

Mexico: The Land of Contrasts



The natural landscape of Mexico is beautiful and bountiful. So why do so many Mexicans go hungry?

Mexico is a nation of tremendous contrasts. On the one hand there exists a landscape of incredible natural beauty, a nation with immense physical and biological resource endowment, and a vibrant kaleidoscopic culture. On the other hand there exists a land despoiled by an array of liquid hazardous and solid wastes, a national economy plagued by new age colonial imperialism and extensive walls to hide magnificent mansions while miserable tenements house much of Mexico's people.

My emotional and intellectual experience with QUEST mirrored these contrasts. As an environmental educator, I teach methods for solid and hazardous waste management, the microbiology of water and wastewater (Mexico's *aqua negra*), and resource management rooted in ecological literacy. Surely, my education and experience would allow me to envision solutions to Mexico's impending environmental crises. However, my *western* beliefs, knowledge, and views were challenged daily and I found myself increasingly asking questions to which "instant-coffee" style answers seemed, simultaneously, inadequate and doomed to failure.

For instance: Why is systematized recycling not practiced in a country flooded by Coca-Cola products delivered in plastic bottles? Why are soft drinks more popular than potable water and is there a correlation between the availability of the two? Why are gas prices so high for Mexicans, when the nation has so much petrochemical resource? Why is there so much hunger in the Mexican populace, when the country has such agricultural productivity?

What factors account for the burgeoning Mexican population, and what is the relationship between culture, history, politics and the impending environmental catastrophe?

The QUEST program immerses participants in the wake of economic globalization that includes environmental destruction from profligate resource extraction and waste management, racism, sexism, oppression and poverty.

The division between Malthusian "haves and have-nots" is overwhelming in this beautiful land. The QUEST experience



A river runs through it: pop bottles, human and animal waste and other garbage line the riverbeds and pollutes Mexico's waterways.

makes participants discontent and thereby, starts the process of transformation. What transformation, and to what degree each participant changes, is unique. Truly, the only thing that prevents change is not to change!

– Eric Bauer
Professor, Loyalist College

A message from the board

Welcome to the third edition of the Quest Internacional newsletter. This issue focuses on some of the observations and analysis by participants who experienced the two-week program in 2005.

As we enter 2006, Quest has some exciting new developments in our programs. We are expanding our curriculum, and working with new group facilitators who bring with them unique perspectives and fresh thinking to help us keep the organization and our programs innovative and current.

We hope to keep you informed as Quest expands and improves as we move forward. We also welcome any feedback you may have or input into how we can make Quest even better. The Quest experience belongs to all of us, and we all play a role in ensuring its success. Thank you for supporting Quest Internacional, and happy reading!

Life Lessons From the People of Mexico

The first day I spent in Mexico was really overwhelming for me, a sensory overload. All the colours, the smells and the sounds. It was all so different from what I was used to, growing up in Canada. The buildings were all right up against each other, and the streets of Mexico City streets were choked with cars and street vendors. We had some relief however when we drove out of Mexico City on the highway into the mountains, where there was nothing but blue sky and massive green hills for miles and miles to see. Speaking as someone who has never left the shelter of Canada and the U.S. this was strange, new and a little scary for me.

We arrived in Cuernavaca, hopped from one bus to the other and finally arrived at the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. The Daughters seemed like a sanctuary to me; this quiet, pristine place in a city filled with noise and craziness. I spent the first few days of our trip taking pictures and breathing in the views and the cityscapes. The colours of the buildings amazed me, and I just felt there was so much to look at. I lived behind my camera. Three rolls of film spun through my camera before the first five days passed by.

