March 2015

Travels with Anzie: San Miguel - How a Rug Turns into a Wonderful Memory

Meet Hilario. He's a weaver from Oaxaca. The state of Oaxaca lies to the south of Mexico City. Its southern border is the Pacific. Many of Mexico's popular crafts are produced in and around the capital city, Oaxaca (pronounced *wahaka*): terra cotta miniatures, glossy black and green pottery, *alebrijes* - wood sculptures of fantastical creatures painted with bright, detailed colors - and carpets - lots and lots of carpets.

Hilario represents the fifth generation of weavers in his family. He migrated to San Miguel de Allende (hereinafter referred to as SMA) several years ago, and opened a carpet shop next to a major artisanal market in downtown. We had bought a carpet from him a few years ago, which decorates the floor of our guest bathroom. The vendors in the Mercado de Artesanias generally have the best prices, provided you're willing to spend the time bargaining. Anzie took me there to buy me a straw hat as a gift for my upcoming birthday. After completing our purchase we meandered until we came upon Hilario's shop, Artesanias Oaxaca Rugs, on Loreto. As we entered I was struck by the pleasant odors of wool and incense. Anzie had mentioned that she was looking for a carpet of the "Arbol de Vida" or "Tree of Life" design to hang on our living room wall. We had seen and priced others in other shops. We really weren't ready to buy.

As you can see from the attached photos, Hilario's features reveal his indian ancestry – part Mayan, as well as other tribal influences. Upon entering the shop we mentioned the purchase we made a few years ago. Of course, Hilario remembered us, or faked it well. He proceeded to lay out several examples along with their prices. We then began to swap stories about each other. Hilario is the youngest of eight. He grew up speaking Oaxacan – one of eight languages, as well as a multitude of dialects spoken in the state of Oaxaca. He didn't learn Spanish until he went to public school. His father died when he was sixteen. He had to quit school to help support his family. Along with learning the weaving trade he found that he possessed a knack for sales. Eventually he moved to SMA where Oaxacan carpets were highly prized and sold for higher prices than in their region of origin.

As our conversation continued, we occasionally referred to the carpets. Each time we did, Hilario dropped the price. We told him that we weren't ready to buy, but it didn't phase him. Finally, "This is my final price. It's special only for today. Tomorrow the price goes back up!" It took 40 hours to weave it. The Tree of Life.



After we concluded our purchase, Hilario spoke of his many gringo friends. He mentioned that he had invited three couples for dinner at his house the next evening. He then invited us to join them. It took us about a minute to agree.

We all met at the shop at 5 PM the next day. The couples constituted quite a geographic spread: Seattle, Toronto and Maryland. We all piled into two cabs, and rode about three miles out of SMA, down a dirt road into a complex of brick and masonry houses. All of them were "works in progress". As we entered Hilario's compound, we were introduced to his very simpatico wife Gloria and several members of the extended family. The house consisted of an open courtyard that fronted a dining/living room open to the courtyard. Behind that room were two other rooms. We climbed a cement staircase to the second floor, which consisted of three rooms – one large and two half-size – both still very rough and under construction. The large room served as the kitchen and wash area.

Ron from Seattle gave us a brief history of the family. He and his wife had known them for some years. Hilario had started virtually from scratch. He began gradually to build the house as he was able to set aside money. This time last year there was no electricity and no second floor. Water is delivered to the complex by truck each week, at which time the cistern is filled. All of the houses in this little community are owned by Oaxacans – what Ron terms the "Oaxacan mafia". This is not to imply criminality; rather that they are a tight-knit community. Does Hilario really own the property? Ron replies that it's a good question.

Anzie spied a large floor loom that occupied one corner of the courtyard. On it was set up the beginnings of a red carpet. Both Hilario and Gloria proceeded to demonstrate how it worked. Then many of us gave it a try.

We then sat down to dinner – a delicious squash/corn soup followed by tamales. I have never ordered tamales. They just never appealed to me. However, these were delicious! Chicken with a mole sauce over a corn paste, steamed in a banana leaf. Everyone had brought beverages: wine and beer. We brought Fresca – I wasn't drinking. The conversation around the table was enervating and interesting.

Bob from Maryland exclaimed, "This night is the highpoint of our time here in SMA." On the cab ride home Bob ruminated, "Do you realize how blessed we are to have shared this wonderful experience?"

Yes, Bob, we all agreed.

Hasta luego,

Chuck & Anzie

https://picasaweb.google.com/chuckanzie/HilarioAndGloriaOaxacanWeavers?authkey=Gv1sRgCMXdxL-JgoPkXw#

For more on Oaxaca and the surrounding art towns:

http://167water.com/uploads/Travels_Mexico_8_-_Oaxaca_Mexico.pdf

https://picasaweb.google.com/chuckanzie/OcotlanTulaAndSantaAnnaDeValle