

**“Wish I’d Known” Survey**  
***Xalapa, Mexico***

**PACKING AND TRAVELING**

*Specifically, what kind of LINENS did you need to bring?*

- None
- I was glad I brought my own bath towel. The sheets were a little on the rough side, but nothing I couldn’t deal with.
- None
- Depends on the program. If you are staying with a host family you do not need to bring any linens. If you will be living on your own, there is a good chance you will need sheets for your bed, towels, etc.
- None for Homestay. Bring a sleeping bag if you plan to travel, camp, or stay in the cheaper motels or posadas. They may not be the cleanest. Blankets or other bedding are cheap in Mexico. I bought a large bedspread, two light blankets, and two pillows for \$20 and other blankets from \$5 to \$20 a piece.

*What are you glad you packed from home?*

- Pictures, warm clothes, several pairs of jeans, jacket, dictionary—Spanish/English, film (for camera), wash cloth, fiction book, small hand towel, and American food like granola bars and peanut butter.
- A little bag full of medicine and first aid stuff.
- Discman, t-shirts and work-out shorts
- Pictures of family and friends. Travel Guide
- A few CDs, notebooks, pictures of my family, dog, and interesting things from the town I live in here, scenery, my house, etc. Your new friends may want to see a bit of your life or surroundings here in the USA.

*What do you wish you had left at home?*

- A pair of shoes I didn’t use
- I traveled pretty light, so I didn’t pack too much stuff.
- So many pairs of pants, it’s hot here.
- Tons of stuff. I have studied abroad 3 times now, and I have over packed every time. In reality, you don’t need that much stuff. Depending on the weather, maybe 7 outfits and you are fine. A pair of tennis, dress shoes, and sandals. If you are going somewhere cold, you might want boots. But in Spain my host mother did my laundry, so I always had clean cloths. Here in Mexico it is really easy to take your laundry to a ‘lavandaria’ and they wash everything for a very reasonable price.
- I brought too many clothes. Xalapa had Wal-Mart and a multitude of shoe stores and other clothing stores and prices were equal to or cheaper than here. Bring enough socks and underwear for a week or so, and 3 or 4 pairs of pants and shirts. If you are a big buy or gal, you may want to bring more because their sizes are smaller and you may not be able to find the right size, especially the shoes. Bring a light waterproof jacket. It rains a lot in Xalapa in Septiembre. You can also get these

there. Do not bring Visa travelers checks, it was hard to find a bank to accept them. Bring American Express travelers checks or use a Visa or Master card (credit or debit from checking). They have ATMs. The exchange rate was to our advantage: 11 pesos to the US dollar in December 2003.

*Do you have any travel tips to pass on (planning advice, safety considerations, guidebooks, train vs. bus, etc.)?*

- Traveling by bus is not that expensive. If you are going to travel a long distance by bus it is better to travel at night (you can sleep the whole way), but at night it is a little more dangerous.
- Don't buy traveler checks. Everyone I knew that bought them had trouble getting them to be accepted. Use your ATM card.
- Bring a Mexican travel book.
- Guidebook: Lonely Planet. Travel advice: Travel! Don't stay in the city that you are studying in! Get out and travel as much as you can. But don't travel in big groups; it gets too hard in the planning. Find one or two people who you travel well with and go with them. In Europe the trains are better, in Mexico the bus system is really good. Also, in Mexico when you have breaks from school you can travel on the buses for half price.
- Buses were very cheap. There were chicken buses, about like school buses here. These were very cheap and there were 3 terminals of this type in Xalapa. Use these mostly for day trips of about 40 miles or less. You can use them for longer distances, but you will have to change buses often and find out where to change and when. They have 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class buses for longer trips (ADO, AU and others). Some have bathrooms and show a movie or two. They are equal to or, I feel, better than Greyhound. You can bring suitcases, which are stowed underneath. The chicken buses often have a roof rack. I traveled with a small backpack, a mountain bike, and sometimes a suitcase. Sometimes they charged an extra 3 or 4 dollars for the bike.

