

GUNFIRE, BRIBERY & TOURISM

Paul and Helen make their way through the corrupt streets of Mexico and into Belize and El Salvador, where the drug cartels rule the roost

Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden

On the mountain road to Palenque



WE WOKE TO the din of passing traffic, stretched the tightness out of our awkwardly constrained limbs, and realised we had a difficult task ahead of us. Our night sleeping in the cab at a PeMex garage had been on the very edge of the second largest city in the world, and our host was waiting somewhere in the sprawling mass of humanity that sat in the vast depression stretching out below us. We edged slowly out into the fast flowing stream of manic traffic surging towards its centre.

Mexico City overflows a natural geographical bowl, 60 miles long by 30 wide, and the condition of its streets and buildings, at least on the outskirts, lends it the image of a post-earthquake zone. Huge potholes, cracks, and fissures in the road surface. Grey concrete, old timber, protruding rebar rods and broken unpainted joinery on the buildings. Dust and litter everywhere, and a constant whiff of sewage. Horns blaring, ancient trucks and buses belching thick black exhaust, and a distinct lack of brake lights are testimony to an obvious indifference towards vehicle maintenance.

As we slowed on the approach to some traffic lights, the beggars raced forwards. Fit young men and women darted between lorries and cars, begging for pesos, dashing back to the safety of the verges as

the traffic surged forward again.

Then, in our door mirror, we spied a car with flashing red and blue lights. Our hearts sank as the police pulled alongside, and gestured for us to follow. We pulled onto the slip road and the police car pulled up in front of us. We were about to encounter the corrupt police we had heard so much about.

After multiple exchanges – the officer rattling away in Spanish, and us repeatedly saying “No Español” – the police officer handed us a glossy booklet printed in Spanish. We looked at it and handed it back. “No Español,” we repeated.

He waved his arms in the air and said ‘smog’. We knew that with a foreign registration and a licence plate ending in 4, Mexican smog controls prohibited us driving here on a Wednesday, or on any weekday between 5am and 11am. But it was Saturday afternoon, and none of that applied. We expressed more confusion, until, with the police officer’s persistence equalled by our determination, after almost an hour of battling, he literally wandered off and left us alone.

It was only when we arrived exhausted at our rendezvous point with our host, that we learned of the unwritten Mexican City rule that goes: “Police officer hands driver booklet, into which driver slips large denomination peso notes before

From top
Cold water, blunt razor – not an ideal shave. After his fall from the roof, this is the nasty gash Paul got in his leg. Trying to find the elusive earth fault at the roadside in Altamirano.



handing booklet back to police officer. This proves that police officers never ask for bribes but drivers are generous patrons of their police force.” Oh well, ignorance is bliss.

going loco...

From Mexico City we headed southwest to the coast at Acapulco. On the old roads, we slowly chugged our way around the endless twists and turns as they wound their way round and over the mountains, enjoying passing through the villages and the amazing scenery, taking the old routes of men and horses.

If we had taken the toll roads, we would not have seen the oxen ploughing the tiny roadside fields, the crops planted on ludicrously steep mountainsides, the smoke curling from woodfired stoves making tortillas at roadside cantinas, and the locals hauling their wares on small carts or donkeys.

Entering Acapulco we encountered police corruption once more. No sooner had Paul pulled away from the kerb after drawing some cash from an ATM when we were flagged down by the police, and our licence and registration demanded. We managed to understand that we were being accused of not having stopped for a pedestrian at a crossing. Of course any pedestrian we may have missed

waiting at the crossing would have long disappeared by this time and we had no way of knowing what the truth was. A typically indefensible 'set-up'.

"Very dangerous driving", the policeman said in broken English, before asking us how long would we be in Acapulco, typical preparation for asking for a bribe. We know that whatever we say, he'll add two days to it, and make this the period before we can recover our licence from the local police station. Introducing significant inconvenience creates the incentive for us to offer some financial 'lubrication'.

hysterical sobbing

We told him we were planning on leaving within the hour. He gravely told us we would have to visit the police station in two days to pay a 5,000 peso (£225) fine and get our driving licence and car documents back. We could have looked worried and asked if there was any way we could pay quicker than that, whereupon he would have taken the opportunity to offer for us to pay him a smaller cash sum immediately.

Instead I gasped, and exclaimed "5,000 pesos!" loudly, before bursting into a fit of hysterical sobbing and badly miming that a fine of that scale would rob us of

food for three weeks. When he beckoned Paul round the back of the car and offered to help out by taking a smaller sum in cash, Paul took my lead and explained I was desperately upset because we didn't have that much money. I kept wailing loudly until, about five minutes later, the police officer waved us on, excusing us as we were tourists. As Paul slipped our Landy into gear and pulled away, I carefully concealed my smile.

With our celebration over, we

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Main
Block houses cling to the impossibly steep hillsides in Mexico.

Below
The Mexican children are absolutely fascinated by our technology

headed swiftly out of town again and soon found ourselves at Las Peñas. So tiny it's not on the map, this small village tumbles down off the coast road and spills out on to the beach.

Pulling up next to a sign for a café at the end of the beach we asked if we could pitch our camp there, and spent the rest of the week sharing the beach with domesticated hens, turkeys, pigs, ducks, geese, and the occasional semi-domesticated dog.

At our next beach stop we found a bizarre reason to use our winch. As

we sat in the cab on the edge of the beach, enjoying the night sky and contemplating where best to pitch our tent, a car hurtled past us, out onto the beach, ploughing axle deep into the soft sand. We watched as the passenger got out and argued with the driver before storming off. After a minute or two, the driver got out and staggered over to us, slurring that he needed a tow out of the sand.

