

CANTINA HOURS

A DEEP DIVE INTO MEXICO



CHRIS THARP

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by Chris Tharp

For Grandma and Grandpa C.

El Mar

It takes me a while to find a joint that's open at eleven in the morning, so I'm hoping my first hit won't be a dud. As I make my way around the barrier that prevents prying eyes from taking in the boozy sin within El Tiburón, I adjust my gaze and see that there is only one other customer in the place, an emaciated old white dude who's almost sliding off his stool. The cropped-haired matron behind the bar greets me with a scowl as I stammer out an order. She nods, turns, and produces a fat, one liter bottle of Pacifico called a *Ballena*, or "Whale."

She pops the top, and, without fanfare, fills my flimsy clear plastic cup, the kind that accompanies big bottles of suds in boozers all over the country. This is a good sign. I'm cotton-eyed and stiff and can smell the swamp of sweat soaked up by my t-shirt. Still, I feel a smile crack my lips, because I know I've finally arrived. I've traveled twenty hours by bus and wandered the local streets for a few more in order to savor one of my favorite things in the world: an ice-cold Mexi-brew in a cinder block bar, with faded pictures ripe women on the walls and ceiling fans chopping away at the air. As I arch back in my creaking wooden chair and take that first sip, I know, if only for a second, that everything is right with the world.

A couple of other customers trickle in, including a middle-aged guy who takes a seat at the table next to me. Like most Mexicans who drink alone, he just sits with his bottle, staring into himself, awash in a deep, beery meditation. After a while, the wizened old *guero* sitting at the bar slaps down a couple of coins and shuffles out.

"He's from Canada," the barwoman says, as she takes away his empty.

"Canada?"

"Yes, but he's lived here for many years."

"Do you get other gringos in this place?"

"Sure, in the winter they come. Like you." She gives me a look of weary recognition that just may be her version of a smile.

"Where do you come from?" The man at the table next to me emerges from his trance. Well accustomed to such inquiries on both sides of the Pacific, I respond. He nods and lobs a few follow-ups my way ("Where did you learn Spanish?" "What are you doing in Mexico?" "Where will you go next?"). I sputter answers to each that I hope do the trick, until, seemingly satisfied, he sinks back into silence.

The squeal of a trumpet slices the air, followed by the thump of a drum and oompah tuba as a *banda* song sparks up and blares forth from the jukebox. The spirited, brassy bravado of the music now bounces off the concrete walls of the cantina, infusing the sleepy place with a sudden vigor. I now know that I've chosen wisely.

As I gaze up, I see the bartender standing in front of my table, frowning slightly less than before. She thunks down a glistening Ballena and nods in the direction of my solo-drinking neighbor, before making an about face and continuing her jaundiced-eyed vigil at the bar.

"Gracias," I say, casting my eyes his way.

"De nada, amigo. De nada." he replies with a wave of his hand. "Welcome to Mexico."

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Mazatlán was the first Mexican town I'd ever heard of, though for years I referred to it with the malapropism of "Mazat-land." I'm sure I wasn't the first, though I'm ashamed to say that this unfortunate habit clung to my tongue all the way to high school, until, one day during first year Spanish, I was cruelly corrected by my teacher, Senora Hills, a wizened, gypsy-looking woman who clearly loathed her job and most of the hopelessly meatheaded students that came with it. But that's another story.

The reason I knew the name "Mazatlán" was because my grandparents used to vacation there in the seventies and early eighties. They would fly down to escape the dreary blanket of the Pacific Northwest winter for a week or two, drink up the sun, swim in the Pacific, and just hang out at the beach with their fellow gringos. Best of all were the souvenirs they'd inevitably haul back and shower onto us grandchildren. One year I was gifted an actual sombrero, which I wore with pride, happy to practice a bit of cultural appropriation as a nine-year-old. The next year my grandparents upped their game, delivering me a Mariachi marionette. He, of course, sported the requisite sombrero and tent caterpillar mustache. In his right hand, he held a guitar; in his left, a bottle of hooch. I maneuvered and played with my little racially insensitive string puppet until the fishing line that attached his limbs to the cross of control sticks became irretrievably tangled, and the cheap glue holding his instrument in place finally gave way.

So I suppose you could say that I chose Mazatlán as the place to start this deep dive into Mexico because of my grandparents. It was, in a sense, familiar. It was also somewhat easy to get to, a straight shot from my brother's place in Phoenix, Arizona. From there I just had to board a very comfy bus and let it take me across the Sonoran Desert and then down the east coast of the Sea of Cortez.

I had certain expectations about Mazatlán before actually arriving. I assumed it to be a wall of overbuilt hotels and schlock shops on an otherwise nice beach, I figured it would be overpriced and full of gringos, and while there certainly is a super commercial tourist resort zone known as La Zona Dorada that gets mobbed with North Americans during the winter, that is only a single slice of the town. In fact, Mazatlán still retains real, old-school Mexican charm in spades, especially in and around El Centro Historico, the colonial old town where I hung my hat.

I stayed at the Hostal Mazatlán, a three-story affair with private and dorm rooms that was populated pretty much by Mexican tourists. There were also a dreadlocked Frenchie and Swiss girl hanging around working there part time, but both spoke fluent Spanish and I discovered right away that my English would get me nowhere.

Now this wasn't a problem, as I can navigate my way through Spanish, and one of the reasons I came to Mexico was to exercise this particularly atrophied muscle. That first afternoon, however, I was forced to do it full-on: first, at the cantina, and later hanging on the roof of the hostel, sipping even more Ballenas with a few local boys and the two Euros. It was all Spanish, all the time, and there were more than a few moments where I just smiled, nodded, and pretended to understand everything that was being said, with a generous peppering of "sí, si." A decade and a half abroad has taught me that faking comprehension for the ease and comfort of the group is perfectly kosher. In fact, it's probably appreciated.

Aside from six mind-blowing oysters I'd slurped down on the street (with hot sauce and lime), my stomach was empty. I made this known, and soon, Luis, one of the local dudes, was taking me on a walking tour of the neighborhood. As it always is in Mexico, he knew just about everyone he came across, exchanging greetings and slapping palms, and soon we sat down at a tiny place where we were served up plates of *sopes* that can only be described as transcendent. *Sopes* are thick, soft, corn tortilla cakes with a rim formed around the top to hold in the good stuff, which, in this case was *carnitas* and *chicharrón* over a bed of black beans, topped with a bit of lettuce and *queso fresco*. This was my first real meal in Mexico, and it rocked.

After dinner I followed Luis along some alleys and sidestreets, and then up some steep stairs scaling the hill that overlooks the Centro Historico. This slopeside neighborhood was a bit ramshackle and rough looking, with cracked cement walls and graffiti tags galore. At one point we came across one of his buddies who sat hunched over on the stairs. Tattered clothes hung over his emaciated frame, and bloodshot eyes peered out behind scraggly strands of black hair. The dude was obviously down on his luck, and after exchanging some pleasantries, Luis reached into the paper

sack containing the second sope that he had taken to go. He handed it to his friend, who gratefully took the loaded-up corn cake and dug in with some real hunger.

Luis then led me down to a great spot on the promenade overlooking the waves, which surged and exploded on the rocks below. He asked for some beer money, which I coughed up, and returned a couple of minutes later with a few more Ballenas. Soon more young people began to coalesce in this spot, with the expanse of the Pacific as the backdrop. They sat or stood around talking, laughing, smoking cigarettes, sipping beer, puffing *mota*, performing skateboarding tricks, and just watching the layers of the evening gently unfold.

I soon found myself in a conversation in English with a half Peruvian/half Hungarian kid named Benjamin, who was working at a local resort. My Spanish had basically run out at this point and his company was welcome. He warned me that things could get a bit sketchy after dark, that these young cats I was hanging around fancied themselves local gangsters, and that a lot of them were into meth. I had sensed as much, that these kids were tolerating me for the time being, especially since I was supplying some of them with beer (Luis had since made a second run). But I knew how quickly things could turn, especially when you become marked as the local ATM. Despite the magic of the twilight, I figured that if I hung out long enough here I could get rolled. At some point, someone likely would have a go at me. It was time to make it back to the relative safety of the hostel.

This wasn't a hard decision to make, as I was zombified from the lingering jet lag, immense bus ride, sea of beer, and bellyful of sopos. The idea of bed suddenly sounded magnificent. Benjamin called me a taxi and I made a quiet exit; after a ten minute ride I was back in my bed at the Hostal Mazatlán, where I drowned in sleep underneath the perpetual hiss of the AC.

I awoke the next day to a sun-splashed city. It was humid as hell but I didn't mind, since Korean summers are cut from a similar cloth and I guess I've just gotten used to it. As I sipped my coffee back up on the roof, it occurred to me just how friendly Mexicans can be. It's really off the charts compared to most anywhere I've traveled, save maybe the Philippines, which I've always considered a kind of Asian version of Mexico, anyway.

Everyone in the guesthouse greeted me with a smiling "Buenos dias." The previous day saw strangers buying me beer in a local cantina and Luis showing me the streets and views of his barrio. This has happened to me every time I've come to this country, and while I know to be vigilant and don't naively follow everyone who calls out to me, my experience Mexico has been that these are some of the warmest, most open-hearted people

on earth. The place has its share of problems, but the spirit of the people is immeasurable.

I rented a squeaky, thirty peso bike and, after a late street stall breakfast of *cahuamanta* (a kind of spicy manta ray and shrimp soup) I rode the length of the beach promenade, a walk/bikeway that ribbons for miles along the oceanfront. Wanting to get a true feel for the town, I even explored the overbuilt, Senor Frog-inated environs of La Zona Dorada. As I cruised next to the sands, *pulmonia* after *pulmonia* (the golf-cart like taxis ubiquitous to the town) passed by on the main road, with banda music pumping and Mexican tourists sipping cans and partying hard in broad daylight. At one point my rusted catastrophe of a bike suffered a sudden shift of the back wheel, making it impossible for the chain to stay on. As I knelt there, gushing sweat and incompetently attempting to rectify the problem, a guy eating prawns and sipping beer with this family at the seafood shack next to the sidewalk went to his truck, produced a magnum-sized socket set, and fixed my bike for me right then and there. Oh, Mexico!

That evening I lounged on the roof, reading, writing, and chatting with a few of the other guests. It was the rainy season and thunderstorms were blowing in. For hours I sat there, glancing up to witness lightning rip open the sky, followed by the chest kick of inevitable thunderclap. This was nature employing its brutal magic, a light show of pure fury and magnificence, and I had a front row seat. Eventually the rain came, with an army of pregnant drops detonating on the roofs and streets of the city. As the storm washed away the bake of the day, I realized that I was officially in love.

On my final day I took a sweaty hike through a scorching morning up to El Faro, the lighthouse that's perched atop a small mountain at the tip of the isthmus on the southern end of town. I was joined by scores of Mexican families huffing and puffing up the path. Mexico is a country gripped by an obesity epidemic that even outdoes the States, and many of my fellow trekkers that day just confirmed this. Still, they clutched their water bottles (and least one coca cola), gushed sweat, and gasped their way up that little mountain. For that, they had my respect.

