

CHAPTER 1

Into Mexico



*The Owl and the Pussy-Cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat.
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note*

THE OWL AND THE PUSSY-CAT
Edward Lear

THE MAYA BELIEVE LIFE
COMES FROM MAIZE

I WAS SITTING IN THE LITTLE THAI restaurant waving my arms at the ceiling. “The trees were enormous. They reached the sky and then some. It was like being swallowed by vegetation and we were completely and utterly lost.”

Kathleen’s attentive eyes were wide. “Weren’t you worried you might break down or something?”

“Nah! We had everything we needed: enough food and water for a week. Eventually some ingenious and helpful local would come along and either insert a twisted paperclip into the engine and thus fix it, or fetch help.

“Looking into the undergrowth it was like the corner of a plant shop,” I continued, “You know, where they’ve crammed all the pots together to make

the plants look bigger and fuller. Only these plants *were* big and full, and had lizards and spiders and all sorts of insects eating them and making their homes in them. Some leaves were so long that Eve would have only needed one. Others were so small that they would have hardly covered the head of a pin.”

I pulled out some pictures and showed her one of our little motorhome overwhelmed by jungle on a gray damp dirt road, “Look.”

“Wow! That’s incredible! You really ought to write a book.”



About a year earlier we had bought a little motorhome, with a fantasy about driving to Panama when John retired. We took a quick drive to California and back to Houston, and made a couple of weekend excursions, but we were inexperienced motorhomers.

After Christmas, I made repeated visits to the consulates to make sure we had the correct documents for a British and a U.S. citizen, for the motorhome and especially for Brindle, our mongrel dog. We had done virtually no planning as to where we would go and what route we would take. There were friends to visit in El Salvador and Guatemala, and we wanted to do at least two weeks of total Spanish immersion to work on the language. We also wanted to transit the Panama Canal. Ultimately we wanted to have a fun trip and return safely with the dog. We weren’t even sure that we could take the dog all the way; we had heard that some countries wouldn’t let dogs in. If that was true we would just change our route.

John quit work on Friday and we had a farewell party over the weekend. Our inexperience was illustrated on Sunday evening when John backed the motor-

home into our brick flower box and knocked the handle off the waste water or “dump” system.

DAY 1

Tuesday, January 14, Heading South

Our first stop was the RV store. Fortunately, they had the replacement part for the waste water system and we were out of there in less than an hour. We emptied our waste tanks, filled the propane tank and at last we were off. We had no schedule but we wanted to be back for our daughter’s graduation four months away.

Our first overnight stop was the Wal-Mart parking lot in Raymondville, Texas. I realized that we were not prepared for the cold weather here or in the mountains to the south. Since we were going to the tropics, I had not packed much in the way of warm clothes or bedding and it soon became clear that two light blankets would not be enough, so we purchased a comforter. One of my main concerns from the beginning was storage. I now wondered, ‘what am I going to do with a comforter when it gets hot?’

At last we were together without outside distractions. I had a map of Central America fixed to the table and covered with plastic. We ate dinner shifting our plates from one country to another as we outlined our route over the long list of places we wanted to visit. We had anticipated this for so long and were excited that our adventure was about to begin. We didn’t know what to expect but looked forward to the journey.

DAY 2

Wednesday, January 15, Into Mexico

The guidebooks recommend crossing borders at daybreak, but this was not to

be our style. Throughout the trip we usually crossed borders at mid-day, while most everyone was at lunch. Luckily on this day it all went very smoothly. We got the “green light”, literally, so we did not warrant an inspection from customs as we entered into Mexico. Most of the traffic entering here doesn’t stop at all because Matamoros is part of a *free zone*. You don’t need documentation to enter if you’re only staying a couple of days in the border zone, but don’t forget your papers to re-enter the U.S.

