



## EXCHANGE REPORT

Name

Year and term for  
exchange

Obi Okolo

Spring term 2020

Exchange university

Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Estado de México

Degree programme

Energy and Environment

## 2.5 months in Mexico

### Before departure

I had studied Spanish since 6th grade of primary school, I had built a very good understanding of the structure of the language and I had good reading and writing skills. However listening and speaking were not as good, so for my exchange I wanted to go to a Spanish speaking country to master these skills too. I wanted to go to a Latin America country specifically as this was a region where I had never been before. I narrowed it down to Mexico and Colombia, as I heard that these were countries where they speak Spanish in a relatively clear way that is easy to understand for someone who is still learning. In the end I chose Estado de México in Mexico over Bogotá, Colombia due to the warmer weather in this part of Mexico.

My expectations and aim for the exchange was to be able to communicate more or less fluently in Spanish after my exchange. I also wanted to meet a lot of new people and especially a lot of locals. And of course I wanted to enjoy everything that Mexico had to offer when it comes to culture, nature and food.

No Visa was needed. According to Sweden Abroad, one is allowed to stay in Mexico for 180 days as a tourist. They write that if the purpose of the trip is not tourism, you could need a special permission, but this was not something that I needed. I had taken Spanish B2 at KTH before traveling and there was no language test before starting the courses. If you have a B2 level of Spanish, I believe that you have learnt the basics to be able to take any class at the university in Spanish, but for it to be successful you have to actively try to improve your Spanish during your stay in Mexico as well.

### Upon arrival

I arrived in Mexico on the 20th of January, almost three weeks before the courses started. I would recommend anyone to arrive early for your exchange to acclimatize and hopefully get to know some people before school starts. I moved into a house called La Casa de los Onces Geranio, which as the name hints, has room for eleven people (more about accommodation further down). There were approximately 10 other international students that had already arrived and more would be dropping in during the weeks before the courses started (there were 27 exchange students in total this semester mainly from France, Sweden, Finland & Netherlands). We spent these first weeks by having house parties, going to Mexico City, playing football, going to the gym etc.

Personally I also took a private language course by a teacher recommended by the international coordinator at TEC (short for Tecnológico de Monterrey), for which I used the language course grant from the CBH school. This course was very useful for me and made me even more prepared for my studies at the university, that would all be in Spanish. This is

another reason why I would recommend anyone to arrive early to Mexico, to be able to get your Spanish speaking and listening going before the classes start. It was interesting how being in Mexico really forced me to start speaking Spanish and I was amazed by how fast I improved.

There was a student union for us exchange students called Amikoo. They were approximately 10 students that helped us all get to know each other in the beginning and that helped us with any questions we had during the semester. They didn't have any formal activities after the introduction day, but they became our friends and we did many things together with them during the semester.

The last week before school started all exchange students had arrived. The school organized an introduction day (with Amikoo) and a trip to the pyramids at Teotihuacan. Most of us then went on a weekend trip to Puebla before starting school the following Monday.

## **Financials**

I got the travel grant from the CBH school of 7000 kr and used the Language course grant to take the Spanish course I mentioned above.

In general, living in Mexico was much cheaper than in Sweden. I lived in the most expensive housing alternative offered by the university, which was at 2000 kr/month. Most types of foods were also much cheaper than in Sweden. We had walking distance to school, but if we wanted to go somewhere else we used Uber that was also very cheap (especially as we traveled together and therefore split the costs). The costs to cover basic needs are very low, but with all the travels the total costs will vary. Some exchange students travelled to the USA and Cuba for instance which obviously costs more, but the weekend trips in Mexico generally cost between 500-1000 kr.

A specific tip to save money and time if you live close to the Estado de México campus, is to order food from Walmart online instead of taking an Uber front and back (10 minutes away from where most of us lived). I would also recommend to use the Revolut bank card to get better exchange rates when doing bank withdrawals. You can pay by card in many places in Mexico, but for the street vendors and at the markets cash is preferred.

There were no mandatory fees from TEC or from the student union, Amikoo.

