



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Foreign Places:
Mazatlan, Mexico**

Mazatlan, Mexico Report One

October 8-9, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Recently, I spent a few days in Mazatlan, Mexico, with some relatives---one of whom is a close relative, my wife. This is our second trip to this part of the world. Last year Holly and I flew down here to be with kinfolk and enjoyed the time so much we decided a repeat trip was in order.

Mother-in-Law and Vacation

The evening before our flight to Mexico, we stayed at a hotel in Albuquerque, which was near the airport. The hotel provided a shuttle service to our airline. We sat up front in the vehicle, just behind the driver, who greeted us with, "Good morning. I'll have you at the airport in a moment or two." Glancing at us from the rear view mirror, he asked, "Where are you headed?"

- Reporter, "Mazatlan, Mexico."
- Driver, "A fine vacation spot."

I am retired. Every day is a vacation. I wish I had retired earlier, say, right after college. A forty-year vacation would have suited me just fine. But then, it is likely I would have picked-up golf earlier in my life, and ruined what would have been several decades of blissful ignorance.

- Reporterette, "Yes, and we're going to be with family...My mom and brother, my sister-in-law, her mom, our niece."
- Reporter, "I'm going on vacation with my mother-in-law."
- Driver, "You're a real trooper."

Because my mother-in-law is reading this report, may I make clear: Every day with my mother-in-law is a vacation. There, a potential family rift is avoided...and mom's will remains intact.

This Seat and Those Next to Me are Taken...by Me

Having taken a diversion into obesity a few years ago, I have come to appreciate the relationship of calories to adipose tissue, as well as double bypass heart surgery. And I have become more observant of the propensity of many Americans toward, putting it diplomatically, plumpness.

While waiting in line to board the plane, we noticed three chubby people standing in front of us. They were possibly a family of husband, wife, and child. They were likely over two hundred pounds each. They were possibly destined to sit next to *me*. If so, I was going to insist they pay for part of my airfare, because they would be occupying part of my seat. I intoned a silent remonstrance to the Great Ticket Agent in the Sky: *Please, don't let it be me.*

Sound familiar? You've had the same experience? Which is worse, a fleshy seat neighbor, or a never-stop-talking seat neighbor? I don't know about you, but I'd rather have the shoe bomber in an adjacent seat. He at least keeps to himself and his shoes.

As we moved forward toward the entrance ramp to the plane, I uttered another silent prayer as I tried to read the seat assignment numbers on the boarding passes in their hands. As we walked onto the plane and strided past the first class area, I wished I had purchased seats designated with small row numbers. We continued to follow them toward the rear of the plane. All the way back into the high-numbered rows, and they had not yet stuffed themselves into their seats...and mine.

At row 23, they made a right turn and began to squeeze themselves into three adjacent chairs and part of the aisle. They were assigned and consigned to their own self-imposed discomfort. Holly and I sat down just behind them in row 24, sorry for them and thankful for us.

Security at Mazatlan Airport

After a pleasant flight from Albuquerque, through Phoenix, to Mazatlan, we exited the plane and encountered the sign shown in Figure 1. The words *classic pig fever* caught my eye. Classic? The definitions for *classic* are *top-quality...generally accepted...always fashionable*. I was tempted to ask Holly if she knew the difference between *top-quality*, *generally accepted*, *always fashionable* pig fever; as opposed to *poor-quality*, *not accepted*, *never fashionable* pig fever. .



I let it pass, as well as my confusion about the word, *fitozoosanitary*. Not to mention the idea that I might be allowed to import a dead pig in my suitcase---but not a live pig.

The fat trio, amazingly enough, were lost in the crowd. Undeterred by their absence, we managed to queue-up to the immigration line. There we stood behind a cool looking dude. He was close to my age. I

was bedecked in a polo shirt and other ordinary attire. In contrast, he was costumed as a hard rocker. Ear ring in the left ear. Red tank shirt. No socks. Black pants. Backward baseball cap, decorated with an American flag and a flying eagle.

Notwithstanding this impressive display of rebel apparel, his cover was broken: On his sockless feet were brown penny loafers---straight out of an Ivy League shoe catalog. The only shoes more anomalous to his costume would have been wing tips.

I thought perhaps he was an erstwhile maverick, a former social renegade, but now relegated to an ordinary life and on vacation from his generally accepted mode of existence. Perhaps his vacation to Mazatlan gave him the chance to take a trip back to the rebellious life he once knew,

one he still cherished and missed. Fine with me. God knows, we can relate. After all, in times past, we were all rebels. Go for it, if even for one time-sharing week.

The Mazatlan airport has an unusual feature. I have encountered it in only one other airport: A security checkpoint to *exit* the airport. Several years ago, I traveled to Belfast for a lecture. Before leaving the Belfast airport, my luggage and I were searched by men armed with UZIs. They allowed my lecture notes and me to enter Northern Ireland. At Mazatlan, our luggage passed through a security X-ray machine located at the exit. Next, my luggage was opened and its contents were examined by a customs person.

I was curious. I asked the inspector, "Say, this procedure is unusual. I understand the customs check, but going through security to *leave* an airport. If you don't mind my asking, what are you looking for and what did the X-ray machine check for?"

Luggage checker, who did not speak fluent English, or believed it was none of my business, replied "Things."

Reporter, "Things. I see. Hmm, could the X-ray machine detect a living pig? You know, if I had one stowed in my bag?"