Since we were going into the heart of Mexico we did need to go through some formalities. We had to drive in a full circle around the building to reach the area where we could park and obtain the vehicle permit. All in all, it only took us ninety minutes and \$57 to cross this border. (All money is in U.S. dollars, unless otherwise indicated.) Even though we had signs in the windows announcing the *Perro Peligroso* (dangerous dog), she wasn’t mentioned so we didn’t need to show her papers, but we made sure to have them with us.

Immediately after crossing the bridge we saw a large supermarket chain store, Soriana. We needed to buy some Scotch whiskey for a friend in Guatemala. John almost turned into the parking lot when I noticed steel arches over the entrance that would have decapitated the motorhome. There are numerous eighteen wheelers all along the roads in this area and this setup is designed to keep them out. A security guard directed us to park in a no parking zone on the street in front. I stayed in the vehicle while John went inside. It was a huge, modern market with a liquor store next to the meat counter. John got a nice deal on a Chivas Regal. We later learned that many parking lots and especially private homes in

Latin America have low barriers over their entrances to keep large vehicles out. This prevents thieves from driving a truck into the driveway and cleaning out the house.

It seemed appropriate, to us, in a funny sort of way, that one of the first things we saw in Mexico was an elephant on a flatbed truck. The circus was in town!

For the first hundred miles south of the border we drove through rich, flat farmland. There were massive fields that stretched as far as the eye could see; they looked as though they had just been sown with a spring crop. This was highly cultivated flat land.

There are two ways to travel south from Matamoros. One is through Ciudad Victoria where, according to our Mexican camping book, there is a nice trailer park. It provides a convenient first stop in Mexico and it is the route most people take. The other way is to stay closer to the coast on Route 180, which diverges from the Victoria route 120 miles south of the border. We took the coastal route planning to stay on the beach at La Pesca.

There is a gas station, Chinese restaurant, and huge truck parking area at the route 180 turnoff that would have been perfect for a dry camp, but it was relatively early so we pressed on. We climbed up through pastureland and upon arriving in the higher altitude we found ourselves in rolling hills of chaparral and sage. There were herds of goats and cattle grazing on the sides of the road tended by boys or old men. One herd must have had over 200 goats and was being moved by two *vaqueros* on horseback. The cowboys were wearing straw summer Stetson hats and their saddles had leather straps dangling like the fringe of a skirt.

The road surface was horrific. Often it looked good and we'd get up to 50-55 miles an hour and then we would encounter some grim potholes. Then there were the sunken patches, which caused the motorhome to rock and leap like a bronco. The result of such road hazards was that things broke. The most notable was the rotating plate from inside the microwave, which leaped to the floor.

This microwave was a last minute replacement before leaving home. Two days before we left, John tried to make some popcorn in the built-in microwave that came with the RV, but it didn't work. There wasn't time to get it fixed, so John marched into the house and removed the one from our kitchen and placed it in the motorhome. It did not exactly fit the space, but we could get it into the hole, and to prevent it from bouncing around we packed it in with the deflated soccer balls we were carrying as gifts. We had not fastened the microwave in properly, thinking it would stay put. Mistake! As it bounced up and down the glass plate inside hit the door, opened it, and crashed to the floor. This was a really rough road. John figures the accelerations in the back were greater than 1.5g. Things jumped out from behind a three inch "fenced" shelf to get to the floor.

Also, to deliberately slow the traffic there are the notorious *topes* (toe-pays). This is the Mexican version of a speed bump. Every RV travel book on Mexico we have seen comments on these. They are RV killers. Sometimes we had to come to a virtual stop to climb over them, while other traffic took the opportunity to dart past us. Other times there might be a string of up to a dozen *topes* at the beginning of a town. Not all of them are signposted. Sometimes, just

to trick you, there are signs and **no** *topes*. Occasionally you will see vendors lined up by the *topes* to sell local produce. They know that traffic will be at a near standstill so they will be hard to ignore.

We realized that we just couldn't rush through anywhere. We slowed down, and tried to shake the high-speed life we had been living out of us, as if it were sand from our shoes.

