

TRAVEL

A Boogie Up Mexico's PCH

Story and photos by HILLARY HAUSER

RIO NEXPA, Mexico—Improvising truly awful lyrics to the Chuck Berry song "No Particular Place to Go," we meandered our way north from Acapulco on Highway 200. Our rented van was packed with surfboards and gear, all windows wide open to blow away the intense heat and humidity of a Mexican September.

"Ridin' around in our automobile, Brucee Raph is at the wheel..." someone sang. On our left we got occasional glimpses of magnificent blue sea coves, interrupted by houses and jungle greenery that lined the road. "Gimme the *diccionario*, gotta ask which way to go..." someone else chimed in.

We were happy as anything. My husband,

Jim, and I were traveling with our good friends Bruce and Karen Raph, and we had been finally liberated from the infernal hassles of travel: the morning flight from Los Angeles to Acapulco, the renting of a van (Dollar) to substitute for one we had reserved but which was not there (Hertz); the unmerciful hauling around of bags and surfboards. We'd survived a one-hour traffic snarl in metropolitan Acapulco—a sight completely dumbfounding for anyone, like me, who hasn't visited that city since the late 1960s.

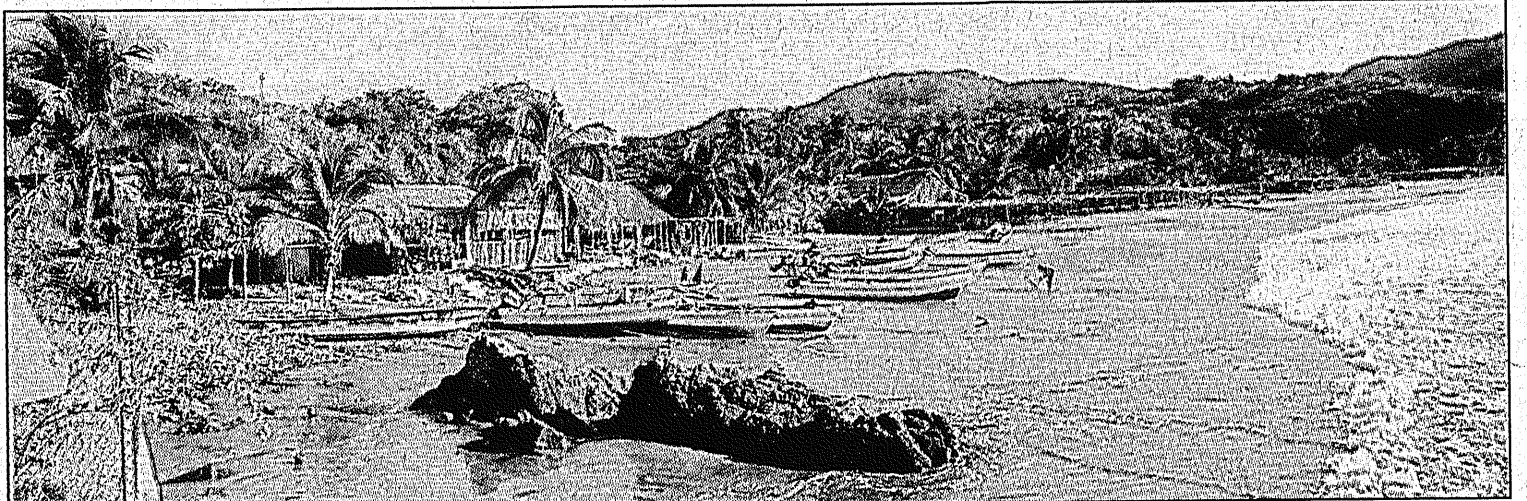
We were off on a follow-our-noses, two-week adventure without reservations along Mexico's version of California's Pacific Coast Highway. Highway 200 follows Mexico's coastline from the Guatemala border to Tepic. Our plan was to drive north from Acapulco to Rio Nexpa, a distance of about 200 miles. Half

the driving would be in the state of Guerrero, and half in Michoacán. Most visitors head to the fancy resort areas along this stretch—Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, Manzanillo, Puerto Vallarta—and miss the wild, unexplored parts of the coastline between them.

