

November 9, 2007

LA LIBERTAD, EL SALVADOR (AP) They had always heard about El Salvador. The surfing beaches, the fresh food, the friendly people, the right-wing death squads.

But they hadn't heard of how modern it was.

So when they departed Allen's marble-floored mansion in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Sam and Brad had no idea of what to expect across the border. Two and one-half hours and five passed semi-remolque double-wide trucks later, they were in the border zone. And that is where they met the first of a panoply of colorful characters on their drive to The Promised Land – Non-Value Add Guy.

Non-Value Add Guy was ingratiating. Slight paunch. Forty-ish. Jet black hair and a pink-orange polo shirt. Like many Hondurans, he had zero regard for others' personal space; in fact, Sam had to roll up the driver's side window just to keep his dead fish-esque breath from fumigating the inside of the car. No, our travelers didn't want Non-Value Add Guy to "help".

But "help" – with quotation marks, like Dr. Evil – he did. He immediately made three copies of the Mother Ship Title, and tried to take their passports to do the same. Sam went into the customs office and the woman behind the desk advised that he instead utilize the services of the older woman with soft eyes and an easy smile. Brad immediately dubbed her The Wise One, because she reminded him of a village Elder he had once met in Laos.

Still, Non-Value Add Guy followed them around like a stalker, lurking outside of every office and bank while they got their business done. He even hired a "helper", which begged the question: how low do you have to go to be the "helper" of Non-Value Add Guy? When Sam and Brad were clear to go through the border (after generously tipping The Wise One), Non-Value Add Guy insisted on hiring a taxi, at his own expense, to "help" them through the El Salvador border crossing, five kilometers down the road.

After blowing by Non-Value Add Guy, his "helper", and the *tuk-tuk* taxi driver in the Mother Ship Honda Pilot, Sam and Brad got to the border crossing and started the efficient process of crossing the El Salvadoran border.

The border crossing itself was a large, modern building with ample space for unloading semi trailers and an air conditioned office. Forty minutes after taking their information and loading it into a computer, the friendly, uniformed officer invited Sam into the office and admonished him to **not** utilize the services of Non-Value Add Guy as he handed Sam all of the papers he needed to depart. Following them again to the border was Non-Value Add Guy, a sluggish Spanish-speaking lamprey spouting protestations of "I made you three copies and deserve a tip" even as Sam himself made the obligatory three copies of his entry papers to give to the border guard (begging the question, really: what was the border guy going to do with THREE BARELY LEGIBLE COPIES of Sam's paperwork?

Archive them? File them? Is there a secret underground bunker under the guard shack that houses the three copies of paperwork for each and every vehicle that passes through the border, just in case it is needed later by the El Salvadoran Homeland Security Department?).

Western El Salvador. Rolling hills, new highways shooting through Tunnels One, Three, and Four (where did Two go?), old-growth trees along the highway. Halfway through, our explorers stopped for dinner at a fish place overlooking the handful of surfers at Punta Roca. They were in La Libertad, the little-known surfer's paradise a short one-hour drive from the modern San Salvador airport.

After a dinner of shrimp-stuffed whole fish and cold Salvadoran beer, the pair patronized a modern Internet café (Macs and PCs with a gigabit Ethernet connection in the middle of a sleepy surf town in El Salvador? Are you kidding me?) in order to search for information on Guatemalan border crossing hours. After purchasing a \$5 twisted-wire scorpion (named "Scorpie", in a tribute to the creative names given by Sam's kids to their stuffed animals Bearie, Uni, and Froggie) but finding exactly zero reliable information on Guatemalan border crossing hours, they thought the better of crossing at night and got a room at the \$60 per night beachfront hotel, complete with a pool and *Hogan's World*, in English, on VH1.

So they had made it through. Eight hours after leaving Tegucigalpa, our plucky pair of swashbucklers were in comfortable beds, stomachs full of fresh fish and beer, ready to face The Big Day.

