

## ***1976 On the Gringo trail (Part #2)***

*Although I kept notes of the travel from Peru down to Chile and Argentina then back north through Bolivia and back to Peru—I did not flesh out those rough notes until several months later—well after my return to Canada. Unfortunately, I delayed the project too long to adequately recapture the sense of discovery at the heart of the original experiences.*

*Nonetheless, I have decided to bring to light excerpts of the final 3½ weeks of the journey in which I rushed back north counting days against dwindling dollars.*

*Also included here are notes of the first few days of return to Canada. That first experience of ‘culture shock’ has remained the stuff of nightmare to this day.*

### ***Quito-Bogota-San Andres, Columbia:***

#### **1**

With Central American visas procured, I am finally able to depart Quito for the Columbia border.

Not an auspicious departure, though: there was the dead rat in the hallway outside the door of the Felix Malthurin hotel and the momentarily loss of my room key delaying me nearly an hour. (The key was eventually found in the outside pocket of my backpack).

I caught a minibus to Tulcan on the Columbian border passing through the green countryside of Humboldt's volcano corridor. At a roadblock just an hour north of Quito, I was the only passenger pulled inside the kiosk by two Peruvian guards (Once again, I cursed the wild-haired 1971 passport picture which has plagued me the whole trip).

“*Tiene drogas?*” asked one soldier with hands shuffling down my pant legs.

“*No uso drogas, nada—nunca!*”

While, I may have made the case that I am not a dope-addled hippie, I failed to find my tourist card—and had to abjectly plead to avoid a bribe.

"Happy trails!"

Coming out of the Custom's kiosk to re-join the minibus, I passed a long blonde-haired gringo just off another parked minibus, being ushered in. At this point—it seems futile in resisting the subculture of fellow *Nortamericanos* along the Gringo Trail.

I reminded myself that a week ago back in Puno I had already decided that the ‘adventure’ was over—the goal having now become just to get back north as quickly and cheaply as possible. Avoiding interaction with fellow gringos to maintain Spanish immersion would no impossible now anyway with the Gringo Trail soon to merge onto the gringo *freeway*... Also given the dwindling funds I will need all the tips fellow travelers might offer...

As the day wore on in the boredom of staring out the smeared window, I began taunting myself:

In a few weeks I will be back in the grey north without a job prospect, with no place to stay—and no money... Two years older—I will be back where I started when first arriving in Vancouver, 2 years ago... Would it not have been wiser to use the nest egg to further academic studies? Then there was a 3<sup>rd</sup> option: I could have just stayed on in my cozy garret on Columbia St. and forced myself to write...

What has really been gained here? How can I justify the colossal squandering of time and money? In a bitter twinge, I pulled out the notebook and flipped through it blindly. Whatever—with 5,000 miles left to go I am down to less than \$250—the entire sum of my net worth tucked in tiny Areo Peru bag tucked under my armpit.

## 2

Columbia, in first impressions, seemed poorer—yet more colourful—than Ecuador. In passing the painted horse carts driven by black Columbians clipping though along the lush green hillsides outside Pasto, I wished I’d ignored the pickpocket warnings and flown to Bogota rather than to Quito on the journey south. Just judging by the price of roadside snacks, money would have gone a lot father here, too. Still, I was itchy to keep on the move—to get as far south as my funds could possibly take me.

It was not until mid-evening that we stopped in Popayan for a meal break at a roadside café. I joined the table with 3 friendly Colombian lads who were fellow passengers headed for Cali. While we sat before our tin plates of rice and beans, child beggars pulled at our sleeves. One little girl with a tin cup held the hand of an older boy who was blind.

With the appetite shrivelling, I pushed my plate to the side of the table and turned aside as little girl scooped up handfuls, handing every second one back to the older boy. I was reminded of the chilling encounter at the Honduran frontier. Just 3 months past—it could have been a year...

Back on the bus, I decided to save to save my backbone at least one day’s abuse. In hearing from one Colombian lad that it would be another 22 hours grinding through mountain roads before reaching Bogota—I resolved to catch a flight tomorrow morning from Cali. It was a pleasant surprise to hear that airfare from Cali to Bogota would not be more than \$25 US. That plan would save me a day’s travel along with the having to

negotiate the dodgy Bogota bus station. Being already at the Bogota airport, I could then fly directly to San Jose, having already obtained the Costa Rica visa in Quito.

I was further tempted to take the Columbian's advice for a Caribbean stopover. Since the flights to Central America were routed San Andres island— why not get a taste of a tropical island? According to the young Columbian engineer, San Andres was: “*muy bonita y bastante barata.*”

Thus, with tremors of excitement I bounced though the remained of the humid night.

At dawn, we reached the outskirts of Cali, passing a stretch of red-tiled bungalows, which could have been transplanted, from a California suburb. At the bus station, I took the gamble and taxied with the 3 Colombian fellow travelers directly to the airport. At the Avianca desk I bought my ticket to San Jose via Bogota with a stopover in Isla San Andres.

Within 2 hours, we landed in Bogota—an entire day's bus journey saved in an hour's flight. Bidding goodbye to my bus comrades from the Ecuadoran border in the busy arrivals gate at Bogotá, I rushed directly through the departure gate to catch the connecting flight to San Andreas. Squeezed into a window seat, before takeoff, I watched the ground crew loading baggage from the trailers into the plane's belly. A tremendous relief it was to see one worker tossing in my brown *mochila*.

### ***Isla San Andres, Columbia:***

#### **1**

After picking up passengers at Medellin, we flew over the blue Caribbean along the coast of Panama then turned eastward over open water. I was seated beside a Columbian schoolgirl called Nusli. Along with her parents and little brother who sat smiling in the seat across, she was headed for a week's vacation in San Andres. When I asked her what she plans were after finishing school, she smiled and said she wanted to get married and have ‘*ninos*’. As we chatted, I could not fail to take note that with her soft curves and ample breast, she was exceptionally mature for a 16-year-old.