We had no set plans other than to wind up at Rio Nexpa, which is nothing more than a point of land halfway between Acapulco and Manzanillo, but is a legendary place for surfers.

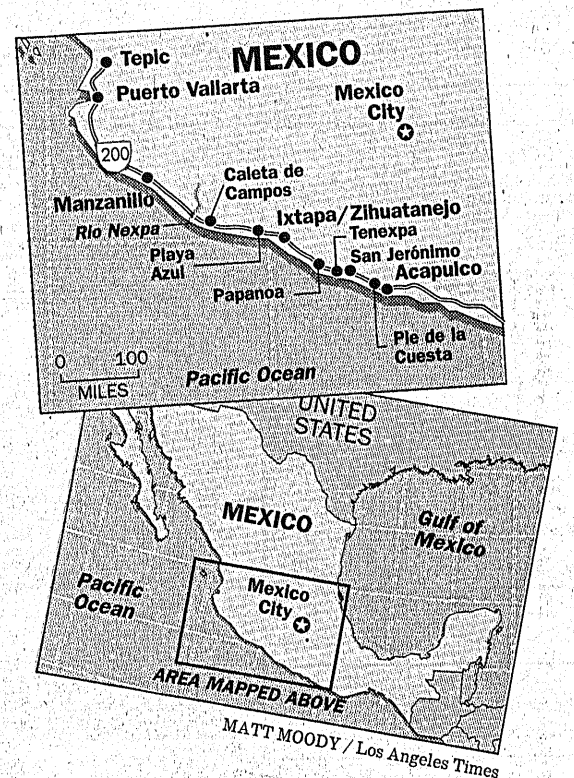
There are risks traveling in undeveloped parts of Mexico such as this: the odd encounter with a hotel room where cockroaches are permanent residents, restaurants with dubious standards of hygiene, air conditioners that produce more noise than cool air. But for those who enjoy spontaneous travel—and the attendant joys of

