

Woman tourist learns peril of banana republic

(Polly Carithers, director of public information for the Oakland Intermediate Schools and a resident of Bloomfield Township, is vacationing in Central and South America. She has sent the following account of her experience as "an unintentional spectator at the Costa Rica session of the Organization of American States" to The Observer & Eccentric.)

For a vacation in an armed camp, try the Hotel Irazu in Costa Rica when it is hosting a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS). Costa Rica is a law and order country and its president, Daniel Oduber Quirós, wants no bombings, demonstrations or kidnappings. There is an armed patrolman at almost every street intersection in San Jose, the capital city.

The tourist arriving innocently during the 15-day meeting of OAS is greeted by no less than two dozen members of the military police. A bellman rushes to the door to assist the new arrival past security.

"SHOW PASSPORT, por favor." The queries begin in Spanish, too fast for the American still clutching a pocket phrasebook. Then English. "What is your business here?" "Just a tourist." "You have reservations?" "No."

Beyond the militia, the plenipotentiaries of 21 American states, their aides and their wives mill in the lobby. Obviously there is no room at this inn.

The bellman takes you to the desk where it is explained to the clerk that you have reservations beginning Sunday.

"This is Friday but may I please have a room?"

"Yes, senora, plenty of rooms."

THE ARMY is sleeping elsewhere. There is an apology for the security. "You understand, senora, it is necessary for the protection of the delegates."

The traveler who had just left home

might have read something about the OAS meeting to consider revision of the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, the Rio Treaty.

The official chief agenda item is to change the rules to permit a simple majority rather than a two-thirds vote to life sanctions against an offending nation. The effect of the change in rules would restore Cuba to the good graces of the organization.

THIS TRAVELER had just completed a 24-day cruise on a windjammer off the coasts of Mexico, Belize and Honduras and had been in an absolute news vacuum. Her two suitcases had been stored in a below-decks cabin of a motor-sailing ship, the Yankee Trader.

It may have been a suspicious odor that aroused the interest of a plainclothes member of the security guard. He joined the bellman on the trip to the elevator. There were more apologies from the bellman.

"Abierto, senora." The plainclothesman was young, polite and just doing his duty. He understood no English. He was shown the grubby shorts and tee-shirts, the shell collection and snorkel. He smiled with embarrassment and shifted his weight to the other foot.

The notebooks, with pages stuck together from humidity, were flipped through—no envelope bombs. The pencil holder of carved Honduran mahogany was examined—and a suspicious coil of woven Mexican belts. All very innocent, if very smelly, he seemed to decide.

HE NODDED, smiled and withdrew. The luxury of a hot tub bath and a meal was next.

Two armed guards were patrolling each wing of the hall. Fifteen were in the lobby. A stroll out of sight of the guards at the entrance produced another routine upon return. There were motions by a member of the guard.

The first meaning was clear. You could not pass. The second required translating either Spanish or gestures. He held out his hand with thumb and forefinger together as if holding a room key. You showed your room key and were nodded past. This happened every time you entered the hotel.

While you were eating dinner, the below-decks smell of the ship took over the hotel room. You realized it would seep under the door and down the hall where it would arouse new suspicions when the guard changed.

YOU OPENED the louvers to the balcony as well as the balcony door. It was dark but not too dark to see that a guard peering the roof of the opposite wing of the hotel was watching closely. Perhaps you should pull the draperies.

That would only make him more suspicious and possibly lead to another room check. You ostentatiously removed all wearable clothes from the suitcases and put them on hangers, widely spaced.

Then you closed the draperies.

The Associated Press and United Press International covering the conference said they came down when it was reported that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger would be present. He didn't come.

Actually, the AP man from New Orleans said, the sessions have resembled the deliberations of any organization as it reviews its bylaws word-by-word—very, very dull. There may be no action on the rules revision until next month when OAS reconvenes in Trinidad.

"Meanwhile," he said, "we're sending out a story every day just as if there were news."

Meanwhile, you adjust to the security with the comforting thought that when you leave in four days you won't smell as if you are a menace to hemispheric solidarity.

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