

### Sleeping over at Estrella's

One Friday evening in late June, we returned to La Esperanza after our siesta to continue measuring houses. Laurel and I came upon a lovely concrete house, turquoise in colour. We introduced ourselves to the owners and informed them of our purpose for being there.

It took a while before we were able to start work, for Mrs. Arroyo Galeana said that we couldn't begin until her husband came home; in fact, he was sleeping in the bedroom. We barely had time to draw the plan and front and back elevations before it got dark. As we were about to leave, the

*Laurel et moi-même avons eu la chance de passer la nuit dans une famille de La Esperanza. Ceci nous a permis de voir plus clairement les défauts de notre appartement à Zihuatanejo. Bien qu'il était luxueux par rapport aux maisons de La Esperanza (air climatisé et eau courante), il était moins bien conçu pour le climat sévère de Zihuatanejo. Notre travail à La Esperanza nous a permis de forger des liens d'amitié avec les habitants et surtout les enfants de la communauté. Les enfants nous accueillaient toujours avec un*



## Ways of living in Zihuatanejo

by Sandra Haefelfinger

sixteen-year-old daughter, Estrella, invited us for supper. To our surprise, the mother even bid us to stay over for the night because they did not like to stay alone when her husband worked all night at a hotel in Ixtapa. This was an excellent opportunity to see and experience how the people in La Esperanza actually live. Before eating supper, we washed ourselves in their *baño*; a tiny square room, resembling an American shower, but made entirely of concrete and lacking running water. A large bucket was used to store water, while a smaller pot was used to pour water on ourselves, in order to wash with soap, and then rinse again. They lent us clean T-shirts, and we talked for a while in the living room before eating.

Mrs. Arroyo Galeana taught us how to make tortillas; Laurel and I failed miserably our first tortillas, but we soon got the hang of things and began a mass production. Originally, the method of making tortillas was to roll a ball of dough in your hand, and then slap the dough from hand to hand until it became a flat circular disk. The

In the apartment



Estrella and family

*grand sourire, une curiosité débordante, et leur désir d'apprendre.*

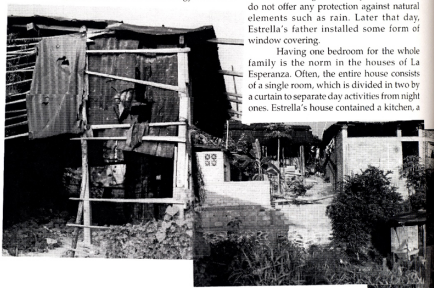
*Experimentar la forma de vida en un hogar en la comunidad de La Esperanza nos hizo más conscientes de las condiciones de vida en nuestro departamento durante nuestra estancia en Zihuatanejo. A pesar de que éste contaba con todos sus 'lujos' como el aire acondicionado y el agua corriente, no estaba adaptado a las condiciones climatológicas de la región. Trabajar en la comunidad cada día nos dió la oportunidad de entablar amistad con los adultos y especialmente con los niños, los cuales siempre nos recibían con sus sonrisas en la cara, su curiosidad y ganas de aprender. Este artículo es una narración de nuestra vida en la comunidad.*

task is now facilitated by the use of a little tool that effortlessly flattens the dough. For supper, we ate meat in a soup sauce with tortillas, avocado and cheese. It was delicious! Before leaving for work, Mr. Arroyo kindly told us to make ourselves at home.

Carmen, one of Estrella's friends, had come to visit. She is deaf, but was able to communicate with us through sign language and facial expressions. I also tried to converse with drawings and writing. These conversations took a lot of energy out of both

was not used to sleeping like a sardine in a can. When the sun rose, I woke to the loud sound of roosters crowing; La Esperanza's public alarm clock. I could hear different tones of cries, crows from close by and the responding crows from roosters further away. Laurel woke up later that morning soaked; she slept beside the window and a cyclone had begun to rage during the night. In La Esperanza, windows are not glazed; they are simply holes in the wall, covered by a decorated metal grill for safety reasons. These do not offer any protection against natural elements such as rain. Later that day, Estrella's father installed some form of window covering.

