

# OUR CLUBS

**VIRTUAL VISIT**

## At home in an adoptive land

Rotary Club of San Miguel de Allende-Midday, Mexico

**San Miguel de Allende**, rising up out of Mexico’s central highlands, has been a magnet for tourists and expatriates since American artists began flocking here in the 1930s. They were drawn by the cobblestone streets lined with colorful homes, the colonial architecture, and the traditions of local artisans. As if under the city’s spell, many never left.

Together with longtime residents, the newcomers helped establish the city as an international arts center. This revived the fortunes of a place that a century prior had fallen into decline with the diminished production of nearby silver mines that had generated riches during centuries of Spanish rule. The city, founded in the 16th century, is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In 2005, a handful of the city’s expats chartered the Rotary Club of San Miguel

de Allende-Midday to channel their time and resources into service projects, continuing a long tradition here of newcomers partnering with local nonprofit organizations. “From the beginning, it’s been projects, projects, projects,” says longtime member Gary Peterson, originally from California. “Our focus has always been on projects and fellowship.”

In many ways, the group is like other Rotary clubs started by people who relocated to other countries for work or retirement, including Bocas del Toro in Panama, Chiang Mai International in Thailand, and Tokyo Hiroo in Japan. These clubs provide expats an opportunity to continue doing Rotary service using their own language while acclimating to their new communities. The San Miguel de Allende-Midday club has also been a particularly effective bridge for newcomers to form a deeper connection through friendships and service with their adoptive community and vice versa.

One of its longest-standing projects involves working alongside local organizations like the Centro de Desarrollo Agropecuario (Agricultural Development Center), or CEDESA. Together, they form collectives with female leaders in rural communities and train them to build and manage drinking water cisterns. “By connecting with organizations like CEDESA, it allowed us to demonstrate the value of why we are doing what we are doing,” says Club President Joe Ruffino, who moved to San Miguel in 2017 from upstate New York and bought a small pizzeria.

Lee Carter, immediate past president, agrees. “At the very beginning, we realized

we had no credibility in the rural communities and for us to go out and work there would be ridiculous,” says Carter, who has lived in San Miguel for more than 30 years. “CEDESA works directly in communities. They are our inroad.”

Alongside the service, members of the club have formed friendships beyond the expat community that they might not have otherwise. “It has been the greatest pleasure in the water projects to get to know and work beside these amazing women,” Carter says. “I have been friends with many of them for over 10 years. It is these relationships that keep me involved.”

But despite all that, until recently, something was missing. The club was predominantly male expats. At the start of his 2022-23 presidential year, Carter set out to recruit more women, young people, and native residents. As a result, the club’s membership has nearly doubled since then. Now, more than a third of its 48 members are women, and eight are bilingual Mexicans, including several young adults.

“It’s been amazing,” says José De Anda Pérez, one of those young adults, a dual member of the Rotary club and the Rotaract Club of San Miguel de Allende. “Working with both has opened my mind to creating opportunities to help the community. I want to learn how to plan projects and bring that knowledge back to my Rotaract club.”

The club’s efforts to empower women and girls have also helped it diversify its membership. The club partnered with the international organization Days for Girls to provide washable menstrual products



Members of the Rotary Club of San Miguel de Allende-Midday (from left): José De Anda Pérez, Carla Cadena, Joe Ruffino, Andrea Spessard, and Lee Carter. The club serves as a hub of cultural exchange.

## HOW TO ESCAPE THE EXPAT BUBBLE

Working with the local community is an important part of any Rotary service project, but it is especially important for an international club of expats. As vice president of community service for the Rotary Club of San Miguel de Allende-Midday, Andrea Spessard connects with members every meeting to learn how they want to get involved. The club has organized around project teams instead of committees and encourages every member to be on a project. She shared these additional tips for engaging the local community:

**Start with an assessment.** “We want to ensure we understand what the community’s need is and not just our perspective of it,” Spessard says.

**Collaborate with local organizations.** The San Miguel de Allende-Midday club partners with some of the area’s more than 100 nongovernmental organizations. That helps the club tap into their local knowledge and credibility.

**Involve community leaders.**

The greater San Miguel area includes about 500 rural communities. In their cistern project, the club provides funding, resources, and training, but the communities build the cisterns themselves. “They have the pride of ownership and learn how to maintain them,” Spessard says.

**Stay connected.** The rainwater harvesting cisterns are made of concrete and covered with waterproof paint. “Every few years they need to be repainted,” Spessard explains, “and we make that a Rotary project too.”

for more than 1,700 girls in the fifth and sixth grades. And the club works with Niñas Sabias (Wise Girls) to educate the girls about menstrual health and empower them to understand their worth and potential. “I think this project more than anything else has opened people’s eyes to Rotary being more than they thought,” says Carter.

Andrea Spessard, who leads the club’s service project teams, has seen the results firsthand. She was invited to attend a sixth grade graduation ceremony last June for a girl in the program who was initially reluctant to go on to secondary school. “Through our program she was empow-

ered, learned how important education is, and developed a connection with a teacher who believed in her and encouraged her to stay in school.”

The club also supports a school for people with hearing impairments. An initial global grant helped expand the capacity of the school, which provides education and vocational training in skills like woodworking, sewing, and cooking. A new global grant is funding a vocational training team including educators from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York, to provide teacher training in San Miguel and surrounding areas. “About 60 young people have gone

through the school,” says club member John Doherty, who helped establish the school. “We’ve had kids come in cowering in a corner. Now they are fully engaged 10- or 11-year-olds.”

The club also holds a mix and mingle every Monday night with the Rotaract club and the Spanish-speaking Rotary club in the city to form friendships and practice language skills. It’s one of the ways the club has become a hub of cultural exchange. “We have plenty of people come to the meeting who are visiting or guests,” says Ruffino. “They may not want to join Rotary, but they just come to learn.”

— ARNOLD R. GRAHL