



Spring Band Trip Chiapas, Mexico April 1 - April 9, 2011 (updated 11-4-2010)

Over the years we've earned our nickname *The World Traveling Decatur High School Band* with trips to Germany, Slovakia, Japan, England, and many other destinations. Sharing our music and our moves with others, and experiencing other cultures first hand, are an important part of our band.

Ch-ch-ch-changes - International Trips will be once every 4 years

Beginning in 2010, as described in the 2010 Band Parents Handbook, we will be taking an international trip once every four years. This is a change from our recent history, where we took an international trip every other year. The change to a trip every four years was made last spring, and the purpose is to enable all students to go on international trips and to prepare financially.

In particular, this means that this year's trip to Mexico is *the only international travel opportunity your child will have with the band during the next four years*. We encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity, since it promises to be a great experience. There will be a domestic trip planned in Spring 2013.

There has been some confusion about who may participate in this trip. *The trip is for all members of the Decatur High School Band, including marching band, drill team, concert band, jazz band, and any student enrolled in band classes*. Our band director Megan Williams will work to make sure that there are adequate rehearsal and performance opportunities for **everyone** who goes on the trip, including large group pieces, small ensemble pieces, etc.

¡Viva Mexico!

Last spring, we decided to make our trip to Mexico. There were many reasons for this decision:

- We have not visited a Latin American country in recent memory.
- Most of our kids have been learning Spanish since elementary school, so it will be a good educational experience for them to be immersed in a Spanish speaking country for a week.
- A trip to Mexico was more affordable, and we wanted to be responsive to concerns about the escalating costs of the band trip.
- There was a clear preference for a trip hosted by families with high school age kids affording an opportunity for relationship building and meaningful exchange.

We are working with an organization called the Friendship Force. We have worked with them in the past, most recently on the trip to Slovakia. A nice feature of this trip is that *the kids and adults who are our hosts in Chiapas, will come to Decatur to stay with us and visit in the Spring of 2012*, tentatively either March 19-26 or April 23-30 (not spring break weeks). These true international exchanges are a unique and valuable educational experience for our band.

Safety is our First Priority

We want to be perfectly clear that the safety of the band and chaperones is our first priority. We fully recognize that there are parts of Mexico, which are not good destinations for tourism right now. Several parents have expressed concerns about safety, and the band leadership is keeping a close eye on the situation. That said, travel can't be done without risks, so we are working to make sure that our decisions are based on facts, we stay well informed, and we are prepared.

We contacted the US embassy in Mexico for clarification and recommendations. Their response was to direct us to the state department website (which they pointed out, they are required to do). However they also said

“We travel to Chiapas at least every 4-6 months. We primarily stay in the big cities such as Tuxtla Gutierrez, San Cristobal, Tapachula, Comitán, etc. ... Chiapas is a major tourist destination. Lots of American citizens (and foreigners from all over the world) live, visit, work, travel in the state of Chiapas!”

The [state department information page on Mexico](#) mentions Chiapas briefly. From what we can tell, the very rural Chiapas is more likely to be subject to political land ownership disputes, NOT major Drug cartel activity. The [embassy page devoted to Chiapas and Tabasco](#) seems to reinforce that the activity there is mostly about helping address poverty, not crime. We are also keeping an eye on state department warnings. The [U.S. Embassy’s Mexico Security updates](#) do not indicate any cause for concern in the Chiapas region. Also, that area is not subject to any [State department restrictions](#) (as opposed to some of the more dangerous areas along the US Mexico border).

As with any travel, there is still some risk, but based on our careful examination of the best information available, we don't think there is any reason for us to change our plans. If you have any other questions or concerns, please bring them to our attention. We don't want to overlook something. Barring something unexpected, the trip is a go, and we think it will be a great experience for our kids.

Encouraging words and opportunities to ask questions

Here are some excerpts from an email sent on August 3, 2010, from Mavi Rameriz, who is our Friendship Force exchange coordinator in Chiapas. You can see that they are very enthusiastic about the band exchange, and we wanted to share this communication with you.

The UN held a meeting here in Tuxtla last week with over 300 delegates from 50 countries, that came here to know more about the Rural Cities program. We had ambassadors from Canada, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Chile, Guatemala, etc. that wanted to see the model of Chiapas and bring it to their country. I believe this information will help parents to understand that everything is in order around here.

I'll have a meeting today with the Secretary of Tourism and the Mayor. I will also be in contact with the Coordinator from the Governor's office. We are planning a dinner at the Government House for members of the Band and an official reception that the Governor Juan Sabines Guerrero will offer.

We will have a new mayor in January, and he is already informed that this Exchange is taking place and will be taking charge of this event. We have very good relations with everybody and we're getting great support.

In addition, Malu Tansey, a fellow band parent, has put us in touch with a group called 'Cactus and Rocks' based in El Paso, which just returned from a trip to Chiapas. They said they had a great time and saw no signs of unrest at all. They said their hosts were very gracious and they enjoyed the visit a good deal. They are happy to answer questions about their recent experience. Rather than do this via a live conference call (which would be logistically complicated due to the need for a translator), we are accepting questions which we'll send to them and get answered. We're also accepting questions for the Friendship Force in case you couldn't attend the DHSBPA meeting on the October 25 when we had a representative there. All questions and answers will be posted on our website. Send your questions about the trip to Lew Lefton or William Edmisten.