## **Accommodation**

If you get in contact with the international students coordinator at the Estado de México campus, you will receive a list of accommodation alternatives that are approved by the university. Most of them are very close to the school and I recommend you to choose a housing option close to the school such as La Casa de los Onces, Mexico Lindo Housing, TEC Suites or La Casa de Enfrente. They are all very affordable compared to Swedish rent prices, and the most expensive one costs approximately 2000 kr/month.

As I wrote previously I lived at the Casa de Los Onces Geranio. I lived with five French and three Mexicans and we had a lot of fun together in the house organizing barbecues and pre-parties for instance. The conditions of the rooms were very good and all of us had our own bathrooms.

One thing to take into consideration if coming to Mexico for the spring term is that it could be very cold in January during the nights and as there was no heating in the houses we had to ask for a few extra blankets. This cold only lasted for a few weeks though.

## University and studies

Tecnologico de Monterrey offers a wide range of undergraduate, postgraduate and high school programs at campuses all over Mexico within the following subject areas: Built environment, Creative studies, Business, Social sciences, Engineering and Health. It is one of the top universities in Latin America and among the top 200 in the world (155th in the last QS ranking). I believe that this ranking is justified as the facilities of my campus were very good, the teachers were competent and the online resources were good for instance. From the middle of March the school closed down due to the COVID-19 situation and we had the classes through Zoom for the rest of the semester. I believe that the school handled the shift to online classes very well too.

I chose the Estado de México campus as it was the one that had the courses that I needed to take during my exchange. Apart from the buildings with classrooms the campus has restaurants, a library, a gym, a football pitch, a running track, an indoor swimming pool and tennis and basketball courts + some other nice areas where one could hang out. Because of all the things you could do at campus, we also spent a lot of time there.

The university offered a long list of extracurricular activities, including sports, arts and culture and most exchange students had around two activities that they were enrolled in. It is also possible to organize most of the activities on your own and we played football with friends at TEC many times. I didn't take any extracurricular activities as I was part of the university's football team during the semester.



*The stadium where many of the representative teams trained and played matches, including the football team that I played in. To the right you see a huge billboard that says: "Welcome to Borregos Territory."*

I had all of my classes between Mondays and Thursdays. This was something that many exchange students wanted to be able to travel during the weekends. Classes were scheduled between 8 and 22 from Monday to Friday, but the extracurricular activities were mostly earlier on in the day. I will use my own schedule as an example:

Monday: Class 10-11:30. Football 11:00-13:00. Class 16:00-19:00. Class 19:00-22:00.

Tuesday: Football 11:00-13:00. Class 19:00-22:00.

Wednesday: Football 11:00-13:00. Class 13:00-16:00. Class 16:00-19:00.

Thursday: Class 10-11:30. Football 11:00-13:00.

Friday: Football 11:00-13:00.

There were normally breaks of 15 minutes after 1.5 hours in the classes that lasted for 3 hours.

## **Courses**

All six courses lasted for the whole semester. Further, we had a lot of homework (more or less after every class) and partial exams in each course (3 partial exams per course in general). All of the teachers and classmates were very helpful and I always felt comfortable in the classes. I was the only exchange student in all of my classes (except one course that one French guy attended), which was great as it forced me to make new friends. Some teachers' Spanish speaking was easier to follow than others and some teachers' taught better than others. Very similar to KTH in other words. Although I had to do a lot of work at times, I believe that the homework and exams were a lot easier than they can be at KTH.

### AD2011 Innovación, mercados y desarrollo tecnológico (Innovation, Markets and Technological Development)

This course was about understanding the impact of innovations on markets, the process of innovation and how to identify opportunities on the market. This was a very interactive course and all of the different examinations were done in a group.

### CV2013 Hidrología (Hydrology)

A general course about hydrology. We also learnt a lot about statistics in this course. In the first homework of the course the teacher had us go into Mexico City (2 hours in total in an Uber) to gather information from the National Weather Service!

### IQ3009 Diseño de procesos químicos (Chemical Process Design)

As the name hints, it was about designing chemical processes. Choosing the appropriate type of reactor, chemical reactions and process conditions for instance.