With some difficulty, we found a point under the car where we could attach the winch rope, and pulled



Ferry crossing from Corozal to Sarteneja, Belize



Dear head roasted on an open fire.



Jungle camping at the Mayan ruins

something growing in it, and even when the flat land ends, ramshackle homes are wedged precariously on the steep hillsides. So it was easy and practical to follow the advice we had been given on safety, and we camped many nights nestled among the trucks parked behind the state PeMex garages that were always just outside the main towns, often having armed guards.

The opportunity to camp somewhere more pleasant was always welcome. As we neared the border with Belize, we pitched in the dark just outside some Mayan ruins. As we slipped off to sleep, we heard gunshots in the dark, and remembered our close encounter with hunters in the Siberian forest.

The next morning, we sampled the tender meat of a deer shot just hours before, as we watched Juan, who lived in a wooden shelter nearby, salt the meat from the already fully butchered carcass. The deer's innards sat on a nearby shelf awaiting processing, as its tiny head roasted slowly over the embers of the fire, watched intently by Juan's small dog. Life is somewhat different here.

The next day, we slipped across the border into Belize, welcomed by cheery faces at immigration and genuine concern that we should find Belize a happy and welcoming place to visit.

The first few days in Belize were spent weaving our way south and west on mainly dirt roads, towards the Cayo region and San Ignacio, where we hoped to pick up essential spares. However, disaster fell the morning after we stopped at a campsite near the Belize River to

the car free. The driver then put his car into reverse and sped back towards the Landy, missing us by inches. He then roared off in the pursuit of his passenger, while we debated the merits of enabling a drunk taxi driver to continue to ply his trade on the dark main highways.

good news and gunshots

As we began our drive towards the border with Belize, a long email exchange brought us welcome news. Dave Dineen at 4Site4x4 had managed to secure us a renewal of our General Tyre sponsorship. Awesome news, and hats off to Dave – he'd never known a renewal before! We quickly backtracked to Tuxtla Gutierrez where an outlet for General Tyres, Zureco, fitted and balanced a new set of AT2s and checked our tracking.

Having already seen how well these tyres had performed through the first leg of our trip, it was a great relief to know we had the best start for what we expect to be more challenging terrain as we reach the tropics during the wet season.

We had found that options for camping in Mexico were few and far between. Even in the countryside, Mexico is heavily populated. Anywhere that is flat and reasonably dry has something built on it, or has

Ramps at Adventure Trax Belize give us access to the stubborn gearbox drain plug.



► hear the howler monkeys at dusk. As we packed away our tent in between tropical storms, I happened to mention to Paul that a small frog was sitting by the back wheel.

That was a mistake. As Paul climbed off the roof he paused to peer off the side to see if the frog was still there. As he leaned, his foot suddenly slipped off the roofrack and he crashed earthwards, impaling his upper thigh on the point on the top of the front passenger door frame. Shreds of Paul's trousers and his blood were matted against the white paint.

We rapidly left to head for

Rural bridge crossing in Mexico.

the trip from the creek along the five miles of uneven, rock-strewn track and small river crossing to buy our supplies and parts from Graham at LR Belize. A Welshman who has made his home and business in Belize, Graham generously let us use his ramps to take a look under the Landy and try to identify the source of a persistent oil leak. We also had another go at removing the gearbox drain plug that had been refusing to budge.

Although we still couldn't budge the drain plug, we left armed with a new brake vacuum valve – the old one looked like it was leaking from

to replace the cardboard and gaffer tape that he'd used to camouflage the damage caused in Siberia. Unfortunately, the oil leak persisted.

Further investigation back at Barton Creek revealed that oil was leaking from the fuel lift pump. When it was removed, the cause was obvious. The bar that acts as a stop to the pump lever had become damaged and dislodged from the body of the pump, allowing oil to leak out.

The bar was badly bent, damaged, and slightly cracked, and when Paul tried to straighten it, the alloy snapped. Without a replacement pump, Paul called on his skills again, and fashioned a new bar out of a bolt and nut, cutting and filing them down to fit, and then sealing them in place with epoxy resin. With the lift pump refitted – the oil leak vanished.

The El Salvadoran Land Rover Club had obtained special permission directly from the Minister of Transport for us to drive our right-hand-drive car in their country. So, with the start date of our special permission approaching fast, we hurried across the border and down through the Guatemalan countryside towards El Salvador, conscious that we were now entering Zetas territory – the most ruthless drug trafficking cartel in the world – and that Guatemala is their most recent battlefield.

LRM

Further investigation revealed that oil was leaking from the fuel lift pump

Barton Creek, which the guidebook suggested would provide the best off-road driving in Belize.

In a beautiful setting alongside a small river, Barton Creek campsite was the ideal place for Paul to recuperate. There, with cicadas chirping loudly and the regular chuckle of geckos punctuating the night, we watched in amazement as leafcutter ants marched to and from their food supply in the darkness.

The need for some essential repairs gave us an excuse to make

the diaphragm. Graham directed us to the nearby Progressive Mennonite town of Spanish Lookout where we found a whole industry supplying parts for tractors and farm machinery and where we picked up some less common parts, including a new drain screw for the fuel sedimenter.

After a few days' rest, Paul gave the Defender a service, changed the rear brake pads, oils, and filters, and fitted the new brake servo pump. He also fitted a new headlamp surround

