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At Hughes Hotel, a Sense of Disbelief

By ALAN RIDING

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ACAPULCO, Mexico, April 6—"You're kidding! Howard Hughes is dead?"

Betty Kraft lay beside a pool 20 floors below the suite where the recluse billionaire spent his final two months.

"We used to say he died years ago, but now I just don't believe it," she said.

Most of the guests at the luxurious Acapulco Princess Hotel seemed aware that Mr. Hughes had been the mysterious occupant of the entire top-floor penthouse, but almost no one knew that he died yesterday while being flown for medical treatment in Houston.

"People were talking about him at breakfast today as if he were still alive," said Mrs. Kraft, the wife of a Detroit motor industry executive. "Why, just last night, the entertainer in the cabaret was joking that he had asked for a job with Hughes and had been turned down."

The hotel management, which had never formally acknowledged Mr. Hughes's presence here, added to the mystery.

"I don't know the man, and I haven't seen the man," said Nikolaus O. Klotz, regional vice president of the Princess Hotel chain. "The Summa Corporation took the penthouse for an indefinite period. If someone buys a floor, they have jurisdiction to it and have a right to privacy. We don't know who was there. People came and went, and we didn't keep tabs on them."

In fact, few people saw

Mr. Hughes being taken out of the hotel around noon yesterday.

"We were told to move away from the service elevator when they brought him down," Jose Dominguez, a bellboy, said. "But we could see he was lying on a four-wheel stretcher. The sheet almost covered his face, but I noticed he was being given oxygen."

Lidio Sandoval, a 27-year-old mechanic, was riding on top of the service elevator as he took Mr. Hughes to through the roof and saw seven people on board, one of them on a stretcher," he said. "They were giving the old man intravenous feeding."

Outside the hotel, a yellow and-white ambulance from the Manzaneros Funeral Parlor, which also provides ambulance service, had been waiting three hours for the patient.

"I helped put him inside," Jaime Quevedo, the ambulance's driver, said. "He didn't speak at all. I think he was unconscious."

Mr. Quevedo and his assistant, Alfonso Olivera, then carried Mr. Hughes aboard a Lear jet ambulance plane from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., that had been chartered to fly him to Houston.

"I knew nothing until I saw the television news last night," Dr. Guillermo Irigoyen, who heads the hotel's first-aid clinic, said. "Hughes had three of his own doctors here, and they never consulted us. They brought their own equipment and did what

they liked. I don't even know the cause of his death."

Mr. Hughes's departure was almost as sudden as his arrival had been. According to eyewitnesses, he entered the hotel in a wheelchair before dawn one day in mid-February.

News that he had switched his operating base from the Xanadu Prince Hotel in the Bahamas to the Acapulco Princess leaked out slowly, and Mr. Hughes attracted little attention in the Mexican press.

Total Seclusion

At this exclusive 777-room hotel, where single rooms cost \$75 a night, Mr. Hughes seemed to find the combination of tropical surroundings and total seclusion that he had sought in recent decades.

Built in 1971 in the shape of an Aztec pyramid at a cost of \$44 million and owned by the American millionaire Daniel Ludwig, the hotel looks out toward the blue Pacific Ocean. Below the six penthouse suites that were still occupied today by Mr. Hughes's aides and out-of-bounds even to most hotel personnel, palm trees and bougainvillea bushes surround a series of manmade pools where guests can swim in fresh water.

And in front of the hotel, an 18-hole golf course adds a dramatic splash of green to the dusty landscape.

Mr. Hughes was never seen to leave the penthouse during his eight-week sojourn here. On the top floor, which was being rented at a weekly cost of \$9,933, a kitchen provided r.d.l.m. with food.

"We were rarely called by the penthouse for room service," one of the chefs said today. "I guess they cooked their own food. And anything that went up to them had to be left on the floor below."

Except for the brief flurry of activity as Mr. Hughes was being taken out of the hotel yesterday, most guests and even the hotel staff had little reason to know he was there. His security men limited themselves to preventing any outsiders from reaching the penthouse floor.

"I guess we knew he was here," Nick MatMartin, a medical student from Birmingham, Ala., said, "but we were out swimming yesterday, and we missed it all. You're really sure it's true?"