Please see **HIGHWAY, L8**

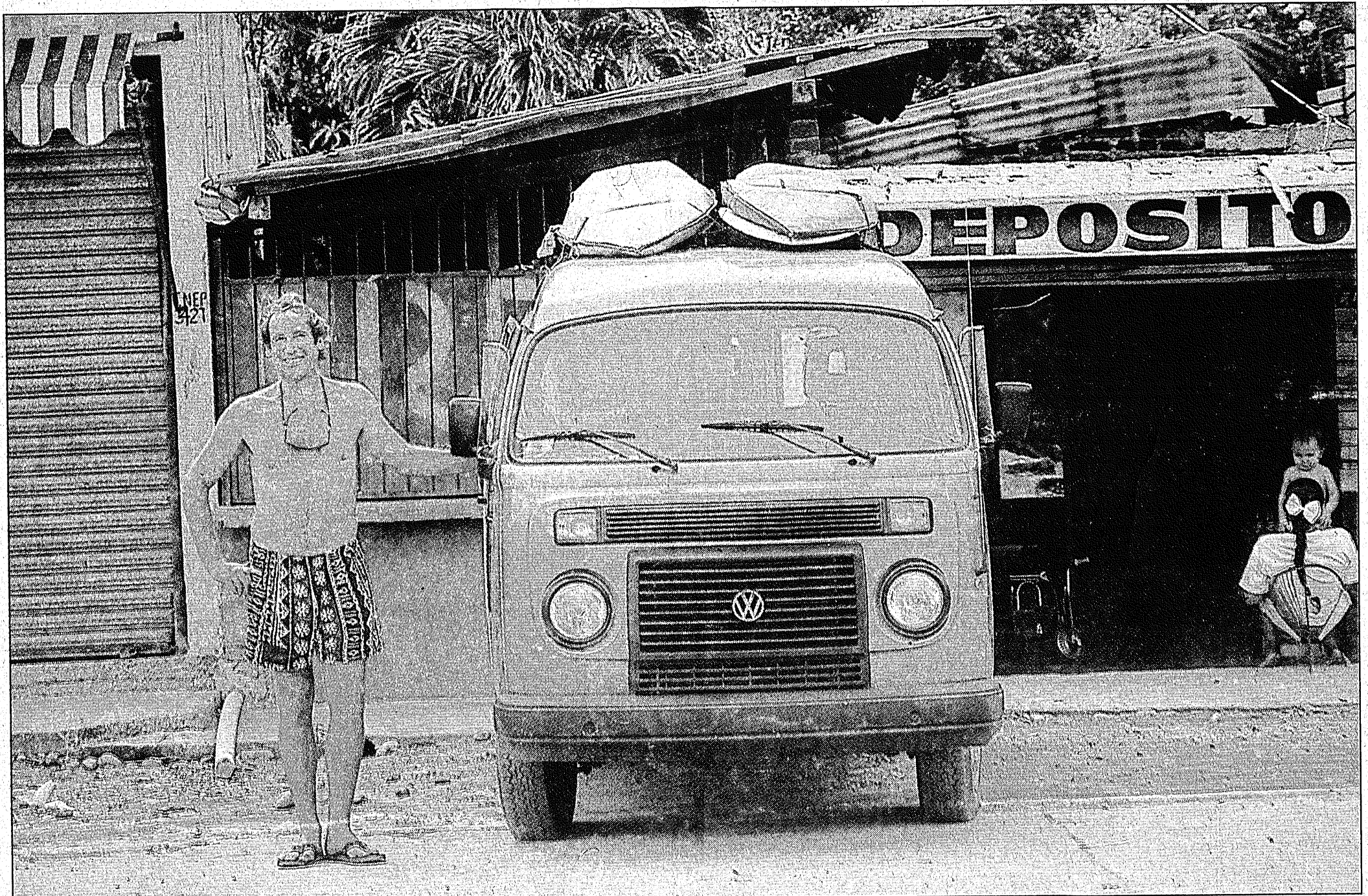


Balmy: Beachside ramadas and fishing boats at Caleta de Campos.

- **The setup:** four friends, a rented van, no set itinerary.
- **The locale:** little-traveled Highway 200, between Acapulco and Rio Nexpa.
- **The discoveries:** deserted beaches, inexpensive hotels, lush tropical coastline, big surf, no tourists.



MATT MOODY / Los Angeles Times



Board room: Surfer Jim Marshall and the van that carried fun-seekers from adventure to adventure.

Destination: Mexico

HIGHWAY

Continued from L1

discovery—things don't get much better than this.

A few vital tips:

First, the weather in this part of Mexico is hot, muggy and rainy June through October. Jim and Bruce wanted to go in September, probably the worst month of all, because that's when the surf is huge and crazy.

The most pleasant time of year to visit is November through May; according to Surfer magazine's Surf Report, the surf breaks along this coast all year around.

Second, this part of Mexico is known for stories of *bandidos*. While we met only friendly, helpful Mexicans, the official advice is to refrain from driving at night or off main roads. You don't want to suddenly find yourself accidentally driving in a remote area where, say, illegal marijuana crops might be growing, for obvious reasons, and you don't want to become a target of robbers who easily spot your rented or foreign vehicle.

Also, don't leave your car unlocked or your campsite unattended, hide excess cash and, above all, don't be argumentative in the event of any confrontation, either with locals or federal police if you are stopped. Be nice.

On the advice of an Acapulco cabdriver, we headed to San Jerónimo for our first night. Nice hotels, he said.

On the map, Highway 200 seems divided into short hops between towns, but each hop takes time. There are a number of sharp turns, and we also took time to stop at various roadside stands to buy mangoes, papayas and a big watermelon. We bought ice for the big cooler Jim had brought, and stocked it with sodas and beer.

By the time we got to San Jerónimo it was dark. Bumping our way into town on a rutted dirt road, we came upon a brightly lit town square where a Saturday night fiesta was in full swing.

We looked into a few hotel doorways, but despite the recommendation of the cabdriver, we decided everything was a little too primitive, even for us.

Pressing on in the dark at 9 p.m., just when we were all plenty tired and beginning to think our adventure was not so much fun anymore, somebody spotted a roadside sign for a hotel at Papanoa. Driving up to a big white stucco building that looked uninhabited, we went inside to find a night clerk sleeping on a couch in a spacious open-air lobby. We rented a couple of nice rooms that cost less than \$30 each (we paid in pesos), said good night and retired.

