

RIDING EL CHEPE

NORTHERN MEXICO BY TRAIN



CHRIS THARP

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by Chris Tharp

Already There

I was still in Phoenix, but it sure felt like Mexico. As I sat in the one-room bus station in that sprawl of a town, I was surrounded by a flurry of travelers chatting in the lilt of Mexican Spanish. All the posters were in Spanish, as were the handwritten paper signs clinging to the greasy glass with Scotch tape. I had even mustered my best Spanish when I purchased my ticket: “*Un boleto para Los Mochis, por favor.*” The girl behind the window humored me for few sentences until I hit a snag in comprehension. Sensing my confusion, she switched to flawless, unaccented English, which caused my face to heat up and redden like a tomato. I’d made a pretty good stab at it, but I hadn’t regularly spoken the language for nearly fifteen years. My tongue had atrophied. The only way to give it life would be to speak the damned thing, which, judging from my first go, was going to be a messy endeavor.

I was the only *guero* in the room, but people paid me no mind. In fact, as far as bus stations went, it wasn’t so bad. It was well-lit and clean-ish. It didn’t reek, and it certainly had any Greyhound terminal beat. There was none of the drug-soaked detritus that so often washes up at such a place. No junkies, no crackheads, no tweakers—no sketch cases nodding, scratching, or twitching about. The people in and outside of this station were honest folks on their way back home. They were happy to be on the move and it showed in their loose shoulders and broad, uneven smiles.

It was a Friday night and the place was abuzz with kids, grandparents, men, and fleshy women in jeans that often threatened to burst. An old man approached. He wore a checkered shirt, tan chinos, and the white cowboy hat ubiquitous to northern Mexico. He sported a mustache and was traveling with a dark, diminutive woman. She gave me a shy, sugary smile as the two of them squeezed past to take a seat on one of the faux-stainless steel chairs bolted to the bench frame next to me. I eavesdropped as she talked over her phone to who I gathered to be her daughter, picking up bits and pieces of the conversation. She was obviously thrilled for the upcoming reunion somewhere south of the line.

I was hungry and I had some time to kill, so I got up and wandered in the dark around the side of the building and through the parking lot to a food truck parked across the way. A line of multi-colored Christmas lights blinked from the edge of a canopy that was attached to the truck. Beneath was a collection of red plastic tables, at which sat a smattering of men and a few women taking down their food from white, disposable plates. I took a seat of my own, ordered, and was soon tucking into three tacos al pastor washed down with the long-necked glory that is a bottle of Mexican Coke. As I savored this exquisite little meal, I took in the overcooked action of the *telenovela* flashing on the TV screen above and was soon filled with a warm bloom of pure happiness. Sure I had yet to cross the border, but this

was already the Mexico I was seeking—colorful, humble, and absolutely delicious.

Why Mexico? Why not just continue to chill poolside at brother's place in Phoenix? Certainly that would have been easier, cheaper, and—at least according to news reports—safer. While I did enjoy a few terrific days with my family, they were now getting back to their routines of life and work. I still had a week free and was just a couple of hours from another country—an intriguing, tragic, and brilliant place that continued to pull me like magnetic ore. How could I not go?

The fact is Mexico had been calling me for a long time. Aside from a few short visits years before to a couple of towns near the border, I had seen almost nothing of the place, despite the fact that it had long been an object of my fascination. After moving to Korea I got to explore much of Asia, but Mexico and greater Latin America had managed to stay out of reach, if for no other reason than that they just were so far away. Sure, I'd been back to the States every couple of years, but adding a second country to the itinerary of a trip back home had always seemed like a theft of precious time.

This time, however, I resolved myself to go. This compulsion to taste a deeper version of Mexico had steeped in my bones for years now, through the books I'd read, the music I'd listened to, and the food I'd cooked in my little kitchen back in Busan. Hell, I'd even started making my own corn tortillas. So when my bus finally pulled up, I boarded it with the enthusiasm of an astronaut about to blast into space. Screw it. I was going to Mexico, *cabrón*.

El Fuerte

We crossed the border at Nogales around 2 A.M., and despite a half-assed inspection of our bags (presumably for American guns heading south), they waved us through without even glancing at our passports. After that the bus shot straight down the east coast of Sea of Cortez, through the towns of Hermosillo, Guaymas, Ciudad Obregon, and Navajoa, before pulling into Los Mochis, which lies at the northern end of the notorious narco-infested state of Sinaloa. I hopped off, grabbed a taxi downtown, and boarded a local bus to take me up into the countryside. Two hours later we pulled into my first destination of the trip: El Fuerte. It had taken me nearly eighteen hours to get there, but I was immediately glad I had come.

Towns in Mexico can be uninspiring places of utility and commerce, or seductive, multi-hued historical jewels. El Fuerte could confidently claim place in the latter camp. It was a colonial town built around a wide plaza and stone church whose steeple towered above the aging settlement. The streets were also made of stone and the buildings painted in shades of

lime green, ochre, crimson, and sky blue. The afternoon sun blasted down in vivid slats, while palm trees and overhanging roofs gave ample shade in which big dogs lazed. As I strolled through the town's streets, I couldn't help but notice a dignified shabbiness surrounding me: the sidewalks and doorways and walls were all slightly cracked and crumbling. Nothing was too shiny or overly done-up. This was no museum piece, but rather a very lived-in town with its own story to tell. El Fuerte was a beautiful place that made no efforts to obscure the patina of age. This honesty only served to enhance its charms.

I checked into the Hotel Guerrero, which offered up basic rooms in a courtyard colonial style. After showering off a day's worth of road grime, I locked the room's gargantuan metal door that just may have come from a jail (very reassuring) and made my way out into the common area. A tall white woman in bright hippie pants stood with her nose buried in a French edition of the Lonely Planet. This came as no surprise, as I was at the northern end of the Gringo Trail (the Latin American backpackers' circuit), but I still had to momentarily get my bearings. For just that second, I could have been in a guesthouse in Vietnam, Thailand, or Laos.

Once again confident that I wasn't in Banana Pancake Land, I headed out the gates of the compound in search of some grub. This was a daunting task, since the town was bursting with cheap, drool-inducing choices. After nearly pulling the trigger at a ceviche stand, I settled on a stall offering up tacos at the street market just across from my humble hotel. Why reinvent the wheel? When I go to Bangkok, my first meal is usually a plate of pad Thai. The taco, to me, is the very definition of Mexico. What better way slide back into the country?

