

summer travels

VOL 3 NO 36 MAY 15-21 1998 WWW.OCWEEKLY.COM

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ORANGE COUNTY'S NEWS, ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT PUBLICATION



Rebel Mexico / Beautiful Barstow / Vegas Cheese / Real Jamaica

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So, Jim Washburn is floating around the Caribbean, a few hundred feet off the shore of a Jamaican resort, when a guy motors up in a boat and asks, "Wanna buy smoke?"

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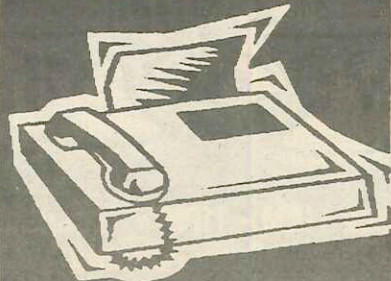
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TRAVELS IN MEXICO

SUBCOMANDANTE INSURGENTE MARCOS AND ME

About 20 minutes south of the famous Mayan ruins at Palenque, in 95 degree heat and 100 percent jungle humidity, we hit the third checkpoint of the day. As usual, there are five or six *federales* standing around our car, but this time, they are joined by a smirking federal judicial police officer who has an Uzi slung over his shoulder.

It doesn't take a genius to see we're in trouble. Thanks to the heat, both Johan Vogel, my Dutch colleague and photographer, and I are drenched in sweat. Neither of us has shaved in two weeks, and our car is covered with dust. We've got a four-wheel-drive vehicle with California license plates stuffed with cameras, equipment and baggage. Worse still, I can't seem to find my sunglasses. I hate going through roadblocks without my sunglasses.

Unlike me, JoVo doesn't get nervous at roadblocks. Fifteen years ago, when he was just 19, he spent half a year in Central America taking pictures. In 1982, he paid a visit to El Salvador's left-wing rebels—shortly after four other Dutch photographers were murdered by the army. After leaving the rebels, JoVo entered a Salvadoran village and asked for a hotel. A friendly restaurant owner led him to the local "hotel" for visiting photographers: the Salvadoran army barracks.

At any point, the soldiers could have developed JoVo's film. If they had, it's likely they would have murdered him. Instead, he hung out with his hosts, playing pool with them and listening to them cry over fallen comrades. They fed him and drank beer with him; four days later, they let him go.

"De donde vienen ustedes?" asks the mean-looking Mexican cop, punctuating his question by squinting his eyes at me like a rat. His trick—staring at the nervous gringo without sunglasses—is working, and I'm spooked.

"Para San Cristóbal," I answer, lying. I speak Spanish more or less fluently, but I try to sound like someone who's just learned the language from a Berlitz manual. Then, as if I'm under the grip of some sort of nervous seizure, I jerk my thumb back and forth, needlessly gesturing behind me.

"Do you speak English?" he asks in Americanized English, raising an eyebrow.

The evil cop's accent is flawless, and he knows it. Perhaps this guy has some sort of U.S.-sponsored intelligence-gathering background. Maybe he polished his English in North Carolina at one of Uncle Sam's training schools for Latin-American security forces.

He asks for our passports and visas and hands

them to one of the soldiers, who starts looking through them. The cop's eyes stay locked on mine the entire time.

"You are traveling in a zone of conflict," he tells me, changing back to Spanish. "Where are your *armas*? Your guns? Do you have any drugs or alcohol in your car?"

I tell him that we have no guns, no drugs and no alcohol. That we're tourists on vacation, and we've driven all the way from California to see the ruins in Palenque. That we've been driving all over Mexico to get here. I'm giving him way too much information, like I'm in a hurry to get away. Because of the humidity, sweat is dripping down my forehead into

answer. This is certainly going to be the beginning of the end of our wonderful road trip through Mexico. At least it isn't raining.

Traveling in Mexico can be one of the most pleasant experiences in the world. You can fly to Mazatlán, take a cab from the airport to your four-star resort hotel on the beach, ask your cabby to drive you to the restaurant that serves the biggest *langostas*, tell him to pick you up in 90 minutes so he can give you a lift to a disco where there aren't too many gringos, and then get tanked on Cuervo 1800 and Pacifico and dance until dawn, forgetting everything in the world but the incredible Mexican girls who are dancing all around you, chanting "Puto!" to the latest hit from the Mexican rap group Molotov, and waving their sweaty bellybuttons at you.

You could also take a somewhat different approach. Say, for example, you are actually not a tourist at all but a journalist whose assignment is to track down and interview one of the most sought-after and elusive voices in Latin America. Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos is the official mouthpiece of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), pipe-smoking darling of the international left-wing intelligentsia, and personal hero to millions of people like myself, who, mortals that we are, occasionally like having heroes to worship.

For the past 20 years, Marcos, a one-time philosophy major and student activist in Mexico City, has been hiding out in the Lacandon rainforest along the Guatemalan border, where he encountered thousands of landless peasants

who, like him, had no place else to run. Marcos and a handful of his cohorts managed to organize several thousand of them into a peasant army—without ever being caught, until the Zapatistas decided to show themselves on Jan. 1, 1994, the same day Mexican and U.S. officials implemented the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Two weeks of heavy fighting later, Marcos and the Zapatistas disappeared back into the jungle, where he sent out a series of poetic, impassioned communiqués, often by Internet, telling the world why it should care about a land crisis in a forgotten corner of Mexico.

Say that Marcos is now silently thumbing his nose at the most recent ultimatum ("Paz o Guerra") from the Mexican government and add to this the fact that this same government has refused to give you an official press visa, the FM-3, which gives you legal



Welcome to Mexico: The author in Chiapas

my eyes, forcing me to blink rapidly as I speak.

Now the cop is threatening to search the car, warning me there are going to be *problemas* if he finds anything. The five soldiers cock their heads at me, waiting to see my reaction. This is my last chance to behave like a normal person.

"It's the truth," I say in Spanish, shrugging my shoulders. "We don't have any of these things you're asking us about. All we have is food, water, extra gas, clothes and camping materials."

"What do you do in California?" the cop asks me, unconvinced.

"I write."

"I'm a photographer," admits JoVo, when it's his turn.

"What do you think of Chiapas?" the cop asks me, sneering, as if he's expecting to be entertained by my

BY NICK SCHOU • PHOTOS BY JOHAN VOGEL

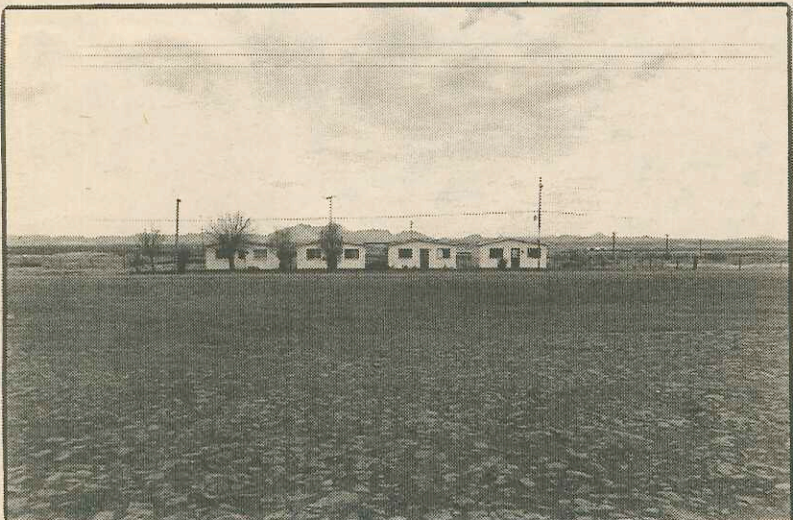
Volunteers arriving at
Aguascalientes IV (Morelia)



TRAVELS IN MEXICO

permission to work as a member of the foreign media inside Mexico.

