

Down Mexico Way



Ian Middleton

First published in Great Britain 2004

Copyright © 2000 Ian Middleton.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission from the copyright owners.

Cover design and all illustrations
by Ian Middleton Copyright © 2002

Published by Schmetterling Productions
ISBN: 0-9540779-3-8
Email: sales@schmetterlingproductions.co.uk
Website: www.schmetterlingproductions.co.uk
Author's website: www.ian-middleton.co.uk



Contents:

- 1, Shivering on the Dock of the Bay
- 2, No Talent
- 3, The American Southwest
- 4, The leaving of California
- 5, Baja Beer Time
- 6, The Great Train Journey
- 7, A Journey Through the Mountains
- 8, Tourists
- 9, Traffic Problems
- 10, Death by Mexican Wiring
- 11, A Hot Tradition
- 12, Friendly Locals
- 13, The Darker Side of Paradise
- 14, An Expensive Custom
- 15, I Want Pizza!
- 16, Two Exits and No Waiting Please
- 17, Surprise Meetings
- 18, My Island Paradise
- 19, A Village in the Clouds
- 20, Silver Town
- 21, Loco in Acapulco
- 22, A Hot Time on the Central Pacific Coast
- 23, End of the Road
- Epilogue: An Illegal Alien

© 2000 Ian Middleton.

www.ian-middleton.co.uk

Shivering on the Dock of the Bay

The one problem with taking long flights alone is that you never know with whom you'll be sat. Especially in my case, as I always like to have a window seat. This often means being jammed in a corner by two people who might have a social disorder that involved being miserable gits who regard any form of conversation with a stranger about as exciting as touring a paint factory. Or he could be a smelly old pervert like the one sat next to me on a flight home from Australia once. My seat was unoccupied, but because it was in the smoking section a small variety of people would come from the front and have a cigarette. One of these was a middle-aged man, who I assumed to be either Greek or Turkish judging by his accent, complexion and the fact that I could have cooked a fry-up in his jet-black hair. His face bore the expression of a lecherous old man who probably had his own private collection of lusty thoughts. From his line of questioning I guessed that he wanted me to help add to them.

'You meet lots of people on your travels?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied, 'lots of people.'

'Oh! What kind?' he continued, with a grin that revealed his intention of getting off on whatever stories I might tell him.

'Oh you know,' I replied, putting on my headphones and looking above me for the oxygen mask, in the hope of him maybe taking the hint.

He did and went away. He tried to return later, but his place had been taken by a very attractive Australian girl; much to my

delight.

This time however I had no one sat next to me, and a welcome amount of legroom. So I sat back and enjoyed the scenery. I was as nervous as hell. Not only was I flying off to a foreign country alone, but also I knew nobody at the other end. I still wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing. Sure I'd been travelling the year before in Australia, but then I had the advantage of knowing people in that country. This was the first time I had ever travelled totally alone. What would it be like? Would I meet lots of people to travel with? I had in Australia, but that was different. The majority of people who go backpacking go to Australia. It's right on the round-the-world-circuit that is taken by the majority of backpackers. But how many travel Mexico? Also what would the locals be like? Would they accept me? Or consider me a stinking gringo and spit on me? like in the movies.

I had always wondered what Mexico is really like. The strongest images that I had of the country were of dusty pueblos adorned with adobe houses, each with a man sitting against a wall, a large sombrero tipped over his face, heavy snoring sounds emitting from underneath that hat, barefoot Indian women and children walking through the dusty, cobbled streets. Or mariachi bands wearing ponchos and giant sombreros, playing guitars and trumpets and singing *Guantanamera*. I had also read James A Michener's historical novel *Mexico*, which charts Mexico's history through the ancestry of a fictional character. From that book I got the impression that Mexico has much diversity. These were the many things that had ignited in me a burning desire to see this country for myself.

I was flying to San Francisco and planned to spend a short time in California before heading down into Mexico. There were a couple of reasons for this: I had always wanted to see California and felt that this was a good opportunity. Also, the American West did used to belong to Mexico: until they went to war with the US. It all began with the Texas Revolution in 1835. The state of Texas broke away from Mexico to form an independent republic, known as *The Lone Star State*. Ten years later it was annexed by the United States, who actually set the southern boundary 150 miles south of the agreed Texas-Mexico border. This provoked anger from Mexico. The United States also offered \$30 million for New Mexico and California, which was angrily refused by Mexico. What followed was a two-year war between the two countries. The result of this war was

Down Mexico Way

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexico ceded all of its land west of Texas to the US; for which the US paid \$15 million. So what used to be the far north of Mexico is now present-day Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah and Colorado. The loss of all this land sparked an animosity between the two countries that has pretty much remained to this day. So as California is technically *Old Mexico*, I felt it was sufficient reason for making it the starting point for my trip.

