

## **A Year in Medellín: Music, Culture, Strikes and the Lockdown**

*Experience Report, Universidad Nacional de Colombia 2019/2020*

When I started to plan my academic exchange to go to the Universidad Nacional in Medellín, Colombia, I told myself I would go into the experience without expectations. I even stopped watching “Narcos” because I did not want to build a picture of Colombia in my mind centered around their drug wars of the past half century. But despite my best attempt at having no expectations, my exchange in Medellín was nothing like what I expected. It was in so many ways better, but also in so many ways plainly different than what I had allowed myself to imagine.

I had done research ahead of time regarding which neighborhoods I might want to live in, and hence picked a hostel in Laureles, about 20 minutes by foot from the University. I arrived in August, a few weeks before classes started, so my first objective was finding an apartment. For those first 10 days, I looked at two or three apartments every day, which was a great way to get to know the city. I spoke with people working at the hostel and got their opinions on the legitimacy of the different listings, and slowly but surely narrowed down exactly what I was looking for. I found exactly what I wanted in an apartment on *La 70*, with three flat mates, a balcony, and a huge window overlooking a little park. The traffic noise was persistent, but I got used to it. Only the “*aguacate, aguacate, aguacate*” calls through the loudspeakers of the street vendors never failed to wake me up at 7 in the morning. But there is nothing better to wake up to than cheap, delicious avocados right outside your door.

The first three weeks of class were fantastic. I still to this day incredibly am impressed by the quality of the classes, the level of investment of the professors in each students’ success, and the breathtaking campus. But as I made friends with my Colombian classmates, the more I heard about the discontentment of the students with the government. The Universidad Nacional is a public university, and the government had just signed a declaration allowing the state’s education funds to be used in the case of Colombia having to pay off unexpected debt. What started as Friday afternoon strikes, soon turned into street blockades of civil disobedience that were routinely dispersed with tear gas and police in full riot gear as the students tried to make their voices heard.

By mid-November, the students declared a two-week strike, which ultimately turned into a two-month strike. Each Friday, the students would meet at 8am for a town hall style assembly and everyone who wished to speak, could. At the end of the day, sometimes as late as 19 or 20:00, all present students would vote with a simple raising of a hand, whether the strike should be continued or not.

What these student strikes meant for me and the other foreign exchange students, was that we had to meet with our professors independently to finish our classes. In some cases, I had private lessons, either alone or with another exchange student. Sometimes we had to read the texts and hand in discussion papers for each class that we would have otherwise attended. For many Colombian students, however, the strike meant returning home to their families, as they couldn't afford to live in Medellin without the financial support of the state, which was stopped after three days of the strike. For others, it meant losing internship opportunities, as they were no longer able to complete the necessary credits in time to begin. So while I was and still am sad that I didn't get very much traditional class time in the end, I also recognize how privileged I was to have been given the opportunity to finish those courses within the first semester.

After many weeks in the empty library with just a handful of other exchange students, I handed in my final papers and was officially on break. I took that opportunity to travel to Chile and Argentina, to Patagonia, as January and February are the two short months where the climate is mild enough to hike there. The experiences I had in those six weeks could fill an entire book, largely afforded to my by-then fluent Spanish, which opened so many doors for cultural exchange and adventure, as I set off through the mountains with only two sets of clothing, a tent, and my backpack.

I returned to Medellín looking forward to the next semester, with a new appreciation for the abundance of fruit, the comfort of my bedroom, the warm evenings and the ever-present sun. In what now seems like a lifetime away, I went to Baranquilla for Carnival with some other exchange students, where we danced on the street for an entire weekend. We had heard about some virus in Asia but hadn't taken it seriously. We figured it wouldn't get to Colombia. Boy, were we wrong.

Just as the second semester was set to start, the government closed the borders. The Universidad Nacional cancelled all incoming and outgoing exchanges, even for those of us who were already in Medellín. One week later, "Pico y Cedula" was introduced, where we were only allowed to leave the apartment to get groceries or go to the bank on certain days (usually twice a week), depending on the last number on our *cedula de extranjeria*, or Colombian ID. From April to June, this was our new reality. Another exchange student moved into my apartment, as the Colombians all left to return to their families. Though our contacts at the university, we were able to attend the virtual classes without credit, and both of us also started the summer semester at our home universities, as these classes had, of course, also been moved online. Although this meant waking up at 4am twice a week for me, I appreciated the fact that I had some sort of structure to my week.

