

MEXICO

Mexico City

Update on the Fielding Mexico guide book. Hotel Maria Angelos is closed. At least it is in winter. Also, the telephone operators do not all speak English.

"Zeez eez Otel Maria Angelos"

Zat and I sat in the taxi and stared over in the dark to an uninhabited dwelling.

"It looks closed to me"

"Yeez"

We waited in the taxi for a couple of minutes.

"Do you know of any other cheap hotels nearby?"

The driver grunted and pulled away from the curb and we drove down what looked like the main drag, up a side street or two and lo, the Hotel Miramar. It was \$35 a room, a bit steep but it was 11:30 p.m. and I was beginning not to care. The room itself was OK, complete with 30 Watt bulb and TV which worked, although I did have to struggle for a while with the vertical hold. There were about 8 channels 3 of which were screening 20-year-old U.S. movies with somewhat out of sync dubbing. I ripped open the curtains in the morning to reveal a huge external fan.

We had breakfast downstairs - only us there. Neil Diamond was playing, shockingly, from an ancient speaker in the corner of the room and to compound the obscenity the tape operated at variable speed. Since Zat and I have a combined Spanish vocabulary of perhaps ten words, breakfast was going to be a surprise. It turned out to be scrambled eggs with little bits of bacon mixed in - wonderful. I only hoped that our prophylactic antibiotics were going to do their job.

[all the dogs in Mexico are beginning to look very similar - brown, skinny, short hair, cowed; there is another variant, dirty white with black specks, skinny etc (see above)]

Oaxaca

Oaxaca (pronounced wah-haaca) is Disneyland, unreal, especially around the town centre, called the Zocalo. People wander about leisurely in colourful clothes and listen to the musicians playing in the bandstand. It seems a far cry from Philadelphia. Curiously the police are here. Why? Perhaps there are roaming gangs of bandits we just don't know about. Guards armed with rifles stand at the entrances of banks. Our culinary adventures

continue and it is becoming apparent that Mexican food is much different, and better, than that in the U.S. In fact my last Mexican meal was about ten years ago in San Francisco when, six hours after the last spoonful of **muy picante** taco + assorted strains of E. Coli, the Angel of Death came to visit. Stuff was coming out of both ends, not quite simultaneously, but damned close. It was indeed a grim night.

But here, in Mexico, the food is great and not hot. I'm sitting on the beach, well, in a chair by a table but my feet are in the sand. It's a little fishing village called Puerto Angel on the Pacific Coast. Zat and I have ordered a couple of **cerveza clara DOS EQUIS XX - lager especial** - to while away the night. While away until they turn off all the lights and we then will slink off and settle down beside one of the small fishing boats faintly illuminated in front of me.

What of the past few days?

We hired - at great rip-off expense - a VW beetle in Oaxaca. Hertz and Dollar have no competition here and charge what they like which is at threshold levels for normal gringos let alone scallywags like us. I said no competition but that's not quite accurate; a local company had taken over the Avis concern and they did charge a little bit less. But the little bit less made it a possibility so we took the plunge. You see, the problem is accidents. In Mexico if you are involved in an accident (especially a Spanishless gringo) then, no matter if it was your fault or not, you pay a deductible of 10% the cost of the car. Not an attractive scenario. And I mean plunge because the road between Oaxaca and Puerto Angel involves a long tortuous mountain stretch with, no doubt, future encounters with kamikaze local drivers foaming at the mouth, overtaking on suicide bends whist hooting insanely.

Still, the Pacific beckoned and off we went. I don't know how widespread hitching is in Mexico but we forced a local into the car as part of a sidetrack to a distant church. He seemed nonplussed as he bumped about in the back but we wallowed in our good deed. Strangely the church was cordoned off with high fences. Why? The village was quite small and poor and here was this edifice to God in it's midst but the locals weren't invited. I probably read it all wrong - maybe the church silver was being protected from bandits who magically appear from their hideouts in the hills. 10,000 churches were built in Mexico after Cortes vanquished the Aztecs and the vast majority were erected via Indian slave labour. They broke their backs building mansions and temples in honour of a god they knew not of whilst the Spaniards (the ones who had

failed to succeed in the Peninsular and had come over to make their fortune) lazed and barked orders in the 'New Spain' as they became rich.

By all accounts Cortes was very lucky in his Mexican adventures. For one he managed to acquire two interpreters and thus find out who were the enemies of the Aztecs and subsequently obtain their help, and two, as a contrast to the previously more forceful and warlike Aztec kings, Montezuma II was far too thoughtful and indecisive. He decided to welcome the Spaniards initially rather than destroy them there and then as he should have.

We bumped back onto route 175 again and in no time at all were presented with another unwilling hitcher. In fact this elderly Indian lady really did want a lift but it was tough discovering to where. Zat boldly attempted to find out with a mixture of pidgin English/Spanish/French but to no avail. I was sure she would make it plain at the appropriate time and told Zat to relax. Sure enough about half an hour down the road she said "Aqui" in some village and actually said "Quanto?" - how much. It was she who first alerted us to the TOPES, bumps in the road designed to slow down traffic in the villages. Sometimes they were not indicated by a TOPE sign stuck at the side of the road and only Zat's frantic "TOPE!" saved us. As it was the beetle's suspension was severely tested. Sometimes we were fooled by illusory TOPES and we would screech to a halt for reason

"Why did you shout?"

"I thought I saw one"

"Well you didn't"

"I'm sorry"

As I suspected there were loonies on the roads and not crashing on the mountain stage was really just a matter of luck. Of course there were no barriers to speak of except perhaps a feeble one foot fence every now and then but other than that nothing between us, a crazed Mexican driver, and the ravine.

The map indicated several large towns on the way to Puerto Angel but they did not appear and the planned pit-stops evaporated. Were we, indeed, on the right road? Not that it mattered because there was no way back. This particular journey in Oaxaca did not reveal any wildlife but there were plenty of goats, donkeys, dogs (see above), and locals looking knackered by the side of the road. We pulled into a rare parking area amongst a bunch of shacks - some bananas and bottles on a table on a table had caught my eye. Especially the bottles. Were they full of some glorious and bizarre mountain moonshine?

I hoped so. After a couple of minutes of us sniffing about the goodies, an elderly weathered man poked his head out of a door. He sauntered over and grinned. I pointed to the bottles and said

"Que aqui?"

He grinned again

"Muy bueno!"

Zat thrust herself forward unexpectedly

"Marijuana?"

A little misunderstanding.

"Si, si! Muy bueno!"

I looked more closely - the bottles contained a wax-like substance.

"It's honey" I said. A little disappointing. However, you never know - they do grow marijuana in Oaxaca (in fact, armed with this knowledge I had initiated several sorties into roadside fields to investigate promising candidates "this is the stuff Zat", "it's too big, marijuana has smaller leaves", "but perhaps this is a local strain", "Eric, it's 8ft tall with red flowers", "So?" and despite Zat's indifference I gradually acquired a selection of dubious looking leaves to be agonized over later on [I mean, maybe they contain a certain Mexican nerve toxin]) and the honey just might have a kick to it. We bought a couple of bottles and a stack of bananas for the hell of it.

That's the end of my notes - at this point I think things began to drift off into a sea of Mezcal. The sand beckons...