Pitilla Logistics

Estacion Biologica Pitilla is a remote biological station in Northwestern Costa Rica, it’s remote and isolated location means that it is imperative you comply with the logistical protocols.

Background
Pitilla is located in and administered by the Area de Conservacion Guanacaste (ACG). The ACG incorporates Santa Rosa National Park, Rincon de la Vieja Park and Guanacaste National Park into a much larger and continuous conservation area. Pitilla is in the area of the former GNP. It is located 9 km south-west of the village of Santa Cecilia, accessible on a rough mud road by 4-wheel drive vehicles. The station lies in the mid-elevation (700m) tropical rainforest biome, on the interface of primary forest and reclaimed pastureland. The location is very humid and frequent, abrupt rainstorms occur which will last from 1 minute to 3 days. The damp conditions mean that it is very difficult to keep yourself, your equipment, and your clothes dry. Also, water levels can rise rapidly in the rivers so always be aware of how many you have crossed. Waterproof clothing is essential Temperature is pleasant, around 18 to 28 °C, but can become cold in the evenings so bring at least a couple of warm clothes. It is often sunny, but sunscreen is only needed if you walk down the exposed road (else the forest provides enough shade).

The Station
Pitilla is a large hacienda-style wooden station (30m x 100m) which consists of the following:
- two dorm rooms, each with 5 bunk beds, one washroom with flush toilet and cold (stream) water shower.
- kitchen with a propane stove, sink and food storage cupboard.
- open work areas.
- living quarters for the park staff (currently one ranger).
- stable
- wide verandah around entire station for working.

There is a small amount of electricity generated by a solar panel, enough to power a lightbulb in the kitchen and each dorm room each evening, and to recharge the cell phone and laptop. There is not ho water in the station. Water is piped in from a nearby stream, and must be boiled before drinking. The high humidity mean that you should be drinking 3L of water per day at a minimum. Always ensure there is enough boiled water on station. It is likely that our crew will be the only researchers at the station for extended periods.

What to bring
Water bottle
Rubber boots (comfortable, high, good grip soles, good insoles make walking nicer)
Rain cape (better than rainjackets/pants in the tropics: cooler)
2 Flashlights with many batteries (the stronger, the better, for night walks)
2 headlamps bring halogen bulb for nightwalks, regular bulb for station
Knapsack for day use
Binoculars
*Lightweight* clothing (long pants, short sleeve shirts, T-shirts: QuickDry is ideal)
One or two warm items (eg. fleecy and long sleeve shirt)
Sandals or flipflops for the station (only)
Thick socks for rubber boots (to avoid chafing)
Books!
Toiletries
Camera and camera batteries (in a dry box with silicon packets, because of humidity)
Spanish dictionary, etc.
Insect repellent (pack in watertight bag)
Batteries if you have any battery-powered equipment.
Pocketknife
Safety whistle
Either a suitcase or backpack is appropriate for packing the above in. We will drive the baggage to the station. **Whatever you bring will get mouldy Do not bring anything you cannot afford to lose, the conditions can damage everything.** Please bring only one item of personal luggage: you will also be bringing a trunk of equipment.
Cheap Sunglasses
Swimsuits

**What not to bring:**
Sheets, blankets, towels, sleeping mat, pillow (provided by station).
Clothes that you mind getting moldy.
Leather walking boots, these always mold and get destroyed, **always.**
Goretex jackets, etc (too hot!)
**MACHETE – DON’T YOU DARE BRING ONE.**

**What will be supplied:**
First aid kits, compasses, snake venom extractors, trail maps, battery-powered lanterns, rechargeable batteries and charger for lantern, mosquito nets for your bunk bed.

Candles can be bought in town.

**Water**

Boil all water before drinking at the station – it comes from a stream. We usually store it in large carboys. Santa Cecilia water is fairly OK to drink but use caution in general when eating in town (e.g. avoid ice in drinks).

