

Asia Pacific Regional Geography Olympiad



Left to right: Bridget Anderson, Jonathan Steven, Laura Bennett and Tarang Immidi

Representing Australia were four of our brightest Geography students who won their places on the team after taking part in Geography's Big Week Out held in Western Australia in December, 2010, and before that, the National Geographic Channel Australian Geography Competition:

Bridget Anderson, St Mary's College, Hobart

Laura Bennett, Coffs Harbour Senior College

Tarang Immidi, Sydney Grammar School

Jonathan Steven, Camberwell Grammar School, Melbourne

The Australian team was supported by the Australian Government through the Quality Outcomes Program, administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Congratulations to Tarang who won one of only two gold medals presented at the Olympiad. Jono and Laura won silver medals and Bridget a bronze, meaning all four team members returned with medals. The highest individual score was gained by Isaac Ramirez from Mexico.

The Australian team arrived a day early to aid their recovery from jet lag. On the Sunday afternoon the team wandered into the city centre, down an avenue lined with magnificent colonial buildings and modern sculptures. Being Sunday the town square was filled with market stalls and they were lucky enough to see a traditional dance performance with the girls in beautiful dresses, accompanied by a 12-piece band.

Mérida, where the competition was held, is a beautiful city with an European feel. The first thing we noticed after getting off the plane was the humidity. Coming from winter in Australia, the weather was a big adjustment. In the centre of the city is a very old church. Mérida is definitely a city which we all would like to visit again. Bridget

The Opening Ceremony on Monday 4 July, was followed soon after by the first of the exams, the Written Response Test, worth 40% of the marks.

Australia has triumphed at the 2011 Asia Pacific Regional Geography Olympiad in Mérida, Mexico, with the highest team score in the Olympiad.

Sitting in exam formation before the first test of the Olympiad was really nerve wracking. However, as I skimmed over the paper and tried to attempt it, I realised that it was actually quite interesting as it tested all of the skills and techniques we had learned across a broad range of areas. We were made to apply our geographical knowledge to challenging questions that required not only the theory but a sense of how the earth functioned as a whole. All in all, a difficult but entertaining test. Laura

On Tuesday we all travelled south to visit the Hacienda de Sotuta Péon to learn about Mayan Culture. After boarding a "train" led by Jesus and his mule Chitzo, we arrived at a typical traditional Mayan house, owned by a Mayan called Antonio (who was only 4 ft tall). Following his interesting comments on Mayan architecture and buildings and many photos, we moved on to visit a sinkhole. This beautiful, underwater cenoté was freshwater and amazing to see, and we were even allowed to swim in it. This refreshing swim in the middle of the Mexican summer was great fun for everyone to enjoy. We were then shown the different stages of rope making from sisal (or henequen) in Mexico, and also the Spanish influence on their colonial buildings. After enjoying a Mexican/Mayan lunch, we returned to Merida. This great insight into Mayan culture was both interesting and fun, providing one of the highlights of the trip. Jono

The students sat the next test late that afternoon. This unusual arrangement was to take advantage of the relatively cooler mornings for outside activities.

In the multiple-choice test, students answer questions related to photo interpretation, maps, graphs and tables. It is worth 20% of the final score. This component of the competition was perhaps the most simple. Unfortunately this did not mean it was easy. As a team we found this part quite challenging as it required a large range of practical geographic applications. Tarang

Thursday was completely taken up by the fieldwork exercise with students in the field in the morning and early afternoon and returning to Mérida for a related test conducted in the classroom later in the afternoon.