### IQ3010 Fundamentos de ingeniería de microprocesos (Fundamentals of Engineering Microprocesses)

It was about developing and solving mathematical models on chemical microprocesses. There was a project part of the course where we were supposed to demonstrate a complete

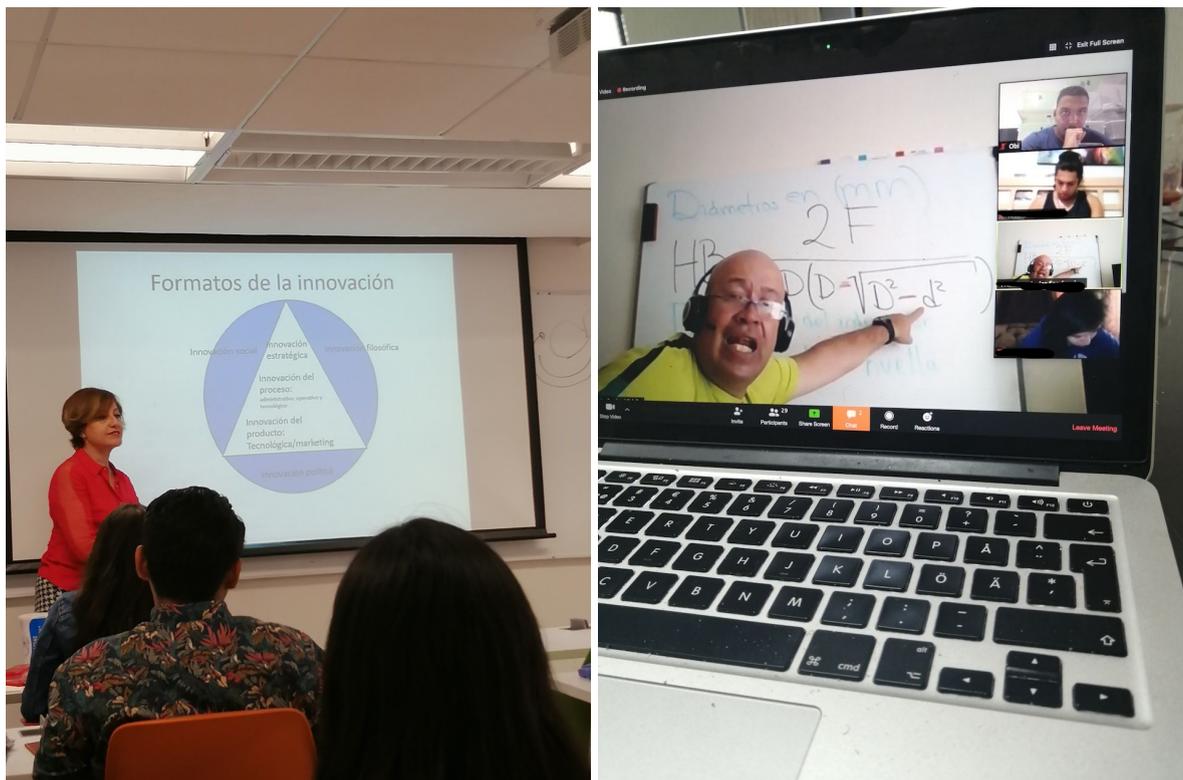
microprocess, but this was cancelled due to COVID-19 as it was supposed to be done in the lab.

### M2024 Procesos de manufactura (Manufacturing Processes)

Included many different manufacturing processes and different types of mechanical testing. This course had up to 5 smaller exams. I learnt a lot from this course as the teacher spoke very clearly and as he often repeated and emphasized things that were important. Perfect for someone like me, still trying to improve my Spanish!

### M2028 Tecnología de materiales (Materials Technology)

Had to do with how the structure of materials has an impact on the properties of materials among other things.



**To the left:** Class in *Innovación, mercados y desarrollo tecnológico*. **To the right:** Online class in *Procesos de Manufactura*. **Extra note:** These were my two favorite professors!

