

Latin Flavor

Blake students soak up Spanish and the vibrant tapestry of Cuernavaca, the language-school capital of Mexico



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Feature

By Alyssa Ford

Cuernavaca, in the Mexican state of Morelos (pronounced moh-RAY-los) was once the summer home of Emperor Maximilian, renowned as the “city of eternal spring” for its thermal wells and crisp-cold natural rivers.

Today, Cuernavaca is more bustling city than spa resort, with honking taxis, open-air jewelry markets, tacos al pastor carts and street vendors selling pirated DVDs. Home to more than a million and a half people, Cuernavaca is a city where sometimes the sidewalk disappears and you have to walk on the side of the street. In this fascinating urban jungle of new sounds, foods and words, 22 Blake students, from sophomores to seniors, threw themselves into a monthlong intensive program. Their reward: a super-concentrated dose of language and culture.

The school they enrolled in, called UNIVERSAL Center for Language and Social Communication, has been ushering international students through its intensive program since 1983. On the tropical campus, with leaf-roof canopy classrooms, courtyards and a pool, the

Keegan Dubbs '09 (left) and Ummul Kathawalla '09 with a Chinelo dancer

Blake students took in four solid classroom weeks from mid-June to mid-July, improving their Spanish but also learning about regional cooking, Aztec history, salsa dance and more. There were plenty of grammar drills, but there were also frank discussions about Mexican politics, abortion, cultural norms, and how “el machismo” — the macho view of masculinity — affects gay men in Mexico.

“I really thought that certain topics would be too controversial,” says junior Tara Lukas. “But in class, we were really bouncing ideas off each other. Nothing was off limits. I was using Spanish vocabulary words I never dreamed I’d be using.”

The students navigated through Cuernavaca, taking local buses, walking or hailing cabs, having to ask for directions, negotiate fares and translate maps. After the big meal of the day at 3 o’clock (the “comida”), many Blake

kids would take a traditional siesta and then congregate in El Centro, Cuernavaca’s downtown, around 8 or 9 o’clock to watch break-dance performances and buy soccer jerseys, cowboy hats and tall glass bottles of Mexican Coke, made with real cane sugar instead of high-fructose corn syrup. Some of the young women got catcalls — “joye güeritas” (Hey blondies!) — which they promptly ignored.

“One of the most powerful things about the trip is that, for some students, this is the most independence they’ve ever had,” says Jon Dicus, a Blake Upper School Spanish teacher who accompanied the students. “From day one, they are the owners of their own experience. They learn how to be independent travelers and to take control of their own cultural encounters.”

Pairs of Blake students were assigned to different Mexican families, adding another layer of richness to the experience. Dicus and his wife, Jenny, stayed in a yellow-

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painted house with lush bougainvillea, palm trees and a swinging cage with a tropical bird in the front yard. His host mother, Guadalupe, and her elderly sister told him about the days of lawlessness just after the revolution, when people washed their clothes in the street canals, and their mother was almost kidnapped by roaming bandits. Seniors Milanda Landis and Lily Conover watched Mexican soap operas with their host mom, Lucina. While Lucina cooked dinner, she would tell them Mexican legends about the city and the pair of volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtacihuatl, hovering to the east and southeast. Lukas and her roommate, Ellen Abram ’09, couldn’t sleep at their Mexican house for the first week because their bedroom window wouldn’t shut properly, and salsa and ranchera music wafted in all night from the food cart on the street. Junior Ummul Kathawalla’s host mom, Sara Lidia, helped her plan a sweet 16 birthday party for her other “daughter,” Keegan Dubbs ’09. Peter Hajas ’08 bonded closely with his host brother, who had plans to visit Minnesota in November.

“The night before we left, both Lily and I were bawling,” says Landis. “We talked about how powerful and

Pictured, L to R: UNIVERSAL teacher Ricardo, Eric Barry ’09, Ellen Abram ’09, Milanda Landis ’08, Tara Lukas ’09 and Lily Conover ’08 during class time



Peter Hajas '08 (in foreground) and Devin Durant '09 with young friends at Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos Orphanage

shocking it was that a place could feel this much like home to us in such a very short time.”

When the group left the happy confines of home and school, they went out to do cultural sightseeing. At the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, they saw locals reading with obvious emotion the letters of Frida Kahlo, part of an exhibit now on view at the Walker Art Center. At the Muros Museum in Cuernavaca, they took in a multi-panel painted mural by celebrated artist Diego Rivera, which catalogs the conquest of Mexico.

On another day, they took an hour-and-a-half charter bus ride through mountainous terrain to the historic silver city of Taxco, nestled against the hillsides, with the stone-carved, Baroque-style Santa Prisca Cathedral in the middle.





Pictured, L to R: Bryanne Colby '09, Mihika Hemmady '10, Tess Perese '10, Keegan Dubbs '09, Ummul Kathawalla '09, Chloe Rekow '09, Peter Hajas '08 and Devin Durant '09 at Teotihuacan

Each trip offered a fresh sampling of life in central Mexico. They jumped in the fountains at the Jardín Borda, a botanic garden. They played with 3- and 4-year-olds at an orphanage. They used ropes to jump into the chilly Las Estacas natural river, and they marveled at the stunning view atop Tepozteco Pyramid, until Peter Hajas almost got run off the mountain by a pack of raccoon-like coatimundi eager for his Oreos.

But like many things in life, the most powerful experiences were completely unplanned, like when they stumbled into a massive political rally in support of López Obrador, who was determined to have lost the presidential election by Mexico's supreme court. In an enormous city square in Mexico City, called the Zócalo, the Blake students found themselves walking against the tide in a sea of people, their ears filled with shouts, chanting and the rhythms of timbales and drums.

Kathawalla and her roommate found their way over to an impromptu market, set up by villagers hoping to cater to the throngs of people at the political rally. There they met a shaman from a rural district who offered to “cleans” them for just a few pesos.

“He did a little ceremony with some burning incense, and he cleansed us,” says Kathawalla. “It felt like the whole trip — wonderfully strange, and like nothing in Minnesota.”



Pictured, L to R: Bryanne Colby '09, Caroline Burns '09, Eric Barry '09, Milanda Landis '08, Ellen Abram '09, Peter Hajas '08 and Devin Durant '09 at Janitzio, Michoacán