



# A LEAP OF FAITH

FINDING TRUTH IN THE HEART OF MEXICO

*Bill Drago*

**“YOU WANT TO GO WHERE?”** I ask, acutely aware that the tense tone in my voice has uncovered my apprehension.

“North Central Mexico,” answers Skip Mascorro, owner of MotoDiscovery Motorcycle Tours. “I’m taking nine Canadian riders to Copper Canyon, deep in the heart of Chihuahua. Can you go?”

Mexico? Now? Until the last few years, Mexico had been on my bucket list of places to ride, but lately, not so much. Constant media reports surrounding the brutal drug war violence has tainted my view. Mass graves, images of dead bodies hanging from overpasses and a constant barrage of anecdotal, second-hand stories from my fellow countrymen have quenched my desire to visit anywhere south of the border. I’ve got a wife, a granddaughter on the way. I’m not really into tempting fate these days.

But then I say it, before my good sense can kick in and convince me to pass on this one. “Yeah, you bet—count me in.” I have barely hung up the phone when my stomach

begins to turn a little. I’m all for adventure, but this time, my fear of the unknown doesn’t revolve around possible river crossings or tackling singletrack on my BMW G/S Adventure. This time, the images that fill my head are of machine guns, warlords and violence. What have I done?

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FEAR

Sometimes fear gets a bad rap, but I didn’t think this was one of those times. Healthy fear alerts us to danger, keeps us alive. But when misplaced, fear can cripple us. I needed to find out if my fear was misplaced, so the first thing I did was to sit down at the computer to try and ferret out the truth. What I got were numbers—numbers that didn’t help any. Last year, according to

the BBC, Mexico had 15,273 drug-related murders. The bloody conflict between warring cartels began in 2010 with 69 murders in one day, ten of which were in Chihuahua, a city where we would spend our first night. Violence against journalists is on the rise. On its Travel.State.Gov website, the US Department of State writes:

*The situation in northern Mexico remains fluid; the location and timing of future armed engagements cannot be predicted. US citizens are urged to exercise extreme caution when traveling throughout the region.*

This was like typing “sore back” into Google, only to read you may well have kidney cancer or a degenerative spine disease. *This isn’t accomplishing anything.* I turn off the computer, head out to the garage and begin to pack.

## TRUSTED GUIDES

I wouldn’t do this ride alone, and was comforted knowing that Ken Upchurch had been assigned point on this trip, with Skip bringing up the rear. Ken has spent years living south of the border and knows his way around. I ride alone much of the time, but in this case the benefits of being with a group seemed prudent. *Like the old adage says: Safety in numbers.* Skip has been leading motorcycle tours into Latin America for 34 years, most of that time under the well-known banner of Pancho Villa Tours. If anyone knows what to do and where *not* to go, it’s Skip. His livelihood, not to mention his life, depends on his good judgment. I trust the man.

We would be meeting our friends from British Columbia in El Paso, the safest large city in the US, according to statistics compiled by CQ Press. We’d then circumvent Juarez, its neighbor just across the border where “murder is a way of life,” according to the Miami Herald. From there, we would continue southwest to Creel, and eventually to Batopilas, the tiny village at the bottom of Copper Canyon, 40 miles from the nearest pavement.

I kiss my wife good-bye and roll out of my driveway in Norman, Oklahoma, turning southwest towards the border, 700 miles away. When I stop for coffee in a small town near the border of Texas and Oklahoma, the usual question comes from one of the locals.

“Where y’all headed?” the man asks.

“Mexico,” I reply, as nonchalantly as I can.

“Old Mexico?” he asks. “Are you crazy?” And he goes on to recount the horror stories heard on the evening news.

“Have you been there?” I ask. “There are dangerous places here, too. I’d like to see Mexico for myself.”

“No, but I’ve heard ....” His voice trails off as I stir my coffee, now lost in my own thoughts and not really wanting to hear any more of his.

