

To be a student at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico was not in my plan, but it turned out to be one of the best academic experiences I could have.

I left Germany and Berlin in January 2018 to attend one semester at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana Cali, in Colombia and when I left, I never thought that I would end up in Mexico too. It was autumn 2016 and I was waiting for the confirmation of my exchange from PUJ which was not arriving till the very last, almost a month before departure. With the fear of not being accepted and with a bit of paranoia, I applied for a second exchange, for the summer term in other Latin American universities. I wanted to learn Spanish and I wanted to live there. As it always happens, my confirmation for Colombia arrived and I left for my semester abroad.

While in Cali, I received the second big news of my Viadrina student career: I was selected for another exchange semester at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, known as UNAM, in Mexico City. Next to the excitement of having the chance to prolong my experience abroad in one of the best Latin American universities, I was scared by of the possibility moving to one of the biggest cities of the world! But who knows me, knows as well that I am not really scared, and I'm not someone who gives up or refuses an opportunity. So I applied at the partner university and I got accepted. And then it all started again: call to my parents saying I was moving from Cali to Mexico City, start to look for all the courses, find a place to live, pack again my luggage and take another plane.

Being the second exchange, I knew what I had to prepare and in the meantime my Spanish got better. The university's website was easy to navigate and finding the courses I wanted to attend was not difficult.

After the experience I had in another university as an exchange student, I was a bit disappointed by the welcome from the UNAM. We didn't had an introduction/welcome tour of the university, which is one of the biggest I've ever seen, and it was not explained to us all the possibilities we had as students there. It was all kept short, basic and quick: three emails, 30 minutes of access/credential login information and a usb stick with some info and maps of the university, city and transportation. The meeting for the credential access and enrollment to courses was mandatory, and it was held something more than a week before the beginning of the classes. I had only those 30 min to meet fellow exchange students, which I never saw again in the next 5 months. This was a bit of a downside for me, because it would have been nice to connect and exchange experiences with other international students. Contrary to the semester I had before at the PUJ, there was no buddy that I could contact for any questions and sometimes reaching the tutor was not that way. There was a long wait to an answer to the email and it was actually faster to pop into the office and get the info directly there.

I understand that the university has many thousands of exchange students each semester, but I think it would have been really nice to have at least one welcome meeting/drink/tour in which we could connect and get a bit more confident with the enormous campus.

The courses I choose were of the Master in Communication: Theories of Communication, Methods of Communication and Thinking Through Images: Cinema and Philosophy. We were having class once a week, classes were of 3 hours and we had to prepare lectures every week for the class. Each course was structured differently: for one I prepared two

presentations to expose to the class, for another I had to prepare a mid size length paperwork and for the Cinema and Philosophy class I was preparing lectures and having screenings (in this class I was the only student so it was basically a one-on-one class). The competence and the preparation of the teacher was just amazing. I really had the feeling of studying in a top quality university and the knowledge they shared with us was infinite. My colleagues students were also really nice, helpful with giving me advices and curious to get to know me and the place where I come from. Overall I think I had one of the best academic experiences ever at the UNAM. A bit of a downside were the strikes and protests happening at the beginning of the semester: some classes were cancelled and there were several demonstrations.

The university offers also language courses if you want to learn Spanish, but I didn't attend one since I saw that my level of Spanish was going quite well! I tried instead to attend a Russian language course offered by the ENNALT, the language center of the university: language courses are really good and super cheap. We had class 4 days a week, three hours per class. Due to a week of sickness and the overlapping of another seminar I was attending, I had to cancel the class after one month (unfortunately starting to learn Russian and missing the first classes which are about learning to read and write was not so good, leaving me a bit behind my other classmates).

The university hosted also olympic games and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage. The buildings and the facilities are really good. There is an olympic swimming pool, a stadium, you can do every kind of sport but, as exchange student, we didn't really had a proper introduction or advice on how to join all of it: you need to register to some website, get an appointment, get a health certificate, pay a (really really small) fee and then you can sign up for a course. It took me almost two weeks to understand how to do it and by the time I got all the information it was a bit late to join.

The campus has several museums, theaters, halls, observatory, laboratories etc. Its students are really active in organizing activities but also politically or socially involved. Teachers are from the finest minds.

Finding accommodation was not that easy: Mexico City is huge, the neighborhoods to choose from can be infinite and the most diverse. You can live close to the university in a ok neighborhood or further away in a better or more touristic one. Traffic in a big city like that can be heavy and take hours to do few kilometers. The university gave us the access to a website/database of accommodation options but unfortunately I was not able to find anything there. Through a friend made in Cali, I stayed the first weeks at his family's place, until I found an apartment for myself in the colorful neighborhood of Coyoacan. I used facebook groups and housing websites to find accommodation. To live alone I was paying something like 230 euros per month. The prices for accommodation can vary a lot, from 120 to 400 euro, depending on the area you want to live. After spending 5 months in Mexico City I would definitely recommend the following areas to live: Coyoacan and San Angel, which are closer to the university, and Roma, Condesa, Hipodromo and Napoles which are good connected to the CU (Ciudad Universitaria), I liked the neighborhood of San Miguel Chapultepec and Anzures too, although a bit further away from the public transportation, direct to university. These areas offer places to hang out and are not dangerous. I think my expenses were about 800 euros a month, but I was trying to get to know also a bit of the surrounding of Mexico City by taking some short trips.

Mexico is not really expensive, you can have really good meals for 4-5 euros with drinks included. Public transportation is super cheap and probably where I spent a lot of money on was UBER, where a ride of 20-30 minutes could cost around 5 euros in a non heavy traffic time. I totally recommend taking UBER instead of normal taxis, for the service, security and cost.

Really important again is having a good health insurance. I made mine with the group recommended by my german health insurance, which is called ENVIVAS. I had a bit of a misadventure with some poisoned food (or a mosquito bite, it's still unclear what happened) and I was under surveillance at the hospital for a day. I went to a private hospital since the difference between public and private service in Latin America has a huge difference. The bill at the end was super expensive but once back and sent the invoices to my health insurance, I was refunded for the total one week later. From that day I started to be a bit more careful about the places I was eating, the water and of course I was bathing in mosquito repellent spray.

In the end I can say that the experience is more than 100% worth, but there can be a little bit of space of improvement from the host university side, by informing and organizing (even a really small welcome meeting with a bit of networking) exchange students about all the possibilities the university and the city has to offer. It is called university city, there are over 260.000 students, its offer is over the top but its organization leaves a bit of disappointment.