So I sat my ass down and ordered up three tacos de *carnitas*. A young guy manned the grill in front of us, which hissed and sizzled under a mountain of finely chopped pork. He loaded up six corn tortillas (doubled up, street style) with the steaming meat and topped them off with a generous layer of grilled onions, which was a taco first for me. I, in turn, slathered them in their homemade red and green salsa, added a few pinches of fresh, fragrant cilantro, and dug in.

The pork was succulent and the grilled onions added a burnt sweetness that just added to the melody of flavors. These tacos were even better than I expected. I groaned with each bite. I saw fireworks. I wanted to weep. The two guys eating next to me looked up from their own little plates of heaven, nodded, and smiled.

Now that I had some food in my belly, the next order of business was ice cold beer, which, to my luck, Mexico happens to do quite well. During my previous visits to the country I had passed a lot of time sipping cervezas in shabby little bars with boozy *Norteño* polkas blaring at volumes unacceptable and I was determined to replicate the experience. So I jumped off the stool and began a quest for a cantina.

My wish was granted just a few doors down. I came across a white doorway with the word "BAR" painted in unadorned letters above. Accordion music accompanied by bravado vocals blasted forth, and I girded myself for entry.

Now entering unknown bars in foreign countries (not to mention small towns back home) can be an intimidating experience. Mexico is no exception, especially when you're alone. To top things off, this bar, like most in the region, had no windows out front through which I could peek in and make the call whether or not to enter. But I was determined to have that beer, so I sucked in a lungful of hot, Sinaloa air and made the plunge.

The bar was a boxy, one-room affair, windowless and brightly lit by sickly radiating fluorescents. About ten men sat a few tables, all of whom sported white cowboy hats. My eyes darted from table to table as I walked towards the bar itself, but aside from a couple of glances, most of the old boys paid me no mind. Once I made it across the room, I greeted the bartender.

"Buenas tardes."

"Buenas tardes," he returned, wiping his hands on a bar towel.

I ordered a single can of Tecate, paid, and retired to a small table against the bare concrete wall. The beer was arctic and gave new life to my dry throat. I took down half the can in two swallows.

There were several televisions bolted to the walls overhead. Companionless and still feeling squirrely, I glanced up at a TV in the far corner, expecting to see footage of a soccer game or a talk show. I was instead greeted by the moving image of a naked black guy (with a rod like a coffee table leg) giving a white woman a hard backdoor delivery. He drilled the hell out her while she gasped in pain or pleasure or perhaps a mixture of both. As I checked out the other TVs in the bar, I saw that they too were broadcasting the same slamming anal action. A few of the men seated across from me glanced up at the screens, while most of the other sipped their beer and chatted with a studied nonchalance.

While I don't consider myself a prude, a bar blasting hardcore porn from its monitors isn't the kind of place I'm prone to relax in, regardless of the country. I was already feeling self-conscious enough, so, I drained the remnants of the can, thanked the barman, and made a beeline for outside.

I wandered in search of a less penetrative experience, and soon found myself outside another joint with festive music pumping. This was a larger place with a much more palpable energy afoot. I could just glimpse people up and moving inside, so I leaned into the swinging doors and crossed the threshold.

To my great pleasure, I saw that the music pouring forth was being played live by proper little *Norteño* band—bass, guitar, and accordion. Again, the clientele was primarily the white cowboy hat brigade, with a few women sprinkled in. The one TV in the room was playing an actual soccer game, so I knew right away that I had come to the right place.

I ordered a large bottle of Tecate (served in a mini bucket of ice) and nestled myself at a small table in the middle of the room, where I soaked in the splendor of local music played masterfully by a local band. Soon, a silver-haired old vaquero ascended the stage and joined the trio as a singer. His soaring vocals glided over the tight notes and rhythms of the combo, reaching points both mournful and joyous—often at the same time.

The music washed over me as I took down the sweet Tecate from the tiny plastic cup accompanying the bottle. My head bobbed and my body began to sway as I melted into the chair, and soon I felt the eyes of the room warming to me. They seemed to get that I was appreciating their thing, that my love for the music and surroundings was genuine.

One guy in particular kept looking my way and waving. He was an emaciated old dude with a pair of jeans cinched up with a frayed piece of rope. His deep lined face was a roadmap of the ravages of booze. I braced for the worst as he staggered my way. Years in Korea had taught me that being a foreigner all too often makes me a magnet for the worst drunk in the room. Why shouldn't this translate to Mexico?

Once he reached my table, the teetering old *borracho* held out his bony, calloused hand. As I gripped it, I looked into his foggy eyes, where I saw no malice. Just two tables over a big man shook his head, as if to say, "That guy is bad news," but for the moment I was cornered.

The skinny dude now addressed me in a slurred waterfall of words that I had no hope of understanding. I just smiled and concentrated my energy upon the stage, hoping he'd lose interest and just leave me be. Swaying above me, my new amigo struggled to retrieve a pack of cigarettes from his front pocket. Despite his state of hyper-inebriation, he managed to fish out three and deposit them on the table as a gift. He then pointed to the door, brought his hands up next to his head in a pantomime of sleep, and weaved his way out of the bar.

The band finished its set and I got another beer. As I walked back to my seat, I was greeted by a man at a neighboring table.

"Are you alone?" he asked. "Come sit with us."

His name was Luis. He was a big-bellied man in his mid-40's. He told me that he was recently divorced, so he was now free to spend his Saturdays boozing it up without getting nagged. His companion must have been north of 70—another aged bag of bones beneath a white cowboy hat.

Soon a much younger long-haired dude pulled up a chair, completing the quartet. Luis ordered more beer from a rather flamboyant waiter who walked with what could only be described as a pronounced sashay.

“He is a *maricon*,” remarked Luis. “*Un joto*.” He had managed to casually employ two pejoratives for “homosexual” in just one breath. His two companions nodded in silence, as if to confirm an unmovable truth.

Some patrons whistled as the waiter swished by. More than one grabbed his ass.

“Is this a problem around here?” I asked.

