

Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico

Semester One 2015

BSc (Ecology major, Marine Science minor) 2nd year

Mexico is one of those countries that has very little to do with New Zealand and very few New Zealanders travel there, but we seem to have an idea of how it is... at least how we feel it should be; a desert-stricken place filled with cactus and poncho-wearing, sombrero-loving moustached men with their donkey and tequila, of course with the given exception of large dangerous cities where many people become victims to the drug trafficking... yea, it's not a pretty picture that we paint in our minds. This could probably come down to the countless "Mexico based" movies that the United States make. Another idea you might have is that all Mexicans are gardeners named Juan, thanks to TV series such as Desperate Housewives. These ideas about Mexico are the nightmares of all Mexicans, it's a bit like telling us that we're either Australians or we do funky things with sheep... But, hey, that's what an exchange is for, right? To open your horizons to the multicultural world we live in, prove worthless the stereotypes we have, enjoy yourself, and... Well, learn.

My motivation to go on a student exchange was mainly to satisfy my obsessive urge to travel and to keep up my Spanish; I wasn't actually always decided on an exchange to Mexico and it did worry me a little bit at the beginning due to the fear of insecurity put into my head by my worried family. To tell you the truth, when it came time to say yes or no to Mexico I decided not to research anything about the location just in case something appeared that would make me decide not to go.

Researching your destination isn't necessary but it is very useful and it saves the embarrassment of, in my case, arriving to a large city built about 2,000m above sea level, in what was a foggy forest, expecting to arrive at a beach-side desert. Xalapa is the capital of the state of Veracruz, a central/south state of Mexico. The state has a lot of diversity in climates and environments but where Xalapa is situated is quite a cold, damp area seen as it is quite close to el Pico de Orizaba, the highest point in Mexico, which is covered in snow most of the year

One of the best things is not only that you immerse yourself in the culture of your selected country nor that you are always in contact with the language. As an exchange student you tend to hang out more with your fellow exchange companions as they tend to understand you more and the activities organised by the university bind you all together. This allows not only an exchange of ideas between your culture and the one you have chosen, but with many more as well. In my case, I hung out with many other people from Latin America and it was interesting to see their perspective on the

Mexican culture... it's probably best to say the culture of Veracruz. This is because Mexico also has national exchanges where students can do exchanges to other states. These students struggled with "veracruzanismos" or things typical of Veracruz. This was an interesting concept because you leave your chosen country feeling enriched with knowledge about all over that country and many other countries, as well. You also make very good friends that you will keep in contact with long after the nostalgia of returning has worn down.

La Universidad Veracruzana

This university has campuses all over Veracruz and you can actually do an exchange to any of those campuses. However, if you don't request this they will just assume you want to go the Xalapa, where the main campus is and all the activities are taken place. One thing that was hard for me to get my head around is that fact that not all the divisions were in the same campus. The university a principal campus "la zona UV" where you will find many divisions, but the rest are spread around the city. This makes taking papers in other divisions a little difficult but not impossible! I was put in la zona UV as that is where the biology division is. This area is situated by a lake and it is quite pretty. La EEE, which I'm sure will be mentioned to you, is where the administration is taken place for all the events, trips and anything else related to exchange students. The staff in this area are very friendly and happy to help with anything, or even just to have a coffee and a chat. I found myself going to the back office many times a week as the staff there were real kind and I enjoyed their company

Classes are not like in Otago University, they are generally two hours long and the structure is quite high school-like in the sense that they are small and rather personalised. Also, roll call is taken and if you wag a certain amount of times you will be failed. However, you will just be sent to "extras" which is like a second-chance exam.

Living in Xalapa

Much like Otago, Xalapa is very much a student city; cheap food, accommodation availability, cheap drinks, and a bonus, travelling within Mexico is very much affordable.

When one thinks Mexican cuisine tacos, nachos, enchiladas, burritos and refried beans are very commonly thought of. However, these foods don't exist in Mexico, they're much rather an Americanisation of Mexican food... ok, I lied, tacos and burritos do exist but not as we know them. Tacos tend to be a lot smaller and contain meat (carne al pastor, sudadero, longaniza, bistec, and cabeza to name a few) and accompanied with coriander and onion. Mexican cuisine includes a lot of corn, due to the tortillas and the dough they use. The cuisine can be split into two categories: antojitos and platos fuertes.

Antojitos are little snack things that you can buy at night. They are an assortment of fried tortilla batter filled, mixed or topped with a certain thing, lettuce and cream. In Xalapa the most common are empanadas, tostadas, gorditas, and picadas.

Platos fuertes are what we would know as dinner. These generally include a stew of some sort (mole, pipian, en salsa verde, pozole, enfrijoladas, enchiladas to name a few) accompanied with beans, rice and tortillas.

Another fundamental part about the Mexican diet is their love of chilli. However, if you're not a big spice fan there's no need to worry, the chilli is typically left on the table in sauce form so you can spice your food. There are a variety of chilli sauces and Xalapa is known for its' salsa de chile seco/ con cacahuate

As Xalapa is a student city the food is rather cheap, antojitos are usually \$6 each, comida corrida (a soup, plato fuerte, drink and dessert) can range from between \$25 and \$40, an order (5) of tacos between \$10 and \$25, and you can usually find real decent buffets in about \$50

*P.S. All prices are
in Mexican Peso*
In 2015:
MXN 1 = NZD 0.09

Many Xalapeños (alguien from Xalapa) build extra rooms in their house to rent to students. There is never a lack of places nor are there times when you can't move. Prices range from \$900 to about \$2500 per month and obviously the price you pay determines what your dwelling includes. Types of accommodation range from individual granny flats without a kitchen, in with case a portable oven is real cheap to buy at Casa ahued, to entire apartments with two rooms, a kitchen and everything included. It would probably be a good idea to find out where your division will be located before finding a place to live as living in the centre of Xalapa isn't a good idea if you'll be taking humanity papers. For this reason it is recommended that you stay in a hostel for the first few weeks. Hostel de la neblina is quite good

As I mentioned earlier, travelling in Mexico is very affordable and there are infinite places to go to. Xalapa itself has heaps of beautiful, quaint villages around it (Coatepec, Xico, Jalcomulco, Naolinco, Almolonga, Volcancillo, Chachalacas and Carrizal are some of the most memorable) and chances are either the exchange office will organise trips to these places or groups of students will decide to go and check them out. Travelling further out to see some Totonacan Pyramids (Tajin) or maybe to explore other states of Mexico is also quite affordable. For example, heading to D.F. is \$800 return, a little further to Guanajuato is \$1,600 return. It is worth the price you pay to travel because Mexico has such dynamics that not one state is similar to another, in culture and countryside.

You will find the Mexicans to be very friendly and they always try their hardest to give you a helping hand. Don't be afraid to take them up on opportunities they offer you, insecurity isn't nearly as bad of a problem as we seem to think it is. When they say 'let's go to such place!' They mean it, it's not a trap. There is so much to see of Mexico and when you most feel like you need a bit of NZ to keep you going is when you should be putting yourself out of you comfort zone the most.

Don't hesitate to contact me with any questions!



Pozole



Tamal



The beach at Chachalacas



A remnant of the 2014 Latin American games in el Puerto (Veracruz), Veracruz



White water rafting trip to Jalcomulco



Farewell dinner on behalf of la Universidad Veracruzana