Having one bedroom for the whole family is the norm in the houses of La Esperanza. Often, the entire house consists of a single room, which is divided in two by a curtain to separate day activities from night ones. Estrella's house contained a kitchen, a



of us. I was learning her form of sign language and made my own signs as well, while Carmen gave her utmost to make sure I understood her. Laurel, Estrella and her mother watched some TV after supper, then soon went to bed, while Carmen stayed with me. I guess she was glad to have a new person to chat with.

After Carmen left, Mrs. Arroyo Galeana lent me a nightgown and I went to bed. The sleeping conditions were as follows: two double beds stuck together, with all five of us, Laurel, myself, Estrella, five year old Jesús and the mother, squashed next to each other on this huge *cama* (a bed). I had problems falling asleep because of the noise; we could hear the neighbour's TV very clearly. These houses do not provide any acoustical privacy. On the other hand, maybe the neighbours were doing it on purpose to spite Estrella, who would often blast her stereo with Shakira's "*Estoy Aquí*" till late in the evening. I woke up frequently during that night; it was hot and humid, a fact of life in Zihuatanejo's rainy season. Besides which, I

living room and two rooms that could have been used as two separate bedrooms, one for the children and the other for the parents. Instead, they used one as a bedroom for the whole family, and the other as storage room for clothes and furniture. This does not provide much privacy for the parents.

When we all got up, we chatted for a while, then ate and got ready to do some work. For breakfast, we enjoyed *piconillas* (meat with potatoes, onions, tomato, and green pepper), with tortillas and *agua de guayaba*. Delicious! Estrella's mom always had the most delightful juices. *Agua de guayaba* was just one, amongst the many other beverages, such as *agua de plátano* and *agua de limón*, which she made with the fruits she grew in her tiny garden. And these trees are only a few of the various fruit trees we saw in Zihuatanejo.

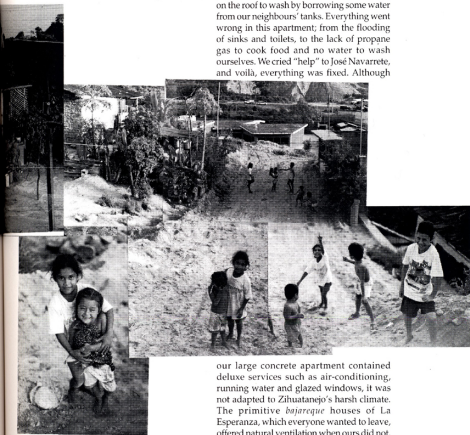
The night before, Estrella had mentioned to Laurel that she wanted to come dancing with us in Ixtapa. Estrella thought maybe she'd have a greater chance if Laurel asked her father, but she expected the answer

would be no, considering her grandmother had died last year. No one is allowed to go to *fiestas* for one year after the death of a close relative. The father did refuse. He was also hesitant to allow his daughter to come to the beach with us the following day. "It all depends on the weather and on the height of the tides," said Mr. Arroyo. I was just amazed that he let Laurel and I, two absolute strangers, stay at his house for the night, but would not allow his child to go out with us. This made me wonder about the varying importance of privacy within different cultures. He had also questioned our relationships with the male members of our group. In Mexico, having a woman live with a man, without being married, is not well regarded. It is even worse having a bunch of men and women living together. Jean-Maxime and I had met a man on the beach one day, and he was quite shocked when he found out that all seven of us lived under the same roof. In the same way we were

surprised that the whole family slept in the same room. All in all, I greatly enjoyed the experience of actually living in one of the La Esperanza homes.

