

Erin Gallagher

Nancy Biller

Study Abroad: Oaxaca

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To be quite frank, before this trip I did not really know anything about Oaxaca. I had maybe-sort-of-kind-of heard of it before, but honestly I doubt I'd have even been able to tell you it was a state in southern Mexico. I was eager to do something exciting this summer. To learn and experience something new and maybe even help some people along the way. Studying abroad seemed like a good way to do this. I had studied Spanish forever, but felt like I needed something to challenge me to take my language skills to the next level. When I heard about this opportunity in Oaxaca, I jumped at it.

Coming to Oaxaca I didn't really have a good idea of what to expect. I knew I was going to be taking some classes here and also doing some health workshops in nearby villages. I knew I would be staying with a host family. I had heard through the grapevine that the food was good, and that was about it. I'm not going to lie, as our departure date approached I was pretty nervous. I am usually a planner. The fact that I had decided to study abroad was a pretty big leap and the lack of a rigid schedule made me, to say the least, quite panicked. A couple nights before I left I worked myself up into quite a tizzy. When and where would our classes be? How would we know what we were supposed to be doing? Was it safe? What would transportation to the villages look like? Did I really think I could speak Spanish well enough to live in Mexico for over a month? I had never traveled alone before. What if something happened? Where should I exchange money? How much money should I bring? Should I bring any American money? The list of questions went on and on. I ended up emailing Mrs. Biller, the program director, word-vomiting all my concerns. She was reassuring, providing me with the information she had and reminding me that the "question marks" were simply "part of the fun and stimulation of a

global experience.” Throughout my trip I used this phrase as a reminder of the necessity for flexibility while traveling abroad. It helped to change my outlook. When something didn't quite go as planned it was not a failure. It was a learning experience. As my mom always says, “Attitude is the difference between an ordeal and an adventure.”

Studying in Oaxaca was most certainly an adventure. It was truly an amazing experience. I have learned so much about the culture, the language, and the people of this beautiful place. I want to use this reflection to highlight some of the most impactful experiences I had while abroad. These include working with and getting to know the village women, exploring the city with friends, and experiencing the many delicious flavors of Oaxaca.

The health workshops were one of the things I was most nervous about coming to Oaxaca. As a nursing student I doubted I had the qualifications and knowledge to advise others on health related issues (not to mention it in Spanish). I was unsure what the access and culture around healthcare was like in these areas. I did not want to come off as bossy or recommend things that were simply not possible for these women. These things were really something we could only know by meeting the women. This is why Cristian and I decided to start each of our workshops with an open dialogue with the women. We would ask the women about their knowledge and experience around the topic we were discussing that day. We would also ask if there were any specific questions these women hoped to have answered during the session. I found this to be incredibly helpful. Not only did it break the ice, but it helped us better understand where these women were coming from, allowing us to tailor our workshops and focus on the issues and questions most important and relevant to the women. Every woman who came to that workshop came for a reason. Our goal was to determine that reason so that we could do our best to provide the information and answers they were seeking.

The women at our workshops had incredibly varied experiences and levels of education. Some women spoke only Zapotec, others had no formal education and could not read and write, yet others were highly educated and knowledgeable in the topics we were discussing.

Every village and every workshop brought with it its unique challenges. We had to be adaptable. While at times this was difficult, I truly believe it was this constant challenge that most helped us grow and improve our presentation skills as well our own knowledge of the topics.

One thing that we encountered across the board in every community we visited was a warm and welcoming environment. The people in these villages were incredibly kind. I want to share a small anecdote to demonstrate generosity of the people we encountered:

*Before traveling to Oaxaca, Cristian had heard of a world renowned candle maker who lived in a small village just outside of the city. This woman makes beautiful decorative candles, which are sold all around the world. While in Oaxaca, we discovered that this woman actually lived in Teotitlan, one of the villages in which we were doing our workshops! We were determined to see her candles. We asked Isabel (the woman from En Vía with whom we were working) if she had heard of this woman and if she knew how we could get to her shop. Isabel hailed a three wheeled Moto-taxi for us and instructed us to tell the driver to take us to “Casa Viviana.” We bumped along the dirt road leading to her house, holding tightly to the small car frame for fear of being thrown out. At last, we arrived at a non-descript house with a large wooden door. We paid the driver and stood there unsure exactly what to do as the Moto-taxi zipped off leaving a trail of dust behind it. We decided the best course of action was to simply knock. A smiling woman in traditional clothing opened the door and asked us if we were there to see the Señora. We responded in the affirmative and she led through the dirt courtyard filled with hanging half-made candles and over to a elderly woman with a long silver braid down her back. Speaking in Zapotec, the younger woman indicated to the older why we were here and the older smiled kindly at us and asked if we like a demonstration before we saw the shop. We readily agreed and the older woman, Viviana, led us to her main work area. She dragged over some chairs for us to sit before settling on the ground near her bowels of melted wax and shaping tools. She made three beautiful wax flowers, explaining the process and telling us*

*about her family as she worked. At the end of her demonstration she told us to keep the beautiful flowers and led us over to the shop. We each bought a candle. Viviana insisted we also take a smaller candle for free and gave us a discount on the larger candles. We told her that this was too generous and we could not accept all this, but she insisted. We left smiling and waving and with too many beautiful wax creations to carry.*

This story is just one of many examples of the kindness we were shown in the towns. Women gave us free rides back to the highway to catch the bus, helped us pack up the chairs after our presentation and so much more. These women went out of their way to welcome us and make us feel comfortable. I will never forget their unbelievable kindness.

This kind and welcoming attitude was not limited to the villages. We encountered it also in the city with the friends we made through our intercambio experience at the ICO. We became incredibly good friends with Cristian's exchange student Emiliano. He happily played the tour guide of Oaxaca for us, bringing us to some of the big tourist attractions as well as some of lesser known gems of the city. We spent many of our weekends exploring the city and visiting attractions such as Monte Ablán and Jalatlaco with him. It was so nice to have a local help us navigate the city. He too, is in college and around the same age as us. We all got along great and had some really good times together. Before we left, we exchanged contact info so we can all stay in touch. We told him to let us know if he ever finds himself in the U.S. We're more than happy to lend a couch to crash on or show him around.

Lastly, but certainly not least, the food in Oaxaca was incredible. We tried everything on the recommended list and much more. Some of my personal favorites were Chocolate con Pan de Yema (we had some on our mountain excursion which I still can not stop thinking about), Enmoladas, and Tortas de Pollo. Almost everyday for lunch Cristian and I went to a Torta stand named "Hormigos" in a park near the ICO. The Torta's here were very affordable and absolutely

delicious! By the end of our six weeks, the woman working the stand knew our order and would give us heart hands as we were walking over. We always had to try at least one sweet treat everyday and we had tons of delicious Raspas, Churros, Paletas, and Empanadas Dulces.

Everywhere you look in Oaxaca there is someone selling some sort of delicious food! Señora Montoya, our host lady, would take long walks through the city with us pointing out the best cart or stand for Esquite, Tlayudas, you name it. The food in Oaxaca was truly an experience of its own. If it were not for the limited size of my stomach (and wallet), I could have bought food from every single vendor I saw.

Overall, I had an amazing experience in Oaxaca. Although at times being immersed in a new language and culture was challenging, I believe that it was in the moments of struggle I learned the most. The people I met, the memories I made and the city itself will forever hold a special place in my heart.