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A Feature
by Roger Doris

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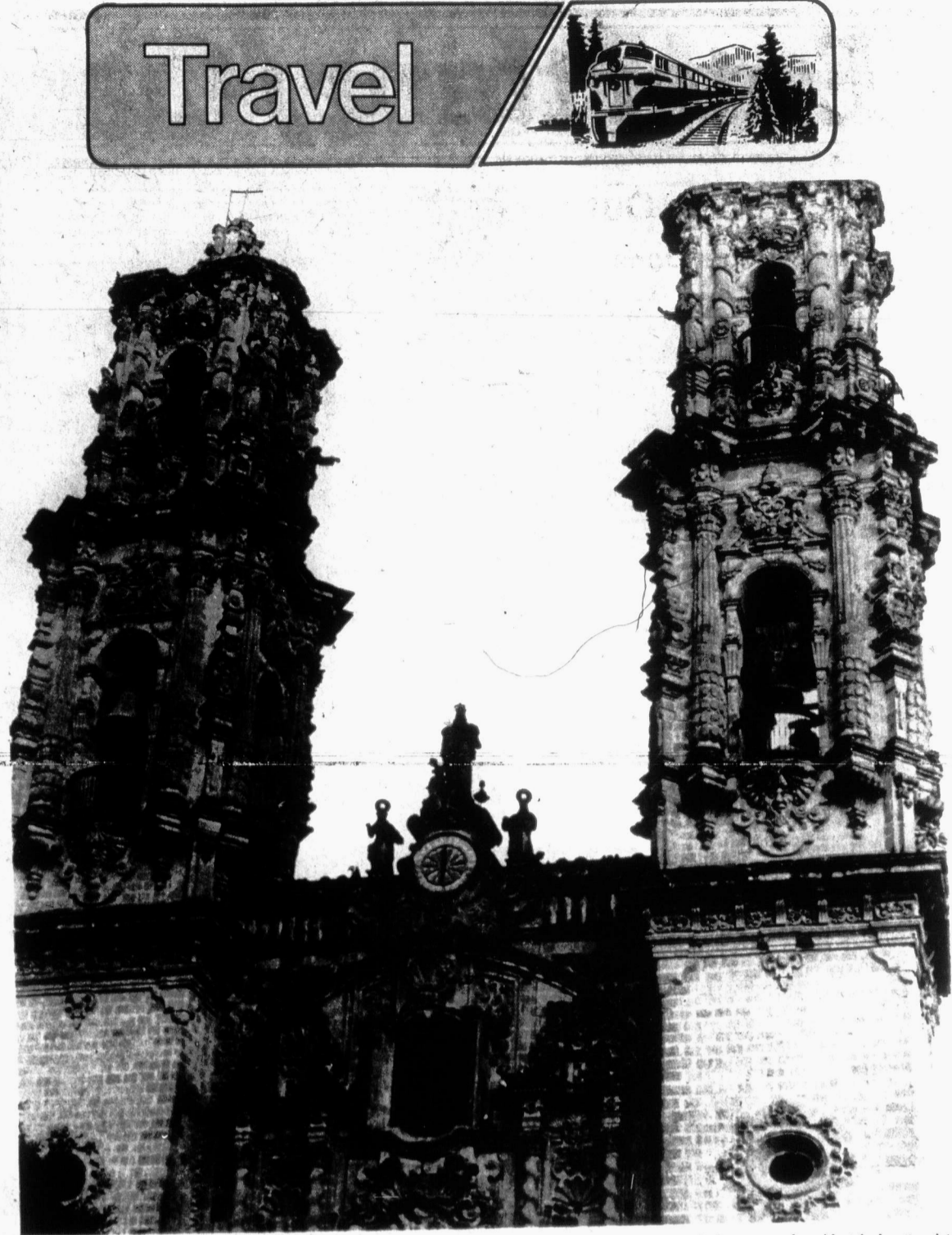
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The twin towers of Santa Prisca are a well-known landmark of Taxco, Mexico. Although often recommended as a one-day side trip by tourists agents, this writer found it worth a longer visit.