Less than 2 hours later, the plane banked over San Andres, a green island ringed by a white sand beach looks like Technicolor movie footage. As we skimmed down across the turquoise lagoon— even the anxiety of running out of money melted in the anticipation of the first swim in tropical water.

In a patois of Spanish and English, the black Colombians outside the airport shack directed us to the battered taxis. Along with pretty Nusli's family, I crowded into a taxi that dropped us at the Residencia Restrepo, a few minutes away. It was a ramshackle compound with a main lodge and outlying cabanas run by a friendly Afro-Columbian family. In checking me in and taking down the information from my passport one Mrs. Hawkins, the proprietor, asked me in her lazy Caribbean accent:

“Which language you speak bes’?”

On the island where English vied with Spanish as *lingua franca* Mrs. Hawkins was obviously amused that a gringo would choose to answer her in stilted Spanish. Stubbornly enough, I was determined to get as much speaking practice as possible in *Castellano* in the days that remained.

With the reputation of San Andres as gateway for the cheapest flights to South America—the proliferation of backpackers—Yankees and Europeans, Aussies, French and English Canadians—was quite expected. In my wearing a black Andean fedora amid heat and humidity (not to mention the empty sleeve) it was also no surprise that I attracted stares.

Still, even with nearly 36 hours of non-stop travel, I was eager to strip off sweaty clothes and immerse in the warm sea. After dropping my *mochila* in my cabana (a cot and bare sand floor—the cheapest room available) I picked across the hot sand.

Undeterred by the islander cutting the throat of a gulping tortoise on the shore, I stepped over the patch of bloodstained sand and waded up to my shoulders in the bath water warm water. Ducking head under, I floated up in a shock of bliss. Why in hell hadn’t I got here sooner?

Later, in finding the cabana stifling hot (no fan) I joined a few fellow gringos in lazing in one of the hammocks tied to the palms at the front of the Hawkins compound. At sunset, I bought a plate of plantain and barracuda fried up right on the beach. Munching contentedly with toes wiggling in the sand, I recalled having decided back in Guatemala that the option of a beach sojourn could only be boring.

## 2

Exploring the next morning, I took the 20-minute bus ride to the other side of the tiny island and walked along the sharp coral on an empty beach. Above the beach amid the coconut groves were hobbled donkeys grazing in small plots where chickens pecked and pigs rooted. Outside the tiny shacks, locals in straw hats with machetes bent amid piles of limes, bananas and coconuts.

Passing along the unpaved road I stopped at the tuck shop outside a tiny clinic (A row of Afro-Columbians waiting on the bench outside jostled infants in slings). The lady behind the counter introduced herself as a Hungarian immigrant. She asked me point blank what I did for a living and I—on the spot—lied that I was a teacher.

"We don't got no teachers here," she said.

I sat on the bench outside her shop, sipping the warmish Fanta and listening to the soft English patois of labourers leading donkeys passing above the beach. Perhaps when I return, I could take teacher training and come back to teach in a setting like this.

At length, an old man drinking *aguardiente* in the adjacent beach shack asked me where I was from. When I told him Canada, he held up his bottle, offering me a drink. Smiling, I waved hand and said: “*Yo no bebo alcohol.*”

He nodded; probably assuming I was a Mormon.

Leaving the empty bottle on the counter, I moved on further up the beach. In passing one local in straw *sombrero* gathering up a pile of coconuts he grunted after me:

“Fuckin’ goddam white man!”

Immediately thereafter a young man leaning back against a tree trunk with his friends seemed to call out tauntingly after me. Sensing I was entering less friendly territory, I turned on heel and started back down the deserted stretch of beach.

Then in an absent-minded moment— I slipped on a slimy rock. Flat on my back on the shoreline, I gasped for breath on the shoreline as waves roll under me. After a few terrifying seconds, I caught my breath and rolled up onto the dry sand. I was able to stand and walk, but something had been badly wrenched. I limped back to the hostel wondering how in hell I'll be able to carry my backpack.

As I lay on the cot the stifling heat, it was plain that I would be postpone the onward journey for at least 2 more days.

### 3

The back pain, fortunately, is easing up. I spent the balance of the day in the hammock although I did venture once off the compound for a gingerly walk along the beach where I found a souvenir conch shell. Inevitably, I encountered fellow gringos also staying at the Residencia Restrepo.

"How much did you pay for that shirt?" asked a British gringo eyeing my Guatemalan embroidered shirt. He was on his way home after having spent 14 months in South America, much of it in Brazil and Paraguay.

As coincidence would have it, I even encountered the same Canadian *gringa* first met back in February at Macchu Picchu.

"Did you see *vicunas*?" she said. "I did, they are incredible. So, you didn't get to the jungle? No? Too bad— it was *so* intense. Orchids that grow before your eyes, weird bird calls and the eyes of the caiman lighting up in the dark."

How very narrow the Gringo trail!

I also met a few Afro-Columbian locals passing along the front of the compound including a dope seller from the neighbouring island of Providencia. Even after I waved away his offer of a free toke, he stopped and chatted.

"Easy to get a little pussy on the beach," he said stoned-eyed and pointing toward pretty young Nusli stretched out voluptuously under a thatched umbrella.

I felt a jab straight to the heart.

"*Que Paso?*" She had sweetly cooed yesterday when I first limped back to the cabana wincing in pain. Since we had sat together on the flight from Bogota, she and her parents had been kindly— even a touch protective.

I felt guilty in having fibbed to her and her parents that I was a teacher on vacation. Maybe they had even thought of the advantages of some nice young *professor Canadiense* being smitten by their daughter before she was impregnated by some local *gallo*.