Luggage checker, "Gracias," as she closed my luggage and sent me on my way. We had passed the customs check and were found to be free of classic pig fever and assorted poultry flus.

Time Sharing Sales People and Associated Pestilences

Until recently, I have not been a big fan of time-sharing properties. I preferred to find an attractive leisure-time place and purchase the property. It seemed to be a better investment. The problem with this approach is the owner's closet, which is located on the property. Naturally enough, an owner's closet contains owner's stuff. Which leads to, *I'm going to Vail because that's where my ski cap is*. Now, because I find I like a change of scenery more often than in the past, I have had a change of heart.

Consequently, we have purchased time-sharing points. The only disadvantage to owning a piece of time-sharing action is with each visit to the time-sharing property, you encounter time-sharing sales people. They are relentless. It is irrelevant if a person has already purchased a time-share week. They want to sell you even more weeks. It makes no difference if you say, "I've so many time-shares I no longer own a home. I'm on the road every week, navigating to my next time share. By the way, I own time-share at this specific hotel. That is why I am standing in the hotel registration line...registering for use of my time-sharing time."

Time-sharing person, "But sir, you should see our offerings for more time-sharing time. Tuesday, come to our meeting. For a free breakfast, all you need to do is listen to an hour of harangue for a service you already have too much of."

In less than 24 hours after our arrival, we withstood several time-sharing assaults. Here are some examples:

Walking out of the airport lobby toward a sign advertising, “Taxis,” a man approached us:

- “Taxi?”
- Reporter, “Yes. To the El Cid Marina Hotel.”
- Man, “Follow me, please,” as we followed him down the sidewalk toward a crowd of desks and people, “Any of your friends already at the hotel?”
- “Yes, relatives.”
- Reporterette, thinking we were headed in the wrong direction, “Where are you taking us?”
- Man, “Oh, we have wonderful news about time sharing here at Mazatlan, and....”
- Reporter, “Pestilence!” As we left the man in search of a non-time sharing taxi.

While checking in at the hotel, a woman approached us holding red and white carnations in her hand (*Beware of strangers in hotel lobbies bearing gifts*):

- “Hola. I’m (whomever). My desk is just across the lobby. Anything you need, just come by.”
- Reporter, thinking we had been greeted by a fine concierge, “Well thanks, we....”
- Reporterette, who has an uncanny ability to sniff out sales pitches, said, “We don’t want any more time-shares.”
- Woman, “Just consider our meeting on Tuesday. A free breakfast! We’ve lots of changes to tell you....”
- Reporterette, “No thank you.”
- Woman, “Oh please come to the meeting. My boss keeps track of....”

Pathetic. Who knows what pressure she was under to just get us into that free breakfast? I wanted to utter a Clint Eastwood retort, but as usual, I could not think of one, and sort-of felt sorry for her. Besides, we were now in the fine company of my sister in law, Tahnee. It was time to move on and, if possible, away from time-sharing sharks. It did not happen.

The following day, we were walking around the city. Just outside our hotel, the El Cid, a car stopped next to us, and a young woman thrust out some coupons, “Look! Ten percent off on (whatever) time shares!”

Two minutes later, a man approached us, “Hello! Two hundred dollars in cash, just to hear about (whatever) time-shares!”

As the days past, we were set upon several more times by time-sharing salespeople. But we ignored them because we were in Mazatlan, at the fine El Cid Marina Hotel, comfortably ensconced in a room with a view of Olas Altas Bay, an offshoot of the Pacific Ocean. The interior of the resort is shown in the left photo of Figure 2. To the right is the view from our room (which looks like a post card, but I made one of my rare good snapshots).

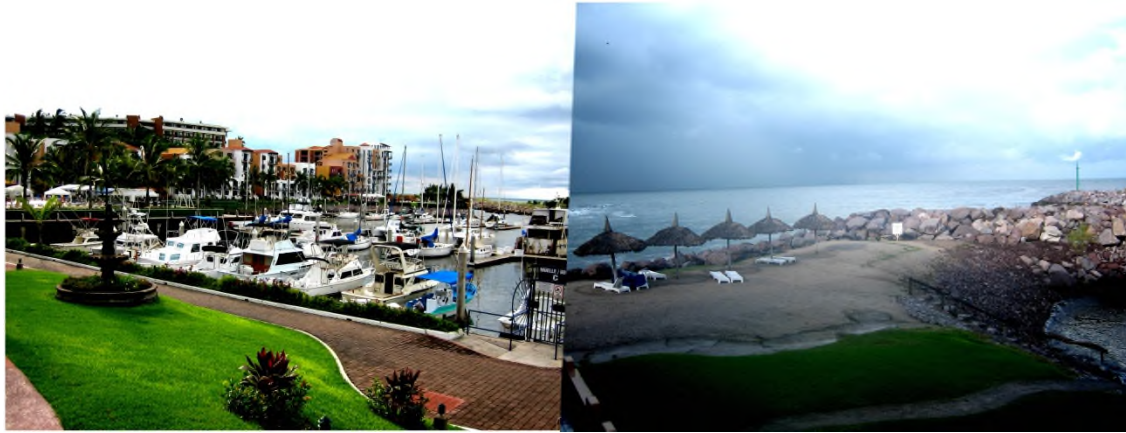


Figure 2. El Cid Marina Hotel.

I will have more to say about Mazatlan and my travel companions. For now, this is Your on the Street Reporter, leaving the computer keyboard, and headed onto the streets for serious research and development (R&D).