El Faro offers an unrivaled view of the city, as well as Isla de Piedras, a popular day trip destination of endless sand and mangrove forests. I was tempted to jump on a boat and make the journey, but after the hike my motivation reserves were low, and, truth be told, I'm just not that much of a beach guy. So I decided to stay more local, and after a fat guy lunch of Mexican-American family restaurant-style enchiladas (think "lake of beans"), washed down with a massive, salt-around-the-rim gringo tourist Margarita, I headed back towards my hostel with the purpose of getting down with some more authentic culture. This meant more drinking, which of course, mean the cantina.

While Mexico offers up a massive array of bars where you can knock it back, nothing is more central to the idea of boozing it up there than the cantina. The modern cantina is usually housed in a bunker of a building. It often only serves one kind of beer, with the company logo painted as a garish mural on the wall outside. You can never see in from the street; the lighting is dark or nonexistent, the bathrooms are biohazards, but the music is roaring and the beer is ice-cold and cheap. In short: it's paradise. Little makes my heart soar higher than hunkering down in a cantina over the course of a Mexican afternoon.

Lucky for me, my hostel was just a block from a two block mini-district of cantinas, and in the name of anthropological exploration, I visited four that day. I chatted with a sad, world-weary waitress who had fled Ciudad Juarez because of the violence; a dude with a deep cheek scar and that telltale coke-nose-touching-tic who waved me over and slurred an avalanche of Spanish into my ear that even a native speaker would find hard to comprehend (I fled after two beers); and finally two old boys-- Edgar and Raul--at a *slightly* more upscale joint who took a shine to me and became my drinking buddies for the evening. We went to two more places together, both with live music, where we sipped and sang and talked politics and cemented a camaraderie that I hope they won't soon forget, because I surely won't.

Come to think of it, Raul looked a lot like that marionette my grandparents had bought for me all those years back. Or maybe that was just my drunken imagination run amok. Whatever the case, Mazatlán was a gorgeous, sea-kissed, slightly shabby kick in the pants, and I was sorry to leave the next day, but it was time to head inland.

La Segunda Ciudad

La Fuente is massive. It occupies a former bicycle factory and is probably the city's most famous cantina, as well as its biggest. The place is packed with Saturday afternoon revelers whose bellows and laughs reverberate around the brick-encased chambers, intermingling with the pianist and singer who perform on a raised stage in the middle of the action. Only instead of Mariachi or *corridos*, these cats are performing opera. This is somehow fitting, since the dimensions and feel of this place recall the two cathedrals I took in earlier in the day. We are indeed in a church: the Church of Booze.

This cantina seems to support a more well-heeled crowd than the Mexican dives that I'm used to, though the prices are still nice and cheap, with frigid bottles of Pacifico and Dos Equis setting me back twenty-five pesos, which is just slightly north of a buck. There is a selection of tequila, mezcal, and even a couple of whiskeys, but something tells me that a request for a cocktail would probably get you laughed out of the joint.

Still, an air of civility prevails. One look around the packed room shows scrubbed down groups of men and women, radiating the soft, fleshy ease of middle age and middle class. This is a respectable establishment, a cantina with more than a whiff of cosmopolitan sophistication. This should come as no surprise, since it's located smack dab in the middle of one of Mexico's biggest urban, historic, and commercial centers. Still, it feels a long way from the comparatively scummy watering holes of Mazatlán.

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At first glance, it would be hard to call Guadalajara a comely town. That's probably true for the second or third glance, as well. It's a sprawling place, one of those burgs whose approach creeps up on you a good hour and a half before arriving in the city center—an ugly spray of gas stations, tire shops, generic shopping centers, and grey, anonymous industrial parks. At least this is how I saw things as I rolled in on a third class bus that smelled of man sweat, tamales, and pee; I would be lying if I said my heart soared. Still, I was happy to be trundling along a traffic-choked road into fabled Guadalajara, the birthplace of Mariachi, and Mexico's second city.

I like second cities. Hell, I live in one, and you can usually bet that a nation's next-biggest town will offer up an unfiltered, honest charm that is sorely lacking in the up-its-own-ass ego trip of city numero uno. In this regard, Guadalajara didn't disappoint. In fact, it only served to solidify my belief in this notion.

I rolled into El Centro Historico with Hyunchang, a young Korean dude that I met outside of Guadalajara's gleaming new bus terminal, which was nicer than a lot of regional airports back home. They don't fuck around with their buses in Mexico, to be sure. He had just arrived from Puerto Vallarta and from his "turtle style" backpack (small one in front, big one in back), flip-flops and ridiculous hippy pants, I took him for a traveller straight away. But given the worn-out state of his gear and much darker-than-usual Korean skin tone, I could tell that had been on the road for a long time. This guy was banana pancake incarnate.

It turns out that I was right. He had been in Mexico and greater Latin America for a year and a half now and was getting ready to fly down to Colombia. He was from Seoul, and you can imagine his surprise when I switched from English to Korean. We waited around for a bus that never came (turns out it stopped running at around seven—it was now eight thirty), and settled for a taxi. After the theatrical ritual of haggling, he agreed to take us into town for one hundred pesos, which is about five bucks.

Hyunchang already had a hostel in mind, so I just went with him, and after checking in we went out for a wander. We were both famished from many hours on the road and food was our top priority.

It was a Friday night and a lot of people were about. The neighborhood our hostel called home sat several blocks back from the main street. The area looked a rough-ish, with cracked and crumbling sidewalks and unflattering splashes of graffiti marring the little storefronts and doorways. Most of the businesses were little print shops, as well. This must have been Guadalajara's center for signage and poster-making.

We also soon discovered that we were embedded in the gay district, or what passed for it. There were a few bars flying rainbow flags and a couple even had drag shows going on, which we could catch fabulous glimpses of through the open doorways. Some men walked down the street hand in hand, and I was heartened to see that, in culturally conservative Mexico, gay folks were carving out a place of their own. There was even a corner restaurant called "Gay Taco" which made a kind of perfect sense.

My young Korean companion had zero idea of just where we had landed, and greeted me with wide, disbelieving eyes when I informed him that we were now ensconced in the city's gay mecca, despite the fact that he had been traveling for sixteen straight months now. His cluelessness proved to me something that I already long suspected: even the most traveled of Koreans have zero sense of gaydar.

We walked for about twenty minutes until we ended up in a buzzing neighborhood next to the city's big university. This was a place of restaurants, bars, and best of all, street food carts. I'm convinced Mexico's sidewalk culinary scene can give any from Asia, including the street food paradises of Bangkok or KL, a run for their money. More on this later.

We settled on a taco cart that was absolutely mobbed, which I took to be a good sign. I ordered one *bistec* (steak) and *labio* (lips), the latter being a first for me. It ended up being an absolute winner, just unbelievably tender and juicy, an explosion of savory excellence, easily one of the best tacos I've ever taken down. And yeah, at this point, I've eaten a shitload. These tacos were monsters once you stacked them up with self-serve grilled onions, pico de gallo, salsa, cilantro, and sliced *nopales* (cactus). I liked them so much that I ordered a third, and then, for the coup-de-grace, we headed down to the next cart, where they put a new meaning on the word hot dog.

First they started with the dog, not a big one, but a thin frank wrapped in another thin slice of bacon. The frank was then placed in a warm bun and covered with a fat scoop of diced tomatoes. The next step was a double slathering of mayo (I opted out); this was then followed by a squirt of mustard and ketchup, followed by a pile of grilled onions and peppers, and finished with a fat slab of *queso fresco* on top. Bam!

Now, of course, after those greasy, bottom-of-the-soul satisfying tacos, we required no more caloric intake, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime dog, and sitting on the curb among the throng of locals with my Korean comrade, I took mine down like a hyena fresh to the kill. This was the center of decadence, an over-the-top, stupidly-stacked hot dog that would give any Chicago frank a run for its money, which made me wonder if the purveyors of food in both of the second cities weren't talking to each other.

The next morning I set out to explore the city center proper, and quickly discovered that one day is enough for such an endeavor. Again, despite some architectural gems, central Guadalajara isn't a place of multi-hued, colonial wonder, but it does contain churches galore--gorgeous old buildings with domes and spires shooting skyward and towering over the otherwise uninspiring urban landscape.

I found my way to the city's main cathedral, which, like in any Mexican town, occupies the literal center of the place. The church was almost always the first thing built when breaking ground on a new settlement here. Everything else just grew up around it.

Guadalajara's main cathedral dates back to 1561 and is defined by its neo-gothic towers and imposing dome. I was blown away when entering the building, as it was an explosion of colors and forms, with a ceiling that

went on forever and stained glass depictions of biblical events that glowed in multi-chromatic splendor. I couldn't help but be awed by the entirety of it all, though I must say that it was really too much to take in in one go.

On the edge of this great church were life-sized figures of various saints and popes that took the form of creepy mannequins. Most notable was the waxed remains of Santa Inocencia, a mummified corpse of a little girl, which is the very embodiment of the morbid forms that Spanish and Mexican Catholicism often takes. Mexico, of course, notches it all up several steps with their veneration of the dead. That said, it's clear that they have a healthier relationship with death than do we, if for no other reason than they openly embrace it in their celebrations and imagery.

I eventually sat down for lunch at a taquería, where I gobbled up five little tacos de carnitas washed down with a bottle of Mexican Coke, my first of the trip. While I've noticed it on my previous visits, it must be said that Mexicans are absolutely hooked on sweet drinks. They accompany almost every meal with some kind of sugary soda or *agua fresca*, in the form of their myriad sugared-up fruit juices. It no doubt contributes to the obesity epidemic this nation currently finds itself in the throes of, and while a long-neck Mexi-Coke does go well with some savory tacos from time to time, these people are poisoning themselves with liquid sugar and it only takes one stroll down the street or meal at a busy restaurant to see it.

After an afternoon nap at my hostel and a couple of cold ones at La Fuente, I headed out for the primary objective of my visit to this old city: La Plaza de Los Mariachis.

Mariachi music is synonymous with Mexico, and got its most famous start on a street in Guadalajara. I read that Mariachi bands still stroll up and down the plaza, performing requests for pesos for people sitting at the outside tables, enjoying their food and drink.

I was expecting a grand square with nice restaurants and the boys strumming their guitars and blowing their brass, but was instead greeted with a scene of urban decay. The plaza lies firmly on the bad side of one of the city's main roads; I had wandered across that border earlier in the day and took in scenes of prostitutes selling their asses and people smoking meth on the sidewalk. Now I saw more of the same: trash lay strewn on the filthy stones and drunks and homeless passed out on scraps of cardboard or the bare pavement itself. Dodgy-looking youth with unfortunate face tattoos openly puffed on joints on benches, and the one restaurant that does serve the plaza had clearly seen better days. The whole affair had fallen into a state of pronounced shittiness.