Things to do right away (hopefully already done!)

1. Make sure your child has a US passport which valid past October 2010. If you don't have this, please begin the passport application/renewal process right away! You may still have time to get one if you rush it. See http://travel.state.gov/passport/get/get_4855.html
2. Think about getting a hepatitis A vaccination. This is not required, but it is listed as recommended on the CDC website page for Health Information for Travelers to Mexico. *You should consult with your doctor to help you decide.* Note that if you choose to get a Hepatitis A vaccine, it is typically given in two doses, 6 months apart. Thus, this is another item that requires you to act very soon.

Chaperones

We need about a dozen adults to travel with the band as chaperones. We have already had several people step up, but we need a few more. You will have to pay your own way. Please contact William Edmisten to volunteer to chaperone.

How much will this trip cost and when is it due?

The total cost per person, based on current budgeting, is \$2000 for the entire 10 days. This includes almost all transportation, meals, and lodging. Some additional spending money is recommended, details to follow.

The first deposit of \$600 is due on December 1st, 2010

The second deposit of \$600 is due on January 5th, 2011

The balance of \$800 is due on February 1st, 2011

Cancellation and Refunds: 50% of the program fees paid will be refunded if cancellation occurs before December 15, 2010. If cancellation occurs between December 15, 2010 and January 31, 2011, 40% of the program fees paid will be refunded. After January 31, 2011, there will be no refund.

We have several fundraising opportunities in which your child can participate to offset their costs. Two which are currently in place are the Bulldog cards and the Fruit sale. Contact our fundraising chair Karen Hill for more details. In addition, you are welcome to fill out our [Application for Financial Assistance](#) which is due by November 15, 2010.

Travel Details

The dates of our trip are April 1 – April 9. Due to flight complications, our trip there will be split into two groups. Our return trip will be all together. Currently we are looking at the following:

Group 1: Depart ATL Delta #363 9:30 AM Friday April 1.
Arrive Mexico City 10:56 AM
Depart Mexico City Aeromexico #555 1:00 PM
Arrive Tuxtla Gutierrez 2:30 PM

Group 2: Depart ATL Delta #365 12:10 PM Friday April 1.
Arrive Mexico City 1:52 PM
Depart Mexico City Aeromexico #557 4:30 PM
Arrive Tuxtla Gutierrez 6:00PM

Return (all): Depart Tuxtla Gutierrez Aeromexico #552 8:40 AM Saturday April 9.
Arrive Mexico City 10:05 PM
Depart Mexico City Delta #366 12:55 PM
Arrive ATL 5:08 PM

Information about Trip Activities

We will be working with a school in Chiapas called the [*Institute Fray Victor Maria Flores*](#), a private catholic school run by missionaries and founded in 1943 for college bound girls in the center of Tuxtla-Gutierrez-Chiapas, Mexico. Since 2000, the Institute Fray Victor Maria Flores has opened its doors to male students in middle and high school. It has about one thousand students, and is a very prestigious school in Chiapas society. They have a band with about 40 students. Mavi Ramirez has told us that the students will be hosted in pairs. Although it is a predominately girl's school, we have been assured that boys will be hosted with boys and girls will be hosted with girls. Chaperones will be hosted by the Friendship Force members in Tuxtla-Gutierrez.

Mavi Ramirez is also working closely with the Governor office to create an opportunity for the students to perform in a Parade in the city of Tuxtla.

Megan Williams and Vicki Stevens will be taking a short trip to Tuxtla Gutierrez at the end of November so we can get a first hand idea of what to expect.

We hope to arrange some joint performance opportunities with the student band there. In addition, we have commissioned a special piece of original music, written exclusively for the DHS band, which will have it's world premier in Mexico!

A [preliminary program](#) is available online. Some of the destinations are mentioned below. This should be viewed as tentative and when we have more detailed information, we will share it.

Welcome at the City Hall

Welcome Party

City Tour in Tuxtla

Parade in Tuxtla

Tour to "[Canon del Sumidero](#)" (Sumidero Canyon – 2 hours boat ride)

Visit to Zoo Miguel Alvarez del Toro, with animals native to Chiapas

Visit to Museum of Science and Technology

Visit to "[San Cristobal de Las Casas](#)" a beautiful colonial city.

We are working to add some Mayan ruins such as [Tenam Puente](#) (near Comitán) and/or [Palenque](#)

Performance at the Intercultural University

Farewell Party

More Information

<http://chiapas-tabasco.usvpp.gov/chiapas-tabasco.html>

<http://www.turismochiapas.gob.mx/>

<http://www.visitmexico.com>

<http://www.deaturband.org/spring-trip-2011> (including a [nice brochure](#) on the area).

The Friendship Force has provided information about travel insurance. Please contact us for more details or a brochure.

Questions and/or Comments?

The trip to Chiapas is going to be fantastic, and as more information about the trip is available (e.g. itinerary, costs, etc.) we will post it on our website www.deaturband.org. For further details, feel free to contact our trip chair [William Edmisten](#), the DHSBPA president [Lew Lefton](#) (404-290-4609), or the director [Megan Williams](#).