This would leave you with little choice but to find your own way through the maze of government and military checkpoints that surround Marcos and the Zapatistas—with nothing in your hand but a tourist visa. Of course, nobody invited us to drive all the way from Orange County to Chiapas and back in a 1989 Chevrolet S-10 Blazer. Nobody—least of all the Mexican government—forced us to take this car



Outskirts of Chihuahua

through more than 3,000 miles of freeways, mountain roads and dirt tracks in an effort to converse with a masked man with a pipe between his lips about the future of Mexican democracy, Zapatismo, free trade, and the seemingly interminable civil war in Chiapas.

In our effort to find Marcos, we have left the Mexico of tourist brochures and Corona beer commercials for a world of dead-end dirt roads that turn into impassable rivers of mud during the rainy season, down paths where the only conceivable destination is Zapatista rebel territory—and if we're lucky, an interview with El Subcomandante himself.

To people like us, and to the ecotourists traveling along the Mayan trail whom we're pretending to be, the Zapatista rebel communities of Chiapas have been nothing but invisible little dots of earth carved out of the landscape, less noticeable from the main roads than the forest fires now raging through the countryside. Occasionally, a massacre happens, like the one on Dec. 22, 1997, when 45 unarmed villagers, including pregnant women and small children, were slaughtered by a paramilitary death squad in the *ejido* of Acteal, just one hour north of San Cristóbal. Meanwhile, to people like us, invisible little dots are exactly how the Mexican government wants these places to remain. The question is whether the Mexican government can find us before we find Marcos.

Our journey south had started three weeks earlier—and badly. Less than an hour after we cross the international border to Mexico's Ciudad Juárez from El Paso, Texas, we pay our first bribe at a military roadblock on the outskirts of town. The bite: a bottle of *agua pura norteamericana*—Arrowhead bottled water. It's a small price to pay to a friendly Mexican soldier who asks us if the stuff tastes good. Sure, it does, we tell him. He likes the water, calls off the ongoing search of our car, and wishes us a nice trip. Ten minutes later, Vicente Fernandez is crooning "El Tapatio" on the car stereo, and JoVo and I watch the last of a blood-red sun sink behind a faraway mesa, wondering how we could be on our way south to Chiapas so easily, so soon. What pros we are.

That's the last thought to flash through my mind when suddenly we arrive at another roadblock, but not a military one. The car stereo goes silent in a

flash. Is it the police? If so, which police? The cop who approaches us is wearing a blue jump suit and carries an Uzi slung across his shoulder. No identification badge or emblem on his uniform, just a foreboding, nasty look on his face.

The cop informs us we don't have a temporary-import sticker on our windshield, which allows our car to be in Mexico. Then he stretches out his hand and demands \$100 in American cash if we want to move on. My Spanish is still sketchy, but this guy seems full of shit; the Mexican customs house in Ciudad Juárez told us we had everything we needed. We try to negotiate, but he starts shining his flashlight into our car.

It's completely dark out, we've been pulled over 100 feet from the road by a guy who may or may not actually be a real cop, and the traffic heading south is almost nonexistent. We talk the cop down to \$50, ask his permission to take a piss on the side of the road—after all, it is his place of work—and continue south.

A deep breath and more Vicente Fernandez to celebrate the relatively easy border crossing. After a while, Santana lights up the car stereo. We pass a truck. Then, like some kind of sick joke, a pair of flashing red-and-blue lights appears in the rear-view mirror. It's the Mexican Federal Highway Patrol pulling us over in the middle of nowhere for speeding. One of them, the younger

houette of a headdress-wearing Indian smoking a yardlong pipe.

Unfortunately, they tell us, our car is illegal in Mexico without a special hologram on the windshield. After indicating their amazement at our ability to penetrate 200 kilometers into Mexico with an illegal car, they decide to let us go with a warning to drive slow. Better take care of that sticker problem first thing tomorrow with the *aduanales* at the Mexican customs agency in Chihuahua, they tell us.

Finding the *aduanales* in Chihuahua the next morning is much easier than we could have possibly known. At 10 a.m., a red pickup truck pulls alongside our car, then slows and pulls behind us. He flashes his lights and lets a dashboard-mounted siren scream. He directs us off the road, tells us to follow him, and escorts us the remaining 60 kilometers, where we find ourselves sitting in the parking lot of the regional Mexican customs-police headquarters.

Ten or 15 grim-looking uniformed and plain-clothed *aduanales* surround us as we unload the car, spreading our equipment and baggage into neat lines on the pavement. They decide to confiscate our vehicle and make us sign papers saying that if we don't resolve our "numerous violations of the federal customs law" within 10 days, they get to keep the car. They also threaten to permanently confiscate JoVo's three cameras and 60 rolls of film because one camera and 12 rolls of film per person is the legal limit for tourists traveling in Mexico.

Desperate, I pull out my just-expired Orange County Sheriff's Department press credential and tell one of the *aduanales* that I'm a travel writer. I tell him JoVo and I are documenting what it's like to drive all the way down to Guatemala and back in a car. Faces that were frowning with seriousness suddenly light up all around me. The guy who pulled me over actually seems apologetic.



Daylong blockade (Oaxacan coast)

cop, stands 6½ feet tall. He's wearing a military-style crewcut and isn't smiling. His partner is tall but older and fatter; he approaches us, puffing on a just-lit cigarette.

"*Un momentito*," he drawls, flicking ash from his cigarette. He marches to the rear of our truck, shining his flashlight through the windows.

JoVo looks over at me, grinning. "Well, since he's smoking, Nick, we may as well smoke, too, because, after all, we *were* going too fast."

There's no arguing with that kind of cool-headed logic, especially not in Mexico, where everybody smokes. So we light up, and when the cop returns, we casually offer our pack to his partner. They are impressed with our brand of cigarettes—organically grown American Spirits. The package features the sil-

"*La prensa?*" he answers, stunned. "Why didn't you say so before?"

The scare is over almost as suddenly as it started. Everybody is welcome in Mexico, the *aduanale* tells us, but naturally, journalists and professional photographers are afforded certain procedural privileges not available to tourists. Like smuggling in a heap of camera equipment—and a car—without getting the proper authorization at the border and being given a second chance to drive our car back to Ciudad Juárez and pay for that sticker. The *jefe* likes us but gives us a stern lecture about the consequences—like going to jail—of paying bribes. We firmly deny the accusation, but we've apparently set the record: furthest south reached by gringos in an illegal car in the state of Chihuahua. ➤

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The *aduanales* return the car later that evening and order us to drive directly to the customs office in Ciudad Juárez—a stone's throw from El Paso, where we started yesterday afternoon, a good five hours north of Chihuahua. Thanks to the car fiasco, we'll have to spend the night 400 kilometers north of where we started the day. Tomorrow morning, we'll be on our way south again, cameras and car in one piece, and above all, the business card of the Chihuahua customs chief stuck in my wallet, just in case we run into any more trouble.

As we're almost out the door, a rich-looking plain-clothes officer who seems the friendliest of the bunch asks us for the third time why we wanted to drive down here on vacation.

"Mexico is one of the most beautiful countries in the world," JoVo answers.

"The most beautiful country in the world!" the *aduanale* exclaims.

Stupid gringos.

In 1913, American journalist John Reed rode with Pancho Villa when the famous Mexican revolutionary captured the city of Torreón with his famed Northern Division. Reed wrote about the journey in his book *Insurgent Mexico*, which described the gunfight in Torreón in which Reed was shot at by *federale* sharpshooters who chased him out of town.