That said, there was a smattering of people at the tables of the restaurant, including one large, boisterous group supplying money to the Mariachi band that tooted and strummed out the songs. The band

members were all old and fat and dopey-eyed and clearly phoning it all in. They hit the notes but everything was just slightly out of tune and behind the beat and uninspired, mirroring the sad scene around them. Another band eventually struck up for another table, while a number of other uniformed Mariachis lounged around, waiting for the arrival of more customers, who may or may not turn up. After all, this did not look like an area you'd want to be caught in after dark.

It was depressing to me that this place—the supposed birthplace of Mariachi music—had slipped into dreary neglect, and it's a stain on the city of Guadalajara that they've allowed this to happen to one of their most important—and supposedly cherished—cultural institutions. What was once the thing that most defined their city is clearly gasping its last breath, and that's just sad.

Somewhat dejected, I ended up back at the hostel, where I shared a bottle of wine with Cristian, a guy from Argentina slowly making his way across Latin America, and hopefully the world. Cristian was a sinewy dude of about thirty, with a bald head and long, thin beard. He was also a juggler, plying his trade for a few hours a day at one of the city's many busy intersections. This is very common in Mexico, where, in addition to pedestrian food vendors, jugglers, fire-breathers, breakdancers, contortionists, and other acts put on mini-shows for drivers waiting for the lights to change. The drivers, in return, surrender five or ten pesos coins in appreciation for the moment's entertainment. Cristian was earning his hostel cash by juggling in traffic every day, and while there is a certainly a roughness to it, he clearly relished the freedom it brought. He was a pure bohemian, waking up each day and living it in the present, which reminded me of a younger version of myself, along with the community I called home back in the nineties. Cristian was also a terrific Spanish teacher who was eager to converse with me, while also gently correcting my many mistakes.

I only spent two days in Guadalajara and can't pretend to have delved deeply into the city. Mine was little more than a scratch on the surface. I was told that for a much better traditional Mariachi experience, I should head to Tlaquepaque, a satellite town just thirty minutes out from the city center, where old Mexico thrived free from the demons of urban decay. Still, I enjoyed Guadalajara, because it was a taste of real, modern Mexico. It was a vital, and very delicious concentration of commerce, culture, and human beings. Best of all, it never pretended to be anything it wasn't, and for that, it has my respect.

El Festejo

El Incendio is said to be the most famous bar in town; the fact that it's just stumbling distance from the front door of my hostel makes it all the more irresistible. I was considering an afternoon nap, but this is an establishment that has been delivering drinks for well over a century, and when I attempt to stroll by I can feel its gravity pull on my spine.

Though it's just four o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon, the place is slamming. It's dark and smells of stale beer and humans. Vibrant murals grace the walls, featuring what I assume to be prominent figures in this wellspring of Mexican history. There's a urinal installed right in the open next to the front door, where a dude stands, taking a leak and giving no fucks. Ballad music blasts from the speakers, and I have to squeeze through a heaving knot of patrons to get to the bar, where I order a bottle of Victoria, a cheaper, sub-brand of Modelo that makes its first appearance of the trip.

I poke into the back room, home to a few wooden tables, and find one in the corner is open. I sit down, slip on my reading glasses, open my notebook, take a tug off my beer, and commence to scribbling the rest of the afternoon away. My hand races across the page as if possessed. Something is gripping me, and I just can't seem to get the words out fast enough. My feverish scrawling draws curious looks from the tables of students around me getting hammered on dirt cheap cocktails of orange soda and mezcal. Every couple of minutes I come up for air, sip my Victoria, and give these kids a knowing smile, before once again diving down and again attacking the page.

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There is a reason that I keep coming back to Mexico, though it's hard to put into words. There's just a raw power to this place, a kind of witchcraft that emanates from the music, the food, the buildings, the people, and perhaps the very land itself. This intangible force never fails to intoxicate me. After just a couple of days I fall under its spell, and despite being in what should just be another country, I feel as if I've stepped into another dimension. Mexico has a way of getting into my bones, and nowhere did that magic hit me harder than Guanajuato.

This, however, wasn't love at first sight. Sure, I recognized the crackled, aging beauty of the town straight away in the form of its winding, cobblestone alleys, embarrassment of stone churches, tree-filled plazas, opulent buildings, and multi-hued colonial houses, but sadly, my guts were in a state of insurrection. I had eaten a dodgy empanada at the bus station in Guadalajara and felt the hot stab of stomach cramps just thirty

minutes into the ride. By the time I got into Guanajuato I was ready to let blast, and after wandering the mouse maze in a futile attempt to locate my preferred accommodation (glowingly recommended by the damned guidebook), I surrendered by staggering into the first hostel I came across, which ended up being a total shithole. I was the only guest in this moldy, filthy carcass of an establishment. Still, it was a bed (with palpable grime in the sheets) and after a liter of water and a happy pill, I laid my ass to rest at eight o'clock in the evening, hoping that the tainted pie would pass by morning.

Guanajuato occupies a very important place in the massive, bleeding tapestry of Mexican history, and at risk of boring any of you, it's worth giving this town's backstory a brief shake:

Upon conquering Mexico, the Spanish learned that the rugged hills of the country's central highlands were rich in deposits of gold and especially silver. Guanajuato was founded in 1559 as a mining center, and quickly prospered as the world's biggest vein of silver was tapped and supplied up to twenty percent of the global market.

The Spanish crown's greed for this precious metal grew over time, and the king eventually cut the locals out of much of their share. This helped to foment resentment in the entire region, resulting in the Mexican War of Independence in 1810.

The war kicked off in neighboring Dolores when Miguel Hidalgo shouted out his famous *grito* demanding independence, which spread like a brushfire throughout the land. Soon, residents of Guanajuato seized the town from the hated Spanish, who responded with a nasty, heavy-handed crackdown. They retook control and instituted a "lottery of death," where they drew names of Guanajuato residents at random, and then tortured and hanged the unlucky "winners." You can imagine how this went down with the locals.

Soon Hidalgo came to the town's rescue with twenty thousand rebels. The garrison of three hundred Spanish troops, along with some loyalist leaders, took refuge by barricading themselves in a huge grain storehouse known as La Alhóndiga. One of Hidalgo's men—a miner called El Pípila—strapped a stone slab to his body as a kind of armor against the Spanish bullets, grabbed a torch, and set fire to the massive wooden door. Hidalgo's forces then stormed the building and slaughtered everyone inside.

So as you can see, history plays a very important part in the story of Guanajuato, and they celebrate El Pípila with a statue standing guard on a hillside over the town. On the base is an inscription that reads: *Aun hay otros Alhóndigas por incendiar* ("There are still other Alhóndigas to burn.).

I awoke early the next morning to a digestive tract much closer to the state of normal, and headed out into the town's very European streets where I grabbed a pastry and a coffee and watched the tendrils of sunlight unfurl over the hills that surround the place. Like so many mining towns, Guanajuato is built on precipitous hillsides over little ravines and gullies. In this way it reminded me of a much larger, Mexified version of Jerome or Bisbee, Arizona, two settlements that also popped up around ore digs.

After a bit of searching, I found the guesthouse where I originally wanted to stay and checked in. This was a bohemian joint called *Correr d' Comedias*, and was head and shoulders over the reeking litter box where I had passed the previous night. The hostel was run by a crew of volunteers, who, in return for staffing and cleaning the place, were provided with a place to live. These were a happy crew of twentysomething Mexican kids, along with a vivacious Brazilian named Jefferson who often reminded all of us that he was "puro gay." In fact, there were several gay and lesbian folks either staying at the hostel or just hanging out, as the place had the feel of someone's home rather than a place of business. On the first night, the volunteers cooked a massive pasta dinner (washed down with a bottle of tequila) and invited all of us to take part. This is easily the friendliest place I've stayed.

I wandered the town that day, taking in its obvious splendor. Sure, there were loads of (mostly Mexican) tourists walking the sidewalks and clogging the shops, but despite a somewhat commercial feel in the main strip, Guanajuato never veered into the tacky or over-touristy. This was especially reflected in the prices of the bars and restaurants. You could eat and drink for cheap in Guanajuato. This surely owes itself to the fact that it's a university town as well as a tourist center, and the students need options for boozing and feeding that won't devastate their wallets. This sets it apart from its more Gringo-fied sister burg of nearby San Miguel de Allende, whose prices are said to reflect its popularity with the more upscale North American visitors and expats. Having had my share of Americans during my visit to the USA and keen to keep pesos in my pocket, I elected to give it a skip.

After hiking up the stairway for a visit to the statue of El Pípila, I stopped in at the big market where I feasted on some carnitas tacos that transported me right to the heart porky heaven. This is where social media sometimes works its magic. When I mentioned that I was coming to Guanajuato, a Facebook friend reached out to one of their friends who knew the town well. They directed me to the carnitas in the market, which was an insider's tip that paid off in spades.

Guanajuato is surrounded by rocky hills that would definitely qualify as mountains in Korea, and I resolved to get my hike on during my second day. In the morning I headed up to a peak that loomed over the town. As I climbed up the ridge over the arid landscape, I was afforded a view of the

town splayed out beneath me in all of its chromatic charm, with the domes of the main churches rising up like ornate eggs. White ghost clouds floated above the mountains in air untainted by even a hint of dust or pollution, and when I reached the top (which, like any summit in this part of the world is marked by a large white cross), I gazed across the valley and was overcome with a spirit of strength and well-being. Best yet, I had the entire mountain to myself. The only other creatures I came across during my morning climb were a family of cows chilling among the prickly pears.

After filling my revived stomach on a lunch of street cart gorditas, I decided to hike up Guanajuato's most famous mountain, El Cerro de la Bufa, a stony-crowned massif that stands like a castle wall at the head of the town. Now I was told by Rapha, the manager of the hostel who went on to be my drinking buddy, that a festival was in the works, that it kicked off at midnight. As I wound up the road approaching the mountain, I took in the preparations first hand. Crews were setting up carnival rides, and vendors were erecting tents. And as hiked on the dirt road cut into the mountain itself, I came across what must have been over a hundred mounted vaqueros. I had seen them riding through town an hour or two earlier, and now they were gathered in a cave on the mountainside, paying homage to San Ignacio de Loyola, the patron saint of Guanajuato, and the reason for the upcoming festival.

After the cowboys, I scrambled up the rock face of the mountain, in which was cut a crude stairway. This was treacherous ground, where one slip could end up in a nasty injury or even death, but soon I was on the rocky top, where I could take in both Guanajuato and the plain stretching out from the town and its hills, all the way to the commercial city of Leon, a place of car dealerships and even a Costco!

Rapha told me that people actually gather on the mountaintop at midnight to ring in El Dia de la Cueva ("The Day of the Cave"), and at the summit I saw a small crew of men making preparations by filling large aluminum cans with kerosene, which they would use to light up the mountaintop. I had a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that people would be scaling this treacherous peak in the middle of the night to party. It was nasty enough in the day. Add booze and who knows what drugs and people could die. But hey, this was Mexico, which, unlike the overprotected, litigious environs of the USA, is still very much a "play at your own risk" kind of place.