### **City and country**

I loved every minute of my time in Mexico! I remember when we were making a rough plan of all the places that we wanted to visit during our stay, and it just felt like an endless list of amazing places (more about the places that I actually visited in the next section). My experiences with the Mexican people were also great. I believe that they are very friendly, helpful and fun to be with. Mexicans were also very patient and supportive with us still trying to learn Spanish, which made me comfortable to use the language daily. My positive experience with Mexicans was both at the university and outside.

Campus Estado de México is located in Ciudad López Mateos (or Atizapán as it commonly known as) in the State of Mexico (Estado de México in Spanish), but it is only 30 km away from central Mexico City. The area in itself is not that interesting, but there are a few bars and restaurants in the area. There is also a commercial center with a Walmart around 10 minutes from the campus. Normally we would be busy studying and attending our extracurricular activities from Monday to Thursday before we travelled to other parts of the country or to Mexico City for different activities. Therefore, the fact that Atizapán itself wasn't that interesting was not a problem.

Mexico does not have the best reputation when it comes to security and the insecurity situation is considered to be one of the biggest problems in the country according to locals. Therefore we tried to be as security conscious as possible. Personally I felt safe during the whole duration of my stay, but there were two attempted robberies (without any weapons) involving two exchange students close to where I lived while they were walking alone after dark. As classes ended as late as at 22:00, we tried to go home from campus together as often as possible after those incidents.

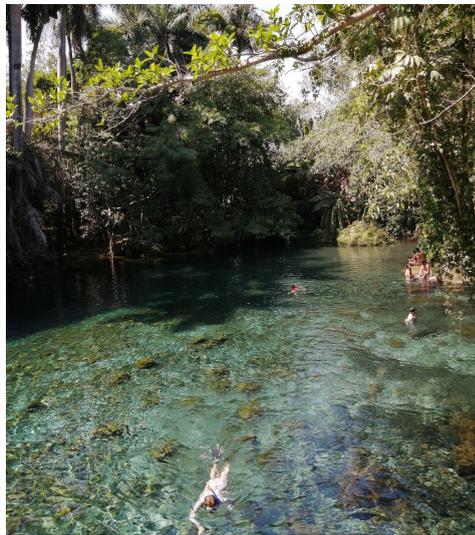
### **Leisure and social activities**

In general I spent a lot of time with the other exchange students + the Mexicans in Amikoo and the ones that lived in my house. I also made a few good friends on the football team. A normal week looked something like this:

- From Monday to Thursday most of us were busy with our courses and extracurricular activities.
- On Thursdays there were often parties at different clubs in Mexico City.
- On weekends we travelled as often as we could. During the 2.5 months before the COVID-19 lockdown in Mexico I travelled to Puebla, Tolantongo, Cuernavaca and Baja California Sur + a few visits to different parts of Mexico City.

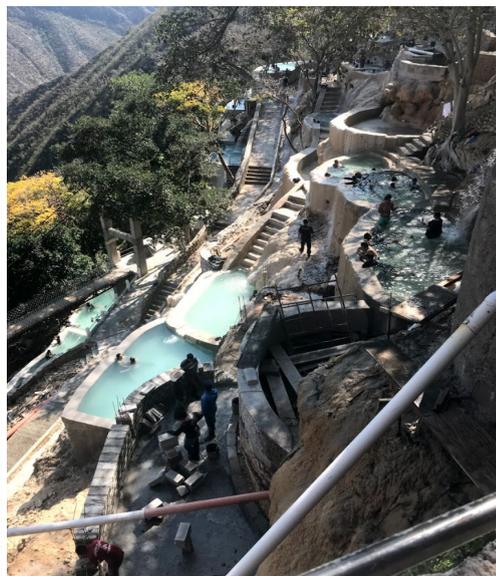
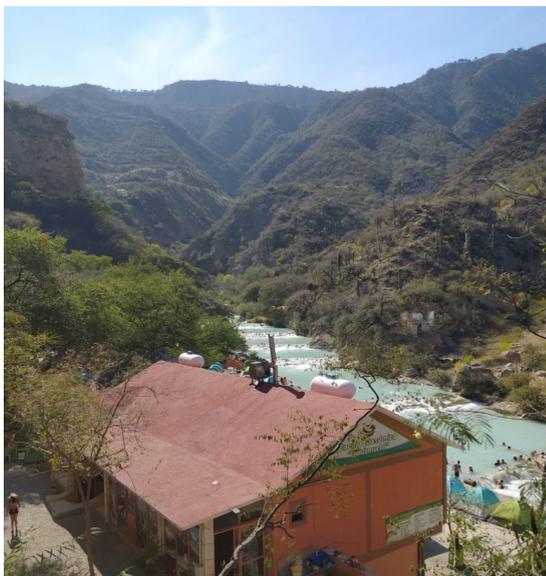
I like to divide the Mexican experience into four categories (and you will want to do some of all of them!):