At sunset, it was wrenching to see her being lured away by the pencil-bearded dive instructor. Although I stayed in the hammock with a view of her family's rooms until late evening, there was no sign of her returning from her "walk" along the beach. I had to wonder whether it had been a show of affection towards a gringo that triggered sleazy *macho* instincts to seduce a 16-year-old *polla*.

Telling that on this last night on a tropical idyll, I would be visited by a claustrophobic nightmare of my native village 4,000 miles to the northeast.

### ***San-Andres-San Jose, Costa Rica:***

#### **1**

After bidding goodbye to the kindly Mrs. Hawkins (Neither Nusli nor her parents showing up at breakfast), I headed out to the airport for the onward flight to San Jose.

As soon as I get to the ticket booth to get my boarding pass, the LACSA agent asked me to show him an onward ticket along with my Costa Rica visa. When I showed him my TICA bus ticket to Guatemala, he shook his head.

"No bus tickets. You must have onward air ticket."

It was clear that once again, I was flagged by the passport picture of the surly 19-year-old with tangled hair. I had to be one of those Gringo Trail travel bums with the potential to contaminate and corrupt pristine Costa Rica.

In a panic, I begged in halting Spanish that I was not a 'hippie' but a student on holiday and headed straight back to Canada. I also pointed to my Nicaraguan visa as proof that I

had no intension of stay in Costa Rica no longer than I take to book my onward journey. The young ticket agent looked down the line up where passengers are fidgeting, some glancing at watches.

Whether due to my plea— or a touch of pity—he finally shrugged his shoulders and handed me the boarding pass.

## 2

Immediately after exiting customs in the San Jose airport, I took the *collectivo* downtown to the TICA bus station and booked straight through to Guatemala City with the departure set for tomorrow night. I then set about obtaining the visas required to transit through Honduras and El Salvador as well as getting the tourist card for Mexico.

After changing a \$10 bill into *colones*, I booked into the same pension I stayed at back in January. This time, I got a windowless room with a scratchy straw mattress. When I asked for the key, the plump Senora sighed in the burden of dragging herself up from in front of her ‘colour’ TV—a black and white set tinted with a blue-green filter.

Lying back on the itchy mattress, I recalled the comment of the Argentinian businessman on the bus from Mendoza to Cordoba. He proudly proclaimed that his country and Costa Rica are the “whitest” countries in Latin America. More subtle than that blatant racism perhaps— is the common assertion that Costa Rica is the ‘Switzerland of Latin America’.

Apart from its ‘Swiss’ virtues of having no standing army and a tradition of democracy etc. etc.— Of course, there are open arms for upscale tourists— even rich white retirees. Yet like the Swiss, the white Costa Rican populace seem to harbour a fear of contamination from darker ‘inferiors’ from across the borders. Seemingly regarded as a *cucaracha* of a different ilk— I feel as conspicuous here as I would no doubt feel in Switzerland... I can hardly wait to get through the next 26 hours!

### ***San Jose-Managua-Guatemala City:***

## 1

By 9:30 AM I was headed north on the TICA bus along with a sizable international contingent of gringos. I still try to practice as much Spanish as I can, but it became increasingly difficult with so much English swirling around my ears. I could no longer get away with avoiding eye contact with fellow gringos or pretending (as I had the audacity to do once in Bolivia) that I am French.

"You want to read this novel?" asked one friendly fellow in baseball cap holding up ‘*the Fan Club*’ by Irving Wallace.

My scowling at his generous offer was undeniably rude.



Still, I could not help feeling annoyed my overheard snatches of chatter: such as that of 2 American couples leaning across opposite seats 2 rows ahead who were waxing on about missing McDonalds milkshakes.

Not all my fellow gringos were young. A grey headed in blue jeans was studying Spanish, murmuring though a verb tense chart. Then there was the young Canadian (I saw him hand over his passport at the police check) earnestly keeping his diary... Why need that have been so unnerving?

Fortunately, on the first leg of the journey, I got a Nicaraguan seatmate to whom I asked questions about the deadly 1972 *terremoto*. He said he remembered the clouds of dust, the screams and moan and even detached human limbs poking though debris.

Later, during the rest stop in Managua, I walked a few blocks from the bus station through the area ruined by the earthquake 4 years ago. Several blocks in the core of downtown are dominated by single story wooden structures with little scarcely sign of concrete buildings under construction. Before piles of broken masonry, I chatted with a guy selling newspapers and then joined him a few others for a few minutes, watching dogs fighting. With such glimpses of friendliness— I wished I could have afforded a stopover. Hope I can someday return.

## 2

Within 2 hours, I was back on the TICA bus headed directly to Guatemala. After the San Salvador border, there was another shuffling of passengers and this time my seatmate was a middle-aged expatriate from Miami living in El Salvador.

"What's been your favourite country?" he asked in chipmunk friendliness. Then when noting my empty sleeve, he remarked: "Maybe in the future we will be able to grow limbs back just like lizards grow back their tails."

At first I thought I was doomed to inane chatter until the Honduras border. But luckily, my seatmate provided one of the most enjoyable conversations of the entire journey:

Originally from Philadelphia, he described himself as an ardent leftist from a Jesuit background specializing in studies in phenomenology. He spoke of his respect for Gus Hall, leader of the American communist movement, as well as for Fidel Castro and claimed an affiliation with the radical priest, Daniel Berrigan.

In his view, "the germs" that evolved into modern capitalism originated in Protestantism. Although he himself was a lapsed Catholic, he still believed that Catholicism promoted a communitarian values-based moral structure unlike the ruthless individualism enshrined in Protestantism.



“Have you heard of the ‘*Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism?*’” he said with a boyish grin, blue eyes bugging, “Max Weber lays it all out historically. You gotta read it!””

