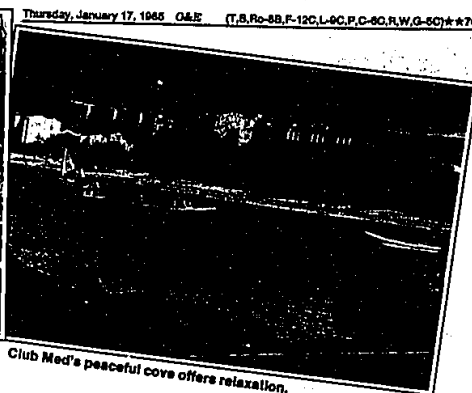




Club Med visitors dance by night, play by day.



Photos by Micky Jones



Club Med's peaceful cove offers relaxation.

Club Med offers an 'antidote to civilization'

YOU CAN always tell the newcomers from the old hands who have been at Club Med for a day or two. The new arrivals get off the airport bus in real clothes — skirts, slacks, shirts, shoes — blinking briefly in the hot Mexican sun. The crowd of newcomers, clapping to the music, passing out fruit drinks, holding canopies high, are all in Club Med dress: bathing suits, sarongs, bare feet and flowers.

Ben, the village chief, is there in his long parca, the length of patterned Tahitian cloth that was immortalized as a "sarong" in old Bob Hope-Dorothy Lamour movies.

Sue Ellen, from Australia, has red bougainvillea in her thick brown hair and wears her parca wrapped like a dress. Brian, from Jamaica, is in a Club Med shirt and red cotton pants.

Didier, the slim blond entertainer from France who will double us up all week with his theatrics, wears his sarong a new way every day, hanging from his waist as a skirt, wrapped around his hips as a bathing suit.

IF YOU think of Club Med as a place only for singles, the crowd of newcomers will surprise you. The new G.M.'s (Gentle Members) looking around like kids who have just arrived at camp, are young single men and women, couples, grey-haired grandmothers, bald-headed men, even a few children.

As they follow the G.O.'s (Gentle Organizers) down the flowered paths to



one-of-a-kind traveler
Iris Jones
contributing travel writer

their rooms, they get first glimpses of the sea between the cream stucco buildings with their red tile roofs. The rooms are small, colorful and comfortable, without an inch to spare and with no locks, as befits the Club Med philosophy. You don't need any money here, and there's no place to carry it in a sarong anyway.

The parca or sarong, is the national dress, almost the flag, of the Club Med village, which is more than a resort, more than a place for sun-sea-sand, almost a little country with a huge permanent family and a new set of relatives coming to visit every week.

The Club Med we visited is at Ixtapa on the Pacific Coast, southwest of Mexico City.

CLUB MED started in 1950 when a group of young Europeans vacationed in army tents in Majorca. Now it is a huge conglomerate with nearly 100 villages in 26 countries, all with the same philosophy and political system.

The philosophy is that vacationers want to relax and play with other people, make friends, have fun; CM advertising calls it an "antidote to civilization." The staff members who make it

work, the G.O.'s, are 16,000 young men and women from around the world who happily work 16 hours a day running the Club, its theater, dining rooms, bar and sports facilities as well as mixing with the G.M.'s.

The Gentle Members stroll slowly around the pool or on the ocean beach, learn to wind surf out there at the end of the huge bay, do water exercises in the pool, play tennis or golf, or just read a book under a palm tree.

A DAY in the life of Club Med begins when you pad down the flowered paths to the pool area and go upstairs to the dining room. Sue Ellen will seat you at one of the big round tables set in acres of breakfast foods.

By 9 a.m., Mario, once a champion cyclist, has led a group of bicycles on a day trip to the village of Ixtapa, the snorkeling class is in the pool, and Mike is teaching the uninitiated to wind surf at the end of the bay.

We walk the beach, past Patricia, who sells Mexican crafts at the foot of the Club Med stairs, past the wind surfers and the tennis courts to the black rocks where the boats leave daily for fishing and island picnics.

All Mexican beaches are public, so you may find a few guitars among the taxi drivers sitting at the end of the beach, or a couple of local snorkelers

diving for oysters among the black rocks.

FROM THE rocks you can see across a forest of red and white sails to the Club Med buildings rising cream and red against the treed hillside. The Pacific is lightly rippled with the white wakes of Mexican boats hulling across the sea to Ixtapa Island, where some G.M.'s go to picnic, swim and sunbath. Misty mountains make a backdrop for it all.

By noon, everybody is back in the "heart of town" around the swimming pool, where Didier is demonstrating the activities we might have missed. By now there is not a shirt or tie or a regular pair of shoes in sight; in half a day, we have all become villagers, stopped worrying about our paunches or our fat thighs, and settled down to some Club Med living.

Those who remember the early images of Club Med, which stressed topless bathers and wild nights, are relieved (or disappointed) to find that everybody looks perfectly normal and is fully clothed, if you can say that about a sunbather in a bathing suit or a sarong.

YOU BUY your pina coloda or your glass of wine at the bar with beads that hang around your neck. By now you don't care that your hair's a mess and you have sweat on your feet when you go into lunch. Everything but bar drinks, boutique purchases and tours are included in the price of your stay, so the only thing you must decide is how to choose from all those food tables at lunch.

I learned to choose one of the special meat or fish foods of the day, the special salad of the day and then go straight to the Mexican table, ignoring the spread of meats, potatoes, vegetables and other "regular foods" that crossed half the room. Then there was the cheese bar, the dessert bar, the fruit bar, and definitely a snooze after lunch.

Dinner is at eight but most of us gather on the terrace around the pool much earlier, to lean against the bar or sit on the wall and watch the glorious daily pageantry of sunset.

DINNER isn't quite as gastronomically interesting as lunch: we pick from an acre of tables filled with soups and salads and other goodies; the main meat and vegetable course is automatically served at table. There is so much food that even at the end of the first day you know you're in trouble.

A little dancing by the pool and the 10 o'clock theater presentation begins. This is where all that young talent comes together, singing and dancing and punning on the stage in a different show every night.

At first you wonder where all the performers come from, but by Day Two you begin to recognize them. That's Sue Ellen in the chorus of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy from Company B." It's Mario that brings the house down as a live Raggedy Ann Doll.

Didier is the juggler, and the magician, and stand-up comic, and usually the master of ceremonies. That is the

smoking instructor in the Chinese costume, and that girl at the end of the stage, isn't she the one who teaches yoga?

Thursday night, when the G.M.'s have been together for days, they choose Mr. and Mrs. Ixtapa to the hula and cheers of the crowd.

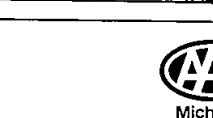
As midnight approaches the music slows to a waltz speed. The bar closes, the poolside dancing ends, and you must decide whether you want to go to bed or walk a few hundred yards across the grass to the disco and the bar that opens at midnight.

This is the one time when age may separate the disco-lovers from the early-nighters in the family.

For information, contact your travel agent about new direct flights from Detroit to Ixtapa or about Club Med vacations elsewhere, or telephone Club Med toll-free at 1-800-528-3100.



Diners beware: Med's food tables are plentifully stocked.



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