Mazatlan, Mexico Report Two

October 10, 2005

Hello. Your on the Street Reporter is in Mazatlan, Mexico, performing R&D: *Research* into the Mexico liquor industry in order to *Develop* a taste for tequila. Forget Hennessy XO, and Irish Coffee. They cannot be found in the local cantinas.

I'm an R&D *tourist* this week, which is good for this city, because Mazatlan relies on tourism to keep the economy going. Also, Mazatlan is Mexico's largest Pacific Ocean seaport. The city seems well-off, and it appears to be populated with friendly people. They are friendly even to us northern gringos.

A Hugging Frenzy

Stepping out of our airport taxi at the hotel, I walked to the bell stand, where I recognized the bellman from last year. I had forgotten his name, but I saw the name plate on this shirt, "Hello, Freddy, remember me? Last year, I was with my sister-in-law, Tahnee and her family."

Freddy, "Hola, welcome back." Then he hugged me! A bellman hugged me. I have never been hugged by a bellman, or a bell woman, in my life. In Ottawa, I stayed at the same hotel several weeks a year for over ten years, and not once did I receive a hug from the staff. Sure, Canadians are more reserved than Mexicans, but still....

Tahnee accompanied us to our room where another bellman hugged Tahnee and my wife before he left. Leaving the room, he gave me a gentle pat on the shoulder. Think of that, a pat on the shoulder from a foreign bellman, even before I passed him a tip. We went down to the pool to greet my brother-in-law, Brad, his daughter Britnee, my mother-in-law, Jeanne, and Sherri, the mother of Tahnee. There we met Rosa, a waitress, who upon being introduced, hugged Holly and me.

Shortly, a Mexican couple and their baby joined us. He was a former bellman from our hotel and had come to the hotel to visit with Tahnee, Brad, and Britnee. Greetings again with hugs. We took a walk around the hotel grounds. A maid spotted Britnee. The maid stopped her work, hugged everyone, and asked Britnee if she would like a ride in her laundry cart. Later, we went out on the town, and entered into a small jewelry store and shortly thereafter, a smaller clothing store. In both stores, the owners greeted Tahnee, Brad, and Britnee with hugs.

I learned later that Tahnee and her family had been invited into the homes of several of these Mexicans, feted to a meal and drink--- and I would wager, hugs all around. That evening had put a big hole in the budget of the hosts, and they made these gestures for "Ugly Americans."

Why the social intimacy? Why the embraces? Other El Cid Marina Hotel guests were not subject to bear hugs by the hired help. Nor did I see the jeweler or the clothier lock into a grip with their other customers. Are the Mazatlan citizens warmer than Russians, Parisians, and those cuddly New Yorkers?

To this question, the answer is no. The answer is Tahnee. She has been coming to Mazatlan for several years, initially, as a teenager. Nonetheless, an American, however familiar with a foreign city, would likely still be treated as a foreigner, not as a friend of the family. Tahnee is different from many traveling Americans. She embraces those around her. And they reciprocate. Tahnee makes no distinction on the basis of class or color. Quite the opposite, she treats all folks as if they were part of her family. Here are some photos (Figure 3) I snapped that capture the spirit of Tahnee, her family, and Mazatlan's citizens.



Figure 3. Mazatlan friends.

Starting at the top, Britnee flirts with the bellman, Freddy, the same man who hugged me upon our arrival. To the right: the maid gives Britnee a ride in her cart. At the bottom, Britnee and the clothing store man. To the left, the jeweler.

Diversion (I)

Hey Gringo! Get off the tour bus. Try to talk to someone besides an American. Make a gesture. Make a difference. Speak Spanish, if only haltingly. Move out of your social cocoon. You're only a few generations removed from being a foreigner yourself. Look to others. Walk in their shoes---if they have any shoes to walk in.

Besides, before long Gringo, Mexico will take back California, Arizona, and New Mexico...maybe even Texas. But not like you did with this land in the 19th century, not with a gun. The Mexicans are going to do it with the ballot box.... Proposition 999 in The

Golden State: “We’re more Mexican than American. Secede! And while we’re at it, we’re moving the state capital to Tijuana.” Stay tuned.¹

A Visit to a Mazatlan Orphanage

Each year, Tahnee visits orphanages in Mazatlan. She brings gifts that are important to the children’s needs. For example, one year she brought shoes for the kids. This year, Tahnee took us to the Orfanatorio de Mazatlan to visit the children and to give them the contents of several large boxes she had brought from the States. This orphanage is a non-profit, non-denominational organization providing a home to twenty abandoned or orphaned children. A U.S. citizen and retired school teacher, George Beu, spends a lot of his time at this orphanage helping the children and making repairs to the facility.

George picked us up at the El Cid Marina Hotel. En route to the orphanage, he talked about his work as a volunteer handyman, friend, and father figure to the children. Later, I watched him interact with the kids. He lives in Mazatlan more than half the time. He teaches English there and uses this position to help the children in the orphanage.

After a twenty minute drive, we arrived at the orphanage, to be greeted by Rafalela Valdovinos. She is the Director of Administration. We began the visit with distributing some of the boxes’ contents. One gift of interest for this report was a pillow-per-child, with each child’s name on the pillow case. What a fine idea: personalized bedding in a potentially impersonal setting. (But Rafalela and George do all they can to make it personal.)