*What places would you advise future students to see and why?*

- Teotihuacán and El Tajin—the pyramids are amazing
- Take a trip to Acapulco. Also, take the weekend trip to El Tajin. Be very careful with the party at Xico (the running of the bulls). Some people from school went, and they saw a guy get killed right in front of them. Too much alcohol and the bulls make for a very bad combination.
- El Tajin, and Tecolutla, the waterfall in Xico, Acapulco.
- Mexico: Oaxaca City, Chiapas (anywhere), Mexico City, Beaches= Puerto Escondido (in Oaxaca). Tasco, Vera Cruz (small beaches north are much cleaner), Tulum...
- El Tajin near Papantia. Ruins of the Totanaca Indians. Also los viadores de Papantia At el Tajin. El Rio Filobobos near Tiapacoyan. White water rafting, rock-climbing, waterfalls, you can dive off of at least one of these falls. Coatepec and Xico—several movies filmed near waterfalls near Xico. Coatepec is famous for coffee. Ride a bike from Coatepec to Teocelo for beautiful mountain river scenery. Orizaba, a town close to El Pico de Orizaba, the tallest volcano in Mexico. I biked from Orizaba towards the volcano and met people using Holstein steers to plant

plow and plant potatoes. This area is absolutely beautiful and the people are wonderful too. The altitude may kill you, but what a rush. Five or six hours going up and 1-1/2 coming down a winding mountain dirt and rock road with no guard rails. Other places close enough for chicken buses: Naolinco (famous for leather goods), et Lencero, Coacoazintia, many others. The people were kind and very helpful even in these small mountain villages.

## **MONEY AND COMMUNICATIONS**

*How much money in U.S. currency would you recommend students have at their disposal for their whole time abroad?*

- \$600-700
- USD1000
- \$500–600 dollars
- Depends, first on if you are staying for a semester or summer, and where you are. Some countries are more expensive than others. For a summer, (six week program) I would suggest \$1,500...\$500 for emergencies. For a semester, I would suggest \$3-4,000 some also for emergencies. It also depends on if you are staying with a host family (then you don't have to pay rent etc.) and if you are planning on traveling a lot.
- I spent about \$2,000, but I think \$1,200 would be enough. I spent a lot because everything was so cheap. What a deal, I'll take it. I also bought a mountain bike and some accessories for a bit more than \$200.

*How much money did you have in foreign currency when you left for your program? Was it enough?*

- Zero
- None. I exchanged some money at the Houston Airport, but I advise people to use their ATM cards in Mexico. This way they will get the best exchange rate.
- \$300, not enough.
- I had about \$300 US dollars. Yes, you can get money easily from ATM machines. Usually you can get a better transfer rate in the host country.
- None. I had a 2-hour layover in Houston, so I changed \$20 there. You get a better rate of exchange if you wait until you get to Mexico.

*How did you manage your money (credit cards, traveler's checks, bank accounts etc.)? How and where did you access your money?*

- Cash, traveler's checks, credit card, and ATM card. Most of the time I exchanged my money (cash and traveler's checks) at the money exchange places in Xalapa. There are also several ATM machines around.
- I used my ATM card. FYI, very few places accept credit cards in and around Xalapa. If you were planning on using them, better go to plan B.
- ATM card, credit card, I always got cash out of ATM machine, and used a credit card when available.
- I managed my money on line. I had some problems with my credit card so check with them before you leave. I didn't bring travels check, but I am not very organized. I would suggest bringing them.

- I brought traveler's checks (Visa) for the first 2 months El banco Bital accepted them and then they wouldn't. By then I had money sent via Western Union. Use American Express checks and/or Visa or Master Card credit or debit cards or change a bunch of cash or credit card money and leave it at home, take what you need. Most motels and restaurants in smaller towns do not take credit cards. Even in Veracruz I had to hunt for a motel to take a credit card and it was too expensive. I eventually found a room for \$10. In Xalapa, never pay more than 25 pesos for a cab. Each cab has a number in the back window. If you feel you have been over-charged, remember the number and call the authorities.

