



Having dinner at *Gozobi Restaurante* in Oaxaca. Except for the lady in glasses, these are my housemates, with Eunice in black on the right.

Learning Spanish surrounded by the culture and cuisine of Oaxaca

I have always found Spanish to be a melodious language. However, because I didn't speak Spanish, and my preference is to travel independently, I found myself having to rely on people working in the hospitality business for my travels in Spanish-speaking countries. English is already my second language, and it took me years to become fluent, so I worried that learning Spanish would be too hard, but a chance encounter in February 2018 changed my mind.

While visiting Villa de Leyva, Colombia, I met a Chinese woman selling ceramics in the market. Her background was similar to mine, but she spoke fluent Spanish. Observing

her talking to her customers and friends was an incredible experience, sparking my interest to learn the language.

Choosing a program

During several trips to Mexico over the last few years, I met locals who told me that I must visit Oaxaca because it is so unique. Since February is one of the best months to visit, with little rainfall and daytime temperatures that are not very hot, I decided February 2019 would be the time to start my classes.

With that in mind, I began my search for Spanish-language schools in Oaxaca. Of the schools I found,

I discovered that the Oaxaca International Spanish Language School (*Morelos 1107; phone +52 951 501 1832, www.oaxacainternational.com*) had the best reviews.

I emailed the principal, Ileana Jiménez, several times with questions about cost, accommodations, etc., and she answered all of them in detail, replying promptly even during weekends. She was so warm in her replies that I felt this was the right school for me.

One of the decisions I had to make was whether to stay with a host family or in a hotel. After bouncing the idea around for a few days, I decided that in order to be totally

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immersed in the Spanish language, I should stay with a host family. Plus the family could provide up to three meals a day. Though I liked eating out and trying different kinds of food, dining out once a day would be enough for me.

Ileana arranged a room with a private bath for me and said that one of the family members would pick me up at Oaxaca's airport.

In all my travels, I have never bought a one-way ticket with no planned return date, but that would give me some flexibility, and Mexico doesn't require proof of departure when entering.

My plan was to go to San Cristóbal de las Casas to continue my Spanish lessons after Oaxaca and, if I had time, visit Puebla, near Mexico City.

Getting there

American Airlines had daily non-stop flights from Dallas-Fort Worth to Oaxaca, so I took a red-eye flight from Los Angeles to Dallas, then on to Oaxaca, arriving in the afternoon. Rodolfo was there to pick me up.

The nephew of the homestay owner, Eunice, Rodolfo (who spoke very good English) told me about life

in Oaxaca on our drive "home" and pointed out the signs that I should look for when walking home from school.

Eunice, along with her two Scottish terriers, Bruno and Cheeky, greeted me on our arrival at the 5-room house.

Breakfast was served at 8:00 every morning. There were three guests from the US and two from Canada, and we filled up every available seat around the dining table. Eunice and her mother, Carmenita, prepared a sumptuous breakfast while this special group of people talked about many topics, partly in Spanish. The purpose was to practice. Eunice and Rodolfo would correct any mistakes made.

Accommodations cost \$19 a night, including breakfast; it cost \$5 more for dinner. Since the home was one mile from the school, I chose to include breakfast *and* dinner.

Before I left L.A., I upgraded my Cricket Wireless plan to include unlimited data so that I could use my phone to access the internet as well as make calls within Mexico and to the US. I also downloaded a map of Oaxaca into my [MAPS.ME](https://maps.me) app so I wouldn't get lost. I used WhatsApp to keep in contact with Eunice and Rodolfo when out.

Since you can't drink the tap water in Oaxaca, drinking water was provided. There was also usually a



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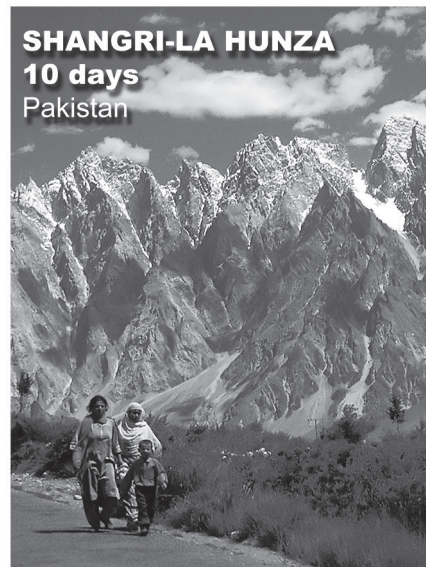
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Raul, the free-walking-tour guide, in front of the Xochimilco Aqueduct.

basket of fruit on the table, so we could take some to class for a snack.

From the moment I walked into the house, I felt the hospitality of Eunice and Rodolfo. They were very helpful in all aspects, and the Oaxacan food that was prepared for us was delicious. Every dinner was different.

Heading to school

It took about 20 to 25 minutes to walk the mile to the school, which was only about 10 minutes from the Zócalo (central plaza).

The school wasn't big. It had three rooms inside and multiple tables outside under sun umbrellas.

I was given a placement test on my first day, which put me in the beginners' class with four others. The first two hours of each class was devoted to grammar. After a 15-minute break, we continued with an hour and 45 minutes of conversation.

Group lessons were definitely more fun and less stressful than taking private lessons. I could learn

from my classmates and give my brain a break when it wasn't my turn to respond.

