

Learning Survival Skills

By Heather Mansfield, UCLA

To tell the truth, my reasons for choosing the Yucatan Peninsula to study

abroad were not academic. The thought of being able to spend weekends frolicking through the Mexican Caribbean and the ancient land of the Maya was the deciding factor in applying for the UCLA independent research program.

When I arrived, I knew very little about Mayan indigenous culture. My projected thesis, studying the correlation between ancient goddesses of the Maya and modern-day Catholic saint worship, was discarded when my research adviser informed me that the ancient Maya only had one goddess, the goddess of the moon. Nevertheless, she reluctantly drove me four hours east of Merida on a Sunday morning to introduce me to the small indigenous community of Xocen (pronounced show-ken), a focal point of religious activity and believed by the to-cats to be the geographic center of the world.

I had the idea that the Xocenese would be accustomed to foreigners studying their culture and that the community had a long-standing relationship with the university. Not so. They hadn't even been told that I was coming. Within minutes after arrival it became obvious that I was in a sobering and serious predicament.

When I extended my hand to greet a little girl, she screamed and ran in the opposite direction. Fearing the worst, the girl's grandfather immediately took me to the village church so the Gods could judge "the nature of my spirit. It is said that the church was built by the Spanish directly on top of the portal to the ancient underworld. I wasn't struck by lightning and bad winds didn't begin to blow, thus the Gods approved of me and was able to stay.

Thanks to my ignorance and lack of preparation, the thought never occurred to me that the Xocenese wouldn't speak Spanish. Thankfully, my appointed "sister," Pasqualla, was fluent in both Spanish and Yucatec Maya.

I spent two months in Xocan. In the beginning the children still wouldn't come within 10 feet of another human being who looked, spoke, and acted in ways beyond their imagination and understanding. But four weeks into my stay I finally had the breakthrough I had been hoping for. I etched a hopscotch in the road, and the outrageous sight of the silly gringa hopping on one foot finally won the trust of the children.

My previous conception of "women's work" was challenged and subsequently was changed considerably. I discovered I was even guilty of not valuing traditional women's work. The North American model of feminism has very little relevance in the Xocenese community. The separation of labor is respected and necessary for survival.

Along with survival skills, I learned about human kindness and humility and grappled with the injustice of poverty, oppression, and racism toward the indigenous people. The experience gave purpose to my life and changed my vision of the world. I've just recently returned from another land of the Maya, Guatemala, where I volunteered at a school for poor children, and I will return there for the rest of my life when time and finances permit.

As for the goddess, contrary to the somewhat biased anthropological establishment, she is alive and thriving in the hearts of the Mayan people, primarily through the cult of the Virgin Mary. The Mother Moon Goddess, Ixchel, gave birth to many daughters who then passed on their knowledge to their own daughters, sisters, and aunts. These modern-day feminine deities are deeply rooted within the Mayan spirit.

As for frolicking on the beach, it didn't happen. I did manage a short Caribbean excursion but found it difficult to enjoy myself knowing that a good number of my friends in Xocen would die without ever swimming in the ocean, although they live only five hours away. To this day, the absurdity of such extreme poverty is difficult for my "first world" mind to understand.

I'm still in contact with my friends and family in Xocen. They love to decorate the inside of their thatched dwellings with the old calendars I send each year. Last year, Pasqualla sent me a baby dress that she had sewed and embroidered herself in traditional Yucatec style. That I would travel alone and unprotected in a strange land was a constant source of bewilderment for the Xocenes, and Pasqualla's gift was surely a statement about my seemingly perpetual husbandlessness.

One day I will return to Xocen with my own daughter, garbed in Pasqualla's fine needle work. I just hope that in this era of free trade agreements, globalization, and migration to the cities the Xocenese community will still be there to receive us.