“No, he’s fine here, “the young guy answered. “Everyone knows him. He can do what he wants. It’s no problem.”

Soon the band retook the stage, thankfully delaying any more discussion of homosexuality in small town Mexico. Luis and I traded rounds of Tecate, dissolving ourselves into the endless stream of traditional tunes. What is it about this kind of music that goes so well with drinking? It’s the perfect soundtrack to throwing it back. Music for drunks, made by drunks...

The music and beer flowed on, melting the hours into one moving mass. It was an afternoon and evening of pure magic—exactly what I was after—but by 9 o’clock I’d hit the wall. After I stood up from the table, said my goodbyes, I stumbled back to the Guerrero, where I called my wife to let her know that I was, indeed, very much alive.

El Chepe

El Chepe is the nickname for the Chihuahua-Pacific Railway, a 637 kilometer line that links the city of Chihuahua with the port of Topolobambo on the Sea of Cortez. For much of its span, it climbs and runs through rugged mountain terrain that’s home to Barranca del Cobre (Copper Canyon), a system of river gorges offering up some of the best scenery in North America. The railway serves as a vital transportation link for locals, as well as a spectacular ride for tourists such as me.

The train was a good 30 minutes late, but eventually the big diesel beast rumbled into a view and came to a stop at the forlorn little station on the plain outside of El Fuerte. People grabbed their bags and made their way to the tracks as the line of cars squeaked and groaned into place. El Chepe generally runs just one train a day each way, so this was our only chance to jump aboard.

A couple of conductors disembarked and helped direct passengers to the appropriate cars, since none of us had actual tickets. You just told them your destination and they responded with a car number. I had done some

research and decided that second class was my best option, since the only advantage to first class seemed to be the

existence of a wildly overpriced dining car. I had eaten a fantastically good breakfast of *birria de chivo* (spicy goat stew) at a street stall back into town, so I was set for food. Second class was said to offer roomy seats and relative comfort, without any other amenities, for a solid one third cheaper than the cars in the front. And even better: by purchasing second class, I avoided the busload of American retirees that poured into one of the front cars from a massive tour bus. While I applaud every one of them for making the trip, travelling with a posse of Yankee silver hairs was the last thing I wanted to do.

Upon boarding, my suspicions were confirmed. My car—the last one in the train—was at best half full. I had my whole row to myself. It was clean and spacious with a seat that leaned back to near bed level. While a visibly drunk dude who I had chatted with on the platform immediately fell into a boozy, snoring sleep, the rest of us were wide awake and excited, as a ride on El Chepe is not something you want to snooze through.

The train clanked and jerked as the engine made its way up the long shot of track towards the hills rising in the distance. A conductor walked down the aisle and collected cash based on our final destination. Mine was the town of Bahuichivo, some four hours up the line. From there I planned to hop onto a local bus and head down into the depths of the canyon to the town of Urique, which, from the cursory research I'd done online, was said to be quite a treat.

But I didn't know. I certainly had no guidebook to continually consult, as I'd made the decision to give up the Lonely Planet some years ago. I like to pack light, and the Lonely Planet is a bulky item. This is why I was amazed to see the hippy-pantsed French woman referencing it just one day before. It just seemed like such unnecessary weight in this age of instant wifi gratification. Do people still need to cart around a three-pound book whose information is invariably inaccurate and out-of-date?

Just an hour into the journey, El Chepe began to climb up into the mountains, and immediately I understood the particular pull of this journey. The plains we had trundled across gave way to rocky shoulders, which in turn became sheer walls. As I sat in my seat, working a crossword, I noticed a few of my fellow passengers shuffling past to the back end of the car. Curious, I got up and followed them.

Two restrooms occupied the left and right ends of the car, with a door in between that led to the outside. I followed a young Mexican couple to that final door, and was somewhat surprised when it opened up. Upon passing through, I realized that this train had no caboose. Our car was indeed the last in line, with just a bit of iron railing between us and the track moving beneath our feet.

El Chepe was by no means a fast train. It pressed forth in a meaningful chug, a determined pull forward with nary a hint of haste. In a way it was perfectly Mexican means of transport—tough, determined, but never in a mad rush.

There was no better place than the actual outside of the train. I leaned over the railing to snap phone shots of the ever-stretching track behind me. The sun doused the scrubby landscape in a hard wash, with a few quilted clouds hanging back as a kind of cottony protection. As the warm air blew across my face, I knew I was living a moment sublime. The rush of the earth and air pierced straight to my spine, and I was immediately high on the fumes of big country.

El Chepe snaked up into the knobby hills, over bridges and tunnels one after another. At one point we trucked over a sizeable river pouring through a broad sandy basin down onto the plain, the mouth of the canyon land that is the trip's main draw. As the train climbed higher, the vegetation transformed from scrub to pine and I could feel the subcutaneous pinprick of the cooling mountain air. Soon I was yawning to pop my ears in an attempt to equalize to the higher elevation, where the lay of the land was suddenly much more eastern Oregon than southern Arizona. The cacti and sand were gone, replaced by green conifers and thumbs of white rock.

As I leaned into the sweet mountain air, I looked to the Mexican couple, both of whom continually snapped away on pricey-looking Japanese cameras. My mouth opened, but my Spanish was far too weak to describe my feelings. I would need deep superlatives, but came up short. Even English did no justice, but still, I tilted out into the wind and exhaled, "Isn't it wonderful?"

Into the Canyon

I jumped off of El Chepe at the town of Bahuichivo—a picturesque hamlet nestled among the mountain pines—and immediately came across three white women carrying big packs. They had been in my train car, and from the sound of their language, I pinpointed them as Dutch. Years of meeting travelers in Southeast Asia had attuned my ear when it came to picking out accents and languages, and Dutch was one of those that I just knew right away.

There were also going to Urique, so we boarded the dusty white minivan heading there and rolled out of town. Our driver was a thin young guy with a soccer player's fauxhawk and thick eyebrows that threatened to meet in the middle. He immediately slammed the gas and began screaming down a narrow road replete with cracks, ruts, and potholes—not to mention dogs, cows, and chickens aplenty. Two of the Dutch women (one blond, one dark-haired) immediately piped up with calls for him to slow down:

¡Tranquilo! ¡Tranquilo!” they cried. In emphatic Spanish, one of them told him that she had been in a car wreck just a few of months before due to speeding and had no interest in repeating the experience. Laughing nervously, our driver smiled, nodded, and just barely let off the gas.