When the plane landed I made my way through the corridors and joined the long queue at immigration. I stood there, impatiently shuffling forward, and spotted a customs official strolling my way. He stopped at me and asked for my customs card. I handed it over. He produced a pen, made a mark on it, handed it back and then walked off. A short while later another came over and asked me the same thing. When he saw that it had already been marked he returned it with a grunt and walked off. This was all becoming quite worrisome. Did they suspect me of carrying drugs or something? It must have been drugs because I certainly didn't look like your average middle-eastern terrorist. The pale skin and blond hair testified to that. My backpack and dishevelled look, after a ten-hour flight that had reduced my eyes to half their normal diameter, probably made me look more like a drug addict. A bead of sweat appeared on my forehead and slowly trickled its way down the side of my face. The thought of being strip-searched and having every orifice probed for drugs didn't appeal to me all that much. I attempted to look unworried, which probably had as much effect as pissing on a forest fire from an overhead plane.

The problem was that I intended to tell immigration I was only in the States for a two-week holiday. The reason being that I wanted to enter Mexico via land border and therefore had no proof that I would be going back home. My intention was to buy a ticket home from wherever I happened to be when I decided it was time to go home. Now American immigration is notorious for being one the most difficult to get through. They won't let anyone in without an onward ticket. So I'd had to buy a cheap two-week return in the hope of convincing them I was just coming for a short holiday. If they delved through my bag they would find evidence to the contrary.

When I reached the desk the official eyed me suspiciously and fired a series of questions, which I answered with a lump in my throat.

Shivering on the Dock of the Bay

'What's at the Broadway?' he asked, pointing to the answer I had given for where I would be staying.

'A hostel,' I replied.

'How do you know that?'

I pulled out my guidebook and explained that I had got the address and number from it and reserved ahead.

'That's where all the nudy bars are at,' he informed me with a grin.

'Really!' I said with surprise.

No I really was surprised, *honest*.

He stamped me through and after putting my bag through the scanner, someone took the marked customs card off me and waved me on. I never did figure out what that mark had meant. But at least my dignity remained intact.

When I had phoned to book my room at the hostel, the woman at the other end told me to go out of the airport and take one of the many shuttle buses that operate from the road out front. This bus would take me right to the hostel doorstep. It was the cheapest option because it would take as many people as possible and drop them off accordingly, thus reducing the cost for the passenger while still making good money themselves; that is if they fill up the bus. I stepped outside and spotted a row of these buses. A man with a walkie-talkie directed me to the bus at the end of the line. I questioned the driver as to whether he could take me to the *Green Tortoise Hostel*. Without saying a word he wandered to the back and flung open the boot door. I took this as a general hint that he could and proceeded to dump my pack there and climb into one of the many empty seats. After a short wait that brought no other potential passengers he started off.

We soon hit the freeway and joined several lanes of traffic. As we approached the city I pointed out a giant silver bridge stretching across the bay and asked my driver if it was the Oakland Bay Bridge. He seemed shocked that I had tried to make conversation with him.

'Excuse me?' he replied.

I repeated the question and he grunted a 'yes' in response. I decided not to put any more strain on his conversational skills and turned to my guidebook instead. The majority of travellers I have met use the Lonely Planet series of guidebooks whenever they trav-

Down Mexico Way

el. I was no exception and had two of them with me: one for California and one for Mexico. I consider these guides to be like the Barclaycard. In other words: *never leave home without it.*

At the hostel I paid the driver and ventured up the stairs to reception. I was greeted by a youngster with wild hair and an indifferent expression. All the dorm beds had been booked when I phoned and only private rooms were available. I had taken one with the intention of moving the next day.

'Will there be a dorm bed available tomorrow?' I asked.

'You can have one now,' he replied.

'But when I phoned I was told there were none available,' I said.

He then went on to inform me in a slow and drawn out sentence - which produced a drop of saliva from the side of my mouth that made its way down my chin and onto the floor - that they only allow so many dorm beds to be reserved. I didn't complain and got my dorm bed, which was a lot cheaper. I was beginning to wonder if smiles or acts of friendliness cost extra in this city. My room was empty when I entered and so I threw my pack in the large compartment provided under the bed and headed out to see the city.

