

MEMORIES OF MEXICO

A PHOTODIARY BY HOLLY WREN



● Gildardo next to the altar made for his late mother

GILDARDO BEGINS TO WEEP AS HE TALKS ABOUT HIS LATE MOTHER. HE VERY MUCH LOVED HER THAT IS CLEAR. A BROOM SHE USED TO CLEAN THE HOUSE WITH RESTS AGAINST THE SUBSTANTIAL ALTAR THAT FILLS THE ENTIRE REAR WALL OF THE DARK ROOM IN WHICH WE SIT. THE BROOM IS AN OFFERING TO HER, AN ITEM SHE LIKED WHEN SHE WAS ALIVE. SOMETHING WE LAUGH ABOUT TOGETHER.

Despite his roots, feminism is not lost on Gildardo. His mood is melancholy as we chat, much of his mothers belongings, in particular her china, was taken or thrown out by his sibling. I feel a genuine ache in my chest as this man, a grown man, one of tradition, tries his hardest to hold back his unmistakable pain.

I can't understand a word Gildardo is saying, he is speaking Spanish through his friend and my interpreter today Maria; a neighbour in the village, their families have lived here for generations. Maria is my guide and a friend of a friend, a Oaxacan native who made her name in L.A. running Guelagueta, a restaurant with a reputation as good as its food.

It's November 2nd, Day of the Dead, or Día De Los Muertos, a well-known festival that honours the dead. It is widely celebrated throughout Latin America, but has strong associations with Mexico. Beginning on the 31st October, this lively three day holiday draws on indigenous traditions, celebrating the lives of the deceased with food, drink, parties, offerings and activities that the dead enjoyed in life. Death is recognised as a part of the human experience, and during these days the souls are said to be awakened from their eternal sleep, to return to earth and share the celebrations with their loved ones.

Gildardo continues to tell me more about his late mother's altar and the traditions of Día De Los Muertos. It doesn't matter much that I can't understand first hand the words he uses, I can't control the tears that fill my eyes. My attempt to hide my emotion fails and Maria leans in to comfort me. Gildardo is confused by

my sadness; he explains that the festival is seen as a happy occasion, a time to welcome back those who have passed, to celebrate their lives. This I know; it was only the evening before I was drinking beer, a glittering skull painted on my face, dancing around a graveyard in the city of Oaxaca.

I read all about the traditions before I arrived. I'd seen the images of the beautiful women with skulls painted on their faces, and heard the stories of partying in the cemeteries. But despite that, there is something profoundly sad to me about how the days of Día De Los Muertos play out. The first two evenings, are when the cemeteries are visited to collect and guide the spirits back to the family home. Coal or candles are laid on the path from the grave to the house, a signpost of the route back to the other side.

The first night, welcomes back the children – those who have passed too soon, and for most, that is never an occasion to celebrate. The graveyards are more solemn that evening, the mood low. Some parents stay at the graves until sunrise to ensure the safe passage of their children back to earth. A child's death is a tragedy, no matter how much time has passed. The reminders of those graves are clear, marked with offerings of toys, Lego, sweets, dolls, and chocolate.

The second evening is more raucous, this is the day you'll hear partying through the night, see parades in the streets, and graveyards filled with people, drinking, singing and laughing.

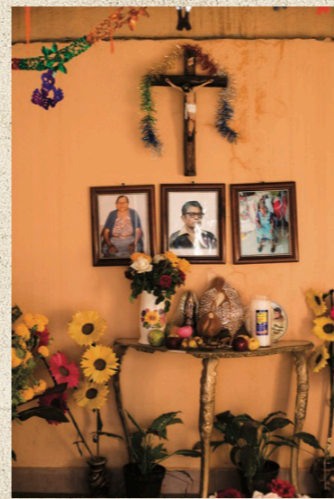
The third and final day, on the 2nd November, is spent at the family

home, celebrating with the spirits until they depart. The lovingly-made altars, like the one before me at Gildardo's, are often grand, but some are more modest. All however, in keeping with tradition, have flowers, candles, bread and other, more personal offerings.

There aren't as many flowers as I expected at Gildardo's, given the scale of decoration at the cemeteries, where I was hit by the sheer quantity of blooms.



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● A more modest altar at the local cemetery

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The sugar skulls came later, along with the Americans, and are now the popular symbol of Muertos. Even in England, the painted face is a recognisable call to action. But here, its about the flowers, they adorn every graveyard; each brought to life with the strong colours of the two traditional buds; yellow wild marigolds and striking pink celosia cristata, as far as the eye can see. And bread is offered on each grave and altar, traditionally baked with an edible sweet corpse that is laid through the middle, affectionately known as "Bread of the Dead". Some graves, have photographs, cracked and worn by weather, their presence seems sort of spooky, representative of a by gone era. But of course, as Gildardo explains, this tradition precedes the invention of photography, so photographs are a more modern offering, not seen on every altar.

