

CHAPTER EXCERPTS

INTRODUCTION

To the readers of my first book, THE ASHRAM; a true story of enlightenment and the dark night of the soul, the storyline of ZIHUATANEJO might come as a bit of a surprise. It's not a spiritual story in the same sense as THE ASHRAM. It does, however, act to fill in the spaces between the two contrasting storylines of THE ASHRAM.

Taking place between 1994 and 1998, the storyline of ZIHUATANEJO details daily life in the small beach town of Zihuatanejo, Guerrero, Mexico and my many various, and at times, hair-raising adventures and misadventures therein. The storyline then travels down through Oaxaca and Chiapas and into the heart of the Guatemalan Civil War that was still raging during that time period.

To those readers who enjoyed the Mexican and Guatemalan portions of THE ASHRAM, hold on tight as we journey once again deep into Mexico, Guatemala and the heart and soul of Latin American culture and all of its exhilaration, passion, and tragedy. Of special reader interest will be an in-depth perspective into Mexican culture, various Indigenous cultures, the untold truth about the Guatemalan Civil War and various visits with the treasured Mendoza family of Todos Santos Cuchumatane, Guatemala once again.

Exercise increased caution in Mexico due to crime. Some areas have increased risk. Violent crime, such as homicide, kidnapping, carjacking, and robbery, is widespread.

U.S. Government Travel Advisory

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Editor's note: All conversations in this book, except those between the narrator and English speakers, have been translated from their original Spanish to English.

CHAPTER ONE, PUERTO VALLARTA, AUGUST 1994

Green: bright, vivid, fluorescent green, running in all directions below me, that's what I remember most as the plane flew low and banked to meet the runway. I was born in Portland, Oregon, so I had seen green before. But this was totally unlike the somber greens and grays of the Firs and Cedars that I grew up in. This was a green that was vibrant and alive and spoke of the hot sun, unending white beaches, coconuts, pineapples, mangoes, tropical fiestas and long sultry nights under the palms.

I had traveled before, even been to the tropics in Hawaii, Fiji, and Australia, but this trip was different. There were no set plans this time, no scheduled date of return. It was a new culture and language, and I had a wide-open agenda before me. I was excited beyond words, and a bit scared too. But I was ready for a change, any change to get me out of the rut I had been living the past few years back in America.

CHAPTER TWO, BARRA DE POTOSI, AUGUST 1994

.....turning around, I looked back and saw the collection of open-air, palm-roofed palapas that the guidebook had mentioned. Again, there was hardly a soul there; almost empty except for a few women cooking in the back and a couple of people fast asleep in the multitude of hammocks swaying under the palm roofs. Choosing the largest of the half-dozen palapas, I got a table and ordered a beer from the barefoot ten-year-old girl who came up and handed me a menu.

Sipping my beer, I once again tried to decipher the menu. But again, it was pretty hopeless, even with the help of my Spanish grammar book. Throwing caution to the wind, I went back to where the cooking was taking place and stood, watching as three Mexican ladies made tortillas by hand and cut up some kind of large fish. All smiles, they started to talk to me rapidly in Spanish but again, after "Buenas Tardes," I was completely lost and let them know it.

Breaking into laughter, they began to pull different kinds of fish out of a cooler and name them; Huachinango, (Red Snapper) Atun, (Tuna) Dorado, (Mahi Mahi) Pulpo, (Octopus) Camarones (Shrimp) and so on. Choosing a fine looking Huachinango, I watched as they scaled it and set it into a pan to fry.

These people were different, very different from Americans. And I felt strongly drawn to them. Just like the people I had met on the bus from Puerto Vallarta, they seemed genuinely happy and had a childlike innocence to them that felt good to embrace.

CHAPTER THREE, PLAYA LA MADERA, SEPTEMBER 1994

.....back from the beachfront of Playa Principal was old town Zihuatanejo. It was quaint and charming with cobblestone streets, residences, and small businesses. It was also very traditional and had a respectable feeling to it. After that, the city slowly morphed into a newer mega-commercial enterprise of busy roads, car dealerships, stores, and shops until it finally ended up running out into the poorer barrios that surrounded the town. In between old town Zihuatanejo and the newer portion of the city lay the Mercado; Zihuatanejo's gigantic central market.

As I continued to explore, the Mercado became one of my daily sojourns as I visited it to buy my provisions. The place was gigantic and divided into separate areas for fruit, groceries, fresh fish, beef, chicken, household items, and small food stands. It was always humming with activity. And every day I was in awe as I wandered about it, bargaining, a new and exciting concept in itself, buying items for a song from the Mexican salesmen and women.

Sometimes in the Mercado, I would have to stand back as a seven-foot-long Marlin or Sailfish was hauled into the market, or a side of beef went by on someone's shoulder. But I loved it all. Mexico was real and, in-your-face, not packaged up in some plastic-cellophane container. It was raw, open, and happening right in front of you. It made me feel alive, fresh, and excited about life again.

CHAPTER FOUR, CALLE ADELITA, OCTOBER 1994

.....arriving back in Caleta de Campo three days later, I was shocked to see a very large Police presence in town. There must have been almost thirty Federales and Rurales roaming the streets, heavily armed, looking menacing and dangerous. When I asked one of the locals what was going on, he told me that the day before there had been some problems; six campesinos had come into town to drink and raise hell, and the local police had moved in and told them to either quiet down or leave.