Market Street is the main street of the downtown area. I took a stroll down this busy street. It begins at the Embarcadero, which is the road that runs parallel to the waterfront. Market Street runs from there right through the heart of the city. To walk along this street shows the diversity of San Francisco. It passes through the Financial District, with giant towering office blocks and people in suits hugging mobile phones, then passes through a section littered with fast food restaurants, cafés and consumers shops. From here the area takes a downward spiral as you head further and further towards the Civic Centre. Once there the area has transformed from affluent to poverty stricken. In a nearby square the city's vagabonds set up a mini market, selling from shopping trolleys whatever wares they have collected. Some would be shoving paper cups in my face and saying: 'Spare some change, man!' It was quite an alarming sight. In this street you can go from rags to riches, or riches to rags in a very short time. Which in essence completely sums up the American way.

I spotted a crowd of people gathering around something and decided to go investigate. Through the gaps in the bodies I was able to make out a row of chess tables. I have never before seen such

Shivering on the Dock of the Bay

an eclectic mix of people playing chess. Mind you, I'm not in the habit of watching chess. How can you sit and watch a game where two people sit opposite each other, chin resting in hand, and staring at a table for what seems like an eternity? Eventually they make one move and then the process is repeated all over again. A great late night cure for insomniacs, but not for me.

I bought a guide to the public transport in the nearby tourist office and set about studying it. However my foggy, jet-lagged mind couldn't make any sense of it, so I decided to walk instead. Now most people are familiar with the famous streets of San Francisco. Well I was about to become very familiar with them - at least my legs were. Some of the hills slope at near on forty-five degrees and all cars must turn their front wheel against the kerb when parked. I imagined a runaway car could cause quite a disaster in this city. However, the tops of these hills afforded great views of the city and harbour, one of the best being from Telegraph Hill.

I sat atop this hill and gazed out at the wonderful panoramic view of this city and bay area. In the distant haze I could see the Golden Gate Bridge. To the other side of me was the Oakland Bay Bridge. The Golden Gate stretches across the entrance to the bay. However the Oakland Bay Bridge stretches across a far wider portion of the bay, straddling a small island in-between, and actually has two levels with five lanes on each. From where I sat this gigantic feat of engineering dominated the landscape, and was without a doubt the more impressive of the two.

I made my way back down and took a slow walk back to the hostel via the city's residential areas. I instantly fell in love with the architecture. The streets were full of row upon row of highly ornate wooden buildings painted in various colours. Each building was different from the next. I loved the diversity of it all. Nowadays we don't seem to care about uniqueness. Where I'm from you can always tell which houses are new because there is a whole row or estate of them all looking alike. Production line housing is far cheaper, faster and more affordable by today's standards. A pity. I would have given anything to have been able to live in a house like one of these here.

Back at the hostel I met the other occupants of my room: a couple of Irishmen and a couple of Americans. The Irishmen were looking for work in the city to kill time before they went to Australia. One of the Americans was on holiday from New York. He was short, tubby and in his forties, with an amazing knowledge of the public

Down Mexico Way

transport system here. My guide contained a map of all the routes but my foggy, jet-lagged mind couldn't make any sense of it. The other American was younger and lived on the road. He told me that he had never really had a home. His family had moved around a lot and when he was old enough he hit the road himself and has been there ever since. When he has money he parties, and when he doesn't he works.

I awoke the next morning with the intention of tagging along with my New Yorker friend, as he seemed to know better than I how to get around on the public transport. However he had already gone, so I wandered up to Fisherman's Wharf, which is the northern part of the city that meets the bay area. It's quite a lively place with plenty of shops and street entertainment. It was also a place for opportunistic beggars. Most of them held a plaque that read:

*I won't lie to you, I want a beer.
Money for the beerless.*

Now there's nothing like honesty, is there?

The wharf was also home to many seals, which I stood and watched frolicking around the boats in the harbour. I noticed a boat nearby advertising boat rides around the bay and the island of Alcatraz on the hour, all for the bargain price of ten dollars. I looked at my watch, fifteen minutes to go. So I decided to take it.

I stepped aboard the boat and took pride of position at the front. We slowly made our way through the harbour, past all the other boats. I watched the seals frolicking underneath the pier. It was a beautiful sunny day and I was dressed in just a pair of jeans and a tee shirt. Walking around the city it had felt quite warm. However I was to learn a harsh lesson. As we reached the entrance to the harbour and made our way out into the open bay area, I caught the full force of the wind. It cut through me like a sheet of ice and I shivered from head to toe. Immediately I made my way to the back of the boat and took shelter there.