I meet Skip, Ken and my new Canadian friends in El Paso. They seem relaxed but eager to get going. At our pre-ride briefing, Skip explains where the trouble spots are and offers considerable insight into the motives surrounding all the reported bloodshed. The worst is along the border, and although some tourists have been involved, most violence has been between drug cartels. Juarez is dangerous, but most of the activity has been many miles



(LEFT TO RIGHT)

- > An agave plant frames a DR rider descending into Copper Canyon.
- > The Tarahumara are a humble, honest people. They are known for their long-distance running ability and colorful dress.
- > Two very contrasting modes of transportation from the old world and the new.
- > Sunday morning, south of the border.
- > Riders enjoying the expansive Copper Canyon region are greeted with fantastic scenery.

to the east, and in Mexico City. The press makes it sound as though the whole country is at war.

I ask Mark, a chiropractor from Vancouver, if he has any concerns about going on this trip. “Not unless you do,” he replies, smiling. Phil, who owns a high-end clothing store in Vancouver, is on the opposite end of the spectrum. His wife forbade his coming, but he came anyway, to join his friends on this guys-only vacation. The others, a mix of professionals and businessmen, are somewhere in the middle, and all trust Skip and Ken to get us there and back safely.

There would have been 10 clients, but one wife was victorious in the battle to keep her husband home.

#### INTO JUAREZ

Our port of entry into Mexico is Santa Teresa, a few miles west of the main crossing to Juarez. At the border we do the usual routine with passports and insurance forms, but the process is relatively painless and we’re back on the road in just over an hour. We roll past quaint villages with stucco

peeling from hand-formed adobe bricks. In the US we pay extra for that look, but it’s the genuine article here. Automobiles are more for transportation than for show, with the exception being the occasional lowrider and colorful graphics favored by some Latino youth. Everyone is friendly. Even some of the Federales wave as we pass their concrete and stacked-rubber-tire pillboxes set up at most intersections near Juarez. Their presence instills more confidence than concern.

We make the 270 miles to Chihuahua the first night. My 11<sup>th</sup> floor hotel room overlooks the city, and when I peel back the curtains I’m greeted with a stunning view of the iridescent skyline. It could be any city in the world, but here the view is different, more exotic. This is Mexico.

I wake up early and look out the window. Flashing blue lights catch my eye and I spot two pickup trucks speeding down the highway, and in the back are several men bracing themselves against forward-mounted machine guns. *I’m glad we’ll be moving on soon.*

#### ONTO CREEL

We leave mid-morning for Creel, a village approximately 150 miles southwest of Chihuahua. Creel has a population of about 5,000 and sits at an elevation of almost 8,000 feet. Its pine forests and impressive rock formations make it a scenic staging area for explorations into the Copper Canyon region.

It feels good to escape the city’s trappings on a motorcycle. We enter more mountainous terrain as we approach Creel, and the pavement turns to dirt for almost half the trip. Villages we ride through are smaller and the local fare is original, fresh and authentic. We roll over miles of rough country, lava rock-strewn hillsides, valleys filled with cactus and scrub—all with their own harsh beauty.

A group of children greet us as we pull into the Cascada Inn Motel, all of them dressed in colorful outfits. These are the *Tarahumara*, native people of Chihuahua known for their bright and beautiful attire, honest living and long-distance running prowess. The children want to sell us their

crafts. Tourism has been decimated in Mexico, brought to a standstill by the lack of foreigners willing to cross the border among the reports of so much violence, and now these kids are eager to see new customers.

In a nearby art gallery, several from our group buy souvenirs for the road. The shop’s owner looks at us through teary eyes, eternally grateful for the business. “Why are people afraid?” she asks. “We see no trouble here, but now it is hard to make a living. *Muchas gracias—muchas gracias!*”

#### COPPER CANYON

We get an early start toward Batopilas. It’s a picturesque ride, and the group wants to allow time for some sightseeing. Already we feel immersed in Mexico, but we’re just scratching the surface. The area we ride through is known as Copper Canyon, which is said to be five times larger than the Grand Canyon and more than 1,000 feet deeper. Much more spread out, it is composed of numerous gorges connected in a maze of topography, creating a vast playground for explorers. Silver was mined

here for years, but its walls gleam of copper in the evening light. The canyon is laced with trails for hiking, biking and, of course, adventure riding. Long distance foot races are held here routinely and, as one might imagine, the local Tarahumara are hard to beat.

