

DECEMBER 1, 1988

The regular rainy season in Costa Rica had to be called off because of the deluge that came with Hurricane Joan. Sheet water plunged into floods that'd make draining the Great Lakes look like a bunch of street kids playing with garden hoses.

Maybe it rained 25 inches in 24 hours; or perhaps, it was two feet in half that time. All I know is that when I heard on the TV that 35,000 refugees were being evacuated to San Jose from the coast, and when an airline agent found me a seat on plane to Mexico City, I didn't want to stay around treading water and adding to the housing shortage.

In Mexico City things were so crowded that I decided to spend what time I had left in Oaxaca, some 150 kilometers, southwest of the capital. Oaxaca has an Indian atmosphere and lots of ruins and museums. The city is surrounded in dusty adobe villages where work oxens still pull cartloads of cane, and tired old ponies power bullwheels that grind up cactus to make a dreadful liquor called mescal.

In the town itself, peasants are awakened early in the morning to sweep the streets with big, bulky homemade brooms. My hotel had walls five feet thick and indoor gardens that were once tended by Catholic Sisters who used the buildings as a convent.

The food in the hotel dining room wasn't spectacular. The best dish, I thought, was a thick, rich black bean soup; the big loser was a tamale wrapped in banana leaves and doctored up in a chocolate sauce.

One of the waiters gave me the framework for the soup. He claimed the way the cook used avocado skins to season the broth was a secret. To be sure, this master plate juggler wasn't packing a grudge against gringos for leaving too light a gratuity, I spilled a sample of soup on my necktie to be analyzed when I got back home. I learned a long time ago, just because a waiter has learned how to serve a cup of coffee without ending up with half the contents in the saucer or in the customer's lap, doesn't mean he can cook, so I always draw my own sample to check out at a later date.

Oaxaca was a good place to dry off. I didn't think I'd ever see too much rain, but I sure did on this trip.