The ride took us out to the Golden Gate Bridge. Here we turned around and made our way back. As we approached the island of Alcatraz - which was a lot closer to the shore than I had imagined - I took refuge in the small cabin compartment. Even at the back I was freezing. I stared through the dirty, misty windows at the tiny island where sat the infamous prison of Alcatraz. On the mainland you could buy a ticket that allows you inside to tour the prison. I'd heard they will even lock you in one of the cells to get a feeling

of what it was like for the prisoners. Sounds eerie I know, but I was wishing I had taken it. It would have been a lot warmer.

Back on dry land I made my way slowly back to the hostel. After having a bite to eat I ventured up to my dorm. The American wanderer was just getting up. I sat and talked with him. As we talked the door opened and in strolled a pregnant girl dressed in denim dungarees. A party balloon trailed behind her. It had been tied to the straps of her dungarees. I wondered if she knew it was there. Her eyes revealed the drug-induced haze that was obviously affecting her ability to see well, because she didn't even appear to notice us sitting there. She walked to one of the bunks and placed a piece of paper on the bottom bed, then turned and abruptly walked back out.

The American explained that one of the Irishmen had found her asleep on his bed earlier. He picked up the piece of paper she'd left. It was her hostel receipt. This was given to everyone when they check in. It's proof of payment and also stipulates which bed you are supposed to sleep in. Hers was the one above. We placed the paper on the correct bed in full view, so it would be plainly obvious that this was her bed. A short while later she came back, ignoring us again, and stared at the piece of paper. She then removed it and climbed onto the top bunk and went to sleep.

When I awoke the next morning her boyfriend was there also. They were well matched. His clothes hung off of him in tatters and his hair looked more like wire wool. I imagined the child's first word would be, 'dude!'

It was time to move on. I found out that the hostel also had a tour bus service called, funnily enough, the Green Tortoise Bus. The service normally consisted of lengthy tours across the USA. But they also ran a short service between Seattle and LA. It was operating three times a week and, as luck would have it, there was a service that evening. It was cheaper than the Greyhound and sounded a lot more fun. So I took it, and certainly didn't regret it.

The downside was that the bus wasn't due to leave until eight o'clock that evening, so I had to check out of my room and wait at the hostel. I could have waited at the bus station, but Greyhound stations in America are notorious for being in the seedier parts of town; and this was no exception. I wasn't quite ready to die yet, so I opted to stay in the hostel common room. But looking at some of the guests, there really wasn't a whole lot of difference. The com-

mon room was more like a disused ballroom. A hazy smoke filled the air and brought with it a very pungent odour. The smoke was coming from a group of hippies sat in the corner. I plonked myself down in front of the huge cinema screen by the door, and spent the time watching more adverts than actual programs. On the upside though, I did spot the very attractive red-haired girl who had flashed me a lovely smile as we passed on the stairs earlier. She and her equally attractive friend wandered in with their backpacks and sat down across the room. Unfortunately they had their backs to me. After a while they got up, put on their packs, and wandered out of the hostel, making it evident that they were leaving. I just hoped they were going to catch the same bus as me.

When seven o'clock came I ventured out into the street and made my way to the bus station. I walked all around looking for a Green Tortoise bus, but couldn't see one. So I asked a group of guys walking past and they sent me across the road and up a narrow alley. The street was deserted. Now call me paranoid, but I had a very bad feeling about this. I was in a narrow back street in downtown San Francisco, in an area teeming with winos and crackheads. Needless to say I made a hasty retreat.

When I got back to the main road I spotted a group of people who were quite obviously waiting for a bus, so I wandered over. As I got closer I noticed the redhead from the hostel. There is a god! I thought. I strolled over and asked her if she was waiting for the Green Tortoise bus to LA. I know it's a corny line, but it was genuine. Anyway she was, much to my delight. The ice was broken and it was plain sailing from here onwards, until I found out that she had a boyfriend back home.

Shannon and her friend Heather were on holiday from Calgary, and planned to spend their last two days in LA before returning home. Shannon had long, fiery red hair and the most beautiful bright blue eyes. It was all I could do to stop myself from staring into them. Further conversation revealed that they were getting off at Hollywood and had booked into a hostel there. I hadn't booked anywhere and planned to just get off at Santa Monica and look for somewhere to stay.

'We're getting picked up at the station. They might have some extra space. Would you like to come with us?' asked Shannon.

Would I like to go with them? Is Cliff Richard still a virgin?

'I'd love to!' I replied.