We reach Torreón late in the afternoon, and it's still an unfriendly place for gringos. Until now, it's been nothing but a first-rate road trip along Mexico's

us which way to go is illegible. We keep right. We pass an incredible sight as the sun disappears behind hills along the city's west side: a Tyson's Chicken plant. Its presence in this desolate city of desperate crowds of loiterers; limping, bat-eared dogs; trash dumps; and roadside cemeteries seems outrageous. One cemetery we pass borders a garbage dump; most of the cross-covered graves within it are littered with heaps of wind-blown trash.

Viva NAFTA. We try not to think about the last time we dined on Tyson's Chicken as we try to stave off the realization that we have somehow gotten completely lost in this hellhole called Torreón, revolutionary history or not.

Finally, we pull over to a tin-shack *tienda* on the side of the road and ask the girl behind the counter how to find the toll road heading south. Her face is bright-red from malnutrition, but the foul-smelling air and a dozen other obvious signs of environmental toxicity probably don't help much, either. Her voice, while polite and intelligent, echoes with unmistakable weariness as she points us back to the left turn we didn't make.

At Cuernavaca, the toll road ends, and the *ruta libre* takes over until it reaches the outskirts of the city of Zacatecas. Between the two towns are nothing but winding mountain roads on our map, which, as the case of Torreón has proven, tends to err on the optimistic side when it comes to road conditions. It's already 7 p.m., and we still haven't eaten lunch or dinner. We dine on quesadillas next to Cuernavaca's only Pemex station and ask the restaurant's proprietress whether she thinks it would be foolish for us to drive north during the night. She laughs at our nervousness, but as a mother would. She tells us the road

glasses sitting next to the door like a bar bouncer stares menacingly at us over his morning newspaper. Next to our table are four equally fat but much more amiable middle-aged Mexican men. They wear beeper-sized mobile phones on their belts and down increasingly brief rounds of whiskey and soda. The aging thug with sunglasses ignores them, but we can almost feel his invisible eyes trained on the unshaven pair of foreign enemy agents as he stares in our direction for a good 40 minutes, right up until we leave.

Our arrival in Mexico City—the largest single mass of humanity on the planet—is signaled by a maze of Friday-afternoon traffic and thousands of butterflies, many of which quickly end their lives on our windshield. As we reach the center of Mexico City, where we hope to locate the apartment of a friend where we are supposed to spend the night, we pass a towering, soot-stained building beside the freeway that is mocked up with a massive neon sign that reads "Hotel Garage." We drive for 20 minutes in search of other landmarks and, sure enough, find ourselves back at the Hotel Garage. Then, several turns later, as the light fades from the sky, we pass under the forbidding shadow of the Hotel Garage for yet a third time.

Utterly lost, we find a cab to lead us on the 45-minute trip to our friend's apartment. The stereo keeps us focused on the mission at hand as we follow the cab driver through the streets of the city. "You're gonna crash. . . . You're gonna die," the British group Loop screams as we race after him. First, we're right on his tail, but then another car edges between us, then two, then three. We can barely see the cab, but JoVo is driving like a lunatic, determined not to lose him. Fortunately, everyone else on the streets of Mexico City this evening is a maniac, too.

"You're gonna die!" screams the music.

After a weekend in Mexico City, your throat starts to burn. A lump forms somewhere inside it below your Adam's apple, and if you grasp it softly between your thumb and forefinger and manipulate it, you can feel it crackle and pop like breakfast cereal. We spend the entire weekend calling reporters at *La Jornada*, Mexico City's leading independent left-wing newspaper, taking them out to lunch and trying to pry information from them on how to rendezvous with Marcos and the Zapatistas.

"*No es posible*" is the constant refrain. "Marcos has disappeared; he could be anywhere in the mountains between Palenque and La Realidad," says Jose Gil Olmos, one of *La Jornada's* most prolific writers on the Chiapas situation, over a seafood lunch Friday afternoon. "Marcos could be in Guatemala right now for all I know. But he's not talking to anyone."

This is bad news. Two weeks ago, the word from *La Jornada* was that Marcos could still be reached. Olmos seems impressed with our determination to do a story about the rebel communities, however, and suggests we drive to San Cristóbal de las Casas and look up a few of his contacts. He sketches out a map showing us their rough locations.

Autonomous rebel communities? According to our Mexican journalist friend, to get anywhere close to these strongholds of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, we first must sneak undetected through a multitude of military, police and immigration barricades. More important, we need to slip through the fingers of the *Guardias Blancas*, paramilitary thugs who support Mexico's ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). As Olmos had written in *La Jornada* the day before we ate lunch with him, the *Guardias* are openly bragging that they control all the roads leading into Zapatista country and had promised to beat the shit out of any foreigners who tried to get inside. "If the government doesn't have the guts to expel these foreign trespassers from our lands, we'll do it with our own tough hands," one of the *Guardias* who spoke with Olmos had threatened. ➤



Compañeras Virginia, Zeinada and Reinalda (left to right) (Morelia)

much-vaunted system of state-of-the-art, free-trade-friendly toll roads. Yet even *la ruta cuota*, as toll roads are called in Mexico, stops right here, where Torreón starts. The road suddenly becomes bumpy as we descend through a bone-dry canyon into the city. Buses, trucks and cars are parked everywhere, their exhaust darkening the sky. Yet everybody in this town seems to travel on foot. A lot of people simply stand on the side of the road, watching us blankly as we pass by. We're both starving, but the restaurants around here are rundown and filthy. The air stinks like sewage.

We come to a fork in the road, but the sign telling

is *fine*—nothing but *banditos* and *chupacabras* out there to bother us.

Moving on all night, we pass our first two military roadblocks (waved through, no questions asked) before we reach Zacatecas at midnight and Aguascalientes at 2 a.m. We keep driving because the roads are so good out here.

After finding a toll-road-side inn in Querétaro, an industrial suburb two hours north of Mexico City, we sleep soundly for five hours with an endless convoy of 18-wheelers roaring just 10 yards from our beds. As we attack our breakfasts in the hotel restaurant later that day, a thuggishly fat Mexican in dark aviator

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It's easy to see why the Mexican government and the *Guardias Blancas* are so upset about foreigners. *La Jornada's* front page yesterday featured U.S. author Susan Sontag posing in front of a Zapatista mural in Polhó, a memorial to the victims of last December's massacre of women and children by the pro-government death squad in Acteal. From the sound of it, the *Guardias* were going to make attending a press conference in one of those towns as difficult a task as finding Subcomandante Marcos.

We thank Olmos for his time and pay for the meal. We aren't going to find Marcos or anyone else if we keep sitting on our asses, eating seafood with



Outside Roberto Barrios

reporters in Mexico City. As if Marcos himself is laughing at our dilemma, we see his image everywhere in this town: on hundreds of photographs, post cards and posters sold outside the philosophy building of Mexico City's National University (where Marcos is rumored to have studied in the 1970s), and on the front of a T-shirt worn by a Mexican punk rocker we bump into near the downtown headquarters of *La Jornada*.

Both JoVo and I are feeling dizzy from the air pollution. My eyes have turned bright-red, and I'm coughing incessantly. JoVo is eager to take photographs. It's time to get out of here.

Somewhere off the main road heading south from the city of Oaxaca to Puerto Escondido and the Pacific highway leading south to Chiapas is San Agustín Loxicha. The *pueblo* is rumored to be the center of recent guerrilla activity in the hills along the Oaxacan coast. But after 200 kilometers of relatively easy driving, we hit steep mountains and a dirt road like the driveway to hell: fallen trees, rockslides, conscript gangs of thirsty laborers and flooded rivers abound. We burn through half a tank of gas—and donate half our bottles of drinking water—yet we still have another 200 kilometers before we reach the coast. By the time we find a *rienda* to ask for directions to San Agustín Loxicha, the turnoff to the town is about 45 minutes behind us, and to reach the *pueblo*, we still need to traverse another 30 kilometers of steep mountain roads.