**Food**
We cook all our own food. We will purchase food weekly in Santa Cecilia, on the research budget, including: rice, beans, pasta, pasta sauce, tuna, cheese, tortilla flour, white flour, baking powder, salt, sugar, yeast, white bread, porridge, tomatoes, avocados, cucumber, chiyote squash, potatoes, yams, onions, garlic, cilantro, limes, cabbage, pineapple, honey, jam, sour cream, powdered milk, tea and coffee. Queso seco (dry cheese) lasts well and is available in small stores in town. Meat is available from a butcher, and should be cooked immediately if you buy it. Oranges can be picked surreptitiously from local trees, or ask the ranger to get you some. Anything else you would like to eat or drink should either be purchased in the American-style supermarkets in San Jose or La Cruz (e.g. peanut butter, bad soya sauce, mainstream spices, granola, whole wheat flour, limited amount of herbal tea) or brought from USA (e.g. Asian food, favorite teas and spices, etc.). Remember that dry goods will not stay dry for long unless in a jar, ziplock, etc. There are some restaurants in town, but every other year someone gets travellers’ diarrhea from eating at them. Use discretion.

There is no fridge. Leftover food such as beans must be reheated to boiling temperature three times a day (morning, midday and night). Dairy products can be kept in a “turkish fridge” (in a bag in a cup of water in a draft, with or without damp cloth) to keep them fresh a bit longer. Buy the hardest vegetables you can to make them last longer.

Station responsibilities.

We use the station thanks to the Costa Rican park system. The station manager is in charge of the station, and should be consulted about any use of non-USU equipment or space. He is responsible for cleaning the bathrooms, and organizing clean bedding every 2 weeks, as well as extensive duties patrolling and maintaining the park area. In return, we help him keep the kitchen and common areas clean, which means sweeping regularly, cleaning the cooker top, etc. His workload should not increase dramatically because we are there. The horses/mules are officially for park ranger use,. All visitors to the station should be cleared by park headquarters in advance – tourists are not permitted.

Telephone

We always make sure that someone has a cell phone that can be used for emergency outgoing calls – check your chip before you leave the USA to see if your cell phone has roaming reception in Costa Rica! The only place to get cell phone reception is at the top of the hill on the northeast pasture. Cali and Petrona also have a cell phone, and often the park rangers. Unfortunately, you cannot get a Costa Rica SIM card to put in your US cell phone as in other countries, so you’ll have to pay roaming charges to use your US cell phone (several $/minute) in Costa Rica, hence my suggestion of emergency use only!

Phonecalls can be made from payphones in town. For some reason, there is only a 50% chance that any given payphone is working on a given day – keep trying phones until you find one that works. Long distance calls are made using phone cards which can be purchased in units of $10 US or 3000 colones (25 minute phonecall to Canada).
Phonecards can also be purchased in La Cruz, but not often in the size needed for long-distance phonecards.

**Internet**

At least recently there was a small internet café in town, in a private house across from the Coopecompro. Slow. We have previously used cellular internet connection and the wifi at Cali and Petronas. Do not rely on having reliable internet connection.

**Mail and fax**

Letters can be sent to park headquarters (Santa Rosa), but not packages. Costa Rica has 85% import duty on items sent to Costa Rica, so packages are kept centrally until this is paid by the receiver. **Realistically, this means that packages will never make it to you in the field season.** We have successfully sent cassette tapes in padded envelopes, as well as magazines, etc. Allow 2-3 weeks for letters to arrive at Pitilla from Canada.

Address:

Your name  
Estacion Pitilla  
c/o Programa de Investigacion  
Area de Conservacion Guanacaste  
APDO 169-5000  
Liberia,  
Guanacaste  
Costa Rica  
CENTRAL AMERICA

You can also send mail by giving it to park personnel passing through Santa Rosa. Buy stamps and postcards in Liberia! Park headquarters will also send and receive faxes on our behalf (fax to USA= 2$ /page) but you will need to pay them. The fax number is often busy: tell your correspondents to keep trying! We are dependent on the generosity of park personnel to bring mail/faxes to and from Santa Rosa, and often several weeks goes by without park personnel passing through Pitilla. Hence, the 2-3 weeks for mail (includes about 7 days traveling between countries).

