

The Long Way Up

“Dude, what state are we in?”

“I don’t know--how well do you know your Mexican states anyways?”

“Actually, I never really learned them . . . You’re right, I don’t know why I asked that.”

Although my question was misguided, the reality of our situation was beginning to set in, along with the stifling heat and questionable smells penetrating from the back of the bus we were traveling on.

My friend and my plans for travel through Mexico were intentionally vague. We had done this once before--last summer--and now we felt we were more experienced, and therefore more seasoned to take risks, cut corners, and push our explorations a little further. Taking a second-class bus ride back to California from the Southernmost part of Mexico was testing even our own endurance boundaries.

But we both knew that this was the consequences for what we were able to experience in the weeks proceeding: exploring Guadalajara and D.F., visiting friends in Michoacan, travelling through Oaxaca, going to football games, traveling up the coast, and crossing the Sea of Cortez to Baja California. We had stories, pictures, ubiquitous Mexican trinkets (blankets, cajas, dulces) and two bottles of good tequila stuffed into our backpacks, and now we were almost pesoless and destined for home.

When we visited our friend Rodolfo, who ran a language school in Michoacan that we attended the previous summer, he hastily scrapped together student identification cards which, in theory, would give us 50 percent off all busfares for the summer. There were a couple technicalities, however. One, you were supposed to be a Mexican student, and two, the ID’s were supposed to be official-looking, not cut up pieces of photocopied paper with photo identification cropped together from a picture of our trip from last summer. Therefore, every time we purchased a ticket, we had to explain and, at times, argue in very bad Spanish why we too deserved the fifty percent deduction:

“Si, si, somos gueros, pero estamos estudiantes ahora mismo en Mexico, entoces podemos tener el descuento.”

The only bus company that did not put into question whether our bits of paper which we called “identification” were valid was the bus that we were currently riding at a snails pace back to the United States. When we purchased these tickets, a near-toothless man behind a barred window took one long look at us, glanced at our ID cards, and then muttered in gummy mumbles to us the discounted price for two tickets. In retrospect, I imagine that he thought it was more of a punishment to allow us on the bus, then to have us wait for something else (and possibly better). It also seemed that he knew almost down to the peso how much money we had left in our pockets. Before I stepped out of the line, I decided that ignorance was not bliss, and asked one final question to prepare myself for what I already knew was a long journey:

“Cuanto tiempo?”

“A donde?”

“A los estados”

“Dos dias”

After grabbing our fake bits of ID, I turned to Dave, “Did he just say two days?”

He let out a tired sigh. “I think he did.”

“Is that even possible? I’ve never heard the length of a bus ride be described in days before. We would have to stop at every bus stop, town and drug checkpoint along the way.”

“I guess there’s a first for everything.”

In fact, I am almost certain that we did stop at every bus stop, town, and drug checkpoint along the way, and then we found some more, just in case the other ones did not suffice. At one point I recalled during the first night waking up to us stopped along the side of the road. Dave was up and talking with the bus driver and his “co-pilot,” another guy who drove when the main driver decided he needed some rest. The fact that he was using our road map was a little disconcerting. After a few minutes, he returned to our row, minus his map.

“I think they’re lost. Plus the windshield wiper is broken, and they’re trying to get some string to fix it. But they didn’t have any string, so I think someone gave them some dental floss.”

It was pouring rain outside, and I imagined that driving a windshield-wiperless bus full of tired travelers in the wrong direction to be a very difficult, and at times strenuous, occupation.

“They kindof know where we are now. But they took my map. I don’t think they brought one. Chihuahua .”

“What?”

“Oh, that’s where we are. The state.”

“Oh, cool. Well, at least we know what state we’re in.”

“Yea, but Chihuahua doesn't help very much. It’s a pretty big state. Who drives a bus full of travelers almost the entire length of a country without a map? ”

We didn’t have to answer this question, because we both knew the answer: A Mexican Bus Company. A travelers first trip to Mexico usually involves a harder adjustment than the subsequent ones, and I think a lot this adjustment has to do with attitude. As Americans, we were of the mindset that if you make an appointment, or advertise store hours, or, for that matter, sell tickets on for a bus destined for specific places, we assume that these goals will be accomplished. But in Mexico, this is oftentimes far from the case. In Mexico the attitude can feel frustratingly laid back, disorganized, and a safe-haven for procrastinators. Of course, again, this is from an American perspective, and in the back of mind writing these things seems mildly racist. This is far from the case, especially for those who have come to love Mexico and all of its unique qualities. After spending a little time south of the border, an open-minded traveller will come to realize that these deficiencies are, in some respects, strengths. You get used to being stood up for meetings, and just assume that they had to or decided to be somewhere else. In some ways it feels like a more honest way of living life. Maybe the store is closed because no one wanted to come to work that day, you find yourself rationalizing. Inconveniences become prioritizing life, and “getting lost” becomes “having an adventure.”