Figure 4 shows three photos I snapped at Orfanatorio de Mazatlan. The left picture shows George, Britnee, and Rafalea. The middle picture shows some of the pillow cases. The right picture shows our party presenting the pillows and their cases to some of the younger children. When we arrived, they were sitting at a small table, doing their homework---as seen on the left-side of the picture. They were surprised to see us and Tahnee’s gifts.



Figure 4. Scenes at the Orfanatorio de Mazatlan.

¹ A January 2008 update. I read that America is experiencing an unusual increase in the birthrate. The statistics show the Latinos are contributing to this increase.

The building housing the children was built in the 1920s by the city of Mazatlan to be an orphanage. Like many buildings in this city, the rooms have very high ceilings (to dissipate the heat) and a large inner courtyard, surrounding on four sides by pillars and doors leading to hallways and rooms. Donations help keep the place in working order, but the staff continually struggles for lack of funds. While we were there, one of the washing machines had stopped running.

During the pillow presentation ceremony, I watched the children's reactions as we handed-out their associated pillows. Please look again at Figure 4, and the girl with her back to us, the one with a blue ribbon in her hair; sitting on the edge of her seat as she watched the distribution. She was one of the last children to be presented with her pillow. It was evident she was excited and was anticipating her gift. Still, I was struck by her reserve as she waited, and then as she coyly received the pillow. Perhaps she had learned not to hope too much.

A small boy latched on to us as we entered the large indoor courtyard. He was as gregarious as Britnee. I was surprised to behold a blue eyed, fair skinned, light brown haired, lightly freckled lad holding onto my finger as he pulled me around the patio. Tahnee later told me a number of Germans settled into this area over a century ago.

No indecision from this child. No hesitation in accepting his pillow. As soon as he had it in hand, he took off down one side of the courtyard. I learned he was running toward his bedroom and his bed, where he placed his new possession. Possibly before his benefactors had a change of heart, he was taking no chances! Figure 5 shows the sprint to his bed with the loot under his arm.



Figure 5. Escaping with his pillow.

Figure 6 shows the boy's face in a bit more detail. In this instance, a picture *does* say a thousand words. Reporting 101 instructs reporters to remain above the fray, to keep our veneer of cool, aloofness intact. But sometimes, as the song goes, it's hard to be hard.



Figure 6. A closer look: Joy over a pillow.

It is time to move on, but before we do, a question or two. Why are you doing what you are doing George Beu? Why are you spending months of your precious, unmetered, unpaid, limited time on earth taking care of strangers? Why not take up golf? Write a book? Research the tequila industry?

Rhetorical questions, George. You don't have to answer. It's enough that you, like Tahnee, are making a difference in the lives of twenty children.

Sherri and Celebrities

Let's introduce another of my Mazatlan travel companions, Sherri Betcher, Brad's mother-in-law. I suspect much of Tahnee's zest came from her mom's influence, but Sherri discounts her role. Whatever the case, Sherri told me about some of her times in Las Vegas when she was a 21-card dealer. One of my first questions, "Did you ever misdeal on purpose...you know, deal under the deck?" (The quotes with Sherri are paraphrased. We were at a bar (along with my mom-in-law Jeanne) conducting R&D on Corona beer and tequila. Consequently, I did not have a notebook in my (occupied) hands.)

- Sherri, "I had no motivation to misdeal. All deals by me were above board."
- Reporter, "Was Las Vegas card dealing exciting?"
- Sherri, "It got to be very boring."
- Reporter, hoping for a more scintillating interview about a supposedly exotic profession, "Any interesting people at the table?"

- Sherri, "Oh yes, many. I recall one man who lost...oh, maybe two hundred dollars. He was a poor player, didn't pay attention to the cards. He became hostile to me."
- Reporter, "You? Why not the house?"
- Sherri, "I don't know. But I recall he stalked out of the casino. Then, a few moments later, he appeared at my table, and jumped over it to get to me!"
- Reporter, "Did he hit you?"
- Sherri, "No, I saw him coming and stepped back. The table was high; he got partly over and then security was all over him. But I was shook up. I went to the dealer's lounge and stayed there the remainder of my shift."
- Reporter, "Don't blame you. Eh, what's a dealer's lounge?"
- Sherri, "That's where we took our breaks. A great getaway from the cards. Wonderful food. Really a fine place to relax. We could play cards there."
- I started to ask, *You took a break from playing cards by playing cards?* But Sherri had some more experiences to share, "Then, there was Bill Cosby. He was a sweetheart, but didn't play much. He bought four twenty-five dollar chips. Bet them away. That was it."
- "Telly Savalis. A friendly man. No hair on his head, but it didn't matter. He was sexy."
- "George Burns was a lot of fun. He always had four or five women around, plus his security guard."
- "Andy Williams. A schlock. A rude man and a bad drunk. I didn't care for him at all."
- Reporter, "What! How about his Christmas TV show? His brothers and their families singing all those jolly carols around the fireplace?"
- Sherri, "He was different in Vegas than on TV. And...you know that incident about his wife shooting the professional skier in Colorado?"
- Reporter, "Yep, I was also in Colorado at the time." *Hm, seems as if she may have shot the wrong man*

On that happy note, Your On the Street Reporter is headed out the door for some more R&D activity and an ice-cold Margarita.

Mazatlan, Mexico Report Three

October 11, 2005

Hello from Your On the Street Reporter, in Mazatlan, Mexico. Hard to believe, but I attended a professional baseball game this evening. The fourth of my life. Before describing the game, a few comments about my looks.

