Porter /Mexico
Introduction

Not until I moved to Santa Fe in 1946 did I have any desire to visit Mexico. Before that, with the exception of trips to Europe, the focus of my interest was the exploration of the United States--many regions which at that time were still not as completely known as they are today. When Stieglitz exhibited my photographs in New York, I met Georgia O'Keeffe, who soon after moved to New Mexico; and it was at Ghost Ranch, where she established herself as a painter of the New Mexico landscape, that I saw her frequently and we became friends. A mutual friend was the Taos writer and poet, Spud Johnson, who had accompanied D. H. Lawrence to Mexico. In February, 1951 my wife, Aline, proposed a trip to Mexico for a few weeks to see a different country and to escape the last of winter. She sought Spud's advice, and together they approached Georgia, who had never been outside the United States, with the proposal that the four of us go on a trip to Mexico. It was an adventure that appealed to Georgia.

Early in February we set off from Santa Fe in separate cars for Laredo, Texas, where we crossed the border into Mexico. At a leisurely pace we followed the Pan American highway south, resting for picnic lunches on food that Georgia provided and stopping early for the night. Georgia

always wanted to eat early, which conflicted with what Aline and I preferred--to have drinks in our rooms before supper. Too often the solution was that we ate separately, Spud, as Georgia's guest, deferring to her wishes. We traveled together until we reached Mexico City, where we became separated while looking for hotel accommodations. After a few days in Mexico City, Aline and I headed south for Oaxaca.

It was in Oaxaca that I had my introduction to Mexican cathedrals and village churches and saw for the first time the naive iconology and colorful decorations that expressed simple Indian reverence. Although I spent more time photographing the Zapotec ruins at Monte Alban and Mitla than the churches in Oaxaca, it was the beauty of the Christian symbolism that in the end attracted me the most. On the way home we stopped at Yanhuitlan, an isolated, lonely monument to classical architecture, which displayed a mixture of formal and unsophisticated symbols of the Christian religion. Yanhuitlan confirmed my desire to return someday to record more generally this aspect of Mexican church art.

Aline had long felt the isolation of New Mexico from the contemporary art world and decided to spend the winter of 1955-56 in New York, where she could be in closer contact with modern, creative trends in art. This provided me with the opportunity to fulfill my goal to photograph Mexican churches. I described the idea to Ellen Auerbach, a New York photographer friend, who liked the proposal and agreed to work with me on

the project. We crossed the border into Mexico at Nogales, Arizona on December 2, 1955. In our Chevrolet van we had large amounts of film and photographic equipment, which according to a Mexican customs inspector exceeded the allowable limit for tourists; but for a consideration of twenty dollars, he said he would overlook the restriction. As we left he wished us a happy trip. We followed Route 15 down the west coast of Mexico to Tepic, where it turned eastward to Guadalajara. Our first stop was Hermosillo, where we made a short side trip to Alamo, a gloomy mining town in which the cemetery was a sight of especially macabre interest with the tombs stacked on top of one another above the soilless ground. From Hermosillo south to Tepic we found little to attract us photographically, except at Mazatlan, and covered the distance rapidly. Tepic, with its cathedral and other churches, was much more interesting, and we stayed there for three days before driving on to Guadalajara. We had now entered older districts of Mexico, where the mixture of Spanish and Indian cultures was more evident. Here we stayed for five days, photographing churches, street scenes, markets and even school children. We had never intended to limit our work to churches, but to take advantage of all photographic opportunities, especially those involving people.

San Miguel Allende was our next objective, from which we visited San Miguel Viejo, the Triadas Ranch church (a short drive from Guanajuato in the center of the silver-mining

district) and Atontonilco, famous for its silver chapel, from which the silver had been stripped during the revolution by a local leader to pay his followers. From Atontonilco we drove to Queretero, where we photographed the golden door, pulpit and confessional in the church of Santa Rosa; on Christmas night from the roof of our hotel we watched the celebration that enveloped the steeple of the church on the plaza in a fiery display of fireworks. On the way to Mexico City we stopped in Morelia for the six days of Christmas festivities. From Mexico City we went north to Acolman to see the Teotihuacan pyramids and Aztec ruins; we also explored the country east of Mexico City around Tlaxcala and Cholula, renowned for its hundreds of churches, of which Huejotzingo and Santa Maria Tonantzintla are among the most celebrated.

