

# Studying Abroad in Puebla, Mexico

## A student-to-student Guide

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS TEXT WAS PREPARED BY FORMER PMCSP STUDENTS AND DOES NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE VIEWS OF THE PROGRAM'S ADMINISTRATION OR CONSORTIUM INSTITUTIONS.**

### Location

Puebla is a city of about three million people, though you might not notice it when you are there as a large part of the population lives on the outskirts of the city. It is situated in a large valley between four volcanoes: Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl, la Malinche and el Pico de Orizaba. Puebla was founded as a Spanish city and the colorful colonial facades downtown reflect this past. Today it is a bustling metropolitan center with a plethora of universities, many modern shopping malls, and a wealth of international corporations such as Volkswagen. Not far from the city of Puebla is its neighbor city, Cholula, which was an important religious center in pre-Hispanic times. Today Cholula is famous for its many churches as well as its ancient pyramid; and since it is also home to many university students Cholula is also known for its nightlife.

Transportation within the city of Puebla is easy. There are numerous bus routes which extend all over Puebla and Cholula. Although finding the right route to take you where you need to go can be a little scary and stressful, once you become familiar with the bus system, you'll appreciate the ease with which you can get almost anywhere. Taxis are another transportation option, though there is a certain protocol to follow to get one. Walking is a pleasant alternative; it is good exercise and it will help you get to know the city better.

The downtown area of Puebla has been named an UNESCO world heritage site. There are beautiful churches on just about every block and plenty of inexpensive markets. On the weekends, artisans and vendors set up two large markets in the city center, one in the Sapos district and another in Analco, that sell everything from antiques to plants to hamsters and tarantulas. The food downtown is also excellent; there are many traditional Mexican restaurants as well as American chains, Chinese, Italian, and other foreign food. There are a handful of movie theaters downtown and in the plazas and malls throughout the city, which show a mix of Mexican and US movies, as well as films from Latin America and all over the world. It is notably cheaper to see a movie in Puebla than in the U.S., so take advantage of that! Wednesdays are two-for-one days at the majority of theaters and student rates are often available daily. The Casa

*de Cultura* screens free independent films and hosts a variety of other cultural activities. Puebla also has a vibrant theatre and live music scene. Each week students receive a newsletter from PMCSP staff detailing upcoming cultural events.

The *Zócalo* is the geographic and cultural center of the city, and is used by everyone from families with small children to teenagers to grandparents. Needless to say it's a lively place where locals and tourists mingle. There are a good number of tourists in Puebla, but you will hardly find them outside of the downtown area. You will find fewer tourists in Puebla than in Oaxaca, Cuernavaca or Mexico City. In fact, the majority of young foreigners in the city are probably students like you, studying abroad at one of the city's many universities. The advantage to a lack of foreign tourists in the city is that the citizens of Puebla don't have "tourist fatigue," and are usually very interested to chat with foreigners about their home countries and their impressions of Puebla.

## Places to go

Here is a short list of restaurants, shops, and other locations that our students have enjoyed. These are just suggestions to get you to explore the great places in and around the city. It's possible that by the time you read this, some of these spots may have changed location or closed entirely, but you can still have fun looking for them!

### ***In and around the Centro:***

**All Day Café:** a comfy café with wireless internet during the day, a slightly pricey bar at night.

**Hakls:** a European bakery next to All Day Café.

**Zaranda Café:** located across the street from the Carolino, this café has wireless internet access and, unlike many other cafés in the center, is open late on Sunday nights.

**Churrería:** one of many churros shops that stays open late.

**Tacos Tony:** a chain of taco restaurants that is a step up from your average taquería.

**Mercado del Parián:** a touristy market just a block from the Carolino that sells Talavera, artesanías, and other souvenirs.

**Barrio del Artista:** next to the Parian, you can hear live music, get your portrait painted, meet local poets or just hang out at a café here.

**La Avenida Benito Juárez:** where many of Puebla's more "fresa" antros and bars are located. La Cantina de los Remedios and La Botica, two cantinas that students have liked, are located on Avenida Juarez. La Botica is also a great

place to watch soccer games, especially if you happen to be in Mexico during the World Cup or any other international tournament.

**Los Sapos:** a flea market during the day, a series of bars at night, where the waiters compete aggressively for your business.

**La Zanahoria:** a good vegetarian restaurant just a few blocks from the Carolino.

**The IPM (Puebla's Women Institute)** has a shop attached to it that sells handmade goods by indigenous women. Profits go to the Institute.