Shivering on the Dock of the Bay

Eventually a bus chugged up that looked like something out of a sixties hippie movie. It looked that old also. As we loaded on our baggage and checked in, I wondered if the bus would make it all the way to LA. This was no ordinary bus. The interior seats had been ripped out, replaced with raised floors and covered with foam mattresses. The overhead luggage compartments were now two rows of bunks. The baggage was placed in compartments under the seating area. All we needed were our sleeping bags. Everybody piled in and formed circles in the front and back of the bus. I was at the back next to Shannon, obviously. The bus was started with jump leads, which didn't help to dispel my lack of confidence in its ability to get to LA.

The layout of this bus was perfect. It created a great atmosphere, much better than the usual unsociable seating arrangements. I decided that all buses should adopt this policy. It would be a lot more fun and maybe more people would start using public transport in the future. On the other side of me was Matt, who looked like an extract from the Beverly Hillbillies. He wore denim dungarees and sported a goatee beard.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'Mexico,' he replied, 'I'm gonna find me a nice Indian girl, give her father a couple of chickens and a goat for her, then take her back to the States.'

I suggested he would be better off remaining in Mexico because if he took her back to the States, she may turn into a complete bitch.

He also warned me to be careful on the border. There were many stories about black market organs on the border between Texas and Mexico. Mexicans were reportedly befriending young people in bars and drugging their drinks, then dragging them up a dark alley to perform back street surgery in order to remove a non-essential organ. The victim is then stitched up and left. Not a pleasant thought to say the least. It was a story I was to hear many times during my trip. I therefore made a point to keep an eye out for dodgy-looking Mexicans with surgical instruments, offering to buy me drinks.

When it came time to sleep we all manoeuvred into sardine position. It was quite cramped, but I figured there were worse things in life than being squashed next to an attractive Canadian girl. All my fears about this trip had completely vanished now. Aside from the

Down Mexico Way

fact that I fancied her, Shannon had proven to be a very nice girl. She and her friend had displayed the kind of friendliness that is all so common amongst backpackers. I was no longer alone. As Shannon's deep blue eyes met mine and she wished me goodnight with a warm smile, I felt like the luckiest man alive. With this thought in mind, I drifted happily off to sleep.

Traffic Problems

Guadalajara is Mexico's second largest city. It said in the guidebook that the traffic flowed freely here. Well it flowed a little too freely for my liking. It was a case of *stick to the pedestrian crossings or die*. At least minibuses had provided the local bus service in Puerto Vallarta; here they were full-length coaches. Their exhaust emissions were louder than a rugby team's post beer and curry night. I got a room in Posada San Pablo, a hotel by a road that appeared to be a popular route for this bus service, which turned out to run from six in the morning until midnight. My room also fronted onto this road, so would be no late sleeping for me. It was a huge room and even had a balcony, which would be nice during the day. All for the bargain price of sixty pesos.

I had just spent the last four days on my own and so was keen to make some new friends. It's nice to be on your own sometimes, it's a good time to reflect and ponder things, and to digest everything that has happened so far. But after a while boredom starts to set in and you feel that you have to do something soon, before the constant loneliness sends you slightly mad and you end up wandering the streets talking to yourself, or scaring locals by desperately trying to befriend them with wildly inane conversations in parks and supermarkets. With that boredom looming I was glad when I had read that this hotel was popular with backpackers.

The foyer was a huge open area with one small table in the

middle. The two New Zealander's sitting there had just come up from South America. They had travelled for the past six months, visiting places during the day and travelling on buses at night, thus avoiding the cost of hotels. The whole experience had taken its toll and they were staying here the night to recuperate. However they still had enough energy to come out for a beer with me and an Englishman I befriended after them.

Simon lived in Puerto Vallarta with his girlfriend. They were both from England but had been living in Spain for the past two years before moving here. His girlfriend worked for First Choice holidays, and he was trying to set up an import/export business with a friend back in England. Therefore he was in Guadalajara on business. He spoke fluent Spanish, which I figured would come in handy.

We all found a nice restaurant that had recently opened and the owner was eager to please. He was selling two beers for the price of one, and every now and then would give a round on the house. It was to end up becoming a regular drinking spot for Simon and I. We spent the evening sharing our experiences and engaging in the usual backpacker conversations about life.

The centre of the city houses a large twin-towered cathedral. Four very beautiful plazas surround it. I wondered if *plaza* was an old Latin word for *do nothing*. Each plaza I had come across so far seemed to be full of people just sitting around. It appeared that the national pastime in Mexico was to don a large stetson and sit outside on a bench.

