



A bus, a *brocha* and bullet holes

CHECHA TAJ DRIVES ONE OF THE MOST DISTINCTIVE FORMS OF GUATEMALAN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION DESPITE THE DANGER THAT COMES WITH THE JOB.

By Soraya Keiser

Checha Taj braces his hand on the half-open driver-side window of his *camioneta* as he whips around the bends of the Pan-American Highway at 70 mph. The door to the blue and white brightly-painted former school bus is wide open, and César, Taj's son, holds on to bars just inside the bus. He stands in the doorway, undeterred by the speed.

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Checha Taj drives his *camioneta* through Guatemala City on his first of three daily trips. He drives that stretch of the Pan-American Highway seven days a week. "I've experienced many hard things doing this job," Taj said, "but it's the only one I know how to do, the only one I'm good at." | Photo by Bryson Rosell



»» The bus makes its way first through the town of Santa Lucía Milpas Altas and 10 minutes later the town of San Lucas. César hops off the bus as it slows down, calling out “¡Guate! ¡Guate!” He makes sure everyone gets on as quickly as possible before jumping back onto the bus as it drives away. Taj releases the clutch and the bus starts to move before César is even completely on the bus.

Taj and César make this drive three times a day, seven days a week as the *piloto* and *brocha*, or driver and helper, of a *camioneta*, a cheap form of transportation in Guatemala that is known as a “chicken bus” to tourists. Taj is one of hundreds of *camioneta* drivers who brave the dangerous

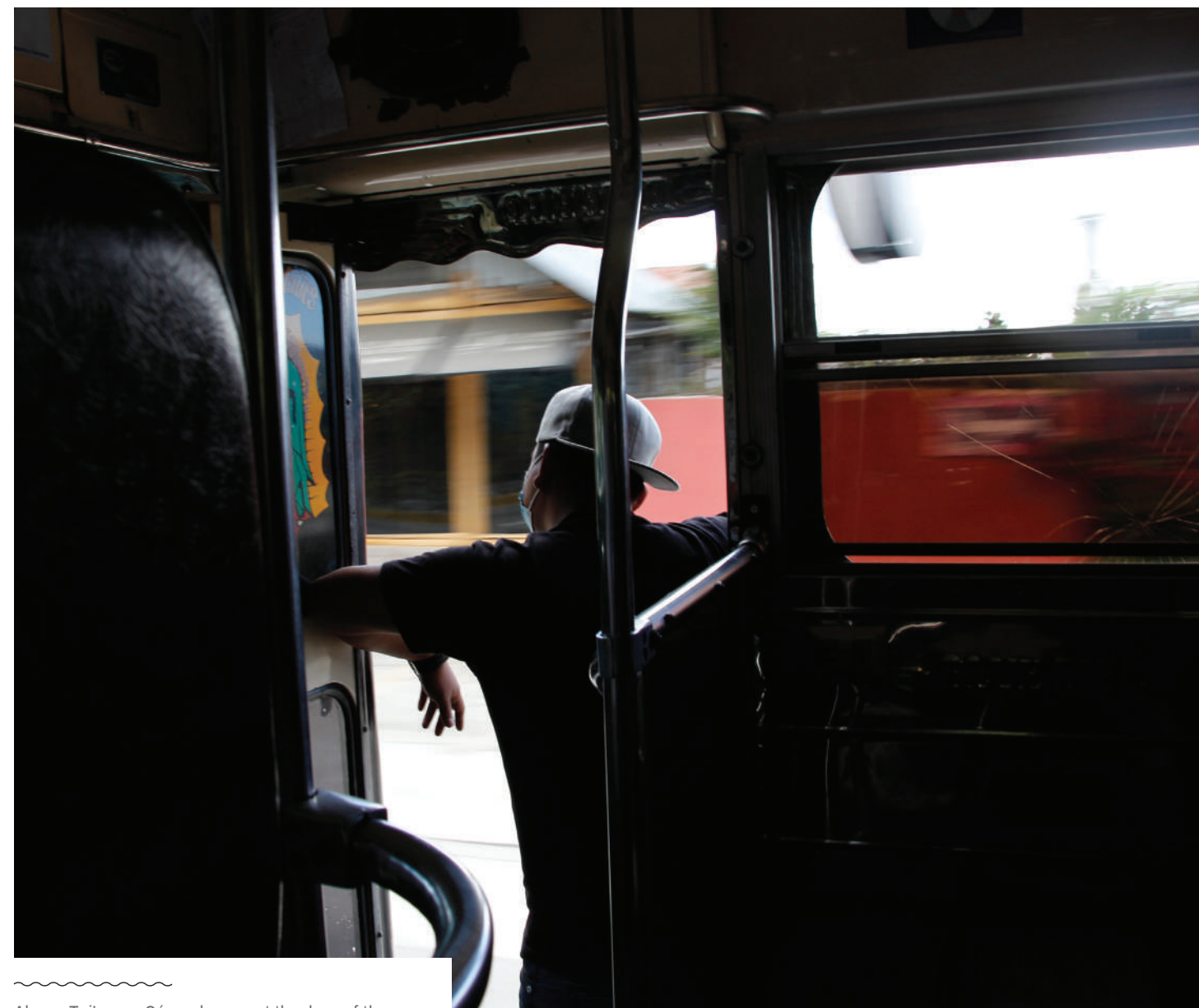
streets of Guatemala City to get Guatemalans where they need to go as fast as possible.

