

Entre Amigos: SOU exchange students rave about Guanajuato



Southern Oregon University exchange student Cynthia Trujillo stands beside the stone snake head at the foot of the step-Pyramid of Kukulc-n, a Mayan ruin on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. Trujillo visited the ruins before beginning classes at the University of Guanajuato. [Photo courtesy of Cynthia Trujillo]

By Kernan Turner Amigo Club

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Two Amigo Club scholarship recipients, Cynthia Trujillo and Sarah Martinez, have returned full of enthusiasm from a semester attending the University of Guanajuato as Southern Oregon University exchange students.

“There are so many little nuances to the Mexican culture that touched my heart,” Trujillo said in an email interview. “My many experiences with the friendly, warm, respectful, caring, and laid-back attitude of the Mexican culture were what impressed me the most. And ... so much more: the food, music, gatherings, fiestas, parades, dances, colors, flavors, artwork, smells -- Mexico is so full of life and ‘culture,’ it’s incredible.”

Trujillo and Martinez attended the university from mid-July through mid-December. They responded recently to questions about their Guanajuato stay.

Martinez lived with a Mexican family that had been hosting students for 30 years.

“My semester in Guanajuato was filled with traditions, holidays, history, and ... school, in ... a relaxed, friendly and welcoming” atmosphere, she said.

She has earned her SOU bachelor’s degree and hopes to become a physician assistant, using her “Spanish and knowledge of Mexican culture to better assist patients.”

Her hosts smoothed her transition into Mexican culture by arranging what Martinez described as “one of the most memorable experiences I have from Guanajuato” — a pre-Columbian “temazcal” sweat-lodge ceremony to cleanse body and spirit.

“We were guided through the ritual by a local woman,” she said, who “put us in touch with our ancestors, had us acknowledge and honor the pain, and ... explained that once we were cleansed we would be new again.”

Trujillo first shared an apartment with another student, but spent the final three months in a studio apartment close to the university and an all-girls youth center where she worked as a volunteer intern.

She cooked for herself, but frequented cafes with friends and ate a lot of street-food “found on any given street, most anytime (tacos at 3 a.m. is common in Guanajuato.)” She shared dinner sometimes with some 30 girls and staff from the youth shelter.

She found classes at the university more relaxed than at SOU, but her instructors “were wonderful, funny, intelligent and approachable; the authoritative gap between teacher and student was just barely there.”

Signing up for classes was stressful for her and all the foreign exchange students, until she “learned to relax and groove into a different system.” That included adjusting to “Mexico time,” exemplified by a professor who arrived 15 minutes late for class on a regular basis and some friends and a dance instructor, also routinely late to scheduled times.

“After becoming aware of such cultural differences, I learned to love them, and that the culture fits me well.”

All university classes were in Spanish, which was difficult at first for Trujillo and Martinez.

Martinez said the instructors were patient and explained intricacies of the language, “like idioms and their origin, or even the slang.”

Trujillo said her Mexican friends wanted to practice their English with her. She was upset with herself for speaking so much English, but “in hindsight, I imagine that was my saving grace. I think it helped me to maintain emotional stability; to be able to have a balance between the two languages.”

Trujillo, a first-generation college student majoring at SOU in Spanish with a minor in Native American studies, said she decided while in Guanajuato to seek a master’s degree after graduation.

“Studying abroad was a strengthening experience that helped me believe in myself more and see a new world of opportunities,” Trujillo said. “My career ideas for the future are endless ... Guanajuato was a truly life changing experience, and I am forever grateful.”

— *Amigo Club’s Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears on the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.*