

Language Tourism in Ocotol

By Tom LeaMond

[Tom LeaMond works with Travel Alive which promotes the Segovian Spanish School. For more information, visit: www.travelalive.com.]

It is a typically sunny day in August, and puffy clouds blanket the hills surrounding Ocotol, a small agricultural city in the north-central, coffee-growing region of Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua. A group of local women are meeting in a neighbor's home to talk about hosting international students in a new program that will bring Spanish students and volunteers to their community. After coordinators lay out the details, only one question remains: "How soon can students start arriving?"

Even before that day, preparations had been under way to support a new form of educational tourism in the town. An exchange of language, skills, and ideas between cultures, the program combines language study, volunteering, and sharing daily life with a Nicaraguan community.

Spanish lessons are brought to life through role-play and practice with neighbors, on the streets, in shops, and exploring smaller towns and the countryside surrounding Ocotol. Classes focus on skills that make daily life in the small Nicaraguan city more rewarding. Learning continues with volunteers sharing experiences, values, and tasks in a variety of interesting jobs available in the community. And in the home, basic needs (shelter, food, and companionship) are met as guests quickly become members of the family.

The blend of study, work and community involvement sets the Ocotol program apart and creates a more meaningful experience for participants and local families alike.

That day in August 2005 was the go-ahead day for creating a school to attract Spanish language and volunteer tourism to Ocotol. There was no shortage of interested home-stay families. There were plenty of qualified teachers eager to work. And of course, there is always a need for skilled and willing volunteers in the community. Efforts intensified to hire and train qualified Spanish teachers, coordinate volunteer placements, and prepare homes for guests.

The day in August represented new opportunities for many in Ocotol, a town out of the main stream of tourism. And in February 2006 the Segovian Spanish School opened in Ocotol. The dream of local residents, friends, and business partners Gerardo Lopez and Francisco Artega, the school is their contribution

to economic revival in the community. The program they offer is an extraordinary combination of language, cultural immersion, and volunteering opportunities in schools, orphanages, clinics, farms, or on a coffee plantation (just to name some of the opportunities available), and home-stay with Nicaraguan families. Any one of these activities would create an unforgettable experience; combined, they provide true cultural immersion, the best possible conditions for language acquisition, and an opportunity to live, work, and give back in the remarkable community of Ocotol.



Speech pathologist Robin Hauge (left) volunteered in a school for children with special needs. Here she visits the local church tower with Francisco Artega, and Jose Lopez. Photo: Beth Lee for Travel Alive.

Family and community come first in Ocotol. Once divided by war the people now deal with economic hardship on a daily basis. Every member of the family contributes, and in one of the poorest countries in the world community run institutions support the elderly, orphans, sick, and less fortunate. Homes and public spaces are clean and well kept. Celebrations, festivals, church, and community are important aspects of life. For a community that gives so much to its own people, welcoming others comes naturally.

Language and volunteer travel is manageable, sustainable, and adds to economic growth in the region. The people of Ocotol, including the women

who manage the program's home-stay network, benefit from:

- creation of professional level jobs teaching Spanish and hosting international volunteers
- program revenue distributed throughout the community
- residual revenue in shops as visitors make purchases
- skilled volunteers in community supported social services, agriculture, environmental protection, and healthcare
- family and community based cross-cultural exchange

because she wanted to improve her Spanish language skills, and she wanted to experience life in a Nicaraguan community. Being able to volunteer as a speech pathologist also influenced her choice — she wanted her participation to have a positive impact on the community.

Hauge's volunteer assignment was in a school that was created in Ocotol by mothers of children who had special learning needs. She quickly discovered that the school and the community could benefit greatly by her experience, and they were delighted to have her work with them — but also that she did not know a lot about the professional language of her trade in Spanish, which limited her effectiveness as a speech pathologist.

Being a resourceful woman among resourceful people, Hauge learned new vocabulary, worked with children, and taught Nicaraguan teachers skills they could use to identify and treat speech impediments. Robin's Spanish teacher saw where she needed improvement and worked with her to enhance her professional vocabulary.

In the short time she was there Hauge developed a great relationship with the teachers at the school. Unfortunately the school was only open the first two weeks of her stay. Realizing that Hauge was a valuable resource, the Segovian Spanish School helped Hauge set up shop in someone's home to work with children whose parents made a special trip to see her. Since returning home Hauge has sent pencils, notebooks, and other supplies to the school. Her continued support will help the school give the type of attention to students it was designed to give. Hauge is also developing a sister-school relationship between her school in Walnut Creek, California, and the school in Ocotol. And she is planning to recruit other teachers and speech pathologists to visit Ocotol next year.

To recruit people for the Ocotol program the Segovian Spanish School has partnered with Travel Alive of Oak Park, Illinois (www.travelalive.com). Working with Hauge and the Segovian Spanish School, Travel Alive helped create the opportunity Hauge had in Ocotol. Travel Alive works with individuals, schools, churches and other groups to customize language and volunteer programs and assure meaningful learning and cultural experiences in Ocotol.

Programs are offered year-round and are extremely affordable. This year's fees were \$1,085 for two weeks, and eight weeks of total immersion in Ocotol cost less than \$3,000. Travel Alive recruits individuals, groups, young people, adults and seniors of all backgrounds. There is no age limit, or required level of language or experience; the only requirement is a desire to learn and share in this remarkable Nicaraguan community.

The people of Ocotol are eager to welcome you in to their homes and will host you any time during the year, for any length of time. You can find out more, and sign up for the Ocotol program by visiting www.travelalive.com, by emailing Travel Alive at info@travelalive.com, or by calling toll free (866) 551-1929.

Participants benefit from:

- true Spanish language and cultural immersion in a region not overrun by tourism and commercialization
- learning Spanish and about Nicaraguan culture
- volunteering in challenging positions relevant to their interests and experience and beneficial to the community
- living with a Nicaraguan family and as a part of the community

This summer the Segovian Spanish School hosted participants from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. Reaction has been very positive and participants have provided helpful feedback. Beth Lee from Washington, DC, a beginning to intermediate Spanish student commented, "I was using my Spanish the very first day, and by the third day I really felt like I could communicate with people. My family was wonderful; they helped me adjust and were very supportive." Russ Conrad from Ohio created a strong bond with his host family. After his program he traveled around Nicaragua with one of the members of his family and stays in contact with the family via email.

Robin Hauge, a speech pathologist from California spent three weeks in Ocotol. She chose the Ocotol program

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