Some years ago my wife and I used to visit Acapulco in Mexico in the winter. It was my custom then as now to get up early and, there, I would walk around the town, especially in the market district, before the heat of the day set in; for the Mexican sun grows increasingly wicked as the day progresses and one is better off swimming than walking at noon.

Occasionally of a morning I would pick up a copy of Pasaratos, a small, inexpensive (and poorly printed) magazine filled with all sorts of puzzles for children. In it one found the time-honored "connect the dots" as well as "how many errors can you find in this drawing", simple anagrams, and small crossword puzzles (called in Spanish crucigrammas) with many unkeyed letters. These I would try to solve over a late breakfast in a small, grubby -- but sympathetic -- restaurant just off the Plaza. I like puzzles, and these were good for my Spanish vocabulary which is somewhere below the level that the magazine required of their child-readers. I can honestly say that I never completely filled in any of the rompecabezas -- a fine compound word meaning "head-breakers".

In passing, it should be said that pasaratos is the equivalent of our "pastime". One also runs across pasatiempo with the same meaning. Rato is a short length of time approximating our "little while". A Mexican may indulge himself in the luxury of diminutives and shorten the time-span by using ratito, which then becomes something like a "jiffy". The double diminutive ratitito may also be used. This is a very short period of time indeed, and might be translated "right away!". It is not used much, I think -- the Mexican is honest enough to realize that hardly anything can be done in such a short time as the ratitito.

So, armed with my magazine, I would sit in the restaurant off the Plaza and have a late breakfast. First, over orange juice, I would connect the dots; then move on, over toast, to finding the errors in the picture; finally over eggs and coffee I would get down to the really important puzzles, the crosswords.
I remember one such morning well. I was wondering about a four-letter word for a domestic animal, and had discarded perro (a dog) for obvious reasons. A second cup of coffee gave me the needed stimulus to come up with gato (a cat). Imagine! Two of its letters were unkeyed! I was writing it in triumphantly (but lightly because it might have to be erased later), when I noticed a middle-aged Mexican at the table next to mine, working on the crucigramma in the daily paper. These are awfully difficult and I learned quickly not to attempt them: my hands were full enough with Pasa-ratos. I could see that my fellow-puzzler from South of the Border was in a quandary. He noted my glance and turning to me said, very politely, "Senor, do you happen to know what the Toltecs called our modern town of Chilpanzingo?" I looked at him steadily, thinking of various answers, and discarded them. Mustering my best Spanish I said, "I regret very much that I do not remember..." He turned back to his paper sadly, and I to my sheet. Shortly after, I paid and left him to his puzzling. I was glad I had not tried to be funny -- it was not a moment for witticism.

This brief meeting of two enthusiasts (or, aficionados) was delightful and quite made my day. I have thought of it with pleasure many times since, and in fancy have run into this friend in New York. In fancy, too, he is doing a children's crossword in English, at the next table, while I am deep in the New York Times Sunday puzzle. I like to imagine myself leaning over and politely asking him, "Excuse me, Sir, but do you happen to know the ancient Indian word for Philadelphia?"