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Zihuatanejo, Village by the Sea

By MEGAN HARLAN

A FEW days into my weeklong stay in Zihuatanejo in January, I got the distinct feeling I was getting away with something just by being there.

Maybe the colorfully illicit history of Zihuatanejo (pronounced SEE-wha-ta-NAY-ho and often shortened to Zihua) had inspired the thought. The beach town on the Mexican Riviera has long attracted an eclectic array of outlaws, dreamers and dropouts.

In the pop-culture realm, there's "The Shawshank Redemption," in which the jailbirds played by Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman daydream of the ultimate good life in Zihua. In 1963 and slightly more in the real world, Timothy Leary organized a notorious LSD convention on its beaches (he was promptly arrested by Mexican officials). Further back still, the British pirates Sir Francis Drake in the 1500's and George Anson in the 1700's used the town's natural harbor as they preyed on rich Spanish ships.

Perhaps my satisfying sense of making out like a bandit was simply due to the panoramic views from a hotel room costing about \$120 a night: Zihuatanejo's sheltered, diamond-shaped bay — less than two miles wide — is fringed by creamy beaches, clear green-tinted coves and spiky cliffs, against which the Pacific suds and sparkles. In many spots, red foothills of the Sierra Madres, leafy with coconut palms and mango trees, jut into the waterfront. By night, the harbor's velvety blackness is broken by great swaths of little lights from the adobe buildings studding the hills and the sailboats bobbing on the water.

meant going down exactly 203 steps — I counted as I limped down them the third day, my calves aching from the half-dozen times I had run up them the day before.

But the trips were well worth it. Playa La Ropa is a half-mile crescent of powdery sand snugly bookended by glistening cliffs. Though locally owned hotels and seafood restaurants line the beach, there's not a skyscraper in sight, thanks to development codes limiting buildings to no higher than four stories. The atmosphere is luxuriantly low-key; restaurant tables spill onto the sand, inviting quick dips in the warm ocean waters between refreshments. Playa La Ropa's name, "clothing beach," comes from pirate lore: When 17th-century buccaneers riddled an unsuspecting galleon with cannon-fire, its contents — fine Chinese clothing — washed ashore and covered the beach in silk.

Together, the Sotavento and Catalina hotels have the largest strip of private beach on Playa La Ropa. It's lined with dozens of palapas, sturdy, palm-frond thatched umbrellas, each shading two chaise longues. Grabbing the choice palapa, or any at all, requires competitive prowess: Guests have been known to sneak down at 1 a.m. from their rooms, territorially drape chaises with towels, then return to bed. We made the daily excursion at 7:30, after losing out at 9:30 the first day.

Once stationed under a palapa, I would simply watch the brilliant blue days pass. White and yellow butterflies would drift by, while overhead, large black-winged gulls, locally called tijerillas and resembling little pterodactyls, glided on ocean breezes. Occasionally, a fantastically scaled, dachshund-sized iguana would appear, posing motionlessly on a branch. If the lulling natural setting isn't relaxing enough, young local women with remarkably strong hands give Swedish massages on beachside tables. A 45-minute session costs \$17; my husband and I, during our week in Zihua, each had three massages.

But the town soon beckoned. Playa La Ropa cups the bay's southeastern edge, while the town center is tucked in a flat basin in a northeastern crook. We made the 20-minute walk over hilly back roads leading to Playa Madera, a tiny, dark-sand beach just north of La Ropa and the location of many small budget hotels. From La Madera, a beachside walkway cuts through a rocky patch of coastline and leads into town.

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My husband, Matthew, and I had come to Zihuatanejo for a belated honeymoon. We were looking for a typical sunny setting in Mexico, one slightly off the beaten beach path. But, being city people at heart, we wanted to be near a good selection of restaurants and shops.

The Mexican Riviera certainly boasts more famous resorts, places like Acapulco (160 miles to the south), Mazatlán and Puerto Vallarta. But developments in these towns have often come with phalanx-like rows of high-rise beachfront hotels and chain restaurants. Witness Ixtapa, just four miles up the coast from Zihua, a shiny tract of skyscraper hotels and golf courses built from scratch in the early 1970's.

Zihuatanejo, for us, turned out to be a perfect and amiable alternative. It's often described by guidebooks and brochures as "a sleepy fishing village," though it's home to nearly 40,000 people, several of whom pointed out to me that it hasn't been a sleepy fishing village for the last 30 years, not since Ixtapa arrived on the scene and Zihua began catering to the new influx of tourists to the area. What is indisputable is Zihua's authentic small-town charm.

Our hotel, it turned out, dated from the fishing village years. The 1950's-vintage Hotel Catalina is the town's oldest lodging, and was joined with its neighbor, the nautically themed Sotavento, when the two owners married.

With the recent death of the Sotavento's owner, Carlos Brewer, the hotels are again under separate management. For now, guests at either hotel are welcome to use the facilities of the other. Both establishments are friendly, comfortable and perched above Zihuatanejo's most stunning beach, Playa La Ropa. The Catalina's terraced, stucco bungalows all have ocean views, and white-washed, fan-cooled interiors, with attractive bamboo furniture, minifridges and basic, shower-only bathrooms. Suites also offer large, partly shaded private balconies strung with hammocks.

The Catalina resembles a big Swiss Family Robinson treehouse, since its buildings and amenities — including a pool and two bars — sprawl over a steep, tropical hillside and are interconnected by networks of stone staircases, often draped with vines. To get from our room to the beach