

Mexico on sale

From flea markets to eateries to cab tours,
it is always a case of haggler beware

By Mary Blye Howe
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A CAPULCO, Mexico—It's our third day in Acapulco, and we've spent all three of them at the flea market: "Come here!" calls a merchant, flinging open a poncho for me to look at. "You like?" I picture my husband in one of them, flipping back the left hand corner to reveal a six-shooter, taking on a gang of outlaws with the calm of a drunk, then strutting toward me, talking in a sexy, husky monotone while a cigar stub bobs in slight movements between his lips. I consider the sale.

Another merchant drags me, literally, into his shop to look at a key chain. I don't need a key chain, I tell him.

"For your husband," he says.

"My husband doesn't need a key

chain."

"For your father, then. Your brother. Your son. Your neighbor. Here, I am wrapping it up for you. \$10."

"Ai yi yi, too much!" I say. "\$4"

"Ai yi yi, too little! \$9."

I'm not interested in the key chain and inwardly chide myself for haggling. "I really don't need the key chain," I explain, walking outside. The merchant follows me, grabbing onto the back of my shirt and pulling it, I think, somewhere close to the back of my knees.

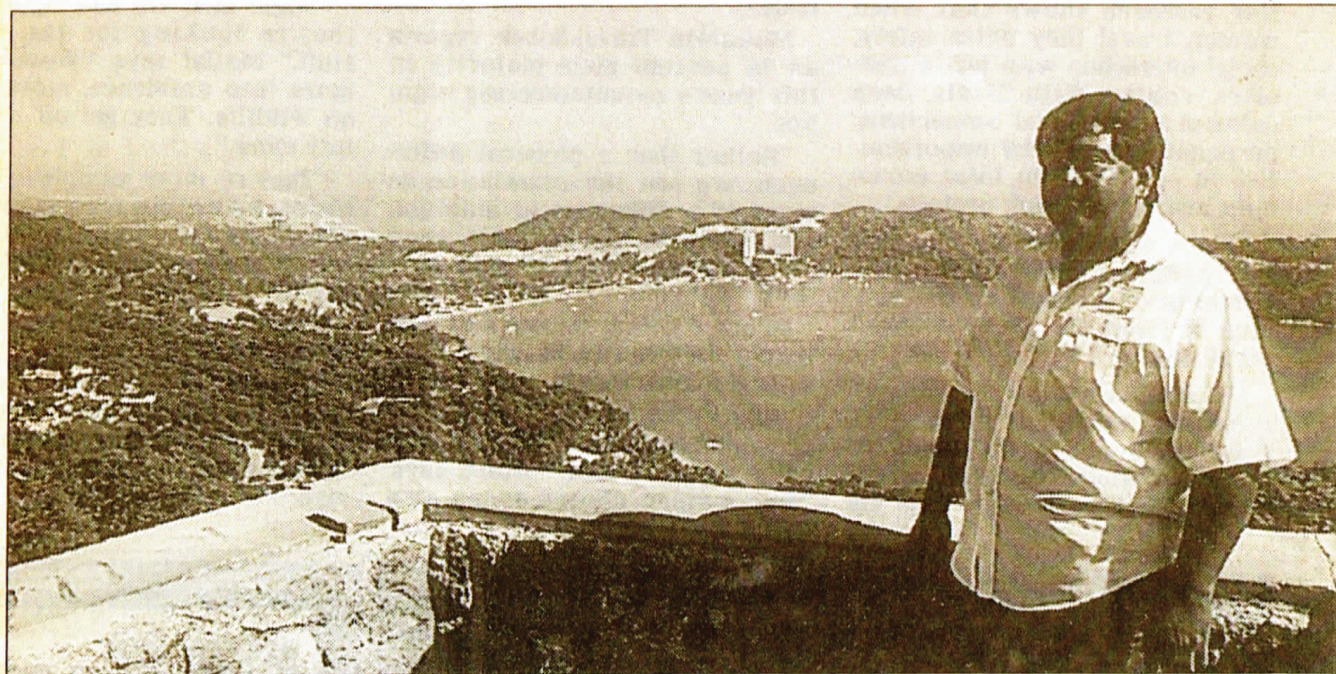
"Let's make a bargain," he pleads. "\$7."

We barter a bit and I agree to buy his key chain. He's as happy as a two-time Oscar winner. Carefully he winds paper around the key chain and puts it in a clear plastic bag, then follows me outside again, pecking on my

back as soon as we're out the door. "A couple of dollars for all my trouble?" he says, extending his hand. He laughs uproariously; I'm charmed and give him the money.