His supplementary theory was that in the early 17th century the corrupt pope in Rome, one Innocent XI, secretly supported the protestant William of Orange “just to get the French off his back”. He said that Innocent secretly helped financed the decisive Battle of Boyne allowing a victory of the Protestants and the ascendancy of mercantilism that followed.

Proclaiming his Irish heritage, he was also proudly anti-British and pro-IRA. He asserted that the assassination of dangerous political figures was sometimes justifiable and supported the SLA’s abduction of Patty Hearst.

"Patty turned out to be a really good girl," he said.

Yet at the same time as he espoused the radical left, he offered some strangely reactionary opinions— such as suggesting that the cruelty of the Spanish conquest of the Incas and Aztecs was exaggerated.

Over the few hours we sat together, I let down my guard enough to tell him how I felt conflicted about my travel experiences along the Gringo trail. I said that I felt I was experiencing a political awakening but at the same time dreaded being among hoards of backpackers whose very presence might be doing harm. I ‘confessed’ that I have even been avoiding fellow gringos over the last few months— even to the extent of sometimes pretending that I couldn’t speak English.

"I know how you feel," he nodded. "But I do try to remind myself that there are jerks of every nationality. At the same time, some of the more interesting people that I've met here are my own countrymen."

When he departed at the Honduran border, I felt chastened. In my effort to stay immersed in Spanish, how many other such conversations had I missed? I resolved that from now onward I would keep myself much more open to encounters with fellow travellers— even when it did require speaking English.

### 3

In going through the formalities at the Honduran border, I recognized a few of the very same beggars seen in passing through here 3 ½ months ago. Indeed, there the same boy under a wide sombrero whose face is almost entirely covered with scabs. He thrust out his hand at each passenger as we stepped off the bus.

Equally unsettling, was the presence on the bus of the same Salvadorian whom I sat across from on the journey south— the same guy who gave me the *Popul Vu* book. In our awkward greeting, I wondered if he'd expected me to give it back to him.

At the cafeteria rest stop across the Guatemala border, I talked with a young Guatemalan and his wife. He said he worked for the *Cruz Roja* and had spent the last 2 months on earthquake relief. Back on the bus, now overcrowded, I volunteered to take the shaky stool in the middle of the aisle just to avoid sitting with the Australian *gringa* or the Canadian girl from Windsor, Ontario.

"We've got one Canadian from the east, one from the west and one from the middle," she said. "Far out, eh?"

### ***Guatemala City:***

On the very outskirts of Guatemala City, we begin to encounter the destruction from the terrible *terremoto* that struck in February, just a few weeks after my departure. Amid the piles of rubble of crushed adobe were bulldozers and platoons of workers piling debris.

Off at TICA bus station, I found a room at the nearby Pension Luna. After a *comida* of chicken and chips (most filling meal in a week) I walked around, bracing for the horrors of the February earthquake. On the block where I stayed back in January, more than half the buildings around the Galgos Pension were collapsed. One boy on the street from whom I ask directions briefly escorted me around the neighbourhood showing the buildings hardest hit. He said that he lost his own brother when his house came down and he escaped only because he been drinking that night and was sleeping in a car at 3:00 AM when the *terremoto* struck.

"*Fue un acto de Dios!*" He gave a strange laugh. Given the scale of devastation wrought by this 'act of God', the boy's rueful tone could not have been more appropriate...

Bussing afterwards to Zona #1, revisited the area where I had stayed on first arrival in Guatemala City in late December. Behind the bus station a high-rise was crumpled. Near the central plaza, Pension Santa Anna was secure but next to it, Hostel Central Roca was rubble. I ducked behind the alley and climbed up the pile of rubble to look into the window of the Central Roca. The walls were crashed down but the Bar Hawaii, where I'd had a beer (ogled by a porcine *puta*), was still open for business. The arbitrariness of the destruction left me almost nauseous.

Across from the central plaza, the Cathedral was seriously damaged with major cracks in the walls. While some of the naves were collapsed, the *imagen* of the black Christ was still intact and more crowded with worshippers than seen back in January—before *Dios* demonstrated his omnipotence.

In the park across from the Cathedral was a mini-tent city amid the garbage-littered dry grass. One big cardboard sign read: '*Guatemala en pie*'—Guatemala is underfoot—a touch of morbid humour.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the central plaza, *el Palacio Nacional*, bastion of secular power, looked untouched. In the block behind it the Hotel Posada— where I'd stayed the first night I arrived in December— was rubble. Again came the wave of nausea...

Back to the pension in Zona #2, I chatted with the desk clerk while his family crowded around the TV watching the soap opera. In taking my money he addressed me in English (“yes sir, yes sir!”) but he did make a few revealing observations in Spanish:

“*El Presidente Ford tiene buen corazon,*” he said, but the real problem is that “*El Estados Unidos es tan liberate!*” The USA was *too* free! His suggestion seemed to be that a dose of Guatemala-style dictatorship was the prescription needed to purge the social rot in *Nortamerica*. ‘It was a sentiment probably not uncommon of Guatemalans pursuing the Protestant ethic.

Before dark, I visit the *artesanias tipicas* market where I bought a belt, a couple of woollen handbags and an embroidered shirt for buddy LJ in Cranbrook. Back in the hostel, I slept fitfully amid rolling thunder that came before a steady rain. It was not hard to imagine the moment when monumentally more deafening *trueno* [thunder] struck back in February.

### ***Guatemala-Tapachula, Mexico:***

On the Galgos Internacional bus to the Mexican border, my seatmate was a Guatemalan engineering student. When I asked whether the banana plantations we were passing were owned by the United Fruit Company, he changed the subject by asking just how cold it is in Canada. He either suspected I am a socialist or is just a dumb ass for asking such dangerous questions.