*How much money did you spend on books?*

- About \$30
- 300 pesos, which I was not told about before I left the US. I was under the impression that my tuition included books as well.
- \$22
- Less than \$20 US dollars.
- Less than \$30.

*How did you communicate with the U.S.? What would you recommend to future students (e.g. calling card, set up e-mail account and where, etc.)?*

- Bring a few calling cards from the US with you so you have a way to call home, but make sure they can be used for international calls. Email was very accessible. I would email my parents and tell them when and what time to call me at my house in Mexico.
- I recommend the Sam's club AT&T card, but the cheapest is setting up a time with your family and waiting for the phone to ring. From the U.S. to Mexico, you can pay as little as 9 cents a minute.
- You have to buy calling cards here, but it is expensive. It's easier to set up a time for your parents or others to call you. I used e-mail a lot. There are cyber cafés everywhere.
- E-mail. It is too expensive to call. There are lots of Internet cafes in Europe and Mexico, and they are very cheap.
- I bought Ladatel prepaid cards (not cheap, I guess about 50 cents/minute). These work for long distance as well as local. You need these cards for pay phones; their pay phones do not accept change, only cards. Many students had cell phones, some from here, some from there, but it will be a cold day in July before I carry a cell phone.

## **SCHOOL WORK**

*How did your academic experience abroad differ from your U.S. experiences concerning:*

Relations with professors/Classroom Instruction?

- I had wonderful and very capable teachers while in Mexico.

- I had some bad teachers, some really good ones. Classes were conducted in about the same manner.
- The professors are more laid back, and don't be surprised if they go out with you at night. But they are very willing to help with all your questions and concerns.
- Similar.

#### Grading?

- The grading scale is 10 to 1 (10 is the best)
- Grading was fair. No letter grades, but a scale from 1 to 10.
- Haven't received grades at the time this survey was completed.
- Truth...easy.
- Depended upon instructor but I feel that it was generally less demanding than here.

#### Study habits?

- I didn't need to study as much.
- I studied, but most of the people that were there were partying and didn't care about their classes.
- Same
- Remember that you are in a different country. You need to study but also take advantage of the situation that you are in. If you are trying to learn a language the best way to do it is to go out on the street and talk to people or make friends with the people and go for a coffee or something to practice your language skills.
- Same for me, I do not have the greatest study habits. If you work as hard as you do here, you will have no problems and probably score a bit higher.

#### Library?

- Library at the EEE was very limited. Small places with not that many resources.
- Didn't use it.
- Umm...I study in my room.
- Small one at EEE, but one that is very nice near sports stadium.

#### Computer Access?

- There were very few computers in the school for foreign students and Internet access was extremely slow. There are Internet cafes where you can rent a computer. It costs about \$1 per hour. Internet cafés are all over.
- This is my biggest complaint. Six computers for 120 students!!! And they were Pentiums 200, so you had to wait for 10 minutes before your e-mails loaded. Absolutely terrible!
- Cyber cafés are more accessible than the comp lab at the school here.
- Very accessible. And cheap. Sometime printing can be a little expensive but that is because we are used to it being free.
- Go to la UV library near sports complex. They have better computers and Internet than La Escuela para Estudiantes Extranjeros. Internet cafes on every corner. From 50 cents to 1 dollar an hour. Cheaper to print here than EEE.

## Other?

*What enabled/hindered your successful academic experience?*

- A good relationship with my instructors, attendance, and doing my homework enabled me to get the most out of my classes, as well as good grades.
- My tutor, or cultural assistant, was excellent. Talk with teachers outside of class. They are very helpful and interesting.

## **SOCIAL LIFE**

*How did you meet students from your host country?*

- Through my tutor
- Through my tutor, Fabiola.
- Through my tutor.
- It's easy in your school because everyone is in the same situation and want to meet new people. If you are studying a language, you need to meet native speakers. This means trying harder, go to cafes or bars. Or take a class in the real university.
- Walking the streets or sitting in the corridor de la EEE. Bike rides to small towns. I had more interests in meeting campesinos, shop owners than college students.

