I spent a semester at Universidad de las Americas (UDLA) in Puebla, Mexico. I had been studying Spanish for many years; so I decided to go to a country where I could practice the language. I spent five months at the UDLA (January-May, 2008) and took four courses there: 3 Spanish courses and a psychology course in Spanish.

The UDLA is located in Cholula, right next to the city of Puebla, in the state of Puebla. Puebla has a great location and is close to several archeological sites, beaches and many bigger cities (e.g., it is 2 hours away from Mexico City). It also has a small airport that handles both international (between Mexico and the United States) and national flights.

**Before Departure**

- **Visa:** it is important that you get a student visa before you go to the UDLA. It is also possible to enter Mexico as a tourist and get a student visa there; but this procedure is rather long and expensive. If you are not a Canadian citizen, make sure to apply for the student visa in time at the Mexican consulate in Vancouver as the processing of your application might take longer. The good news is that student visas are free of charge.
  
  Once in Mexico, you will be asked to register your visa. Most of this procedure is done by the UDLA. However, you will have to go to the immigration authorities in Puebla yourself to pick up your documents.
  
  Also, you have to remember to take your FM-3 form (it is a booklet that accompanies your student visa) with you every time you leave Mexico. You have to get it stamped when you leave or re-enter the country.
What to pack: Cholula is rather cold in January. You will definitely need a jacket and some warm clothes. Also, there is no heating in the buildings; so sometimes it is colder inside than outside. Although you can rent blankets in the residences, they are often not warm enough. It is easy to catch a cold in winter. Furthermore, many of the exchange students suffer from stomach problems during the first few weeks (you might need some time to get used to Mexican food). Therefore, I recommend you take some medicine with you.

Arrival and Orientation

Try to arrive the day the university suggests. There will be a group of local students waiting for you at the international airport in Mexico City. They will explain to you how to get to the UDLA by bus.

Every semester, the exchange office organizes a week-long orientation for all exchange and international students. The program includes a lot of information sessions as well as several trips and excursions. All information sessions are held in Spanish, however, they hand out sheets with all the important points in English as well. Also, the very same group of local students who wait at the airport will help you during the first few weeks with any sort of problems or questions.

Accommodation and Living

Living in Mexico in general is cheap. There is a long street of restaurants, bars and clubs behind the university, where you can find food and drinks for a very economical price. Concerning accommodation, you have three options: you can live on campus, rent an apartment or stay with a Mexican family. I lived on campus; and this is the option I would
recommend the most. This is the best and easiest way to meet people, especially Mexicans. Also, I found that many students who stayed with a family did not go out or participate in the activities as much as they might have wanted to because they lived far away from the university.

**Academic Details**

As I said before, I took four courses at the UDLA (five is the maximum). Classes are generally much easier than those at SFU; therefore, I had a lot of free time. Also, I arranged my schedule so that I would have Fridays free. Most exchange students tried to do the same because this way we had 3 days to travel on the weekends.

Mexico is a great place if you would like to practice your Spanish, however, I would not recommend it if you are a complete beginner. Generally, it is very easy to get by speaking only English; and I found that most exchange students who spoke little or no Spanish did not learn much of the language for this reason. Also, even though the school offers courses in English, the number of courses is rather limited, and the classes might change from the list they previously advertised. This meant that many of the exchange students found out the first week of classes that the courses they wanted to enroll in are not actually offered.

**Social and Extra-curricular Activities**

The UDLA offers a wide range of activities. The most popular ones are dance classes (around $100/term), intramurals and the social events organized by the residences. Also, some of the residences offer free yoga and dance classes (anyone can attend; i.e. you do not have to live in that residence building to be able to participate).

The university also arranges community service opportunities exclusively for exchange students. These mainly include teaching English, working in an orphanage or organizing activities for children.
Travelling

Travelling in Mexico is very easy. They have a good, cheap and reliable bus system. I travelled a lot during the weekends as Puebla is close to many great places. Also, during Semana Santa (Easter break), we had 10 days off, which gave us an opportunity to see more of Mexico. The Yucatan Peninsula and the state of Chiapas were popular destinations during this holiday. Furthermore, many students travelled to Guatemala or Belize during this time or after the final exams. Canadians do not need a visa to enter these countries as a tourist.
Words of wisdom

Try as many new things as you can, visit as many places as possible. Remember: your exchange is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.