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A Class Trip Meant Much to Mexico

By ELISABETH MALKIN

MEXICO CITY — After weighing the risks of traveling to [Mexico](#), the parents of one American teenager decided to allow her to join a school trip to Oaxaca, where students volunteered at an orphanage, visited archaeological sites and sipped vanilla milkshakes on the honey-colored town plaza.

The fact that the parents were President Obama and the first lady, Michelle Obama, and that the teenager was their daughter Malia, thrilled Mexican tourism officials, who are trying to redefine the country's image as it has struggled with drug violence.

"It's a compliment that the daughter of President Obama and her friends have decided to live the experience of Oaxaca," said José Zorrilla, the state secretary for tourism and economic development, slipping into promotion mode.

Each updated travel advisory from the United States State Department is painted as an affront here. Especially galling to Mexicans was the spring break [warning](#) issued by the Texas Department of Public Safety suggesting that Texans avoid Mexico altogether.

Plenty of Americans are ignoring the government warnings. Last year, Mexico reported a record year for foreign visitors, 22.67 million, and most of them were American.

Malia, 13, attends Sidwell Friends School in Washington, which has been organizing trips to Oaxaca for years, said Ellis Turner, the associate head of school, who pointed out that there was no State Department travel warning for Oaxaca.

Although the White House asked English-language media to remove articles about the visit from their Web sites this week, the visit was never a secret in Mexico. "The reality is that Oaxaca isn't that big and it isn't that easy to hide 10 girls and that security," said Mr. Zorrilla, the tourism official.

On Monday, the group sat down for lunch at Terranova, a family restaurant behind the porticos lining Oaxaca's central plaza. The headwaiter, José Victoria, said they ordered bottles of water, vanilla milkshakes, pizza and spaghetti. Malia opted for cheese quesadillas, which he said she ordered in Spanish.

Along with their work at the orphanage, which Mr. Turner did not identify, the teenagers trooped through all the tourist spots in Oaxaca, a handsome colonial city set in a blue-green valley steeped in pre-Columbian culture. They toured Zapotec archaeological sites and visited nearby villages famous for producing black pottery and fantastical wood carvings called alebrijes.

But what the group is most likely to take back may not be a souvenir but the memory of a strong earthquake that prompted the White House to lift its news blackout, acknowledge Malia's trip and assure everybody that she was safe.