The sun begins to rise over Guatemala City as Taj whips around a white Nissan truck, and passengers hold on as tight to the backs of chairs as best they can. Because it is the morning shift, the bus is full of people heading to work. Under the blue LED lights attached to the ceiling, passengers squish into seats and stand in the aisle, clinging tightly to bars hanging from the ceiling. As Taj continues to drive down the highway, he weaves in and out of cars in order to get to the next stop as fast as he can. He must bring in 2,500 quetzales (\$325) per day if he wants to receive his monthly salary of 3,000 quetzales (\$390).

The bus fare is 20 quetzales (\$2.60) for the full drive from Antigua to Guatemala City, less if people get on later. This price has doubled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because fewer people are allowed on the bus at one time for social distancing purposes, bus companies have had to make up the money by increasing the ticket price. This increase in price means more people opt out of using the bus, making Taj and César’s job harder. Their required daily quota has stayed the same. They must move faster. Take more chances.

Soon the *camioneta* hits traffic. The roads are already streaked with red taillights at 5:45 a.m. Taj switches on the music. *Bachata* for the morning. The distance for the first leg of the drive is 37 kilometers, about 23 miles, but it takes about an hour and a half.

Taj has been up since 3:30 a.m. He drove 10 minutes from his house in Ciudad Vieja to the bus depot. He checked the tires, tested the breaks and made sure the gas tank was full.



Above: Taj’s son, César, leans out the door of the *camioneta* as Taj speeds through Antigua. César’s uncle died as a *brocha* when he fell from the bus as it was driving full speed. | Photo by Soraya Keiser

Left: Checha Taj’s shirt, half unbuttoned, reveals scars he acquired from years working as a *brocha*, a job his son César now holds. “The job [of a *brocha*] is really more disadvantageous than advantageous,” César said. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

Checha Taj crawls under the bus at the halfway stop of his first route to check the brakes before finishing the rest of the route with malfunctioning brakes on the right half of the bus. | Photo by Bryson Rosell



**CAMIONETA
SLANG**

Brocha
(bro·cha)
The bus driver's helper.

Plata
(plah·tah)
Money.

Pasaje
(pah·sah·heh)
The voyage ticket every passenger has to pay. The brocha is in charge of collecting it. The amount changes depending on where the passenger hopped on the bus.

¡GUATE! ¡GUATE!
(Gwaa·tuh / Gwaa·tuh)
When the brocha yells this out the door, he is telling the people standing in the bus station the bus's final destination is Guatemala City.

Camioneta
(kha·myoh·neh·tah)
This is the word Guatemalans use to refer to a "chicken bus."

Chafa
(shah·fah)
Something that is fake or not of good quality.

Pasele
(pah·seh·leh)
Welcome, get in!