Because we haven't seen a gas station since Oaxaca, we fill up at a Puerto Escondido Pemex and head south to Chiapas. Stopping at a beach along the way, we discover a surreal-looking cross facing the empty ocean. It's a memorial to an anonymous drowning victim, but the place has the feel of

Stonehenge. The waves break violently on the beach, and as they recede, they crash into one another furiously from all directions.

Halfway to our planned destination for the evening, the industrial port city of Salina Cruz, the traffic gets slow and heavy in a dirt-poor coastal village that doesn't exist on our map. Right in the middle of town, the traffic stops completely. All we can see ahead are parked cars on the roadside and groups of people walking up and down the highway, some of them selling food to the stranded drivers in front of us.

I jump out and ask someone what's happening. "The road is closed today," he answers nonchalantly and then walks away.

As it turns out, a group of local students and teachers is demanding accreditation for an independently run (non-Mexican-government-controlled) teaching school. They sit on a puny line of concrete blocks that have been stretched across the highway and are surrounded by what looks like half the town's population. On either side of their barricade, hundreds of trapped truckers, buses, families and tourists sit in their cars. I approach the roadblock and show one of the organizers my expired press credential. I ask if it's okay for my photographer to take some pictures.

"Sí, se puede," he answers, grinning, pleasantly surprised by the fact that I'm not some gringo tourist complaining about the road being blocked. When JoVo returns a few hours later to the car, his face is gleaming with pride. Since I had told the demonstrators I

least of all the roadside entrepreneurs who inhabit this nameless village. They will be provided with a captive market of vehicle-bound customers from dawn to dusk each day until the protest ends.

Several nights later, after three weeks on the road, we are finally heading into Zapatista country. We leave the narrow, cobblestone streets of San Cristóbal, turn left onto the main road, slow down for speed bumps and casually drive by the police checkpoint. Even though we're a couple of gringos heading out of town at 3 a.m., we're waved through by a sleepy-looking cop in the control tower. Climbing uphill around a few bends, we look for signs pointing toward Ocosingo and Palenque. But it's as dark as a graveyard, and the road is shrouded in mist; we can't see more than 10 feet.

We slow down, confused by the sudden arrival of a cloud that is rushing down the foothills on its way to San Cristóbal. JoVo brakes to a stop and squints blindly out the window. This is definitely not the road to Palenque; it's the entrance to San Cristóbal's military garrison. A lone sentry stares at us over a wall of sandbags to one side of the entrance. He shifts his automatic rifle into a firmer grip, so we wave at him and point forward like lost tourists.

We find the exit to Ocosingo 30 meters down the road and start our ascent into the mountains. The fog thickens into a white wall—or a cloud, as if we're suspended between heaven and Earth. Just then, a pair of yellow headlights materializes in the white blur ahead of us. The 15-foot-wide road between us and them has no center-divider line. As the lights pass by, I realize they belong not to the flag vehicle of a military convoy on its way to the garrison but to the red-eye luxury bus ferrying tourists between Palenque and San Cristóbal.

Life starts early in rural Mexico, and in less than an hour, the indigenous villages we're driving through spring to life. Men and women in *ropa típica* file past us on either side

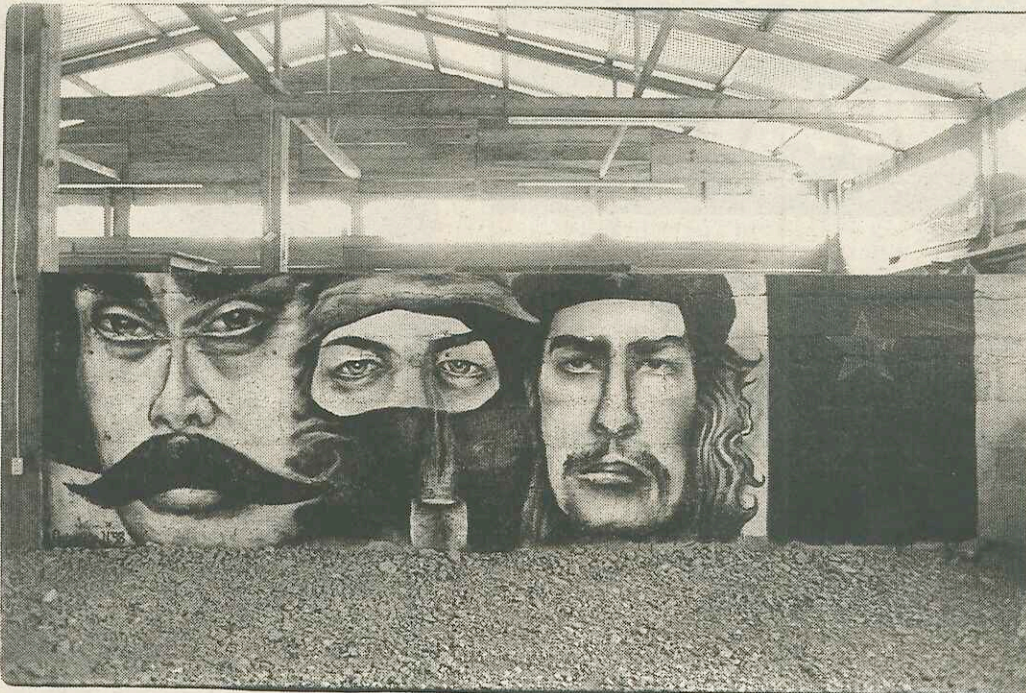
of the road followed by their children—men walking with machetes to the fields, groups of women with baskets of fruit and woven goods on their backs. They're marching to the local Indian markets, which will be ready for business at dawn.

As the Blazer finally drops out of the pine-covered hills separating San Cristóbal from Ocosingo, the fog becomes merciful. Thousands of stars appear in the sky for a few seconds at a time. Driving through another cloud on the other side of the mountain, I notice a full moon glaring down at us. In another minute, it is gone.

Our goal is to reach the *ejido* of Morelia, a communal village 20 kilometers north of Altamirano and

home to one of the five biggest Zapatista civilian-support bases, the five Aguascalientes—in this case, Aguascalientes IV. Four years ago, thousands of well-armed and -organized peasant revolutionaries in this state marched out of these hills and into the streets of San Cristóbal, Ocosingo and Altamirano. From a colonial balcony overlooking San Cristóbal's central square, the Zapatistas declared themselves a sovereign army. Just as quickly, they shot their way through the Mexican military and disappeared. The military's last operation in the two-week battle against the Zapatista rebels was to drop napalm on the villages near Altamirano and Morelia.

In order to find our contacts in Morelia, we've been told to do four things: arrive before dawn in Altamirano to avoid the immigration checkpoint outside town, drive to the town square, find the "big white church," and ask one of the nuns there for ➤



Aguascalientes IV auditorium: Zapata, Marcos and Guevara (Morelia)

was an American reporter, they were all pointing at JoVo and shouting: "George Washington! George Washington!" Even as I'm laughing at the joke—JoVo is Dutch, not American—our neighbors announce that the students have agreed to open the road for 12 hours until tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. The road south to Chiapas is open.

Of all the obstacles in Mexico blocking our path to Marcos and the Zapatistas, this roadblock by far took the most time and patience to maneuver. But neither of us regrets the delay. It provides us with one of the most important lessons we encounter with Mexican roadblocks: far from separating people, as barricades are designed to do, this one has the vivid effect of bringing people together. In Los Angeles, a similar stunt would have motorists firing shots at one another in less than 30 minutes. Yet during the more than five hours we are stuck here, no one feels cheated,

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TRAVELS IN MEXICO

directions to Morelia—which according to our Mexican Thomas Guide, the *Guía Roji*, is nonexistent—before anybody in town gets suspicious about our California license plates.

