

Alumni Advice for English Teaching Assistants to Mexico

PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE TO HOST COUNTRY

Host Institution Contact

Your tutor should be in contact with you before you arrive in Mexico. If not, contact Valerie at the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) at vcardenas@sep.gob.mx. She is a great contact within the department and excellent about responding to emails quickly.

Baggage

Overweight baggage carries a charge of \$40 to \$60 US. Your transport from Mexico City to your host city will be pre-arranged, by either bus or airplane. I was one of a few people to fly out. Because my jet was regional, it had very limited cargo capacity and I was charged for overweight luggage.

Startin' Off Money

Bring enough money for at least two weeks of living in Mexico, which should be about 4,000 pesos (\$350) assuming you have to pay a month of rent. Carrying cash is generally safe and more a matter of personal preference. Just be careful when physically withdrawing money from an ATM that no one is going to follow you, etc.

Language Prep

From my experience, prepare by studying the subjunctive tense, reviewing verbs that are reflexive or use direct objects, looking at some slang, and finding vocabulary related to using transportation, understanding directions, and being in a university or other school setting.

ARRIVAL IN COUNTRY

I would recommend attempting to coordinate your trip from the airport to the hotel with other grantees. In fact many of the Mexico grantees arrived to the Mexico City airport at about the same time, so we joined together to split a large van taxi in order to stay together, accommodate our luggage, and lower the price.

Travel to the host institution is pre-arranged by COMEXUS and the host institution. You will be provided with your ticket or information about your individual travel plan when you arrive.

HOUSING

Arrange temporary housing in advance with your tutor. Try to keep the commitment short-term: I went straight from the airport to the house where I would stay for the next month, which was convenient, but you may want to move out sooner than you expect.

Housing is affordable by US standards, but can vary in price. Specifically, Mexico City (DF) is much more expensive than other markets. The range of what we paid is 1,400 to 4,500 pesos monthly, obviously with differences in location, quality, and furnishings provided.

Make sure that the person renting the apartment or house 1) is renting at a fair price and 2) is the actual owner or manager of the property.

Think about what living situation you want:

- What are fair market prices?
- Do you want to live alone, with a family, with university students?
- Downtown or further afield?
- What neighborhoods are good, which ones should be avoided?

Finding an apartment is difficult – there is generally no centralized infrastructure with which to quickly compare a lot of options. Mostly, you have to do a lot of legwork: scrounging around the university for fliers, cruising neighborhoods for “Se Renta” posters, and talking to Mexican friends/acquaintances/colleagues.

Renting in Mexico can be a very flexible, casual setup where the lease is not strict in terms of minimum stay and the rent may be paid in advance, or even a little late, etc. Otherwise the month-by-month process is very similar to the US. Negotiation on price, length of lease, etc is highly encouraged as long as you know the market.

DAILY LIFE

Shopping

Prices are generally much cheaper than in the US, except for electronics. The quality of clothes for sale can be a problem, and the variety can be limited, and since many clothes are imported, Levi's and other foreign brands are significantly more expensive.

Laundry

You have a few options: you can hand wash it, use a washing machine, go to a laundromat, or use a lavandería. Private washing machines and laundromats are rare, so lavanderías are a common but rather expensive option. You take your clothes over, they weigh them, you pay by kilo, then come back a few days later. Folding is usually free, ironing costs extra.

Food

Food is inexpensive, generally. There are all levels of restaurants, from late-night street stands to basic open-air taco places to fine restaurants. To shop for your own groceries, you might go to the supermarket “super,” and a produce stand or market as well. More regional foods like mangoes, guavas, pineapples, etc. are usually cheap and fresh. Make sure to wash everything before eating it.

Cost of Living

I would recommend that you never reveal how much money you get from the grant to your colleagues or grantees from other countries (like England or France). You will have enough money to live well in Mexico.

Other Fulbrighters

Getting to know other Fulbrighters, especially ETAs, was an absolute blast. We often met up at different points in the grant in different cities, sometimes in big groups, sometimes with one Fulbrighter hosting another. The group serves as a great sounding board for ideas, resources, solutions to problems, and generally a place where you can discuss cultural differences with people who are going through the same things.

Work Colleagues

This can vary, but generally fellow English teachers are a great resource for navigating the school and for being and introducing new friends.

Transportation

The most common mode of transportation is bus. Buses are cheap (6 pesos for a ride) and generally pass through nearly all parts of the city. Taxis are another option. Typically, all taxis within one city will be the same make and model, with the same paint job. Licensed taxis will share either a license plate prefix or a certain sticker displayed on the windows. Depending on the location, they have meters, or you may have to ask the price to get to your destination. A typical taxi ride is 20 to 40 pesos, or \$3.50. Taxis can safely be hailed from the street in most places, but it is always a good idea to find out the phone numbers for one or two taxi companies that can dispatch cars on demand for late nights or trips to the airport or bus station.