We soon pulled off into a kind of mountain depot with a couple of school busses parked outside. This is a common sight in Mexico, since they routinely buy old American school busses and reuse them for public transportation. A dozen or so locals milled about in front, while a tough-looking woman in jeans and a ponytail (who had been riding shotgun with us) got out, slid open the passenger door, and informed us in military-sounding Spanish that we’d now be transferring to a very shitty looking school bus sitting next to the van. The thing was covered in dirt and grime and most every window had at least one major crack. We could see a number of locals sitting inside its dark cavity.

Now all of us had agreed to pay 230 pesos (around \$15) for the two-hour ride, which, while not exactly a king’s ransom, wasn’t really a bargain, either. We knew we were being charged the “gringo price,” which didn’t bother me so much, as I think double-tiered pricing in parts of the world where people are seriously poor is just fine. What bothered me—and the Dutch trio—was that they were changing up vehicles on us. We were initially led to believe we’d get to ride to Urique in a private van, but now we were being foisted off onto a filthy bus that looked like it was held together with glue and baling wire. And we hadn’t even seen the inside. Though two of the Dutch women spoke good Spanish, I nominated myself to make a stand.

I jumped out of the van and located the woman in charge.

“If you are... changing vehicles...” I sputtered... “then... you have to change the price.”

“No, no. Everyone pays the same price.”

“But we paid for the van. Not this old bus.”

“You are taking the bus.”

“But it is not fair. “

“230 pesos is the price. Or you can walk.”

She had us by the collective ballbag and we had no choice but admit defeat. Before we knew it they were tossing our bags from the roof of the van into the bowels of the jalopy. We soon followed, slinking onto the crowded little school bus and squeezing into our seats, where we took our hosing in grim silence.

Not only did the passengers change vehicles, but so did the driver. The Dutch women groaned as our smiling speed demon sat down at the

controls. They understood clearly that he was about to navigate us down the narrowest of roads that descended into a very deep hole in the earth, a place where one miscalculation would mean the death of us all.

The bus was now filled to capacity, with four foreigners and local folks of all ages and sizes. We found this out very clearly just before departure, when a young woman lumbered on board with her daughter, who must have been about five years old. At this point there were no seats left, so she and her little girl were forced to stand as the old bus herked and jerked out of the depot and onto the main road.

I felt sorry for this woman and for a moment I was seized with the impulse to surrender my seat, but one good look at her mammoth ass quickly disabused me of such a notion. Her ass was so big that it nearly managed to touch edges of the seats on either side of the aisle. To top it off, she had it squeezed into a pair of short shorts which did little to contain the cascade of blubber. The ass fat just fell out of the bottom, huge slabs of cheek being called the ground by that brutal bitch named "gravity."

Feeling the eyes of the bus drawn to her beef flanks, she kept trying to pull down the tiny strips of denim in a futile attempt at modesty, but they were invariably pulled back up while that ass just made a run for her feet. There was simply no way she was going to fit into just one seat. I tried to avert my eyes, but each jostle of the bus shook her cheese in tectonic waves, and I just couldn't help but stare.

Luckily, our creaky bus pulled into another improvised station just 20 minutes down the road. Much to my relief, the woman and her daughter exited the vehicle, though I'm sure some of the local boys were more than happy to have such an addition to the area's landscape.

We soon pulled off the main road onto a very rough gravel track which brought us out along the top of the Urique Canyon. It was gorgeous country. The river carved out its path over millions of years, revealing golden and red rock that rose from the verdant valley in sheer magnificence. The sky was a brilliant blue, with blossoms of white and purplish clouds hovering just over the spires. Far below we could see the silvery brown thread of river snaking through the bed of the canyon, with the settlement of Urique laid out as a motley assortment of colorful buildings. It was the kind of scenery that punches you in the chest; all I could do was gasp in a kind of blissful disbelief.

But the savoring of the canyon's grandeur was interrupted by our maniacal driver, who blasted the bus along the tiny gravel track a rate that made our hearts sprint. With each jerk forward and hard corner we left claw marks in the seats in front of us.. The dark haired Dutchie (Katja) who sat across from me was especially horrified, having just recently survived a crash. Along with Jessica (the blond), she again protested, admonishing the

driver to slow down. “We don’t want to die!” they shouted. “We don’t want to die!”

And “die” is exactly what would happen. This particular route was blasted out of the face of the cliff, with sheer drop-offs of thousands of feet at the road’s edge. This left zero room for error, yet our driver lurched and careened as if there was no danger in the world.

We were offered a respite when we turned off and stopped at the *mirador*, a large viewpoint with metal platforms bolted onto the lip of the cliff. This installation offered vistas of the whole valley, opening up the wide expanse of canyon for all of us to take in. We took turns snapping photos and breathed in the pure air before once again boarding our rolling tube of death.

As we began to drop back into the canyon, I noticed that our driver was having trouble with the gears. He was grinding them pretty hard, and at one point he just stopped for a while and revved the engine in neutral, as if he had lost the gear altogether. I took advantage of the pause in horror to retrieve a small bottle of Jameson that I had stashed in my pack. I immediately unscrewed the cap and took a few hot swigs to dull the sharp edge of fear slicing up my insides.

After more revving and clashing metal he found his gear and we throttled forward once more, only now the bus picked up even more speed. His driving became extra-erratic, jerking and weaving within inches of the road’s killer edge.

The locals rode in seemingly unconcerned silence, while the four of us looked on with faces drained of blood. I was seriously pondering the possibility that this may be it, that at any moment we were going over. After all, we read about deadly mountain bus plunges all the time. Who was to say that I couldn’t go out that way, in a crushing tumble of glass, rock, metal, bone and blood?

I had been on these hell rides before—on a crowded Vietnam highway, in a minivan in Sumatra, on the Karakorum Highway in far western China—and each time had come face to face with real, cold sweat fear. Here I was again. I thought of a passage from Paul Theroux’s “Riding the Iron Rooster,” where his own terrible driver crashes the car while heading balls-to-the-wall through the mountains to Tibet:

“It infuriated me that this had happened on a dry road, under clear skies, so early in the trip. Now we were stuck, and it was because of the incompetence of Mr. Fu. He had been driving too fast. But it was also my own fault for having said nothing.”

