

IAESTE Report – Research Assistant in Brazil



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Employer: Federal University of Viçosa

Location: Viçosa, Brazil

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As soon as I knew that I was accepted for an internship at the Federal University of Viçosa, a little town lost in the middle of the Minas Gerais state for two months, I booked beforehand one month stay in Rio de Janeiro. On the one hand, I wished to learn intensively Portuguese and on the other hand, to get to know one of country's biggest city. Altogether, I would have spent 3 months in this gigantic country, perfect timing to avoid any paperwork needed to get a visa.

As planned, my accommodation in Viçosa was organized by IAESTE Brazil. I was living like any student, in a so-called "república", which is basically an old family house transformed in an apartment divided by many students. In my case, we were 6 girls and a cat sharing not only our house as well as a familial friendship.

On my first work day, I was welcomed by the professor itself and she gave me much information about her laboratory. There was no IAESTE representant on-site, but the presentation of the campus university's facilities was taken over by the international affairs service. I was given all help I needed to get through the whole bureaucratic steps to enjoy all the advantages of a student. Indeed, everything had been clearly communicated about my internship by IAESTE before my arrival.

During my internship, I assisted master and PhD students with their research. I could choose from the beginning the topic I would like to more focus on; I opted for specializing in mushrooms. I only knew theoretically the basics of mushroom's growth, but I had never realized the potential it has in various areas.

First, I took part in all the production's step of two mushrooms species, Hiratake and Shiitake. It was about re-isolating the mushroom, substrate's preparation and mushroom's inoculation, considering factors like pH, light and temperature. Then, I looked at the enzymes' potential in a biotechnological aspect, which is contained in one mushroom specie. It consisted in analyzing the enzyme's quantity and efficacy, by spectrophotometry and SDS-Page. I also helped in the realization of a project about the influences of the substrate's biofortification with selenium on the mushroom's production and absorption. This last research line was particularly relevant for my further studies. Parallely, I learned about the other researches going on in the laboratory, about mycorrhizas and their interaction with the environment and about bee's microbiome to understand better their role in the ecosystem. Additionally, I participated in an International Symposium of Microbiology and Biotechnology (SIMB).

There was actually no typical daywork in Viçosa. I had two fixed reunions on Monday and Wednesday and otherwise, the students knew they could contact me the day before to tell me when they would need me. As it was a twenty minutes' walk to get to the university, it was no problem for me. As a result, I was working between 4 to 6 hours a day. It was not as much as I had expected, but there was no time to get bored in this little university town.

Besides, it was interesting to observe how a public university works in Brazil. After passing a national exam, public universities are completely free, and research is mostly financed by the state. The result is a really a high education's and research's quality, but the lack of money is a constant problem. That is why Brazilians have developed a lot of workarounds, like using a clothes dryer in default of a centrifuge, and it anyhow always turns out working.

Moreover, I decided to continue taking Portuguese classes in Viçosa. There was a free offer for exchange students like me, so I took the opportunity. This was first good for me to enhance my level, but also to get to know the other foreigners studying in the same university. Most of them were students from other south Americans countries. It was indeed nice to have new contacts with people having a similar experience. And therefore, I again want to point out how important it was for me to have learned Portuguese since the beginning, as English was almost useless. Even at the international congress I took part in, most of presentations were in Portuguese.

Most of the week-ends, I stayed in Viçosa, to enjoy life as Brazilians do. Since Viçosa is a university town, many events were organized with other students and friends, so there was no time to get bored. Once, I use an extended weekend to go to visit the World Heritage city of Ouro Preto, a four-hour journey by bus.

To conclude, it was not only a rich experience in learning new skills and knowledge, but also in discovering a new culture. Brazil is a country with a special energy I wish everybody could get to know one day.



Some pictures of my stay in Brazil: the UNESCO World Heritage city Ouro Preto, cocktail with my colleagues at an international congress, excursion with other exchange students to the Viçosa's Christ statue, university's main building and group picture with my flatmates.