

35th annual Summer Nightly Indian Dances come to a close

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Dances drew tourists from around the globe

One couldn't have asked for a more perfect evening — a beautiful New Mexico sunset splashed across the sky, a gentle breeze whisked by and the soothing melodic sounds of a flute danced in the air. The evening of Sept. 3 marked the end of another year for the Gallup Summer Nightly Indian Dances.

In their 35th year, the nightly dances once again proved why they're such an anticipated event. The dances highlight various Native American tribes, who display their culture through song and dance. Dressed in their tribal regalia, various groups come out and perform before audiences for one hour.

Each year, the City of Gallup and the Gallup-McKinley Chamber of Commerce collaborate to host this unique event to showcase talented Native American dance groups like the Taos Pueblo Flying Eagle Dancers, Polequaptewa Dancers from the Hopi tribe and the White Mountain Apache Crown Dancers, to name just a few.

From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the dances entertain crowds who turn out from the surrounding areas and all over the world. On the final night of the dances, well over 215 visitors from California, Texas, Colorado, and as far away as Australia and Germany, turned out to see the performance.

As kids lined the concession stand to get their last Sno-cone, the Cellicion Zuni Dancers wrapped up the evening with Fernando Cellicion's traditional Native flute music.

Hailing from 33 miles south of Gallup, the group traveled in from the Pueblo of Zuni to perform dances and songs from their culture. Always a favorite with the audience, the group has been with the nightly dances for some time, and Cellicion said the group felt honored to close out the year.

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“Wow, it makes me feel old,” he said, laughing. “It’s been nice to share our culture with the people from all over the world. It’s an honor for us to open and close, so it’s always good to see all our friends.”

While the dance groups bring their traditions and culture to life, what goes on behind the scenes makes the shows possible in the first place. Teri Fraizer, director of the Nightly Indian Dances, has significantly contributed to the success of the event, through scheduling performers with the help of her staff and through her own unique touch.

When asked how it felt to close out the year, Fraizer said the tourist turnout speaks for itself.

“It was a good summer,” she said. “The biggest change I saw this year was the presence of visitors from out [of] the country.”

In his second year working for the Dances, Michael Nashboo, who handles the audio for the event, said he was glad he jumped on board.

“It feels good to be a part of it, when the opportunity came, I thought it was going to be boring,” he said. “It’s something different — a good challenge — and it came out to be really good. I love it, going on [my] second year.”

The small staff said their work seems more like a family than a job, and each night is different. The staff consists of emcees, audio technicians and ambassadors who answer questions from the audience about the groups and announces points of interest around Gallup and its surroundings.

Not only do the tourists enjoy the various dance groups, but local brother and sister Travis and Amy Wagner have diligently attended every performance for the entire 35 years, come rain or shine. One can always spot them in their usual spot, waiting for the dances to begin — the duo has simply become a part of the Nightly Indian Dances.

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“When it began at Red Rock Park, they hired me out as security there for the Dances, then when they moved it over to the train station, they asked again if I could be security,” Travis Wagner said. “Later, I started bringing my sister, and she insisted we not miss a night, she really loves it. We love the performers no matter how many times we see them, we like them as people, and we’ve gotten to know them. When I first saw Cellicion’s [performance], the girls dancing now were just little, and it’s just neat to see them grow up. I almost feel like they’re family.”

Amy Wagner said it’s the people who make it special and keep her coming back.

“It’s neat, and I like the dancers and everybody else,” she said.

You can bet that the Wagners will be back for the 36th year of the Gallup Summer Nightly Indian Dances in 2019.

Visit: www.nightlyindiandances.com

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