Funny, You Don't Look Mexican

I consider myself a non-descript person. No one looks up when I enter a room. I'm so non-descript I don't notice myself when I enter a room. Sometimes I think I'm still in the room I came from. That said, I think I am relatively culture transparent. That is, I don't think my persona shouts, "I'm an American!"

For example, I think I could just as easily pass for a Texan. I admit I don't have the swagger of our President. For example, I keep my hands to my sides when I walk, and I stopped wearing cowboy, pointy-toed boots a few years ago, because they began to interfere with my aging, spreading, flattening feet.

- It made no difference in Mazatlan. A (first) person at the baseball stadium eating area approached me, "Sir, mind if I share the table?"
- Reporter, "Not at all. Sit down. (Pause, as we eat tasty, highly seasoned, very spicy hamburger meat.) Say, why didn't you speak Spanish to me?"
- First person, who smiled as if he held a secret, "Because I assumed you didn't speak Spanish."
- Reporter, "You knew I was not a Mexican?"
- First person, "Of course."
- I was about to begin an enquiry into why I did not look like a Mexican, but I was interrupted by a second person, who asked in English, "Excuse me sir, where did you get the Coke Light?"
- I was becoming concerned that I stuck-out in the crowd---which nowadays is not a good thing for an American to do in a foreign country---and was therefore at a momentary loss for words, "Hmm," as I looked around for the appropriate kiosk.
- Second person, "That's OK sir, just point."
- Just point! The man thought I could not even speak. Maybe he thought I might blow my cover. So I pointed and the second person said, "Thank you," as he headed for his Coke Light.

I have too much gray hair on my head and face to be classified as fair-haired. No one can tell anymore. But I was suntanned, brown looking. I was eating hot food with the best of Mexicans. I was mixing it up with the natives, occasionally shouting an OLE as I bit into the next munch of my fiery morsel. On one particularly spicy bite, I yelled a high grito. EEEEHAAAA! Otherwise, I was non-American looking and acting.

I had on a Polo shirt as did many of the Mexicans. I had on a baseball hat...at a baseball game. I had on white Nikes, so did a lot of Mexicans. What was it? Was I eating my taco with the wrong hand? No, that's a Middle Eastern taboo. Was my OLE without the proper accent? Was my grito too highly pitched...on the wrong key? It remained a mystery for the remainder of my visit.

But I was curious. Even other foreigners, without so much as a second look, said hello to me in English, regardless of where I was in Mazatlan. One day, I was greeted on the streets by another American. I knew he was an American because he spoke Americanese, "Have a nice day."

I couldn't resist, "Hola. Coma esta? Que es eso de Cefito? Aqui mi tienien ustedes." Score one for cover! My fellow Yankee was surprised, and I got out of there fast, knowing I had uttered some phrases that may have made no sense at all. Even worse, I may have challenged him to a duel, or cast doubt on his origins in relation to his mother.

Where did I come up with this gibberish? I remembered the phrases from my high school days. Mr. Carlton, my Spanish teacher, was so exasperated with my linguistic ineptitude during rehearsals for a Spanish-spoken play that he made me write down my script on the brim of my sombrero---portions of which I uttered to the dumbfounded tourist.

Sombrero! Of course. Claro que se! I was not wearing a sombrero during my sojourns around Mazatlan. No wonder the natives knew I was not a Mexican. I didn't have on the required sombrero. I was sure if I donned one of these hats, I would blend in with the crowd.

I went shopping for my non-gringo camouflage. Not one single solitary sombrero could I find, except in a tourist store at the airport. So much for stereotypes. Oh... The baseball game. Coming up in the next Your On the Street Reporter report.

Mazatlan, Mexico Report Four

October 11, 2005

Hello from Your On the Street Reporter, still reporting from the streets of Mazatlan, Mexico. After eating spicy Mexican hamburger at the baseball stadium, my pipes, fore and aft, were cleared. I had also accepted that my countenance was not Mexican. It must have been the American flag in the collar of my Polo shirt. Anyway, I turned my attention to the baseball game.

As another example of Mazatlan citizens' thoughtfulness, Tahnee's friend Freddy spent four hours in the rain to secure our tickets for the season opener of his Mazatlan home team. He and his family greeted us at the stadium, thanking *us* for coming to the game! Then, he spent the better part of thirty minutes moving his relatives around so Brad, Tahnee, Holly, and I would have the best seats of the 20 he had purchased.

(Freddy, come to Washington, DC. Harvey and I will treat you as regally as you treated me. Plus, Harvey will explain to you that all those Mazatlan ball players with Spanish names, those who wear crosses around their necks, are really Jewish. (See "Baseball in the Nation's Capital".))

Paste those Tomatoes!

The Mazatlan Venados were hosting the Culiacan Tomateros. The English translation was, the Mazatlan *Deers* were hosting the Culiacan *Tomatoes*. Deers were to be locked in baseball combat with tomatoes! Deers, not very macho. Perhaps a moniker such as Indian, Mariner, or Astros would better convey assertion over, say, one's white-faced enemies, the ocean, or another planet.

We Deers are going to kick the Tomatoes' asses tonight! Seems a bit flaccid. Still, it passes the name test: A lot of deer populate the Mazatlan area.

We Tomatoes are going to kick the Deers' asses tonight! That claim might be stretching the mascot idea a bit. Tomatoes suggest little about aggressive, team winning performances. *What a tomato!* Is the only cliché I can recall about a tomato---and the phrase didn't deal with baseball contests. I recall ham actors *getting the tomato* for poor performances. Anyway, I was told the area around Culiacan grew tomatoes, so someone came up with the idea that the Culiacan baseball team should take-on this name.

