

On our own in Oaxaca

By BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

WE did it in France and we did it in Italy. We even did it at the Jersey shore. But, until this year, in spite of our many trips to Mexico over the years of our marriage, we had never done it in Mexico.

Rented a house, that is.

Finally, though, the urge became overpowering and we succumbed. We found a little row house in one of our favorite cities, Oaxaca, and we began to live our retirement dream by renting it for a modest \$850 a month, including utilities and TV. (There are many little apartments belonging to established hotels that you can rent by the week. Mexicans in general aim to please, and the way they handle their property rentals is no exception.)

"What on earth will you do there?," most of our friends wanted to know. "How are the restaurants? Can you cook at home?" And everybody's favorite, "How about the water; aren't you afraid of getting sick?"

Well, as for what to do, in the Oaxaca area, in a high valley about 350 miles southwest of Mexico City, there are lovely museums, a friendly town square and about a dozen weekly craft

The leisurely charm of getting to know a city by living in a casita

markets in Indian villages a short bus ride from the city.

They sell baskets and all manner of pottery, from huge red pots to tiny, doll-sized utensils fashioned into necklaces. You can buy vegetables and fruits galore and, of course, piles of peppers in all sizes, shapes and degrees of fire.

Then there is a huge Saturday market on the edge of the city. This one caters mostly to locals, but has plenty to interest visitors. There are all manner of kitchen gadgets like hand-carved wooden spoons, originally intended for stirring mole (the highly seasoned sauce Oaxaca is famous for) and lime squeezers (invaluable for margaritas). There is clothing, costume jewelry and myriads of off-beat things to examine, bargain for and buy.

Nearby, there are spectacular archaeological sites. On a sheared-off mountain top is awesome Monte Alban, situated on a sheared-off mountain top, with mysterious carvings and scattered remains of Zapotec culture. A favorite ruin is

Mitla, a tiny ancient Zapotec city that has been restored so that its beautiful stonework in complicated geometric designs gives instant insight into the origin of the patterns that are used on the local pottery and hand woven rugs.

Best of all, you have the leisure to enjoy the charms of the city. You can sit on your favorite bench in the beautifully planted Zocalo (central square) and watch the locals drift by. Or you sip a beer at busy El Jardin, or a coffee from the espresso machine at Terranova.

You can book a table with a view at Asador Vasco, a second-floor Basque restaurant across from the central bandstand where concerts are performed nearly every evening. Asador Vasco provides a superb vantage point to observe the action of whatever huelga (strike or demonstration) that's taking place outside the Government Palace.

But you don't have to eat out at all. Having your own casita means you also have a kitchen — which means there's a reason for you to shop for the wonderful foodstuffs at the local mercados (markets), and to ask advice on how to prepare them — magnificent yel-

low, green or red-skinned mangoes, fragrant pineapples, tomatoes with taste and perfectly ripe avocados.

Another treat is to find brilliant orange-yellow bouquets of zucchini flowers. They're gorgeous in a vase and delicious as an hors d'oeuvre dipped in an egg wash, then flour, then fried in butter and corn oil spiced with a dash of hot pepper.

Of course, when we think about washing fruits and vegetables for the table, we have to talk about the water — the W word that strikes terror into visiting American hearts.

There is a simple solution, of course. All you need is a good supply of bottled water — unquestionably, an important part of living in Mexico.

Fortunately, trucks loaded with 5-gallon bottles of purified water make their way up and down the streets of every neighborhood. All you have to do is step outside and wave to the truck driver, who'll bring in a 5-gallon bottle.

Our one-bedroom casita (this kind of accommodation is frequently called a "bungalow") belonged to the Hotel Hacienda La Noria, which is just across the street.

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TO MARKET: An Indian girl with pineapples to sell.

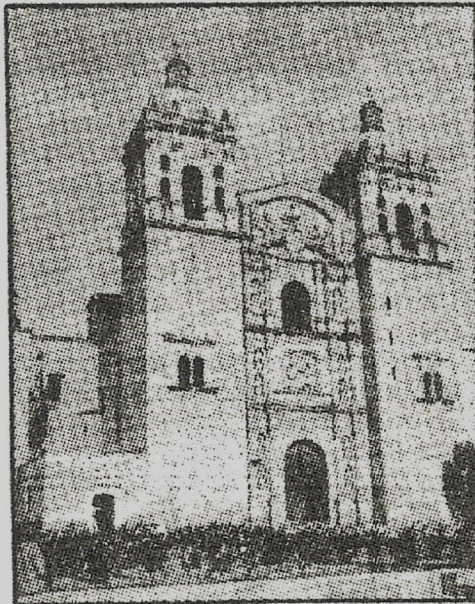
Bungalow life in Oaxaca

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By renting a bungalow that belonged to a hotel, we had both a garden and a pool. Only, of course, they weren't for our exclusive use; other guests had access to the facilities. But with the single exception of a visiting busload of high schoolers from Mexico City, it was never too crowded or noisy.

Unless you rent a luxury property, you should be aware that rental kitchens come only with bare necessities: a pot for boiling water, a couple of sauce pans, a frying pan for huevos rancheros (fried eggs perked up with a hot pepper sauce). With a few other odd bits and pieces, you have just enough to rustle up a meal.

Besides the water and the sparseness of the kitchen (you can always buy a few extra pieces), renting in Mexico presented few inconveniences. And we loved living on our own. To get around, we used local buses (for about 15 cents a ride) or simply walked the streets, peering into interior



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OAXACA LANDMARK: *The Church of Santo Domingo.*

courtyards, nosing out restaurants that weren't on the tourist route and finding off-beat places with music.

In other words, we slowed down long enough to smell the hibiscus.

FAST FACTS

Getting to Oaxaca: Mexicana and Aeromexico run daily 45-minute flights from Mexico City.

Apartments for rent: Villa Maria, downtown. Phone: (951) 65056. She has a variety of properties for under \$600 a month, utilities included.

Hotel Real del Fortin, on the edge of town. Phone: (951) 751-35. Swimming pool down the hill. Suites with separate entrance, \$1,000 a month; weekly rentals available.

Hotel Hacienda La Noria. Phone: (951) 67555. Walking distance from town in a family neighborhood, but within "hearing" distance of a noisy highway. Four tiny townhouses, monthly basis. From \$650 for one bedroom.

Esther de Bonilla, in the lobby tourist office of the Presidente Hotel. Phone: (951) 65791. Apartments about \$400 per month.

Museums: Ruffino Tamayo Museum, Morelos 503. The artist's own collection of pre-Hispanic artifacts.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Macedonia Alcala 202. Displays of contemporary local artists.

Regional Museum of Oaxaca, next to the Santo Domingo church at Macedonia Alcala and A. Gurrion. Famous for its display of Monte Alban gold and stone jewelry.