The shadows were getting long and we had no idea where we were going to stay for the night. La Pesca was thirty miles off the main highway and now out of the picture. It was pleasant country but there was absolutely nothing there. We were on a hilltop in the wilderness of Tamaulipas. The nearest place on the map was Soto La Marina, half an hour away, but we had no guarantee that there would be anywhere there to park for the night.

There was a restaurant on a hilltop, and a woman standing outside a little store that was part of the enterprise. We bought something from the store and she said we could park at the back of the establishment for the night. We could see for miles in all directions over the tall golden grass that looked like velvet as the wind stroked past. The grass gave way to short chaparral fading into gray green before a flat horizon of brilliant blue. I turned in a circle. Apart from the restaurant all I could see in any direction was chaparral meeting sky at the curvature of the earth.

The sky was clear and the stars were extra brilliant. They dropped in a curtain to the horizon. There were no lights in any direction and the stars looked like they had been polished by the wind. It was cold. We were glad we had our new comforter.

RIGHT: First Night Camping in Mexico

Day 3 Thursday, January 16, Tamualipas to Tuxpán

As we drove south we came down in elevation and the scenery became more green and lush, dotted with great cattle ranches. I have never seen so many cattle and such sleek animals. They were mostly Brahma with enormous humps on their shoulders. There was big money in the area judging by the quality of the fencing and the corrals. As we approached the coast there was more cultivation of crops, at first in large fields and then in smaller plots close to homes.

We stopped at a roadside stall and bought about 30 terrific tangerines for a dollar. The fruit was tied together like a necklace. I ate four immediately, spitting pits out of the window as we went. We also got some oranges so we could enjoy fresh juice in the morning. My plastic juicer was one of the things that hit the floor and had broken, so squeezing them became a small challenge.

The Tropic of Cancer was signposted and we passed it with enthusiastic high fives. We were in the Tropics!

The previous night we had started out a little too late to find a place to stop and we didn't want to be in the same position. Tonight we were aiming for a trailer park in Poza Rica, but we were in Tuxpán forty miles away and it was getting late.

Rather than press on, we changed our plans and headed for the beach on the other side of Tuxpán. Following the signs to *La Playa*, and various instructions from locals, at last we glimpsed the beach between a string of shanty homes and palms. It was getting dark and we couldn't be too fussy. We pulled off the road and stopped at a stall selling beer and chips and asked for advice. The owner said we could stay right where we were parked. It was a little close to the road and not a very good location, but it would have to do.



A car stopped next to the motorhome, and a girl came over trying to speak English with us. She had been partying somewhere up the beach and was on her way home. She invited us to follow her to her home, where she said it would be safe to park. It was now dark, and we decided not to follow this stranger to some unknown location nearly an hour away. We thanked our new friend for her offer.

We had a couple of bottles of beer that we bought from our host. My, they went down easy! Six ounce bottles stack up really fast when you are thirsty. Brindle had a great time with the local dogs; they played in the sand then sat under the table as we enjoyed our drinks.

We then strolled the fifty yards to the beach. It was glorious. And there was a large parking area under the palms where there was plenty of room to pull up the bus. This was the place! Normally it would be crowded on a Saturday night in the summer, but now there was no one. We drove down the hard-packed

sand road and parked with the palm fronds sweeping the dust off the roof and the waves breaking just 100 yards away. Then it started to rain and the palms beat on the roof as the wind came up. It was decidedly cold overnight.

DAY 4
Friday, January 17,
Tuxpán Beach to the Emerald Coast

At first light we let Brindle out and she ran up and down the beach and found more dogs with whom to discuss the important matters of the day. It was a cold gray morning with wind whipping the waves. It was refreshing and fun and made the beginning of the trip all the more exciting. For the second time we had been extraordinarily lucky in finding a great campsite.

Heading back through the town of Tuxpán we turned south on route 180 again towards Veracruz. Today we took it much slower. It had taken us three days of driving to understand that these were not U.S. highways and we were not in a

