DESTINATION MEXICO

Spring 2011 Exchange Report ---- Attila (contact at ama85@sfu.ca)

ITESM Puebla, Mexico

Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City

Mexican Caribbean Coast (Yucatan Peninsula)
INTRODUCTION

Hello! I am an SFU Communication major, I just returned from my first exchange semester abroad. I absolutely love to travel and I was looking to gain a new perspective on my career other than that which SFU has to offer. I love being exposed to new ways of thinking, so I decided to go on exchange! I chose Mexico as my destination for a number of reasons, here are a few:

- Very affordable living costs = more opportunities to travel during exchange
- I already spoke Spanish
- Mexico is a fascinating country with endless cultural, leisure & eco-travel activities to explore at an affordable price
- Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey is recognized as an academic leader in Latin America, known for its entrepreneurial approach to learning & research

WELCOME TO PUEBLA!

Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM) has over 30 campuses throughout Mexico. One of its newer locations is Puebla, Mexico. Located in central Mexico, this is the country’s fourth largest city (pop. ~3 million); while relatively unknown to foreigners, it is an excellent location to study and live in.

Puebla is a university town, with 5 major universities – and a wide variety of entertainment and nightlife options for all student budgets. Living costs are very affordable and the city is very safe (families walking the streets even around midnight, students stay out much later). If you are
looking for the “real Mexico” experience or to perfect your Spanish, it is a great option. Almost all of your classmates at ITESM Puebla will be Mexican, but half of them are from out of town and very eager to make friends and travel. Finally, Puebla has a 500-year history and a rich cultural offering: one local festival, for example, brings together 200 international musical, theatre and dance acts, all performing for free.

Typical Sunday, Puebla historic center
WELCOME TO: INSTITUTO TECNOLOGICO DE MONTERREY

ITESM is an SFU Preferred Business Partner, with many business courses transferring (pre-approved) as specific SFU Business courses. The school promotes an “entrepreneurial culture,” and offers professional opportunities for students to gain work experience with local companies and even start up personal business ventures if one is interested. Many courses are offered in English, and it is fairly easy to get into most classes – even if the subject matter is not remotely within your major. I had no trouble enrolling in all the classes I wanted.

Class sizes are small (20-25 students) which was a great change from SFU, and class projects are mostly team-based and very hands-on. Little essay writing is involved: instead, major projects will usually require the use of audiovisual media, group work and creative thinking. The Puebla campus offers a state-of-the-art digital media center for sound and video editing.

The average course load is 6 courses: the workload is comparable to 12-15 credits at SFU depending on the classes you take. Course readings – if there are any – are not as intensive as at SFU.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

As an ITESM student you have access to the weight room, running track, tennis and basketball courts and a very broad variety of sporting, cultural and recreational clubs and activities. These options have no additional cost beyond possible equipment (i.e. photography equipment, dancing shoes, etc.). Students are encouraged to get involved; this school has a vibrant student life. ITESM
also organizes 2 or 3 student trips per semester, to the beach, to Six Flags Mexico or camping in the mountains.

Downtown Puebla Historic Center

WHERE TO LIVE

Puebla has a huge student population and probably half of them come from out of town. Shared accommodation is thus not very hard to find. If you know Spanish, plan ahead and search online for “departamento compartido Puebla,” there are numerous websites offering shared accommodation listings from other Mexican and international students looking for roommates. Try to get in contact with them before you leave. If you cannot, ITESM International Office is eager to help you find accommodation (shared or otherwise) very near the campus.

ITESM has its own residences (not within walking distance of campus) with their own bus service. This will be your most expensive option. At approximately $400 a month (shared room), rent runs more than double what you will find at shared apartments in the same neighbourhood. The benefits you get for the price are a free weekly cleaning service and gated security, though the area is very safe.
LIVING COSTS

One advantage of doing an exchange in Mexico is the low cost of living. Your weekly grocery bill will probably be about $50, and eating out is much cheaper than in Canada. Entertainment options (i.e. movies, nightclubs, museums) and transport (taxi or transit) also cost much less, leaving you with more funds to travel within the country. You can expect your total living expenses to average about $500 – $600, including entertainment outings.

WEATHER

Puebla’s climate is mild and dry. Daily high temperatures are between 18-27 degrees. The winter nights & mornings can dip to 2 degrees Celsius, so bring a sweater! Nighttime lows & daytime highs are often very different: you’ll learn to dress in layers.
Puebla is located in central Mexico. Very affordable first-class bus service makes the rest of the country very accessible for travel. Reliable bus connections exist between Puebla and all major Mexican cities, with service even to the smallest towns. During spring, summer & winter break, your student ID will get you a 50% discount on bus tickets.

- Mexico City, with its (literally) endless cultural & entertainment offerings is 2 hours away by bus (regular $8, first class $15).
• The beach (Pacific & Gulf coasts) is also easily accessible by bus, as are colonial cities and archaeological sites such as Oaxaca, Veracruz, Monte Alban, Teotihuacan, and Queretaro.

• Nearby Mexico City offers airline connections to all national and most international destinations. I highly recommend visiting the Mayan Riviera (pristine beaches, eco-tourism, nightlife and archaeological sites) in Yucatan ($250 roundtrip from Mexico City).

Tulum archaeological site, Mayan Riviera

PEOPLE

Mexicans are a genuinely warm and friendly people. They will be very interested in meeting you and talking to you, especially if you are a foreigner... you will likely be invited to many parties right away!! If you interest yourself in learning from and sharing with others, you can easily make friends that last a lifetime. At ITESM Puebla, most students speak English to some degree, often fluently. Lifestyle among students is quite similar to the Canadian experience; Puebla has large malls, multiplex cinemas and a wealth of nightclubs and bars. However, family life continues to be very central to all Mexicans. A visit to downtown Puebla offers a fascinating and lively cultural experience, particularly on weekends, when everyone is out enjoying the sidewalk cafés, art galleries, free music and dance performances, and traditional markets and sidewalk bazaars.
Zacatecas fireworks (northern Mexico)

TRAVEL & VISAS

I cannot offer too much advice regarding visas as I entered Mexico as a Mexican citizen. Canadians will need a student visa and must visit the Mexican Consulate in downtown Vancouver to complete the paperwork or obtain more information.

Your best bet for air travel is a flight to Mexico City (MEX), with multiple daily departures from U.S. and Canada (Air Canada flies nonstop from Vancouver to MEX). Roundtrip airfare usually ranges between $500 and $700 CAD.

From Mexico City’s airport, first class bus service to Puebla runs every hour ($17 CAD).
CHALLENGES & WORDS OF ADVICE

The most important advice I can give to any exchange students is to go abroad with a very open mind. The more open you are to new experiences; to different people; to surprises (good & not so great); to trying something you hadn’t imagined trying before, the more you will benefit from your program. You will come back to Canada with a completely different perspective on life and a much more relaxed attitude about things. Going on an exchange is, academically and personally, one of the most rewarding experiences you can have. I highly recommend it to everyone: even if you never study or work abroad again (but hopefully you will!), you will come back a more mature person, with a more positive and receptive attitude towards whatever opportunities or challenges life presents you. Make the most of your time abroad learning, travelling and making new friends: ENJOY YOUR EXCHANGE!