I don't know when exactly it happened, if it was our visit to La Estacion or talking with a woman who lives with her family in the Ravine; but I started to be less interested in taking pictures and more interested in listening. I started to see the people, how they lived, loved and laughed. Their struggles, their fears and dreams. They became real to me and I let down the shield I had been holding between us since we had arrived. I learned about their culture, their families, their everyday lives and what they wanted most out of life – which surprisingly wasn't that



Mexican sisters in La Estacion: they have very little money or food, but they have more than enough love to go around.

different from what I wanted for myself. All they desired for themselves was to have their loved ones close (particularly their children) and to make their lives better, even in the smallest ways (such as owning the floor their homes were built on). There was such energy emanating from these people, nothing could tear them down, because they had each other.

Having the opportunity to hear and witness that kind of fearlessness and love is something that I have come to hold so dear. I hope I always do.

A lot of people I have spoken with since I came home have asked me why I would want to return to a place filled with such poverty and corruption. A lot of them asked if my journey made me appreciate the things that I have here in Canada

more. I tell them yes, in a small way it did, but mostly it made me envious of the Mexican people. This response is usually met with awe struck silence and a face of disbelief on my companion.

I envy their love for one another, the affection they show one another and their sense of community. These are things that in seem to be lacking in Canadian culture.

We Canadians need to hug each other more...it does more good than I can describe in words. My trip to Mexico taught me a lot of things, but above all it taught me that even when you seemingly have nothing you can still have everything you need.

– Jessica Porringa
Student, Brock University

A Deeper Journey: Opening the Heart, Eyes & Mind



The Quest Loyalist College group from 2005, after a hot day painting the children's school at La Estacion.

The two week Quest experience my family and I had been so eagerly awaiting seemed to almost begin and end at the same time. I call it an experience rather than a vacation as it's the only word that I can think of that comes close to doing the trip justice. It really is an experience.....an experience full of faith and despair, love and anger, beauty and disgust. In fact those mixed, sometimes contradictory emotions are the part of the trip that I personally had the hardest time with. As a Quest Board Member I thought I was as prepared for what I was about to see and experience as one could be. Was I wrong!

Faith and despair....

Over and over again as our Mexican teachers shared their life stories they were sure to express the importance faith had played in their lives. Faith in their family, their community, and faith in God. These people were living in conditions unimaginable for most Canadians and Americans.....homes made of cardboard and tin, little money for medicine, clothing or even food. The only thing these families seemed to have in abundance was faith! It begs the question: "Is the degree of one's faith related to the amount of one's possessions and wealth?" With this question comes my despair. In the "First World" most of us have all we need or would even want.....yet we seem to lack real faith.

– Kevin Wells
Quest for Justice Internacional Board Member

Love and anger....

The depth of love and caring shown by our Mexican hosts was truly amazing. Time and time again we were invited into the homes of Mexican families and treated as one of the community, their community. The frank and honest way they shared their stories with us and answered our questions gave me a sense that they considered us one of their family. After two weeks I could not help but also feel a part of their community, their family. This newfound sense of community is what leads to my feeling of anger. If I was part of this larger "global" family then that meant all the atrocities (of which we were learning) being committed by the Mexican, Canadian and American governments were also being done to me! The devastation being caused to the rural Mexican farmer by NAFTA, the influx of commercialism and "big box" stores coming from the United States, or the breaking of the Mexican economy by the World Bank – these are all related, and we all share the effects!

Beauty and disgust....

The beauty is easy to find. The architecture of the 500 year old churches, the mountains off in the background, the bright vibrant colours of the buildings in Cuernavaca, the local art in the market, the native dancing in the Zocolo, and the beauty of the people of Mexico. At the same time one must look deeper. Deeper to see and feel the disgust that is not sitting neatly on the surface. The squatter's settlement of La Estacion (just out of tourists sight behind a large stone wall), the raw sewage floating down the ravine outside of Estella's home and under the sidewalks of Cuernavaca, the well and disease in Tlamacazapa, Maggi's story of her trip to the United States at the hand of "Coyotes". Feelings of beauty and disgust showing themselves at the same time....one on the surface and one just below. What is difficult now is finding a way to change the disgust below the surface without destroying the beauty that is above.

I wasn't ready for the emotions!