Soplones
(soh·ploh·neh)
People in each bus station whose job is to call the bus drivers to let them know if they have passengers for them in that particular station. They are much like dispatchers.



I've experienced many hard things doing this job, but it's the only one I know how to do, the only one I'm good at.

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Checha Taj

The *brocha* is supposed to do all of this, but because his son is his helper, Taj lets César sleep in for a while longer.

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Taj was a *brocha* at 16, hanging out the door himself. He has scars on his chest from lifting baskets full of avocados, textiles and tortillas onto the roof of what English speakers call the “chicken bus” because they have been known to carry any number of people, goods and animals — including chickens.

Day after day, the rough woven material would cut his skin and make him bleed.

Taj's *piloto* was an alcoholic, he says. But Taj would buy the *piloto* alcohol so that he could practice driving instead of just hanging off of the side.

At 18, he became the *piloto* himself with a fake license. He earned a regular license when he was 21 and his professional bus license at 23.

Taj has been a driver for 35 years. He is 52.

Taj spent four years undocumented in the United States. He left Guatemala because being a *piloto* was not giving him enough money to provide for his five children. Taj says it was easier to cross the border in 2001 than it is today, but he still had to pay 94,000 quetzales (\$12,200) to a *coyote*, or migrant smuggler, to help him make the journey successfully.

In the United States he spent time in Miami, New Orleans and Houston working odd jobs and eventually

buying a bus of his own to drive. But after the uninsured bus was damaged by a young driver in 2005, Taj decided to return to Guatemala. He began driving *camionetas* again, even though that was the vocation he tried to avoid in the first place.

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The job drains Taj not so much physically, but mentally. He always has to be paying attention — to the busy road, to the passengers and to César hanging off the side. Taj tries to get a few minutes of rest at stops if he gets to them fast enough. However, he often prioritizes César over himself, letting César sleep on a seat in the back of the bus when possible.

“It becomes something very different, something hard,” Taj said.

Taj's bus is insured by his company. He is not. If Taj were to get into an accident, he would have to pay his own medical bills.

At age 22 and without a family to provide for, César enjoys his job more than the clerk job he used to have at a store. However, he dreams to leave *camionetas* behind and become a chef.

“The job [of a *brocha*] is really more disadvantageous than advantageous,” César said.

It's dangerous. Taj fears for César's safety. One of Taj's brothers died being a *brocha*. He lost his balance, fell off the bus and got run over.

*Camionetas* also have to deal with the possibility of thieves boarding the bus at any time of day.

Once, Taj was driving his normal route through Guatemala City when someone pointed a gun at his head.

Taj was ordered to continue driving through the busy streets as four thieves robbed the *camioneta's* passengers and threatened to shoot if they didn't comply. One passenger moved his hand down to his pocket, and without hesitation, a thief shot him point blank.

Taj covered the bullet holes of his bus with stickers.

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Taj needs the money, so he continues his routine. At 6:35 a.m. the *camioneta* reaches its final destination in the city, a bus depot in Zone 12. He takes a few minutes to stretch his legs and check the brakes before starting the journey back to Antigua.

The right side of the brakes are completely shot. He will need to get a full repair back in Antigua, but for now half of the brakes will have to do.

By 8:30 a.m. the *camioneta* is back where it started in Antigua. Taj will make the trek two more times that day. He loves to drive, but he gets tired of the routine. In fact, his dream job is to be a tourist bus driver.

“If I could have any job, I would choose to be a *piloto* but for tourists,” Taj said. “[I want] to be able to wander without taking risks.”

But Taj keeps driving the chicken bus.

“I've experienced many hard things doing this job,” Taj said, “but it's the



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only one I know how to do, the only one I'm good at.”

Sometimes, Taj finishes his last ride from Guatemala City as late as 10 p.m. He parks the bus and drives to his dark, empty house in Ciudad Vieja. In just a few hours, he will wake up and do it all again. ✂

(Additional reporting by Majo Díaz.)

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Checha Taj climbs back into his *camioneta* after quickly checking his brakes at a bus depot in Guatemala City. The right side of the bus's brakes are broken, meaning Taj will have to get them repaired after driving back to Antigua. | Photo by Bryson Rosell