It’s 40 miles from where the pavement ends to Batopilas, a village of 1,100 at the bottom of Copper Canyon. Riding into Batopilas is like rolling back time. Forty-amp electric meters hang askew by cloth-insulated wires, icons of “modern” retrofits, now at least 60 years old. Skinny, horned cattle roam the alleyways, and the people of this simple village move in a slower manner than I’m accustomed to back home. There doesn’t seem to be any rush, no immediacy brought on by 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and the “advantages” that seems to afford us. I’m taken by this place.

We stuff our motorcycles inside a small, gated corral on Main Street, probably an unnecessary precaution in this sleepy town. Our home for the next two nights is The Casa Real de Minas de Acanasania, a classic

courtyard house with rooms surrounding a beautiful outdoor living area complete with fountain, trees and open steps leading to a balcony. We shuck our gear and shower away the dust before gathering to clink beers and laugh off the fatigue of a long ride. Martín, the hotel’s owner, is a long-time friend of Skip’s. He typifies the hard-working entrepreneurial spirit that exists in a harsh land; his little hotel in the depths of Batopilas canyon has served as an oasis for many travelers over the years. We shake hands, enjoy his welcoming smile and witness the traditional Mexican hug—*abrazo*—between Skip and Martín, indicative of the great relationships fostered here over the years.

Skip asks Martín about his thoughts on security in the Sierras. He smiles and looks at Skip. “Skeep,” he says in his thick Mexican accent. “You have been down here many, many times. Have you or anyone you’ve been with ever been a victim of a crime?”

“No,” Skip replies. “Not once.”

Martín then begins telling us of all the



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)

> Author Bill Drago has some fun with the children living near the Satevo Mission, outside Batopilas.

> Warm nights and a wonderful community atmosphere made evenings especially enjoyable.

> If you want the best Mexican food, go to Mexico.

> Our ride was not overly technical, but there was not much room for error because of the remote location and rugged terrain.



accidents, visits to clinics, patching and bandaging of riders over the years, the bruises and broken bones—all of them an unfortunate byproduct of many adventurous pursuits. Then, capitalizing on the irony of his statements, Martín smiles and takes Skip's hand.

"I find it curious how so many are afraid to visit this beautiful land for fear of violence," he says, "a violence that we know has never affected you and your friends. Yet you are all so quick to take a risk of riding a motorcycle, knowing that at any moment you could get hurt—or worse. No paso nada, Skeep." *Nothing happens.* "Tell your friends to come to the Sierra. *No paso nada!*"

#### SOMETHING HAPPENS

Martín wasn't entirely right. Something does happen. Mexico captivates you, changes the way you think, alters your perception. I stroll through Batopilas in the evenings, putting myself among the locals, offering a wave and what little Spanish I know. The magic of this place erodes my fears, putting me at ease as if I were walking through my own neighborhood back home. I walk the streets alone after dark, watching children play in the town square and young women sit with their babies, enjoying the cool of the evening. A police officer armed with an automatic rifle stands by, but his presence seems almost unnecessary.

We spend another day in Batopilas, enjoying a short ride to the Satevo Mission—The Lost Cathedral—before

turning back toward Creel the next morning. Our final night in Mexico is spent in Nuevo Casas Grandes, at the giant Hotel Hacienda, which is impeccably kept and almost deserted. We sit by the pool as the sun sinks low on the horizon, enjoying one last round of margaritas and beer south of the border.

Sitting there, under a perfect sky in perfect weather, I chuckle about my reservations before leaving for Mexico. During this trip we have all felt as safe as we do back home. Michael would say it best the next night at dinner. "We came here to experience riding motorcycles in dust and grit, to see a few old buildings and a canyon, and maybe eat some good enchiladas. We got all that, but we also saw the needs of a people, our neighbors, that are only met when folks are courageous enough to leave their two-dimensional world and enter a third."

