

ENTRE AMIGOS

COVID-19 curtails Guanajuato Day of the Dead festivities

by Kernan Turner for the Tidings
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A mariachi band serenades Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) revelers in a Guanajuato plaza. Rex Scofield photo

Freelancers writer Rita Weatherholt and photographer Rex Scofield set out to cover the elaborate “Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)” festivities in Ashland’s sister city, Guanajuato, Mexico. That was before COVID-19 got in the way.

The former Oregonians — Weatherholt is from Klamath Falls and Scofield is from Eugene — live in Tucson and spend months each year in Guanajuato.

“When we left for Guanajuato in March, days ahead of the border closure due to COVID-19, no one knew how deadly the pandemic would be in Mexico and the United States,” Weatherholt emailed this week after their return to Tucson. “With the Dia de los Muertos approaching and spirits high, we took safety precautions, including temperature-taking, hand sanitizer, wearing masks and maintaining 4.5-meter social distancing. Most activities, from shopping to dining, were outdoors.

“We already knew Dia de los Muertos celebrations would be abbreviated, but we anticipated enjoying the La Catrina spectacular, usually staged at the Teatro Juarez, and the ‘Tapetes (carpets) de los Muertos,’ a competition of floral and seed street carpets honoring departed loved ones. However, the city’s health department, fearing an onslaught of national and international tourists during the pandemic, canceled both events. This left us viewing the street carpets online, thanks to the quick thinking of organizer Veronik Chacon, who broadcast the colorful tapetes at entrants’ homes or other available spaces.”

Dia de los Muertos festivities, Nov. 2 and 3, usually feature parades that draw thousands of people with painted faces and in colorful “dead” outfits into the streets to sing and dance and make offerings to their lost relatives and friends. In normal times they flock to watch the spectacle on the steps of the Teatro Juarez featuring women outfitted as La Catrina, a tall, lavishly adorned female skeleton topped by a fancy hat with feathers.

“Despite the Dia de los Muertos event cancellations, the city pulsed with festive energy, and skeleton decorations adorned many buildings,” Weatherholt wrote. “Families took to the streets, costumed children collecting “dulces” (candies) in their plastic jack-o-lanterns, and mariachi bands serenading people in restaurants and the city’s plazas and streets. Many people wore masks, but not everyone. Life felt a bit careless on one epidemic evening, leading us to leave an overcrowded restaurant before the musicians began to play.

“We took an excursion to the mountain town of Santa Rosa where Guanajuato restaurateur Michael Dunlop has opened the Sierra Restaurant. He said being a business owner in Mexico in pandemic times is challenging, faced with far more obligations and far fewer paths to assistance than in his native Canada. He also shared some concerns about safety.”

Guanajuato State has become Mexico’s most violent, resulting from a raging turf war between two fuel-theft, drug-trafficking and extortion gangs. The state reported 3,400 homicides in the first nine months of the year. The gangs mostly kill each other, but the rising death toll includes innocent victims.

“Despite the buzz about it, we find, as other frequent visitors to the capital city Guanajuato, there is little to worry about,” Weatherbolt wrote. “Most of the violence has been between the two cartels in other, smaller towns in the state. As is the case everywhere, awareness and caution are important.

“More relevant, as we departed our favorite home away from home, the pandemic was surging. Despite the hard times Guanajuato faces along with the rest of the world, she has done it with grace and beauty.”

By this Wednesday, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases had reached 56,589 with 3,814 deaths, including 1,910 confirmed cases and 106 deaths in Guanajuato City, the state capital.

Amigo Club’s Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club board member.