

Dance of the Autobuses



By the time we had arrived Querétaro, Mexico, the capital and largest city of the Mexican state of the same name, my wife and I had already made numerous trips to Mexico before but none to the central plateau region. For perspective, Mexico City is only three hours to the south---by bus. In the fall of

2007, we were new Peace Corps trainees which meant we weren't able to drive a car unless we rented it or our sponsor (e.g., government agency) had the insurance to cover us, which they rarely did.

Consequently, we had come to rely on walking and riding the intra-city and inter-city buses, both of which are in abundance. By comparison, in the U.S. it's the "Grey Dog" i.e., Greyhound, or nothing, the Mexico inter-city bus system is quite likely the best in the world, with elegant Volvo and Mercedes buses and phenomenal, punctual service and drivers. But the intra-city buses, or *autobuses*, are another matter altogether. Querétaro has many different bus companies and lines and hundreds of buses, most which look like old school buses without the long snouts. This saga is about the talented, but insane, drivers of those buses and their unique styles. As far as I know, the drivers are all men. There may be a female driver cruisin' somewhere out there in Querétaro, but she is very, very lonely.

So, what about the drivers? Even though we had used various bus systems on travels in Mexico over the years, we had never used city buses day after day, month after month, for over three years. Consequently, during our Peace Corps service, we had ample opportunities to observe and physically experience the skills and styles of these cowboys of the byways and the metal steeds they drove. Riding an autobus in most Mexican cities is a visceral, sometimes gut-wrenching, experience. In the States, when you get on a city bus, you stare out the window, snooze, read a book, meditate, or try to chat with an fellow, frequently unfriendly perhaps almost hostile, passenger. Usually it was a very calming, if not boring, experience. You do have a definite feeling of security that the driver is probably not drunk or stoned. But in Mexico, any tranquility

that a foreign bus passenger *might* feel happens only at stoplights, exiting a bus or through faith, dedicated prayer and massaging the hell out of one's rosary, but definitely not from boredom. You are continuously conscious of participating in a moving theatre, if not a circus. A seatbelt would only impede you in a fiery crash. The driver is the director or ringleader of this theatre circus. He is *El Rey*---The King---the name of the most famous Mexican song ever sung by perhaps the most famous Mexican Ranchera singer ever, Jose Alfredo Jimenez. For good reason; most Mexican men think of themselves as *muy macho*, as king. However, all that said, the drivers are also very skilled magicians. In all our hours and days of riding and I only saw one bus "accident" and that was when our bus barely clipped the bumper of another bus.

In our typical work day, we walked to the bus stop just a few minutes from our house. The stop is on a major thoroughfare and normally got us to our work at the government office of SEMARNAT within minutes, depending on the driver. And to an extent, the traffic conditions. For many drivers, heavy traffic is not an impediment but a challenge. The journey experience has everything to do with the driver's style, and a driver can fall into a number of different style categories, sometimes several simultaneously on any given day.

1) Speedy Gonzales. Speedy has a penchant for speed at all costs. He is fearless, and he assumes that his passengers are likewise. Or, more likely, he could care about his passengers. Speedy maneuvers through traffic with the grace of a Formula One driver. The difference is he controls a BIG bus, not a highly maneuverable race car. Red lights are no obstacle for Speedy, nor are other buses, or "deer caught in the headlights" pedestrians. Speedy is on a mission from A to Z, and B through Y are only impediments.

2) Top Gun. Top Gun watched too many Gobernator, Charles Bronson or Tom Cruise movies. Like Speedy, he has a speed mission, but he wants to take flight, i.e., leave *terra firma*. If his bus had wings, he would. Top Gun is so much interested in speed as he is in believing he is on the runway or the deck of an aircraft carrier. He stops for no one even if they are madly waving and screaming directly in his take-off trajectory, he just swerves around them. The frantic pregnant woman with one hand out as though she were trying to stop Top Gun and one hand on her swollen abdomen is not worthy. Bloodless-faced gringos with a backpack is not worthy. Cyclists straying too far from the curb are not worthy. They are pylons, minor hindrances, as if he were dodging clouds or taking a driving agility exam. Usually, Top Gun doesn't avoid Grand Canyon sized potholes; they are viewed as tests for his suspension system. If you are one of his

passengers, you simply hang on and pray that he will touch down somewhere near your destination.