Given the right-wing regime, he was probably wise to be cautious. Despite addressing me in a tone suitable to a 6-year-old, he was friendly enough. A few minutes after I turned my head to the window, he tapped me on the shoulder and offered me his *Reader's Digest Selecciones*. While he napped, I read ‘*Yo soy la matrix de Maria,*’ [I am Maria's womb] and an article about *los Tupamaros*, who were excoriated as evil terrorists bent on making Uruguay a second bridgehead for Moscow in Latin America.

Crossing the Mexican border, the *aduanas* took my tourist card (supposedly valid for 6 months) with a frown while the American Peace Corps volunteer ahead of me in the lineup got his tourist card returned with a smile. The volunteer's Spanish was much more fluent than mine— not surprising after his having spent 3 years working as an engineer in Venezuela and Honduras. (He said he especially liked Honduras). He was a little standoffish, possibly thinking me rude for asking how Peace Corps were regarded by the locals.

On the Mexican side of the border, we waited in the sticky heat for the bus to Tapachula. A couple of young *machos* behind me snickered something about gringos with “*mochillas de marijuana.*”

On the bus to Tapachula, just before town we passed a jungle plantation where my seatmate, now the Peace Corps engineer, pointed out the Izapa Mayan ruins. Even having just a day in town, it was definitely worth checking out. I stepped off the bus in central plaza directly in front of a dead rat. A portent?

Crossing the square, I checked into Pension Maria, wincing in the price— double of that of equal value in Guatemala. The desk clerk's addressing me in obsequious English added to the suspicion that I was paying a gringo price.

After dropping the *mochila*, I walked back to the bus station for an onward ticket to Mexico City, departing tomorrow night. I then changed some money in the central plaza alarmed that the \$10 American bill I was given as change was so faded it could have been counterfeit. Do I dare to pass it on?

Walking back to the hotel from the marketplace, I passed a gringo with a Canadian flag stitched on his backpack and wearing a fedora hat just like mine— or rather mine was just like his (Must be the season of the witch!)

For the rest of the afternoon, I washed clothes in the sink and began reading the Gabriel Garcia Marquez short story '*Los funerals de mama grande*', purchased in the marketplace. I fell asleep with the light on then drifted awake sometime in the middle of the night vaguely aware of a knock on the door and a voice outside the door demanding that I switch off the light.

Whether that was imagined or not— I turned off the light then fell into a disturbing dream of taking a job with the New Brunswick Forest Service wherein I was sternly informed to prepare for 6 months in a snowbound cabin...

With a whole day to kill before the night bus to Mexico City, I started the day with *huevos revueltos* in the Bremen restaurant where I breakfasted on my first stop in this city back in December. Afterwards, I took a local bus out to the Mayan ruins of Izapa. Without a guide and with no one in sight except a man on a horse on the other side of the road, I was nervous entering the banana grove thicket. Still, amid banana and cocoa trees, along with a few scratching chickens, I beheld a circle of dead monoliths.

Meanwhile, the horseman slowly approached from across the road hissing: "*psss, gringo!*"

Assuming he was trying to sell drugs or fake carvings, I ignored him.

Within a half hour I rattled back to town and then took another 30-minute bus to Puerto Madero, to bid goodbye to the tropical Pacific. The gray sand and garbage-strewn beach was hugely depressing after San Andres. Still, I sat under an umbrella at a beach shack picking at an overpriced plate of *camarones* while staring out at the combers.

Back in the Tapachula central plaza surrounded by Jose Lopez Portillo election banners and balloon sellers, a shoeshine boy whispered ‘gringo’ after tossing peanut shells at my feet.

Then there was the passerby who held up fingers when I asked him for the time. No question that Mexico is even less welcoming to gringo backpackers than was Peru. Perhaps to be expected in its being located, as former dictator Porfirio Diaz put it: ‘*tan lejos de dios tan cerca de Estados Unidos*’ [‘so far from God and so close to the United States’] Glad that I did not spend the last 5 months on a beach, as originally optioned.

Still, in the long wait with packed *mochila* for the bus departure at 7:00 PM, on the same park bench— I was lucky to strike up a conversation with a friendly Belgian-Canadian who was an ardent NDP supporter. We spoke of the coming Federal election in Canada where the Tories apparently have a new leader— some junior MP from Alberta. Again, it was a chastening lesson not to dismiss the possibility of fruitful engagements with fellow travellers.

### ***Tapachula—Mexico City:***

#### **1**

On the bus to Mexico City my seatmate was a bank manager from Mexico City who initially patronized me (“*Tienes carina?*” “*No?*” “*Falla mucho!*”) but through the night becomes much more *simpatico*. When the police entered the bus at a security roadblock and asked passengers to produce passport— the bank manager touched my shoulder and said to the cop that I was his “*amigo Canadiense.*”

Still, it was a long and cramped night made no more endurable by the *marimba* music blaring on the bus radio. Winding up through the mountains in the dark, I recalled the comment ascribed to Cortes when asked back in Spain how the country of Mexico looked. He was said to have taken up a piece of parchment, crushed it in his hand, and threw it down on the table. Though the night, we passed through that crushed-up mountainous middle.

Near dawn we passed Puebla and were speeding toward Mexico City on a multi-lane freeway. Maguay cacti dotted the fields and stands of pine clustered the mountainside as we climbed higher. While modern *haciendas* and factory buildings grew thicker along the highway, out on the fields a few sombreroed *campesinos* were riding on donkeys— harkening to a Mexico that was passing. Catching a spectacular view of the snowy dome of Popocatepetl in the morning light, I regretted not making it to Malcolm Lowry’s Cuernavaca. Hopefully, there will be another opportunity...

