

Universidad Veracruzana

Xalapa, Mexico

Semester 2 2013

BA Majoring in English, minoring in Spanish Language

My main reason to go on an Exchange was to take the opportunity to do some immersive Spanish learning and I thought I may as well choose somewhere completely different while doing so. Another attraction to Mexico for me was I knew it would be an affordable place to live that also offered a lot of different areas to travel to. I was very happy that I chose Xalapa over Mexico City as it was quiet (for a city) and, once you got used to the bus system and the crazy labyrinth-like streets, it was easy to navigate. It also has a pretty landscape and is a student friendly city with lots of music, dance and good cafes. While Xalapa doesn't have heaps to offer for things to do in the city, they do have a famous anthropology museum (make sure you have a day free for that – it's huge) and I found I was able to busy myself drinking great coffee and trying out different foods. Xalapa is also close to heaps of places to visit for day trips during the weekend or even weekend long trips.

I found the Mexican people to be very fun and inviting people. They are very happy to help one another out and are very interested in foreigners so it's not too hard to make some Mexican friends. I had various Mexican students come up to me from class offering to help me with course work if I needed and even when I was the only foreigner in a class I felt very included. If you are female, keep in mind that you will draw a lot of attention from men but you just have to accept this as part of the culture. I found this to be especially true in Xalapa compared to other parts of Mexico I visited because it really isn't a touristy city. This had its positives though as I felt like I was really experiencing the Mexican lifestyle and being fully immersed in the culture.

Visas and Flights

Visas caused a bit of hassle for me. If you are going on an exchange for one semester you do not need a student visa, you only need the tourist visa which you obtain when you go through the airport into Mexico. If you are studying for a year you absolutely need a student visa. To get a student visa you need to fly to the Mexican Embassy in Wellington, and there is a \$40 fee. I emailed to double check if I needed the student visa and they said yes, but I didn't. As I then entered on a student visa I had to go to the immigration office within 30 days of being in the country. If you don't go within 30 days you will not be allowed to study for that semester. The administration at EEE is really helpful with the process and very patient if your Spanish is a bit rusty.

The most common way of getting to Mexico is flying through LA but this is a bit difficult because of the visa rules in the US. According to the American Embassy in NZ website, an ESTA won't work for a transit to Mexico or Canada if the traveller is staying in either place for more than 3 months, so you need a C transit visa or a B1/B2 visitor's visa. These both cost \$208, so in my opinion the B1/B2 is better because it lasts 10 years and you can go to the states and stay without hassle for 6 months at a time. To get this visa you need to fill out an online form and then choose an appointment time in Auckland. Don't leave this until the last minute like I did because everything suddenly gets super stressful, I only had two appointment days before I left the country to choose from. I decided to go to Auckland four days before I flew out to LA because sometimes the visas take a few days to process. In the end the process was actually a lot easier than the website made out and I got my visa straight away, but go prepared. Take proof of funds, return flight details (to prove you want to return home) and your acceptance letter into Veracruzana.

I organised flights through STA on George St and they were awesome. A return flight from NZ to LA cost \$1780 and it was then \$300 one way to Mexico City. It took 12.5 hours from Auckland to LA and then 4 hours to Mexico City. I then bussed from Mexico City to Xalapa rather than flying. The best bus 'ADO Platino' has massive seats which pretty much can turn into beds and costs around \$50 NZD one way. If you want to bus you need to taxi from the airport to the TAPO bus station. Make sure you get a secure taxi (called a 'taxi seguro').

Accommodation

I stayed with a friend and her Mexican family for the first two weeks while I looked for a flat. This was also helpful because I didn't have the best Spanish and so ringing for flats felt a little bit daunting on my own. You can find flat vacancies in the local newspaper called "Diario Xalapa" which people sell on the street but Carla at the EEE provides lists as well and can also pair you up with a buddy to go flat hunting with which can make it less scary! I was a bit put out with some of the flats – a lot of them were shared rooms in someone's house. Meals were sometimes provided but a lot of the rooms were small and didn't have much furniture provided. I found a place eventually that was nice and close enough to the centre to walk to the EEE. I paid 2000 pesos (around 200 NZD) a month and this included gas, power and internet. Throughout Xalapa rent seemed to vary from 1500 -3000 pesos (150-300 NZD approx.) a month all inclusive.

Another option is the homestay. As the other reports say there are mixed opinions about this. I had wonderful experiences with my Mexican friend and her family so if you are considering a homestay even just a little I would say maybe do it for a couple of weeks and then venture out on your own.

Getting around Xalapa

There are a lot of buses and taxis in Xalapa, but there are no bus timetables so trying to figure out the local buses takes a bit of time. The buses are only 5 pesos if you have your student ID to go anywhere in the city and they are generally very regular. Taxis are also super cheap - generally 18-25 pesos anywhere in the city unless you are going out to the mall which is 30-40 pesos. At night I would recommend taking a taxi, you can just stand on the side of the street anywhere and get a taxi usually within 5 minutes.

Food

I found dairy products weren't so great compared to New Zealand although Mexico has some really interesting and yummy cheeses. In Xalapa food is really cheap in comparison to somewhere such as Mexico City where you are going to be paying prices more similar to NZ. In Xalapa you can get a good meal and a drink for 60 pesos. I ended up eating my main meal

when the Mexicans did mostly, between 2-4pm and having comida corrida. This is a three course meal, soup, a 'plato fuerte' of rice or spaghetti and meat and then a small dessert. Juice is also included and it costs between 25-50 pesos. The cheapest I found was near to the Humanities department for 25 pesos and there are always a few options for each course. In Parque Juarez there is also good park food and trying the hotdogs are a must. Don't be too weary of street food as I don't know any one that got ill from it, just make sure you are used to the food in general before you start getting adventurous. I generally stuck by the rule of only eating from somewhere if there were quite a few people eating there and this seemed to work!

The University

The university was a complete contrast to the University of Otago. The organisation is not very reliable and trying to choose papers and figure out what a paper is actually about was a bit of a mission for me. I took one paper at the Humanities department and three at the EEE. The EEE was more structured but I really enjoyed my experience in the class with the Mexican students. However students now must pay for all the courses at the EEE (around 350 NZD each) whereas the courses at the main university go on your loan, so I recommend doing the main courses where possible. Don't feel daunted about learning in Spanish. I was quite nervous because I hadn't studied Spanish in a year and had only completed up to the first intermediate Spanish paper at Otago. But it really is amazing how quickly you absorb a language when you are immersed in it completely and you will find yourself understanding almost everything before you know it.

You will also end up with some unexpected days off. Because I was there during rainy season uni was cancelled three times due to heavy rains or cold fronts.

Travelling

The travelling was definitely a highlight of my exchange. Due to the cheap living costs in Xalapa having extra cash for travelling isn't too difficult. Xalapa is close to many places and buses go almost anywhere so there is also the opportunity to be a bit more adventurous and travel overnight to further away places. Tickets can be bought at ADO bus stations, Caxa is

the station in Xalapa. However on Carillo Puerto there is also an ADO office where you can buy tickets. Coatepec, Xico and Naolinco are all close and good for day trips, you can catch buses from Las Sauces. For weekend trips I went to Puebla, Mexico City, Oaxaca, Veracruz City, Catemaco, Papantla and El Tajin; and I recommend all these places! My friends and I also did a 3 day road trip around the state of Veracruz, along the coast. This was super fun because we ended up stumbling across a really cute town called Tlacotalpan, in the south of the state. If you end up that way I definitely recommend checking it out.