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Mark Friedman

Traveling in Mexico

Traveling in Mexico is great fun except for a few of the details. Like for instance, you have no idea what anyone is saying. And you imagine that the parts of the conversations you don't understand are something they will laugh about for years to come:

Me: How much is this T shirt?

Vendor: The T shirts we sell to imperialist pigs are only 120 pesos.

Me: How about 80 pesos?

Vendor: How about sticking the T shirt in your ear for 100 pesos.

Me: OK I'll take it.

In each case the sentence ends in somewhat recognizable words. But the words in the middle are a complete blurr. So they could be anything. I'm sure that most of the people we meet are wonderful charming people but unless you tape record, transcribe and translate these exchanges how can you tell.

So then you try to be respectful and use a little Spanish and things get worse. Yesterday we came down to breakfast somewhat late, around 3:30 PM, and I tried to ask the woman at the cash register if they would still serve us eggs. At first she was counting and didn't seem to hear me. Uno dos, stupido americano, tres quatro cinco and so forth. So I tried to ask the question in Spanish. But the only part of the question I knew was the word for eggs, as in huevos rancheros. So I said to her Ahuevos?@ And the reaction I got was completely unexpected. AWhat?@ she said as she drew back indignantly and called for a waiter. I have gone over this exchange many times now and have concluded that the word Aeggs@ must somehow relate to ovaries and is actually Mexican slang for bitch. So I was trying to ask politely for eggs and instead ended up calling the woman a bitch.

The truth is that you don't need to know Spanish because everyone you interact with can get by in passable English anyway. So they wait patiently while you butcher their language and then ask you what you want in English. My favorite so far is the use of money. I'm pretty good with money having been a fiscal officer in a previous lifetime, but I spent several days handing people bills at random. AHere, take what you need for you and your family and give me back the rest.@ Later I got more sophisticated. AQuanto cuesta?@ I would say, holding up a can of V-8 juice. And the cashier would say a word that I knew was a number in Spanish if only I could remember which one. So after a few seconds of me staring down at the floor and apparently counting on my toes, she says Asix@ in English. And that should be the end of it. But then of course the question is six what? Six centavos, six pesos, six hundred pesos, six hundred dollars, six geese a laying? I finally settle on pesos, which means about 60 cents, about what it would cost in the good old USA. Meanwhile this woman is thinking. AIf he asked me the price in Spanish, why doesn't he know the numbers from 1 to 10?@ And you have to agree with her.

There are many other cultural things to learn here that are not mentioned in any of the guide books.

Actually, I didn't read any of the guide books, but I'm certain these kinds of things would not be mentioned. For example, our hotel has a lovely set of grass covered cabanas at the top of the beach, with comfortable chairs and tables. Waiters come occasionally and ask if you want anything to drink. So I found one of these and sat down to read for a while while I waited for my girlfriend to join me. And a few minutes later a woman comes up from behind and starts to drag the chair next to me away. I am in a foreign land, but I know when my territory is being invaded. Even here it must be OK to stand up for yourself in such situations. "Wait a minute," I say, "I'm going to need that chair for someone else in a few minutes." And she says, "Yes, but we reserved this cabana weeks (months or years) ago." and unstated "This chair belongs to me, you idiot and what are you doing in our cabana?" No one told me the cabanas had to be reserved. No one told us the towel system either. You have to sign out towels like books in a library and if you don't return them by 8 PM they charge your room the full cost of the factory that made the towels in the first place. The first few days I didn't understand this and just thought they put out towels randomly for the guests, so I took one that was lying there unused and took it off to my chair. I'm certain that some other guest will be paying off the factory costs for the rest of their life.

Perhaps the most interesting part of being here in Mexico is the way you are viewed as a gigantic dollar bill with arms and legs. If you walk within 500 yards of any commercial establishment you are immediately assaulted with offers to sell you something, feed you something or do some unspecified thing to your body. "Here, amigo, we have the biggest lobsters in town and a table is waiting for you at the best table in the restaurant where our waiter will massage your back for only 5,000 pesos." Many merchants have perfected these lines over the years, and my favorite was from a jewelry store in Zihuatenejo. Two men leaped up from their chairs with open arms and shouted in a loud voice. "We have been waiting for you signor." No one ever says this in real life. "Where the hell have you been" is the usual line. But here I am the savior come at last. I am the Pope. I am Godot. If I had the nerve I would say, "Yes, I have been waiting for you too. At last we are together. Would you like to come up to my apartment and drink some chalupas?"

I don't want to be the ugly American. But no matter what you do you seem to fall into the role anyway. So you are tempted to give up. "No, gracias." you say repeatedly without eye contact each time you are asked to look at or buy something. I'm sure if I were in a car accident and the ambulance attendants came to help me I would say "No gracias," and be left for dead by the side of the road. Can't say I'd blame them.