

Field Report

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

August 2017 – March 2018

“It’s slow in SLO” – That is the slogan people living in San Luis Obispo (“SLO”) like to use the most when describing this little town on the central coast of California. In contrast to the metropolises San Francisco and Los Angeles, which are located about 220 miles north and south of SLO, it is a rather quiet town. One can say that it sometimes feels like most of the 50,000 people living in SLO are either students, faculty and university employees, or people which are either close to retirement or already retired. The small size of the city makes owning a car not really a necessity. Most of the hotspots can be reached either by foot or bike, while taxi services provided by Uber or Lyft help reaching remote locations. Although there is a public transport system, it is not as well-developed as it is in most Austrian (or European) cities. There are only a few bus lines serving the area of San Luis Obispo, while Amtrak trains provide connections farther north and south. However, these trains are slow, which makes most people stick to their car if they must take a trip out of town. The area around SLO and the California central coast in general provide a beautiful landscape and lots of fresh air. Although San Luis Obispo is not directly located at the ocean, there are many small harbor towns and beaches less than a twenty-minute-drive away. Morro Bay, Pismo Beach, Avila Beach, and Montana de Oro state park are just some of the idyllic places which make for a great trip to the beach. The favourite sport of people living around the coast is, of course, surfing. Besides that, people seem to love to go biking or for a run. Most of the general population of San Luis Obispo is very much into sports. Even on campus, a huge gym (“RecCenter”) was built by California Polytechnic State University to offer its students a place to work out for free. Most of the people living around here are very friendly and open-minded – it seems the weather on the central coast just always puts you in a good mood. Between August 2017 and February 2018 it only rained about five times. With temperatures up to 85°F in January, taking a dip in the pool located right next to the RecCenter on campus is a great afternoon activity, even in winter. In contrast to swimming in the pool being an available option for most parts of the year, doing the same in the ocean might not be as pleasant. The water temperature of the Pacific Ocean rarely rises above 70°F, even in summer. Overall, San Luis Obispo is great city to stay and serves as a good starting point for day- or weekend-trips to landmarks and sights around the west coast such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Yosemite, Sequoia, Death Valley, or Big Sur.

California Polytechnic State University (often called “Cal Poly”) represents the biggest institution in the city. Over 20.000 students are currently enrolled in programs provided by the university, which’s motto is “Learn By Doing”. The academic year is split up into quarters, with most students taking the summer quarter off to do internships at one of the many companies located in and around California. Most of the people going to classes here are in Bachelor programs which take four years. Although Cal Poly offers master programs in some fields of study, there are twenty times more undergraduate than graduate students.

Although research is an important part of Cal Poly's philosophy, the focus of the work done at this school is education. Therefore, the university does not offer postgraduate (Ph.D.) programs. Despite being relatively unknown internationally, Cal Poly has a great reputation in the USA, especially in agriculture and architecture. In addition to that, the College of Engineering starts to gain popularity as well. Some speak of the Software Engineering program as one of the best programs of its kind in the country¹, all things considering. When thinking about inclusion in the organization, one can say that the international office is trying its best to make visiting students feel at home. As an international student, one can for example sign up for the international welcome ambassador program. Once registered, visitors will then be assigned a student ambassador who helps with settling in. In addition to that, the international office organizes events such as a weekly "Coffee & Tea time". This provides exchange students and visiting scholars a great way to come together weekly and get to know each other. There also exist student-organized international clubs which hold events, such as group dinners, on a regular basis.

Living on the American west coast is quite expensive. Since San Luis Obispo is a relatively small city, the housing situation is especially problematic. There barely are enough affordable houses and apartments. Monthly rent for a small single room in a shared house is usually around 800 to 1100 \$. Prices for shared rooms are not much cheaper either. For example, sharing a small room with another student cost me about 600 \$ per month without utilities. Since I visited as a research scholar and not in an exchange program orchestrated by Graz University of Technology and Cal Poly, there was not a whole lot of support from the campus administration in San Luis Obispo. Overall, I had to move three times in my time in California due to the quarter system even further complicating the housing situation. The rooms and apartments provided on campus are also quite pricey and only allow one-year-leases, which was not helpful for my eight month stay. Besides housing, groceries and food in general are also more expensive than in Austria. Especially trying to buy healthy food, vegetables, or fruits can cost a lot of money.

Lastly, I want to say that my stay abroad in San Luis Obispo was probably the best experience of my life. Going forward, I will encourage people to stay abroad to study or do research. Besides practicing my English as well as doing research on a great project, the experiences made during the past months are something I will never forget. The places I have been to, things I got to do, people I met, and friends I made are something I am going to remember for the rest of my life.

¹ <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/education/article137493643.html>