



# Studying in Mexico as a Heritage Student

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## About the author

My name is Maria, and I am in the class of 2020 at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. I study Biology and Spanish in the honors program at Swarthmore. I am most recently from Oregon but have lived all over the United States. I enjoy hiking and travelling.

## What is a heritage student?

Heritage students, or heritage seekers, are students that choose to travel to and study in a country with which they have cultural or ethnic ties. Students may have been born in this country or their families may have originated there, but the point is often for students to further understand or reconnect with their own cultural or ethnic identity.

## Why Mexico?

For my entire life that I have been conscious of it, I have struggled with connecting to my ethnic identity. From feelings of embarrassment to plagues of guilt, my relationship with being Mexican-American has been one full of confusion and of unspoken questions. My connection to this identity was cultivated by my *abuela* and by the house of my great-aunt Crucita—cluttered and smelling of cigarette smoke, the Virgin of Guadalupe towering in the corner and Jesus Christ gazing at me from the walls.

I did not grow up speaking Spanish, though it was my mother's first language. When I started high school, I almost decided to take French classes instead of Spanish. My mother cried when I told her, begging me that Spanish was my identity, but I failed to understand what that meant. Spanish had always been this alien concept connected to me through my mother, but that was somehow never fully passed onto me.

I decided to study in Mexico because I wanted to understand the voices that had been muted in my family 50 years ago and the silently-constructed walls into which I was born. For many years, I have not felt comfortable in my own skin—insufficiently Latina, unappreciative of the hardships and strength of my family. I yearned to reconnect with this identity that was written on my skin but that did not flow freely from my mouth. I wanted to show my *abuela* all that she meant to me, all that I felt that I had failed to show during my youth. I hoped to find in Mexico the answers to some of my unspoken questions and the relief of finally understanding who I was.

## Fluid Identities

Mexico, like so many predominantly non-white, previously-colonized countries, has a long history of unrecognized racism. Since colonization by Spain in the XVI century, the large majority of the population has been of mixed indigenous and Spanish (white European) decent. Lighter skin connoted a higher proportion of Spanish blood and therefore a higher ranking in society. After five centuries, the large majority of Mexican residents are, to some degree, of mixed Spanish and indigenous decent, and therefore racial discrimination is not based on ethnicity but rather each individual's perceived degree of indigenous

blood. Those seen as more indigenous face discrimination and persecution. For heritage students, this racial perception is something of which to be acutely aware. The ways in which we identify ourselves may not be the same as how we are seen in Mexico. We may face more discrimination in the country with which we share ethnic ties than we have faced in the United States.

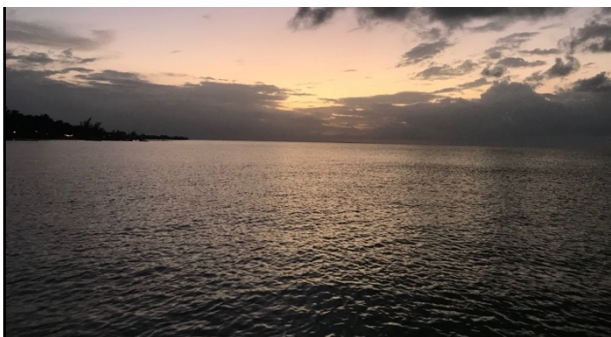
Heritage students should also consider the manner in which language plays a role in their identities. I sometimes am unnecessarily hard on myself for not being perfectly fluent in Spanish because I feel as though it is unfair for me to claim being Latina if I do not speak the language flawlessly. This internal pressure on myself increased while in Mexico because I was challenging the basis of my identity every day and found that I was treating myself unfairly when it came to grammatical errors in Spanish. Of course I would make mistakes- I make mistakes in English all the time, and I've been speaking that for 21 years. What I needed to remind myself that it was not my fault, nor was it my mother's, that I did not grow up speaking Spanish. I cannot change the past, and what matters is that I am trying now.



### **Growth and Reflection**

The IFSA program in Mérida encourages self-reflection at all points throughout the program. The directors have students keep a journal to track their thoughts and emotions as they progress through the semester. This resource is incredibly valuable as it pushes students to consider the spaces they occupy and the roles they play in Mexican society. Each of us has a unique perspective to share, but it is also important to recognize the voices of others—especially those that are silent. Though I began to identify more and more as Latina during my time in Mexico, I also learned more about what my white cultural upbringing meant in the context of living there. Though we may share ethnic and cultural ties with a certain location, we are still entering Mexican society from a vastly different perspective. The places from which we come determine, at least in part, the level of privilege we hold relative to one another. For me, one of the most important

experiences for self-reflection of this aspect came from our time in the Mayan villages. I hope that future students get to participate in this experience as well. This is not a service trip but rather an opportunity to learn about and connect to the sides of Mexico that are not urban, westernized, and Spanish-speaking. I would encourage future students to prepare themselves for this trip by reframing their expectations to ones based around listening and asking questions rather than filling a possibly uncomfortable silence. Sometimes the occasions in which we learn the most about ourselves and our effects on others are when our ears are more open than our mouths. If you are confused, uncomfortable, uncertain, stressed, write it down. If you find clarity or comfort, write it down. The IFSA program offers a unique opportunity to reflect on who you are and on who you would like to be.



### Upon returning

Now that I am back in the United States, I feel more comfortable living in my own skin and defining my own identity. I am Latina. I am Mexican-American. My name comes from my strong great-grandmother who crossed the border, and I am the only one that may determine how I claim it. Traveling to Mexico has allowed me to realize this and to recover a powerful connection with my mother's family. It has also shown me the great power that we have as individuals to reflect on the spaces that we occupy in society and on the impacts that we have on those around us. We are individuals, but we inhabit one community. It is our job to listen to both what is and is not spoken.



It is also important to remember that these experiences are different for every individual. Though each of us desires to understand ourselves and where we come from to a greater degree, our lived experiences of our identities differ greatly. Cultural and ethnic identities are often associated with the color of our skin, whether we speak our country's native language, or the culture with which we were raised. But we know that identities are not necessarily so polarized. There is no right or wrong answer to how we cope with confronting our identities. What we gain from these experiences is personal and unique and will help shape us into who we hope to become.



### Final Advice

Though Mexico may bring you entirely new perspectives to who you are as an individual, you are never alone. The IFSA staff is always willing to talk or to simply listen. Remember that any emotional turmoil you may experience as a heritage student or person of color is from a legitimate place. We, as people of mixed decent, must define for ourselves who we are—our identities are not simple to determine from any angle. Nor should they be. We represent bridges between cultures, but being a bridge is not always easy. By deciding to study abroad in Mexico, you have already made a huge display of the strength that you contain. ¡Felicidades, y buena suerte en México!

