



# Focus On MEXICO School Program

*“My year in Mexico was all about learning and growing, friendship and family. Things were different from home, but my host family was very welcoming, and I became an integral part of their family and still am. My year in Mexico shaped the rest of my life in more ways than one, and I am extremely grateful and glad to have spent my year in Mexico, which I now consider a second home for me.”*

*Emily González, participant from Barbados, 1989-1990*

Mexico encompasses deserts and jungles, mountains and beaches, volcanoes and ancient Aztec pyramids. The country is a breeding ground for whales, sea turtles and millions of monarch butterflies. And though many of its rural towns still feel 19th-century, Mexico is also one of the world's fastest-growing industrial economies. In big cities, skyscrapers rise next to low colonial churches that still have food and crafts markets arrayed on their front plazas. Yet no matter which natural setting or economic niche Mexicans occupy in this rich national smorgasbord, they are typically relaxed, casual and always ready to hang with family and friends.

## ***AFS & Your Experience***

AFS Mexico has been in existence since 1976. AFS volunteers in 25 chapters across the country work hard year-round to provide you with the most satisfying intercultural experience possible. During the year, AFS Mexico hosts more than 100 students from as many as 20 countries. AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers.

Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have the support you need during your sojourn abroad.

## ***Landing in Mexico***

You will arrive in Mexico City International Airport in the capital of Mexico. Once the plane lands and you collect your baggage, you and your fellow AFSers will pass through customs and be met by AFS Mexico staff and volunteers.

## ***Arrival Orientation***

After you have spent many long and tiring hours on the plane, a two-day arrival orientation run by AFS Mexico staff and volunteers at a private retreat in Mexico City will give you a chance to relax, get to know the other AFSers in the program and learn about

AFS in Mexico and Mexican culture. After the orientation, you will travel by bus or plane, accompanied by a chaperone, to meet your host family.

## ***Living in Mexico***

### **Lifestyle and Family Living**

Mexicans are warm and hospitable people. The family is the strongest institution in the society. A household may include aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. Generally, the wife has the responsibility of supervising the children and managing the household; the husband usually works outside the home. The family is the center of social activity; there will likely be many family outings to museums, parks, etc. Mexican families are very affectionate and protective of children. Teenagers are expected to show respect for their parents and elders and to let them know when they are going out, where, with whom and when they will be home. Teenagers also accept guidance from their family regarding their activities and friends.

Mexican host families, like AFS host families worldwide, are not paid. They open their homes to students in order to share their community and culture as well as to enrich their own family lives.

Most AFSers are placed in urban areas with middle-class families.

### **Dress and Appearance**

Like teenagers everywhere, Mexican teenagers tend to dress casually, so bring jeans, T-shirts, shorts, etc. You should also have one or two nice outfits (dress shirts and ties for boys, dresses or skirts and blouses for girls) for special occasions. Bring warm clothing, including a raincoat and jacket for travel to the mountains.

In general, lightweight clothing is suitable for places such as Monterrey and Colima because these regions tend to be hot in the summer. In Mexico City, Oaxaca or Guadalajara mid-weight clothes are suitable for year-round wear.

### **Diet and Meals**

Staple foods include corn, beans and *chiles*. They are combined with spices, vegetables, meats or fish in daily meals. It is difficult to place vegetarians in Mexico.

It is customary for the whole family to eat the same foods at meals together; it is considered inappropriate for individuals to request special foods or to prepare separate food for themselves.

### **School**

School is probably the best place for you to meet people and make friends during your stay in Mexico. Mexico has both public and private schools. Most AFSers attend private schools with classmates between the ages of 16 and 18. Some private schools and all public schools require uniforms; you should bring US\$200 to cover this cost.

The school year runs from September to June. The school day is from 7:30 or 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 or 2:00 p.m. Mexican schools tend to be academically oriented; teachers give

daily lectures from which students take notes. There are required courses in biology, chemistry, civics, foreign languages, geography, history, math and music.

You can obtain a certificate of attendance if you attend classes regularly, complete the course work and pass the examinations.

### **Teen Life**

Football (soccer) is the most popular sport, and it is played in cities and towns wherever there is an empty field. Baseball, tennis and jogging are also popular. Teenagers gather in groups on the weekends to hang out in a central plaza or to go to discos and movies.

Many schools offer extracurricular activities such as sports and crafts clubs and this is a great way to make friends.

There is one very important custom you should know about: teenagers do not usually go out in couples but go out in group get-togethers. Most likely there will be social gatherings or parties every week. Get-togethers of a crowd of friends are more common than a boy and girl going out alone.