**El Paseo San Francisco:** On the other side of Boulevard 5 de Mayo from the Carolino, Paseo San Francisco is a brand-new mall that was built on top of an old leather tannery. It has a movie theatre, a convention center, and many shops and restaurants. Much of the original structure of the factory has been preserved or rebuilt, and there is a very pleasant park in the back that is a great spot for a picnic.

**Arena Puebla:** Every Monday night this arena hosts lucha libre, Mexican wrestling matches, which are attended by everyone from grandparents to infants. Fans go for the wrestling as well as the opportunity to yell *groserías* at the athletes and the other fans, and to purchase wrestling masks, capes, and other memorabilia.

#### ***Outside the Center and beyond:***

**Los Fuertes:** on a hill overlooking the city center, the fort at Los Fuertes was the spot where the battle of 5 de mayo was fought. Today it has several excellent museums, an IMAX theatre, a planetarium, and great views of the city and the volcanoes.

**Cholula:** known for a busy nightlife that caters to university students, the bars and clubs in Cholula are always changing. 'El Tigre' and 'Pulque para dos' have been perennial favorites.

**Los Balnearios** (public swimming parks) de Cholula y Atlixco are numerous and cheaper than water parks in the US. It is usually warm enough to go swimming from mid-October to mid-May. Atlixco, because it has a different elevation than the city of Puebla, is usually warmer than Puebla at any given time of year.

**Agua Azul Balneario** in the Agua Azul neighborhood in Puebla. The water smells like sulfur but it's always warm.

**Parados**, a taco stand in the Agua Azul neighborhood. Many a late night order of "tacos arabes" or "gringas" has been consumed here.

## University

The Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla consists of two campuses, *CU (Ciudad Universitaria)* and *Centro*. The *Centro* campus consists of beautiful, historic buildings around the *zócalo* and downtown area. The *CU* is a large modern campus about a 20-30 minute bus ride from the *Centro*. There the buildings are grouped together by concentration or *facultad*. There is a movement to move all classes to the *CU* campus, and perhaps in the future that will be the case. But for now, some students take classes in the center, some spend all their time at *CU*, and some travel back and forth between the two campuses.

## Money

You will receive money in pesos from the Resident Director when you arrive in the airport in Mexico City, so it is only necessary to bring the cash you need during your travels to Mexico. You can, of course, bring more cash if you like. It is not necessary to change the currency before you leave the U.S., though most U.S. banks will do it if you are more comfortable that way.

Once you arrive in Mexico City, you can change money at the airport. Most hotels in the D.F. will also change currency. There are also several Casas de Cambio within walking distance from the hotel. It may be a better idea to wait until after you have arrived at the hotel, so that you will feel more relaxed and able to follow what is happening. The airport is very busy and stressful.

Most students find that the easiest way to deal with money in Mexico is to bring an ATM card and withdraw money from a U.S. bank account as needed. Many U.S. banks charge a large fee to withdraw money in Mexico (up to 10 dollars for each transaction). The only bank we know of that does not charge is **Bank of America**. Account holders can withdraw money at any **Santander Serfin** ATM for absolutely no charge. If you would like to keep your current bank it is wisest to make withdrawals of large amounts of cash at once and keep the money in a safe place. Paying 10 dollars every time you want take out 20 dollars will make your money go much faster than you'd probably like.

## Safety

Puebla is a relatively safe city, but as with any city there are precautions every student should take.

- Never keep your phone, wallet, camera, or other valuables in a pocket or bag where they could easily fall out.
- Always carry your camera, iPod, computer, etc, in a case or purse, not out in the open where anyone could see and grab them. Even if you are at a restaurant or bar, do not put your camera or phone on the table.

- Always go to the ATM during the day. If you withdraw large amounts of money, put them in a safe place until you get home. Don't count your money in the street.
- When you arrive in Puebla, get the phone numbers of different taxi companies that you can call at night instead of taking a taxi from the street.
- Take care of yourself and your friends when out at night, especially if you are drinking. Don't let your drink out of your sight and don't accept a drink if you did not see the bartender or waiter serve it.

## Travel

Traveling within Mexico is easy and relatively inexpensive. There are many opportunities to travel. The program orientation takes place in Mexico D.F. (*Distrito Federal*) and at the beginning of the semester there is a daytrip to archeological ruins close to Puebla. There are also two longer excursions each semester. In past years PMCSP has gone to Cuetzalan and Oaxaca or Michoacán in the fall semester, and Veracruz and Guanajuato in the spring semester.