Back in San Cristóbal, an organization supporting the Zapatista communities had given us “press credentials,” professional-looking laminated purple cards with our photographs attached. They’re the kind of thing that would get us arrested for violating our tourist visas and meddling in Mexican politics at any one of the government’s checkpoints. So we’ve stuffed the credentials deep into our socks. Now we’re practicing our phony explanations as to why we’re driving into Altamirano at this time of night. But as long as the military and police and immigration officials in this area continue sleeping until 6 a.m., we probably won’t have to use them.

Fortunately, there’s a chance the cops will forget that three hours ago, the clocks in the southern Mexican isthmus jumped forward an hour for daylight savings. For most Americans, it’s a twice-annual occurrence, something we look forward to. Yet switching clocks is alien to rural Mexicans, and they see this switching back and forth as a crazy, urban attempt to control the rhythms of the countryside. They call daylight savings time *la hora de Ernesto Zedillo*, a sarcastic jab at the increasingly unpopular and feckless president of Mexico.

We’re in luck: the immigration checkpoint at the entrance to Altamirano is still closed for the night. Just minutes before 5 a.m., we blast by it and turn left toward the center of town. It’s as if the town is frozen: not a soul is visible on the streets, not even the police. The big white church where the nuns are supposed to sleep is exactly where it’s supposed to be, towering over the unlit *zócalo*. Except for a few shadowy figures sweeping the square, there are still no signs of life anywhere near the church.

Worse, the iron gate to the church is locked. Without talking to the nuns inside, we have no idea how to locate Morelia and the Zapatistas short of simply asking someone how to find them. That was exactly what we promised not to do when we got our official-unofficial press credentials. “There are a lot of PRI-istas and spies in Altamirano,” our contacts had warned us. “People will get suspicious and tell the police. So whatever you do, don’t ask just anyone.”

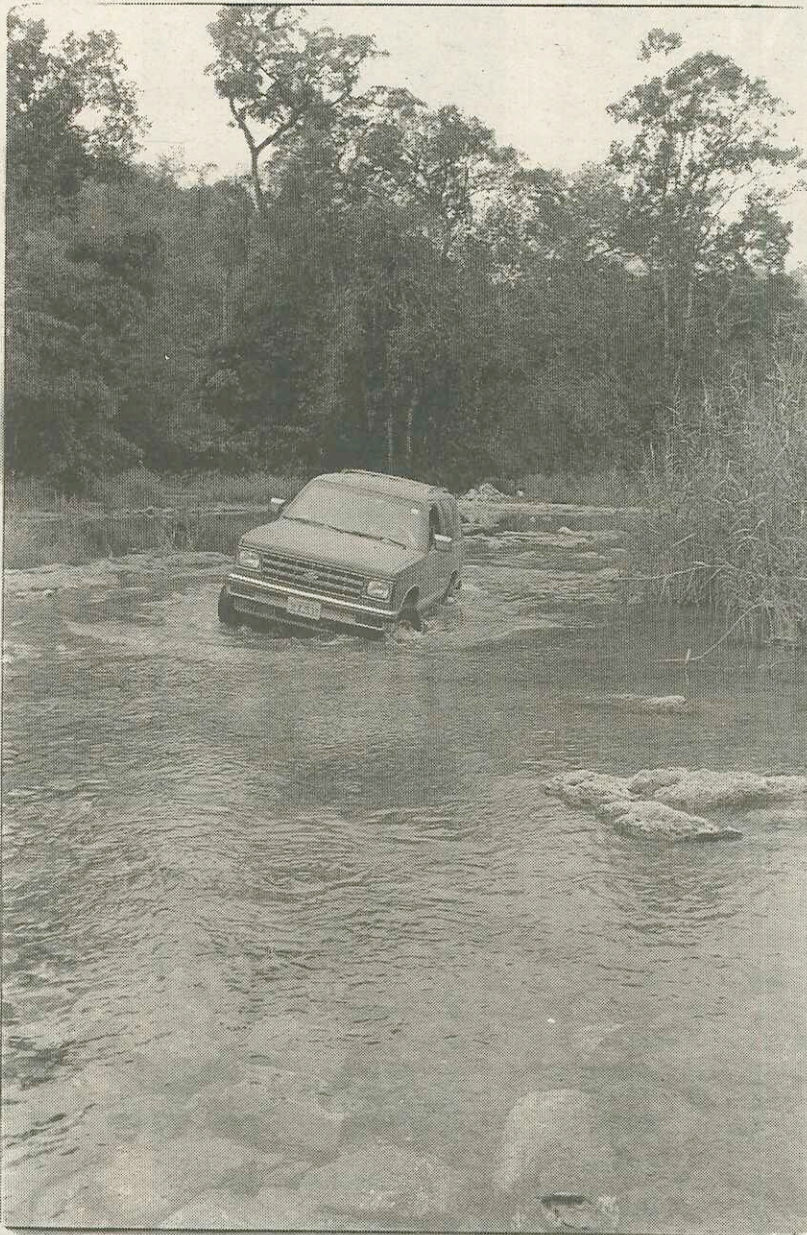
All I know is that at dawn, JoVo and I will be sitting ducks in this place, nuns or no nuns.

So I approach an indigenous woman as she strolls by our car, trailed by an older woman (perhaps her mother) and two small girls. I’ve frightened her, but when I mention Morelia, the woman looks up at me with a broad smile as if she wants me to know that she knows why we’re going there but doesn’t mind. She points downhill.

The pitted, beaten dirt road from Altamirano to Morelia includes a one-lane bridge with just inches to spare on either side of our tires—beyond which is a 20-foot fall into a rock-strewn ravine. The road also

has a fork in it the woman forgot to mention. For some reason, my instincts tell me to go uphill, but several minutes later, we arrive at the main highway from Comitán to Ocosingo. A white Ford Explorer with tinted windows is passing by the intersection; the driver spots our car but doesn’t stop or slow down. We wheel around and go downhill.

At dawn, we reach Morelia, a 80-year-old *ejido* of several dozen adobe and tin-roof houses, some with occasional access to electricity. By now, the grassy corridors of the *ejido* have come to life, so I ask for directions to the *campamiento de paz*, which is where the foreign observers are supposed to sleep during their stay with the Zapatistas. Besides ourselves, there are six foreigners at the peace camp: a team of sunburned Italian and Basque volunteers working on a water project, and two Americans—hippie human-rights workers who live in San Cristóbal but have stopped by



Crossing into Roberto Barrios

for a few days to provide accounting classes to members of the local women’s agricultural co-operative.

When everyone has left for work, JoVo and I stretch out on the grass until late afternoon. Our rest is constantly interrupted: first by chickens in the courtyard of the peace camp, then by the dull echo of a helicopter passing somewhere above us. Several times, we hear helicopters circling in the sky, but it is still too hazy to see anything. We go back to sleep, trying to ignore the hungry, pecking chickens.

In the evening, we wait for an interview with Morelia’s head *responsable*, one of the dozen or so elected representatives of the Autonomous Municipality 17 de Noviembre (the anniversary of the Zapatista army’s inauguration). 17 de Noviembre, of which Morelia is the capital, is an unofficial collective of a few dozen *ejidos*, all of which exist within the boundaries of the official (govern-

ment-controlled) municipality of Altamirano. Unfortunately, our contact, Compañero Saqueo, which is not his real name, has disappeared. Hours pass. Shortly before midnight, we secure a meeting with three of Morelia’s female Zapatista leaders, Compañeras Reinalda, Zeinada and Virginia, which are not their real names, either.