The next morning, on what was my 50th birthday, I was greeted with the most beautiful gift I have ever received. From



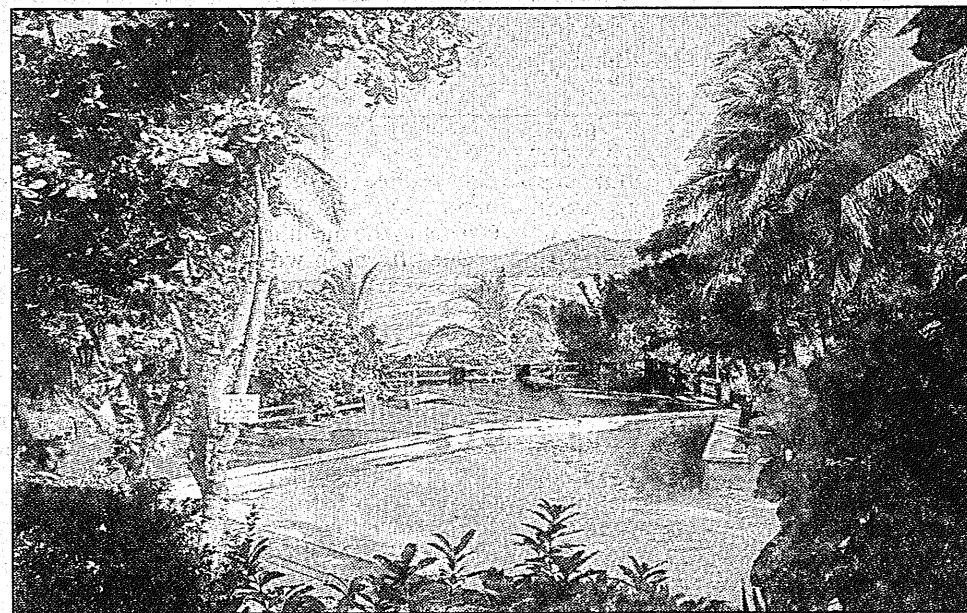
Photos by HILLARY HAUSER

Fare weather: Al fresco beach dining at Chicho's.

the veranda of our room we had a view of a crystal-clear blue sea and a clean, sandy beach, rimmed by a tropical jungle. Jim and I left our room instantly, descending past an inviting swimming pool on a lower terrace to the beach below. At the opposite end of the cove we saw Bruce and Karen walking in our direction with two local dogs. Except for a lone fisherman, we were the only ones on the beach. I jumped into the sea and swam to my heart's content.

We also seemed to be the only guests in the hotel. After coffee and a wonderful breakfast of *huevos rancheros* (about \$4 each), we set our sights on Rio Nexpa, a drive that would take most of the day. About 46 miles up the road we came to the Zihuatanejo turnoff. Here, the highway widens into a modern thoroughfare marked by overhead signs and landscaped with trees and tropical shrubbery. I couldn't help but remember the way Zihuatanejo was when last I saw it in 1968: a small, dirt-road pueblo accessible only by local bus from Acapulco.

Saving Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa, with its jungle of high-rise hotels, for the trip back, we continued exploring what I came to think of as the Land of Broken Dreams. During the two weeks we spent exploring the coast, we drove down many bumpy dirt



Fresh view: Hotel Club Papanoa.

roads where we saw construction projects that had fallen into ruin on isolated beaches as exotic and beautiful as those that inspired the Zihuatanejo/Ixtapa developers.

At Bahía de Petacalco we sat on the beach in the shade of a thatched *palapa* and, while eating lime-drenched mangoes and sipping tequila, watched enormous ocean swells undulate across the horizon.

At Playa Burrita we discovered some beautiful open-air *ramadas* on the beach where oysters are served at pleasant tables beside an azure-blue sea.

Even when we needed to be back in the Acapulco area at the end of our trip, we avoided the tried and true by exploring the Pie de la Cuesta area just north of Acapulco. Here, in a hotel row catering predominantly to Mexican tourists, we discovered a charming little pink hotel, Ukae Kim (Mayan for sunset), where our air-conditioned rooms facing the beach cost \$66 a night.

But the best part of our makeshift itinerary was our main destination: Rio Nexpa and Caleta de Campos. A few hours after crossing the state line between Guerrero and Michoacán (at Rio Balsas, near Playa Azul), we arrived at Caleta, our home for the next 10 days. Nexpa, a few miles up the road, has only surfer lodgings—primitive huts on the beach without lights or private baths.