Aside from official PMCSP excursions, students take advantage of holidays and other days off from school to travel. Popular destinations for past students have been Acapulco, Taxco, Veracruz, Yucatan, Chiapas and the beaches of Oaxaca. Two recommended guidebooks are *Lonely Planet* and *Let's Go*. Students may also have the opportunity to attend conferences promoted by the departments in which they take classes, in locations such as Tabasco, Chiapas and Mexico City.

If you are planning a trip, a helpful website is [www.ticketbus.com.mx](http://www.ticketbus.com.mx) because it has bus schedules and prices for most locations in southern Mexico. If you're headed north, you'll have to check out other websites for bus lines. Another helpful bus website is [http://www.differentworld.com/mexico/common/pages/bus\\_info.htm](http://www.differentworld.com/mexico/common/pages/bus_info.htm). Here you will find links for many bus lines that operate throughout Mexico, including the north of the country.

If you want to buy tickets ahead of time, you can go to the CAPU (Central bus station) or a local *Ticketbus* location. The CAPU has ticket stands for all of the bus lines that it serves. *Ticketbus* offices sell tickets for all the *Ticketbus* lines (ADO, OCC, AU etc.) and also a lot of tickets for other bus lines not listed on the website. The offices are scattered throughout the city. If you live near Los Fuertes, CAPU is closer. If you live in or near Prados Agua Azul, there is a *Ticketbus* right around the corner on 11 Sur in between 55 and 57 Poniente. There is also a *Ticketbus* machine inside the MultiPack across the street from the Carolino, but it is like an ATM machine and not staffed by a real person. You can find other branches by looking in your host family's phone book or on the *Ticketbus* website.

## Home Life

Because each family and home is different and all students are unique, every student will have a different experience of their home stay in Puebla. The program administration works hard to match students with compatible families. However, it is never possible to predict how a student and host family will interact before they have met. If your living situation doesn't work out, you can always request a move. Students move for all sorts of reasons, and many students who stay the whole year change houses at the beginning of their second semester for the sake of trying something different.

Most of the host families have been housing international students for years and know how to speak with you, what to expect from you, and best of all how to cook for you! Once you figure out your class schedule, you can coordinate afternoon meals with your host mother. It is also a good idea to accompany your host family to the supermarket at the beginning of the semester so you can show them exactly what you like and don't like to eat.

Each family is different. The children of your host parents may live at home or they may have kids of their own. Some students have their own bathroom and room sizes vary. Many families have housekeepers. All houses have Internet access. In the past, the majority of students have lived within walking distance of each other.

An obvious advantage to living with a family is the chance to practice your Spanish. Meals are an opportune time to make conversation and, if you have questions, your host family can usually answer them for you. Young people in the house are a great resource for learning about culture, slang, and the *poblano* social scene. Watching Mexican television can also expand your knowledge of Mexican culture and language.

## Language and Academics

The use of Spanish is highly encouraged from the first day of the program to the last. Part of your goal in studying abroad, after all, should be to gain fluency in a foreign language. It will be tempting to speak to other program students in English, but it can give a bad impression and alienate you from Mexican students. The program completely discourages any use of English in class. Speaking Spanish whenever possible lets your Mexican classmates and professors know that you are open to making friends and interested in learning about Mexican life and culture.

Professors at the BUAP are generally accommodating to American students and usually make themselves available for extra help or additional explanation of class assignments. Classes vary in difficulty, size, and interest level. At the beginning of the semester, students get advice from Mexican students employed by the program, read past student evaluations, and have access to some course descriptions to help in course selection. Students usually "shop"

multiple classes in the first few weeks before narrowing their selection down to four courses.

The first two weeks of class are the most difficult as you adjust to the university system and the speed and accent of the professors and students. These first weeks can be very frustrating for American students who are used to strict schedules and meticulous organization. The BUAP does not have strict rules about professor attendance and you may find that your classes do not always meet when they should. Many students and professors do not attend the first week of classes due to travel issues and other matters. It is important to go the first week, however, as it will give you the opportunity to meet other students who are hanging around waiting for classes.

You will also find that some of your classmates seem to skip a lot of classes. There are various reasons for this, including work and family obligations and the fact that it is not uncommon for a student to take more than four years to finish his or her undergraduate degree. For PMCSP students, however, good attendance is key. In many cases, a large part of students' final grade is based on participation and attendance.

The key to surviving the adjustment to the academic system is learning to be flexible— remind yourself that you are immersed in a different culture and that things are done differently. Most students learn to appreciate the differences and take some of what they learn home with them.

*Enjoy your time in Puebla!*