**Cities:** Mexico has a lot of beautiful cities with a lot of history such as Mexico City, Puebla and Guadalajara. The city centers are very beautiful with churches, museums, markets and shopping. Most times there are also very interesting places outside the actual cities. For instance, during our trip to Cuernavaca, we visited the pueblo mágico (more about these below) Tepoztlán and the beautiful natural park Las Estacas. As our campus was close to Mexico City we naturally visited many different parts of the city. I specifically enjoyed visiting the Azteca Stadium (one of only two stadiums in the world that has hosted two FIFA World Cup finals) and the colorful canals of Xochimilco.



**To the left:** Cruz Azul vs Tigres at the historical Azteca Stadium. **To the right:** The beautiful natural park Las Estacas.

**Nature:** There are many beautiful nature areas, with waterfalls, mountains and pyramids for example. I would recommend you to google Tolantongo specifically, that place was ridiculously beautiful!



*Both pictures are from the truly beautiful Tolantongo.*

**Beaches:** The most famous ones are the ones around the Yucatán peninsula with Cancún and Playa del Carmen for instance, but there are a lot of other beautiful coastal areas around Mexico. Probably the best trip of the semester was when we took advantage of the week free of studies, when the school planned for the online classes, and went to Baja California Sur. There we partied and saw whales in Los Cabos, did a road trip to La Paz and visited beaches such as the Cerritos beach and the Balandra beach. That is an area that I would really recommend anyone to visit!



*Pictures from the Baja California Sur trip **Top photo:** Whale watching in Los Cabos. **Bottom left:** Playa Balandra, sometimes ranked as the most beautiful beach in Mexico. **Bottom right:** The beautiful Malecón board walk of La Paz.*

Pueblos mágicos: Mexico's Secretariat of Tourism, have listed 121 "magic towns" with a lot of history and that show Mexican identity and culture. The magic towns are all very different and I would encourage you to google "pueblos mágicos" and have a look at a few of them. They are truly amazing! I visited the magic towns San Pedro Cholula, Tepoztlán, Todos Santos, Teotihuacán and Tepetzotlan, but I wish that I would have had time to visit many more.



**To the left:** A pyramid and cactuses in Teotihuacán. **To the right:** A great experience playing football with kids in the pueblo mágico San Pedro Cholula (spot the volcano in the background!).



*The university football team, that I was a part of, before one of our games.*

## Final verdict

I travelled back two months before the semester ended as the COVID-19 situation led to most things being closed down in the later part of March. Even though this was very unfortunate, I believe that I really got the full Mexican experience during my time in the country. I had time to travel to many places, try out all kinds of foods (I liked *huarache* the most) and make a whole lot of new friends. And I improved my Spanish a lot! Being in Mexico really forced me to start speaking Spanish and I am stunned by how much I improved in just 2.5 months. Before I came to Mexico I felt nervous about having a conversation in Spanish and now I feel that I can discuss basically anything with anybody in Spanish. I am really happy that I chose to do my exchange in Mexico and would highly recommend it to anyone!



*Some of the great people I met during my time in Mexico! Here on our way to Tolantongo. I am the guy wearing a shirt of the best team in England :)*

P.s. Feel free to contact me by sending a message to [okolo@kth.se](mailto:okolo@kth.se) if you have any questions about doing your exchange in Mexico.