

MAY 2, 1985

About every six minutes a group of Americans pass by my table. It's a Sunday morning and I'm in Matzatlon. The hotel patio is lighted by the morning sun and in the forefront a rock staircase leads down to the beaches. I am lingering over a cup of strong black Mexican coffee, attended by what well could be one of the most alert and unobtrusive waiters on the coast of Mexico.

I have severed all relations with the English speaking constituency of this hotel, including the staff and a large colony of Americans that live here. Until I land in Texas tomorrow, honored indeed is going to be the Americano whom I acknowledge.

The change occurred yesterday down at the sailboat harbor. I had just spent the day sailing with some people from California and Oregon. The sea had been smooth and the wind just a bit above what it takes to move without support of the motors.

I'd had a whole lot to tell these folks. In the four or five days I'd spent bucking and pitching around on a tram and a bus, a backlog of stories had built up way above normal. The boat was a perfect setting for story telling. We lunched on deck and threw the gulls crumbs and watched the islands and beaches in field glasses. The Mexican Navy had a gunboat anchored off shore and our Coast Guard had a ship big enough to carry a helicopter docked close by.

In these strange surroundings, it must have been mid-afternoon before I noticed that a lady from California was translating my dialogue. She hadn't traveled much in Texas, but she'd spent enough time among different nationalities to be good at dialects. She was quick and had a style that was inoffensive and most effective.

The people weren't impolite or unfriendly about our language difference. I'd say that once I became aware of the barrier, they seemed more curious than anything else. They were eager to know, for example, whether I would understand the people back in Texas after being gone for a week or so.

Until I'd been isolated on a sailboat without any Mexicans or Texans to talk to, I hadn't thought of the possibility of losing my mother tongue. Expatriates do drop their French and Spanish after they've been gone for a long time. I don't suppose I'd ever forget how to talk to cowboys, but I sure might lose the rest of my idiom struggling to communicate in other situations.

Once we started back to the hotel last night, it hit me how lucky I was that I hadn't fallen overboard out of earshot of my interpreter. I am going to have to study English when I get the chance. I think I'd prefer traveling in the United States over any other country were it not for the problem of the language.