

SPANISH IMMERSION

Past, present and future tense come together in a weeklong language odyssey in Mexico's capital city.

BY JENNIFER BUEGE



IT ALL STARTED with a phone call. On the other end was Sonia Gil, co-founder of the language-learning program Fluenz, who kicked things off with some getting-to-know-you questions in English. Then she segued into Spanish. Our conversation was going well until she lobbed what seemed like an easy request: “Tell me about your most recent trip.” I found myself flailing. Past tense competed with the imperfect, masculine nouns became feminine and my French made a surprise appearance—*merde!* At the end of the call, Sonia was kind but direct, saying, “Your accent is good—but there are definitely areas we can work on.”

For two years, I’d been studying the

language at home, relying mainly on apps and a basic grammar book. But my skills had plateaued, and I needed something to propel me forward. The most obvious options—finding a Latin lover and/or moving south of the border—were nixed by my boyfriend. He was much more supportive of a weeklong immersion, and Fluenz had recently launched an intriguing one that combined classroom time, cultural activities and a bit of yoga. That’s how I find myself in Mexico City, trying to wrap my mind around translating *could*, *would* and *should* into Spanish.

The week begins at our home base, a hotel in the upscale Polanco area, where all six students are staying. After breakfast, we meet the instructors, a diverse sextet of two simultaneous interpreters, a poet, an editor and two philosophers. The thought is that each will bring something different to the linguistic table. Sonia is there as well, and she explains that our time will be split between solo and group lessons—totaling about five hours a day—with rotating coaches.

Then it’s go time. My group lesson is small, just one other student. We dive into studying the conditional, which will pave the way for more complex topics later in the week. Our coach reviews the grammar rules, then has us asking and answering questions that challenge our skills and imagination, like “If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?” At first, my partner’s seemingly high level of fluency makes me think that I’m out of my league. As the class passes, though, I notice that we’re stumped over similar concepts, tripping over the same parts of the lesson—and I realize how well-matched we are. I let go of my uncertainty and throw myself into it. Time races by.

After a traditional lunch prepared by our private chef, I head to another nook in the hotel for a one-on-one continuation of that morning’s lesson. This time, my tutor—an interpreter—really concentrates on pro-

nunciation, asking me to read several passages aloud so we can work on the rolling *r* sound. She weaves in exercises featuring Mexican artists, musicians and authors, giving me a taste of the country while I try to master its language. Afterward, I’m exhausted yet exhilarated—I’ve made progress in one short day.

The rest of the week rolls out in much the same way: class, lunch, class and an hour of yoga, with a different cultural experience added to the agenda each day. One night, poet Fernando Fernández brings to life through words and photos Mexican codices, colorful, illustrated manuscripts depicting the history and culture of the Mixtec, Aztec and Maya. Although the topic is advanced, he speaks in an accessible Spanish, accompanied by translation. Another evening, at the home of Fluenz co-founder Carlos Lizarralde, philosopher Adrián Pascoe leads a crash course on politics in Mexico from ancient times to today. Early Friday morning, we’re treated to an exclusive tour of the Museo Nacional de Antropología with noted anthropologist Jacinta Cámara. Our hosts also arrange for us to visit the Frida Kahlo Museum, a blue-hued, greenery-filled oasis where the artist spent much of her life. Finally, there’s an outing to Pujol, one of the city’s most celebrated restaurants—and a highlight of each immersion week. We wine and dine, then are ushered into the kitchen to watch the culinary team at work (a rare opportunity).

The week culminates Saturday morning with presentations by all the students. It seems fitting to end where I had begun: talking about my most recent vacation, to the Arctic. This time, the past and imperfect dance together beautifully, the polar bears remain male and I speak with confidence. While my knowledge of the language has markedly improved, it’s this newfound self-assurance that will turn out to be my biggest takeaway—and that’s something I never could have gained alone at home with my grammar book. ▶



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