Caleta de Campos is a small beach town built on a hill over a wide, protected cove. The town is centered around a rutted dirt-and-concrete main street that has clean, bustling stores and restaurants on either side. At the end of this road, overlooking the sea, is a modern school where hundreds of uniformed schoolchildren file in each day. There are attractive homes—a few of them luxury villas owned by wealthy Mexicans—in the hills above.

We arrived in Caleta about 5 p.m. and made our way to the town's only real hotel, the Yuritzi, a place that looks funky from the outside but which is simple and clean on the inside. We rented two rooms with tile floors and nice bathrooms on the top floor. The rooms shared a veranda, and in the mornings this patio became our private breakfast area where we brought brew-it-yourself coffee from the small cafe below and ate papayas and mangoes. Our rooms had a generous view of the Caleta cove, and every night we could hear the surf and the passing thunderstorms.

Caleta de Campos' beach is rimmed with many open-air restaurants, where tables and chairs are set in the sand amid dozens of colorful hammocks strung beneath thatched roofs. At the southern end of the cove, on the other side of a huge rock that juts out from the surf, the beach is unpopulated, raw and wild. At the northern end there is a jetty that directs the surf coming into the beach, great for catching waves. On the hillside above the jetty are the beginnings of what locals told us was to be a nice hotel.

The tourist trade in Caleta is nearly 100% Mexican; the beach is well known to Michoacán locals, many of whom come down from Uruapan and other mountain towns to visit. Not many *norteamericanos* come here because there are no fancy resorts, credit cards aren't accepted and no

Destination: Mexico

one, including the hotels, takes reservations. Restaurants are rustic and atmospheric, serving simple but delicious Mexican fare: beef, pork or chicken dishes, or locally caught fish (mostly snapper, snook, lobster and shrimp) with rice, beans and tortillas.

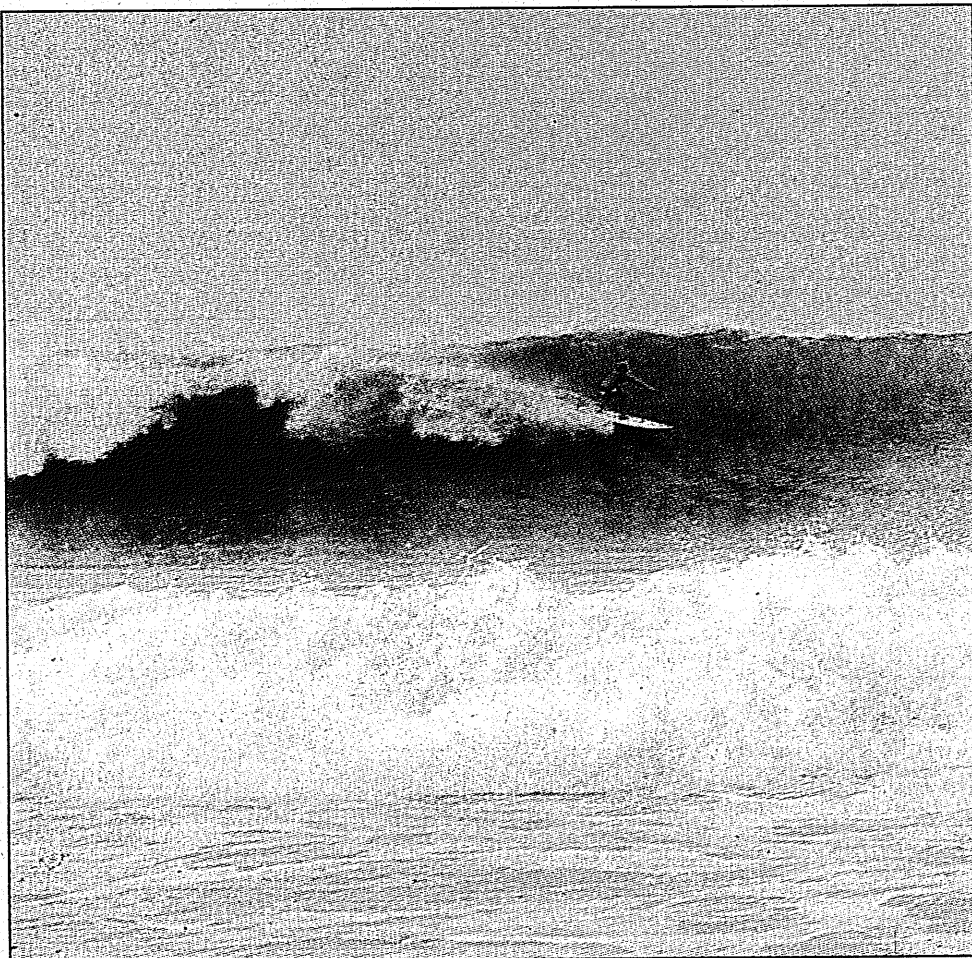
But among our happiest culinary discoveries in Caleta were *paletas*, frozen juice bars made at the Yuritzi Hotel. In what became a nightly ritual, we dipped lime *paletas* into small glasses of tequila—creating a kind of margarita snow cone—as we sat and talked and watched the evening thunderstorms from our veranda.