After creeping through more than 90 minutes of suburb, we finally reached the bus station in the heart of Mexico City. Despite a minor hassle collecting my *equipaje* (momentarily misplacing my tag) I was mercifully freed for a few hours from bus claustrophobia. In shouldering my *mochila*, I turned to bid farewell to my banker

seatmate from Tapachula who seemed on the verge of inviting me to stay with his family. Still, I turned away a little too quickly and missed the opportunity.

Out on the street, I immediately entered a metro station and in a fuzzy-headed rush, took the wrong train. Struggling under the *mochila pesado*, I finally found my way back to the *monumento de revolucion* and the Hotel Philly where I stayed back in December.

Somewhat refreshed after a shave, shower and short nap, I headed out to buy a bottle of mescal for 40 pesos. I was later to discover from window-shopping that I was badly overcharged. I was also overcharged on the copy of Marquez' '*Cien Anos de Soledad*' purchased in Sanborn's for 70 pesos. Then on another impulse, I bought a Marine Band harmonica in the key of 'D'— which was probably no cheaper than it would cost in Canada. Down to my last few dollars and with more than half a continent still to cross—I need to be much more careful.

Back exhausted at 4:00 PM, I slept through until 7:00 AM.

## 2

By 9:00 AM I had purchased my bus ticket to Tijuana leaving in early evening (an ass numbing, back wracking 36-hour trip) so had the rest of the day to play tourist. I walked down Paseo de la Reforma to Chapultepec Park. In the *Castillo de Maximilano*, I visited the *Museo de Historica*. The revolutionary murals were impressive but the rest of the exhibits somewhat dull.

Sitting on a park bench in Chapultepec, I listened to Mexican students nearby practicing their English with an American girl. The blonde girl nodded and smiled as the Mexican enthused about watching Gilligan's Island (Obeisance to the cultural imperium?)

Heading back to the hotel by metro, I changed trains at the Merced station, admiring again the temple ruins incorporated into the platform at Piña Suarez.

Near the Philly hotel, I passed a barbershop. In anticipation of the American border less than 48 hours away, I opted for a haircut.

"*Tan joven, tan joven!*" [So young, so young] tsks the barber running the clippers over the bald spot on top of my head.

With the sky threatening a cloudburst, I took cover in a restaurant, shocked by the price of fish and chips. Still, I ordered a plate that left me with stomach-ache.

In my remaining few hours I made an effort to fulfill a promise to get a glimpse of University City, missed back in December. The bus route down Avenida Insurgentes took nearly 40 eye stinging minutes. Dropped in the middle of the rather desolate (spring break?) university grounds, I walked around a few faculty buildings, some of which were

graced with the murals of the Mexican maestros: Siquieros, Jose Orozco and even Diego Rivera.

With the stomach pangs now accompanied by nausea, I headed back to my room in the Philly for the last night in Mexico City.

### ***Mexico City-Tijuana:***

Before catching the bus for Tijuana, in a street stall across from the station I had my last egg and orange juice *batido*—which further aggravated the stomach-ache.

The 36 hours that followed were probably the most gruelling bus trip of any in the last 5 months. As if being squeezed in a straight-backed metal seat with knees almost to chin wasn't bad enough—there was stomach pain and nausea, which had me rushing to the toilet in every rest stop. Almost delirious in Morelia, I dry heaved amid images of a kicking chorus line of deformed Christs...

Still mercifully, the long road gradually receded toward the northern border. Then even amid the sickness there were brief glimpses of beauty such as a sunset over Lake Chapala (an Americanized Atitlan), squawking parrots in a freight crate in Guadalajara and the sunrise at Mazatlan, albeit beheld through the window glass smeared from the greasy hair of the nodding chubby seatmate in the window seat.

In passing north of the Tropic of Cancer, there was a pang of sadness in leaving the tropics—uncertain as to when (or if) I might return.

Passing through Hermosillo, I recalled the story of high school friend, JP, of a passing truck hitting his open car door resulting in his head breaking through the window. (Just one his more than 9 lives already squandered). An hour or so later, we passed the bridge and cove at Guaymas. J.P. had a colourful tale about Guaymas, too: involving an extended hook up with an American girl on the beach. I have no such romances to claim (although I will never forget the dark-eyed Chilena, Paty, on the bus to Santiago; or even little Nusli, in San Andres) but I certainly would not trade for any price, JP's adventures for mine...

In the midst of the Chihuahua desert, the mind wandered to recall the *Teachings of Don Juan* (No glimpses of Yaqui shamans by the roadside). Then there was came a heart in mouth instant near Navojoa there when an overloaded truck barrelled toward us in our own lane. Our driver braked and bumped to the shoulder just in time.

The final stretch to the border was a purgatorial time crawl. The bus stopped in every dust-blown *ranchito* to pick up passengers. Many among them slumped into the bus with an air of defeat, as if degraded by their experiences north of the border. For the final few hours there was standing room only. A fellow gringo stood right above me for over an hour while we ignored one another's presence. At that point, all curiosity was shut down in the concentrated effort to blot out time.



Nearing dawn, we passed Mexicali and headed west parallel to the lights of America winking across the desert. At Tecate, we passed strange rock formations in the desert and in grey morning light on the outskirts of Tijuana it became icy cold. Crawling in toward the Tijuana bus station we passed the billboards advertising divorce, marriage, dentistry and car upholstery for gringo day-trippers.

At the frenetic Tijuana bus station, woozy with hunger and fatigue, I had a last chat in Spanish with a girl in a hostess uniform who was reading Konrad Lorenz. She agreed with my comment that Tijuana seems as decadent as Havana before the revolution. Still, she claimed, people from all over Mexico were coming here for good wages in *las fabricas*.

"*Hablas Espanol muy bien,*" she said in parting.

Alas, *el fluidez* was getting better just as opportunity to practice was *terminado*.