At home I detest shopping and order even my underwear by mail. Here I'm enchanted and drift through the markets all day. The awnings of wedding-white Spanish dresses, embroidered in purple and pink, priced "just for you, senorita" are beautiful. Woven straw baskets with purple and pink flowers bulging around the edges line the shelves, onyx chipped into tic-tac-toe boards and chess sets and candy dishes and bookends cover the floors, and the walls are virtually *made* of jewelry: Mexican silver that I'm easily talked into buying hoards of every time I go to Mexico and which turns everything in my





Mary Blye Howe photos

Taxi driver/tour guide Pedro: His tip is included—sort of.

suitcase green before it arrives.”

At a table outside one of the poorest shops stands a bare-chested boy of about 10, the tiniest bit of flab thrust proudly over a pair of cutoffs. As we slow our pace, the boy fans his hand across a table filled with woven bracelets. His eyes are the color of semi-

sweet chocolate. I wonder how much it would cost us to buy all of his bracelets.

“Did you make these?” my husband asks.

Si, señor.”

“C’mon. You *made* these?”

“Si!” The boy grins and picks one up, in a manner that indicates such a gesture indisputably proves his claim.

“Will you take one apart and weave it for me?” my husband asks. Mike picks up a hot pink bracelet with the word “Acapulco” woven with black thread and hands it to the boy. With rapidity and ease the boy unravels the thread and re-shapes it. My husband is impressed. “How much?” he asks.

“\$2,” says the boy.

“Ai yi yi! Too little!”

“Give me a dollar.” Suddenly dozens of children appear from the surrounding shops, speaking rapidly in Spanish, giggling behind cupped hands, explaining to the boy that the señor wants to pay him *more*, not less, than his asking price for the bracelet. Their bright eyes glance mirthfully into ours, then shyly away, then back again. They encircle us, unfamiliar with this new kind of bartering but ready to play. “Too little,” Mike says again.

“Give me 3,” says the young barterer.

“Ai yi yi, too little still.”

“Give me 4.”

“How about 5?”

The boy smiles brightly at us and for the rest of our time at the



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Let's make a bargain: Hats for sale on the beach in Acapulco.

flea market, two dozen Hershey-kiss-eyed children follow us around the market.



Flagging down a taxi, Mike and I ask to be driven to a cafe near the Holiday Plaza, where we're staying, for an evening snack. The restaurants in Mexico are flea markets in their own right. Each evening waiters stand outside the restaurants on the sidewalks and hand out miniature paper menus, insisting you come in and eat.

After getting our food at a cafeteria this evening, we pay the cashier at the end of the line, eat and prepare to leave. A man wearing a white uniform approaches us and tells us we forgot to leave a tip for the waitress. "But we didn't have a waitress," we protest. He insists we leave a tip and we, not eager to make a scene, hand him a dollar. I gripe about this for the rest of the night. I consider going back down and demanding my dollar back.

Mike tries to distract me, knowing that I'll probably not only ask him for the dollar back, I'll ask him for two extra ones to go with it, "for all my trouble." I doubt this tactic, however, will be as successful as it was when the flea market merchant used it on me.

We like Cindy's, a diner like the American Denny's, with 24-hour service, a basic but varied menu, and the least expensive menu we've seen anywhere in Mexico. Mike orders seafood soup made with shrimp, octopus and vegetables and a main dish of spaghetti with "meat" sauce. I admire his audacity, while ordering for myself a safe meal of salad, garlic bread and nachos.

One night, at another restaurant where we ate while it was raining so we could see if the grass roof really held up against the water (it did), we ordered off a chalkboard menu hanging on the wall. It advertised nachos with "malted cheese, burritas, cheff salad and breadad fish," among other items that slipped past the "computer spellcheck."

I ordered the "cheff" salad and received one massive leaf of Romaine lettuce, topped with two gigantic sliced onions, a sliced tomato and a pile of cubed cheese. \$15. Ai yi yi, too much, but no one wanted to barter.

My favorite meal in Mexico is any kind of fish, frenetically chopped in a skillet with onions and green peppers fajita-style, and served with black beans—squashed to perfection—rice and hot sauce. No restaurant in Mexico prints such a dish on their menu but I've never had a single restaurant refuse to make it. Each time I return to

Mexico, this is my dietary mainstay.



Unless they're drunk, Mexicans flirt well.

If a male passerby hoots, the other men standing around laugh loudly while averting their eyes in obvious embarrassment, and talk among themselves in a language that I liken to zipping past my 33 1/3 rpm brain at a 45 rpm speed. Then they come over and apologize for the hooter's brazenness and begin flirting brazenly themselves. Husbands don't deter them in the least.

