

# Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

## Knitting in San Miguel de Allende

So there I was earlier this month – on writing assignment, deep in the mountainous high desert of central Mexico, surrounded by some of the world’s oldest and most productive silver mines. ... Actually, it wasn’t really a writing assignment. Pat had brought me to San Miguel de Allende to attend a knitters’ retreat. Yes, a knitters retreat, with 23 women and four men.

All the men and six of the women were non-knitters, along to experience the wonders of an historic Mexican colonial city first settled by the Spanish in 1542. Today San Miguel de Allende has a population of over 60,000 people, with perhaps 6,000 American residents, and is a mecca for artists, musicians, chefs, and creative people from around the world.

Most of the knitting retreat group flew into Leon, about an hour and a half van-trip from San Miguel del Allende. Our flights from the States left from Dallas or Houston, Texas. Thus we avoided the border areas that are so dangerous these days. The only dangers we were exposed to were the numerous, horrendously rough bumps in the road that Mexico apparently uses to control traffic around country towns.

The retreat’s knitting “professor” so to speak was Irene York, nationally-known knitting entrepreneur, designer, and instructor. The workshop was organized by Irene’s husband Bill. This was the fourth year that Irene and Bill have hosted retreats in San Miguel de Allende. They delight in providing a good learning experience for knitters and a unforgettable time for all.

Headquarters for the get together was the beautiful Villa Mirasol Hotel, a renovated old mansion, with 12 artistically-decorated spacious suites. Natural light and ample courtyard patio seating encouraged conviviality and made us feel right at home.

San Miguel de Allende is spread out over steep hills at an altitude over 6,000 feet. The old town is filled with spectacular churches; historic buildings; art galleries; wonderful jewelry, curio, and clothing shops; and uncountable fabulous restaurants. Many buildings have courtyards that reach deep away from the street. Picturesque hotels and bed & breakfast places are intermingled with all the sites around town. Nightlife and live music are plentiful.

The narrow streets are paved with cobblestones from colonial days. Traffic is heavy at times. One-way streets, parked cars, and blind intersections make driving a challenge. Many in the local population “bounce” around town in ATV’s. Taxis and busses are available at inexpensive rates for trips around town.

But San Miguel de Allende is a great place to walk. There are so many attraction to catch your attention on each block that you find yourself repeatedly walking along the same streets to see what you missed earlier. We also found ourselves each day returning to the central square – an impressive gathering place for both locals and tourists – right in front of the town’s most famous landmark, the incredibly beautiful Parroquia de San Miguel Church.

And the doors; San Miguel de Allende is famous for its intricately-carved wooden doors – a fascinating visual perk of walking around town.

Steep and narrow sidewalks, high curbs in a few places, deeply-cut stone gutters, and the rough cobblestones can challenge your stamina and concentration, but it's well worth the effort.

Bill and Irene York hosted a welcoming dinner for the retreat group at a favorite family-owned restaurant, where we got to meet the entire staff. For the rest of our week in town, Pat and I had great fun exploring different eateries for lunch and dinner. We never had a bad meal and prices were very reasonable.

A culinary highlight of the trip for us was a special dinner we had as the sole guests of Bill and Irene. The restaurant was in an old hotel, high in the hills of San Miguel de Allende, with a marvelous view of the city below. Bill and Irene had personally scouted around for the "best restaurant in town." We had a great time and really appreciated the York's thoughtful attentions.

One day during our weeklong adventure, the knitters took a day off from their workshop and 12 of us visited the nearby old silver mining town of Guanajuato. Silver was discovered there by the Spanish in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and for many years this area produced more silver than any other place in the world. Today Guanajuato is a city of 150,000 and is the seat of government for the Mexican state of Guanajuato.

Traveling in a van, our first sight of the Guanajuato was from a spectacular mountain top overlook, with the entire city spread out below us in a bowl-shaped valley. The brightly-colored homes, stately government buildings, and beautiful churches stood out from high overhead. We toured Guanajuato's impressive Diego Rivera Museum, the ornate San Cayetano Church near the fabulously rich Valenciana silver mine, and a fascinating pottery factory in Santa Rosa. For me the highlight of the day was being driven through a maze of traffic tunnels – originally constructed for flood prevention - that form a complex network beneath the city of Guanajuato.

On the first Friday in March, San Miguel de Allende observes a religious festival where Indians from neighboring villages celebrate in the town square. Awakened by loud fireworks that day at 6:30 am, we eagerly joined the crowd to watch the concheros dancers in elaborate, very colorful, traditional costumes. They danced in home-village groups around the plaza. The sometimes earsplitting drums pounded out a steady rhythmic beat as the dancers kept up their almost frenzied motions - for hours it seemed. We burned up our camera batteries taking photographs. The festival ended at dusk with a bright fireworks show.

On our last night in town, the entire retreat group had dinner together in a restaurant just off the main square. The brightly illuminated spires of the Parroquia de San Miguel formed an awe-inspiring backdrop to our roof-top tables and inspired happy fellowship for a wonderful meal. As a final treat, Bill York arranged for a 10-member mariachi band to serenade us.

Great weather, good times and happy memories: San Miguel de Allende is certainly a magical place.

I truly enjoyed my first knitters retreat. I may have to take up knitting now!



*The Parroquia de San Miguel parish church is especially beautiful when showing off its nighttime illumination. (Photo courtesy of Bob Ring)*