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# *IAESTE internship in Bogotá, Colombia*

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*View on the city of Bogotá from a hill in the very north of the city*

## Introduction

To complete my studies of environmental sciences at ETH Zürich, I was supposed to do an internship in either Switzerland or any other country. I never had any real working experience in other countries than Switzerland or Germany and so I decided for myself to try doing the internship abroad. IAESTE sounded like an awesome opportunity to do an internship, especially because they are well organized and paid so that the financial burden is not so heavy.

So the day came and I found the offer of a University in Colombia and it directly decided to apply. The application process was stressful but well organized. But I applied more than 6 months in advance for the internship and this amount of planning ahead might not be possible for every student. The project that I applied for sounded very interesting to me and as I received the confirmation, I was super happy and excited.

I tried to prepare myself for the internship as good as possible, including a Spanish course as refreshment of my knowledge. The communication with the university was somehow a little difficult, but everything, including the accommodation and visa was organized about two weeks before my flight to Bogotá.

## The university and supervision

The Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas y Ambientales (UDCA) is a small, private university in the north of the city of Bogotá, Colombia. At the university, one can study subjects like veterinary medicine, economics, international relations, environmental sciences and geography. Public and private universities both charge school fees per semester that can be quite high, especially taken into account the average income in Colombia. The UDCA counts about 3500 students and is one of about 115 tertiary training institutes in Bogotá. The supervisor for the internship was Dr. Grace Montoya, lecturer at the department of geography. She is specialized in soils and their resilience under the influence of climate change and is currently doing a post-doc project. During my internship, she told me that she picked me among other applicants for the position, because of my background in psychology and my specialization in human health, nutrition and environment. She was hoping to gain further insides for her postdoctoral project through my outsider's perspective.

## My work

Originally, the position I applied for was declared as follows: „Multi-temporal analysis of ecosystems soil transformation in areas of high mining conflicts at Magdalena River “. Already on the first day, it was clear to me that I am going to work on something else and I never got any information about the original topic. This confused me a little bit. But I was happy that I got another topic, that sounded exciting to me.

My work was mostly consistent of literature research and brainstorming. The question I was working on was, which climate change factors have an influence on the people of Bogotá. Additionally, I was working on the question of how resilient the city of Bogotá is against climate change and how the people perceive climate change in the city. All these questions are quite hard to answer, especially if the main working tool is just a computer. First, I was supposed to define factors, that are directly connected to climate change, in contrast to factors like pollution, that are human made. These factors that I found, I put into SWOT matrices that described and verified with literature.

In the beginning of the internship, I was told to be working with GIS in order to look for maps that can support my speculations. For example, I was looking for maps that describe precipitation patterns today and 50 years ago. The software license for ArcGIS could not be accessed through the university, so that I had to work with a test-version. My GIS-skills are quite limited, so that I struggled to find the maps that I needed and I needed a lot of help from other people. Moreover, many webpages are only available in Spanish which made it even harder for me to find the maps I was looking for. The work with the maps and the GIS software was thus reduced to a minimum. Additionally, I was in good contact with two further teachers who invited me to participate in two field trips. One was with a class from the first semester and another with a class from the 8th semester in geography. Also with the students, I had a lot of good contacts and conversations and once I even could participate in organizing a seminar with the students from the first semester. I was supposed to talk to them about climate change in general and about the recent peace agreement with the FARC guerilla. Furthermore, I was allowed to participate in GIS-classes.

The two classes which I accompanied for the field trips, answered questions that I was able to pose to them and their responses became part of my work. The questions were my own initiative and Grace Montoya appreciated this idea and was interested in the responses.

At the end of the internship, I was allowed to present my results in a short presentation. Grace Montoya told me, that she was content with my work and that the report helped her a lot for her postdoctoral project.

## IAESTE event

Roughly after my first month, I participated in an event organized by Colombian students who work for IAESTE. We spent three days with about 30 students and it the event was a lot of fun. I met interesting people from all over the world and I could grasp the idea of why IAESTE is a good organization and why it is a great opportunity to participate in one of the internships provided by IAESTE. The event was quite expensive, especially with an average Colombian income. But still, we were very well taken care of and had a great time.

## Personal challenges

The first big challenge was the language. In the description of the internship, good English and Spanish knowledge was required but, especially in the beginning, my Spanish skills did not quite met that. Before I came to Colombia, I thought that in a university context, English is spoken by almost everyone. In Colombia, this is not the case. Grace Montoya was the only one in the department with whom I could talk in English. My Spanish skills were very little at the beginning of the internship and were maybe on the level A2. This changed quickly and also the communication difficulties became less and less severe. In the beginning, it took a while until Grace Montoya and I got the same picture of what my work was supposed to look like. The onset of the internship was tough for me. It took a while until everything was set properly. At the beginning, I was told that I got a laptop from the university, but at the end, I always took my private laptop to work. The university network was accessible after about 2 weeks and for literature research I mostly used the ETH-network that I could access via VPN. Grace Montoya and I had meetings in a 2-weekly-rhythm.

I for myself was often in doubt about my work, because for the questions I was working on, I could often hardly find any literature or maps that could have supported my claims. A lot of the material were newspaper articles or summaries and peer reviewed literature was hard to find. My Spanish was not sufficiently good to decide about the quality of a source. After a few weeks, I told this to my supervisor and she reassured me that what I do is what she needs and that she was aware of the fact that a lot of my work is based on speculations.

A very positive experience was the exchange with the two other lecturers that took me to the field trips. The trips and the communication was fun to me and helped me a lot to gain further insights into the country. The contact with the students and the insight in what they learn and how they work on problems was very enriching to me. The internship got a lot easier as my Spanish skills improved.

Besides, it helped me a lot, to let go of stress and pressure and to focus on how I could profit from this experience the most.

## Final reflection

When it comes to my skills, I had hoped for a little bit more during the internship. I would have wished to improve my ArcGIS knowledge a little bit more which was only partly possible, because the focus of my work quickly changed away from the work with maps.

The UDCA was a lot smaller than my university at home and also the financial opportunities were smaller. That was the access to software was limited and also the infrastructure at the university was less advanced. This experienced, retrospectively, gives me the opportunity to appreciate the ETH a little bit more. Very positive was for me the personal contact at the university. All the people I had contact with were incredibly friendly and made the time in Bogotá very valuable to me. Due to the fact that most of the people talked Spanish to me, my Spanish skills improved rapidly and the possible topics to talked about increased on a daily basis.

My time could be mostly managed by myself and after a short time, I felt confident with it. I experienced my work at UDCA as a lot more relaxed than my regular schedule at my University in Switzerland. I could also use the time in Bogotá to do a lot of research about the city and the country as a whole and I learned a lot about both.

For my scientific career, the internship was not exactly what I had imagines, but as a personal experience, I am very thankful for everything and everyone I encountered.

## Pictures



*Zip lining at the IAESTE event*



*Riding really old jeeps at the IAESTE event*



*Visiting a coffee farm at the IAESTE event*



*Street art in the center of Bogotá*



*Field trip to Chingaza national park*



*Field trip to Río Claro*