

Studying art for spring break

By Emilie C. Harting

Special to The Miami Herald

San Miguel, in the mountains four hours northwest of Mexico City, developed as a provincial art city in the 1920s with the establishment of the Art Institute, a huge castle-like building behind the walls across from our guesthouse. Now there are many art schools, photography workshops, galleries, museums, concert venues, and a profusion of small, relatively inexpensive restaurants.

Day and night a blend of middle-class Mexicans, North Americans, and some Europeans and Asians walk through the streets going to classes, concerts, cafés and restaurants and shopping for groceries. For almost a century this area of Mexico has been known as a place to come for the perfect light, temperatures in the 80s 10 months of the year and inexpensive food and housing.

Thea and I took drawing lessons, explored the city, spoke a bit of Spanish, and ate lots of good Mexican food like jicama salads, tacos, and spinach apple soup. We shared adjoining rooms decorated with Mexican antiques, an Art Deco bathroom with black and white tiled floors and walls, and large zebra-striped cabinets. In the morning we came down to a kitchen decorated with hand-painted Talavera tiles. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday we stood at easels in the spacious downstairs studios and took lessons in charcoal drawing from Casa de Suenos's owner, Keith Keller, a well-known local artist and excellent teacher. I'd never had art instruction. Thea, on the other hand, demonstrated artistic talent early, and had taken a number of courses.

Mixed media

Our classmates, about 15 of them, were Mexicans, Americans, Brits and Asians who ranged in age from 17 to their late 70s. Most were attending the class for several months and were deep into complicated oil-painting projects: portraits, outdoor scenes and still lifes with backgrounds of bones, fruit, velvet, dolls, vases and other bric-a-brac. A young Mexican man with Tourette's syndrome created portraits with sensitive faces. A middle-aged woman who often drives down through Texas and northern Mexico was perfecting the skull of a horse in her oil painting. A nattily dressed Japanese woman did an exacting portrait of a friend. An older American man dressed in black clothes and a black skull cap stood arched over an easel drawing abstracts.



Gateway to the historic center of San Miguel de Allende.

Carlos Sanchez / Mexico Tourism Board

For a lesson on perspective, our art class stood along Ancha de San Antonio and drew the angles and curves that led up the hill to the center of town. Cobblestone streets lined by the common ochre walls of houses disappeared into a hill of trees, church spires, rooftops. The larger vista was the small colonial city of San Miguel de Allende, 6,000 feet above sea level and silhouetted against a higher circle of mountains in the distance.

Keith moved about the rooms, giving short lessons to a few of us at a time, offering critiques, and encouraging us to walk around and observe how the other artists were painting. Beginners like us learned how to accentuate features by using shadows, how to draw faces and bodies with an oval and lines, and how to draw scenes by doing cityscapes with lines going to a point on the horizon. The next step was copying a portrait by the early 19th century English artist, John Singer Sargent.

Quickly Keith picked up that we were a daughter with talent and a mother who was expressive, but had not taken drawing lessons.

As soon as I started drawing, I felt relaxed and pulled into another world. I'd learn basic concepts and get lost in whatever piece I was sketching, hoping that later I could apply some of the insights on process to real life back home.



Teacher Keith Keller talks to Thea Harting, the author's daughter, about her charcoal drawing in a class at Casa de Suenos in San Miguel de Allende. Emilie C. Harting / Special to The Miami Herald

When we copied the portrait we drew an oval and vertical and horizontal guidelines at certain points before plunging in and letting our view of the final sketch guide us. With both drawings we accentuated the obvious, dominant images with darker charcoal.

Papier chase

On Tuesdays and Thursdays Thea and I took a papier mache workshop several blocks away, where the wide Ancha de San Antonio veered to the left. Lisa Simms, our teacher, explained the process of layering materials, leading us through the process over three days of pasting, drying, and painting.

As in Keith's class we had to decide on a final project and figure out how to get there. After skimming through art history books for inspiration, I decided to make a modern abstract version of a 3,000 year-old Olmec mask.

Of the nine students, six made brightly painted yellow and red chickens, full-sized and realistically proportioned down to plump middles with ample feathers and rough red combs. Papier mache has long been the medium for statues and masks for religious festivals, and now dolls, animals, and especially chickens are a fad in home décor.

Our tablemate, a college professor from Seattle, worked on a large Virgin of Guadeloupe with flowing purple dresses and gold veil. She told us that though she was Jewish, she'd imagined making one since her art history course 40 years ago. The project would take several weeks or more.