Not happy with having their festivities interrupted, the campesinos had pulled out guns and killed two of the local police force and wounded another. Then they had beat a hasty retreat out of town.

I was shocked to hear that something so gruesome and deadly could still happen in the world, so close to me. But I found myself intrigued by the incident also; strangely stimulated and excited by it.

A few weeks later, back in Zihuatanejo, I walked right into the aftermath of another gun battle! The story was that a large group of armed men had come down from somewhere in the Sierra Mountains east of Zihuatanejo and stormed Banamex (Mexico's largest banking firm) in the hopes of getting some quick cash. Unfortunately, the police had been alerted and had confronted the bank robbers just as they were exiting the bank. A shootout had occurred and, just like the old cowboy days, men on both sides had been killed as the remainder of the bank robbers fled out of town with the law hot on their trail.

Walking through the aftermath of the gun battle, I stared in amazement at the spent shell casing everywhere, bullet holes in the windows of the buildings close to the bank, and the blood on the pavement. It was all so real, so angry and desperate looking. This, as well as the incident in Caleta de Campo, was a side of Mexico that I had heard about but until then had been completely oblivious too. Here, in idyllic Zihuatanejo? I couldn't believe it! Little did I know at that time that these types of incidents would soon come to be a central theme for me that would dominate my life south of the border.

CHAPTER FIVE, DOÑA CHENCHA, SPRING 1995

Arriving back in Zihuatanejo was a joy, but the heat was so bad that I decided to go up into the Sierra Mountains east of town to do a little exploring. I wanted to find a cool refuge. Talking with Doña Chenchá one day, I told her my plans and asked if she knew a good place up there where I could escape from the heat. Her reaction was immediate: she stopped in mid-stride and turned pale as her face distorted into a grotesque mask of fear and anxiety. "Eric, what are you thinking? Are you crazy? You can't go up there," she almost screamed at me in terror and shock.

"What are you talking about Dona Chenchá," I replied. "It's hot, too hot here and I want to cool down. I love the mountains, have lived in the mountains most of my life, and know how to take of myself. There's gotta be someplace up there to get away from this blinding heat."

Putting down what she was doing, she came over, sat down next to me and got very serious. "Listen Eric, those mountains that you see over there, those beautiful, green hills reaching up to the sky. Those aren't mountains like you have known in America. That's the Sierra."

"So," was my reply. "They look good to me."

"Ah yes," she said. "They do look good, from here. But if you go up into those mountains, my dear friend, you will never return."

"What do you mean?" I replied again.

"Those are the Sierras Eric, the SEE-AIR-AHS" she enunciated very slowly. "The most dangerous place in all of Mexico. They look nice from here, but they are full of bandits, mafia and drug dealers of the worst kind. They grow marijuana and poppies for heroin up there. And the people who live there are extremely suspicious of outsiders, especially Americans. Even the police don't go up there, except in heavily armed convoys of fifty or more men. Even then, they're usually attacked."

"Oh come on, Doña Chenchá. You've gotta be kidding."

"Eric, Eric, Eric, listen to me. Just last week, a couple from Mexico City had the same idea. And without checking with anyone in town, they drove up

into the Sierra, and before they even got out of the foothills, they were stopped on the highway, and both were brutally murdered.”

To drive her point home, she hailed a passing friend and told him that I was thinking about going up into the Sierra. He, too, looked shocked at the announcement and slowly began to shake his head. He then went on to chronicle the numerous dangers of going up into the Sierra.

CHAPTER SIX, OAXACA, DECEMBER 1995

In December of 1995, I took a taxi to the bus station and bought a first-class ticket on a bus south out of Zihuatanejo. Boarding the bus at ten in the evening, I settled into my seat with quiet anticipation for the journey I was beginning and the wonders that awaited me.

Things went along pretty smoothly at first: three hours to Acapulco, a short stop, then south towards the Oaxacan border. A half hour out of Acapulco though, I observed a pickup truck pull out in front of the bus. In the back, there were five men armed with automatic rifles and shotguns. A bit alarmed, I mentioned it to the Mexican gentleman seated next to me.

Craning to get a better look out the front window of the bus, he saw the same pickup truck driving in front of us and replied, "Ah yes, that is our armed escort. Hopefully, there is another one behind us."

"Armed escort, hopefully, there is another one behind us! What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Well, you see my friend," he continued, "this stretch of highway is one of the most dangerous on the coast, especially at night. For many years, buses and cars on this route were routinely stopped by gangs of bandits and robbed, as well as targeted for kidnappings. This was a very dangerous place. But since the government started having these armed escorts accompany the buses, the level of numerous, violent incidents has dropped considerably". Smiling at me, he made the sign of the cross, said "Gracias a Dios," closed his eyes and fell sound asleep.

"Most dangerous highway on the coast, numerous violent incidents!" I was just going on an excursion, getting a new visa. Sure, I was expecting some possible inconveniences once I got down into the war zones I would be passing through, but already! We had just left Zihuatanejo!