



West Virginia IFYE Program

Vol. 9 No. 2

December 2006

Greetings from Guanajuato, again! I've had a busy few weeks filled with festivals, holidays, traveling, and much more.

Guanajuato hosts the International Cervantino Festival for three weeks each October. Dance, music, theater, and other cultural events happen all over town during the festival. Acts are brought in from all over Mexico, and even all over the world, to perform. This year, the state of Chiapas was the honored guest from Mexico, and England was the honored guest from the world. These two areas brought their best performances and were the focus of the festival. And acts are not the only things that come from around the world; people from all around the globe visit Guanajuato in October to take part in the festival.

I had the opportunity to attend a performance of William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" that was put on by a group from Spain. Even though the performance was in Spanish, I was able to understand much of what was happening by body language and voices, as well as my previous knowledge of the play. In addition to "Hamlet," I stumbled on many street performances such as mimes, musicians, and even acrobatics.

As much as I enjoyed the cultural aspect of Cervantino, the number of tourists was difficult to deal with. Guanajuato usually has a decent amount of tourists around, but during Cervantino, it was unbelievable. I had trouble walking through the main part of town because of the crowds. It was like being in Morgantown on the biggest West Virginia University football game day of the year but for a solid three weeks. The restaurants even raised their prices for the festival to make the most of having so many out of town people around. I am a little ashamed to say that I wasn't sorry to see the town return to normal once the festival ended.

After Cervantino was over, I had about a week to relax before the next big holiday. November 2 is Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. While it might sound like a scary or morbid holiday, it is actually quite joyful and upbeat. Family members and friends gather to celebrate the lives of people who have passed away. Almost every household and many businesses create altars to their loved ones. The altars generally include a picture of the person who has died, foods, candles, water, and marigolds. Altars dedicated to children usually include toys for the spirit.

The Mexican people make special foods for Day of the Dead to use on the altars to enjoy themselves. One of my favorites is pan de muerto, bread of the dead. One type of pan de

muerto is a sweet bread that is shaped to look vaguely like bones. Another type is flavored with anise and is supposed to be eaten with cajeta de guayaba. Cajeta is goat milk caramel that can be flavored with different fruits and sweets. Families also make tamales and atole, both pre-Spanish foods.

The family I am living with created an altar in the house and had the entire extended family over on the night of November 1. I was also able to see many other altars throughout the city that were made in plazas or windows of businesses. Most of the restaurants in town had a small altar in a corner of the room. There were fireworks all night on November 1 and parades through town.

My favorite aspect of Day of the Dead was the market leading up to the festivities. For about a week before the holiday, one of the plazas in town was transformed into many small booths of people selling items to leave on altars. There were the standard candles and orange marigolds. But many of the items being sold were candies shaped into everything imaginable. You could buy white candy skulls and have someone's name written on the forehead. Or you could buy a small cardboard coffin with a candy skeleton inside. Everything was homemade, and the market was always packed with people looking for the perfect item to leave on an altar for someone they love.

When I haven't been attending cultural events or taking part in holidays, I have had the chance to do some traveling. I made a two-day trip to the nearby towns of San Miguel de Allende and Dolores Hidalgo. Both towns are rich with history of the Mexican revolution of 1810. I visited the church in Dolores Hidalgo where Miguel Hidalgo gave the cry of freedom on Sept. 16, 1810. His speech is now repeated each year on Independence Day.

In addition to the historical sites in San Miguel, there is also a very large artisan market. Locals sell their crafts in stalls at very reasonable prices to hordes of tourists. You can buy pewter figurines, silver jewelry, and lots of ceramics. They make beautiful ceramic plates, bowls, soap dishes, and even light switch covers. You can get just about anything you'd want in your home made from beautiful painted ceramics.

Throughout my traveling and holidays I've discovered some interesting things about Mexico:

- It is impossible to buy large Band-Aids down here. I fell in a hole while walking, cut my foot open, and needed a large Band-Aid. Hopefully the only size they sell is the standard small size. It is also very difficult to find a bottle of aloe to soothe a sun burn.
- Time is a very loose concept. Very few things begin on time and it's not uncommon for someone to be a half hour late, or even more, in meeting up with a friend. For example, most of the students for the English class I teach show up anywhere from five to 15 minutes late. This generally isn't frowned upon by other Mexicans. I'm still having trouble getting used to it, but always carrying a book makes it easier to pass the time.
- I love going to the movie theater in town! First, it is extremely inexpensive compared to home. Tickets cost only about \$2. I also really enjoy reading the

- Spanish subtitles and finding interesting translations. My favorite so far was translating “a’ight?” to “ya?” And my final reason for loving the movie theater is intermission. Around half-way through each movie, the lights come on for about five minutes so everyone can use the restroom and get their free refill on popcorn.
- I finally got sick for the first time down here. When I went to the pharmacy, I found out that I could buy antibiotics without a prescription. The only downside is that I need to know the exact name of the medicine I want to buy, because the person behind the counter is not always a pharmacist. This can lead to purchasing the wrong medicine more than I like.
 - The rainy season in Guanajuato is supposed to be over by the end of September. We’ve had exceptionally strange weather recently. It rained for five days in a row in the middle of October, and my host father told me that it hasn’t rained in October for five years. Jokingly, I blamed it on El Niño.
 - Construction rarely seems to get finished around town. Sidewalks are constantly torn up, and a new road is closed each day. A friend explained to me that most construction workers are paid by the hour so it makes sense for them to take their time on a project. It makes walking through town a new adventure each day depending on what’s passable and what’s not.

My last month in Guanajuato should be very interesting. I am planning a trip to see the monarch butterfly migration in Morelia, a nearby town. Before I come home, I should have a chance to experience some of the preparations for the Christmas holidays.

Hasta luego!

Amanda

P.S. Please have a look at my latest photos.



