Report to International Study Travel Grant Committee

From: Stephen Burr, Chair Hospitality Management

Re: Language Study travel Grant to study Spanish in Sayulita Mexico.

Date: Oct. 30, 2011

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During the months of January and February 2011, I had the opportunity to take Spanish language lessons at the Costa Verde Language School in Sayulita, Mexico.

Sayulita is located about a forty–five minute bus ride north west of Puerto Vallarta.

The language school is part of a Costa Verde International School which is described according to its website as:

“an ecological, community-oriented, multicultural and bilingual private school located in Sayulita, Nayarit, Mexico. Incorporating the natural beauty and dynamic culture of the local area, **CVIS** provides an intellectually stimulating curriculum for preschool through 6th grade with small class sizes and hands on instruction to inspire healthy, happy and well-adjusted life-long learners.”

(<http://www.colegiocostaverde.com/Joomla/en/about/about-costa-verde.html>)

Within the School environment, there are a variety of learners from preschool to adult travellers. The travellers range in age from early twenties to seniors; from diverse backgrounds from around the globe and with variety of Spanish language proficiency from beginner to advanced.

After a brief discussion during registration with a language instructor, it was determined that I was a beginner. Initially, I registered for a weeklong session – 2 hours each morning for 5 days. The classes covered basics – alphabet pronunciation, basic phrases and simple verb conjugation and along with basic questions and conversations.

After a break of a week, I arranged for two weeks of a smaller tutor session with one other person. The second training session was more challenging and interesting. First, it was a native speaker who was able to better explain the nuances of the language, provide richer personal insight of the history and cultural background of Mexicans.

Also, the language school offered cultural experiences; a key one was an Aztec circle ceremony. A woman of Aztec descent, in traditional clothing, performed a dance ceremony. The participants were engaged in the ceremony through the use of musical instruments and story telling.

The language training I achieved was minimal, but assisted me in travelling for the next two months throughout Mexico. The training enabled me to have simple conversations at bus stations, restaurants and accommodations. In these situations, I was able to make my needs known, and understand most of the information relayed to me. Attempting to speak the language, and as well as having some understandings of the cultural values seemed to make native speakers more willing to work with me as I struggled through these conversations.

The values of this learning opportunity were numerous. The most important value was the challenges of returning to school as a student. Once again, I experienced the anxiety of getting home work done, not understanding the material or how to pronounce or how to conjugate verbs. Struggling through the daily classes, once again reminded me of the difficulties students have understanding new course material, as they are confused, feel that is all “Spanish” to me. Also I recognized the difficulties of studying another language. My previous language education was many years ago, and High school French was not my best subject.

Doing the language and cultural programs afforded me better insight into the Mexican way of life. It gave me a window to view their ways, and enables me, in a small manner, understand ‘where our Mexican students come from’ and the hopes and ambitions that lead them to Vancouver Island University.

The opportunity to take these language classes refocused my sensitive to student learning experience, re-vitalized my love of learning and hopefully made me more sensitive to all students, especially international students. I may not have learned a great deal of Spanish, but through the language training, I acquired a great deal of understanding of Mexican language, culture and society. I will be returning to Mexico in the future and continue to take language classes.

Thank you to the committee for affording me this opportunity.

Stephen Burr,

Chair, Hospitality Management.