That night I accompanied Rapha to a local bar owned by the same guy who owns the hostel, a smiling, rotund boss who is doing a very good job injecting joy into Guanajuato. In fact, this wasn't just one bar, but a whole complex containing five different bars. This guy really knew how to party.

The manager of this particular boozier was a young dude named Gabriel, who like me, took a keen interest in drinking and history. At the time I was reading *A History of the Conquest of Mexico*, which, while exhaustive and detailed, is still very much told from the point-of-view of the Great White Man. Gabriel gave me a list of Mexican history books to read from the perspective of the workers and the Indians, a kind of Latino Howard Zinn reader, for which I am very grateful.

Gabriel had an interesting, if sad story. We talked for a couple of hours that night over beers and mescal and even a taste of pulque, the ancient Aztec booze that is a bit reminiscent of Korean *makkeoli* rice wine. He came from the town of Irapuato, which is in Guanajuato State, not so far from the city we were in. He lamented how the place had been taken over by narcos, who now ran the town like the gang they are, killing with impunity. He had come to the otherwise peaceful environs of Guanajuato to escape this madness, and it occurred to me that I was only seeing one slice of Mexico. The Mexico I have taken in so far has been peaceful and largely working. I hadn't even seen hints at the failed, murderous narco state that it's often portrayed as, despite it being all around me (Guanajuato state was the country's deadliest in 2019). It was useful to be reminded that the blood is still flowing in this country, something to think about while I lounged my afternoons away knocking back bottles of Indio and Dos Equis.

The next day was my final full day in Guanajuato, and also happened to be El Dia de la Cueva, the city's festival celebrating its patron saint. I had originally planned to head south on this day, but happy accidents like this don't occur too often when we travel, so I had to roll with my fortune.

I spent the afternoon exploring the Casa y Museo de Diego Rivera. He was born in Guanajuato and spent his early years there, and his old house has been converted into little museum.

While I can't claim to be deeply versed in painters, Rivera has long been one of my favorites and I count myself as a fan, so it was a pleasure to visit his childhood home and check out some of his original art, especially some sketches done for his big murals. It was a small museum, but a piece of art and Mexican history that I really couldn't miss. Plus, there was a nude Frieda Kahlo.

Next I found myself at la Musea de las Momias (The Mummy Museum) is exactly what it claims to be. In the mid-seventies, scores of perfectly desiccated and preserved corpses were discovered in Guanajuato's main cemetery. They are now all on display in their macabre glory at this museum. It was a morbid place that, while claiming to respect the corpses and their history, clearly has them propped up in cases for our titillation. Creepiest was the row of dead babies, which was like a battery pack for nightmares.

After a nap at the hostel, I decided that it was time to head to the festival, despite the fact that I had overslept and it was now into the evening. As I made my way up the road heading to the party on the outskirts of town, I saw that I was walking against the flow. Most people were now leaving, as things had been raging all day (since midnight for some). It turns out that I was a bit late to the celebration, but still managed to catch the drunken tail end of things.

The sun was sinking behind the mountains and a spirited breeze kicked up from the adjacent plains. I strolled toward the pulsating lights of the carnival, swimming against the river of people heading my way. Eventually, I reached an improvised midway of food tents and vendors that made up the approach the rides. It was now a full press of human beings walking and shouting and clearly possessed with the spirit of the fest—teenagers, parents, kids, old folks—a real slice of the community out to eat and drink and celebrate San Ignacio. Revelers clutched cans of Modelo and Corona. People hawked leather bags and cheap watches and toys and pizza and you name it from stalls that lined each side of that dirt track. Music poured forth from speakers and somewhere in the dusk, a brass band sliced the air with their pumping tunes.

I just kept walking, as if pulled by an invisible force. Soon I came upon a tent bar selling cans of beer and shots of mescal and pulque. I opted for a Modelo and fell in with a table of a couple of rough looking women along with a rougher looking dude. A fat cluster of empty cans stood as a testament on the table and their tiny daughter scratched and played in the dirt below. Around us was the general swirl of shouts and music and laughter—the sonic chaos that makes up the heart of a Mexican saint day festival.

Above us were the rock crowns of Cerro de la Bufa, which I had climbed the day before. Amber flames twinkled in the dying light and I knew that the real party was currently going down right there at the summit, and the beer, along with a cup of mescal that followed, injected me with a sudden wash of courage.

Now, I try to be clear-headed and sensibly cautious when I travel, while still understanding that there are times when you have say “fuck it” and just embrace the danger. Sometimes I make questionable decisions. Sometimes I resolve to get into situations that may not turn out well for me. This was one of those times. I decided to scale La Bufa one more time, in the dark, at the messy end of a Mexican bender.

So after stopping for a couple of tacos to fuel my ascent, I began the climb, in the inky black, up the path that met up with the dirt road. A smattering of revelers were stumbling down, lighting their way with their cell phones. I just cruised through the dark, pushed on by my own

curiosity and determination, as if climbing this mountain would somehow complete my time in Guanajuato with an exclamation point.

The city shimmered below as I pressed on. Adrenaline course through my veins as the evening breeze turned into a stiff wind. The lights at the top were still winking and blinking, but it appeared some had been extinguished. Was I too late?

The path hit the dirt road that went to the cave and the stone stairway leading up the mountain's face. I slunk along the road towards my destination, until I came up on three young women making their way up as well. They were the only other people I saw going my direction.

As soon as I caught up with this trio, a group of about ten cops appeared, heading down. The leader spoke up, telling us that they were done with their work, and if we wanted to go to the top, we could, but they could not guarantee our safety, that it was dangerous.

"What do you mean by 'dangerous,'" I asked. "The mountain? Or the people?"

"Both," he replied, before moving on with his pack of exhausted comrades.

The girls shrugged and continued ahead. I took about seven steps forward, stopped to consider what the cop had said, and abruptly made a one eighty. What the fuck was I doing, alone, in the dark, with all my cash and passport, on a Mexican mountainside? A shower of sense suddenly washed over me, and, with the cops as my chaperone, I headed back down through a flurry of fireflies. The brass band was still at it, echoing up the hillside, and the lights of Guanajuato shone like thousands of jewels.

Once I reached the bottom, I found the band, who, in the dark, blew their horns and thumped their drunken beat for a few bleary-eyed holdouts. I danced and swayed to the frenzied jam. The party may have been over, but the magic lingered, and I would surely take it with me once I left this town.

Soledad

I cruise the streets alone, in search of somewhere to throw down a drink, but I just can't settle on a place. Sure, there are plenty of bars, but I end up giving them all a pass: they're either too dark, dirty, and empty, or they have that hipsterfied soft-light look of the modern, artisanal, *mezcaleria*. The first will be cheap but potentially sketchy; the latter cold, clinical, and surely hard on the wallet. I require a joint that strikes a balance between the two, a bar that feels just right from the outside, and when I take in the blood red storefront and blazing yellow letters of "La Casa de Mezcal," I know I've arrived.

As I pass through the saloon-style swinging doors I can tell that I've stepped into a local institution. The bar itself is standing only—there are no stools—while a room to the right contains tables and chairs for customers in search of a sit-down experience. Intricate murals grace the walls, depicting vivid Mayan scenes of pyramids, gods, kings, serpents, and jaguars. AC/DC incongruously blares from the speakers, but as I squeeze my way into a claustrophobic spot at the bar, I don't mind. I love AC/DC, and it all makes perfect sense.

I shout to the bartender for a bottle of Dos Equis and a pour of *mezcal de la casa*, since the scores of bottles on display behind him remind me that I don't even know where to begin when it comes to ordering the stuff. He instead slides a well-worn, double-sided plastic menu my way which lists so many versions of the local tippie that my head spins. As I scan the endless varieties, I recognize the word *espadín*, a type that I'd sampled the night before and enjoyed. Soon he delivers the green bottle of beer along with a tall shot glass filled to the rim with the clear spirit.

I gingerly lift the glass to my lips and take a sip. The smokey, slightly sweet essence of the mezcal blossoms over my tongue and fills my chest with a vapory warmth as I take it down. I grab a slice of green rind orange from the bowl in front of me, dip it in the salt and chili powder, and give it a good suck. The citrus dances in my mouth while the salt and chili neutralize any hint of the agave aftertaste. I chase this all with a hearty slug of lager while the jangly opening chords from "Smells Like Teen Spirit" fill the air. The barman looks my way and gives me a nod that says "It's good, isn't it?" before clearing more bottles from the bar. I nod back and smile before pinching the glass between my thumb and pointer finger and starting the whole ritual over again.

Before the song is over I'll be singing along with Kurt...

Travel is a privilege, and a massive one at that. I remind myself this each day that I'm on the road, that I'm lucky to be doing what I'm doing, to dive into a place and drink deeply from its waters, to soak in the rains and the smells and the palpable vibe of wherever I am. Such is a luxury denied to most because of money, time, or most often both. I've pursued and cultivated a lifestyle that allows me to do this thing from time to time, but it also comes at a cost. I own almost nothing of real value and despite the trappings of a middle class lifestyle, I often feel like I'm just making it up as I go along and am only one slip up away from financial ruin. But that's the case with so many of us, no?

Oaxaca welcomed me with open arms and was exactly the exquisite city of cobblestone streets and colonial wonder that she had been hyped as. I arrived on a Friday and the whole central city was one ongoing festival of music, strolling, selling, eating, drinking, and an overall wash of joyful Mexicana.

That said, there were also loads of tourists in Oaxaca, and for the first time on this trip, I came across a lot of Americans. Now before you think that I'm looking askance at my fellow countrymen, the Americans I encountered in Oaxaca tended to be extremely well-behaved, cultured, quiet, and moneyed. Not your spring break crowd. There were a lot of well-scrubbed, smart-looking white people attempting their best Spanish in hushed tones. Professors, tech folks, doctors, teachers, lawyers. We're talking Obama's base. These are the folks that stay in all of those expensive, hacienda-style hotels in the city center and eat at the foodie joints indicated by \$\$\$ in the Lonely Planet. These are the folks who do pricey mezcal tours and actually buy the handicrafts that help keep the local economy afloat.

Encountering these particular Americans probably caused me to turn in on myself in enchanting, lipstick-smearred Oaxaca. Not only did I feel like an outsider as a gringo travelling in deep Mexico, but I also felt like an outsider among my fellow gringos travelling in deep Mexico.

I arrived at night, found an adequate, and sawdust cheap hostel, and proceeded to ambulate around the town. The first stop was a little restaurant specializing in *tlayudas*, a Oaxacan speciality. A *tlayuda* is a large tortilla toasted over a grill and then topped with refried beans, veggies, and sometimes meat. Mine came with beans, lettuce, onion, tomato, avocado, and a couple links of fiery Oaxacan chorizo. While I was excited to dig into a new permutation of the national cuisine, I found the tortilla a bit chewy and the chorizo stroke-inducingly salty. I also realized that, despite great regional variety and flavors, so much of Mexican cuisine is just chucking stuff on top of tortillas of different sizes and calling it good.