Today, sat with Gildardo, I am reminded of the days leading up to our meeting. I am in awe of this rare chance to have a first hand account of these indigenous traditions.

My journey began in the City of Oaxaca, which offers a very colourful glimpse of the celebrations. Despite its location, and its official status as a developing Country, Oaxaca city is very much an up and coming place. A 21st century haven of coffee outlets, art galleries and trendy restaurants mixed with tourist shops. It's a popular place for Americans to visit over the festival, as the celebrations are particularly large. Although, the party-going tourist set that flood the streets are hard to spot, because it's the locals who lead the parades, dress up their children and sing by the gravestones.

Oaxaca City, is however a stark contrast to the very basic living in San Andres Solaga, a place I'd visited and stayed a few days before. Travelling from Oaxaca via a very long and winding mountain road, I had the opportunity to explore some of the tiny villages, the forgotten rural communities, miles away, in both distance and modernisation, from the coffee culture of Oaxaca.

The indigenous people that live there have a beautifully simple life – basic houses, tin buildings, and a loud speaker to play music and make announcements. The stone churches and steep hilly villages house the



● Gildardo outside his home in Mitla

remaining, mainly elderly generations that will soon be lost to history. Zapotec is the traditional native tongue, but now, spoken by only a handful of people, it is in danger of extinction. And although many of the younger villagers are bilingual, the elders fight hard against the tide of migration, to maintain a culture and language that is little understood outside these small pockets of population. I met two of only eight children living in one of the villages, and noted the sense of anticipation, that they too, would follow their predecessors to Mexico City or even America. Even in these very isolated parts of Mexico, where there is little contact with the outside world, you can't seem to stop the tide of change.

I stayed for the night, managing to shut my eyes for a few hours, laid, fully dressed, on a borrowed bed, in a house I didn't know. Woken at 3 am for the market, I was confronted with the eyes of the town, most of who, already knew about my presence. The news of my visit had travelled fast, but of course there was skepticism about why photographs were being taken and what for. Luckily I'm not American, because if I had been, taking pictures would have been prohibited. My British accent became my passport to their trust.

In the cold, dewy morning, the market was heaving, bustling with people, although I wasn't entirely sure where from. The focus was very much on the gathering of items needed for altars and Muertos celebrations. Money wasn't always exchanged; goods were also used as currency. And in my translated conversations, many of the elderly locals talked of their families – grandchildren and children that now live in America, unable to return for fear they won't be able to cross back through the border to their new lives in the states. The "Golden Bird Cage", as they call it, has them trapped.

I was there in Solaga, in the days leading up to the festival, and although they were busy preparing the

feasts, baking bread, slaughtering pigs and buying flowers for their graveyards and altars, I was still a few days away from being fully submerged in the celebrations.

Today, sitting with Gildardo, the mood has shifted. It is the third day of the festival and the graveyards are now ghost towns (no pun intended), the streets eerily quiet compared to the days preceding this, where fireworks could be heard almost continually through the night.

Despite my emotional reaction to the festival, and the overwhelming feeling of sadness it provokes in me, I'm overcome by the sense of festivity that lingers during this week-long party. Rurally in the village of Mitla, where Gildardo and Maria live, we are greeted by a feeling of family and Christmas like celebrations; the experience is much more traditional, more personal than that of the City.

After leaving Gildardo, my day is finished by a visit to Lucia, Maria's godmother, where I am welcomed like family and a feast is prepared for us. And although her home is still relatively basic, it's a far cry from my visit to the indigenous communities, where pig slaughter is a rare treat and those who eat it do the preparation.

We eat well; bread, mole, rice and pork, around a large table next to a much smaller altar. There must be 8 people at least; it feels like Christmas Day, the entire family is there. A young thirty something guy called Diego sits next to me, he lives in America, and practices as a lawyer, but travels back for the holiday. We connect on Facebook. The altar here, laid heavy with Budweiser, is for his grandfather.

Later, back at the hotel, I make my own altar on the small side table. Some choice marigolds I purchased in the market, and two tea lights. I can't help but feel engulfed in emotion once again as remember my friend and Nan. I have to remind myself that this is a celebration.

I didn't come for the bustle of the city,

the painted faces or the parties at the graves. I came to experience the real Oaxaca where the traditions originate. I came to meet the people that believe in the true sentiments behind the holiday. I feel incredibly lucky to have met and photographed these communities, these people who do not open their doors to Western photographers. To pull up a seat at their family table and share their food and memories has been an honour.

I am filled with a feeling of nostalgia, a sort of heartbreak mixed with zeal. It makes sense to me, for everyone to celebrate the lives of those they love, rather than mourn their passing. But still, I can't help but shake the wave of emotion that passes over me every time I think of Muertos, and its significance.



● My guide, Maria, lights a candle at the altar for her godfather

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