Does a travel warning mean I shouldn't travel to that country?

No, not necessarily. Travel Warnings are not to be taken lightly. However, not all travel warnings indicate the same amount of risk. Depending on what situation has created the need for the travel warning and whether or not the State Department is suggesting travel be curtailed, the travel warning should be seen as additional information to help you understand the risk associated with being in that country. Ultimately you must examine the situation and what your plans are for being in the country.

4. What should I look for in a travel warning to help evaluate the risk of travel to that country?

There are at least three things to pay attention to in a Travel Warning.

- The first is to consider what the situation is that is causing the travel warning to be given.
- The second is to consider if the situation is location-specific or applies to the country as a whole.
- The third is to consider whether the State Department has included a specific statement about travel to the country.

Let's compare 3 travel warnings ([Honduras](#), [Lebanon](#), and [Chad](#)) on these 3 aspects of a warning. Read through each Travel Warning to see how variable the language is across travel warnings.

- *What is the situation causing the travel warning to be given*

The Honduras Warning is clearly a result of the high crime rate associated with drug trafficking. The Chad Warning is mostly about the high crime rate but includes information about rebel groups that have recently been subdued and the recent cessation of war between Sudan and Chad. The Lebanon Warning is clearly about terrorism targeted at U.S. citizens as well as the risks associated with collateral violence resulting from warring factions or families within the country.

- *Is the situation location-specific or endemic to the country as a whole?*

The Honduras Warning discusses the high crime rate within specific regions (called departments) of Honduras. Although it is difficult to determine without a map, the regions are primarily in the north and west of the country of Honduras. The Chad Warning discusses the extreme risk in the eastern regions of Chad but also discusses the high crime rate throughout the country in both rural and urban settings. The Lebanon Warning is clearly talking about the danger to people throughout the country as a whole.

- *Is the State Department stating people should not travel to the country?*

The Honduras Warning makes no mention of not traveling to Honduras, but discusses at great length the need to exercise caution if traveling alone or traveling at night once in the country. Additionally, the Warning indicates that travel in high risk areas of Honduras should be minimized if possible. The Chad Warning recommends U.S. citizens avoid all travel to the eastern parts of Chad and explains that all travel by government personnel outside the capital city is reviewed for approval by the U.S. Embassy, which would indicate the seriousness of the risk of travel anywhere in the country. Further, the Chad Warning urges all U.S. citizens to consider extra security measures to mitigate exposure to violent crime throughout the country. The Lebanon Warning urges U.S. citizens to avoid all travel to Lebanon.

5. What else should I consider when evaluating whether to travel to another country?

You should consider the nature of your travel plans and how they match with the security concerns in a country. Whether you are traveling alone or with a group, whether you will be spending time in areas of high risk, whether you will be isolated (e.g., backpacking) or in populated areas and so on are all important considerations, particularly given the specific information provided in the Travel Warning for the country you are planning to visit.

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Travel Warning

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Bureau of Consular Affairs

Honduras

November 21, 2012

The Department of State has issued this Travel Warning to inform U.S. citizens about the security situation in Honduras.

Tens of thousands of U.S. citizens safely visit Honduras each year for study, tourism, business, and volunteer work. However, crime and violence are serious problems throughout the country. Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world. San Pedro Sula is considered to be the world's most violent city, with 159 murders for every 100,000 residents in 2011. These threats have increased substantially over the past several years, and incidents can occur anywhere. In January 2012, the Peace Corps withdrew its volunteers from the country to conduct an administrative review of the security situation.

U.S. citizens do not appear to be targeted based on their nationality. Resort areas and tourist destinations generally have lower levels of crime and violence than other areas of the country. Moreover, tourists traveling with group tours only rarely report criminal incidents. In June 2012, the government agreed to increase police presence in areas frequented by tourists, such as the Copan Mayan ruins and Roatan. The government also established special tourist police forces in Copan and Roatan and is evaluating this option in other locations. Additionally, major hotels and other tourist installations have increased security, including with the help of police, in response to the crime epidemic.