It was a beautiful sunny day. Once again I was back in the mountainous interior at an altitude of 1563 metres. It was a much more comfortable heat than that of the tropical lowlands. I wandered through the main plazas and found a tourist information centre where I met two English girls who told me about an evening of traditional singing and dancing at the Degollado theatre the following night. I was quite curious to see what traditional Mexican dancing was like, and so I decided to go.

Simon was curious about this too and came with me. We only managed to watch half of it, though. It had been quite interesting, but we both agreed that we couldn't stand another hour of men in funny hats and women in bright coloured dresses stomping around and making strange wailing sounds. I imagined that at the end of

each performance the cleaners would have to sweep all the dead cockroaches into a big pile in the middle of the stage. Perhaps that was how the dance was invented. Some guy comes home drunk one night and starts stamping on all the cockroaches in his front room. His wife comes to see what the noise is all about, thinks he is dancing and joins him. Pretty soon the whole street starts doing it and voila, a new dance is born.

The next morning Simon was going to Tlajomulco, a small town on the outskirts of the city. He was going there on business and invited me along. I figured it would be quite an experience watching him work, conversing with the Mexicans. As we headed to the main bus station we came across an extremely busy junction with no visible crossing. From where we stood we could see a policeman directing traffic. Once the traffic came to a stop at a set of lights further up, we started to cross. Then all of a sudden from out of nowhere came a wide row of cars and buses charging towards us. Smoke bellowed from their loud exhausts as each vehicle revved like mad to be the first to knock down the two gringos in their path. We ran for our lives. As we stumbled onto the safety of the pavement on the other side, the policeman laughed and yelled out: '¿Qué pasa güeros?' which Simon translated as: 'What's going on, white boys?'

Once we had brought our shakes under control we headed to the station and took a bus to Tlajomulco. Simon had the name of a guy who made and sold grinding bowls out of volcanic rock. A few conversations with the locals sent us in the direction of the nearby village of San Lucas. One of the locals expressed his concern about us wandering about here. 'Be careful, it's dangerous around here for you,' he said. 'If they see Americans they instantly think you have money.'

'But we're not Americans, we're British,' replied Simon.'

'It doesn't matter,' said the man.

Despite his warnings we stood by the side of the road and tried to hitch to San Lucas. A group of greasy-looking locals working in a nearby garage watched us inquisitively. One of them called out. Simon grinned and shouted something back. Then they both began conversing in rapid Spanish. Others joined in while I stood there like a lemon. From what I could gather they talked about football and other such man stuff. Eventually they shook hands and we continued to hitch, but with no luck. When a taxi came along Simon

flagged it down and we got in. As we drove to San Lucas the driver happily chatted away to Simon.

Upon arrival we got out and walked up the dusty street. We really were out in the sticks now. The iron bars across shop doors and windows made me suspect that theft was a problem in this area. If you wanted anything you were served through the bars. Simon was conversing through the bars of one shop while I surveyed the area.

Children in dirty clothes played in the dusty, stone-filled streets, while a guy wearing a stetson trotted up on a horse. Being in places like this always makes me feel like I have gone back in time. There were no pavements or street lighting. No carpets or windows in the houses. These were basically shantytowns where the people eked out a living any way they could. Here it seemed, they all made things out of volcanic rock. After much conversing, the guy in the shop opened up his fort and allowed us inside. Piled up along the wall was a display of the grinding bowls that Simon had been looking for.

From there we went to the home of a very nice middle-aged couple where we were shown another vast array of these bowls, and even some ornamental ones. They even told when and where to catch the bus back to Tlajomulco. On the way there we stopped for refreshments. Simon talked with the woman in the shop and she produced a selection of her own handiwork. It seemed there was no shortage of these things in San Lucas.

As we bounced our way back along the road in the bus Simon told me that he was a bit unsure about what to do. He felt that if he started trading with one person, then he would upset the rest. And he didn't fancy a bunch of irate Mexicans after him.

That night we went out with the English girls I had met in the tourist office, and also a new arrival in the hotel, Robin from South Africa. Guadalajara is renowned for its nightlife, and we certainly sampled it.

When I had gained enough momentum to get out of bed the following morning, the three of us went to Tlaquepaque. It seemed that the further south I went, the more complicated the names became. The thing was that I had to ask for tickets to these places, which left me in fear of ending up in the wrong place. As the bus zoomed through the busy streets I spent the journey in a semi-

Down Mexico Way

dreamlike state, trying to ignore the raging hangover that was pounding the inside of my head. Upon arrival I was dragged back to reality by the sound of Simon's voice telling me that he was off to do some business. This part of the city was lined with arts and crafts shops. So Robin and I wandered around them before meeting with Simon later for a coffee, which was served in clay cups.

