

Nov. 10, 2002----

ACAPULCO, Mexico--Like jalapenos in a tortilla, a middle-aged crazy streak of Chicago is tucked into the trendy Costa Azul neighborhood, three blocks from the Costera in Acapulco. The Costera is the happening strip of high-rise hotels and nightclubs that borders the Acapulco Bay.

Chicago-based restaurateur Jimmy Rittenberg, ex-Chicago cop Jim Hansen, and former Chicago insurance broker Ron Norkus are partners at Mother Hubbards bar and restaurant, No. 10 Avenue Horatio Nelson in Costa Azul. Rittenberg and Kathy Fitzpatrick own Mother Hubbards, 5 W. Hubbard, in Chicago.

Rittenberg has been vacationing in Acapulco since 1971. During spring 2001, Rittenberg and his pallies opened their Acapulco club in a former Spanish restaurant because the Costera reminded them of Lake Shore Drive. Costa Azul was reminiscent of Lincoln Park. Year-round, Acapulco recalls Chicago during those two months of summer.

Rittenberg, 59, is best known in Chicago as founder of the 1970s Faces discotheque on Rush Street. Earlier this year I visited Mother Hubbards in Costa Azul with fellow Sun-Times reporter Carlos Sadovi (whom I bumped into at the Mexico City airport) and ex-Sun-Times sportswriter Mark Vancil.

Rittenberg was hanging with a well tanned Johnny Blandino, one of the original general managers of the Palm Restaurant in Chicago. They were calling Norkus a "1970's Rush Street Hall of Famer." Under the chatter, War's "Low Rider" blared out of the CD jukebox. A total of 23 ceiling fans stirred the thick tropical air.

I felt like I was on the set of "Ocean's Eleven."

The Hubbard's Acapulco operation is a welcome touch of home, especially for tourists wanting to keep up with American sports through the cantina's eight televisions. Mother Hubbard's also serves the best burgers (green peppers, onions, celery salt, eggs) in Acapulco. The restaurant uses the same recipes used at Mother Hubbards in Chicago.

During a conversation at the Acapulco club Rittenberg said, "A lot of Chicagoans come here, Acapulcoans and people from Mexico City who spend weekends here. This is a big Chicago town. New Yorkers go to Cancun. Chicago firemen and policemen live here. You retire from those departments and get a \$35,000 a year pension. Down here, that spends \$80,000. Acapulco is the best bang for the buck for developed tourism in Mexico."

Norkus remodeled the club and he operates the restaurant and bar when Rittenberg is back in Chicago. But that's only part of the story.

Since 1995, Norkus has driven between Acapulco and Chicago nine times.

NONSTOP, 36 HOURS!!!

He has a private pilot's license, so he is not afraid to fly.

Norkus is 61 years old. He is the Cal Ripken Jr. of the road.

"I start with a cooler full of Coca-Cola, ham sandwiches and a case of Corona," Norkus said. "I leave Acapulco about 10 p.m. I prefer driving at night, especially since so many people think night driving is dangerous and also because I can get through Mexico City and miss most traffic and corrupt police.

" After Mexico City, it is clear sailing to Matehuala (about 10 hours from Acapulco). There, I stop for a few minutes and look at the sky. It is the most beautiful sky on this planet, almost like being in outer space."

Norkus arrives in Chicago between 9:30 and 11 a.m. the second morning out. "It sounds funny, but I can predict my arrival time within 15 minutes," he said, quite seriously.

Norkus has done six of the nine trips by himself.

His wife, Maria, and 10-year-old daughter, Lucy, have participated in the never-ending road trip twice. The other time Norkus brought along an illegal alien for companionship. He drives a white truck.

He has a few games he plays to keep awake. While driving in Mexico, Norkus has one cold beer every 100 miles. "No more, no less," he said. "When I start to get tired, a cold Coke helps. The only stops I make are for gas, when I also use the washrooms. All Mexican stations have attendants who pump the gas. They do anything to get people working."

Norkus also likes to calculate his estimated time of arrival to the next city.

He explained, "The border from Acapulco is 930 miles. All calculations are done in my head while driving. Generally, I cross into the U.S.A. about 1:30 in the afternoon (about 15 1/2 hours after he left Acapulco). On the open roads in Mexico, you can run 80 to 100 miles an hour without problems. Once the border is crossed, you can run 80 through Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee and Missouri. All those states have a 70 mph except Illinois (65 mph). In Southern Illinois from the state line for about 50 miles, the police are thicker than cement."

One time a young Illinois state trooper stopped Norkus as he drove across the state line. "He looked like a teenager," Norkus said. "He had a heavy acne problem. He looked like he should have been an usher at a local theater. He stopped me for

going 72, along with not having an insurance card and expired plates."

Norkus explained that there are no insurance card laws in Mexico, but he produced his insurance policy. He was off the hook on that charge. "I then explained my plate renewal check was going to get lost in the poor Mexican mail and I was going to Illinois to renew them," he said. "The second problem was out of the way.

"We had a nice line of communication open. He was interested in my drive, and I explained I worked for an agency of the U.S. government and that I was on loan to the Mexican Federal Police for four years. I could not tell him what agency I worked for. But I did say I was the one guy in the group, that when we busted drug dealers, inventoried all the drugs and cash, kept it in my possession until it was secure, and then filed my reports with the U.S. government. He thanked me and let me continue on my way without any violations on my Mexican license."

Norkus is crazy like a Vicente Fox.

There are no direct flights between Chicago and Acapulco. He explained, "I see more people from Chicago driving to Acapulco. They can't get decent airfares, flight days and they don't like waiting in the airport. I can carry anything I want.

"Nail clippers. Beer. Emory boards. And when I get there I save another \$250 in rental cars."

Norkus flies a private plane and rides his Harley-Davidson motorcycle around Acapulco on a daily basis.

"I think all means of travel are safe," he said. "And the degree of safety all depends on how you do these things. I can guarantee you that you will get across the street more times crossing with caution than without.

"Same with any other means, posse or no posse."