How many Mariners populate Seattle? Are those famous Texas Rangers batting for the Texas Rangers? Any Padres in San Diego? How about those Pirates in Pittsburgh? Braves in Atlanta? Indians in Cleveland? Nope, but there are deer in Mazatlan and tomatoes in Culiacan. On with the game!

My Favorite Brother-in-Law

Brad is my favorite brother-in-law. Okay, he is my only brother-in-law. Not that it matters, because he would be on my list of top three brothers-in-law even if all three of my single sisters-in-law were married. What is more, Brad knows baseball, and he loves the sport. During our

visits to Mazatlan, Brad has continued the process my friend Harvey began, which is to bring me up to speed on hits, runs, and bunts.... Sorry, I think the correct words are hits, runs, and errors. Hits and bunts mean the same thing so why have redundant words in the list?

Sure, but a bunt doesn't seem like a real hit, at least, not a macho hit. You know, a deer or a tomato might go for a *bunt*, but an Astro would *hit that ball!* I'm making progress. Last month, I learned it was four balls and three strikes, not three balls and four strikes. This month, I'm dissecting hits and bunts.

Brad is often Clint Eastwood like---uttering cool sentences---except Brad is more pleasant than Clint. He even smiles when he tries to explain to his luddite brother-in-law that a pitcher's crouch scratching is not an attempt to re-arrange *two* balls, but rather an attempt to arrange how *one* ball is tossed to the catcher. So, crouch scratching is one example of a complex, intricate system of signals between the pitcher and the catcher. I was grateful to Brad for any tidbits about the game, and I am gaining an appreciation of its nuances.

The Season Opener

The fans were happy to have a seat at the season opener. The game was scheduled to begin at 8 p.m. preceded with a celebration of the upcoming season and a toast to the home team's league championship of last year. The celebration lasted over an hour, during which time the playing field was covered with bands, cheerleaders, gymnasts, flag bearers, a Michael Jackson take-off, and fireworks. Figure 7 shows three scenes of the ball game. To the left is the entrance to the stadium. On the top right is a photo of the Deers warming up before the game. At the bottom right is a snapshot of the fireworks.



Figure 7. Baseball scenes.

The fireworks usually exploded in the air but occasionally on the playing field as well. During one such incident, several rockets left their launch pad, but maintained a horizontal trajectory, straight toward some boys at midfield, who, holding huge flags, were not very mobile. The scene looked scary, but the lads watched the approaching missiles with nonchalance. The fireworks ran out of fire a few feet from the boys.

I might have been one of the few persons in the stands who gave this close encounter a thought, especially after some hot chucks of descending rockets hit folks in the stands. Can you conceive of this arrangement passing OSHA muster in the States? Who knows how many other U.S. regulatory agencies have been created to keep us safe from *any semblance* of harm. This is a sore point with me. I'll leave it for now and return to the subject later in the week when we go swimming in a fanciful---and by American standards---dangerous body of water.

The Sound Bites Bite Me

The Deers defeated the Tomatoes 12-2. The tomatoes were pasted.

I learned quite a lot about baseball that night. Brad is a fine teacher. But I also learned something else. Perhaps I did not learn it on this occasion, but it surely hit home: The change of style for a baseball game: from a quiet, relaxed atmosphere to one of frenetic, loud music. If not music, then obtrusive announcers, hawking the next batter---even the next pitch.

Yes, you read it correctly, the next pitch. Every pitch. Both the Deers and the Tomatoes had music or chants played before *each* pitch. The noise lasted a few seconds as the pitcher arranged two balls, and planned his trajectory for the third.

Surreal. Pitcher: Look at the catcher. *It was a little bitty teeny weeny yellow polka dot bikini...* Start the wind up. Music stops. Ball is thrown. "Strike One!" Catcher: Toss ball back to the pitcher, during which, ...*that she wore on the first day of spring.*

The process began again---a lyric between each pitch---but with a different song. The theme from *Rocky* was popular. So was Mariachi music; Sting; Sousa marches; themes from *Evita*, *Cats*, and many others; Michael Jackson's *Beat It*.

....And I beat it out of there.

Thank you, Brad. Thank you, Freddy. I could have withstood the musical and vocal insults from a game that was once a placid, pleasant way to spend a few hours. And after all, I was the guest of gracious people. Unfortunately, these interruptions were coupled with a speaker system that was turned up beyond even the comfort level of rock groupies.

An increase of 10 decibels is equivalent to a 10-fold increase in intensity or power. A whisper has an intensity of 20 decibels. Being near a jet taking-off results in a 140 decibel sound---the threshold of pain. I estimate the speaker system that night was at the 110-130 decibel range---continuously. Similar in volume to the speakers in those cars that pull-up to you at a traffic light.

But the Mazatlan stadium was not an exception. We are evolving into an increasingly loud, cacophonous world. I hope my view is not the result of my growing old and because of my hearing problem. No, on second thought, I wish it were. Then it would be my solitary problem.

Go to a professional basketball game. You will come to understand it's as if the game is secondary to the hype of the game. Same with other events. This fixation on the notion that humans are not capable of enduring silence is permeating into just about every aspect of our culture.... I'll leave it at that. Thanks for listening, if you can still hear.