I was fed up with looking at things that I couldn't buy, so I went to catch the bus back with Simon. We left Robin there and made our way through the narrow streets to the bus station. As we turned a corner we spotted a funeral procession coming our way. It appeared that the whole of Tlaquepaque had turned out for it. One funeral car was crawling along with the rest following on foot. He must have been a popular guy, if it was a guy. Mind you there were a lot of women carrying babies, so perhaps they were all his mistresses. After what I had been hearing about Mexican men, this could well have been true.

After a week in this traffic-choked city, I felt the need for a change. Five hours away was Guanajuato, a city with a similar traffic problem. The difference was that they had solved theirs. Due to the city being built onto the steep slope of a ravine and the streets being mostly narrow, the government needed a solution to the problem created by the amount of traffic. The solution was to build a series of underground tunnels. The city was originally settled in 1559 because the silver and gold mines there were among the richest in the world. It's a town rich in culture and ancient colonial architecture. Many travellers had raved about Guanajuato, so I decided to go there and see for myself. Simon was planning to head to Mexico City and decided to come with me. Robin said he would join us the day after.

The bus service to Guanajuato was the most luxurious I had ever been on. To be able to say this about a service in Mexico seemed quite strange. But nevertheless it was true. As I went to get on I was presented with a complimentary drink and sandwich. The seats were more like the luxury first class seats on an aeroplane. A single row on one side and a double on the other made the whole bus quite spacious. There was enough room between seats to stretch out your legs completely, and even a board that pulled down at a forty-five degree angle for you to rest your calves on. The trip took five and half hours and cost a little over ten pounds. I could

Traffic Problems



Guanajuato



have done with more journeys like that.

We arrived at the main bus station outside of town, and took a local bus to the centre. We clung on for dear life as the minibus swung its way along the narrow streets that slowly wound their way up the hill in to town. Guanajuato was reminiscent of an old Spanish town. It was full of narrow, winding, cobble or stone-tiled streets that nearly always led out in to a small plaza with an ornate fountain in the middle. Each house was painted a different colour to the next, and the detail was incredible: ornate tiling, intricate designs hand-painted on and around doors and windows, beautifully arranged window boxes with wrought iron framework. This was the sort of town where you could spend hours just wandering.

We found a place to stay called *Casa Kloster*. At reception we were greeted by an old man whose face seemed set in stone. Friendliness certainly wasn't one of his strong points. He led us to the room and then proceeded to give us a detailed description on how to use the key. 'You turn the key to the left to unlock the door. Do not turn it to the right as this will lock it.' He then told us to choose our beds, stay in them and not to touch the others. As if we were going to have a sudden change of mind in the night and move to others, or use them as bouncy castles.

Sat outside our room was a young Mexican who was studying at the university. As I unpacked my stuff I attempted to understand the rapid flow of Spanish that was being exchanged between him and Simon, but got lost after the first few sentences. According to Simon he was a walking question machine, badgering him for information on everything. He was a bit like the robot off *Short Circuit*, constantly soaking up input. Fortunately for me he directed these questions at Simon, but my time would come later.

'He's doing my bloody head in!' said Simon, after yet another ear bashing.

While Simon was engaged in another brain draining session with our young friend, I noticed a familiar couple walk in. It was the Americans who had given the lift to Daniel and Fran. I figured if I was going to keep meeting them like this, then I ought to find out their names. Pete was originally from New Zealand, but came to America when he was young. He married Linda and set up his own business. They were already checked in somewhere but parking wasn't very good, so they were looking for a better place. They booked in here.

One of the main attractions in this town was El Museo de Las Momias (The Museum of Mummies). Simon and I went there the next day. The local authorities had dug up bodies in a nearby cemetery to make room for more. (A rather strange idea, I thought. What had they intended to do with the ones they dug up?) However they discovered that the minerals in the soil had preserved the bodies, so instead of finding skeletons they found mummified bodies twisted and contorted into grotesque forms. Each looked as though he or she had died a painful and horrible death. This was due to the drying out of the skin causing their mouths to fall open. The whole thing was testimony to Mexico's fascination with death. There are over 100 mummified bodies here. As we were gazing at one of the exhibits a tour group passed us by. We tagged along behind and Simon provided me with the translation.