I made my way down the little hill to the main action, walking along the

stony pedestrian way with all of the little colorful flags hanging above the many vendors and beggars, until I arrived at the zocalo, with its cathedral and mariachis and cumbia combos and tables of fat families further emblubbering themselves on beer and huge plates of beans and tortillas and Indians pushing bracelets and scarves and balloons and youngsters stroking and kissing and who knows what else until I became dizzy from the whole vortex of the thing underneath the shadow of the cross that glowers over everything in this country.

I surrendered to one of many mezcal bars in this town, where, for a chunk of your wallet's glory, you are afforded a nice sipping shot of the nectar of the agave, a seductive spirit that's a world away from your Jose Cuervo swill. It's technically different from tequila and is mainly distilled in and around Oaxaca. Mezcal's roots are pre-Columbian, and after just a couple of glasses I considered myself a convert to that sacred elixir.

I ended up at a boxy boozier near my guesthouse called Bar Enigma, run by a scary looking beef slab named Raul. He had spent a few years in Nebraska and Kansas (where I imagined he worked in slaughterhouses) and despite his murderous demeanor, he proved to be a very sweet and friendly dude.

Soon I was invited to a table with a couple of young dudes (Joel and Manuel) who were drinking from an ice bucket containing ten Indios (*una cubeta*). They were thrilled to have me and we drank and sang and were eventually joined by two others. They were a bit older than my beer companions; one was amiable and courteous, while his buddy took a deep unshine to me as the night wore on.

This particular hombre took exception to the fact that I wasn't able to understand everything he was slurring forth at two hundred miles an hour and started giving me the hate eye. He then began grilling me about Donald Trump, whose popularity in Mexico is on par with radioactive cat shit. I responded by proclaiming my hatred for the man ("¡Es humana basura!" I spat), but this did little to ameliorate his growing bile. This guy despised me for what I represented: the money, power, and arrogance of *los gabachos*. Even if I personally claimed to abhor Trump, I was guilty by association in his stabby, bloodshot eyes, and the longer we shared that table, the more his antipathy towards me hardened. I sensed that he may lurch for me or take a swing at any time. He was hate-hammered and looking for a fight, and just when I thought things may kick off, he suddenly turned grey, leaned over, and let loose a cascade of puke that splattered on the concrete floor. Raul shouted from the bar and fined the dude fifty pesos on the spot, which he paid, before stumbling towards the door with his friend, who grinned sheepishly and apologized for his companion's uncouth behavior.

Raul sauntered over with a mop, shook his head and grumbled, "Pendejo."

I spent the next two days in Oaxaca wandering and eating; I scoured the stalls of the Mercado Benito Juarez, where I dove into several varieties of Oaxaca's most famous dish, mole, as well as the local version of a tamale, which was not only larger than the standard type, but came wrapped in banana leaves, rather than the usual corn husks. I was living it up, but also hurting. The hangover I incurred on that first night was a two-day affair, plus, my guts had been on fire off and on since leaving Guadalajara and were now flaring up something fierce. I'm sure this had nothing to do with the river of beer and shots of mezcal with which I had bombarded my innards, along with the endless train of street tacos and orange habanero salsa that I insisted on cascading over them.

The net result of all of this was the black cloud of the traveler's blues, which anyone on an extended solo jaunt will have to reckon with. I just felt ravaged. The accumulation of days of movement, indulgence, and relative ostracization had done a number on my body and my guts and moreover, my psyche, and I felt myself sinking into a hole.

This is normal, it's happened before and it will happen again anytime I set out, especially with no one else in tow. Oaxaca was also an exceedingly romantic place, with couples strolling hand in hand, stealing pecks, and generally basking in the sweetness of it all. And those who weren't coupled up were travelling in small packs, as friends. I suddenly felt very alone, and more than anything, I missed the hell out of my wife. I wanted nothing more than for her to be at my side.

Welcome to solo travel. This is the gig. Most solo travelers are unattached, but I am married, and Minhee has signed off on these periodic journeys. Every time I meet someone new I have to explain that yeah, I'm married, but my wife isn't with me, which elicits uncomfortable questions or at least eye raises from the other parties. Sometimes I want to tell them to go fuck themselves, that my marriage is my business, that we have an arrangement when it comes to me getting out in the world, but then maybe they're right. Maybe I shouldn't be doing this. Maybe it's just an exercise in incurable self-indulgence.

Even if this is true, despite the blues and downs and feelings of not belonging, I love solo travel, because it is the ultimate expression of freedom. I wake up, and pretty much get to do whatever the hell I want. I just let the day blow its breath into my sails, and this, my friends, is sublime.

On my second to last day, in the depths of my funk, I sat in a very civilized corner bar, taking refuge from a late afternoon thunder shower. I felt like raw, raggedy ass and attempted to organize the shards of my thoughts

into scribblings in my journal. Suddenly, I was drawn into a conversation with an English woman and her Italian boyfriend who were sitting out the tempest next to me. For one hour we bared our lives to each other, as the rain washed away the day's grit from the pavement just feet away. I put down my pen and closed my notebook. I got out of my head and engaged with real people doing the exact same thing as I was: loving Mexico.

The next day I lazed at my guesthouse, sipping cinnamon-infused coffee, reading, and scribbling in my journal. By the mid-afternoon I had grown restless, so I slipped on my shoes and made my way out into the heat, down the hill toward Calle de Manuel García Vigil. As I approached this cobblestone concourse, I could begin to make out the thump of drums and squeal of horns. Now street music was nothing new for me in Mexico; in fact, it seemed to spring up wherever I went, but I soon found that this was more than just another strolling band.

As I hit that main street, I came upon a procession of sorts. In the vanguard were about thirty people in bizarre, multi-colored costumes. Some wore masks with fake beards and sported sombreros and huge, golden headpieces. A few marched along with wooden parade rifles, and one even had the taxidermied carcass of a badger strapped to his back, along fake plastic fruit and vegetables—grapes, onions, carrots, and avocados—tied and dangling underneath. Next were two giant puppets in the shape of women. One wore a blood-red dress while the other was clad in black, with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe emblazoned on her chest. These towering figures danced to the beat of the drum corps, and were followed by a couple of spinning white orbs with swabs of red, blue, purple, yellow, and orange material attached to the sides. In the middle was the band, made up of bass drums, rat-a-tat snares, as well as a line of tubas and trumpets. Bringing up the rear were about a dozen men and women in peasant garb—the hats and simple clothes of campesinos—ambling along on lofty wooden stilts that put their feet well above the heads of even the tallest people in the crowd.

I took the parade to be a religious celebration of sorts, though the military and peasant imagery seemed to carry a political message as well. Like so much during this journey, it was completely unexpected, and I immediately found myself caught up in the euphoria of it all. This was deep, intoxicating stuff, and for a moment I envied Mexico. I realized that this country had more culture in a Saturday afternoon than we do in a whole year back home, and that while I come from a place of great natural beauty, my people and traditions, by comparison, were empty and sterile. Everywhere, Mexico oozed history, superstition, flavor, color, and ceaseless celebration. This was doubly true in Oaxaca, and any remnants of the blues that had gripped me the day before were washed away by this frenetic street ritual. I may not have comprehended what was going on, but somewhere, somehow, I understood it.

El Camino

I never liked Corona. I always found it underwhelming, watery, overpriced, and way too gringofied. Whenever I see a bottle I'm bombarded with images of horsey-toothed, backwards baseball hat frat boy surfer spring break dude-itude: "Nothin' like a cold Corona on the beach, brah." Like Foster's in Australia, I figured it to be something shipped out and pawned off on undiscerning yokels, rather than a brew that locals actually drank.

This trip, however, has proven otherwise. Corona is everywhere in Mexico, and while not the most popular beer, it's sold and drunk in all corners of the country. This includes the indigenous village of Latuvi, where it's the only option in the hamlet's sole store. But at fifteen pesos a pop, I'm not complaining, even if the bottles are nowhere close to cold.

While Latuvi lacks an actual cantina, it's blessed with the kind of scenery that makes you grateful that you have to drink outdoors. I sit perched on a promontory overlooking two valleys, where I watch the afternoon melt away from the relative comfort of a wooden chair. My feet are sore and chewed up by insect bites, but the mountain breeze acts as a kind of natural masseuse as I kick them up on the gnarled fence rail, lean back, and savor the scene.

This is verdant, pastoral country, and as the light recedes behind the distant ridge, the bulbous, ivory clouds take on darker forms. The *cha-chaka-cha-chaka* of cumbia floats up from a stereo in a house below, but is soon overtaken by the accordion polka-beat of norteño from a neighbor's rival set of speakers. The idea of keeping music to yourself seems foreign in Mexico, a place where volume, more often than not, is a competition.

I take another warmish slug of Corona as the day drains away. A few dog barks punctuate the clash of songs. The sputter of a motorcycle rips through the air. A rooster crows before the sun has even set, and, for a moment at least, I find myself in the most beautiful place on earth.

*

I've always been an avid walker, but since nearly losing my lower left leg in a gory motorcycle accident a few years back, I vowed to make it the centerpiece of my life. I've largely kept to this, especially when I travel. These days, wherever I go, I try to organize the trip around some kind of big walk.

Mexico, for all of its size and splendor, offers limited opportunities for extensive hiking (without expensive guides and loads of equipment), especially the kind of village to village walks I like to do. There are certainly plenty of places to ramble, but often the infrastructure (marked, maintained trails, places to stay) is lacking. There is one exception to this, however, and I made it the bullseye of this particular journey: Los Pueblos Mancomunados.

Los Pueblos Mancomunados are a collection of native villages situated high in the Sierra Norte Mountains just out of Oaxaca City. They're largely autonomous with their own laws and customs and traditions; as a result, they're pretty much left alone by outside authorities.

Some years back, these pueblos decided to embark on an ecotourism project. Already linked together by a series of local trails and dirt roads, they opened these up to hikers and mountain bikers, along with basic food and lodging available in each village. They also offered up local guides.

As soon as I read about this area, I knew that I had to go. Village walking is a favorite of mine, since you don't have to hump around loads of gear and, at the end of the day you get a hot meal, bed, and sometimes even cold beer. I've done it extensively in Korea, as well as in Laos, China and the Republic of Georgia, so Mexico was a no-brainer.

I squeezed into a dented-up minivan at Oaxaca's shabby but comprehensive second-class bus station (It has its own little dental clinic!), and soon we were off, rattling through the grimy, run-down part of town that surrounds its gem of a colonial core; after forty minutes of cruising through the wide valley that is home to many of the region's mezcal distilleries, we turned off and began to switchback up the wall of rock and dirt that forms the Sierra Norte.

Soon we were at the top, where I was deposited at the village of Cuajimolayas, my starting point. It was a starkly bright morning, and as soon as I jumped out of the van, I felt the cut of the mountain air. It was cold up there, and when I say up, I mean over three thousand meters. I was at some pretty serious elevation for casual hiking, and would be dealing with breath and fatigue issues anytime I had to climb. The good news was that I was already at the highest point of the trek. The trails to the other pueblos would be taking me mostly downhill. To be honest, I felt like I was cheating, since I usually hike going up, but why bust my own (now freezing) balls at this height? Plus, everyone else seemed to do it this way.