As a Board Member I get to read most of the exit surveys written by past participants. Many have a common message.... "that one leaves the Quest experience with their eyes opened." I agree, but for me it is more than this. As a result of my time in Mexico my eyes, my heart, and my mind were opened to beautiful people that not only need our help but deserve our admiration and respect. It is with this open heart and mind that I look forward to continuing to improve Quest for the benefit of our participants *and* the Mexican people.



“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”

– Confucius

Not enough people are aware of what the world is really like. The Quest Experience is an amazing vehicle with which to see how the majority of people in the world really live. To meet the quality of people and be exposed to the information and insight and share their lives – you would have to spend months in a single village to cultivate the relationships and experiences that Quest provides.

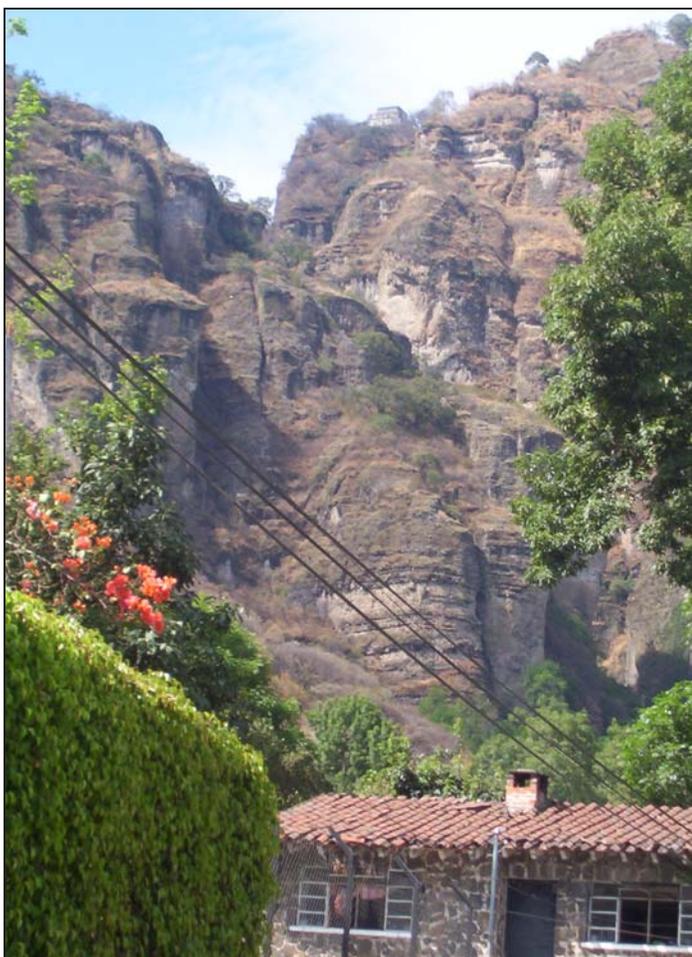
Perception creates your reality – for many people their reality is no bigger than the community they live in. Every time you experience something new or meet another person your reality is expanded. After meeting a the people and learning about just some of the issues in Mexico, Morelos in particular, most people will have had their reality changed forever.

What each individual chooses to do with their new-found perspective is an individual choice. Knowledge is power; it has the ability to make you aware of the first step you need to take in a long journey in order to improve the world and find your own place in it.

Quest exposes you to something that you would have a very difficult time finding without the structure offered by facilitators and the curriculum. I would recommend the Quest experience to anyone who is even contemplating taking a step in the right direction – but whether it is small or large, and what you do with it, it is up to you.

– Michael Madden
Student, Loyalist College

Climbing the mountain at Tepozlan: taking the first step is the hardest, but the view from the top makes it all worth it!



Do you want to participate or
learn more about our programs?
Contact Us!

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**Our classroom is Mexico's Third World.
Our teachers are the poor, and their stories are our textbooks.
We ask our participants to rewrite history.**