We hadn't come all this way for *paletas*, however. We were here for big surf. That first afternoon, as soon as we had checked into the Yuritzi and had our inaugural swim in the sea, we headed 10 minutes north for Rio Nexpa.

The sun was setting when we got out to Chicho's Place, located on the Rio Nexpa beach at the end of a rutted dirt road unmarked on the main highway. In Chicho's pleasant thatched-roof restaurant, a few surfers sat around at tables in bathing suits, drinking beer, talking and watching the sunset. We met Joy and Andres from Mendocino, as well as a trio of friendly, long-haired surfers from South Africa who had been there for two months. Chicho's wife, Martha, was cooking in the kitchen and tending their three children, who for their daytime naps slept in hammocks strung between the tables. Chicho was mending his fishing nets, which he uses to catch snook, his main source of income. He had built the primitive beach huts almost as a favor to surfers, who pay as little as \$2 a night for shacks with concrete or sand floors, wooden bed frames on which to throw sleeping bags, no electricity and no running water. But there are clean his-and-hers bathrooms near the restaurant, and one cold-water shower that everyone uses in full view of everyone else.

Chicho's restaurant offers a great array of informal breakfasts, lunches and dinners—everything from sandwiches (about \$1), scrambled eggs and potatoes (\$3), grilled chicken (\$4), and the ubiquitous rice and beans (\$2). The first night we ordered dinner—sensational fresh-caught snapper, tortillas, salsa, rice and beans, all for about \$5 per person—and afterwards sat and talked as our table and chairs sunk this way and that way in the sand.

Early the next morning we returned to Chicho's for the serious business of surfing and serious business it was. Nexpa tends to "go off" in the fall, meaning that the surf gets humongous and gnarly, just the way Jim and Bruce like it. On this particular day, the ocean was particularly angry, astir with huge waves and rip tides. Jim went in at the Point, the most difficult entry of all, and fought his way through rolling, white-foamed surf that pounded



Hang a left: One of Rio Nexpa's famed waves.

directly onto treacherous rocks. Before the morning was over he had managed a number of harrowing rides and I took pictures until the blistering sun had me running for shade.

The death-defying surf of Nexpa is created by the Nexpa River, which slices its way through forests of palms and empties into the ocean on a significant shoal that creates frenzied left-breaking waves. All my life I have loved swimming in every ocean in the world, but the moment I set eyes on this scene I knew I'd never even put my toe in here.

I saved each day's swimming for later, when we all went back to Caleta de Campos.

The waves here were simple enough for me and my Boogie board, but interesting enough for Bruce, Karen and Jim on their surfboards. For 10 days we played in the water like children.

Every afternoon, when we arrived at Caleta, we established camp at a table in the shade of Enramada de Laura, which was, like Chicho's, an open-air restaurant with tables and chairs set in the sand. We had the restaurant and beach to ourselves since school in town had just started its fall season. In the restaurant, we could order beer and anything else on the menu (there

was wonderful lobster *a diablo* for about \$7), then go back into the water to surf until our plates arrived at the table.

Thinking about this now, I ask myself, where else have I ever sat down to a wonderful dinner while wearing a pair of swim fins? I certainly don't remember another time in my life where the end of a dinner was announced by an ocean wave sweeping the furniture away.