A majority of serious crimes are never solved; of the 24 murders committed against U.S. citizens since January 2010, police have closed none. Members of the Honduran National Police have been known to engage in criminal activity, such as murder and car theft. The Government of Honduras lacks sufficient resources to properly investigate and prosecute cases, and to deter violent crime. The Honduran government is in the early stages of substantial reforms to its criminal justice institutions.

Transnational criminal organizations conduct narcotics trafficking and other unlawful activities throughout the country and use violence to control drug trafficking routes and carry out other criminal activity. Other criminals, acting both individually and in gangs in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, commit crimes such as murder, kidnapping, carjacking, armed robbery, rapes, and other aggravated assaults.

Kidnappings and disappearances are a concern throughout the country. Kidnapping affects both the local and expatriate communities, with victims sometimes paying large ransoms for the prospect of release. Kidnapping is believed to be underreported.

U.S. citizens should be vigilant of their surroundings at all times, especially when entering or exiting their homes or hotels, cars, garages, schools, and workplaces. Whenever possible, travel in groups of two or more persons. Avoid wearing jewelry and do not carry large sums of money or display cash, ATM/credit cards, or other valuables. Avoid walking at night in most areas of Honduras, and do not walk alone on beaches, historic ruins, or trails. Incidents of crime along roads, including carjacking and kidnapping, are common in Honduras. Motorists should avoid traveling at night and always drive with their doors locked to deter potential robberies at traffic lights and on congested downtown streets.

The location and timing of criminal activity is unpredictable. We recommend that all travelers exercise caution when traveling anywhere in Honduras. However, certain areas of the country demonstrate higher levels of criminal activity than others. Honduran "departments" (a geographic designation similar to U.S. states) with crime rates higher than the national average include:

Atlantida (where La Ceiba is located)
Colon
Copan (where the Mayan ruins are located)
Cortes (where San Pedro Sula is located)
Francisco Morazan (where Tegucigalpa is located)
Ocotepeque
Yoro

Certain areas of Olancho, particularly the municipalities of Catacamas, Juticalpa, San Francisco de la Paz, and Santa Maria de Real, also report a significantly high crime rate.

For more detailed information regarding personal security, please see the State Department's Country Specific Information for Honduras. For the latest security information, U.S. citizens traveling abroad should regularly monitor the Bureau of Consular Affairs' Web site, where the Worldwide Caution, Travel Warnings, and Travel Alerts can be found. U.S. citizens living or traveling in Honduras are strongly encouraged to sign up for the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program to obtain updated information on travel and security within Honduras.

The Embassy is located on Avenida La Paz in Tegucigalpa and can be reached by telephone at (504) 2236-9320/2238-5114 or by fax at (504) 2236-9037. For after-hours emergencies, please call (504) 2236-8497. The Embassy's American Citizen Services Unit can be reached directly by fax at (504) 2238-4357 or by e-mail at usahonduras@state.gov. The American Citizen Services Unit's Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/acstegucigalpa>, is another resource for updated security information. Travelers may register with the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa through the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program](#). Travelers may obtain up-to-date information on security conditions by calling 1-888-407-4747 toll-free in the United States or outside the U.S. and Canada on a regular toll line at 1-202-501-4444. For information on general crime and security issues, U.S. citizens should also consult the U.S. Embassy in Honduras and the U.S. Consular Agency in San Pedro Sula. Stay up to date by bookmarking our [Bureau of Consular Affairs Web site](#), which contains [Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts](#) as well as the [Worldwide Caution](#). Follow us on [Twitter](#) and the Bureau of

Consular Affairs page on Facebook and download the Smart Traveler App for [iPhone](#) or [Android](#).

The U.S. Consular Agency in San Pedro Sula, which accepts passport applications and performs notarial services, is located on the eleventh floor of the Banco Atlantida building (across from Central Park), telephone (504) 2558-1580. The agency is open Monday-Wednesday-Friday from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. In case of emergency in the San Pedro Sula/north coast area, please contact the Embassy in Tegucigalpa at (504) 2236-9320/2238-5114, which will forward the call to the Consular Agent if necessary.