#### The Apartment

On a few occasions, we ran out of water in our apartment. We suspected the janitor, Luterio, of purposely not filling our tanks for his own amusement. His excuse was that there was a shortage of water in the city, but it was quite interesting to note that all of our neighbours had water. The worst time was when we did not have this necessity for four whole days and were unable to wash! Having no running water at all is a fact of life for most Mexicans; but how did we solve the problem? We just complained and stank for four days. It never even dawned on us to purchase some water and wash ourselves like they all do in La Esperanza. We had the facilities; two showers in our apartment; just *¡no agua!* Finally, some of us thought of going on the roof to wash by borrowing some water from our neighbours' tanks. Everything went wrong in this apartment; from the flooding of sinks and toilets, to the lack of propane gas to cook food and no water to wash ourselves. We cried "help" to José Navarrete, and voilà, everything was fixed. Although



our large concrete apartment contained deluxe services such as air-conditioning, running water and glazed windows, it was not adapted to Zihuatanejo's harsh climate. The primitive *bajareque* houses of La Esperanza, which everyone wanted to leave, offered natural ventilation when ours did not. In order to remain in the apartment without

becoming insane from the trapped heat, we had to turn the air-conditioning on full blast. One day, it broke down... Our apartment didn't even provide an overhang to shelter us from the sun, or a verandah where a natural breeze to cool us off.

### The children

I still remember our first day of work in La Esperanza. As we arrived in the community, the president welcomed us with mangos and drinks. Other residents later made us feel at home by conversing with us and offering us food, drinks and a chair to sit on. At approximately 1:30 pm., a flock of

installed. The holes dug for these drains became a new playground for many of the children.

The children really seemed happy even though they did not have many toys. A huge smile was always present on their faces. One day, while I was painting a watercolour of the settlement's president's house, a few kids came over to see what I was up to. A little four year old tomboy, Nelly, sat beside me, a huge smile tattooed on her face. She was touching my water colour paints, when I noticed her patting with her other hand, an enormous flying ant! I freaked out when I saw her pick it up and play with it as if it was a toy. I asked, "*¿Cómo se llama tu amigo?*" Nelly's smile as well as her friend, Leticia's, turned into roaring laughter.

The children of La Esperanza are given more freedom in the streets; they are not strictly limited to "no further than down the block" as I was as a child. In a small settlement where everyone knows everybody, parents feel safe allowing their children to roam around freely. Children learn to be independent very young. Kids go to the tiendas to buy groceries for their parents. They play in the streets, and know where every crack, ditch, and stone on the paths is, and walk through all these swiftly. We, on the other hand, walk the *calle*s with hesitation, looking at the ground with every step we make. Children didn't complain much; many walked and ran on the earth and stones barefoot. A little boy threw rocks at his sister. Instead of crying and running to Mommy, she just got angry and defended herself. The children seem to have a greater respect for their parents and for strangers. They are less agitated, not that they lack energy, on the contrary, they are full of vigour, but they are not hyperactive, and as a rule, listen to their elders.

The children were very patient with my attempts to communicate in rudimentary Spanish. Nine year old Carlos even asked me to teach him English. He was the most polite child and had a great will to learn. Every day I saw him, he practiced English with me.

The people were extremely generous, since they were brought up in large families, where sharing between siblings is obligatory. One July day after a morning's work, I met the other members of the group at Ilse's house before taking the *combi* (the small bus) back to Zihuatanejo. Ilse's sixteen-year-old sister, Ivi, was conversing with Jean-Maxime. Ivi had pinned up her hair into a bun, attached with a yellow clip. After I complimented her on her hair pin, she took it out of her hair and gave it to me. Returning it to her, I replied that it looked nice in her long dark hair and not in my shorter blond hair. She insisted,



*Linda and her playing with Bernardo's dog in CTM*

curious children suddenly surrounded us. They had just finished school and were on their way home. *Gringos* such as us, (even though we're not really *gringos*, which is a term used for an American tourist), are quite an attraction for Mexican children. They encircled each one of us, anxious to discover our work. Some children even assisted Juliette and Laurel in drawing. Later on during that day, I fled the group to go sketching. I discovered a family of baby chicks bathing in the shade of a tree with their mother. As I was sketching away, two young girls came to see my work. One of them, Carla offered me a chair from her neighbouring house.