One afternoon we were joined by Luis, an 18-year-old local fisherman who came out on his surfboard to join us in the Caleta waves. While floating around out there, he and I were speaking to each other in Spanish when I suddenly realized he was trying to pick me up. With a big laugh, I told him I was flattered but that I was old enough to be his grandmother. *No problema!* he replied.

And then there was Ruby, a 16-year-old waitress who went Boogie-boarding with me. Every time I caught a wave, Ruby would cry: *Vuela, vuela, vuela!* ("Fly, fly, fly!")

Fly, fly, fly! *No problema.* That is basically the mood you get into if you follow your nose along Mexico's Highway 200.

Hauser is a free-lance writer based in Summerland.

GUIDEBOOK

Along Mexico's Pacific Coast

Getting there: One way to begin a drive along Mexico's Highway 200 is to fly to Acapulco and drive north. Delta has nonstop service to Acapulco with restricted round-trip fares beginning at \$403, excluding taxes. Mexicana and Aeromexico have direct or connecting flights with fares starting at \$423. United, American and Continental also offer connecting service. You can also fly into Puerto Vallarta and drive south.

Driving: Car rental agencies operating out of the Acapulco airport are Hertz, Dollar and Budget. We rented a nine-passenger Volkswagen van from Dollar (telephone: 800-800-4000) for \$655 per week plus mileage fees after 1,400 kilometers. The Hertz rate was \$720 per week, unlimited mileage (tel. 800-654-3001).

Americans need to purchase auto insurance within Mexico; U.S. automobile insurance is not valid here. The cost through car rental agencies is about \$11 per day.

Highway 200 is not a toll road. An excellent Mexico road map published by the Automobile Club of Southern California is available at many bookstores or through AAA branches.

Where to stay: On the beach in Pie de la Cuesta (the turnoff is well marked from the main highway), just north of Acapulco, the Ukae Kim is a charming, small hotel with a good restaurant. Double rooms are about \$50 off-season, \$90 during the winter high season (only three rooms are air-conditioned). The hotel restaurant is excellent and moderately priced. Reservations: Sun World International, tel. (619) 451-8838, fax (619) 451-8800, or dial direct to Mexico: 011-52-74-60-21-87.

From Acapulco, the drive to Papanoa is about four hours (marked from Highway 200). Situated on a beautiful white-sand beach, the Hotel Club Papanoa has a swimming pool and restaurant, and overlooks the ocean. Double rooms are \$30 off-season, \$38-\$42 high

season (no telephone). From Papanoa, it takes a little over an hour to drive to Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa, where there are wide assortments of both luxury and mid-priced hotels and restaurants.

In Caleta de Campos (a five-hour drive from Ixtapa), the Yuritzi is the only hotel in town. Rates range from \$15 to \$30 per night off-season, \$34-\$37 in winter months (no telephone). There are a few excellent restaurants in Caleta de Campos (no credit cards) that offer local fish dishes, as well as delicious Mexican fare. There is an excellent grocery store in town and a pharmacy. Rio Nexpa (10 minutes north) offers camp-style accommodations on the beach at Chicho's Place, starting at about \$2 per night. There are similar lodgings nearby. Chicho's restaurant offers breakfast, lunch and

dinner, with the most expensive meal about \$6; sodas and beer (\$1).

Advice for swimmers/surfers: At Rio Nexpa, big waves occur during the rainy season (June through October), although good surf breaks all year around. (There are better wind conditions during the other months, Novem-

ber through May, however.) Because of often rough, dangerous waters along this coast, surfers are encouraged to obtain travel evacuation insurance if they need to be airlifted out by helicopter in case of serious injury. The cost is about \$40 for two-week coverage; one of several companies offering policies is Travel Assistance International (tel. 800-821-2828). A tetanus shot before traveling to this region is also advisable, especially if plans include surfing or swimming near river mouths during the rainy season because of bacterial infections.

For more information: Mexican Government Tourism Office, 10100 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 224, Los Angeles, CA 90067; tel. (310) 203-8191. For Mexico surf reports and forecasts, tel. (900) 976-SURF (95 cents per minute).

—H.H.



Timeout: Veranda at Yuritzi Hotel.