To escape the exceptional January cold that had settled on Mexico and had people talking about the "hielo" (the snow), we decided to go to the Yucatan and return to central Mexico in spring. We drove to Vera Cruz on the Gulf Coast, visiting Jalapa and other towns on the way. From Vera Cruz we continued along the coast to Minatitlan, where the greedy proprietor of a lodging house overcharged us, and when we refused to pay, called the police, who accepted our account of the dispute and fined the proprietor. We stored the Chevrolet in a garage in Coatzacoalcos and on January 26 flew in a small plane to Merida with intermediate stops at Villa Hermosa,

Ciudad del Carmen and Campeche. We hired a car with a driver, who drove us to all the places we wanted to see, which included several small towns and villages and, of course, the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza and Uxmal, of which Izmal, Hoctun and Muna were the most interesting. We also wanted to see the Mayan ruins at Palenque in the tropical forest of Chiapas, accessable only by the railroad connecting Campeche with Coatzacoalcos. We took the bus to Campeche to catch the "Rapido" for Palenque, a name that implied a speed that was not born out by the actual performance of the train, which chugged along at 15 to 20 miles an hour. It took all day to cover the 200 kilometers to Palenque, but judging by the wavy condition of the tracks if a higher speed had been attempted, the train most probably would have derailed.

The Palenque ruins had been partly cleared of the tropical vegetation that was slowly destroying them, and we were able to climb down into the recesses of one of the temples, where the sacrificial chocmol was still to be seen. The "Rapido" carried us back to Coatzacoalcos, where we repossessed our car and drove across the isthmus of Mexico to Tehuantepec. Here a matriarchal society was clearly manifest in the markets. We visited Salina Cruz on the Pacific coast and Ixtepec on the Pan American Highway, which continued east to Ocozocuautla, Chiapa de Corzo and San Cristobal Las Casas in the state of Chiapas.

We arrived in San Cristobal on February 8, at the time

of fiestas and dances at the Chamula and Tenejapa Indian villages, of which the fire dance at Chamula was the most spectacular. In an alleged hynotic state the Indians walked barefoot and painlessly on a bed of hot coals. I noticed, however, that they all wore thick, rubber sandals. We stayed in San Cristobal eight days, first visiting Santo Domingo, the most ornate and richly embellished of its churches. I also explored the surrounding country with an American expatriate guide, who took me to several remote Spanish and Indian villages, including that of the shy Lacandones, who are so reduced in numbers that siblings marry.

We drove to Oaxaca on the 18th of February and stayed until March 15th, the longest time in one place of the entire trip. There are many churches in Oaxaca, of which Santo Domingo is the most famous, but we also spent a lot of time in the markets, where I was pelted one day with peppers by a vegetable vendor who did not want to be photographed. We spent many days driving around the neighborhood of Oaxaca to villages in which the smallest churches often contained beautifully apparelled images of the saints and exquisite representations of biblical events. Especially notable were the churches in San Felipe, Huitzo, Coyotopec, Matatlan and Xoxocatlan. In the Santa Helene church in Xoxocatlan we photographed a red-haired saint, a striking feature for a Latin country; in the Coyotopec church the saints were apparently clothed with such loving and lavish care that

even though we asked the priest for permission to photograph them, which he willingly gave us, when we returned the next day, we were confronted by members of the congregation, who refused to let us photograph in the church even though we said the priest had given us permission. "He does not own the church," they said, "we do." After pleading with them and expressing admiration for the beauty of the images, they relented, permitting us to photograph a few selected saints. While we were going about it, they watched to make sure we did not cheat. We also went farther afield to the earthquake-ruined cathedral of Cuilapan and to Yanhuitlan and, of course, we could not resist spending time in the pre-Columbian ruins of Mitlan and Monte Alban.

On the last return to Mexico City we stayed in the vicinity of Puebla for a week, photographing many of the churches in the Cholula area that we had only briefly visited two months before on the way to Vera Cruz; and as a final digression we drove to Cordoba on the southern highway to Vera Cruz. We arrived in Mexico City during Easter week, when religious services were being conducted in all the churches, and we witnessed the Easter service in Acolman on the first of April. At Tepozotlan we spent a long time photographing the golden interior of the church. From Mexico City we made excursions to Cuernavaca and to Pachuca, where we visited Atotonilco el Grande and watched a Judas pageant in front of the church.

Our Mexican journey was drawing to a close, but before heading north and home there was one part of Mexico we wanted to see. We drove west through Morelia to Patzcuaro, where

the lake fishermen are more interested in displaying their nets to tourists than in catching fish, and then on south to Uruapan, which we had been told was of special interest because of its isolated location; and on the way back to Morelia we stopped to see the Templa de Jesus in Naranja. The last place in which we stopped to photograph was Zacatecas on the highway north of Morelia. Here in Yuriria, a deserted monastery and national monument, I found a beautiful, blue, sculptured Guadalupe fresco--my last photograph. By now we had traveled several thousand miles throughout Mexico, had visited hundreds of chapels and churches, and had taken thousands of photographs; we were eager to leave Mexico. We took the shortest route north through Aguascalientes, Durango and Chihuahua to El Paso, Texas and home.