Anyway, I have trouble with loud noises---part of my unusual hearing impairment. I was disconcerted by the noise. It was affecting me in a way that I can't describe, but in a way that I found upsetting. So, I left my seat during the second inning and went to the food kiosks, where I learned I didn't look like a Mexican. Shortly, Brad joined me there---in the middle of an inning---a sacrifice so to speak. He asked, "Say, are you OK?"

Pretty cool. Maybe not Clint Eastwood-like coolness. No, even better coolness. He was concerned by my discomfort. Clint regales in others' misery.

Your on the Street Reporter, who still has ringing in his ears, will sign off for now.

Mazatlan, Mexico Report Five

October 12, 2005

Your On the Street Reporter has recovered from over indulgence of spicy food and acute noise. I am ready to sally forth into the streets of Mazatlan to file my next report, which will begin at the market in Mazatlan's old town district.

Diversion (II)

Hey Gringo! As I said, we're taking over. Remember the Bolsheviks axing Trotsky in Mexico City? You don't? Illiterate. Anyway, those Commies morphed into Mexican itinerants, who spent their formulative, ingestive years shopping at Mexican markets, fortifying their bodies and immune systems by eating questionable pigs, chickens and other market victuals. Stay tuned.

A Visit to the Market

Many of the readers of these reports have visited a market in another country, say Mexico. As you know, this market is different from an American grocery store. In one sentence: Piggly Wiggly is a symbol in an American market and a physical presence in a Mazatlan market. To illustrate, take a look at Figure 8.²



Figure 8. Piggly Wiggly finds a home

Just the right touch. Eyes closed. A peaceful death. But the tongue ever so slightly sticking out. Making sure the pig's head purchaser will know the tongue has not been removed to be sold as a separate delicacy. No pickled pig's tongue here, fresh meat.

We're having fun. That's what these reports are about. But I do think we Americans have lost a lot in the way of diversity and variety in our never-ending pursuit of a

germ-free life. What is it with us? The FDA, the Department of Agriculture, and who knows whom else, maintain a cocoon around us.

No question, I do not want nematodes in my pork chops. First, they're unnecessarily expensive because they ratchet-up the butcher shop scales. Second, the larvae wreck misery beyond your

² I took the liberty of citing this story again in the series on food (Series 22: Food Effects and Drug Defects).

worst Montezuma's revenge nightmares. And thanks to our government, we have a lot of protection against these kinds of diseases and discomforts. So, what's my beef? Nothing. I was talking pork here.

Anyway, I've been reading a lot about our forbears who settled America. Maybe they sowed the seed of our uptight attitude about pigs' heads and other quite reasonable food fare---and about our uptight attitudes in general. The Puritans, the Quakers, the Amish, the Mennonites. Let's blame them. They were fastidious folks.

Old Memories

Each to their own. I love the markets in these countries. In my younger days, I lived in the Far East for awhile and became accustomed to the sights and smells of the market. I learned the citizens in most countries did not have the luxury of rejecting slightly faulty food. For example, they did not think a broken egg in an egg carton was a food travesty. The egg was still an egg. If it were not yet rotten, it was still edible, full of protein---and with some salt, pleasant to eat. Figure 9 shows several eggs that were for sale in the Mazatlan market, proudly displayed, perhaps at a discount. I tried my Spanish with the egg vendor.



Figure 9. Still for sale.

- Reporter, "Hola, Eh, que es el precio para las pelotas?" (What is the price of these balls?)
- Vendor, "Pelotas? Donde?" (Balls? Where?) *I still had my mind on the baseball game.*
- Reporter, "Lo siento. Huevos." (Sorry. Eggs.)

The vendor assumed this gringo could speak at least a smattering of Spanish. He launched into Spanish, beyond my vocabulary. I bid him, "Gracias," and a goodbye with the traditional, "Vaya con huevos."

Diversion (III)

Hey Gringo! I'm miffed at your ancestors. They wiped out most of mine. But don't worry Gringo, turn-about is fair play: "What Columbus wrought, will be wrought back." ...Remember those Bolshevik Communists in Mexico City? They've morphed into Mexican itinerants? Ha, and they avoided your sterile Safeway stores. They kept eating open market beef, fish, chicken, and associated larva, bacterium, ciliate, coccus, E. coli, salmonella, spirillum, staphylococcus, stentor, streptococcus...to name a few. What did you gringos eat? Not one live tape worm! Stay tuned.

Through the Eyes of a Child

Nestled around the El Cid marina and hotel rooms were two large swimming pools. We spent several afternoons at these pools, eating hot salsa and cooling our mouths with Margaritas. I was especially impressed with one of the pools, shown in Figure 10, where cliffs, caves, and waterfalls graced the middle of the pool.



Figure 10. A regulatory nightmare.

The caves beneath the small cliffs meandered toward the back of the hotel. Inside the caves were a few smaller off-shoot enclaves, with more waterfalls cascading down onto the water in the grotto. It was a lovely watery cavern, designed for young and old children. What I would have given for this fantastic experience when I was Britnee's age. Swimming in a mud tank on Dad's ranch in the prairies of southeast New Mexico, I had to imagine caves and waterfalls. Even now, as an old man, I love swimming through the caves and diving off the cliffs. In a way---and for this week--- I was a child again.

There is another way to be that child. It is to play with one. Just keep in mind that the child's rules are the rules for the games, not those of the adult.