The women meet us at the rough-hewn dinner table in the courtyard of the rather spartan peace camp. Reinalda tells us she is 34 years old, but the lines in her face give her the appearance of someone who is 50. The three women are accompanied by their children; everyone sits quietly while Reinalda nurses her baby and tells us about what happened two weeks ago. That’s when the military tried to land one of its helicopters in the makeshift soccer field near Morelia’s church. The men were all out working in the *milpas* (fields) when the helicopter arrived at 5 p.m. Led by Reinalda, about 80 women—carrying their children, armed with sticks and stones—flooded onto the soccer field and attacked the helicopter.

“Fuera, fuera!” they chanted, “Out, out!” The chopper hovered menacingly a few feet above their heads for several minutes before giving up and flying away. That’s the last time the military tried to enter Morelia, but rumors are already circulating that another raid will occur sometime before the end of April.

Reinalda and the rest of Morelia have good reason not to like helicopters. Every time the military decides to sweep through the town, it sends in a chopper first. Of course, whenever the military has no plans to enter the town, it sends in a chopper anyway, just to get people thinking about the next sweep. The skies have gotten so busy lately, the *compañeras* tell us, that the children start crying and end up with fever and diarrhea whenever they hear the faintest sound of helicopter rotors.

The worst raid this year happened on Jan. 3, when the military and police closed down all the roads leading into town and, coming from all directions, poured into Morelia. Hundreds of federal army troops and judicial police officers knocked on doors and entered and searched houses for weapons, rounding up any men they could get their hands on. Anyone carrying a machete quickly lost it. Food disappeared from shelves; crops in the fields were later discovered stamped to shreds. Five days later, the same thing happened again. The *compañeras* say it’s been this way ever since Jan. 1, 1994, when the Zapatistas overran the official municipalities of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Altamirano and Ocosingo in their famous two-week offensive.

Jan. 7, just five days before the government signed a cease-fire with the rebels, has special importance in Morelia. It started when the military swarmed into Morelia and rounded up the entire male population. In groups, the men were herded into a church and tortured for several hours by the judicial police. “Where are the Zapatistas?” the police demanded. “Where are your weapons?”

When they failed to get answers from the men, the police questioned the women. Finally, a PRI-supporting woman fingered three of the town elders—Dons Hermelino, Sebastián, and Severiano—as a trio of Zapatista supporters. According to the *compañeras*, the police grabbed the three old men and pushed them into a waiting helicopter, which promptly disappeared into the night.

The bodies of the three men were found in a ditch near the turnoff from Altamirano to Morelia a few weeks later, chewed apart by stray dogs. Although the case has been picked up by the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the Mexican government continues to deny that any military or police action took place in Morelia on Jan. 7.

After the killings, Morelia, which had received almost nothing from the government in its seven decades of history, enjoyed a series of high-profile visits by local PRI officials who handed out money to residents and invited the population to vote for PRI-backed local candidates in the upcoming elections. Anyone who refused to take the money was branded a Zapatista and advised to leave the community.

But the only people who have left Morelia in ➤

TRAVELS IN MEXICO

the past four years are a few dozen PRI supporters, along with a group of 100 male Zapatista supporters who on Jan. 7, 1996, held an inauguration ceremony for a new *ejido* a few miles outside town. Lest the government misunderstand their intentions, the men named their new home Ejido 7 de Enero—Collective January the 7th—in tribute to the three old men who had been murdered exactly two years earlier.

Just as the women finish their tale, Compañero Saqueo shows up. He's too tired to talk, but we get his permission to take a tour of the nearby Aguascalientes, the municipal headquarters for 17 de Noviembre, the following morning.

The name Aguascalientes—or “hot springs”—we discover, is a joke: there are already hundreds of Mexican cities and towns named Aguascalientes, so the name has the idea of “Everytown, U.S.A.” To the Mexican government, the Aguascalientes are anything but funny. Guadalupe Tepeyac, the first Aguascalientes, included a hospital, auditorium and several dormitories until the Mexican military burned it down shortly after the Zapatista uprising. So the Zapatistas built five more Aguascalientes, telling the government that if it destroyed these, 25 more would be constructed—first all over Chiapas, then all over Mexico—to replace them.

Which explains why the Zapatista municipal headquarters outside Morelia is named Aguascalientes IV. At first, the place seems as empty as its name, isolated downhill along a dirt road. We are greeted by eight or nine wooden buildings, most of which are decorated with brightly colored Zapatista murals. Then, still farther down the hill, we notice a group of 60 men digging irrigation ditches, which we are told will be fed by a water-pumping system. It should be completed sometime this summer.

If the irrigation project is a success, this communal *milpa* will be Morelia's greenest. Running water is a three-hour-per-day scarcity in this town, and without the rains, most hills in this region are burning, literally. During our stay in Chiapas, wildfires raged throughout the state, eating up the dun-colored hills, transforming them into black, still-smoldering stubble. Locals say the fires are no accident: the Mexican military starts them as a pretext for their frequent sweeps through Zapatista territory.

So far, everything is going well with the Aguascalientes IV water project, however. The men digging the ditches aren't even from Morelia but rather a nearby *ejido*. More impressive, they are PRD-istas, peasant supporters of the chief Mexican opposition party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). Today is their first day helping out; it's 90 degrees out, late afternoon already, and these men have been laboring since dawn without complaining.

We leave the car parked where a swarm of children buzzes around it. Wherever we stop, the car is a kid magnet. In the shade of one of the buildings, we join a group of caravanistas from Mexico City who are preparing a lunch of handmade tortillas. They arrived yesterday afternoon in a van full of food, children's books and medicine. They have spent the morning helping out with the water project. A female caravanista looks as if she belongs on a Newport Beach tennis court. She's wearing a Rolex—or a slick Mexico City imitation—on her wrist, and her tennis shirt matches her visor.

“We're here to learn about life in these communities,” she tells me in Spanish. “And today, we're learning how to make tortillas.”

I can see that for myself, but she goes on anyway.

“Because, in Mexico City, we don't know how to make tortillas by hand,” she continues. “We have big machines that do it. And when the tortillas come out of the machines, they're all *flat!*”

In case I've gotten lost somewhere along the way, the woman decides to show me what she means by clapping her hand together.

“*Flat!*” she says.



“A three-hour-per-day scarcity” (Morelia)

Getting out of Morelia and back on the road to Ocosingo the next morning turns out to be a breeze. Instead of heading back through Altamirano and the dreaded immigration checkpoint, we take the dirt road all the way to the Comitán-Ocosingo highway and skip Altamirano altogether. In 20 minutes, we find the road and head north.

Immediately, we hit a military roadblock. Five soldiers carrying Israeli-made machine guns approach and surround the car. Hopefully, they haven't spotted us pulling off the dirt road from Zapatista country, which lies in plain view only about 100 yards behind us.

“*Permitame hacer una revision de su vehiculo,*” one of the *federales* says, signaling for us to shut off the engine.

By now, we have dealt with the military enough to know that we have no reason to be nervous. If these guys find JoVo's camera equipment, the worst thing that will happen is that they end up

calling the immigration police, who, if they look carefully enough at my notebooks, will deport us. But according to Mexican law, the *federales* can only search our car for weapons and drugs. And they can't detain us any longer than necessary to perform the search. They're not even supposed to ask for our passports.

And they don't. Accompanied by a yawning soldier, I walk to the rear of the car and pop open the hatch. “Camping materials, additive for the gasoline, extra gasoline, a stove for cooking food, and our clothes,” I tell him in Spanish, pointing out each item.