After securing my hundred peso tourist permit at the local office of Expediciones Sierra Norte, the group that runs the ecotourism project, I slipped on my pack and got to walking. Now, I had the option of hiring a guide, but I elected to go solo. I had done a fair bit of research

beforehand, and learned that it was quite possible to go at it alone if you were an experienced hiker and could speak at least basic Spanish. With both boxes checked, I set out for the trail.

This was no easy task, since the biggest difficulty when it comes to hiking these paths is often just finding the trailhead. There aren't always signs and they're usually located on the edge of the villages. The trails themselves are also spottily marked. The whole area is covered by a spider web of paths that serve not only the villages, but the grazing and farmland that the villagers work. So unless you see the little yellow sign with the figure of a native guy hiking nailed to a tree, you're not sure if you're even on the right path.

After being pestered by a desperately hungry little puppy (I gave the poor thing some cheese and bits of tortilla) who seemed to want to follow me back to Korea, I managed to locate the trail and began my walk towards Benito Juarez, the next village over and the spot where most hikers start their treks. Given that the distances between villages weren't too great (usually between six and twelve kilometers), I wanted to try to do two legs a day, so starting at Cuajimoloyas seemed the better choice.

As I walked that morning, I was struck by how much the landscape resembled the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, with pine trees and great slabs of rock. The sky was a deep azure, but clusters of clouds were already mustering in spots and I figured I could count on rain at some point of the day. I was prepared to deal with that when I had to.

As the trail descended through the pines, I came upon fields of corn and the little wooden houses of the farmers who tended them. The air was sweet and everything was perfectly bucolic, like I was taking a country stroll through Mexican Hobbiton. Soon, however, I came upon a fork in the wide dirt track, with, of course, no sign. The road to the left seemed to climb back up towards the ridge, which didn't seem right. Plus it appeared to be recently made, which further disqualified it. I chose the fork to the right with confidence and continued on.

After about twenty minutes, however, I began to doubt my decision, as the little road began to dogleg to the right and veer away from the ridge that was home to Benito Juarez. Still, I pressed on, until the road itself suddenly ceased to be, replaced by a narrow footpath shooting steeply down into the gorge below. I knew this was wrong, so I doubled back and retraced my steps towards the fork.

At this point I was hoping to find a local, but no one stirred. I did see a farmer working the corn far down the hill, but he looked like more of an ant than a person. It was just too much distance for me to get his attention, so I continued on.

I had almost arrived back at the fork when I happened across an old man coming my way. When I asked him how to locate the trail heading to Benito Juarez, he told me to turn around. I was going to have to re-retrace my steps. I had already burned well over an hour by this point and was just a few kilometers in. Perhaps I should have hired a guide, after all.

I turned around and trudged on, shaking my head. But just two minutes later, I heard the *viejo* shout to me. When I turned back towards him, I saw that he was pointing to the left. There it was, a tiny track heading up some farmland towards the far ridge, with a little yellow sign nailed to the tree.

After a lovely, but breath-stealing climb, I came out on the road to Benito Juarez, and stumbled into the little hamlet just in time to sit down to a packed lunch of tortillas, tomato, avocado, and Oaxacan string cheese.

That afternoon I headed out of Benito Juarez towards La Nevería, my destination for the night. The path dropped steeply before joining a dirt road. At one point I came across a villager in a yellow t-shirt and blue baseball cap.

“Buenas tardes,” I said.

“Buenas tardes. Where are you going?”

“La Nevería.”

“Ah, I see. It’s just down there on the other side of the valley.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you sure you want to go? It’s going to be very wet.”

He gestured to the clouds, which had now congealed into one purplish mass.

Rain, in this part of Mexico, in this part of the year, is a given nearly every day. I had packed a rain jacket, and some thick plastic bags, so I was prepared to get wet. My only real concern was with how cold it would get. I can deal with rain in Korea in the summer, because it actually cools you off in the nasty heat. And while it now very warm in the Sierra Norte, I knew that one blast of frigid rain could turn a day from pleasant to miserable in an instant.

I changed into my rain jacket, deployed my pack cover, and made sure everything of value was wrapped safely in plastic bags inside my pack before pressing on. Thunder grumbled throughout the clouds and blankets of grey water poured forth in the distance, but so far I’d managed to escape the deluge.

The path descended deeply into a ravine, and then climbed back up towards the village of La Nevería. I was almost to the top when the skies opened up. At first it was a medium pelting, which then turned full blast. And this was chilly rain, ice-cold water that saturated everything around it, including me.

I began to shiver as I walked into the village, absolutely chilled to the marrow. While it was only about a twenty kilometer day, it ended on a frigid note, which is appropriate, since nevería (without the accent on the "i") means "ice cream parlor" in Spanish.

I quickly located the tourist office and *cabañas* that sat perched above the village, and soon I had my own little cabin which was more like a small room at a three-star hotel. It was cozy, immaculate, and best yet, came with a hot shower. Not just a shower, but a full pressure blast of nearly scalding water. This was heaven in liquid form, especially since I had been staying at tatty hostels whose idea of hot water was a trickle of tepidness. I always felt like was getting peed on.

After a meal and a hot cup of Oaxacan chocolate, I retired to my cabin to read and sip from the bottle of artisanal mezcal I had packed. The rain had now backed off and the whole of the mountain was enveloped in a shivering grey. It didn't take me long to slip into sleep, which, at twelve dead hours, turned out to be the best I had in months.

I awoke to another glimmering morning, and after a breakfast of eggs, black beans, tortillas, and fresh cheese, I set out towards my next destination, Latuvi. Given the immovable fact of afternoon thunderstorms, I decided to take it easy and just hike one leg, opting to then spend a nice, lazy afternoon at the village. While I was totally alone on the hike the day before, there were now others heading out on the trail, including a very cool Swiss couple that had been in the van from Oaxaca, and a two-family group of six or seven Indians (*India* Indians, not native Indians) out on a Mexican adventure.

The Indians hired a guide and headed out before me, so I shadowed them for a while to make sure I found the trailhead. The Swiss couple (Bert and Barbara, who were also going guideless) and I had also gotten directions from one of the guys at the Expediciones Sierra Norte Office, and while I got the gist of them, Bert spoke much better Spanish and seemed to understand this guy's rapid monologue perfectly. All I knew was that once I came upon a little wooden house, there would be a big log nearby, and the trail shot off to the right. Okay!

Armed with this partial information, I blew past the Indians and their guide; they seemed to be surprised that I was hiking on my own. The dirt road then went into the cool shade of the forest for a few kilometers

before coming upon the little wooden house. However, right before the house there was another road branching off to the right. *This must be it*, I thought, and got to more hiking, though after five minutes of heading down the road, I realized that it was heading in the opposite direction. I then walked back to the *casita* and looked for a log, but no dice. I figured I could wait for the Indian party and their guide, but they would be a while, and I would also seriously lose hiker face for needing their help after going solo. But soon Bert and Barbara arrived, and knew exactly what to do.

“The guy said the log was two hundred meters from the house,” said Bert.

Sure enough, about three minutes down the trail we came upon a massive log.

“And the trail is twenty meters beyond the log,” said Barbara.

And just like that, there was the trail, again a tiny footpath, though totally unmarked.

“Why are there no signs?” I asked.

“This actually isn’t the proper trail,” said Bert. “He explained that the main trail goes above here, but is closed because of fallen trees. This will join back up with the real trail soon.”

“Uh, I guess I missed the part. My Spanish sucks in the morning,” I said.

Sure enough, we were soon on the main trail with its yellow signs, and after crossing the little river at the bottom of the valley and joining a larger road, I was soon strolling into Latuvi.

The tourist cabañas in Latuvi occupied the best real estate in the whole town. They sat on a bluff overlooking valleys on either side, along with clusters of houses and structures that formed part of the village below.

Once again I got a great room, and spent the brilliant afternoon sipping beers outside, reading, writing, and basking in the beauty of it all. We were already at a much lower elevation and avoided the biting cold of the upper villages, as a result. Dark clouds gathered before sunset over some ridges in the distance, but it didn’t rain all day.

I awoke to another sunny morning and decided that this would be my last day walking. There was still plenty more to explore, but planned to head on to Chiapas and would need more time.

This was a best trail of the bunch, a well-marked twelve kilometer route that ended in the twin villages of Lachatao and Atitlán. The trail descended steeply to the right, switching back and dropping through a

thick forest until hitting the valley floor, which was wide enough to play host to plenty of little homesteads, most of which were growing the corn that is ubiquitous in the region.

Eventually the river picked up water and speed and carved out a proper gorge. At this point the path climbed far up above the cascades and pools, into a wonderland of bright stone and hanging moss. I was buoyed and enchanted as I cruised along this trail alone. The plant life had shifted from a very alpine, cold-weather ecosystem to the more deciduous trees and cacti that I would normally associate with Mexico. It was both scenic and inspiring, and taste of nature that I had never experienced before.

After three hours and some change, I wandered into Lachatao, which sits on the edge of the Pueblos Mancomunados. I found a tiny village store and bought a cold Coke, which I used to wash down the round loaf of chewy bread I had bought back on Latuvi. Soon I was joined by Bert and Barbara, and we walked the final steps of the trail to its terminus at a great stone church that seemed to speak of a village much larger than the population of just two hundred.

Bert talked the man at the tourist office into opening it up for us, and for twenty minutes we had the place to ourselves. Inside were the figures of scores of saints that had been gathered from surrounding villages and towns during the Mexican revolution. They had been brought to this fortress of a church for safeguarding and had remained there ever since.

At one point I ascended the precipitous stone staircase to the belltower in the top, and surveyed the valley around me. A proper road slithered in the distance, and the town of Ixtlan, where the Swiss and I were heading to hire a cab back to the city, lay splayed out on the opposite mountain's flank. A few dogs barked, some chickens clucked, and a group of kids played basketball on the court below. The bounce of the big rubber ball ricocheted off the church's aged stones, and their shouts and laughter rode on the breeze.

¡Viva Zapata!

It's only my second Michelada of the trip and I want to kick myself: Why I haven't been drinking these all along? The first, sipped atop a mountain outside of Oaxaca, was a revelation: beer, lime juice, Worcestershire, soy, and hot sauce; a dash of tamarind and a few glugs of Clamato, served up with ice in a one-liter cup, rimmed with sea salt and chili powder? Yes, please. To the uninitiated, these elements may seem disparate and even bizarre, but trust me when I say this is a drink that more than achieves verisimilitude.

This Michelada even surpasses the first. Rodrigo, the hulking barman and proprietor, takes great care in its preparation, and the zesty, cooling satisfaction it delivers is just what I need, as the heat here in the lowlands is no joke. I'm covered in a slick of sticky perspiration, and the air is heavy and unmoving. I can feel it press down on my skin and smother what's left of the afternoon. All the while, the forest around us hisses and squawks with unseen life.