Inspired by Theroux, I resolved to raise my voice, but Jessica beat me to it. She had had her fill. She shot up the aisle of the heaving vehicle and shouted, in very demanding Spanish, “What part of ‘slow’ do you not

understand? Are you crazy?? Do you want to die???" Our driver grimaced, and the two of them continued with a short, hurried conversation.

Jessica threw up her arms, turned back towards us, and announced in loud English, "THE BUS IS BROKEN. HE SAYS HE CANNOT USE THE LOW GEAR. IT'S NOT SAFE FOR ANY OF US." Switching back to Spanish, she shouted "Stop! Open the door! I'm not riding on this bus any longer!"

Abashed, the driver obeyed and brought the bus to a halt. She wrote down his number so she could later track down her bags, and motioned to her two companions, who got up and walked down the narrow aisle in solidarity.

For a moment I froze. After all, I had supported their attempts to get this driver to slow down. For me, the most nerve-wracking aspect of traveling in less-developed countries is the stupidly aggressive way that so many people drive. I hate it. The fact that these women weren't putting up with it made them heroes in my eyes. On the other hand, we were on a mountainside somewhere in... Mexico. Could we just jump off this bus and expect everything to turn out okay?

Of course we could.

I grabbed my light pack and joined their walk out.

As the bus rolled away, we were left with nothing but the rocks, earth, wind, and clouds. I was decked out in my new light hikers that I had picked up for this trip, but the women were in flimsy little flip-flops and totally unprepared for a long slog down a road with jagged rocks jutting forth like so many crude arrowheads.

We were probably about halfway down the mountain. We could clearly see Urique below us, with the road making countless switchbacks in its seemingly never ending descent. Any way you cut it, we had a long way down.

As we walked (with a lot of sliding and stumbling on their part), I learned their story: Jessica and Katja were doctors. They had been working at a hospital in Mexico's southernmost (and poorest) state of Chiapas. Sylvia, Jessica's sister, was a mother of three back in the Netherlands and had flown into Tijuana for a visit. They had spent several days travelling in Baja, before taking the ferry across the gulf to Los Mochis, where they jumped on El Chepe. They planned to continue on to Chihuahua City before heading back to Chiapas, and Europe, respectively. They were enjoying bit of girls' adventure, only now with a random American man thrown in.

We hiked down the road into the wide embrace of the canyon, marvelling at the rocks and the sky, which took on a supernatural look. A bruised cloud unleashed a streak of rain onto a nearby mountaintop, with the low

rumble of thunder confirming its presence. It seemed to be wafting our way, but we managed to stay dry on our side of the canyon.

“So what’s it like working at a hospital in Chiapas?” I asked. A large hawk circled overhead.

“It’s a Catholic hospital,” Jessica said.

“Run by nuns,” remarked Katja.

This caught my attention. “Nuns?”

“Yes, but we think they’re actually *brujas*,” Katja replied, using the Spanish word for “witches.”

“That’s right,” said Jessica, laughing. “We’re crazy bitches who work for witches!”

After about an hour on the road we heard the sound of a vehicle crunching on the loose rock behind us. Jessica and Katja waved it down and soon we joined two local dudes sitting in the back of the black pickup. We rode in the rocking bed for about five minutes, until we spied another vehicle heading up the road towards us. It was a red jeep, piloted by none other the driver of our bus. He had been sent to retrieve us.

The four of us jumped down from the back of the black pickup and poured into the jeep. “*¡Tranquilo!*” admonished the women. “*¡Tranquilo!*” Our driver, Damian, was all now all smiles, as if the incident on the mountainside was all forgotten. He pulled a very careful three point turn and, to our relief, delivered us into Urique at a speed that could only be described as geriatric.

Urique

It was around five o’clock on a Sunday evening and the whole town was drunk. As Damian rolled us through its streets, we were greeted by bleary-eyed, swaying men gulping down red and silver cans of Tecate. Music blasted from doorways, balconies, and the few vehicles putting along. People shouted to us as we passed. From the look of things, it seemed like we were catching the tail end of Urique’s all-weekend bender.

The town itself was made up of about three main roads and a minor maze of side streets. The houses and buildings were all just one or two stories, while a number tall trees provided shade from the punishing desert sun. Urique was originally founded as a mining center, but now relied on tourism and local agriculture, not to mention the drug money that was surely circulating through. Damian made sure to point to a few of the “mafia properties” to me, which included the biggest house in town and an

empty motel with a few hard-looking men sitting in the parking lot next to a couple of menacing, black SUV's.

The Urique River gurgled past, penned in by expansive rock fields on either side. Like most deep canyon streams, the silty water resembled a heaving, rolling channel of chocolate milk. A pedestrian footbridge made from cables, chain-link, and wooden slats spanned the river, delivering crossers to a collection of humble houses across the way, as well as the town's baseball diamond.

After driving in circles for the better part of an hour, in what I supposed was an attempt to introduce us to the town, Damian brought us to our guesthouse, a wide, terrific compound of traditional stone outbuildings called "Entre Amigos." The Dutch trio took a private room, while I opted for a bed in the dormitory lodging, which, to my luck, was empty of guests.

We were, in fact, the only people there. Aside from the couple of backpackers I'd seen at my place in El Fuerte—as well as the American senior citizen tour group at the train depot—I hadn't come across any other non-Mexican tourists during my admittedly short time on the road. Foreigners just weren't making the trip and I was absolutely sure this was due to the drug violence that continues to plague northern Mexico. While everything I'd heard and read assured me that—as bad as things may be—tourists are almost never targeted, the bloodshed was enough to keep people away, and Urique was feeling it firsthand.

Still, I was glad to have a private room for the price of dorm.

- The two nights and days I spent in Urique were hallucinatory. I could wax for pages, but in the interest time, it's best to boil it down to just a few snapshots:

The food at Restaurante Plaza, where Dona Tita offered up down home fare that scratched a deep itch. Each meal was a massive plate of rice, beans, beef or pork fried with garlic and chili peppers or slabs of fish, all served up with lettuce, avocado, salsa, and flour tortillas. It was the food of the home, of the family. Dona Tita was a woman in her 60's and respected throughout the town. She kept a cat that, every night, slept on a shelf over a portrait of her late husband. She told me that the cat never much cared for her husband when he was alive, but now honored his memory. "Animals, know these things," she said.