The fieldwork test, worth 40% of our overall score, was easily the most challenging and the longest of the three tests. Having been kept in the dark about the nature of test we were all surprised to hear we were studying the town of Izamal, a town two hours from Mérida. This town has been around since the early 5th century AD. Our challenge was to complete five sections of questions and tasks around Izamal, including relating to sites centred on two Mayan



The main Mayan pyramid at Chichén Itzá,

pyramids and a church. Working through the heat of the day, each team of four students – mixed amongst each of the five nationalities – worked hard to successfully complete each of the five sections and a final map of Izamal. This day was not just challenging but exciting as we were able to learn about Mexican culture. The test in the afternoon, allowed us to see how much knowledge we had retained and could use. This was the most enjoyable of the three tests and we all had great fun. Jono

On Thursday the students toured the iconic Mexican archaeological site of Chichén Itzá.

For one of our excursions we went to Chichén Itzá, an ancient city near Mérida. As we had finished all the exams, we were all feeling relieved and ready to look at how the Mayans once lived. The main pyramid was spectacular and the special thing about it was how the acoustics worked. We stood at the centre of one of the sides and clapped and an echo came back with a buzzing sound. The whole city was amazing with its ball court, temples, cenoté, and other buildings whose scale and size could be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Jono

The Cultural Function was held that evening.

This particular night has a reputation for being the highlight of the Olympiad, and 2011 didn't disappoint. The five countries all displayed key ideas about their unique cultures and expressed these through dance, activities such as rope making (Mexico) and quizzes (Australia). Many little souvenirs we shared amongst the countries such as vegemite and little sombreros and the audience was always involved in the entertaining displays. Although this wasn't a competition, I believe the Taiwanese boys were the most amusing in their interpretation of the girls' dance video that was popular in Taiwan. Laura

Students had free time to explore Mérida next day, with the important Medal Ceremony and Farewell Dinner in the evening. After the Olympiad, the Australian students went to Mexico City where they visited the historic centre and the world-class National Museum of Anthropology, and took a tour to the Teotihuacan pyramids. Much to the delight of the

students, unlike at Chichén Itzá, you are still permitted to climb the Pyramid of the Moon and part-way up the Pyramid of the Sun.

Mexico City is unique blend of Spanish Colonial influence. The money of a rising city, the smells and traffic of the capital – and yet Mexico is a developing country. We arrived in Mexico City in the morning and the first thing we noticed was the infamous smog, which gives Mexico City the reputation as the most polluted city in the world. Eager to make the most of the city rich in culture, after dropping our bags at our apartment, we walked to the central square – "Plaza of the Constitution", and visited the city's magnificent cathedral. We proceeded through the centre of the city and passed another cultural icon, The Palace of Arts, a fine example of Art Nouveau architecture. That evening we dined at Café de Tucuba. The next morning after a visit to the Mexico Anthropology Museum we went on a bus tour of the city. Thankfully this was a double-decker tourist bus rather than the city's dilapidated bus transport. This tour displayed parts of the city that would be mistaken for a European city. It wasn't until the next morning on our way to the Teotihuacan pyramids that we saw the other side to the city. It is this contrast that gives Mexico City its distinct character. Tarang

Our second day in Mexico City we went to the National Museum of Anthropology. It was a Sunday and the street was closed off for a big Disney Fun Run in the park where the Museum was. Having been to Chichén Itzá, the Mayan section was very interesting, as we could picture the similarities of the Meso-American Civilisations, with their gods, rituals and even architecture. After looking at many cultures including the Aztecs we met up with the Taiwanese Team for lunch. Bridget

And we'll leave it to Laura to sum up the experience:

Travelling across the world to compete in the Olympiad was truly an amazing experience. I met some unforgettable people who showed me their culture and way of life which was an eye-opening experience within itself. Viewing the country Mexico was wonderful and I thoroughly enjoyed all the time I spent and with the people what were a part of the Asia Pacific Regional Olympiad. Laura

To give your students a chance to experience the 2013 International Geography Olympiad in Kyoto, Japan, enter your Year 11s (and Year 10s over 16 y.o) in the 2012 Australian competition. The 2012 Olympiad is being held in Cologne, Germany, with Australia's team selected from the 2011 Geography's Big Week Out.

Younger students get the opportunity to represent Australia at the National Geographic World Championships.

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