

Article: "The Real Cancun"

By Sara Loftson
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When I first think of exotic locales like the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Mexico, images of vacationers lying on the beach, listening to the ocean waves crash while sipping cocktails come to mind. I imagine surfing, salsa dancing and sun tanning.

And that's exactly what the travel industry wants a young person like myself to think. University-aged people are a huge niche market for the resort industry, especially during study breaks.

However, these tropical destinations aren't simply surrounded with abundance and ripe with natural beauty. Often these countries struggle with socioeconomic, political and environmental issues. But the hype surrounding resort vacations often masks the full reality.

In a world where students are constantly cramming for exams and scrambling to meet assignment deadlines, it's no wonder they are paying thousands of dollars to do virtually nothing for a week of all inclusive food, alcohol and room service. It's a hard sell to resist; who doesn't want to live like royalty if only for a short while.

But as Catholics our idea of a good time, our idea of living like royalty, should be to imitate royalty: Christ the King. We should seek to serve, not to be served.

Jesus washed the disciples feet at the Last Supper, He didn't spend His last moments living it up in a five-star hotel getting His shoes shined. Jesus invited everyone rich and poor to eat at His table, not gorging Himself at an all-you-can-eat buffet being served by the local peasants. And most importantly, Jesus didn't hide His eyes from the lepers and prostitutes who roamed the streets. He wanted to see the entire picture.

This week we feature two young Catholics who've chosen to spend their vacation time doing like Christ would do. Daniel Francavilla visited the Dominican Republic for one week, but he didn't stay at a tropical resort. Instead, he travelled to parts of the country most tourists pay to avoid. As a result, he now gives lectures to school and parish groups, trying to raise awareness among Canadians about the poverty he witnessed.

Angela Hilton decided to spend three summers in Shreveport, Louisiana, building homes for low-income families. Shingling a roof and putting siding, windows and doors on is a far cry from lounging on the beach.

What sets these two apart is they took a chance and opted for an adventure outside the neatly advertised box. They decided to spend their vacation investing in relationships with their peers, with the poor and with God.

This may sound like more work than pleasure. But the rest and relaxation comes in doing God's work. A service vacation brings about spiritual peace of mind that sun tanning just doesn't offer.

The purpose of a well-deserved vacation is to re-energize and to refocus our life's priorities on Christ. Seeking adventure at a resort in Cancun, Mexico, doesn't have to be the only vacation option for young people. Instead, celebrating life and God's creation by visiting places and people off the beaten path gives the term the "Real Cancun" its true meaning.