### ***Tijuana-Los Angeles:***

The Greyhound to San Diego reached the border within 5 minutes. On the American side, the officer, who looked like the Marlboro man, ambled down the bus aisle checking documents. In flipping through my passport, he first scowled at the array of stamps and visas from South America— but then became genial. As he probably reckoned, someone who would cross so many borders would hardly be a drug smuggler. Noting that I was bringing in one bottle of booze over the limit, he even asked an older Mexican gent in the seat behind to hold my extra bottle of *Rompope* as we crossed the border.

At San Diego bus station I transited immediately onto the bus for Los Angeles.

In my months long habit of making conversation with my seatmate, I started up a chat with an American girl. At first suspicious, she then said she was had finished high school and was looking for a job in LA. I asked if she had any recommendations for a traveller visiting California for the first time. As she gushed on about the wonders of Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, I could well have been hearing a 6-year-old. I could only remember, in sadness, interesting conversations with Latina girls younger than her. Welcome to America!

### ***Sacramento-Canadian border:***

1

After barely an hour's break in the LA bus station, I continued the northward journey. Fortunately, through much of the long haul to Sacramento, I was able to sleep. Off the bus for dinner break in Sacramento, I changed the last of my cash: 2 long-hoarded Canadian \$20 bills. I was pleasantly surprised that the Canadian dollar was 10% above par.

Back on the bus in the darkness, I pored over *the San Francisco Chronicle*, lingering over the arts section. Therein I observed that partaking of the range of cultural activities and events in a city like San Francisco would be a full-time endeavour. At the same time, it occurred that any serious artist could not possibly keep abreast of the myriad offerings in his field while also devoting sufficient time to his own work. With such thoughts, I turned off the light blanketed with the newspaper pages...

## 2

In the middle of the night we crossed the Oregon border and headed north through eastern Oregon passing to the east of Crater Lake. In pre-dawn we reached The Dalles and then headed east along the Columbia River. By mid-morning we were labouring north into Washington State.

When I asked the driver when the bus would reach Spokane, he looked at me a little suspiciously and asked where I was from. I realized that my foreignness was marked not just by the Ecuador fedora hat— but by my odd pronunciation of ‘*Spook-cane*’.

From Yakima to Spokane, I sat beside a cute Forestry student gal, who bade farewell with a warm smile. After a brief rest stop, we headed east across the Idaho border to Coeur d’Alene.

From the Coeur d’Alene bus station pay phone, I called old buddy, J.L., in Cranbrook. Luckily, after a few rings, he picked up. He sounded a little nervous but offered to drive down and meet me at the border. I was later to feel guilty that he had been about to go to work but then had to book off a day. A loyal friend, indeed!

Since there was no Greyhound service for points north of Coeur d’Alene, I hoisted the knapsack, walked from the bus station to the highway and stuck out my thumb.

The initial excitement of the piny fresh spring air soon dissipated into the gloom of northern shadows and growing chill. Still, within minutes I caught a lift with a Mennonite in a pickup truck. It seemed that upon first seeing my black fedora, he assumed me to be plain-folk brethren. He was only going as far as Bonner’s Ferry but kindly drove me a little further north to a crossroads hamlet called Copeland, just a few miles shy of the Canadian border. Sheltering from the chilly wind in the lee of an abandoned roadside shack, I feebly blew my harmonica in attempt to warm up. I also whispered to myself in Spanish in the sting of almost getting to the point of ‘thinking in Spanish’, when I was so abruptly cut off.

After nearly an hour at the lonely roadside with scarcely any passing traffic, I saw a tan-coloured pickup truck coming south over the crest of the hill. As it drew closer, it slowed and the turn signal went on. It was old buddy, J.L.! Grinning broadly, he pulled over and opened the door.

“Hey, I went down to meet you!” he said, then told me that just a few weeks ago he was in Tijuana.

“That’s a little far from Bolivia,” I said.

I took a few nervous drags of the cigarette he offered, then tried to joke.

“Hey, just call me the Alexander Mackenzie of bus riders. Is there a rock around I can paint a message on? How about: *‘from Argentina to the Canadian border by bus, in one full moon.’*”

He laughed— then thoughtfully turned the heater on.

## 2

Back in his place at Moyie Lake outside of Cranbrook, I nervously greeted his girlfriend, K., who seemed a little irritated. Lest she be worried about my wanting to stay longer, I made it plain that I would be taking the bus to Vancouver tomorrow night.

Even with a headache and a desperate need to sleep, I mustered the effort to be friendly to a succession of his buddies who dropped in over the afternoon. In the evening, I was thankfully left alone listening to records while J. and K. went to the drive-in. I was already bedded down on the sofa pretending to be asleep when they returned.

Though the next morning, the gloom deepened for what awaited me back in Vancouver.

Trying to be positive— I was grateful that it was springtime. It is hard to imagine the gloom of returning to Canada from the tropics in fall or winter. Also, I was grateful to have a few weeks’ cushion in the \$200 tax refund check that had been mailed to J.’s address that he had kindly let me use for forwarding mail.

Yet from this day forward until further notice— there is ‘no fixed address.’

### ***Cranbrook, B.C.– Vancouver (May ’76):***

## 1

J. dropped me off at the Cranbrook bus station on his way to his evening shift at the train yards. Although, I tried to wave it away, he slipped me \$20 towards the ticket. As always, I was humbled by his generosity.

At 5:00 PM, the Greyhound bus pulled out for the long trip to the coast. My initial seatmates were 3 hockey players and a buck-toothed fellow who claimed to be an artist. After introductions, we had nothing more to talk about.

Through the evening and into the night we passed westward through Creston, Nelson, Trail and Princeton before winding down from the Cascades. Only in that last stretch did I nod off, perhaps for an hour or so. I jolted awake in pre-dawn as rain began plashing against the window just outside of Hope (perhaps better-named 'Despair'?) After 2 hours though the Fraser valley, on a rain dreary Tuesday morning we rolled into the Vancouver Greyhound depot.