- Endlessly cruising the circuit of the town with Damian while the weekend's party staggered to its conclusion. Over the course of the evening I bought several six packs of Tecate at the walk-up open air beer mart and shared them with him and anyone else who needed a one (which turned out to be a lot). They sold the cans in plastic bags that include a scoopful of ice. Damian cranked the Mexi-music as he

drank and drove at around the town at 5 mph, introducing me to *el patron* (his boss), his very pretty wife and son, as well as a long chain of friends and relatives, including his cousin—an M-16 wielding cop who gave me a handshake and Damian a couple of smokes.

- Hiking up the canyon along the dirt road skirting the river in the press of the afternoon heat. After an hour I was forced to turn back, dizzy from the early signs of heat exhaustion. I revived myself by plunging into the cheap, algae-choked above-ground swimming pool of the *Entre Amigos* compound, which was also home to actual, live fish.
- Doing a crossword and sipping an ice-cold Dos Equis in the shaded courtyard of the guest house while the compound's cat lounged nearby.
- Bisecting a nasty-looking black scorpion as I whacked it off the side of the candlelit wall of the shared bathroom/shower outbuilding with a broom handle. I didn't want to kill the thing, but its presence in such a intimate space was just too much to bear.

Urique was a charming vortex, and I regret that I didn't have more time to spend there, to do a proper canyon hike, or even a horseback trip. This was driven home as we boarded the white minivan for the trip back up to the canyon rim to the Chepe stop at Bahuichivo. *El patron* (Damian's boss who seemed to own all of the vehicles that got us to and around town) implored us to come back and see and do more, and to also tell our friends to come—that Urique was actually a safe destination.

This was the overriding mantra I heard during my week in northern Mexico: *Tell people to come. It's good here. Really.*

Back on the Train

As we pulled out of Bahuichivo, memories of the past several days flashed before me: the boozy, musical afternoon in the El Fuerte cantina; the enchanting train ride into the mountains; the close shave with death on the canyon road; the splendid chaos and grandeur of Urique. All of it added up to a heady string of hours, the kind of travel I hadn't properly tasted for years now.

By my standards this was to be a short trip—just a week—so I was wringing it out for all it was worth. Perhaps the time limitation forced me jump into things head first and do my best to truly live in the moment. What I do know is that most everything that had transpired since I stepped off the bus in Los Mochis only reaffirmed why I do this—why I find this kind of travel so intoxicating. I've found few other avenues that come close to charging me with such an electrifying sense of freedom.

El Chepe weaved through the highlands now, a world of pines, small farms, and white rock formations approaching the psychedelic. It was a bright, sun-soaked land of big sky and blooming clouds. Again, I was reminded of the American West, before chiding myself on the worthlessness of such comparisons. The land itself was the same on either side of the border; it will always be indifferent to those very temporary, large lines drawn up by small men. A magnificent stone spire doesn't give a damn about the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and it never will.

One of the more thrilling parts of the trip took place when we passed the El Chepe train heading the opposite direction. There are only two trains each day—one heading east from Los Mochis, and one heading west from Chihuahua. The moment the two meet is cause for celebration for the passengers and crew on both sides. I leaned out between two of the cars and cheered, and was met with smiles and fanfare from people on the sister train. It was a very simple, childlike moment of recognition, of saying, *Hey, we're all doing this same thing and it's a hell of a lot of fun.*

After a couple of hours, the train pulled into the stop known as El Divisadero. This popular viewing and access point sits atop the rim of the canyon and is home to a cluster of luxury hotels, along with a ramshackle track side complex of handicraft and food stalls. One look and whiff had my mouth gushing, despite the fact that I had bought and taken down three excellent tamales during the ride there. I just couldn't resist the pull of freshly prepared fare offered up by local women from humble little food stands.

We were now in Tarahumara Indian country, and many of these women were natives, dressed in colorful shirts, headscarves, and long skirts. The smoky aroma of frying meat hung in the air, underscored by the constant sizzle of the pans. One stall caught my eye, and I soon walked away with two thick flour cakes—*gorditas*—over which the woman heaped fat little piles of pork cooked up with loads of onions, spices, and red chilli peppers. I spooned on two kinds of salsa and tucked into these juicy, hot, delectable treats, eating just for eating's sake. The fact that I wasn't even hungry never entered into it. This was a chance to experience a native take on Mexican street food, and there just was no way I wasn't getting down.

Afraid that the train would pull away, I hurried back aboard, where I sat for another 15 minutes. El Chepe makes a 20-minute stop at El Divisadero to give passengers a chance to visit the viewpoint that looks out over the expanse of canyon. This fact must have sailed past my ears (or cerebral Spanish comprehension center) when they announced it as we pulled in. I somehow didn't get the memo and missed out the big photo op and vista, but those *gorditas* were so damned good that I didn't care.

A Town with No Bars

I jumped off El Chepe in the town of Creel, which serves as the tourist base camp for the whole Copper Canyon region. It's full of hotels, restaurants, and companies that book excursions in or around the surrounding canyon land. After a few days in the hinterlands, I felt firmly back in the realm of civilization.

I really had no idea where to stay, so I threw my fate into the hands of a hotel tout who greeted me when I walked off the train. I've dealt the touts and hawkers throughout my travels and have learned how to ignore or avoid them accordingly, but sometimes they come in use. If you need a accommodation and a guy working with an actual hotel promises to bring to you a decent place to stay, it's not always a bad idea to take him up on the offer. Most hotel touts aren't there to rip you off; they're just trying to get their cut while hooking up the proprietor with guests.

His name was Oscar, and he led me to a more-than-acceptable hotel for a price that seemed fair. I got a fully-outfitted, clean, warm room (Creel is a high elevation town, and it was late October and cold), and he got his commission. This is what scientists call "win-win."

I hadn't hit a proper boozier since El Fuerte, and after talking to my wife and grabbing a couple of quick tacos, I figured that I was overdue for some cantina time. My trip was winding down and I longed for the drunken polka-beat and according squeal of *norteño* music washed down with proper Mexican lager.