I glanced out the window of our magic bus, now with parts operating with the help of someone’s dental floss, as we entered one lost city in the middle of nowhere after another. It’s funny how towns just appear, and as one turned into the next, I wondered why people chose one specific place to settle in, over the hundreds of similar points on the landscape that I could see in any direction. Drug checkpoints became chances for everyone to stretch their legs, the drawback being that sometimes this stretching took place at gunpoint. I hesitated stretching my arms to the sky with a police officer roughly the same age as me training an automatic rifle

in my direction as they dug through our bags and took apart panels on the bus with an electric drill. Their quest was always the same: opiates, and as they conducted this ritual over and over again I wondered if there were still drug smugglers stupid enough to try to line a second-class bus full of cocaine.

Bus stops would appear out of nowhere. There were not signs for them, but somehow people just knew that this was the spot in the road where the bus would stop, if he happened to see some people with food, luggage, and at times animals, he would swing over and pick them up. There is something unsettling about waking up to a goat walking down the aisle of a bus in search of leftovers. He eyed our peanut butter sandwiches, but also sensed that they were very precious to us, and well guarded, and let us be.

“Gueros, estamos aqui!”

“Hey dude, this is Tecate,” I nudged Dave, who was sleeping. “We’re here, and they’re throwing our backpacks in the street,” I stated calmly, watching our co-pilot chuck our packs with little disregard from the luggage area under the bus into the middle of an intersection. We were the only guero on the bus (*guero* being slang for someone with blonde hair, but liberally used to indicate anyone who has lighter skin)

And, just like that, we grabbed our sandwich rations, and on the way out the driver threw Dave our map of Mexico with look that indicated that he never really needed it in the first place (although the map itself was suspiciously folded incorrectly back together). Then our bus limped a way. There were no goodbyes, and no hard feelings. For some reason the voyage of the bus itself was not complete yet. I thought we were riding it to the end of the line, but then I imagined it heading due west to Tijuana, and then heading down the Baja Peninsula. At La Paz, the very tip of this peninsula, I imagined it driving, on fire, straight into the sea. I don’t why, but a Viking funeral seemed fitting. It had done its job, and now it was time for our limping vessel to be laid to rest eternally at sea.

Meanwhile, Dave and I gathered our packs and began to slowly wander around the border town of Tecate like newborn colts, burdened by heavy packs and legs that had not worked for two days, trying to figure out which way north was. It seems like it should be easy to find the edge of Mexico, but like everything in the country, it was a little confusing, and not

really what we would consider logical. Finally we located the border, which turned out to be a 20 foot high corrugated steel barrier. I don't know why, but I was expecting something different. And it felt strange being so close to man made barrier that runs for almost 1,000 miles, only to be relieved by the natural barrier of the Rio Grande, which separates Mexico from the state of Texas. It also seemed strange that the only reason this barrier existed was to keep people from moving about freely. After spending a month doing exactly that--moving freely--the wall made me feel sick inside, and ashamed. When a division is so severe that a fence separates the two, being close to that symbolic barrier is a powerful experience. Growing up in California, I had grown used to the caution signs that start appearing in highways as you get close to Mexico, depicting a family running across the road, and indicating to motorists that one should keep your eyes out for families of fleeing, illegal immigrants. But now it was real, and I too felt like running.

We ended up following this manmade monstrosity of a border line down to the main road, and after one last meal of fresh corn quesadillas and cold Tecates served from someone's house and paid for with the very last of our pesos, we found the crossing for those who decided to enter or exit Mexico on foot instead of by car. With passports in hand, we stumbled with our backpacks through the one-way turnstile back into our country, weary, unshaven, exhausted. As we heard the click of the turnstile that indicated we were through and that our irreversible decision to return was complete, we were already planning our next trip south.