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A Country Like Home

BETTER EXIT

IT never struck some of La Rosa's guests that they might leave soon. They were the ones who came in, took a couple of breaths of the local atmosphere, found it good, and accepted their surroundings straight away. The life was not so much something new, but something they'd been unconsciously missing for a long time. They immediately became part of the place and said they just couldn't understand anyone who didn't find it like home. Others had a bad time for the first two or three days, and then gave up struggling and found they were at home after all. Others still, not particularly concerned with vegetarianism or to decry their soul tracks in the cosmos, reacted warmly to a flavour of hospitality they were not used to. U.S. travellers expect service of a special kind, and in the U.S. they generally get it. Perhaps you could call it value for money. You pay so much, and you get a standard of material comfort, someone at the other end of the line when you buzz, crisp smiles, the conventional words of hospitality, and a discreet check before you leave in case you're tempted to flog the towels. La Rosa was not like that. It was all sorts of things far too mingled for clear description, but I think what this third category of people liked was a feeling of village life that's harder to find in the U.S. now that there's mechanisation in every cheque book and fifteen million cheques are written every day. The U.S. citizen still likes to visit with his neighbour, but that sound instinct has become feverish. What it entails now is get in the car and go go go. La Rosa gave them the chance to sit around and gab in an uncompetitive atmosphere. There was time to stroll or to dance, and if you couldn't keep going you chose a siesta rather than a pick-me-up cup of coffee. This system also has its rewards for the workers. Once, when I was in the vegetable garden, I took some tomatoes and parsley to a couple who were about to leave. "Gee!" they said, when I put the bright, fresh vegetables on the table in their casita: "Gee! That's just swell. We thought you'd come to check the linen."

People like this are pleasant to live with, we found, whether they are estate

agents from Puerto Rico, or manufacturers of precision electronic recording systems from Redwood City, Calif., or Montana wheat farmers. When the time came for them to leave La Rosa it was goodbye between friends and the processes of departure were always lengthy and collected a large crowd. Often I found myself co-opted as an expediter of processes. It was more like a fiesta than a job, and the way other dull, neglected, routine jobs piled up I might as well have been at a fiesta.

Usually I was caught in the office. I worked early in the mornings when it was cool, and when people who had to drive a long way, wanted to start driving. The cashier started work later, and so when these early leave takers wanted to pay their bills, I took the money if it was simple, or routed out the cashier if it was complicated. The cashier's house was under a tree in a remote corner, and before disturbing her at breakfast it was as well to run down a few details. Did our friends who were leaving want to buy anything else? Books written by El Profesor, or a series of correspondence courses? Did they have a note from El Profesor for a gallon of grape concentrate, and had they already paid for that? Almost invariably they had paid El Profesor when he gave them the note the previous evening. This was the only time he came in the way of hard cash, and he used the sales of grape concentrate as a source of pocket money. The cashier got everything else. Then, where was the cash-box? It might be at the cashier's house or it might be in several other places. The visit to the cashier usually turned into a gossip occasion with reminiscences and a cup of tea on the patio.

After that there was the grape concentrate, an order for a vitamin packed food supplement, and a visit to the kitchen to beg a loaf of bread made from germinated wheat, a jar of wild honey and perhaps some grape leaf tea. These were on the free list and always went freely to friends when they left. By this time the crowd round the car was large. Were there any processes left to be expedited? Had the casita key been handed in and the deposit recovered? What had been left under the bed or in the shoe cupboard? And, as a simple repeated statement, what a wonderful time they had had.

—G. leF. Y.



(C) Punch

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