

# Worms for Dinner

*Travel offers cultural enrichment for teachers*

By ELAINE GRIFFIN

They sauté them with garlic and serve them over a bed of guacamole—worms, that is, in Puebla, Mexico. You can order them with a side of ants' eggs, which are soft and buttery. In Oaxaca, grasshoppers are more popular fare, appearing in tortillas as a main course or covered in chocolate as a dessert.

When I learned that I would be a participant in the Fulbright-Hays 2011 Summer Seminar in Mexico, a five-week program run by the U.S. Department of Education, I was eager to taste the cuisine in each of the eight states on the itinerary. It never occurred to me that I'd be eating bugs—at least not on purpose.

As a high school teacher, I'd always thought of cultural differences as opportunities to broaden my perspective. Yet there's something about having to *eat* the culture that makes accepting cultural differences more personal and much more challenging.

When I teach literature, I talk about the importance of perspective in interpreting novels. Our way isn't necessarily the right way; it's just the way we know. With that credo in mind, I lathered my worm in guacamole, closed my eyes, and swallowed.

The trip awakened me to other cultural misconceptions as well. When visiting San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, I toured San Juan Chamula, a Mayan community. Our guide, archaeologist Chip Morris, began at the graveyard, which frankly resembled the outskirts of a garbage dump. Empty plastic soda bottles littered the areas around headstones. I saw this as a sign of disrespect. Morris set me straight: in the Chamula tradition, he explained, the dead must be remembered and honored. Having graveside parties and leaving bottles show that the family is meeting its obligations.

Travel regularly yields such epiphanies.

Travel is also a great way to discover and reflect on the sometimes surprising interactions between cultures. Morris next took us into the church in the town's central square, where we saw a significant blending of ancient Mayan practices and Catholic influences. Chickens are sacrificed, as the



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statues of Catholic saints look on. Posh, a homemade rum drink, is offered by families who want to invite others to witness their audible prayers. And so is Coca-Cola.

Coke as a Mayan ceremonial beverage?

It's true. In the 1960s, Coca-Cola made local Mayan leaders partners in the distribution of their beverages. By the 1970s, community leaders agreed that Coke and other soft drinks could be substituted for posh, deemphasizing the use of alcohol during religious ceremonies. The billboard on the road coming into Chamula shows a man in traditional festival dress celebrating with a Coke. Whatever one might think about Coke—and it has a checkered record in Latin America—it has played a significant role in reducing alcohol abuse in Mayan communities.

By the end of the trip, I had even come to have a better understanding of the Mayan practice of human sacrifice.

After visiting Chichén Itzá and other Mayan sites, I came to see that these sacrifices involved not only enemies, but also what was most important to the Maya. They sacrificed their bravest soldiers during wartime. They sacrificed children and women, who shed the most water in tears during times of draught. In short, they sacrificed not because life was cheap, but because it was precious and their gods deserved the best of who they were.

I choose seemingly outrageous examples because they best illustrate why teachers must travel. We rightly insist that students share different points of view, but we often don't demand the same of ourselves. And until we are out there "eating" another culture, we might not be scrutinizing our own misconceptions about place, people, and history.

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