



Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title: A Taste of Mexico: Food, Culture and Language in Our Neighbor to the South
Name: Rachel Balsam

Other Team Members:

Program: New York City Program

Trip Dates: 11/30/-0001 - 11/30/-0001

Location Visited: Mexico

Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 01

Project Summary: Swine flu, drug wars, a failing economy...what could we in the United States possibly have to learn from Mexico?? Well, after my six-week journey to three distinct regions of the country, my mind has been opened! My goals were to improve my Spanish, get into the rhythm of daily life by staying with local families and learn more about regional cuisines. I first traveled to the colonial city of Oaxaca, where I lived with a generous family that had been coffee farmers before moving to the city. During this time, I attended Spanish school in the mornings and was able to take several cooking classes to learn more about Oaxacan cuisine, which has deep indigenous roots and makes good use of local squash, corn and dairy. Next, I traveled Puebla, a city famed for its multitude of Catholic churches. Here I began to appreciate the influence of Catholicism in Mexican culture, which I now think is essential to any understanding of the country. I attended a wonderful Spanish language program, Livit Cultural Immersion, and thanks to the teachers there I advanced greatly in a short time. My homestay "mother" in Puebla is an extraordinary baker and cook, and her son is a professional chef, so I was able to learn about traditional Poblano cooking at home. Before returning to Oaxaca for a few more cooking classes, I spent a week on the Yucatan peninsula, where I hired a local guide in order to practice my Spanish in context and learn more about coastal cuisine. I am incredibly grateful to have had the chance to experience so many positive aspects of Mexico throughout my journey.

Career Impact: *Improved Spanish communication skills greatly in a short time

*Learned firsthand how the seasons, the land and the people converge to create distinct regional cuisines

*Gained a deeper understanding of Mexican daily life including women's roles, religious rituals and festivals

*Began to comprehend the questions Mexico grapples with internally regarding politics, drugs, oil, big business, immigration and relations with the United States

*Developed the ability to slow down and notice beautiful details

Classroom/Community Impact:*As an ESL teacher, I have increased respect from my students who know how hard I am working to acquire a second language myself.

*I have a wealth of materials and experiences to apply to my "Food and Culture" class.

*The Mexican students know how much I loved my experience in their country, and I have a deepened connection with them.

*I am newly motivated to improve students' access to healthy, delicious, local food during the school day and in our community.

Open Response: *Language learning and food blog: <http://seekashadow.wordpress.com>

*Planning winter course on "Food and Culture in Mexico"

*Initiation of a weekly girls' running group as a starting point for discussing healthy living

*Reinvigoration of my school's annual International Food Festival, beginning with an informative and delicious table featuring Mexico

*Development of a weekly farmer's market or CSA (community supported agriculture) share site at our school

Quote: The more I learn about Mexico, the more fascinated I become. How could I have let our neighbor be a stranger all this time?

Photos:



On the way to one of the 300 Catholic churches in Cholula, Puebla



Making mole in Puebla--yes, that tortilla is supposed to be on fire!



Stuffed squash blossoms in Oaxaca



At the Museo Cultural de Oaxaca



With the wonderful director/teacher of my language school in Puebla



Enjoying cooking class



School lunch of rajas con crema in Puebla



Making tortillas on a comal