

March 2011

Easter in San Miguel

Sure it's a little early to begin Easter Week. Does anyone complain about St. Patrick's Month?

First Lent. It is a big deal in this predominately Catholic country. Every Friday is meatless. San Miguel restaurants boast a plethora of delicious Lenten recipes that are drawn from past generations: eg. cream of corn and poblano chile soup.

Here in San Miguel they begin the pre-Easter ritual in a big way. It starts in the small village of Antontonilco in a beautiful little church, the Shrine of Jesus the Nazarene, also known as the Sistine Chapel of Mexico. The church interior is covered with frescos. It also houses the banner which depicts Santa Maria de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. This banner was used as the standard carried by Fr. Manuel Hidalgo, Allende and the other leaders the night of the beginning of the 1810 revolution for independence from Spain. The church is also the home of a famous statue, "Nuestro Senor de la Columna", "Our Lord of the Column". It depicts Jesus with His crown of thorns, resting on a short column, his back a mass of open, bleeding wounds from whipping -- an image that could have come straight from Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of Christ". The statue is credited with miraculous powers. <http://www.experience-san-miguel-de-allende.com/atotonilco.html>

On the Saturday night before Passion Sunday (the fifth Sunday of Lent) a massive crowd of worshippers gather at the church to begin a procession carrying this statue, as well as that of Our Lady of Sorrows and the Apostle John, the 12 kilometers to San Miguel. They walk all night carrying candles and traditional silver and copper lanterns along the highway and streets that are lined with worshippers. Several processors are customed: Christ in purple robe, Roman centurions with uplifted swords. The procession arrives in SMA via Avenida Independencia just after dawn, to the accompaniment of fireworks.

We awoke Sunday at 5:30 AM and walked over to Rich's house to arrive at 6:30. Rich Beatty, former Newburyporter and longtime resident of San Miguel agreed to guide us to the procession of Christ of the Column. We arrived at the church, San Juan de Dios. People were setting up an altar and chairs for an outdoor Mass. The grassy medians and berms that surrounded the church were taken up by blanket-covered lumps. These lumps were people sleeping. They had arrived during the night from the countryside. From the church we traced the path that the procession would take.

The street decorations are amazing. Please check out the accompanying photos. Worshippers spend the night decorating the street with flowers, purple and white balloons, colored tissue paper and sawdust. The large pictures are

done with colored sawdust. The greens you see strewn are fennel, chamomile and other fragrant herbs that emit wonderful fragrances when trod upon by the procession. At this point the parade has become a huge mass of humanity. It resembles a swarm of locusts. As it goes by the decorations are stripped as souvenirs as high as the crowd can reach. The sawdust pictures turn into a non-descript porridge.

The procession stops before a kind of reviewing stand to sing and to receive blessings from the priests. It ends at the church, San Juan de Dios, where a mass is celebrated. The statue of Jesus is then placed inside the church on the high altar, where it remains until Easter Wednesday. It is then returned to Antontonilco in a much smaller procession.