

Mexican Money Madness 1993:

Mexico's peso had inflated to about 3000 to the US dollar, so at the end of 1992 they just divided by 1000, dropping the three zeros. The Nuevo Peso...N\$Peso....was about three-per-buck. All the paper currency had to be reprinted. The dollar was more valuable than ever, so the Mexicans had old pesos, new pesos, huge clunky coins (most big coins were old pesos, finally sold for scrap to China, and the small coins were new) and US dollars in mixed circulation.

Since we were staying at Cancun Club Med (which uses its own timezone—really!), I carried a little zippered black-leather belt pouch with me that contained a mixture of Club Med bar beads, old and new peso coins, new paper pesos, traveler's checks, US paper money, US coins, a couple credit cards, a little beach sand, a few gum wrappers, our room key and some Bullfrog SPF-50 sunblock.

To make matters worse, many cash registers had not yet been updated to accept the new pesos, so decimal points were often wandering around unsettled. Often a piece of chewing gum stood in for the decimal point. And the abbreviation for US dollars and Mexican pesos were identical. And of course the exchange rate floated hourly and varied from place to place. I sometimes used several types of currency in one deal (except maybe the Club Med bar beads). Yeh, okay *and* I didn't speak much Spanish, and in fact many of the salespeople were Mayan and many of them didn't speak Spanish or anything else I could recognize. And there was the third-world altered-reality of some things being ridiculously cheap and some thing being even pricier than in the US. Tolls on the fast empty toll road from Cancun to Merida, for example were twenty bucks or more.

Buying was further complicated by the cutthroat bargaining and the fact that small change was just a throwaway or a tip in most deals by custom. Did I mention that the change was never offered in anything but a handful of Nuevo Pesos regardless of what form the original payment was in? Nobody gave back US currency—but everyone accepted it.

Thus, the calculations needed to pay for something were usually beyond my vacation tropical-Sun-addled brain. This was a problem that I solved by either giving everyone US \$20.00 to start and hoping for the correct change (sometimes they wanted more money) or; holding all my money in various currencies in my open pouch and letting them root around and take what they wanted.

Both systems seemed to work well.

Eric