Rodrigo's joint, El Mono, is a bare-bones affair consisting of a short wicker bar and a couple of tables with cheap plastic chairs. A tiny hut behind holds his supplies, and a corrugated metal semi-roof, along with parasols above the tables, are all that protect us from the elements. There are no walls and no windows, and just raw earth underneath. This is as open air as it gets, and everything is covered in grime and the greasy film of tropical rot. But fuckin' hell: this Michelada is a thing of deep wonder, a magical concoction that strikes me to the core as I sweat my life away in this steam room of a jungle.

I drain the big styrofoam cup, sigh, and ask for one more. Rodrigo nods and disappears into his hovel, while the plaintive groan of a howler monkey grates the trees, ushering in the creeping dark.

*

When I initially set out on this trip, I wasn't sure if I would make it to Chiapas, Mexico's rugged southern state that borders Guatemala. After all, it was really far, and the roads leading into it were said to be narrow, serpentine byways winding up and down mountains and sometimes blocked by agitated locals. I thought instead that, once I left Oaxaca City, I'd just head west, to the famously laid-back beaches on that state's Pacific shores. But I had already been to the beach in Mazatlán, and as much as I enjoy the ocean, I'm just not a lay-around-on-the-hot-sand-all-day kind of guy. Mountains and rivers are more my jam. Also, when I

talked to the locals and posed my choice, every single one of them told me to go to Chiapas. So I took their advice and am damned glad I did.

Chiapas is probably most well-known for what kicked off there on New Year's Day, 1994. Indigenous people, who make up the majority of the region's population, were done with living under the boot of poverty, racism, corruption, and a federal government that did nothing to advance their interests, so they rose up in armed rebellion. Known as the Zapatistas (or EZLN) and led by a balaclava-wearing, pipe-smoking professor known as Subcomandante Marcos, they seized control of most of the state and effectively run much of it today, especially in the countryside. I could feel the presence of the Zapatistas most everywhere I traveled in Chiapas, whether through political graffiti spray painted on the sides of buildings, actual banners and signs sporting red stars and the letters EZLN, or in the eyes of the local people, who, while absolutely open and kind, clearly carried the spirit of resistance and took no shit from anyone.

My first stop was the mountain town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, which, after Guanajuato and Oaxaca, completed the trinity of my Mexican colonial gems. San Cristóbal radiated cobblestone charm, bringing to mind a smaller, more hippified version of Oaxaca. The place had a soft, welcoming feel, and it was cool being in a town where, with the exception of the churches, every single building was just one story high. I'm not sure if this was because of the frequent earthquakes or just to create a certain look, but it resulted in a small-town feel, despite the fact that the place is home to nearly two hundred thousand people.

I stayed at a hostel called Los Camellos ("The Camels"), run by a French couple in their fifties. They had been in Chiapas for fifteen years, and seemed to spend the lion's share of their time sitting at a table in the courtyard sipping beer and vino while chain smoking cigarettes and spliffs. Their Mexican partner did much of the actual work, but hey, these Frenchies, in true Gallic fashion, knew how to enjoy life.

Southern Mexico sees a good deal of travelers and backpackers, and the French were highly represented. There were also loads of Spanish, which should come as no surprise, and even a good deal of Italians, for whom speaking Spanish is just a small leap from their own tongue. And while there were a lot of Americans in Oaxaca, I ran into very few in Chiapas, which was fine with me.

After a couple of easygoing days, it was time to move on, but here is where things got tricky. My plan was to head to the town of Palenque, which is home to the famous Mayan ruins, but the main road there, Highway 199, was said to be famous for stick ups. It was evidently so bad that the major bus companies refused to even drive the route, electing

instead to take a detour to the north that added many hours to the already long journey. Private tour companies did travel the road though, and not only that, they stop at two of Chiapas's most famous waterfalls on the way to the ruins. I guess they just viewed getting periodically robbed as a cost of doing business.

I signed up for one of the tours, and at the unholy hour of four, we were off in a minivan, heading onto one of Mexico's most notorious roads in the pitch black. Now I was the only gringo in the vehicle and determined not to show my nerves, as the Mexicans didn't seem fazed at all. They were a nice group of folks and our driver only drove like he did half a line of meth (not the usual suicidal speed), and soon I forgot that we were trundling into potentially hostile territory.

This was EZLN land, the very countryside where the rebellion caught fire, and countless signs and placards on the side of the highway reminded us of that fact. More ominous were the burnt-out husks of trucks left to rust on the side of the road. When asked about it by one of my curious van mates, the driver said that there had been roadblocks and the trucks were torched in protest. He seemed to be very sympathetic towards the Zapatistas (as were most people I met), but somehow I didn't feel so reassured. These little outfits, however, made this trip most every day, and if things were as sketchy as the guidebook and others made it out to be, these companies surely wouldn't be risking it. I got the sense that things had been relatively quiet of late.

After a buffet breakfast in the town of Ocosingo with the vanfuls of other visitors making the run, we pressed on through a gorgeous, semi-tropical mountain landscape, and at half-past eight we had arrived at Cascada Agua Azul, the big waterfall that is a centerpiece of travel in Chiapas. We were among the first there that morning, and the series of cascades were in the height of their summer monsoon power, bursting forth with roaring intensity. This was a wide, if not particularly high set of falls. I was told that in the dry season the water takes on a hue of purer blue (hence the name "Agua Azul"), but this was an impressive movement of water as it was, and after climbing up the series of cascades, I located the big swimming holes, which were perfect pools of deep, cool water, surrounded by rushing white currents. I jumped into the swiftest part and let the power of the water carry me, feeling the river wash away the grime of travel.

The next stop was another waterfall called Misol-Ha (native Ch`ol language for "high falls"), which, as the name suggests, is a high cascade. The selling point of these falls, other than their obvious beauty, is the recess eroded in the rock behind them, allowing visitors to walk and stand directly behind the gushing ropes of the water. The falls pour into a deep pool that forms a kind of small lake, and once again I donned my swim

trunks and dove in, awash in the splendor of clear water, with a backdrop that was the stuff of travel company promotion videos.

But the day wasn't even close to done. This was just the morning introduction. We hadn't even arrived at Palenque! As we descended out of the highlands and into the steamy flat of the jungle, I felt my insides shift with anticipation. This look at ancient Mexico, so close to the border with Guatemala, was to be the exclamation point on the whole trip.

Palenque is an ancient Mayan city that is to have flourished from 226 BC to 799 AD. It was eventually abandoned and reclaimed by the jungle, effectively hiding it from all but very local eyes until the late 1700's, when Europeans finally began to take an interest in the site. To date, only about ten percent of the city has been excavated, but the structures are amazing in their detail and craftsmanship, clearly showing us just how advanced Mayan civilization was.

The ruins greet you right out of the gate, an astounding collection of stone buildings rising from the jungle's grip. The whole place has a mystical, romantic feel, and kind of seductive mystery emanating from the structures themselves, and like the great temples of Angkor, you're allowed to scurry and climb up a lot of it.

As soon as I entered the complex I knew that I had stepped into somewhere extraordinary; I was so awestruck that I could feel the tears well up in my eyes. The only drawback was the hawkers, who were everywhere, selling their trinkets, including jaguar and monkey calls that they blew every thirty seconds, resulting in a cacophony of artificial screeches and howls that hardly served the serenity that the place calls for. Still, unlike the touts of Angkor, the Palenque trinket sellers were pretty sedate, at least when it came to the hard sell. They didn't pester or follow me around demanding a sale. They simply set up their wares along the sides of the paths and half-heartedly hailed as I walked by, if that.

Palenque is more than just a collection of old buildings, however. What really makes it a special place is its natural setting. The verdant, explosive bloom of the jungle rivals the structures themselves; moreover, it complements the crumbling, ashen stones, a kind of white on green color scheme that cannot be anything but pleasant on the eyes. The net effect is a great park in the jungle. Sure, you can go there to explore and traipse around the ruins, but it's also a terrific place to sit, read, or just relax. This is especially true if you go in the morning or early afternoon (the tour vans from San Cristóbal hit around two and the park closes at four thirty). Things are much quieter then, which is really how it should be.

Rather than head back to San Cristóbal like the rest of my unfortunate vanmates, I, on the advice of several folks, elected to stay in Palenque.

There are numerous accommodations just outside of the complex, right in the jungle.

I chose a place called El Panchan, which is a cluster of different cabañas and a restaurant and a bar or two built up right amongst the trees and streams that flow through. I got a cheap, second story room with open screen walls and ceiling fan, a perfect jungle bungalow, and called that home for the next two days.

El Panchan was a cool little complex, with a very hippy, `shroomed out feel. That's probably because most everyone was smoking weed and magic mushrooms were widely available; having blasted through that door of perception many times in my past, I quietly abstained. Chickens and dogs scurried about freely, along with *sereques*, a kind of a petite, Mexican version of the capybara. Most impressive, and slightly terrifying, however, were the howler monkeys.

I didn't experience them until my first morning. I had just opened my eyes, when somewhere, in the thick of the trees nearby, I heard what at first sounded like someone dragging metal across pavement. This gave way to a deep, soul scouring gasp, and I soon became aware that it was an animal making this noise, that a cute, furry creature could produce a ghoulish growl that seemed to spring from the deep eye of hell.

The howler monkeys were an extraordinary element in Palenque, lending the place a chilling, wild flavor. What made things even more ominous is that I never actually saw them. I just heard that eerie howl, most often at the witching hours of three or four in the morning. I was told that the monkeys don't even fight, that the power of the howl itself is enough to scare other males away and establish who gets to be top ape.

On my final day in Chiapas, I decided to get back out in nature for one final session of swimming. I booked a van to the Cascada Roberto Barrio, the third and lesser-known waterfall in the area. Now I was expecting one little falls with a nice pool where you could swim, but was instead greeted by a series of cascades and little lagoons that were the very ideal of tropical paradise. The pools ranged in size and depth from sit-in-able to probably twenty feet deep. Also, the rocks were covered in a very thin layer of slick, aquatic moss (that made for slipper walking), but this also made it possible to slide off the top and down the stone chutes into the pool below, a kind of natural water slide. You had to be careful to hit the smooth of the rock in the right place, but it worked splendidly. I did skin my elbow when heading down the biggest chute, but a bit of blood in the water was a small price to pay for the glorious surroundings that I was allowed to fully and freely enjoy.

Chiapas is an off-the-charts wonderland when it comes to waterfalls and swimming holes, equally on par with Laos, and perhaps better. The

Cascada Roberto Barrio was the best for an afternoon of pure, unfiltered fun out of the three waterfalls I visited. It was perfect for swimming or just chilling in mouth-agape wonder in front of or behind a waterfall that you had all to yourself. And this was a very real possibility as there were maybe thirty people at the whole site. There was almost no one there, and it was one of the most remarkable spots in nature that I've had the pleasure of not just visiting, but of relishing.

