

An adventure through mountains, coffee and Colombia

An IAESTE internship in Colombia,



Internship in Medellín, Colombia 2016
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Well.... I guess I have to say, congratulations “Click” ... That was the response I got from my father after I told him that I’ve been accepted into an IAESTE internship in Medellín, Colombia. Everyone thought I was foolish going to such a dangerous country, they joked about me getting kidnapped, being involved in the cartel or even worse: getting addicted to cocaine and ruin my life. But all I could dream of was a grand adventure in a country with one of the world’s most innovative city, lush mountains and crazy parties with Colombian salsa and energetic surroundings. I would drink the world’s best coffee while on an exciting internship within logistics. I knew it then and I’m still totally thrilled about it, this was going to be an adventure of a lifetime!

I was a student of mechanical engineering with added logistical studies, I wrote my bachelor thesis in innovative logistics and now I had the opportunity to practice my knowledge and interest in the same field to help develop a new transport line within the public transport system in Medellín! This internship was going to be perfect!



As I soared above the numerous green mountains, preparing to land in Medellín I repeated the phrases in my head “Buenos dias, hasta Clinica Las vegas en poblado, por favour”. I had prior to my trip practiced Spanish through a web-based app named Duolingo as I had realized my English wouldn’t get me very far in this country. In hindsight I can say: Nemas problemas. The Colombians are by culture outmost warm hearted and being a foreigner was in my favor. Going from the airport into Medellín I had to switch taxi just before entering the city. My driver then personally took my luggage, hailed another cab for me and gave the new driver my destination. In another instance I was grocery shopping, looking for something stupid as dates (for desserts, duh) I was assisted by first one, then two and then three storekeepers plus their manager – creating a temporary Spanish speaking SWAT-team with their most important mission to help the lost extranjero (foreigner). In other words, I was well taken care of!



On my first day in Medellín I was instructed to wait outside the entrance to my apartment, because the landlord's mom would show up and let me in "ahorita". So I waited, bought some green mango with salt from a fruit stand, studied the lush nature all around and rested my eyes on the many squirrels carefully selecting seeds and collecting for their nest in the tree next to me and then finally, after 1.5 hour a small and extremely happy woman struts up the street in her high heels, from far away yelling HOLA!, interrupting both my mind-wandering and the daily activity of the squirrels. I later learned that ahorita has a very vague definition and could mean anything from right now to in a couple of hours – very useful!

I had been told that the apartment was shared, but that I would have my own room - perfect. As it turned out, not only did I have my own room – I had a double bed, a desk and mountain views as well. Included in the cost was a cleaning lady that maintained the whole apartment including our rooms and did our laundry – twice a week! All of this for 2300 SEK!

Now this shared apartment experience wasn't new to me, I had lived with other students in Sweden but living with four Mexican girls, one Mexican, three Colombians and one Colombian, all of which almost exclusively only spoke Spanish, now this would be a challenge, right? Wrong! I was introduced to arepas (corn-bread) with cheese and sausage for breakfast, hundreds of kisses on the cheek and Colombian salsa. In reciprocation, I cooked both meatballs and tacos, served pure Absolute Vodka and and blasted Swedish House Maffia early in the mornings (turns out ABBA with their song Chiquitita was quite popular as well).



The Colombian IAESTE had no committee in Medellín to host the interns, but the EAFIT university had a buddy system which assigns one voluntary EAFIT student to guide you through your Colombian visit. My buddy Antonia turned out to be adorable and brought me to plays of local bands, showed me the beautiful nature inside Medellín and notified me about the epic house parties. I couldn't have had a better first buddy. I somewhat confused, yet outmost happily learned that gifts and acts of kindness are a big part of the Colombian culture. Antonia would every now and then light up my day by bringing me small sweets in form of chocolates & cakes meanwhile I was researching weather a two track or a one-track line would be the best option for the mountainsides of Medellín. Best buddy ever!

My internship was made truly inspiring and meaningful by the fact that Medellín was awarded the most innovative city in the world much thanks to the vast public transport infrastructure. With buses, metros, cable cars, bus-rapid-transits, trams, escalators, bike rentals, taxis and ùbers all over the city. This was a big reason for the drastic drop in crime, gang violence and mafia organizations. Because with the increased mobility of the citizens, the gangs could not control neighbourhoods anymore. Simultaneously big investment in upgrading the streets and buildings surrounding the transport lines were also made to attract more visitors through the new public lines. The infrastructure changed Medellín and I was to be a part of it!



The description of my IAESTE internship said that I would make a FEM analysis of haul cables attached to cable cars, nothing more, nothing less. Through the application process I learned that I would be researching and investigating within the GEMI group (El Grupo de investigación en Estudios en Mantenimiento Industrial) of the EAFIT University. On my first day of work I was introduced to the group, presented to my assigned project and explained what each week's deliverable would be. My boss, Leonel didn't speak any English so a GEMI member tried to translate his quick yet thorough technical words. I learned that my project would include a literature study of funiculars, a detailed summary of all relevant EU standards & norms and a blueprint for how to make calculations that finally derived to the dimension of the haul cable to the funicular, which I then should present FEM calculations for. I was overwhelmed and nervous, yet excited about the challenge at hand. I had done similar tasks in school, I just needed to tweak and puzzle the pieces together anew!



We were about 8 people working on our respective computers and projects in GEMI office. I had my own desk, computer and workspace just next to the entrance of the office, excellent for greeting and small-talking with everyone as they passed by. The EAFIT campus was stunningly beautiful with small garden hang-out spaces, creative architecture, sport courts (tennis, soccer, swimming pool etc), outdoor gym and tiny cafés perfectly designed to enjoy a tinto (small coffee) with colleagues and friends. My biggest disappointment was the lack of a proper coffee culture in the country... Colombia is the third biggest coffee producer in the world, although the Colombians themselves barely get to enjoy this delicious natural resource as the finest beans are exported. Normally coffee here is a quick-blend with an insane amount of sugar...

So as I spent my days drinking not so delicious coffee and tinkering on funiculars, my evenings were spent studying Spanish with a private teacher and the weekends exploring what was named after its incredible climate: The city of eternal spring!

One week I was excused from work for a journey within the Colombian borders to an IAESTE national meeting in Ibagué. This meeting was organized for all the interns of Colombia. This was an enchanting experience that taught us more about Colombia and its history, immersed us in an international food fair where all interns got money and help from their respective Ibagué host family to either cook or bake something from their country to bring to the fair. I had the whole family help me make healthy chocolate balls made out of almonds & dates (remember the SWAT-team earlier?).



Colombia is famous for its surreal nature and landscape, so we were shuttled out into the wilderness to go zip-lining through banana plantations, hike on the cloudy mountainsides, enjoy a small old Colombian mountain village where we also were taught how to party like Colombians!



In summary my internship turned out to be way harder than I expected. I needed to learn Spanish to effectively communicate with my boss and I was often frustrated about not meeting the deliverables as I wished. I wanted to execute fast and make progress but the Colombian way and the words of my boss won in the end: Slow and correct. I'm proud to say that through this experience I constantly developed my problem-solving skill and common engineering knowledge.

As the internship came to an end I set out to travel in Latin America, using my newly learnt Spanish and understanding of the Latin culture to get around and work on new projects that were presented to me. And as of this day, I still am on an ever challenging, developing and astonishing adventure in Latin America that an IAESTE internship started. I couldn't be more grateful!

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