Britnee and I played several games, all invented by my niece: Find the Shark (with Britnee-specific rules on how the shark was to be found). If found, avoid the shark (again, with specific rules from the six-year-old ruler maker.) Based on Britnee rules: Toss the tennis ball without dropping it. If dropped, keep the same count; DON'T go back to zero. After all, the goal is to catch 100 tosses in a row. Somersaults under water. Standing on our heads. Swimming with one leg.

One game she seemed to favor over others was riding on my back as I labored across the pool. *Gitty-up, Uncle Uyless!* By the end of the afternoon, I was hung-out and wet. But it did not matter. I had the privilege of spending a brief time in the fanciful world of a six-year-old girl, one who is captivating as they come. Life is good.

OSHA Beware! A Place, Unsupervised, to Have Fun

As I cavorted about in this lovely pool, I wondered if such a place could exist in the States. The rocks in the caves were sharp; we incurred minor cuts on our feet and legs from brushing against them. The caves were somewhat remote to the public. Consequently, however unlikely, an unlucky swimmer could experience a private drowning. The diving area had water running over

it, and the path toward its small platform was constructed of irregularly-shaped rocks---with *no* guardrails. Think of that: Uneven, tilting stairs without guardrails. And perhaps most telling, no lifeguards.

Uncle Sam, why do you coddle us citizens so? Why can't we take a chance with a cup of hot coffee? Must everything be to spec? Why can't we swim in our expansive oceans without being whistled back into an aqueous pen, like fish in a holding pool. Why can't I ride my bike without a helmet? In order to protect my ass, must you, Uncle Sam, look over my shoulder?

I know the answers to the questions. I'll bet you do to. We Americans have always wanted, as a culture, to do the right thing. From the Puritans to the Quakers, to the sheriff at Dodge City, on into modern times, we have attempted to make things as right and fair as possible. Trouble is, we have used the legal system to try to guarantee a fair outcome for all.

Your neighbor and you are debating an overhanging apple tree? Get the hell out of my court room! Work it out yourselves. That no longer happens. We have become the most litigious society in the world. And we write laws in order to protect citizens, not only from others, but from *ourselves*. And that is where I think we have gone overboard.

If I drown by trying to swim to England from the Jersey shore. Fine, I deserve it. I'm buried and that's that. But it won't happen. My death will raise the insurance rates of my fellow swimmers, because my insurance company will be required to pay my heirs a huge sum of money for my asinine act. Next, my heirs will sue the lifeguard, who will sue his employer for inadequate training...on and on... If that makes sense to you, please write your reporter and enlighten me.

Diversion (IV)

Hey Gringo! You should have secured your borders. You should have eaten more pig's heads and cracked eggs. You should have kept your Piggly Wiggly stores populated with a few symbolic germs here and there. Your streets are immaculate. Not a dead dog on any of them. Not even any stagnant pools of water in your alleys---they're all paved! Medicines galore. Antibiotics for the asking. Floors you can eat on.

Gringo, you're killing-off your immune system. We Trotskyite Commies, disguised as wetbacks, are carrying some weird diseases across the border. Avian Flu is an upcoming attraction. Ha Gringo! If we don't succeed fully at the ballot box, we'll execute our Reverse the Abhorrent Columbus Effect---initialized to RACE. Catchy, don't you think? After all, you and other races took it upon yourselves to use race and religion to practically wipe us out.

That and our inability to withstand your diseases.

How times have changed. We Mexicans like irony. We've been steeped in it since you came ashore. Now, the tables are turned. Your Safeway and safeway mentalities will wipe-out your weakened race.

It's a Wrap

You may be wondering why I have included the “Diversion” about gringos and disease. What’s the point? A couple years ago, I read a book titled *The Secret Life of Germs*. The author, a famous expert on germs and disease, said, “Modern medicine is running out of magic bullets.”³

I think the reverse Columbus Effects will increasingly occur as our world continues to become more densely populated, and we humans continue to pick up diseases from all those birds, fish, and animals that are *cramped in next to us*. A model run by the Los Alamos National Laboratory predicts a pandemic flu in the U.S. will result in 33% of the population becoming sick---many of the sick dying.⁴So, get your immune systems cranked-up or move to sparsely populated areas--if you can find them. The Avian Flu is just a harbinger.

Besides, turn-about is fair play. We Europeans decimated a substantial part of the Mexican population with our diseases. RACE, however improbable, is a fitting metaphor for turning the tables. But it will not occur with germs. It will occur with ballots.

Anyway, I have good news to report: As mentioned, I did find some non-gringo camouflage, a sombrero, but not until I was preparing to leave Mexico. I finally came across several in a tourist store at the Mazatlan airport. Figure 11 shows the choices I had.

I liked the red sombrero, but being partial to black colors (and people named Black), I would have chosen the black sombrero. “Would have,” in that I did not purchase a sombrero. I decided my un-Mexican countenance was not the fault of my not wearing a sombrero to the baseball game. It was the fault of my not draping a Mexican Serape around my shoulders---you know, like Marlon Brando did in those Pancho Villa films. We can sense Marlon thinking, *God, it's hot as hell but who cares? The serape looks cool.*



Figure 11. Opportunity denied.

³ Philip M. Tierno, Jr. (New York: Atria Books, 2001).

⁴ W. Wayt Gibbs and Christine Soares, “Preparing for the Pandemic,” *Scientific American*, November 2005, 50.

I'll correct my mistake on my next visit to Mazatlan. I'll put on a sombrero and serape, and go underground to report on the upcoming germ attack from the Commie itinerants and their upcoming ballot victories.

Your on the Street Reporter, leaving Mexico for New Mexico.