HE.ATHER MANSFIELD writes from Los Angeles, CA. She is a 1998 graduate of UCLA. She traveled by rail through Europe the summer after her junior year, and completed two study abroad programs her senior year: a field research program in Mexico and a political science exchange project in Chile, where she interned with the Communist Party.

Affording London

By Aimee Walker, Smith College

It came as no surprise that London is an expensive place to live—all big cities in Europe are expensive.

However, I soon found that there are ways to live in London cheaply if you plan carefully.

Multiple-use passes, good for a week or a month, can be used on either the bus or the subway. The monthly pass costs E60, which seems outrageous, but, unless you are in central London, you'll probably spend more than that on travel by paying for each ride individually. Unlike New York, where your \$1.50 token will take you almost anywhere in the city, London is divided into zones of concentric circles: The closer you are to central London, the cheaper it will be to get to most of the museums, theaters, and restaurants. If your hotel, hostel, or dorm is within zones one or two, it will not only cut down on your travel time, it will also make traveling on either the tube (London's subway system) or the buses a lot cheaper. In addition, within zone one it will also be possible to walk to a lot of places. Trafalgar Square, Picadilly Circus, and Covent Garden are all within walking distance of each other.

The low cost of travel to the rest of Europe makes up for the expense of getting around London. Cheap student travel deals abound, just look for them. I recommend a trip to STA Travel or Council Travel in the U.S. to get your plane ticket and your Eurail pass and another trip over there to make additional travel arrangements. The locations for these agencies can be found on their web sites: <http://www.statravel.com>.

If you are staying in London and only plan to travel to a few other places in England, then the Britrail student travel pass is not really worth the money. Take an inner-city coach (bus).

Some London shows are so cheap for students that it is more expensive to see a movie than a play. With your international student ID you can get really reasonable tickets. (See your study abroad office before you leave.) At the Royal Court theater, which stages world premieres as well as classics, tickets are only 10 pence (about 16c) if you are one of the first eight to get people in line at 7. If you get there at around 5:30 you are almost guaranteed to get a spot. Balcony opera seats are £3.50 (\$6.50) at the opera house opposite the Royal Court, so if you don't get the really cheap tickets, you can still see a great performance across the street. Most of the other theaters in town offer a student rate for standby tickets at around £5-Cr0 (\$8-\$16). The National Theater always has something interesting in one of its many theaters. Time Out magazine, which you can pick up at any newsstand, also lists lectures and other interesting events that you won't find in tourist brochures. London's National Gallery is free. The attached National Portrait Gallery is also interesting, especially for students of British literature or history. Both galleries are large enough to spend the day in.

Inexpensive restaurants abound in London, but there are a few alternatives. Food is always cheaper when you order it to go ("take away"). Covent Garden, which is only a short walk away from the National Gallery, has a sandwich shop and constant free entertainment-the street performers display every sort of talent from juggling to opera singing. Just pick up a sandwich and sit out on any of the benches in the center isle of the marketplace and watch the show.

In London, like everywhere else, the tourist activities are the most expensive. By looking for alternatives, you can save money and have a more interesting experience.

ALVEE WALKER, Smith College, class of 1999, completed an independent study last year at Kings College in London.

The Lifelong Effects

By Mary Ayad, Univ. of Colorado

The study abroad learning experience continues well into the months after you return home. Since you can't always know in advance what you will learn, you must be accepting and flexible in absorbing new knowledge along the way. These retrospective reflections that you undergo when you return home and begin processing your study abroad experiences are a valuable part of your learning process and growth.

The main reasons that students go abroad include opportunities to attend a well-known foreign university, learn a new culture and language, and gain international experience and social skills-as well as develop survival skills in a new and challenging environment. Overseas experience also gives students an edge when it comes to competing for jobs and graduate school programs. All these are goals that are quickly met because they are intrinsic to the study abroad experience.

Living outside of one's original environment is the best way to learn what is universal about humanity. Encountering potential hardships abroad can help turn challenges into opportunities for growth and development and foster interpersonal and communication skills. Overall, the opportunity to realize one's priorities and deeper values in life can be the most valuable benefit. Discovering a new culture, making new friends, and learning about one's self lasts long after the study abroad experience.