My remaining time in Colombia was not what I had hoped for, but I still wouldn't have changed anything about it. While I didn't get to go to class in-person (or get credits from the UNAL) and didn't check off half of the places - I still wanted to visit within Colombia, much less Ecuador and Peru - I did get to spend those first few months of lockdown in the warm, beautiful city of Medellín instead of the grey and cold Berlin. My flat mate and I came up with a variety of projects to keep ourselves occupied. From painting a huge mural on one of the walls, to building a terrace on the roof of our apartment building, we certainly took advantage of our free time.

So ultimately, this exchange was a crazy rollercoaster, but I learned so much about Colombia, about travelling alone, and most importantly about myself. I can only recommend a university exchange to anyone who is considering it. Here are a few of my best tips for an exchange in Medellín, specifically at the Universidad Nacional.

### **My most useful Tips for Studying in Medellín**

*Study:* The Universidad Nacional Campus in Medellín is beautiful. With palm tree lined streets and huge green spaces, it is in fact the city's second botanical garden. As a student, you can take advantage of the gym, equipped with all of the workout-gear you could ask for, as well as the basketball, volleyball and beach volleyball courts, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool with an incredible view of the city. The university offers a lot of free sports programs as well, ranging from sport teams to traditional fitness classes such as spinning and yoga. The classes are much more work intensive than what is usually expected at the Freie Universität. Classes meet twice per week, homework is required, and there are usually multiple quizzes and test throughout the semester. This fact, combined with the fact that many students have two-hour commutes from the outskirts of the city to class every day, results in many students spending most of their free-time on campus.

Finding out which classes to book can be challenging. I suggest looking through the entire course catalog, as there are many classes that are interesting but may not be listed in your course of study. As exchange students, you can typically book any class from any institute, and some electives may be relevant to your studies, even though they are not directly listed in your degrees catalog.

*Where to live:* A look into any English language blog geared toward foreigners will reveal the two most popular neighborhoods – Poblado and Laureles. Both of these offer nice cafés, upscale restaurants, and a lot of western influence, and boast about being the safest place to be as a

foreigner. But for exchange students I would suggest a look at some other areas for people planning to study at la Nacional.

**Carlos E. Restrepo**, or simply Carlos E., is a residential neighborhood only a 10-minute walk from the Universidad Nacional main campus. Even if you don't plan to live here, stop by on a Friday or Saturday night – the main Plaza is filled with people sitting around in small groups, eating street food and drinking a beer. There is usually a guy selling amazing Argentinian empanadas, which are and a nice change of pace from the typically deep-fried Colombian version.

*Best places: La Nacho (in la Iguana, only go during the day), Exlibris, Plaza Carlos E.*

**Estadio** is under some definitions a part of Laureles but is further north close to the stadium. This is where I lived for my time in Medellín and I can only recommend it. La 70, which runs down toward Laureles from the metro station, is the main party street for Colombian national tourists. Thursday through Sunday, the *discotecas* and cross over bars pump their music in never-ending competitions of who can play the louder music, and hole-in-the-wall restaurants all serve the same Menu del Día. While these may not seem amazing at first glance, I absolutely loved it. Since la 70 is always busy, I never felt unsafe coming home in the dark. The walk from the metro station to my apartment was a mere 5 minutes, so I could get anywhere in the city with ease. And most importantly, since the street was so loud, we could throw parties in our flat without any complaints from the neighbors. Though a bit farther away than Carlos E, a 30-minute walk or a 10 minute bike ride on the city's free bike sharing service EnCicla got me to campus without any issue.

*Best places in the area: SaludPan, Mercado Plaza de la America, Naturalia*

My final word of advice for newcomers would be to book a hostel room in the neighborhood that you think you'll want to live in, and then start viewing apartments every day. I found mine through *CompartoApto* but had friends who also had success with *VICO*. Contracts are often verbal, and rent is paid cash at the beginning of the month – seems sketchy but works and is quite common. I would also suggest finding a flat share that is not in an apartment building, as noise complaints will be more prevalent here.

Overall, you will find that everyone in Medellín is incredibly welcoming and generous in their time and patience. The reggaetón blasting from every second building might be annoying at first, but you will probably miss it once you leave. And talk to people on the street, everyone is friendly and now back in Berlin, I yearn for the openness and joy of the people of Medellín. And finally, use the weekends to take the bus to the smaller towns around Antioquia – they are charming.