



Orlando Betancourt

I am posing next to the "El Castillo" (The Castle) ruins in the Chichén-Itzá archeological zone located in southern Mexico

Orlando, you came to Singapore from far, far away. Why did you choose Singapore as the place to pursue your academic dreams?

Several factors played a role in my decision, but the main

factor was the overall reputation of NUS and the Department. I was interested in working on Microeconomic Theory when I applied for the PhD, and NUS was always mentioned to me and to others as an excellent place to

pursue this interest. Of course, Singapore's reputation as an international hub, and the personal prospect of experiencing life in the other side of the globe also influenced my decision.

How does Singapore compare to Mexico? Would you like to highlight some major differences? In fact, are there any similarities?

I have thought about this question for a long time, and I regrettably remain with the unachieved outcome of a satisfactory answer. I think many differences are grounded in the different values that cement our societies. My limited experience here has left me with the impression that Singapore values hard work and discipline, with leisure sided as a byproduct of everyday life. Mexico values having a good time and having a passion for life. And so, it is a contrast to me to observe quiet streets, empty football stadiums, expensive beer and a perhaps healthy lack of friendly banter. It is also a contrast to me to observe efficient public good provision, world-class infrastructure and a highly educated society. My answer of course does not explain why Singaporeans like wearing sandals with socks or refuse to provide napkins for the needy diner.

Luckily for me, both countries appreciate the vital role that flavors play on daily life. I find comfort in the fact that rice is treated with the same religiosity as we treat maize, and that spices are a common ally in our war on bland food.

How was the experience of living in Singapore for so many years?

My experience has been a spectrum of contrasting emotions. It has been motivating to be surrounded by approachable and kind people that have, even indirectly, helped me navigate the academic sea. It has also been challenging to fail at a project and somehow lift my spirits only to fail at the next project. I have experienced the comfort of bonding with my fellow strugglers, forging friendships that will last

a lifetime. It has been lonely to come back to an empty apartment on a Friday night, but it has been heart-warming to have a party with friends in the middle of the autumn. My experience in Singapore has been shaped by kind people, large meals, tough moments and profound reflections that have led, I hope, to a better version of myself.

And with respect to economics, how did you get so interested in the field that you decided to do a PhD?

At the beginning of the PhD, I was exposed to research on many applied topics. This made me reflect on my initial goal of becoming a theorist and pushed me to consider working on social topics that I resonated with and that were more grounded on data. As a person that has both experienced and witnessed the many consequences of crime in Mexico, I have explored topics on crime economics, and more generally, other topics in development economics, like conflict. In addition, as a person that has had to emigrate to pursue a higher quality of education, I have become interested in topics related to minority discrimination.

Now that you are approaching the end of your PhD endeavor, would you say it was worth it?

Yes. Doing my PhD here has taught me many things through many ways, and I believe I would not have grown as much as I did, had I taken a different path. The journey has been challenging but profoundly transformative, both intellectually and personally.

If a friend of yours from Mexico or Latin America in general, asked you if pursuing a higher-level degree in Singapore is a good idea, what would you tell them?

I would tell them to take the leap, or to at least seriously consider it. There is a lot of uncertainty in the global stage right now, and Singapore offers an excellent opportunity to position oneself among a region that is becoming ever more central to our world.



Me and my PhD friends posing in Holland Village after celebrating a birthday in one of the restaurants nearby (third from the right)