Taxco worth much more than just a side trip

By JEAN AHLVIK

When the talk is Taxco, Mexico, don't listen to your travel agent.

Taxco is billed as a side trip, a one-day diversion from the superior delights of Mexico City or Acapulco. But talk to the vacationers who are whisked through the tiny village on one of these overnight stands and the refrain goes like this:

"Mexico City is OK, but it's just another big sprawling city. Taxco is something quite different."

Quite different means an 18th century extravaganza of a town clinging precariously to the side of a mountain. Tiny houses cascade down from a pink church (Santa Prisca) so baroque it looks like the icing on an elaborate wedding cake.

Quite different means burros meandering through cobbled lanes impassable to cars.

Quite different means a town entirely premised on the notion of decoration. The Taxco silversmiths are known throughout Mexico and beyond as consummate artisans and mastercraftsmen. Although prices aren't better, the selection is and people make the pilgrimage to shop in the town's more than 180 silver shops.

Just over 100 miles from Mexico City, Taxco is a mountain village 7,500 feet above sea level where clear thin air makes night lights sparkle and day vistas shimmer like a cache of forgotten gems on the mountain side.

For the Canadian traveller without a car, Taxco is inaccessible except by bus. The best line is the Stella d'Oro (Golden Star) which charges slightly under \$2 for the four-hour mountainous trek from Mexico City. Make sure your coach is air conditioned and bring your Graval; this is some trip.

In Taxco, if you have the good luck to be staying at the Posada de la Mision near the JFK Highway, you'll live with some incredible scenery, and huge marble tiled bathrooms that suggest a castle in Spain.

My room was balconied on two sides and offered a huge canopied bed — quite the most luxurious bed I've ever slept in. I thought I had mistakenly landed in luxury class when the ticket had been booked economy, but I found to my delight from a tour of the rest of the hotel that my room was only about a six on a scale of one to 10.

Huge suites with marvellous sunken bathtubs can easily accommodate a family of six (three of whom can stay free if they are under 12). The high season price is just about the best thing about the suites — \$24 for a double.

With a huge outdoor swimming pool, an incredible view of the town and church, a beautiful dining room, a bodega and flower laden terraces, you'd think the hotel would be constantly full; not so.

Except at Christmas and Easter when there are special celebrations, the hotel has constant trouble with occupancy rates.

The problem is that lovely as it is, nobody thinks of Taxco as a destination. And yet with the beautiful old town, a lively nightclub scene and fine shopping, Taxco is certainly a place to spend more than one night.

Taxco is so rich, so perfect just as it is that the government declared it a national monument.

No new buildings will ever clutter up that skyline — as stunningly beautiful and as old worldly as anything this side of Florence.

But rules like that play havoc with the tourism they are designed to protect. Hence Holiday Inn, that bastion of convenience, is built out of the city, high on a neighboring mountain top.

For the golfers this mountain top Holiday Inn is a peaky paradise 7,500 feet up. The hustle and bustle of the city is far away on another peak and all that empty rarefied mountain air can be dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure on the first golf course in the sky.

Taxco is one of Mexico's shopping hot spots. But beware of tour guides who will take you on a selected tour of all the places where they get a kickback on all of your purchases.

The silver shops near the twin-towered Santa Prisca have the best reputations but you should be sure that each piece has the government silver stamp (the spread eagle) and the \$2.5 stamp which indicates government approved sterling. Without the numbers it could be alpaco which is much less valuable and has a yellowish tint.

Cantarranas is a little rough around the edges but it certainly has something for everybody.

Tourists sometimes skip Cantarranas because they know the varied line-up means a late night and they are saving themselves for the tortuous bus ride to Acapulco the next day.

However, another day or two at Taxco would make Cantarranas a highlight of a Mexican holiday, especially for someone wanting a couple of nights on mountain air before hitting the humidity of the coast.

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