

Living in Mexico City: Exploring Mexican culture through a foreigner's eyes

Vivir en la Ciudad de México: Explorar la cultura mexicana a través de los ojos de un extranjero

Asst. Prof. Teerapong Rattananukrom, MD
Division of Dermatology, Faculty of Medicine, Ramathibodi Hospital, Mahidol University

My time in Mexico City was an experience I will cherish for a lifetime. As a foreigner, I had heard stories about the city's vibrant culture, rich history, and endless energy, but nothing could have prepared me for

the warmth and hospitality of the Mexican people. From the moment I arrived, I felt embraced by a community that turned a potentially overwhelming experience into a journey of belonging and connection.



A warm welcome: breaking the ice in a foreign land

I remember the initial feeling of anxiety as I set foot in Mexico City. The sprawling metropolis, with its vast population and chaotic energy, could have been intimidating. Yet, the people I met made it feel manageable from the very start. One of the first things I noticed was the warmth of the Mexican greeting: a light kiss on the cheek, known as the beso. This simple gesture broke the ice and instantly made me feel welcomed and included. Despite my limited Spanish, the people were patient and generous, always willing to help me navigate the city and immerse myself in their culture.

Without the ability to speak the language fluently, I was challenged to interact in new ways. This limitation turned into an opportunity to deeply connect with the locals, as I had to rely on their kindness and guidance. Every interaction, from ordering food to asking for directions, became a lesson in cultural exchange, showing me just how important relationships are in Mexico.

Discovering the heart of Mexico: food and friendship

One of the first and most profound ways I experienced Mexican culture was through its food. My initial taste of tacos al pastor: tender pork topped with pineapple, cilantro, and onions, was a revelation. This was just the beginning of my journey through Mexico's culinary land-

CORRESPONDENCIA

Teerapong Rattananukrom ■ teerponggrattananukrom@gmail.com ■ Ph: 66 2201 1141 Fax: 66 2201 1211
270 Rama VI Road, Rajthevi, Bangkok, Thailand 10400

scape. From mole and tamales to pozole and chilaquiles, every meal was a reflection of the country's rich history, with indigenous roots blending seamlessly with Spanish influences.

But the food was only half of the experience. What made each meal special was the sense of community that came with it. My colleagues at the Dr. Manuel Gea González Hospital, particularly the dermatology residents and my friends from the mycological service, introduced me to the best local eateries and street food stalls. They didn't just show me where to eat: they welcomed me into their world, inviting me to family gatherings, neighborhood celebrations, and even traditional cooking sessions. These shared meals helped me feel like I was not just a visitor but a part of the community.

Through these culinary adventures, I learned more than just the names of dishes. I discovered how deeply ingrained kindness is in Mexican culture. Each person I met was eager to share the story behind the food, explaining its cultural significance and the traditions associated with it. Mexican cuisine is more than sustenance: it's a reflection of the people's spirit, their love for life, and their pride in their heritage.

Navigating the vibrancy of daily life in Mexico City

While Mexico City is one of the largest cities in the world, with a population that can seem overwhelming, the kindness of its people made it feel intimate. Whether I was lost in the maze of streets or unsure about how to use the metro system, there was always someone willing to offer assistance. Their willingness to help, often going out of their way to ensure I found what I was looking for, showed me just how central generosity is to the Mexican way of life.

However, like any country, Mexico has areas that can be dangerous. While I wouldn't claim that Mexico City is completely safe, traveling with awareness and in the company of local Mexican friends can make the experience much safer. It's important to remain vigilant and avoid placing yourself in potentially risky situations. By exercising caution and making informed choices, it is possible to enjoy the vibrant culture and beauty of Mexico City while minimizing unnecessary risks.

I was struck by how much respect and relationships matter in Mexican society. People genuinely care about building connections, whether it's through a simple exchange at a market or a deep conversation over dinner. This culture of respect and warmth permeated every aspect of my daily life, making Mexico City feel like a home away from home.

Exploring Mexico's rich traditions and cultural heritage

While the kindness of the people made day-to-day life enjoyable, it was the cultural richness of Mexico City that truly made my stay special. I had the opportunity to attend festivals, visit historical landmarks, and dive into the city's vibrant art scene. From the colorful streets of Coyoacán to the grand architecture of the Zócalo, Mexico City is a city that wears its history on its sleeve.

One of the most memorable experiences during my time in Mexico was a visit to Teotihuacan, the ancient city known for its towering pyramids. But instead of simply walking the ruins, I had the incredible opportunity to see Teotihuacan from a hot air balloon. As the balloon ascended early in the morning, the ancient city unfolded below me, its pyramids and streets bathed in the golden light of the rising sun. Floating silently above this historical marvel, I was able to fully appreciate the grandeur and symmetry of the city's layout, which aligned with celestial bodies, showcasing the advanced knowledge of its builders.

This balloon ride was not just a thrilling experience: it was a journey through time, offering a unique perspective on the ancient civilization that once thrived there. For any traveler, seeing Teotihuacan from above is an unforgettable experience that blends history, culture, and the beauty of Mexico's landscape.

Hospital life and the study of medical mycology

Beyond the cultural exploration, my primary purpose in Mexico City was academic. I had the privilege of studying medical mycology under doctor Roberto Arenas, a renowned expert in dermatology and fungal infections. The hands-on experience I gained in diagnosing and treating fungal infections was invaluable, especially as I learned advanced laboratory techniques like PCR and DNA sequencing, which are crucial for identifying fungal pathogens. These tools not only deepened my understanding of medical mycology but also expanded my ability to provide better care for my patients back home.

Working closely with doctor Arenas was a transformative experience. He was more than a mentor: he was a guide in both academic and personal growth. He shared not only his vast knowledge of mycology but also life lessons about purpose, work, and giving back to society. Through him, I had the opportunity to join the Dr. Roberto Arenas Foundation, where we provided medical care to underprivileged communities in Acapulco, Puebla and Chiapas. These experiences reinforced the importance of using our skills to help those in need and reminded me of the value of compassion in both medicine and life.

A farewell full of warmth

As my time in Mexico City came to an end, I found myself reflecting on the sense of belonging that had grown over those three months. What began as an adventure in an unfamiliar city soon transformed into a journey of connection and friendship. I arrived as a stranger, but I left feeling like a part of the community, thanks to the warmth and kindness of the people I encountered.

Some of my fondest memories come from evenings spent in Xochimilco, where friends and I would sing and dance under the stars, celebrating life with laughter and joy. I'll never forget my first taste of tequila, enhanced with lemon and salt, or the smooth mezcal that followed. "Salud", we'd say, instead of the typical "cheers", a small but meaningful reflection of Mexican culture. I even found a new favorite drink: beer with clamato called "micheladas", a surprising but delightful mix.

In the end, it wasn't just the landmarks, the food, or the festivals that made my time in Mexico City so special: it

was the people. The friendships I made, the traditions I was invited to experience, and the generosity I encountered at every turn made my stay truly unforgettable. The people of Mexico City don't just open their homes to visitors: they open their hearts. I left with a heart full of gratitude and a sense of belonging to a city that welcomed me with open arms.

Last but not least, living in Mexico City was more than just an opportunity to explore a new country: it was a transformative experience that enriched my life in countless ways. From the warmth of the people to the depth of the culture, every moment was filled with learning, connection, and discovery. Whether through my studies in medical mycology or my exploration of Mexican traditions, I came away with a deeper understanding of the world and a renewed sense of purpose. Mexico City, with its boundless energy and unwavering kindness, will always hold a special place in my heart.