I asked Oscar about any bars, and he told me there was a joint on the town's main drag, but numerous trips up and down the strip revealed nothing. Eventually, I came across the place he was presumably talking about, but the lights were off, and a padlocked iron gate stood in front of the door.

Undeterred, I continued my march through the streets of Creel, but my recon proved fruitless. I just couldn't locate a cantina, and the temperature was dropping. It was now see-your-breath cold, and the only real warm-weather clothes I packed were a padded vest and a long-sleeved thermal shirt. My teeth were chattering and I was assed-out from a long day of travel, so I picked up a couple of Tecate tall boys from the shop, trekked back to my hotel room, and sipped *cerveza* while I read a fantasy novel on my Kindle beneath a positive avalanche of blankets.

*

Most people who've haven't visited Copper Canyon have never heard of Creel, but this all changed August 16th, 2008, when the town became another infamous entry in the tragic history of the Mexican drug war. A heavily armed gang in three SUV's pulled up to a group of locals as they talked on the street, got out, and opened fire. By the end, 13 people lay dead, including a baby boy. It was cold-blooded killing, straight up.

The next morning I got up, tracked down a decent cup of coffee, and walked around the layout of the town in an attempt to get my bearings. Soon I came across a large compound housing a high school, and behind it, a massive white mural.

What was once an empty lot had been transformed into a simple memorial for the 13 victims. A plaque listed their names, and statue of a woman reaching into the sky with two children at her side, stood on a pedestal up front. But it was the mural itself that delivered the deepest impact. The 13 faces were painted onto the white wall with photographic detail. It seemed to me a simple, yet very effective way to keep their memory alive.

This was as close as I got to seeing any of the drug war violence during my week in the country. It was sobering to take in those faces, knowing that these were just a few of the tens and thousands of people murdered by the *sicarios* of the cartels. The tendrils of violence had reached all corners of Mexico, though it was the northern states—especially Chihuahua—that had been hardest hit. In fact, just two years later, sleepy Creel would see even more violence, when another cartel gang rolled into town, broke into a home, and slaughtered 9 members of the same family, including their 14-year-old daughter.

Despite the fact that I never once felt unsafe during my whirlwind visit, the killing continues in Mexico, unabated. 2017 has been the worst year yet, with over 18,000 people murdered. That is an insane number to try to wrap your head around, the kind of body count racked up by conventional warfare. When confronted with such grim statistics, it's no wonder so many tourists are giving the country a skip.

Even with the grimness of my morning pilgrimage, I was determined to see more of the place, so I rented a mountain bike and headed out to explore a nearby Tarahumara settlement and country around it.

The road out of town was thankfully free of traffic. I peddled under a brilliant high country sky with gnarled, layered rises of rock and pine expanses on either side. Clouds floated by like fat sailing ships, and an intermittent breeze sliced through the insulation of my vest, reminding me of the elevation.

It had been years since I'd hopped on the back of a bike and just it felt good to move my body after several days sitting in busses, vans, and trains. Soon I was at the gatehouse for the settlement, and after paying a toll of 25 pesos, I peddled on over the dirt track leading in.

My first stop was the San Ignacio, a 17th-century Jesuit mission with a big white cross carved out of stone in front. A few local women in colorful clothing stood nearby, selling necklaces, bracelets, and little dolls. It was a cool old building, but like temples in Asia, I have a hard time getting excited about churches, so after a quick peek inside I jumped back on the bike headed out, just as a van full of Mexican tourists arrived.

I really had no idea what to expect when I rode out to this settlement, other than open space and fresh air. I quickly learned however, that this area was famous for the beautiful and bizarre rock formations that popped up around the landscape. Each one went by the name “valley:” The Valley of the Frogs (*Las Ranas*), The Valley of the Mushrooms (*Los Hongos*), The Valley of the Monks (*Los Monjes*), and my favorite, The Valley of the Titties (*Las Chichis*). These were impressive and very trippy stands of stone that more than often clearly resembled their namesakes. Taking these in reminded me of my younger days, when I’d head into out into the open country with a few friends, where we’d attempt to enter new realms with the aid of some particular compounds. This piece of land was perfectly designed for such vision quests, a kind of natural psychedelic theme park.

When I left Creel, the clouds appeared fluffy and harmless, but after an hour of peddling through Indian country a much larger, menacing cloud took shape. It began to pelt the area with bursts of frigid rain, which would ease up, and then return with a stubborn intensity.

For a while I took cover in a nook carved out form the rock underneath a great pine. From there I watched the world pass by in what seemed like quarter time. A farmer worked his field, while his two bristly dogs paced the perimeter of his little field and barked my way. A couple of pickups, one packed with what must have been fifteen locals, rolled by, and three women scurried along the road in hopes to get out of the unpredictable precipitation.

The dark cloud refused to blow over. Instead it just parked its stubborn ass over the land and unleashed its wet payload in waves. Sensing a lull, I jumped back on the bike and blazed out in search of a local lake on my crude, hand-drawn map, which I hoped would be out of rain range. After an hour of grinding trail riding, I managed to locate it, only to discover that my back tire was nearly flat.

Once I got the bike back out to the sealed, main road, there was no air left in the tire. It was dead flat, so I had no choice but to push the bike all the way into town. This, however, turned out to be one of the most pleasant legs of this day’s journey. The rain let up, allowing me to savor a walk along an empty road through stunning quiet, stunning country, reminding me that no form of transit beats my own two feet.

As soon as I got back to Creel, turned in my bike, and retired to my room for a late afternoon nap, the cloud—which had been growing in size and darkness for hours now—let loose an icy, thundering deluge that pummeled the town and drenched the landscape. As the drops exploded on the roof of my hotel, I was serenade into an inky, syrupy sleep.

Chihuahua

The last leg of the eastbound El Chepe is said to be its least scenic. After Creel, the train descends onto a flat expanse of high plains that offers up little for the eye or camera. As a result, many travelers elect to take the bus instead, which saves both time and money.

I opted for this choice, and after a few hours found myself on the outskirts of Chihuahua City, the financial and political center of Mexico's largest state. This was to be my last stop before the long slog back to Phoenix.

