

Dear Friends,

That's it. The fall quarter is over and the Christmas vacation is about to begin. For me, the vacation starts tomorrow morning and, in fact, 24 hours from now I will be in Mexico City. The last weeks were quite hectic since I tried to finish as many businesses as possible before my long trip. I'm glad to report that "my desk is clean" and that I can go on my trip trouble-free.

Yesterday was the busiest day for me. The main reason was that my class took its final exam and I needed to finish grading the exam in the same day. Here, unlike in Israel, I am the one who proctors the class - namely, I'm playing the role of the old ladies in Israel who watch the class during the exam. If in Israel I can wake up whenever I want and just make one or two appearances, here I had to wake up before 7AM! If in Israel I just had to grade the exam, here I have to grade the exam, compute the final grade in the course and then decide how to translate the grades into letters so that it will fit onto the grade history of the course! After finishing that at 8PM I had to write postcards to half of my students, telling them their grade (this is the costume here, I didn't invent it) and also decide what to do with those students who came to me with horrible stories, asking for a second chance. I'm not telling you all that in order to gain your sympathy or mercy! I'm writing that because many of you keep making those comments that imply that I don't do much and just travel and have fun all day long. Even though I enjoy this image (and even contributed to it with these letters of mine), it's time to make things clear! There - I took that off of my chest. . .

Yesterday was hectic also thanks to the Mexican bureaucrats. The night before, I called Mexicana airlines to confirm all my flights. The 30 minutes phone call may be divided as follows: anticipation (10 minutes of recording); shock ("Your name does not show on my list"); protest ("I hold the tickets in my hands"); hope ("I'll double check" followed by 5 more minutes of elevator music); relief ("OK sir, you're on"); mistake ("I just want to double check that I don't need a visa to Mexico"); 2nd anticipation (she went to consult with her supervisor. 10 minutes); devastating surprise ("you definitely need a visa"), followed by deep frustration. The next morning, just when my teaching assistant showed up and replaced me in the classroom, I went and called "The Mexican governmental office of tourism" and asked the same question. They left no place for a doubt: Israelis need visa, no matter what I understood a month before from the recording in the Mexican consulate. So - I returned home, took the car and drove to one of the dangerous and ugliest parts of downtown LA where the Mexican consulate is located. After improving my Spanish while standing in line among Spanish speakers for almost two hours, I handed my passport and application forms to the lady behind the counter. She just took one look in them, raised her head and with a wide Spanish smile returned them to me and said "that's it!". "What?! No visa?!" - I protested. "Oh no", she laughed, obviously amused by my sense of humor, "you don't need a visa. Why didn't you check before coming here?".

Anyway, now I'm all set and could enjoy the math department Christmas party that is now about to end downstairs. Our math department is having parties in every possible occasion (beginning/end of quarter/year/finals - just name it), but usually these parties suck and are terribly boring. However, this one was different: cool, fun, enjoyable.

The thought of being disconnected from mail, email and my phone answering machine for more than three weeks is overwhelming. I hope to be able to cope with that unusual situation. Until then,  
Hasta la vista y Feliz Ano,  
Tamir