The pace of the class was brisk. A topic would be introduced, followed by written or verbal exercises. Several times we were asked to randomly select a verb from a deck of flash cards and would have to use it to form a sentence.

I was fascinated by each topic (examples of which included health care, nutrition and diet in Mexico, area festivals, and tunnels under Oaxaca), and when I couldn't fully understand something, my teacher would translate it into English when asked.

There was never a dull moment, but after four hours of Spanish, I was mentally exhausted each day.

Seeing some sights

Every Thursday, the school organized a tour; the tours were included in our tuition (\$180 per week).

On the first Thursday, we went to

San Bartolo Coyotepec to see a demonstration of how black-clay pottery was made. The demonstration went from clay to finished piece, explained in detail but all in Spanish. After that, we went to the Museo Estatal de Arte Popular to see displays of tapestry.

On another Thursday, we went to Santo Tomás Jalieza for a weaving demonstration. There were four women weaving intricate patterns of different sizes who explained in detail how they were made. Then we went to San Martín Tilcajete for a woodcarving demonstration.

Besides participating in the school-organized excursions, my classmates and I went to Zona Arqueológica de Monte Albán on our own.

I went to the tourist information kiosk in the Zócalo to find out where to catch the bus and was told to go to **Hotel Rivera** to buy a ticket (60 pesos, or \$3, round trip), then walk another two blocks to the bus station. Buses left every hour from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., returning every hour from noon to 5. The entrance fee to Monte Albán was 75 pesos.

The important archaeological site has a beautiful museum (the only place with a bathroom) as well as a snack shop with outside seating, a jewelry store and a gift shop.

Outside the museum and up a hill is the main archaeological plaza. It is huge! One can see playing fields and tombs, and on either side of the huge plazas are temples. My classmates and I spent six hours there.

The next day, Eunice organized a trip to Tlacolula de Matamoros to visit its Sunday market, where people actually barter goods, but you *can* use pesos. From the Second-Class Bus Station in Oaxaca, the cost for the 25-mile bus ride was 18 pesos, and it took 55 minutes to get there.

The bus was *very* crowded, and the driver kept asking us to move farther to the back of the bus to accommodate more passengers. Before too long, I felt like I was in a compactor! People kept coming in from the front, but few left from the back, as we were all going to the market.

Eunice introduced us to many things. We tried fruit that we'd never seen before, ate lamb and goat tacos,

had small sips of different kinds of mescal and had some *tejate*, a drink made from maize and cocoa.

Along the way, Eunice bought vegetables and tortillas, and we ended inside a market, where she bought raw beef and sausages. Then she asked the vendor to grill the beef and sausages together with the vegetables she'd bought. She also bought some *chapulines* (grasshoppers) and avocados. (I hadn't conquered my fear of eating grasshoppers yet, but others said they were very good and very crunchy.)

Some of us went to a nearby store to buy beer, and we all ate our meals standing up inside the market.

The cost for all the food, including all the fruit, the tacos, etc., was only 70 pesos per person.

Back in Oaxaca, my classmate Ann and I saw a poster advertising free walking tours on the wall of the information kiosk in the Zócalo — there was one at 11 a.m. and one at 4 p.m. every day except Sunday — so we joined the 3-hour afternoon tour. The tour took us to an organic market; a restaurant that served excellent tacos; a place that sold organic bread; the aqueduct; the Ex Convento de Santo Domingo de Guzmán; a library for graphic arts, and an art gallery, where our guide, Raul, talked about politics and the politicians depicted on one of the paintings on display.

We ended our tour in a bar for a mezcal tasting, trying three different kinds of this alcohol made from the agave plant.

Raul was so good that Ann and I joined the same tour again a week later!

On a different afternoon, my housemate Betty and I went to **Casa Colonial B&B**, only two minutes' walk from Eunice's home, to listen to jazz music. The cost for the almost two hours of jazz music was 200 pesos (about \$8), and hamburgers were for sale for 90 pesos each.

Casa Colonial is huge, spanning half a block and containing 16 rooms. We got there a little late and there were only two seats left.

The band played in the garden surrounded by trees, and the idyllic



Dancers perform at the Guelaguetza show at the Hotel Quinta Real.

ambience, the soothing music and the delicious food made it a truly memorable evening.

Every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, there was a *grupo de noche en bici* (night bike group) that rode through Oaxaca from 9 p.m. until 10:30. Betty and I rented bikes from Renta de Bicicletas en Mundo Ceiba for 70 pesos for 1½ hours and joined the group of 20 to 30 riders. With loud music blaring from a giant boom box towed by the leader, we rode on dark side streets and brightly lit main thoroughfares. It was a lot of fun. We saw many of the things we'd seen during the day, but they all looked so beautiful basking in the night's lights.

Unfortunately, because of a family emergency, I had to leave Oaxaca after three weeks. Before I left, I asked one of my teachers about continuing to take Spanish lessons back home, and she told me of the availability of Skype lessons through the school (250 pesos per hour). With the exception of a few seconds of weak internet signal a couple of times during each hour-long lesson, the quality of the calls has been generally pretty good.

In summary, this was one of the best trips of my life. I brought back more than memories and photo-

graphs; I learned some Spanish. My comprehension is next to zero, but I *am* progressing.

I want to return to Oaxaca someday, to attend the language school again and stay with my beloved homestay hosts. Oaxaca is a truly phenomenal city endowed with a rich culture and traditions. ♦

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