Bone-weary after 14 hours on the bus, I splashed water on my face in the washroom where the disinfectant was more stomach turning than any stink in a South American can. I then stuffed my knapsack in a coin locker. As soon as cafeteria opened, I took a corner stool and sipped a cup of coffee. Soon others drifted in, including habitués of the seamy downtown east side. The man who sat just a stool away from me began cackling madly to himself. It was a cue to get moving and face the day.

Woozy with fatigue and hunger (only a sandwich since Cranbrook), I walked down West Georgia St. in the gusting wind that threatened to blow off my Ecuadorian fedora. I realized that the hat was drawing curiosity I could do without. Still, amid in the smells of exhaust fumes and coffee grinds, I faintly whiffed my Andean wool and Argentinian shampoo. Several blocks along, I was shivering although there was sweat on my brow.

On Robson St., I stopped in at the blue Horizon Hotel restaurant for another coffee. With the Manpower office on West Cordova not opening until 9:00 AM, I had time to kill.

In the adjacent booth was a plain yet forlorn girl, who seemed to be giving me the eye (A hotel guest?) It wildly crossed the mind that I ought to chat her up. Maybe she would even let me take a shower in her room. Of course, realistically, the only option for the night was a skid row hotel room.

At 8:50 AM, I gave the girl a wistful glance then walked down to the Manpower offices on West Cordova. Because the university semester had just ended, there was a temporary Student Manpower office. At the entrance there were notice boards filled with want ads clipped out from the *Vancouver Sun*. How helpful was that? The drearily familiar was already flooding back.

The only postings of interest were for 'hosting and activities facilitators' for an upcoming United Nations conference called 'Habitat'. Every one of the positions though, required fluency in French.

Even in my dishevelled state, I waited to see one of the counsellors. When it came my turn to sit down before a prim young co-ed, she asked if I had filled out the registration form. As I frowned over the form (what the point: having no fixed address?) I blurted:

"Listen, I'm not a university student. I just need a job so I can eat and pay rent."

As she winced and drooped a pen in front of me, she might as well have been holding it with a rubber glove.

A few minutes later in the regular Manpower office, I was more self-conscious of the impression of my funny hat and slept-in clothes. Also, I realized that until I had an address and a telephone contact number, there was no point in seeing another counsellor. Barely an hour in the city and I was already spinning in the sickening spiral of unemployment.

## 2

Back out on the street, I decided to take a bus across the bridge to Broadway and Columbia St., where I had rented my cozy little garret last fall. Old Mr. Larry, the retired longshoreman who was the landlord, had been friendly enough. Even though it was unlikely that my old room would be available, he might have something else coming up for rent. Still, even with the familiar territory there would be the dreariness of regression: starting back in even lowlier digs than I left in December.

It seemed hard to believe that just a day ago, I had thought myself to be altered by my South American travels. I had felt I was coming back stronger and wiser— somehow inoculated against the dreariness that I fled 5 months ago. How quickly I was sobering from that illusion. It seemed that a pound of flesh was to be extracted for my folly!

I jostled onto the Granville bus, crossed the bridge and got off at Broadway. Although it had been more than 6 months since I'd taken the same bus— it could have been just a few dreary hours before. I was back trudging the familiar streets, killing time— back unemployed. Walking eastward down Broadway, I could almost imagine the thoughts of the passing pedestrians: *"There's that strange lookin' fella who lurks around here. Haven't seen him for a while. Probably bin sick!"*

Above Cambie Street the same crane was draped with the same kangaroo sign. The same crooked traffic signal hung above Willow St., down the block from Vancouver General Hospital. It was like a reversal of Wordsworth's *'Ode to Tintern Abbey'*: Instead of reacquainting with scenes of beauty that sustains one in their absence—these were *ugly* little details hoped forgotten, flooding back to torment. Unavoidable regression: there had to be something of hell therein...

Past Willow St., drawing nearer to Mr. Larry's place, I began to get cold feet. Was I really prepared to hear his hacking cough again and bear the foul smells on his stairwell?

Did I really want to be back in Vancouver at all?

I slackened my step. I need also remember that over the last 6 months there have been dramatic political changes in this province. With the crushing defeat of the NDP, the cynical boom and bust Social Credits were now back in power. Hard not to feel a certain hostility here in the resurgence of the right...

In that realization, there came a rush of excitement. I was not trapped in Socred land: there was nothing whatsoever binding me to this city or to this province. If I so chose, I could head out on the bus tonight.

What about Montréal? I could stand a decent chance of getting a job at the George Williams University library. I could work on learning French and try to qualify for a Civil Service job— a meal ticket that could still allow enough spare time for study— or even write...

In that thought, I stood frozen by the bus stop park bench. The sub sandwich takeout was just half a block ahead, right across from Columbia St. which was just half a block down from Mr. Larry's rooming house.

It occurred that if I was leaving the city— there was no need to be hasty. I could at least take a few days to get organized. I could take a room for a week at the Pacific hotel on Main St. where I first stayed when I landed in Vancouver 2 years ago. Before taking a train back east, I still needed to send a few letters to old friends and sort through my trunk in the storage locker. For that moment though, one thing was clear: there was no stomach for going back to Mr. Larry's.

Just then the Broadway trolley came creaking along from the east. It hissed to a stop and the door clanked open. Why not head up to the university? Maybe I could take a nap on one of the comfortable chairs in the student union building or put my head down on a carrel deep in the library stacks. At least I could think things over...

In that resolve I pulled myself up, staggered down the aisle— and nearly fell into the seat as the bus lurched westward...

***Fini***

*Transcribed from hard cover blue journal and soft white cover white spiral journal  
(2000; 2016)*