Chihuahua stretched through this flat range of scrubland with a few little mountains rising stark from the clusters of pink, green, and white buildings that made up the neighborhoods of the town. A couple of high-rises—nods at skyscrapers—poked up from the general sprawl, reminding us that this is a place of commerce—the center of ranching, mining, and agriculture in this vast, rugged part of Mexico blessed with resources galore.

The bus deposited me in a corner of town far from everything, it seemed, but a very friendly taxi driver ferried me into the city center, where I decided to spend the night. Like several Mexicans I met, he had lived in the U.S. for some years, but was now glad to be home.

This is a great misconception that a lot of people from the U.S. have towards our southern neighbors. Because of the flow of immigration, a lot of us assume that most Mexicans are desperate to cross the Rio Grande or the Sonoran Desert in order to make a new life in the great, big, shiny U.S.A. While this may be true for some of the poorest, most Mexicans that I met who have lived in both places actually prefer life south of the border—where things are still more centered around family, friends and a kind of happiness that can't be found chasing material gain. And despite widespread poverty, Mexico has a very large, thriving middle class—one that, for the most part, is very happy just where it is.

As I walked the streets of downtown Chihuahua, I got the sense that the place didn't draw too many international tourists. Still, I liked it a lot. It had the clean, well-ordered look of a regional capital. Government workers in business attire and lanyards walked down the uncluttered sidewalks, carrying briefcases and paper cups of coffee. The city's plaza was home to a huge, centuries-old church, while nearby the tricolor of a gargantuan Mexican flag flapped in the high desert breeze from atop a towering pole.

I also noticed scores of young people walking the streets wearing black jeans, band t-shirts, and black leather boots. Some had pink, red, or green dyed streaks in their hair. Many of them sported eyeliner and visible tattoos. As I came around one corner, I saw what most have been a hundred of them lined up at a bank. My only guess was that they were buying concert tickets. What else could explain a snaking afternoon queue of emo kids and goths?

Now I had known for some time that Mexico is home to a sizeable subset of young people into darker music. Bands such as Depeche Mode play sold

out soccer stadiums both in Mexico and all over South America. Perhaps this is a nod to their Day of the Dead traditions—who knows—but for some reason this subculture caught fire south of the border, especially among the middle class kids who have the luxury of chasing such trends in fashion and music. I had always been curious about this phenomenon, and it was interesting to see a gathering of this scene's adherents up close.

Northern Mexico is serious cowboy country, and downtown Chihuahua is the place for all of your *vaquero* outfitting needs. I came across three city blocks packed with stores selling hats, boots, shirts, chaps, even saddle and tack. It was like cowboy Costco, with ranchero music blaring out from each shop.

I needed a room for the night, and while I thought about splurging for something nice, I realized that I would probably be spending very little actual non-sleeping time there. In the end settled for a bare-bones \$20 affair that looked like a very good place to bring a hooker of the same price.

The only mistress I'd be meeting that evening was one so familiar to me: beer. So, I located the bar closest to my hovel and walked through the door.

It was called *El Tradicional Cocina/Cantina*, and while I found it more than sufficient, the only thing "traditional" about the place was its name. It was a kind of shrine American sports; the walls were completely decked out in pics and memorabilia from MLB, NFL, and NBA. The clientele was mainly middle-class, educated guys who worked for the government, and spoke decent English. I stayed there for several hours, watching football and baseball at same time on two separate TV's, chatting with the friendly locals, while washing down the evening with bottles of Indio beer and a couple, well places shots of Don Julio, which I sipped, of course.

After a late-night meal of tacos al pastor straight off the kabob rotisserie (tacos as we know them are said to come from Syrian immigrants to northern Mexico), I decided to get one, final nightcap. As I wandered the streets of the city center, I heard music flowing up from a side street. A young man sat playing guitar and singing in front of a small restaurant/bar. A number of tables were set up outside, with customers drinking and listening to the tunes. I pulled up a chair and soaked it in, happy to spend my last night in Mexico as I had my first.

As I sipped my beer and basked in the overwhelming romance of it all, I noticed young woman waving me over to her table, where she sat with two male friends.

I joined them and immediately bought a round of beers, for which they were grateful. From one look I could tell that they were twenty-something bohemians and probably light in the wallet. I know, as I had lived it.

I was right, the girl's name was Rubi, and she was an aspiring theater actress.

"You looked so miserable, over there, alone," she said, in fluent English.

"I'm actually very happy," I said, smiling. "It's been a hell of a trip."

Her friends were Adan and Ivan. Adan was a musician, while Ivan, resplendent in his long black hair and Che Guevara beard, was a painter.

Rubi had lived in the USA, but it wasn't a great experience.

"Where were you?" I asked

"Oklahoma. For two years."

"Oh, dear."

"Yeah, it was terrible. Every day the racist kids at my high school called me 'wetback' and 'spic.'"

It crushed my heart to hear this, especially after the kindness and beauty of spirit shown to me by her countrymen. All I could do was apologize for her mistreatment by my fellow "Americans."

"*Pendejos*," I spat. "*Lo siento*."

I tried to assure them that her view of the States may change if she were to visit a more enlightened pockets. But who knows? The ascendance of Trump has brought out this nasty hairball of anti-Mexican bigotry all throughout the country. Could I guarantee that she would be immune from such abuse in so-called liberal enclaves such as San Francisco or Seattle?

What I can say is that the three of them were very happy to hear of my adventure, especially the fact that I was ending it in their city. As the music reverberated along the walls of the alley, Rubi said:

"You say you are a writer? Then write about this. Tell people about Chihuahua. Tell them how lovely it is. And, please, tell them to come."

What could I do, but smile, nod, and order another round?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originally hailing from Olympia, Washington, Chris Tharp has called Korea home for a long time now. He is the author of *Dispatches from the Peninsula* and *The Worst Motorcycle in Laos*, as well as the co-author of *Jeff Monson: My Road as a Fighter*. His award-winning pieces have appeared in National Geographic Traveller UK, Green Mountains Review, enRoute, Smile, Pindledyboz, Monkeygoggles, Escape from America, Haps Magazine, Travelers' Tales, Road Junky, 10 Magazine, and many others. He lives in Busan with his wife and a shifting number of animals.