Just then, a text message comes through from my wife, Susan, telling me that Japan has just suffered a devastating earthquake and tsunami. She adds that our home is being threatened by a string of destructive wildfires sweeping through Texas and Oklahoma.

I sit back in my chair and take a deep breath, my stomach once again turning a little at the thought of events unfolding of which I have no real knowledge or understanding.

My phone buzzes again, interrupting my thoughts.

This time, the text smacks of irony.

"You may well be safer right where you are." ☺

## OUTRIDER EQUIPPED

> THE GEAR THEY USED AND WHERE THEY GOT IT

### LUGGAGE AND RIDING GEAR

I chose the Kriega R20 Rucksack for hydration, as well as their US-40 Tailbag system, which consists of a durable, waterproof 20-liter bag and a similar 10-liter unit securely clipped to each side. I carry my toolkit in one US-10, layers and rain gear in another US-10, and the rest of my clothing, street shoes, spare gloves, etc., in the US-20. I have traveled many miles with this arrangement and am leaning toward it as a permanent set-up.

I chose BMW's Rallye 2 Pro riding suit for its comfort and versatility. By layering with Icebreaker base layers, I have found it suitable for temperatures ranging from near freezing to in excess of 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Beyond those extremes comfort is elusive at best. The Gore-Tex liner packs small and adds warmth when needed. My tried-and-true Shoei Hornet is getting a bit long in the tooth, but for now it is still my go-to lid.

My friends wore a variety of riding gear from motocross pants to Levis. Sadly, good boots were omitted by one, who broke his ankle when he fell wearing only leather harness boots.

### INCIDENTALS

Food and fuel are plentiful in Mexico and prices are normally a bit cheaper than in the US. Hotel rooms were always clean and reasonably priced. If you like Mexican art, this is the place to get it. Most studios will ship, but a few of the more exquisite pieces required special arrangements.

Most travelers' needs are more or less universal. One can get by without speaking the language, although if at least one member of your party speaks Spanish, all the better.

### WHY GO?

Mexico offers a wealth of adventure for groups or individuals. Taking current news into account, it might be prudent to travel in a group; however, twice we met pairs of men camping and riding with scarcely a concern. As in our own country, it makes sense to use good judgment when picking your route.

Mexico is essentially in our own back yard. Many Americans don't know much about its history, and its geography is as foreign as the moon to most of us. It is a fascinating place to travel. One can explore its expanse and enjoy the hospitality of its people for the price of a ticket across the US, or perhaps a bit less.



SPECIAL THANKS TO SKIP MASCORRO AND MOTODISCOVERY (WWW.MOTODISCOVERY.COM)

> by Bill Drago



### MOTORCYCLES

We used a variety of machinery for our Mexican odyssey. Our Canadian friends rode MotoDiscovery's Suzuki DR650s. The mid-sized thumpers are well suited for a trip of 1,000 miles through Mexico's mixed off- and on-road terrain and raise fewer eyebrows than more flashy iron. Guide Ken Upchurch rode his BMW F800GS.

My BMW R1200GS Adventure was like taking a bazooka to a knife fight, but I enjoy the capability of the big beast in almost any environment. I justified the excess with my need to burn off a quick 700 miles from my home in Norman, Oklahoma, to our starting point in El Paso, then needing to reverse the trip on my way home. The big boxer has few peers when the need arises for a dual sport capable starship.

### MINOR MODIFICATIONS

The DR650s each came equipped with a 3.7-gallon Clarke fuel tank and Corbin saddle for long-distance comfort. Ken's F800GS was loaded with Touratech equipment, from skid plate to the oversized 9.5 gallon fuel tank. The latter was overkill for this ride since fuel was readily available throughout the state of Chihuahua. My GSA was stock, with the exception of an improved skid plate and auxiliary crash bars beneath the valve covers.

