

Oaxaca, México: La Cara del País

By Joel Miller, IE3 International Intern

My internship in Oaxaca, Mexico was one of the most fulfilling and educational experiences of my life, and I am counting down the time until I can revisit the most beautiful and extremely diverse state in the country.

On the first day upon arrival at the internship site, my host mother, Claudia, and her daughter, Monica, greeted me. I later met the rest of the family and found that Claudia was a housewife who cooked and sold lunches every day, and she had three daughters: one a medical student (and because the medical education system in Mexico is much different than in the states, she was the same age as me, twenty, and already completed her first year in medical school), a psychologist, and a secondary school student. All of the three from the family were very nice and set me up in a spacious bedroom in downtown Oaxaca. Because I arrived late, I went to bed shortly after arriving that night and the next day I was given a short tour by the psychologist daughter of the surrounding area of my homestay as well as where my language school was.

It was this day that I found my first bout of culture shock: I was the only American that I knew of and I was seeing so many things that were so different from American culture that I just wanted to talk to someone about, so I called home and talked for over an hour on a public telephone. This helped me to cope with the fact that I would have to accept this new culture as my own in the upcoming weeks and that I simply could not pay \$25 USD to call home every day. (On a side note, the payphones in Mexico differ from those in the states, and I found out the hard way. You must go into a convenience store and ask for a TelMex card, which are prepaid and you insert into the public telephones. The majority of payphones in Oaxaca do not accept coin currency.)

I wrote five online blogs while I was in Mexico, one about every couple of weeks available online at <http://www.tortillatales.blogspot.com>, where I detail out some of the activities and daily routines that dominated some of my time in Oaxaca. Therefore, I'll speak from here on about my overall experience while in Oaxaca. I came to Mexico with over six years of Spanish study, and upon departure thought that I was near fluent. Unfortunately, when my plane landed in Mexico City I realized that I had a long way to go, especially when two Mexicans are talking to each other. Luckily, the host families are all accustomed to students with little to no Spanish experience, and will either speak very slowly to you, or some even know a little (sometimes even fluent) English. In my case, there was a daughter who was a Spanish instructor during the summer to native English-speakers, and she often aided me when I didn't understand what my host mom was saying. If I were to recommend one thing to aid an intern's Spanish skills, it is definitely to get involved in an *intercambio* (exchange), in which a Mexican student and an American student meet for a set amount of time and spend half the time in English and the other in Spanish. I didn't have an *intercambio* until about the fourth week and constantly found myself complaining that my Spanish wasn't improving much, but after we began meeting, I got extremely closer to fluency. And in addition, my *intercambio* quickly turned into my best friend in Mexico, and we eventually even began dating! There are now plans to spend time together in the states, and all of this all stemmed from a language exchange.

Although I loved Oaxaca and all of the people I experienced while I was there, I feel as though the program is not sufficient for pre-medical students that have knowledge or experience in a clinical setting. I was warned from the beginning that this internship was mainly to experience the Mexican healthcare system, which I did, but I suppose I had pictured myself being invited to be more hands-on in the clinical rotations. To get around this, it took us about

three weeks to realize that we were not going to be invited to participate, but rather we had to be much more proactive and ask questions, ask to assist in a procedure, or ask to do anything at all but sit there and watch (which is what will happen in many of the clinical sites if interns do not help themselves by asking).

As far as guidance, IE3, CFHI, and the language school, Becari, go to great lengths to ensure that everything is going as planned. My IE3 regional coordinator sent frequent emails and talked with me on the phone regarding the program and my experiences, which helps to know that someone in the states is looking out for your wellbeing. Additionally, CFHI hires a fellow from a previous program who lives in Oaxaca with you, who is there to not only assist with everyday concerns such as directions and the best place to eat, but also to act as a liaison between the interns and the CFHI medical director, who is always available if needed (but is a *very* busy man, which is great that he has the fellow who take care of the more basic issues that students may face).

I'll finish this essay by giving an overview of my daily activities, now that prospective interns have read through all of the rest. Every student has a slightly different experience when it comes to the food in their homestay and how meals work out, but it's fun to discuss that with your fellow students while in Oaxaca, so I'll just give you an overview of mine: most clinics began at 8:00, so I woke up at 7:00 and had breakfast prepared for me and sitting down by that time every day, usually because my host mother would ask what time I was waking. While the ever-present fruit plate got a little tiresome, usually a hot dish was provided as well, often a quesadilla or sandwich. I would go to clinic from 8:00 to about 1:00, at which point I usually ate lunch at my homestay, which is somewhat early for Mexican lunches as most eat around 3:00. I then would meet my *intercambio* or nap or meet other American students until my language

class, which ran from 5:00-7:00. After that, most students went out to dinner together, as only lunch and breakfast are provided in the program fees. Weekends were the most fun times, though, when we took weekend trips to the beach (Huatulco and Puerto Escondido), or some of the many other tourist areas in Oaxaca, all of which were beautiful and well worth the trip. Some photos of our weekend trips (before my camera was submerged in water at the beach) are posted at <http://www.new.facebook.com/album.php?aid=2170788&l=4ecf2&id=11519879>.