

Mexico or bust

Fort Providence students learn about different culture on school trip

by Roxanna Thompson
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Deh Gah Got'ie Koe'/
Fort Providence

Three Grade 11 students from Deh Gah School in Fort Providence returned earlier this month from a three-week trip to Mexico, and at least one of them can't wait to return.

"I wouldn't mind living there," said 16-year-old Ben Vandell.

Vandell, along with his peers Sechiah Norwegian and Jeremy Landry and teacher Jim Snider, spent each day of the trip taking Spanish language and culture lessons by morning and venturing out on a variety of adventures by afternoon.

The students kept their families informed about their trip by writing an online blog. Posting written updates sometimes proved difficult, given how tired he

was at the end of most days, admitted Vandell.

"I forgot what we did some days because we did so much," he said.

Activities included salsa dancing classes, a visit to a chocolate factory and mountain biking in the hills – the latter of which especially made an impression on Vandell, who enjoys biking in his home community but really got a thrill out of the steep hills gracing the Mexican countryside.

He's even contemplating starting his own mountain biking tourism operation in Mexico, he said.

"I could really go fast on the hills," said Vandell, whose only prior trip outside of Canada was to Cuba – a family vacation that first wet his appetite for globe trotting.

"When I went to Cuba, I started to like travelling a lot. After that, I started travelling lots and lots. Lots in Canada, so I wanted to check out Mexico and see how it is," he said.

The idea for the trip – Snider's second with students – began bouncing around the halls of the school last fall.

"All the kids were like, 'Ah, I don't want to go! They just wanted to go to Edmonton and blow all their money,'" said Vandell, who felt decidedly different, raising \$5,000 on his own.

"This was only a once-in-a-lifetime chance. You could

go to Edmonton anytime."

Vandell stayed with a host family that had seven children.

Of the Mexicans he encountered during the trip, Vandell remarked, "They're still in touch with their culture."

"People are a lot shorter. I felt really, really tall there."

Norwegian also felt the trip was something he could not pass up. He took Spanish lessons before the trip even began, becoming so proficient that the other students actually came to rely on him to translate during parts of the trip, he said.

Missing his bed

The visit to the chocolate factory stood out for Norwegian, who especially dug the free samples.

He came to miss his bed in Fort Simpson, saying of his bed at his host family's house: "It was good, but it was pink. I'm not a pink guy."

Landry, the third student, could not be reached for comment.

According to Snider, the boys became increasingly self-reliant as the trip went on.

"(I was) watching them from the beginning – kind of going from ... depending on me a lot to help them get around to starting to function on their own as they learned some language and become more comfortable in the different culture," he said.

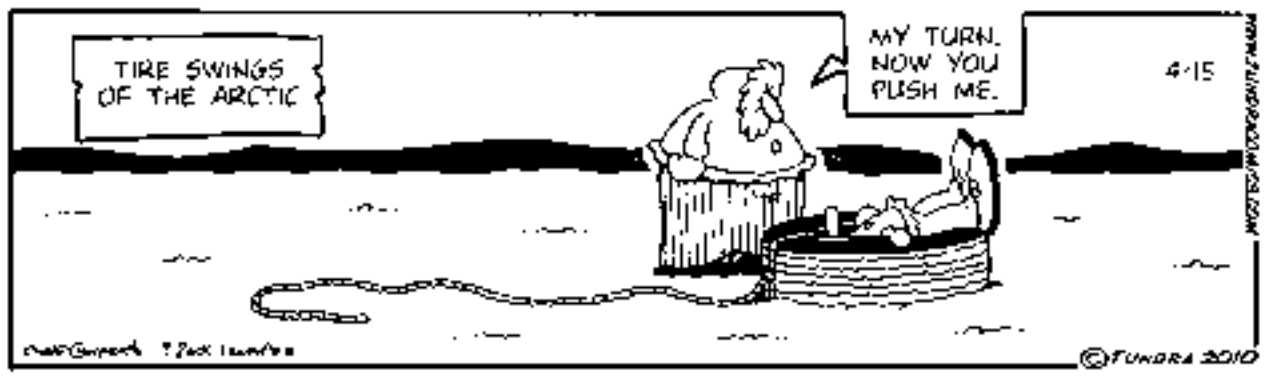
"They became a lot more brave as the trip went on."



photos courtesy of Jim Snider

Jeremy Landry of Fort Providence is followed by his Deh Gah School peer Ben Vandell on a mountain biking trek during a trip to Mexico enjoyed by the boys and one other student last month.

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From left, Sechiah Norwegian, Ben Vandell and Jeremy Landry sight see during a trek up a mountaintop.