Thea constructed a complex frame of wire for her statue of 18 year-old male conjoined twins who had been in the news recently. Just as in the drawing classes, whenever I glanced over at Thea, I saw she was way ahead of me and creating works with many more dimensions. Lisa walked from table to table and gave mini lectures on the triumphs and pitfalls of papier mache, and encouraged us to look at each other's work in progress.



A student makes a chicken in papier mache class in san Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Emilie C. Harting / For The Miami Herald.

Explorations

At least once a day we would make the 15-minute walk up the hill to the Jardin, a thickly treed park in the center of the town square. We never took exactly the same route because the more we walked and read our guidebook, the more we wanted to see. Before long we were finding our way to the top by looking for the lush trees of the Jardin rising up above the rooftops in the center of the town square. Benches are never empty, and at night extra chairs are placed in the street for the evening concerts.

In the afternoons and evenings we explored cathedrals, markets, galleries and art museums, and ate lots of

excellent food. Southern Mexico has lush farmland, so we often had succulent tomatoes, zucchini, jicama, and onions with fish from local lakes.

During the week I kept wondering why everyone seemed so happy in San Miguel. There's a common belief that the city was built on slabs of rock containing narcotic substances, and the pleasure-inducing vapors rise up to the surface. I suspect the sense of happiness is a phenomenon that has slowly built up since the first art colony was established there in 1920.

"You're only here for a week," said a woman who was drawing on the easel beside mine. "I've been here two months, and I'm depressed about having to leave in four weeks." Those who fall in love with the city come back often, I've learned.

Going to San Miguel de Allende

Getting there: There are two international airports near San Miguel de Allende: the Aeropuerto del Bajio (BJX) in Leon, a 70-mile drive, and Aeropuerto Internacional de Queretaro (QRO), a 45-mile drive.

Viajes San Miguel (www.viajessanmiguel.com) is a reliable shuttle from the Aeropuerto del Bajio or Mexico City airport. From Leon the trip is 90 minutes; from Mexico City three hours.

Information: www.visitmexico.com; pick up "San Miguel Walking and Shopping Guide" at the tourist office on the Jardin, the town square. www.internetsanmiguel.com/bed_and_breakfasts.html is a useful website for lodgings.

When to go: Since San Miguel is in the mountains, it does not get tropical heat in summer. Temperatures are in the 80s from March to June, and in the 70s from July to February, but in the 50s in the evening. Humidity is very low. Residents say the least pleasant months are May and June. The rainy season is from June through September. In August the desert has colorful grasses and wildflowers.

Casa de Suenos: Art classes are \$180 per month; shorter terms available for \$100 and up. Rooms \$80-\$140.

www.casadesuenosmexico.com.

Classes: www.classesunlimited.com. Or

www.transitionsabroad.com/publications/magazine/0405/art_study_in_mexico.shtml has listings for arts and crafts, computer, photography, cooking, writing, and Spanish classes

Top cultural sites: San Miguel has many 17th and 18 century buildings. Don't miss Belles Artes, once a convent and now a school of arts with many galleries and a good café; the Public Library (to check out local films, concerts, and art shows) now a cultural center; the Church of San Francisco; and the La Parroquia.

Art galleries: In addition to the almost 50 galleries in the city, make sure to visit the relatively new La Aurora Art and Design Center (www.fabricalaaurora.com) in an old cotton factory. It's filled with studios furniture, jewelry, and antiques, and textiles, has a café with local dishes, and a museum of equipment used in 19th and 20th century textile factories, and offers classes.

WHERE TO EAT

The norm was \$7-10 a person for dinner plus dessert, including tax and tips. Lunch or breakfast typically runs \$3-5 a person for lunch or breakfast, especially at small taco places.

Hecho en Mexico, on Ancha de San Antonio, popular with Mexican families, lots of local dishes. The Tilapia Veracruz, fish with vegetables, is a highlight.

La Finestra, in an elaborate courtyard next to 9 Ancha de San Antonio. Delicious tortilla soup and spinach crepes.

Berlin Bar and Restaurant, on Umarán, heavy food with a German influence. Bar menu is inexpensive. A hangout for middle-aged expats.

La Parroquia, in the courtyard of a pink Gothic church on the Jardin. a favorite breakfast spot with whole wheat pancakes and fruit.

Restaurant NutriVerde, next to Lisa Simm's studio at 46 Ancho Antonio has all natural food. The Mexican chef brings her cookbooks to the table and explains the ingredients.

Juanita's on Orizaba, a neighborhood hangout, has excellent home cooked Italian food, including superb spinach lasagna. Plain, no tablecloths, and loud, but they will turn the TV down.

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