MFARY AYAD, Univ. of Colorado studied at the Univ. of Uppsala, Sweden during 1997-98.

Kimchi at Midnight

By Kate Pope, Cardinal Stritch Univ.

In Korea no cook uses sugar, and sweet desserts are only served at holidays. Tables are close to the ground and diners eat sitting cross-legged on cushions. Stainless steel chopsticks and spoons are the only utensils, and a bowl of rice occupies the place where a plate might be. Seven or eight side dishes in miniscule bowls fill the table: as they eat, people reach across the table and share from the same group of bowls. Among the dishes is always a peppery concoction called kimchi. Without it, the diners may as well not have eaten.

Chai and her family introduced me to kimchi immediately upon my arrival in Seoul. They took me to a restaurant, invited me to sit, and ordered. Then the waitress placed a bowl in the center of the table and Chai began motioning for me to try it. Inside the bowl was something that looked like dyed lettuce and smelled like pepper and garlic. Three glasses of water later, I finished my portion. A week later, could eat the same amount with only one glass of water. A few days later, Chai's mom offered to teach me to make it.

At midnight, she gathered the pans and ingredients, spread newspaper on the floor, pulled bags of cabbage and radishes from the pantry, and began mixing her version of the seasoning. Then we soaked the vegetables in red pepper and sealed them for ripening. A reasonable person doesn't ask people to kneel on the floor at midnight in puddles of pepper sauce, stain elbows red, and wade through vats of leaves just to have spicy lettuce for lunch the next day. Reason says go to sleep.

I wanted my American family to know how this felt, so I began planning a Korean meal for them immediately upon returning home. I bought a 20-pound bag of sticky rice at the Asian grocery store, untucked other Korean ingredients from the corners of my suitcase, and began concocting kimchi, pickled radish, sticky rice, Korean cakes, and seaweed rolls as solemnly as if I was preparing for a sacrament. I set the table with miniature bowls, chopsticks, and round cups. I taught my mom and dad to mimic my behavior with chopsticks, to lean into the bowls as they ate, and to eat directly out of the side dishes instead of taking individual portions.

I thought this would bring Korea back. I thought that if my family and I shared kimchi we would connect in the Korean way and that if they ate kimchi they would experience Korea at least understand what I felt. I thought I would feel as if I were in Korea again-sitting on the anchor at Incheon's port, hearing "Chai-na," as Chai's mom called her to the kitchen, watching brides pose for pictures at Kyongbokkung Palace, and breathing high, clean air from the top of Pulguksa Temple. The kimchi I made didn't ferment, though. The rice cakes resembled gray matter, and the kim pap crunched flat when I rolled it. When we sat to eat, my mom poured soy sauce on her rice, my dad's hands cramped from using the chopsticks, and both had to revert to forks and plates.

I tried to tell them stories as we ate-stories of what I had thought and felt when I was away and the differences between America and Korea. I wanted them to feel what I was feeling, to imagine the man who gathered laundry every morning in Seoul and the feel of bare feet on the heated floor. By eating kimchi I wanted them, in a small way, to be in Korea with me and to experience it with me. I couldn't recreate Korea, though. We were in America, and all I had of Korea were new recipes, stainless steel chopsticks, and five rolls of film-tourist trinkets that I now realize I was using to explain the meaning of the place.

I couldn't bring my parents to Chai's home at midnight. They have a separate reality in a separate world-a separate plate, a separate meal, and a separate way of making it. I must either isolate and reserve my thoughts for only myself or risk reducing them to snapshots and anecdotes. I'll have to enjoy kimchi and its memories alone, without them. That's a daunting thought. It shouldn't surprise me, though. I'm in America again, and Americans don't sit together on the floor at midnight. We sit separately, in chairs.

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