

# Field Report - Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

Stefan Lontschar, TU Graz

If people in Austria are talking about the USA, most of us probably think about big cities separated by vast distances and long roads through the middle of nowhere. This also was true for a big part of my image of America. Coming from a small town in Carinthia I was not overly excited about the big city life, but here San Luis Obispo shines, as it provides an American lifestyle experience while still having the charm of a small town.

## General impression of the research stay abroad

First impressions are often called the most important ones and here San Luis Obispo, or SLO as every local calls it, did a very good job. On arrival there, after a long and tedious journey, I was greeted by very welcoming new roommates that agreed on picking me up from the bus station even at 1:00AM in the morning. While my supervising professor was still out of town as I arrived one week early, I had time to explore the city on my own, which proved to be a unique and exciting experience. One prejudice quickly proved to be true and that was the term of distances. It was very hard to get around only on foot and so I quickly realized that at least some means of transport are for sure necessary. In this case Craigslist (<http://slo.craigslist.org/>) and various Facebook groups were very helpful, as with their help I managed to organize a bike within a day, which made exploring the city a lot easier.

After the first challenges of orientation were beaten I managed to quickly settle in the charming city and so the time passed quickly. SLO and its surrounding area provides countless opportunities in nature for hiking and just walks in beautiful nature. Even in biking distance there were several amazing viewpoints that could be reached within only a few hours, so occupation next to studying proved to be plenty. After not too much time I realized that there is only so much to see in the area and decided to get myself a car (<https://www.calcas.com/> and <https://www.dmv.ca.gov/>). Here Craigslist and Facebook groups were helpful again and within a few days I also had a motorized vehicle which proved to be almost vital in the long term, as even grocery shopping was always connected with at least half an hour of biking in one direction. But this also opened opportunities to see some real gems in the country like Hearst Castle, Santa Barbara and beautiful Big Sur. All this would have most probably been possible as well with organized groups of the international center at Cal Poly, but of course one is a lot more flexible with your very own vehicle.

Another superstition of me and probably many other people, "California is always warm and sunny", proved to be not entirely correct. While packing I thought that a pair of long trousers would only be for the occasional use and come December I was proved very wrong at that, as the notion of heating is not seen as a necessity in most houses there, while temperatures go

down to under 5°C at nighttime. The additional missing insulation of most houses made proper clothing vital.

## Quality of the host institution

I did not have the chance to experience much of the typical student life on campus as I was not very much included into normal courses and classes at my host institution. My supervisor gave me the opportunity to visit his classes but this often collided with other necessary work and deadlines of my actual project work and thus I did not take advantage of this offer too often. On the other hand I had the opportunity to be part of a tightly knit, small project group in the Mixed Reality Lab (<http://mixedrealitylab.io/>) and made very good friends there. This was also an impressive opportunity to see a very different and open type of teaching that I have not yet experienced. Every student with an idea was provided with top equipment for various virtual reality applications and had absolutely freedom of choice to do whatever he/she thought was right and exciting. While the amount of students being supervised by the leading professor of the lab was sometimes arguably too many and things sometimes got pushed a bit far towards deadlines, every student could be sure to profit from great expertise and support for their respective projects and applications. And also students without the initial idea were provided with open project ideas that the professor still wanted to implement, which he had plenty of.

## Contacts within the host institution, inclusion in the organization

The International Center at Cal Poly was my first official point of contact in SLO and proved to be helpful in every regard I could imagine. They were responding very quickly at any time during their normal office hours and provided information about everything necessary to ensure a pleasant stay for incoming foreign students.

My supervisor proved to be absolutely supporting in every regard, not only in terms of project work but also in any kind of private life situation like even fixing issues with the car I bought during my stay.

## Recommendations for future Marshall Plan students and fellows

Start early with your search for housing, as there are mostly always students that sublease their place for one or more quarters, but you have to be quick to get the good ones. Skype/Whatsapp video calls help to get a better imagination of the place you are about to rent and don't send money to random people without having a signed contract, there certainly are scammers around!

Make sure to use the various possibilities on and off campus, like university clubs (<https://clubs.calpoly.edu/clubs-directory>) and bike night (<https://visitslo.com/events/bike-night/>) for socializing and having a good time aside of your sometimes exhaustive scientific work. Don't be shy to ask people about anything you might be interested in or you need to know, starting with roommates or even random people in the stores, almost everyone was happy to help a visitor find his way.