**ATV**

To start, put the key in and turn to “on” position, then touch the throttle. You may need to give it some choke on a cool morning – remember to put the choke back to normal within the first 5 min of driving. The ATV is automatic. To go in reverse, you need to first put it in reverse gear, then turn a handle on the dash as you give it some gas. There are two types of brakes, two hand-operated brakes and a foot pedal brake – get used to using both.
The ATV is purely a research vehicle, not a sport vehicle, and there is a zero tolerance policy for using it recklessly. Do not exceed 25 miles per hour- the gears won’t take it. Minimize driving on asphalt, the tires will get too hot. Always wear a helmet and reflective strip – you really will be fined if the traffic cops catch you without it. The main safety concern with the ATV is tipping, so be careful in deep ruts, especially with passengers or a heavy load. If it starts to tip, leap away rather than try and stop it.

Make sure that there is a carboy with gas at the station, as it is easy to run out (one gas tank = 4 return trips to town). It is sometimes a good idea to unscrew the top of the gas tank and manually check the gas level, as the gas meter can be a bit deceptive on uneven ground. Ask for “regular” at the gas station (just 100 m along asphalt road out of town), and make sure you get a receipt.

Flat tires can be fixed on the spot with a puncture repair kit. Check that there is one in the under-seat storage compartment on ATV. It should include a metal T-shaped tool to poke black rubber in the puncture hole, black rubber strip, and rubber cement. Poke the black rubber in, cut it off at surface and put rubber cement around it – ready to go! The materials can be bought at select gas stations, and Cali and Manuel are pros at the technique.

The ATV gets muddy fast, and the mud can interfere with the smooth operation of brakes and gear shifts, as well as promote rust. The ATV should be washed down with a hose and scrub brush at the end of the day – be careful not to ever get water in the exhaust pipe, and let the engine cool before spraying it with cold water (the engine shouldn’t hiss and steam).

ATVs are considered “on road” vehicles in Costa Rican law, so all rules that apply to cars also apply to ATVs. The ATV needs a RTV (safety inspection) every two years, which is indicated by a RTV sticker on it. Insurance documents are kept at Cali and Petrona’s house, and simply cover your liability in case of an accident – not theft or damage. If you are asked for them by transit police, you can take the police to the house. You need to carry your drivers license and photocopy of passport with you when you drive – I recommend keeping such documents in a waterproof bag!

**Safety**

We have an ATV which can get 2 people to town in under 25 minutes in an emergency. We also have a cell phone to contact park headquarters and park personnel in Santa Cecilia, plus access to the station CB radio. Taxis are available in Santa Cecilia to get to the main hospital in Liberia (50 minute trip). You will be provided with extensive medical insurance. It is important that we tell each other where we keep insurance documents, passports and money.

It is very important that you tell me of any pre-existing medical conditions, including psychological syndromes, food and drug allergies and chronic conditions. If you take prescription drugs, I or the USU person in charge need to know what they are and where
you keep them in case a situation arises where you need to have them but are not able to communicate this information. This information will be kept confidential and does not affect the conditions of your employment.

There is a chalkboard in the center of the station. If you leave the station, write where you have gone, and when you will be back. Always take a trail map and first aid kit if you go hiking.

You will be provided with a venom extractor to be carried at all times when off the station. You have 3 minutes after a snake bite to apply the extractor, so keep it accessible in the field, and in a consistent location in the station. In the case of a snake bite, the most important thing to do is to reduce blood flow from the bite to the heart. Apply the venom extractor, then relax. Sit down, keeping the bitten limb BELOW the heart. Whistle for help. Do not move about unnecessarily, and never run. Do not apply a tourniquet, do not suck on the bite. If someone else is bitten, carry them or help them to the station, minimizing their exertion. Ask the park ranger to radio for help. If he is not around, you should call Santa Rosa (daytime) or Cali and Petrona in Santa Cecilia (evening, night) and ask for a car or taxi to meet us in Santa Cecilia to take us to the hospital in Liberia. Collect the injured person’s insurance documents, passport and bring adequate money for all expenses. Take the injured person to Santa Cecilia on the ATV.

