

# The Australian

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## Higher Education

### The good, the bad and the ugly

- by: Toby Miller
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People march during a protest against violence in Mexico City. Picture: AP

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**I'VE slept with a lot of people. It happens to folks who travel. Being on aeroplanes is one of the few contexts in which most of us sleep with scores of people in a night. There we all are, stretched out comfortably - or not - snoring gently - or not - in the land of Nod. We'd never do this so easily outside the world of transportation.**

As I write this, I'm flying from Mexico City to Paris, from the exemplar of postmodernity to the exemplar of modernity.

Mexico City is one of the places where students from the University of California study abroad.

Many of them enrol at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico. It has almost 320,000 students.

Effectively its own city, the UNAM includes a massive ecological park, top-notch restaurants and museums, even a volcano.

The campus is a phenomenon throughout Latin America and the academic world. No wonder UNESCO has declared it part of world heritage.

Oh, by the way, it is virtually free to attend, provided you pass an entrance test. Mexicans think public education is a right of citizenship. How quaint.

Some UC students do fieldwork rather than take classes. After a few preparatory weeks in the Distrito Federal (Federal District), they make for different parts of the country. We hire mentors to help them (for example, to deal with the many dominant indigenous languages).

But the map of the country is being redrawn. Both the US State Department and the University of California's private security firm say it's safe only to visit Mexico City and points south and east.

Narcotraficantes (drug traffickers) are gaining control of everyday life throughout the land. Thousands and thousands of people are murdered every year in grisly, gruesome acts of power. Church and state are part of the deal, corrupt to the core.

The US is also part of the deal. It is the crucial node of supply and demand for this violence.

We provide the firearms, illegal in Mexico, which the narcos obtain across the border. We decline to criminalise our appetite for guns. We want the drugs, illegal here, which the narcos bring across the border. We decline to decriminalise our appetite for addiction. It's a lethal mixture. Colombians boast wryly that Mexico is becoming the new Colombia.

In Rio de Janeiro, a student in the UC's Brazilian study-abroad program decided to research the narcos there. He ended up in a bar speaking to an informant who was decapitated next to him. I've had to forbid fieldwork on the narcos for safety reasons. Censorship is not what I was put on earth to do, but . . .

Mexico City itself is intensely violent anyway. By turns it is infuriating and impossible, thrilling and manageable. Depending on which statistics you use, the biggest city in the world has more people than Australia; more demonstrations than anywhere else; more abortions than in London (legal there, like same-sex marriage); more film clubs than Paris; more universities than Gotham; 30 years of economic crisis and counting; the world's greatest variety of jokes about death; and the most corrupt police force anywhere.

It is what the French call a *jolie laide*, simultaneously beautiful and ugly.

Mexico City has been a beacon throughout the awful history of US-backed dictatorships across the hispano hablante (Spanish-speaking) world. Sixty thousand Spaniards fled there during the civil war, while the sordid past of Latin-American fascism saw thousands of artists, intellectuals and other leftists find refuge.

The remarkable art and culture of the city strike every visitor and locals are knowledgeable about it.

The average person appreciates and can expound upon Diego Rivera's epic geo-political murals, for example.

In Coyoacan, where I live, you can go from the splendour of Frida Kahlo's house, lavishly sustained by public funds and gringa (foreigner) feminists, to the squalor of Leon Trotsky's last stand, barely maintained through cultural policies and once-a-year documentaries shot by Gauloises-toting Frenchmen.

Across affluent parts of the city, you can also find the homes where narcos and their families live, their money laundered through legitimate business. Yet this remains the most intellectually vibrant city I know.

The scholars one meets are interdisciplinary, multilingual and internationally oriented.

The art and music scene is dynamic. Drama is vibrant. Publishing purrs along, albeit with as many scares each day as a cat.

And people kiss, passionately, in the street. In the UNAM, they embrace deeply and longingly. It's an open city.

The UNAM recently held its third Feria Internacional (international fair) for study abroad. Australia was well represented. And for any enterprising young person, this remains a marvellous, exciting and exacting place to be.

Despite all I have written above, the 10 years I've been coming here have regenerated me intellectually again and again.

Even if leaving each time means sleeping with strangers.

*Toby Miller is director of the Study Abroad program at the University of California.*

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