Each evening Mike and I stroll the beach. Tonight three men standing close to the tables lining the hotels' private beaches sing loudly. Their heads are thrown back like tiny birds receiving food from their mothers. They alternate singing with taking swipes at their guitars, which sound like the toy guitar my 8-year-old nephew plays. Filling the air with Spanish romance, their voices are beautiful.

One morning Mike and I stop to chat with a taxi driver named Pedro. We hope to get some inside information on where to eat, shop and what tours to take.

Pedro eats all his meals at home and he doesn't shop, so he's no help there, but he does know about the tours. In fact, he *gives* them, he tells us, and they are much better than the guy's tours down the street.

For one thing, *that* guy only has Mexican air conditioning (meaning blasts of stifling humid air vented to us by open windows), and Pedro has real air conditioning. For another, he will

give us a private tour, he says, allowing us to stay in each place as long as we want, and to stop and take pictures whenever and wherever tourist mania seizes us.

I can't resist bartering with him. "Will you take us through the town and let us see the real Acapulco?" I ask.

"Si!"

"Does your \$35 fee include the tip?"

"Si!"

We climb inside Pedro's taxi. Our first stop, he says, is on a hill from which we can look down onto the patio of Sylvester Stallone's home. We can stop there and take pictures. The home Pedro points toward sprawls in all directions into congestions of palm trees. Mike snatches our 35 mm and snaps away.

Later that night, Jorge Cortez, a new Mexican friend, laughs and tells us Stallone doesn't live in that house. Part of "Rambo 2" had been filmed at the Pie de la Cuesta in Acapulco, he says, and either the story had grown innocently out of this, or the tour guides simply needed a new stop on their agenda. When in need, he insinuates, make something up.

Pedro next takes us to watch the famous Acapulco cliff divers, where we will also eat supper. The sun looks like a giant orange planet from a Superman comic, about to drop into the ocean, as the tiny-framed, but perfectly built young men climb the cliffs from the narrow inlet of water, opposite from where we stand watching. They thrust their legs upward, one at a time, in unnatural positions, climbing higher and higher in spider fashion. Cautious and fluent.

Balancing on a small piece of rock jutting from the cliff, the young man stands motionless, head bowed, eyes open I hope, for a long moment. He crosses himself, then raises his head. Stretching out his arms like an eagle preparing to fly, the boy springs from the ledge, thrusting his body as far from the cliff and toward the center of the inlet as possible. The timing must be perfect, says the announcer, because if the boy dives into a wave, he can be dashed against the rocks and killed. My husband rolls his eyes. I gasp in terror and suspense.

Each diver climbs higher than the last until finally, the last young man stands on top of the highest ledge. His prayer is longer, his crossing of himself slower and more meticulous.

Then the leap, the minimal sploosh as he hits the water, the surfacing and the crowd's eruption into cheers and applause. Mike looks bored. I'm still trying to regain my breath and wonder if I'll be able to sleep that night.

As we turn to go into the restaurant, the divers, except for the last one, are already standing at the exit with cardboard containers for us to drop dollars into. We eat at the restaurant. Then we catch up with Pedro.

During the ride home I ask Pedro how much his taxi earns. He tells me \$10 to \$15 per day during the off-season months of June through October, but "a lot more during busy months," all of which he splits 50-50 with the company. Mike and I are vacationing during their off-season and the \$35 tour Pedro is giving us is a much-needed day of profit for him and his company.

Pedro rides the bus each day to work and supports a wife and four teenagers.

When we arrive home we hand Pedro \$35. He looks at the money and keeps his hand out, a bewildered look crossing his face. We ask if we have not given him enough money. "My tip," he says simply, indicating we've forgotten to give him one. We remind him that he had told us the \$35 included the tip. "It's okay. If you don't like my tour, you don't have to tip. If you do, well..." His outstretched hand has never moved. I think he's charming. Mike thinks he's a thief. We agree to give him 10 more dollars. Mike gripes about it the rest of the night.



At the airport Mike and I prepare to pay our tax so that we can leave the country. "What happens if we don't have the money?" Mike asks. "Do we get to stay here?"

"Si, señor," the man said quickly, "and we give you free motel accommodations." We laugh but hastily hand the man his money and lug our suitcases toward two empty chairs. Absent-mindedly I rub the green ring on my arm from the bracelet I purchased that morning. I think of the young weaver at the market, the exuberant singers strolling on the beach, and I wonder if we could get our Caprice Classic to Pedro when we buy a new one. The call comes for us to board our plane. I glance back toward the man who took our tax money. Hmmmm, tempting. After all, that "hotel" might just serve fish fajitas.