The *federale* pokes around and wants me to open the plastic containers inside the car. There are two. One has our food and cooking supplies, the other hides two of JoVo's cameras, his film and photo equipment. I open the first, revealing our food. The soldier seems satisfied and tells me I can close the hatch door. As I slam it shut, a cloud of dust blows off in my face.

When it clears, I notice something that I immediately wish I had seen before we left Morelia. Some of the kids who I had seen playing around the car apparently had decided to pass their time scrawling Zapatista slogans all over our rear windshield.

“*Viva EZLN,*” I read in silent horror. “*Viva Marcos.*”

“That's a lot of dust,” I remark, coughing and wiping my shirt with my hands in a ridiculous pantomime.

“*Si,*” the soldier answers, nodding his head politely, looking right at the windshield.

Grunting impatiently, I sweep the dust—and the evidence—off the glass. The *federale* watches me, smiling and nodding his approval.

Just a few hundred yards down the road, there's an immigration checkpoint. It's manned by a lone plain-clothes cop who looks over our car and writes down our passport numbers. Without asking questions, he tells us we are free to go.

An hour later, just before we reach Ocosingo, we hit a second immigration checkpoint. Fortunately, the fat cop who waves us off the road seems less suspicious about what's inside our car than whether I'm from Russia. When JoVo explains that my last name is Norwegian, he nods proudly at us. “Norway's very close to Russia,” he points out.

His curiosity sparked, the cop tells us to sit in the car while he examines our passports and the paperwork for our car inside his Quonset-hut, open-air office. JoVo doesn't like sitting in the car. He

lights a cigarette, and before I can stop him, he walks over to the immigration office with his camera, probably to ask if he can take some photographs, which is what JoVo always does whenever we hit a roadblock, no matter how hectic.

Fifteen minutes have passed since JoVo disappeared. I check out the rear-view mirror: JoVo has gathered the cops around him to point out some interesting aspect of the sky—the clouds, or maybe the way the light strikes a mountain peak, or maybe a circling bird. And they are paying attention to him.

When JoVo finally returns, he quietly hands me my passport and starts the engine. Our tourist visas have been stamped to show that we have entered a zone of conflict and been made aware of Mexico's “general population laws.” The stamp doesn't mean anything. At this point, we're still just a couple of tourists on our way to the ruins at Palenque. ➤

TRAVELS IN MEXICO

In two hours, we run into the roadblock with the evil cop who speaks perfect American English. His squad of five Galil rifle-carrying soldiers stands coiled.

"I said, what do you think of Chiapas?" he asks, this time in English.

"We're not political," I say. Instantly, I realize it's the stupidest thing I could say. He might have been asking about anything—the weather, the landscape, the people. But my answer—"we're not political"—proves just how political we are.

Just then, a middle-aged American-looking couple in a rental car pulls over next to us, even though the soldiers had waved them through. Maybe it's the incredible heat, but they're in a hurry. The husband gets out of the driver's seat and pulls a map out of the front pocket of his Bermuda shorts. He looks lost.

"I think Chiapas is beautiful!" JoVo tells our captors. He's cheery, genuine, as if he hasn't been

cans. Two photographers are also assaulted later that day by police outside the airport at Tuxtla Gutiérrez, where they are trying to take pictures of the deportees being stuck on a plane to Mexico City.

But we won't know about any of this until several days later. That day, we approach Roberto Barrios later than expected, with less than an hour before sunset. Using our compass and passing villagers to guide us, we climb uphill and cross a small creek, where a bunch of men are drinking beer in the shade, sprawled next to a new-looking white pickup truck. Are they *Guardias Blancas*?

A few minutes later, I see a red-and-white radio tower peeking out above the palm trees that line both sides of the road. From behind a camouflaged pill box, a helmet-wearing sentry peers out at us. Another soldier guards the radio tower. We've arrived at the gates of a Mexican military base.

As it turns out, if we want to reach Roberto Barrios, we have to pass through the military base to get there—unless we want to sneak across the river on foot, risking bumping into a military patrol. We drive. Fortunately, there are no judicial or immigration police to be seen. The *federales* seem to believe

almost left at home—on the grass next to the Che Guevara Library. It is now completely dark out. Hidden from view by the students' bus is the Zapatista musical troupe, a shaggy group of folk singers performing for a crowd of hundreds. It's like a miniature Woodstock—minus the drugs and alcohol: Roberto Barrios is a dry community, as are all the Zapatista *ejidos*.

After a few songs, I bump into a cute college student I had seen painting a mural on the Che Guevara Library. In a few minutes, two of her *compañeros* approach us but don't interrupt our conversation. When one of them spots my press credential, he starts interrogating me.

"What is it you're specifically trying to find out by being here?" he asks.

"It's a long story," I reply. "I drove down to Chiapas to interview Subcomandante Marcos. But I'm here to talk to people about how things are going in Roberto Barrios." I sound like the flat-tortilla lady from Mexico City.

"Marcos," he repeats, scratching his ear. "Everybody wants to talk to Marcos. All the North American journalists."

"He's not giving interviews anymore," I continue. "I guess he's got better things to do."

"I'm not too sympathetic about Marcos," the student says, shaking his head. By now, I am accustomed to hearing people in Mexico, especially students, complain about Marcos getting too much attention compared with the indigenous rank-and-file of the Zapatista movement, even though, or perhaps because, Marcos was once a student himself.

But this fellow seems sincere.

"Look at all these murals," he exclaims gloomily, pointing at the nearest building, the entire side of which is decorated with the stern visages of Emiliano Zapata, Guevara and Marcos. "What's Marcos doing up there with Che and Zapata? Is Marcos supposed to be the leader of a new Mexico? I don't think so."

I head back to camp. I have asked for an interview with the *responsables* of Roberto Barrios; they have responded by asking me to write down my interview questions. With a headlamp for light, I scribble away. After a while, a caravanista stops by to warn me about the tarantulas, three of which have just been killed nearby. Since we have no place to hang our hammocks, JoVo and I spend the rest of the night in the tent. The performance on the other side of the bus winds down at about 2 a.m. Outside, mosquitoes swarm; inside, the tent is ovenlike. Sleeping on my side, I use my open palm for a pillow. I wake up several times to drain sweat from my palm and switch hands. At 8 a.m., the morning starts with a jolt.

"Zapata vive! La lucha sigue! Viva la lucha Zapatista!"

More than 100 caravanistas are starting their day with a mass assembly on the soccer pitch. They raise their hands with clenched fists before heading down the hill for breakfast. After I join them to eat, Compañero Brauliano approaches me. JoVo has nicknamed this Zapatista *responsable* "the cowboy" because he wears a straw cowboy hat and always has a red bandanna slung around his neck.

Brauliano tells us we can take pictures of buildings but not of people—unless we have both his and their explicit permission. Children are okay, but definitely no pictures of kids playing with toy guns. "That's a very bad message to send," he explains. "These children aren't readying for war; they're waiting for dialogue and peace."

Brauliano takes us to a bench where I can interview him and two other Zapatista leaders for 10 minutes. JoVo can have an additional five minutes to take pictures. Once JoVo's camera comes out of the bag, Brauliano and his two companions take their red bandannas off their necks and pull them over their faces and noses until I can barely see their eyes.

For the next 30 minutes, I listen to Brauliano describe life in Roberto Barrios since the beginning of the Zapatista uprising. Everything was going well, he says, until earlier this year. I assume Brauliano is referring to the massacre at Acteal, which actually had occurred in the last week of December. But Brauliano is talking about Roberto Barrios. ➤



Compañero Brauliano (center) and other Zapatista officials (Roberto Barrios)

following the interrogation and doesn't see the danger in what I've just said. "The trees, the people—I like it!"

The cop is only half-listening. His eyes follow the lost-looking tourist with the map who is about to interrupt his interrogation, just when things are getting interesting. Reluctantly, he hands us our passports and waves us through.