Santa Rosa: (2)666 5051 ext 230 Róger, 231 Maria Marta
Cali and Petrona: (2)677 8268

The best way to avoid snakebite is to watch where you walk – all the time! Any time you are in the park and not on the station itself you MUST wear rubber boots, do not step off the station without them. If you look, you will see all the locals are wearing rubber boots, this is because they stop the majority of snake bites. Also don’t grab branches, tree trunks without looking. Snakes are in holes in the ground, coiled on the ground, on the trunks of trees, and in overhead branches and vines, and are often camouflaged to match their environment (brown, green). The most deadly is the terciopelo (fer-de-lance) but anything with a triangular head is venomous. Coral snakes (red-yellow-white-black stripes) are also poisonous but their mouths are too small to bite humans, except between the fingers. Biologists are virtually never bitten in Costa Rica because of such vigilance measures – the few that have been bitten are classically bitten when stepping off the station at night in their sandals. Try to respect the very real danger posed by snakes without letting fear ruin your experience of the forest.

Apart from poisonous snakes, there are few dangers at the station. Scorpion bites are painful but their effects last only a few hours: check your boots before putting them on, and your bed before getting in. Bullet ants are like a nasty wasp sting, there will be a bit of yelling and swearing and then it gets better. Killer bees have never been seen at the station, although they are in the surrounding area...submerging yourself in water is the best strategy in the unlikely event of an attack. Still you want to be a bit careful about drumming on hollow logs without looking inside first. Jaguars do not go after adults; feel privileged to be in their country.
First aid emergencies can be dealt with at the public health clinic in Santa Cecilia (1 doctor, 1 nurse, 1 pharmacist, only the most basic antibiotics). If you have a non-emergency medical issue, it is better to simply go to the private 25 de julio Clinic in Liberia than wait half the day to see an overworked doctor in Santa Cecilia.

Most of Costa Rica is fairly safe in terms of crime, except San Jose. People get mugged and pickpocketed in San Jose all the time. Keep valuables in your moneybelt or locked up in our aluminum trunks, keep only what you don’t mind losing in a wallet, don’t wear flashy jewelry. Confidence tricks abound, be prepared for people trying to distract you, and always hang onto any bag or pack.

**Getting to Pitilla**

**Going to La Cruz, Liberia, Santa Rosa Park**

Taxis are available sometimes at main intersection in Sta Cecilia, but fairly expensive because of the length of the trip (40$ one way to Santa Rosa).

Bus departs Sta Cecilia for La Cruz at 5:15 am, 7:30 am, 10:00 am, 11:15 am (en route to Peñas Blancas), 2:00 pm, 5:30 pm (arrives in La Cruz about 30-40 min later).

We need to go via La Cruz when we want to go from Pitilla to Liberia (nearest city) or Park headquarters.

The best connection to Liberia or Santa Rosa is to take the 5:30 am bus from Sta Cecilia towards La Cruz, get off when you hit the highway, cross to the other side next to guard post, and wait for the large coach going south towards San Jose/Liberia/Santa Rosa Park (usually only a 10 min wait). If you are going to park HQ in Santa Rosa park you must tell the bus driver, or they won't stop. When the bus driver drops you off at the entrance to Santa Rosa park, walk the 100 m to the park gate, tell the person you are working at Pitilla (usually no entrance fee in this case), and wait for someone to give you a lift in (usually employee bus comes by in next 10-15 minutes). Always take your passport when you leave the station, it is supposedly legal to carry a photocopy instead, though I prefer to carry the original on long distance buses as the border police are always wanting to flip through the pages.

**Useful reading:**

The Green Phoenix (History of the ACG and conservation)  
Teach Yourself Spanish (or equivalent)

Copies of almost all the natural history guides are kept at the station.