Most children are at school until 1:30 pm. After school, children play with their friends in the street, but on a hot, sunny day, most remain under the shade of trees. They do not have many toys; they use anything available to entertain themselves. Boys will often play soccer in the plaza. Some made a swing with a piece of rope and a used tire. Near the end of July, water pipes were being

saying that if I liked it, it was a present. I was speechless. I was amazed to see how little these people have, and yet they give so much. Here was a family of five daughters, the eldest, Eréndira Fabiola, seventeen, had her own seven month old daughter, and was living at her mother's with her husband and child. The youngest of the daughters was five-year-old Ilse. Their father had left for Texas, earlier in the summer, to work as a musician. They were not expecting him back for two years, neither were they receiving an allowance from him. The mother, who had always taken care of her children at home, and hence, had no formal work skills, was obliged to go out to find a job for the first time, in order to bring food to the table. I was deeply touched and extremely thankful for that hair clip.

All eight members in Ilse's family live in one of the two small *bojareque* houses dwelling the main plaza site. The other citizens of La Esperanza want them to move out in order to obtain a public space with some sort of playground where their children can play. But how is this family supposed to pack up and move with two young children and no income to build a new house? This is causing some tension in the community. The architect, David López, had asked us to design a proposal for the plaza, which we presented to FIBAZI<sup>1</sup>, and later to the whole community of La Esperanza. This also put us in an uncomfortable situation since we had become attached to Ilse and her family, and here we were promoting the destruction of their home.

Parents put all their dreams into their children. The primary school is the heart of the community and school occupies a great importance in the kids' lives. This can be seen at graduations. For example, a large fiesta was held to celebrate the kindergarten graduation of young Jesús, Estrella's five year old brother. Laurel was the honoured godmother during the occasion. A grander fiesta also took place for the elementary school graduation.

When a young girl turns fifteen, a special party, resembling somewhat a wedding, is held for her. The ceremony begins at a church, where the young girl walks down the aisle in her beautiful pink dress, quite similar to that of a wedding dress, where a priest awaits to say a speech and prayer. A fiesta then takes place in a hall or at someone's house, where food is served. Amongst the display of food is a large multilayered wedding-like cake. Ivi showed the pictures of her fifteenth birthday to Aitor and Laurel. Ivi's dress was extravagant. Also part of her outfit was a beautiful crown. Her six *chambelanes* wore mauve shirts, made out

of the same material as her dress. Their job was to remain with her and dance with her during the evening. Aitor and Laurel were just amazed to see the great importance this plays in a young girl's life and how much money is spent for that occasion.

### The Cyclones

Rainy season was welcomed by us all. June was extremely hot, and these rainfalls meant the lowering of the overall temperature, making it more tolerable to work. To our surprise, when it did, it rained cats and dogs and the streets literally turned into flowing rivers, one foot deep. This



Carlos, in the back, is watching Leticia and me play hand-clipping games. I taught some children English songs to go with these hand-clipping games, while they taught me Spanish ones.

happened quite frequently. One Saturday night, we all went dancing in Ixtapa, when another of these great cyclones was on its way. By 4:00 am., the Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo streets were flooded with rain water. One taxi driver refused to drive us home. At first, I did not understand why; we in Montreal do not stop travelling on the roads even when there is a great snow fall. Then I saw the flowing rivers on which we were navigating... Laurel and Enrique's taxi driver drove a little too fast and ended up stalling in the middle of nowhere. They had to walk home, and arrived drenched. No need to take a shower!

<sup>1</sup> Refer to the article, *Tourism, Housing and Development*, on page 8, written by Manuel Lara, for complete description of FIBAZI.