In a few minutes, we find the exit to Chancála, head east, and turn off on the dirt road to Roberto Barrios, which, unlike the Mayan ruins at Palenque, is our real destination.

Private destinies and world-shaping events are often driven by accidents or innocuous details.

Upon leaving Morelia, JoVo and I decided that we would forgo a trip to the Aguascalientes at La Garrucha for the more distant—and potentially dangerous—Roberto Barrios. La Garrucha, we'd heard, was expecting a caravan full of foreigners—and we did not drive thousands of miles to listen to fellow *norteamericanos* discuss the finer points of Subcomandante Marcos' latest communique when we could be in Roberto Barrios, which sits across a river from a Mexican military base.

This turns out to be a fortuitous decision. Just before dawn on April 11, Mexican authorities enter several *ejidos* near La Garrucha and round up and deport a dozen foreigners, including three Ameri-

our story that we're just a couple of tourists who thought it would be "interesting" to camp out in Roberto Barrios for a couple of days. The word "Zapatista" doesn't even come up.

After almost losing our car in the river, we find ourselves driving down a jungle road. A few minutes later, the jungle becomes a wide clearing. Several thatched-roof buildings appear on either side of the road, and there's a sign next to one of them. "EZLN," it reads. "Welcome to Rebel Territory."

Children are standing in front of the sign with wooden toy rifles; they run up to our car and playfully point them at us. Down the hill, we can see the front end of Roberto Barrios, an *ejido* of 1,000 people, which has been around since the 1910 Mexican revolution. To our left is the Aguascalientes; on our right are two thatched huts for the six foreign observers.

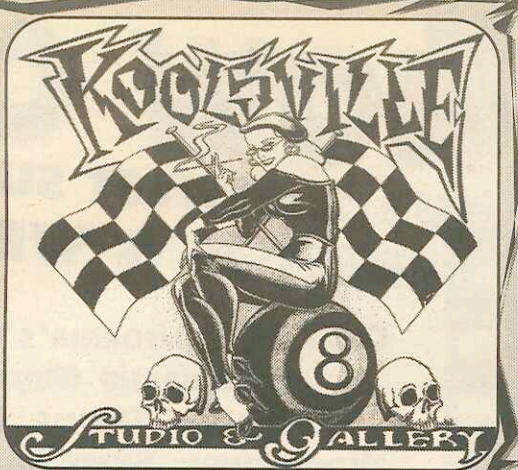
It's spring break in Mexico. Everywhere, groups of young students head across the road for an evening bath in the river we had just crossed; we are told that it is filled with waterfalls and swimming holes. Elsewhere, musicians from Mexico City's National University prepare a stage for their upcoming performance on the soccer pitch.

There are dozens of hammocks slung from the support beams of every structure in the Aguascalientes. But there's absolutely no room for us to sleep. I set up my pup tent—a last-resort item I had

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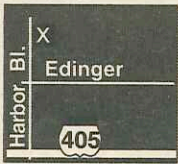
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TRAVELS IN MEXICO

"Have you heard about what happened to Compañero Trinidad?" Brauliano asks.

I had seen Compañero Trinidad's portrait everywhere in Roberto Barrios; he seemed to be as famous here as Marcos or Guevara. From the murals, it appears that he was a relatively young and healthy man. Unfortunately, his small daughter's health was not good. So in order to pay for her medical treatment, Trinidad worked a second job outside Roberto Barrios. Every morning and evening, he was forced to cross the river—and the military checkpoint—simply to get to and from work.

Trinidad was also active with the Zapatista organization in Roberto Barrios, as are more than half the town's residents. The Aguascalientes houses meeting rooms for popularly elected political committees who render votes on a variety of local issues—land, culture, the elderly, health, education and women's rights. Just down the road, the Zapatistas built a new health clinic, which is the only health clinic in Roberto Barrios. During our stay here, we can see, at any given moment, hundreds of the town's residents helping out or participating with the activities, which range from cooking food to planting crops to watching the children sing songs about Zapata and Guevara.

But not everyone in Roberto Barrios has been participating in the fun, and Brauliano tells me that some of the idler, more alienated male residents have been recruited into the local branch of the *Guardias Blancas*. Traveling outside Roberto Barrios suddenly became risky for people like Brauliano and Trinidad, especially after the military established its new base up the road, across the river.

On March 15, a few months after the Acteal massacre, pro-government thugs spotted Trinidad riding in the back of a collective bus heading to Palenque. They jumped on the truck, taunted him and started shoving him around. Ultimately, the bus driver forced the thugs out of the truck, but they grabbed Trinidad. After the bus had left, they pulled him into a clearing by the side of the road, beat him up, and sliced him apart with a machete. Trinidad never recovered from his wounds.

A few days later, Mexican police arrested three suspects, all of them from Roberto Barrios; two have been released. Brauliano tells me a local landowner bailed them out. Then he looks down at his watch, which is the only watch I've seen on a Zapatista in Roberto Barrios, which like all the Zapatista *ejidos* has completely ignored the recent Ernesto Zedillo time change. The interview is over.

Like Marcos, Brauliano has more important things to do than chat with foreign reporters, but he has given me

an extra 20 minutes of his time and answered my questions carefully and thoughtfully. I learned a great deal about Mexico's past and future in those 30 minutes. Places like Roberto Barrios and Morelia have their own stories to tell, histories of struggle that go back before the Mexican revolution. These are exactly the kinds of towns that produce real changes in Mexican politics. Eighty-odd years ago, these were the villages that provided warriors for Zapata's guerrilla army. Even Zapata himself—although from Anenecuilco, a small village in central Mexico—was at one point just another fiery local leader trying to help his neighbors, like Brauliano.

Despite their determination to control their own affairs, the Zapatistas occasionally are forced to rely on outsiders—like a reporter—in order to send a message. Brauliano makes a special point of reminding me to write that the military should stop harassing his town and stop dumping its trash and oil waste into the river. That the military should leave, period. And, he says, more than anything else, the people of Roberto Barrios want justice for their martyrs.

I had driven more than 3,000 miles into this jungle to speak with the world-famous Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos. I never got that interview, but perhaps I got a few of the interviews Marcos would have wanted us to get. Pursuing Marcos, we had discovered many things: a Tyson's Chicken plant in a post-apocalyptic nightmare named Torreón; an anonymous protest in a nameless coastal village in Oaxaca; a trio of women in Morelia—Reinalda, Zeinada and Virginia—who chased away an army helicopter; and a community, Roberto Barrios, where Zapatismo lives despite the arrival of a Mexican military base on its doorstep. Almost without realizing it, I had found the answers to my questions for Marcos in a jungle clearing in Roberto Barrios, talking to someone I had never met about someone I had never heard of: Compañero Trinidad. Which might be exactly what Marcos had in mind when he decided to stop talking to reporters.

Meanwhile, the entire world will continue to judge the political future of Mexico and the Zapatistas by watching and listening to Marcos. But Marcos isn't talking to the world anymore, at least not now. Maybe, like JoVo thinks, Marcos is simply waiting for the rainy season to return—when the roads become rivers of mud and the skies are too dangerous for army helicopters—before he reappears. Whatever his reasons for hiding out, Marcos, perhaps more than anyone else, would certainly agree that Zapatismo—the decades and centuries-old struggle for autonomy, justice and self-determination by Mexico's indigenous population—will go forward in Roberto Barrios, Morelia, and the hundreds or thousands of other *ejidos* just like them, regardless of what Marcos or anyone else has to say about it.

In the end, the most important discovery I made while searching for Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos was this: not once during my visit to the rebel communities did any of the Zapatistas mention him to my face. Except to tell me that they had absolutely nothing to say about Marcos. OC