3) Benito Torres. I haven't seen too many of these guys (thank God) but to them driving is not their primary mission. Making it with one of the fair Mexican maidens in the front seats is. Benito's eyes may *only* meet the road for a millisecond. If you female and riding near the front you try to move to the back or get off at the next stop. I was on a bus once with a driver who looked to be about 14 and could barely see over the wheel. He was combination of a testosterone-saturated Speedy Gonzales and Benito Torres. His *novia* (girlfriend, physically looked to be 22 but probably 12) was seated on a large oil can as though glued to his ride side, with her tongue deeply embedded and twirling in his right ear. Every so often they would actually kiss and grope, usually as mini-Benito was floor-boarded off a stop light. I was really jealous.

4) Gear Grinders. The gear grinder has to be on steroids. The shifting sound physically hurts deep beyond the eardrum, and the process may take 30 seconds to complete. His gearbox has to have been without lubricant for months, maybe years. Typically, to complete the shift requires taking both hands off the wheel and staring at the gear shift with malice. The Gear Grinder should be on the flat or going downhill. Without momentum (uphill) the grinder and the passengers' eardrums are in trouble.

5) Lurcher – Brakers. These guys haven't been told that the Spanish term *suave*, smooth, can apply to more than just love making. The Lurcher – Braker believes his driving skill is measured in how frequently and rapidly he can move his right foot between the accelerator and the brake. He is determined to get at least one passenger to hurl their breakfast or *get* hurled through the front windshield. When you get off his bus, you feel like Frankenstein doing the herky-jerky for a few blocks until you regain your equilibrium.

6) Lane Changers –Light Chargers. These characters can't tolerate *status quo*; they loathe their current lane or having another bus in front of them. They accelerate past other buses that try to exit bus stops ahead of them, and if their buses are inches apart and their mirrors are scraping, the Lane Changer guns it, whips ahead, drops in front of his adversary and slams on the brakes. Rarely do they do concede position because it is not in the best interest of their machismo. Being forced to whip to far lane to avoid being bested may mean they have to bypass their next stop, which also qualifies them for the next category, Rolling Stoppers – No Stoppers. This is not a problem for them even if you are standing at that stop and screaming at the top of your lungs to get attention. They just shrug their shoulders. And since they are usually pedal-to-the-

metal as they are whipping their mighty metal steed into an engine screaming froth, they may have to ignore a red light in the process. But, face has been saved.

7) Rolling Stoppers – No Stoppers. The Rollers open the door for you, but never really come to a full stop. They have watched too many Clint Eastwood leaps onto speeding trains. The No Stoppers don't even try. They may have just changed lanes and gunning past a competitor and aren't about to screech over to get you. They ignore your outstretched arm and screams. They shrug, glare or yell something inarticulate back, but they are on a mission. In effect saying: get the next #28.

The buses themselves are often pieces of creative genius. Apparently the driver can own the bus, or so I have been told, or the company lets him decorate it just about any way he chooses. Usually, there are various Catholic paraphernalia hanging from the windshield and mirrors, and it is not uncommon to see a pair of baby booties dangling from one of the overhead railings. Huge decals of Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*, in goggles, or the *Road Runner* garnish the windows with captions confirming that speed is the essence of life. Once, I was on a bus of a young super gel-haired, maybe aspiring artist and lover, who had an air-brushed larger than life size and very voluptuous semi-nude painted on the plastic partition behind his seat, facing his passengers. The people in the seat directly behind the driver were at eye level with and about one foot away from her thong. In this case, there were two nuns sitting in that seat. I wouldn't imagine this to be too common in city buses in the U.S.

At times, passengers left behind momentos on the seats or floor. Such as wads of Chiclets, urine, or vomit. I've leaped for the rear door only to find myself *Chicleted* to the seat.

These scenarios may sound bleak or scary, but in reality, they weren't at all. We came to view these drivers as highway artists. It was as if they were painting a very large Diego Rivera road mural together or conducting a symphony or ballet involving the hundreds of other buses simultaneously on the same road----a dance in which everyone intuitively seems to know his part. They jockey in and out of bus stops within millimeters of each other, entering and exiting at every angle and speed imaginable, only petrifying their gringo passengers. Everyone else is asleep and chatting amicably.

As we travel around Mexico, between and within the various cities, we came to believe that Mexico has perhaps the best bus system in the world. Convenience is their middle name. The inter-city buses almost always depart on schedule and almost always arrive on schedule. From Querétaro, we could catch a bus to Mexico City, on one line of

several, virtually every 20-30 minutes, and around the clock. The buses are far more comfortable than airlines, have bathrooms, and a few serve snacks. The inner-city buses usually come every 6-8 minutes and cost about 40 cents. I was glad we didn't have a car. I loved their buses. Despite the fact that Mexico still has too many people and too many cars, particularly in Mexico City, the country's bus systems are living proof that mass transit can work and work well.

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