*How did you like to spend your free time and why? Is there anything you regret not doing more of in your free time?*

- I talked with my host family, watched TV, and went to the movies
- I slept some, walked around, went to the malls and movie theaters, and went to bars and clubs a little bit.
- Shopping, traveling, going to the beach, going out at night. Would like to have done more traveling.
- Just take advantage of the time you have. It is going to go very fast. Try to do as much as you can. Go out, have fun, travel, LEARN...
- Bike riding to other small towns. Visiting with the friends I had made and my host family. I cut their grass for my mom doing my laundry. I picked their bananas and oranges, chininis, etc. I helped their son put a fence up in their yard.

*What opportunities for social, recreational, and cultural events that the host university or program offered did you like the best? Why?*

- The fiesta at the school in which the foreign students made a food item from their own country. I liked this because I got to try many different foods. The school also arranged a trip to the pyramids in Teotihuacán.
- I really enjoyed the welcome reception, with the folklore ballet and a reception afterwards.
- The school-sponsored trips.
- The social gathering that corresponded with 'holidays,' for example, we had a party for the day of the dead in Xalapa. It is interesting to learn about the culture and to socialize with your classmates.

- 3 or 4 parties put on at school. Many bars; though I do not drink, I went a few times and they looked fun, especially if you are underage here. Soccer games, State theatre, free music in el Parque Juarez.

*What piece of advice would you give future students regarding their non-academic life while abroad?*

- Take advantage of being able to speak in Spanish.
- Be careful on how much you go out in the evenings. I saw a lot of people that stayed out until 5 am, went home and slept for 2 hours and then came to school smelling like beer. Be moderate in your evening outings.
- Don't worry about dressing to fit in with the locals. It's hot so wear something comfortable. No matter what you wear you don't fit in anyway.
- Go out and discover the country!!!!
- Talk to everyone, they want to talk to you too.

## **CULTURAL ISSUES**

*Are woman treated differently in your host country than in the U.S.? If so, what advice would you pass on to women who are thinking of studying in your host country?*

- The men often whistle or say things to the foreign women. Just ignore it.
- Mexican men are very cordial and polite. The one thing I would advise is on the manner one gets dressed. The American girls wore skimpy clothes and got whistled at on the street. If you want to blend in, you have to dress like the local women, so wear pants and nice shirts. No halter-tops, bare midriffs and flip flops when going to school!
- Women get yelled and whistled at on the street. Just ignore it.
- In Mexico, yes they are treated differently. Be ready for comments from men on the street, and to see that here there is 'Machismo' and, I think, you just have to keep an open mind about it. Remember that it is a different country with a different culture.
- Yes. You may be called "guera;" they may think you came for sex with the Mexicans. Do not worry about this, stay in groups, you'll be OK. Many husbands have a girlfriend or even a second family. Machismo is alive and well.

*Are minorities—racial, religious, sexual identity—treated differently in your host country than in the U.S.? If so, what advice would you pass on to members of any minority group that are thinking of studying in your host country?*

- The country is mainly catholic, and I believe there was one Baptist church in Xalapa. Not much diversity as far as religion. Also, they were either white, Indians or mestizos. I didn't see any blacks or eastern people there.
- No
- I think racial tensions are worse here. There were demonstrations in el Centro often, usually campesinos, farmers wanted better prices. They were peaceful. Very Catholic. La Virgen de Guadalupe esta en todos lugares.

## **OTHER COMMENTS**

- TALK, TALK, TALK. Meet people and do not worry about your grammar. Just let your mouth go, go go. ALSO, listen a lot, TALK and LISTEN. I learned as much in the streets as I did in school. You might consider getting a student visa here (Chicago). I took some running around getting financial documents translated, etc. If you do it here, you can at least talk in English and write in English.