Later that night I was sitting in a cheap plastic chair at a cheap plastic table at "Coco Loco," one of the little jungle bars of El Panchan. It was deadly humid, and I was sipping a Dos Equis with my new friend Juan. Juan was a local indigenous guy who spoke both Ch`ol and Spanish and had an encyclopedic knowledge of the jungle. His eyes shone with natural intelligence and warmth, and he helped me hone my Spanish by gently correcting my (many) mistakes. I in turn taught him a bit of English, and we drank beers and talked life for two nights straight.

"Juan, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"What do you think of the Zapatistas?"

"I don't 'think' anything of the Zapatistas. I *am* a Zapatista."

"I see."

"This is my home. This is our home. And, this is your home. To be a Zapatista is to be free, and now, Chiapas is free. Free for us to live and free for us to enjoy."

"Well I've certainly done that."

"And you are welcome to it. Because we are Zapatistas. All of us. And I mean *all* of us. That means you, too, are a Zapatista."

Tenochtitlán

The sign entices me. After all, it's a good deal: *Two draft beers for seventy pesos*. I'm hot and dizzy and wrestling with a hangover that's got me pinned to the mat, and at this point more beer is the only thing that's going to lift me out of my blanket of shame. This is pure maintenance drinking, and no, I'm not proud. But it's my last day in the country, and if the *flautas* and bowl of *birria* I took down in the neighboring Mercado de San Juan can't make me feel human again, it's going to have to be the hair of the dog.

The place is bright, but still manages to feel unsavory. A handful of patrons sit scattered at the joint's wooden tables, but it's otherwise empty. I choose a seat in the corner, near the window to the sidewalk and wait to be served.

There's one waitress ferrying beers and cocktails to the clumps of customers, but she doesn't even meet my eye. I ferment for a good ten minutes before she finally saunters my way and gazes over me like she's taking in a smear of dogshit.

"Una cerveza de barril, por favor."

She grunts a "sí," scrawls my order down on her notepad and heads back to the bar. After a few minutes she returns with a cold mug of Indio, which she places on the table without any fanfare.

"Gracias," I say.

She walks away in silence.

As I drain the beer I immediately feel the talons of my hangover loosen. This may be the least welcoming bar of the trip, but coming in was still a good idea, at least when it came to clearing the hiss of last night's session out of my head. My glass sits empty for several more minutes before the waitress puts herself back within hailing distance. *You'd think that she's neglecting me on purpose*. I motion for a refill. She responds with a purse-lipped nod that seems to require the minimum amount of effort possible.

As I sip my second beer, I take in the scene around me. Two tables away a man clutches a mug of draft and is lost in the universe of his smartphone. A clutch of customers stands near the bar, where they down neon blue and orange cocktails. Boat drinks. A damaged-looking dude commands the scene. Half of his head is caved-in and his right eye is googly; he carries on in a high pitched wine before limping over to another table. I

think he's begging for money and hope he doesn't come my way.

I finish my beer and hand the waitress a hundred peso note, followed by the most perfunctory of thanks. She strolls back towards the bar, stops, and then lingers.

Again, I wait. She owes me thirty pesos in change, and when I see that she's now serving other customers and then hanging out and playing with her phone, I know that she has no intention of coming back.

I get to my feet, grab my bag, and walk over.

"Señora, perdón." I hold out my palm. "Mi cambio, por favor."

She shrugs, reaches into her apron, and hands over my change.

I shake my head, stroll back to the table, and lay down a ten peso tip. Sure, she was awful, but she did bring me my beer, and I suppose that's worth something.

As I make my way to the exit, I feel the hot glare of everyone in the room. As soon as I push against the door, a booze-soaked old crone seated nearby lets fly a torrent of abuse my way. It's far too fast and slurred for me to comprehend, but the "pinche gringo!" spat in the end is laced with pure poison.

I shoot across the threshold, gulp down a lungful of stale air and scurry off, double time. As I tromp past the taco carts and weave my way through the crowded sidewalk, a brass band strikes up in the middle of the street. The wail of the horns intermingles with the rattle of traffic and shouts of human voices.

Welcome to the big town.

*

Mexico City is a heaving metropolis that is nearly too large to fully contemplate. You see this first hand coming into town. It's a tapestry of neighborhood after neighborhood spread out over the old lake bed and smothering the hillsides that roll up from the vast flatlands. Punctuating this seething mass are snowcapped volcanic peaks looming over the city like sentinels. There is a power here, an ancient force that existed before human beings, and will certainly remain long after we are gone.

I spent three days walking its streets, pushed forward by the gravity and verve of the city itself. I was surrounded by a kind of kineticism of human movement and will. There were people everywhere, buying and selling

and shouting out, while others moved like the tide, as cars and buses and motorcycles clattered and honked and roared down the city's wide streets.

Mexico City is a great city, by some measures the most populous in the world. In some ways it reminded me of the big cities of East Asia, like Shanghai or Bangkok or even Tokyo. The ground-level energy of the place definitely had an Asian flair, and for that I liked it.

I thought I'd known street food, but what I found in Mexico city surpassed anything I'd experienced beforehand. The options were seemingly infinite: tacos, tortas, gorditas, tostadas, flautas, sopes, *huaraches*, and quesadillas (and others with names I couldn't even recognize) were served up with heaps of toppings at cart after cart, along with burgers and hot dogs and sushi rolls and fried potatoes and fruit and pizza and you name it, you could munch it. There were cheap, delicious eats everywhere I turned: the aromas hit you before you see the good and you may regret that there's a limit to how much you can take down, because if you're like me, you just want to eat it all.

The town crackles with a palpable creative energy, the collective result of the myriad ways people dream up to make art and moreover, make a living, which often becomes an art of its own. This is a bustling, pulsating city of constant reinvention and improvisation and it lends CDMX (the official moniker) a kind of electricity and deep coolness that left me slightly in wonder. There is mojo here, and the *chilangos* (CDMX residents) know it, because they're cultivating it.

During my final days in Mexico I called Roma Norte home, a neighborhood of leafy, tree-lined streets, art deco-style homes, cafes, restaurants, and little bars. Roma deserves its reputation for chillness and cool vibes. It had definitely been hipstered out, with loads of tattooed, skinny-jeans youth, but they hadn't seemed to have taken over everything. That said, Roma was still a refuge and stronghold for the city's upper middle class. But that made it nice, and moreover, (relatively) safe, because Mexico City is a place where security is always a concern.

I spent most of my time here walking and eating, hitting the street stands and market stalls for Mexican food that has always satisfied and often knocked my socks off. I can't emphasize enough just how deep the food goes here---not just in CDMX---but the country as a whole. Fifteen years of living and travelling in Asia and a month in Mexico have made me realize just how deprived I was of great food growing up in middle class white bread America (and my mom could cook). I ate well as a kid, but still had no idea of what food could be.

There is so much culture to soak up in Mexico City, and I can only admit to dipping my toe in the water. I tried to get into the National Palace to take in the famous Diego Rivera murals, but it was closed to visitors during my

short stay. I instead checked out the Museum of El Colegio de San Idelfonso, which features some of the nation's other great murals. While they do have one small Rivera (his first), this museum showcases the work Jose Clemente Orozco, Rivera's contemporary. I love murals because they tell a story; there's almost always a narrative at work, and through the lens of struggle and history, it can be heartbreaking. Orozco certainly doesn't disappoint in this regard, where, on the walls of this old college, he vividly depicts bloodsoaked story of the nation, from conquest to revolution.

The museum was located right next to the Plaza del Zócalo, the central square that is surely the town's most famous landmark. As I made my way onto the plaza, I slowly spun around, taking in the ornate forms of the National Palace and other government buildings, along with the twin bell towers of the cathedral, a stone behemoth erected atop the ruins of the Aztec Templo Mayor. As I looked up, a gargantuan Mexican tricolor flapped in the afternoon breeze. Pregnant clouds hung low overhead, and the cool taste in the air reminded me that I was well over two thousand meters up. As I breathed it all in, my body was awash with a feeling of deep satisfaction. I had done it: I had traveled overland from the very edge of the country to within a spit of the Guatemalan border, and here I was, concluding my journey in the physical, historical, and spiritual heart of the country.

Mexico City is an infinite, ever-shifting beast, and it's hard to put my finger on just what makes it so cool. It's a place dripping with art and culture and history and hustle, and while there is certainly still the crime and sketchiness that made it infamous in the past, I got the feeling that Mexico City had cleaned up its act just enough to no longer frighten people away. Sure, there was still plenty of edge to the knife, but it was certainly a more approachable destination than before. This was a vital metropolis where real people were doing extraordinary things, breathing life into the nation as a whole.

On my final day in Mexico I hit a couple of markets, including the foodie paradise of Mercado de San Juan, followed by a visit to Tianguis Cultural del Chopo, a great punk rock/metal flea market that goes down every Saturday afternoon. Snaking down a sides street for several city blocks, this gathering seemed to attract every black-clad rock and roller in the capital, while cloaked in an ever-present white cloud of weed smoke. There were clothes, boots, jackets, hats, belts, stickers, vinyl, pipes, bongos, patches, banners, books, and posters for sale, all set to the soundtrack of frenetic three-chord punk and the sludgy dirge of death metal. A live band rocked out on a small stage at the end of the concourse, surrounded by a few anarchists hawking books and zines on the edge of the little plaza. It was cool to be once again surrounded by the music and subculture that helped define my life for so many years. And

from what I saw, these Mexican rockers weren't fucking around: they were clearly down with the cause of rock and roll and living it for real.

With just a few hours before I had to head to the airport, I had one last mission in mind: tacos, of course. It was now almost midnight, and many of the street stalls in the area had shuttered for the evening. Still, in Mexico City there's always a place to get your fix, and soon I found myself making a beeline towards a brightly lit open-air tent where the aroma of garlic, onion, chili peppers, and cooking meat saturated the air.

I claimed the single unoccupied plastic stool, and soon had a plate with two obese *tacos campechanos*—corn tortillas piled high with grilled beef, chicharrón, and longaniza sausage. I had discovered this mixed grill delight upon arriving in the capital, where I found that it reigned supreme.

A family of four sat next to me: a set of parents with their twenty-something son and daughter. I tried to savor every second as we hunkered over those ridiculously low stools, noshing away on tacos so good they just may be able to move the earth. As I came up for air, I turned to the young woman and smiled.

"They're good, no?" she asked.

"The best," I replied. "I think I might cry."

"Go ahead," she said. "I think we'd understand."

"Here." Her brother handed me a fist full of tissue. "For the sauce," he clarified. "Not the tears."

I looked down at my hands. They were streaked in meat juices and salsa stains.

"Oh, gracias," I laughed, wiping off the remnants of this last supper.
"Gracias."

"De nada," he said. "De nada. Welcome to Mexico."

About the Author



Originally hailing from Pacific Northwest, Chris Tharp is the author of *Dispatches from the Peninsula* and *The Worst Motorcycle in Laos*, both available on Signal 8 Press. He's a regular contributor to National Geographic Traveller UK, and his award-winning writing has appeared in Green Mountains Review, Foreign Literary Journal, enRoute Magazine, Matador Network, The San Diego Reader, and many others. He lives in Busan, Korea, with his wife Minhee and a houseful of animals.

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