

All This and Money, Too!

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IT WAS LATE, AND HOT, and we were all tired. We'd put in a full day of interpreting at the conference and breakout sessions, and then we were asked if we'd mind helping out at an after-hours meeting, "just for a little while." Always glad to oblige, of course, but now it was nearly eight o'clock and we were starting to wilt.

Five of us had come to interpret at a conference in Albuquerque for a week. As usual, friends at home said, "You'll love it out there! Albuquerque is a really nice town." They always

picture me sightseeing, taking day-trips to the mountains, and acting like a tourist. But what usually happens is that by the time I've finished interpreting for the day all I want to do is order room service and lie on my bed, staring at the ceiling in blissful silence. I have spent several days in

some cities and never actually left the hotel.

As interpreters know all too well, conference work can be extremely demanding. At the first orientation meeting you are given a program and you highlight the sessions to which you are assigned, usually two in the morning and two in the afternoon, with coffee and lunch breaks in between. At a large conference, with several hundred people in attendance, the first few breaks can be spent frantically scurrying around trying to find the Sweetwater Room, or the Water-Room Suite, which aren't always exactly where they are shown on the hotel's floor plan.

A conference will of course have an overall theme, but each individual session can be on almost any topic imaginable. You might start off in a workshop discussing criteria for reciprocal acceptance of academic credentials, for example, and then go straight into a lecture on the legal rights of low-income minorities in border regions. After lunch there could be a presentation on children with asthma, followed by an interactive session on non-governmental organizations. All of which is

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interpreted simultaneously from one language to another—and sometimes in both directions at once. That's what I'd been doing all day when I was asked if I minded helping out at that after-hours meeting for a while. I looked at

my four wilting colleagues and thought, "I guess this is our paycheck for Saturday!"

Saturday was the flip side of the picture I've painted so far—it was an interpreter's fantasy come true. After the morning sessions we were informed that, due to a miraculous glitch in the schedule, our services would not be required for the rest of the day after all. A free afternoon! We jumped a shuttle and disappeared before any of the authorities could change their minds.

Albuquerque's Old Town is a charming place to spend a few hours as a tourist. It was originally settled in 1706 as a farming village and military

outpost along the Camino Real between Chihuahua and Santa Fe, and was named in honor of the Viceroy of New Spain, the Duke of Albuquerque. (The first "r" was dropped later on.) We browsed the shops and galleries, and roamed the streets laid out in the classic Spanish grid, with a central plaza surrounded by the vintage colonial church, old single-story homes, and official buildings. The sound of music drew us to an open courtyard where four young musicians from Ecuador were playing the quena, the charango, and other traditional instruments of the Andes.

We made our way to the Casa de Ruiz for a late lunch. Fortunately it was so crowded inside that we were seated in the delightfully rustic back yard, where ancient farm machinery leaned against thick adobe walls that have stood for three hundred years. The air was warm in the sunshine and cool in the shade, and we had a perfect view of the mountains etching a crisp horizon against a flawless blue sky. We played show-and-tell with our souvenirs: Ecuadorian music CDs, special treats for infant relatives, postcards of the legendary Route 66, and a Navajo-English dictionary (because you just never know).

The food was good and the conversation excellent. Fascinating shoptalk of the kind you might imagine when five kindred spirits are fortunate enough to relax together in such a setting. Thinking of the assignment that had brought us there I sighed, "All this, and money too!" Ben smiled and said, "That would make a good title for a story." ★