### **AFS Activities**

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Mexico will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions usually provide new information and ways of looking at things while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

Local AFS chapters organize small trips with the participants to visit tourist attractions or to have contact with AFS students from other communities.

### **Travel**

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Mexico, AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have many opportunities to travel with your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Mexico.

### **Spending Money**

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do such things as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the expenses are your responsibility. AFS recommends that participants bring US\$100 per month in traveler's checks for spending money.

Mexican young people are not used to carrying or spending large amounts of money. Spending more than your peers may create a distance between you and them. It is wise to learn to spend as they do.

### **Safety and Support**

Like your country, Mexico can be safe if you are aware of potential dangers and act accordingly. Throughout your stay, your host family and AFS staff and volunteers will help you learn to live as a Mexican and to have a safe experience.

AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and your family. For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no illegal drugs. Any student who violates either of two rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Mexico may have additional rules.

### **Health Precautions**

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Mexico (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require any medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant, your medical expenses are covered for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

### **Documents**

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. AFS will help you obtain the visa and provide you with instructions regarding the required documents.

### **Program Prices**

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

## ***Country Information***

### **Geography and Climate**

Mexico is the third largest country in Latin America, bordering the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico between Belize and the USA to the east and bordering the North Pacific Ocean between Guatemala and the USA on the west. Its topography includes low desert plains and jungle-like coastal strips, high plateaus and rugged mountains. The high plateau area has a spring-like climate (10°C-22°C). The northern plains are arid, and the southern areas tend to be hot, tropical and wet. The rainy season is from May to September.

### **Population**

Mexico's population has grown rapidly over the past 50 years, from around 25 million in 1950 to nearly 105 million today. Mexico City is the capital and has a population of 20 million, making it one of the largest cities in the world.

The population is not evenly spread. The central states are heavily populated, but the northern states are less so.

### **Language**

Spanish is the official language. There are more than 100 indigenous languages.

### **Government**

The president is popularly elected to one six-year term. A bicameral legislature is made up of the Chamber of Deputies (500 members) and the Senate (64 members).

### **Religion**

Mexico is primarily a Catholic country (92%); however, there are good-sized Protestant and Jewish communities within the country, especially in Mexico City.

In general, however, one can find families whose church attendance varies in all degrees. Do not be surprised if your family does not go to church every Sunday, or not at all.

It is your personal decision, based on your own beliefs, how you will conduct your religious life while in Mexico. We suggest that you talk about this matter with your host family at the very beginning of your stay, especially if you and your host family belong to different churches. This discussion will give you and your family a clear understanding from the start

## ***Launching Your AFS Experience***

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Spanish words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the language.

To further familiarize yourself with life in Mexico, visit your local library. A suggested book is *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, by Eric Wolf.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Mexico. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living life as a Mexican. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local AFS office or chapter and ask them.

In addition, AFS provides its participants with materials to supplement the preparation process.

Finally, Mexicans will be curious about your home community. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country and remember to bring with you some material that may be useful in case you have to give speeches about your own country.

If you have not already received a full AFS application packet, please contact your local AFS volunteer or national office to request one. We wish you a wonderful experience abroad!

### **Curiously Mexican**

Many festivities are celebrated in Mexico. They are related to religion, history and family matters, but one of the most important is Memorial Day, "*Día de los Muertos*" (Nov 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>), in which Mexicans remember all of the family members that have passed away.

"*La fiesta de 15 años*" (a birthday party for 15-year-olds) is one the most important celebrations for young women in Mexico. Usually, this important event is celebrated with a religious mass followed by a big party with friends and family.

Mexicans always find reasons to celebrate. This is one of many reasons why Mexico has frequent national holidays.

### ***How to Apply***

To become a participant in this country's School Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Student age (upon arrival)	16.0 years to 17.8 years	
Country data	Size	1,972,550 sq km
	Population	104,907,991
	Official Language	Spanish
	Government	Democracy with a President elected by popular vote
Currency	Pesos Mexicanos	
Useful websites	<a href="http://www.sectorturismo.gob.mx">http://www.sectorturismo.gob.mx</a> <a href="http://www.sectur.gob.mx">http://www.sectur.gob.mx</a> <a href="http://www.mexicocity.gob.mx/">http://www.mexicocity.gob.mx/</a> <a href="http://www.mexonline.com">www.mexonline.com</a> <a href="http://mexico.web.com.mx">http://mexico.web.com.mx</a> <a href="http://www.mexico.com">www.mexico.com</a>	

	<a href="http://www.mexico.org">www.mexico.org</a>
AFS Mexico website	<a href="http://www.afs.org.mx">www.afs.org.mx</a>

AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>