

Meet Millsaps

The Jungle Blackboard

One student's journey out of the classroom
and into the real world of archaeology

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Lying in my hammock on my second night in the Yucatán this summer, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. I had little experience in archaeological theory, none in the field. I knew only a few phrases in Spanish. And the hammock was going to take some getting used to.

I adjusted more quickly than I expected. By the fifth day of my stay, I was content and comfortable with not only the work I was doing at the Kiuic site, but also with the general pace and nature of life in the Yucatán.

I lived in a house in the small town of Oxxutzcab with other student workers. We rose at 5:30 a.m., rode in a van to the site at 6:15, and arrived at around 7.

The heat at the site, which was in the middle of the jungle, rarely became stifling. But we nevertheless tried to take advantage of the cooler early hours. We worked steadily until 10:30, took a lunch break, and continued working until 2.

Then, we rode in the van back to the town and ate a traditional afternoon meal.

By the time we had taken our chilly showers, it was 5 and we were exhausted. But we often walked to the "lab" house to help with the work that goes on outside of the field, usually washing or numbering pieces of ceramics from pots at the site.

Finally it was off to the hammock, where sleep for me was not deep, but rather a series of intense naps.

The schedule was set, but the atmosphere was relaxed. The life was simple, but the work was rewarding.

Although I enjoyed my schedule, I was apprehensive at times about my responsibilities in the field. I had reason to be: Kiuic is an important site. It is the oldest in the Puuc region, believed by professors and students who work at the site to have been populated from around 400 B.C. to 1000 A.D.





Hannah Page, right, with Anna Catesby McGehee examining the excavation of the Yaxche group of buildings at Kaxil Kiuic, the oldest ruins in the Puuc region of the Yucatán.

There were two areas being excavated this summer in the Yaxche group of buildings: First, Patio B was likely a domestic center, where the support people cooked and disposed of waste. Second, the Dzunun (“hummingbird”) structure is thought to have been a ceremonial or government center.

I assisted a recent Millsaps graduate, Anna Catesby McGehee, in overseeing the excavation of the Dzunun structure. Before I left, I imagined I would be filing and filling out paperwork. Instead I learned not only how to use a digital camera, but also the art of drawing profiles and plantas (bird’s-eye views) of structures used in conjunction with the digital photographs to document every stage of the excavation process.

I was often intimidated by the prospect of my drawings being traced, placed in a computer, and used for years to come. At the same time, I was empowered by that very prospect; I was making a lasting imprint on the project, however small.

The nature of the Dzunun structure was overwhelming, as well. As the excavation moved forward, we began to see that there were stairs not only at the top level, but rather many different sets of stairs and floors underneath the top level — suggesting that there were possibly multiple structures layered on top of one another. In watching archaeologists discuss and theorize about this structure, I began to understand the creative and imaginative side of archaeology.

However, some of my best experiences in the Yucatán were with the people I met there. All of the workers at the Kiuic site were Mayan men who speak a combination of Spanish and Mayan. Although I understood only fragments of their conversations, I connected easily with their senses of humor. One day when I tripped on a rock, the two Mayan men nearest me, Sam and Henri, fell silent. I got up, dusted off, looked them straight in the eyes, and began laughing uncontrollably. They looked at each other cautiously, then joined in. After that, we communicated mostly through smiles, nods, and respect for one another that transcended our language barrier.

By the end of the summer, I wasn’t ready to leave the Yucatán’s hot days, cold showers, tropical evening storms, or its delicious fresh avocado.

I fell in love with the sound of Spanish, and I missed hearing it for weeks after my return.

While I might not become an archaeologist, because of this summer I will always understand the archaeological process in ways books could never teach me.

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