

THE Guelaguetza

text and photos by Jim Cline

THE EXCITEMENT BEGAN soon after I arrived in Oaxaca, as I sat at an outdoor table at a restaurant on the Zocalo. While waiting for my plate of chicken mole I heard the sounds of music and, as it approached, I could hear people cheering. Suddenly a band came around the corner and there were the dancers—the women’s brightly colored skirts twirling in a blur of color and the men waving their sombreros; excited bystanders cheered them on. Grabbing my camera I began taking photographs. The growing crowd lining the sidewalks cheered louder as, one after another, the groups passed by.



Just as everything was calming down, another group approached. The crowd became louder than ever and everyone pushed to get closer to see the dancers. Why the added commotion? A spectator explained excitedly, “it’s the Pineapple Girls!” —the stars of the festival. They came from Tuxtepec in the Papaloapan region—twenty attractive young women dressed in the beautiful dresses of their region, all dancing in unison holding pineapples; they certainly were the crowd favorites. Sixteen groups, one for each distinct indigenous group from the seven regions of Oaxaca, wind through the streets of the city, stopping continuously to dance to the music from their region. They all finish in a blaze of color, music and dance in the Zocalo.

My visit to Oaxaca was to experience the famous yearly Guelaguetza Dance Festival. With its colonial architecture, bustling markets, colorful arts and crafts, its beautiful plazas with vibrant sidewalk cafes boasting delicious Oaxacan cuisine, Oaxaca is a great destination for travelers year round. But for two weeks every year, the city explodes with the color and excitement of the folklore Guelaguetza festival, said to be the largest in the Americas.

“Guelaguetza” originates from a word in the Zapotec language; its meaning is the act of contributing to a community celebration. Like many Latin American festivals, the Guelaguetza evolved from a mix of indigenous and colonial influences. The festival, as it is celebrated today, is a combination of pre-Hispanic celebrations of the corn goddess, Centeotl and the Catholic feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which falls on July 16th.

The city of Oaxaca celebrates the Fiestas del Lunes del Cerro (Festival of the Mondays on the Hill) during the month of July. But the highlight of the festivities occurs on the two Mondays when the Guelaguetza dance performances take place. Dances range from solemn to joyful expressions of local culture, as thousands cheer them on. At the end of their dance performance, each delegation presents its own Guelaguetza to the audience by throwing small fruit, hats and even coconuts and pineapples. The audience has to stay alert to catch the gifts and to avoid getting hit by the offerings! Since colonial times, the Guelaguetza festival has been celebrated on the Cerro del Fortin in Oaxaca (Fortin Hill).

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Throughout the week are numerous activities and shows, such as gastronomic and handicraft exhibitions, art shows, a Mezcal fair, concerts and other cultural events. It was hard to decide which to attend, as it seemed everywhere there were celebrations of music and dance in the streets, many of them unannounced. On many evenings the activities culminated in fireworks over the city. During the day I wandered through the streets downtown, always finding something interesting. In



the markets were some of the famous local crafts of Oaxaca—the black pottery from San Bartolo Coyotepoec, rugs from Teotitlan del Valle, “alebrijes,” the small animal figures carved from copal wood painted with psychedelic colors from villages such as Arrazola and San Martin Tilcajate and much more.

Smaller Guelaguetzas are also performed in several surrounding villages such as Mitla, famous for its ancient Zapotec temples with unique mosaic patterns carved in stone. Much of the mescal in the region is produced near here, with many shops selling numerous brands. On the way was the weaving village of Teotitlan del Valle, where the finest rugs are produced in Mexico. We visited two different homes where entire families are involved in producing the natural dyes and weaving the beautiful rugs.

On my final day, I visited the largest and most impressive of the Zapotec sites, the ancient capitol of Monte Alban, one of the most notable ancient sites in Mexico.

Its construction began in about 500 B.C. and reached its peak from 300-to-700 A.D, when the hill and the surrounding area was home to about 25,000 inhabitants. What a great way to end my trip—after all of the exhilaration of the festival—sitting in silence on the steps of an ancient Zapotec temple, watching the sun setting into the clouds on the horizon.

The Guelaguetza takes place on the two Mondays following July 16th, except in years when Monday falls on July 18th, the anniversary of Benito Juarez’ death. Guelaguetza then occurs on July 25th and August 1st. There are two shows on each Monday – at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m., both of which last over three hours. Advance tickets are available through Ticketmaster in Mexico (www.ticketmaster.com.mx). ✨