The museum contained all manner of mummies: old, young, pregnant, and baby ones. Some even wore socks. But probably the most fascinating of all was the one entitled *the smallest mummy in the world*. It was a foetus of about two months that had been perfectly preserved inside its mother's stomach. The foetus had been removed and made the museum's prime exhibit. This museum certainly wasn't for the faint-hearted. The sight of all those dried and contorted bodies made me feel in need of some extra fluid, so we went for a drink afterwards.

Later that day Robin turned up and we all went out for the evening. This time we took the Mexican lad with us, in the hope that we could lighten him up with a few beers. We went for a meal first where we met three English girls who were also staying at our hotel. Carol and Natasha, who were sisters, and Liz - an attractive brunette who immediately caught my eye - happily agreed to meet us later for a drink.

During the meal our Mexican friend wouldn't drink beer and ordered a fruit juice instead. He didn't eat anything either, so I figured that he didn't have much money. Up until now I had escaped his constant barrage of questions. But Simon, the crafty sod, had made a point of sitting away from him. All through the meal he asked me questions, picking up objects and wanting to know the English word for them. This was a good test of my social etiquette. With each object he picked up I grew more and more tempted to force-feed him that beer. But I displayed admirable restraint.

When we got to the bar he still didn't want a beer, but we



El Museo de las Momias





The smallest mummy in the world

bought him one anyway and stuck it in front of him. He sat there all night and didn't touch it. The sight of Liz soon made me forget he even existed. Her long, black curly hair, bewitchingly brown eyes and trim waist left me hanging on her every word like a lovesick puppy. I made it my mission to get to know her better. During the course of the conversation it transpired that the girls had also met Kim and Chris back in La Paz. They had all arrived at our hotel just after us. Talk about bad timing.

After much beer and good conversation Liz informed me that her boyfriend was coming to Mexico City in a week's time. I couldn't have been more shocked if someone had just run in, slapped me in the face with a wet kipper, and run out again. We had been getting on so well. I suppose I could have kept trying, but even if she had been interested I couldn't do it. Especially as her boyfriend was flying all this way to see her. It's times like this that I wish I didn't have morals.

The next day Simon left for Mexico City. He gave me his number and told me to call him if I decided to go back to Puerto Vallarta. The Mexican lad went with him. I didn't know if he was going the same way, but at least I wouldn't have to be one of his sources of input again. I'd never met anyone like him before. He was more in need of a good shag than anyone I'd ever met.

Robin and I spent the day looking around the town. We tried to visit other museums, but for some strange reason they were all closed on Tuesdays. We climbed our way through a maze of tiny streets that led up to La Pilpila, a lookout point which provided the most amazing view of the town. On the way back down we bumped into Carol and Natasha. Liz wasn't feeling well. They joined us and we went to visit another of the city's attractions.

Callejon del Beso (street of the kiss) is a very narrow street with a famous love story attached to it. Two opposing houses had balconies that virtually touched. The young boy and girl who lived in these houses were in love, but forbidden to be together by the girl's father. They used to exchange furtive kisses across the balconies, until the father caught them and killed them both. That was the story I heard anyway. The balconies were certainly close enough for some hot furtive kissing, that was for sure.

Later that evening I felt something hot also, but unfortunately it wasn't a kiss. It was a feeling in my stomach. I spent the evening in the hotel, deciding that it would be safer to be in the vicinity of a

working toilet. Some of the bar toilets in this country were so foul that you would rather have faced one of Saddam Hussain's biological weapons than remain in one for longer than it takes to piss. The bar from the previous night was a perfect example.

In-between dashes to the toilet, I sat on the bench outside the room. Robin decided he wouldn't go out that evening and instead would sit and talk to me. He proceeded to ask me a series of questions about the theory of electricity and electronics, as it was my trade. Up until this point I had considered him to be quite a good bloke. Then all of a sudden he turned weird on me. It was like having the Mexican lad back again. 'Wow, tell me more!' he would say. I began to wonder if there was an information-sucking alien on the premises that was inhabiting the bodies of the guests one by one. When Robin finally went to bed, I wiped the drool from the side of my mouth and crawled to my room whimpering.

The next morning I packed my bag and prepared to go to San Miguel de Allende. Robin appeared to be back to his normal self and said that he would stay in



Guanajuato for a while longer. The English girls were going to San Miguel also and said that I could share a taxi with them. I couldn't have thought of anything better than being squashed into a taxi with three attractive girls.

Unfortunately for me, we must have got the only taxi driver in Mexico who considered it too dangerous to have so many people in his car at once. So the girls went on ahead and I, deprived of my only opportunity of ever getting that close to Liz, slumped off in to town to catch a local bus; whilst plotting murderous revenge on that taxi driver!

Callejon del Beso