Bus companies are the best way to travel around Mexico. They are cheaper than flying, and the trips, while long, are comfortable and can actually be relaxing. ETN is the most luxurious, Primera Plus the basic, common option, and ADO the only option for the south. They all have air conditioning, show movies, and include small snacks. We don't have this in the US, so take advantage. And use ETN at least once for the full recline. For long journeys, especially into and out of the Yucatan peninsula or extreme south, where roads are windy and bus trips begin to be measured in days, consider flying.

The final option for getting around is a car. The most important part of finding a car in Mexico is first finding a dealer that you can trust, usually via the recommendation of a friend. An honest dealer won't be selling a car with falsified mileage, and can walk you through the process. Transferring money is the next challenge. It must be done digitally, without cash. If you use cash, there is a risk that you will be robbed on your way to make the purchase. The process requires that you know your bank account information and all of the bank account information of the transferee.

MONEY AND BANKING

The Peso is the currency of Mexico. Fulbrighters are paid jointly by COMEXUS (Fulbright commission) and SEP (the Mexican government). They set up a Bancomer checking account and debit card for you and make more or less monthly payments automatically after you open the account by depositing a check at a branch. You can also use cash or personal debit and credit cards to pay for your expenses. However, using US-based cards will result in small foreign transaction fees that add up over time. It is best to use them for bigger purchases.

There are many service branches and ATMs. Look for Bancomer, which is where your account will most likely be housed. Other banks' ATMs will charge a small fee. You can also change money at a *Casa de cambio*. You will lose a little in changing the money, but it is typically not significant. The exchange rate is around 11 to 12 pesos per dollar.

(Plan ahead for the long winter break the Mexican government's accounting process means you will not be paid. You'll want to travel then, and it won't be any fun to do so without any money)

INTERNET/COMPUTERS

Universities have various degrees of internet connectivity. Internet cafes are available, and Starbucks is a reliable connection. There are also various service providers that offer different plans, usually with a minimum term of about 6 months. They will come to your house or apartment to install the internet (much like Comcast or Cox in the US). The setup fee should be about 150-300 pesos for the modem etc. It may not work like it should right away, but be persistent and ask them to come fix it if there is a problem. Occasional internet and even power outages occur.

Bring electronics that you will use. Electronics are one of the few categories of items that are generally more expensive in Mexico than in the US. Most electronics can be bought quite easily, and the price difference is usually not bad.

HOST COUNTRY LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

COMEXUS should be in contact with you prior to your arrival to Mexico. However, visa issues do arise and people arrive without the specific non-immigrant card that they require. If that happens, COMEXUS will help you figure out a solution. In the worst case scenario, you have 180 days in the country as a tourist, which can be reset after setting one foot in another country (i.e. going to the US or Guatemala for a quick trip mid-year).

You will hear this a lot: "Your signature on Form X needs to be the exact same as the signature you have on your passport." Study and practice that signature.

Most of the hassle of dealing with the immigration office comes from missing one piece of the puzzle. Bring everything! Bring your passport and all documents you receive during the flight over/immigration processing in the airport. Make lots of copies of all relevant forms during the orientation week. When taking pictures, make sure that you are not wearing anything, not smiling, and have your ears showing – front and profile. Have many miniature photos made, and save extras.

Bring your driver's license to use as your ID in Mexico for getting into bars, driving cars, etc.

HEALTH AND HEALTH INSURANCE

Bring your test results from the medical exam you completed for Fulbright. My impression is that the ECA insurance is not always adequate. Inquire about what options there are for seeing doctors through your university or other resources via friends.

TRAVEL INSIDE/OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY

Traveling in a few, easy steps:

Decide where you want to go. Get in touch with the Fulbrighter there, if applicable. Look up the bus schedule on ticketbus.com.mx or primeraplus.com.mx or etn.com.mx. Arrive at the bus station at least 5 minutes before the scheduled departure.

PREPARATION FOR RETURN TRAVEL

Look at airline guidelines for oversize luggage. An option for avoiding oversized luggage fees is to can send stuff home with people who visit from the US, even people who are visiting another Fulbrighter.

Shipping takes a long time. My mom sent me an Easter package a week before Easter, then visited me three weeks after Easter. She was at my house when they delivered the slip notifying me that I had a package. Maybe advise parents or friends that shipping takes a while before they send time-sensitive packages.