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November 10, 2007

VERACRUZ, MEXICO (AP) It was an impossible dream. Three corrupt Central American countries, a dozen stops by corrupt police and military personnel, four border crossings, one flat tire, over one hundred curb-high speed bumps while traveling at over eighty miles per hour through massive zones of questionable safety, one attack bird stuck in the grill, one brand-new passport to cause confusion to the border patrols, a dozen helpful (but ultimately non-value adding) Mexican cartographers who offered plenty of advice, over twenty miles of heavy construction in the midst of a wind farm on the Southern Mexican coast, and seventeen hours of driving at high velocities through questionable (at best) roads and regions. But BSW and SEF were up to the task. Oh yes, they were up for it. They had brought their "A Games" and had a full bag of pork rinds and a cooler full of water and Red Bull.

Brad and Sam had a mission when they departed La Libertad, El Salvador, that morning. As they said goodbye to the sun-kissed surfer's paradise at 6:03 AM, they knew that they had a challenge ahead of them. But they had no idea how large that challenge would loom.

After a quick cup of Salvadoran Sanka at a world-class beach spot, these brave troubadours hit the El Salvador-Guatemala border at 7:45. Thirty minutes and not a

minute more, they told the “helper”, and Los Gringos will pay big dollars. We are in a hurry. Paco pulled through in fewer than 27 minutes, getting the car approved and their passports stamped for entry into Guatemala, while the intrepid pair gorged themselves on sweet coffee and egg and bean sandwiches from the women behind the dirty cement block border building. Paco got his week’s salary of \$20, for 27 minutes of work. The women got \$3 for \$2.40 worth of food, and were thrilled. And the race was on.

If Guatemala’s roads were much better than expected, driving there proved to be challenging, if only because of the need to pass large, unlicensed trucks at 105 miles per hour on shoulderless roads. Stopping for gas, the pair noticed a yellow canary wedged in the grill of the Mother Ship and Brad, ever the artist, took several pictures. After a makeshift funeral and dispensing with the body in the gas station *basura*, they were on their way to Mexico. The border, the most-used (and most porous) of all of the Guatemala/Mexico frontiers, materialized large in their minds.

After driving through a dusty, dirty, ugly, teeming town that stuffed ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag and made Camden, NJ look like San Francisco, the intrepid travelers found their way (with no help from signage, which was nonexistent) to the Mexican border. After a small problem on the Mexican side (smoothed over by the liberal use of a Benjamin, traded by Sam for freedom from bureaucracy), they were on their way through Mexico.

Brand-new North-South Auto Pista closed through the gut of the country. Massive flooding in Tabasco. Lots of construction in the only route left.

Shit. Have to go the Southern route, through the mountains.

Southern route has lots of construction. Fine, say our heroes. We can deal with construction. Yes, but this kind of construction means no asphalt, no concrete, lots of stopping. Still fine, say our intrepid travelers. You can beat us down, but we will not give up.

Four corrupt police stops later (you want to rifle through the mess of clothes, computers, a high-end mountain bike, two boxes of Lencan pottery, and various containers of Froot Loops, Red Bull, and fried pork rinds? Go ahead. But don’t expect me to help you), Sam and Brad finally turn North.

Gas stop 1 hour into the mountains. Flat tire. Number One Value Add Guy of the Trip: the guy who NASCARs the tire, repairing it (without pneumatic tools) in eight minutes flat. OK, Gringo, that will be fifty pesos. And it’s On. Our heroes continue.

Eleven o’ clock. Been on the road for seventeen hours, through four border crossings and three countries. Pull into Veracruz. Drive around for fifteen minutes, seeing two shady hotels and a “professional” on the corner, shaking her stuff, Daisy Dukes and all. Hey, Taxi, can you take us to a Holiday Inn if we follow you?

The beautiful colonial Holiday Inn has rooms, room service, cold beer, and comfy beds. Brad and Sam wonder, over tender Mexican carne asada and chilaquiles, how they made it through the day.

And then they answer themselves: it's really quite simple. We rule the planet, and the Pilot, our Mother Ship, is the Millennium Falcon of SUVs.

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November 11, 2007

CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS (AP) Sam woke up an hour early, twitching with anticipation. They had to get to Texas, if possible. Quick cup of coffee and out the door by 7:30.

Pockmarked, one-lane per direction gravel / asphalt / dirt roads with no shoulder up to Tampico. Unlike most countries, Mexico doesn't have a coastal highway on the its Gulf coast, instead relying on a sloppy and poorly planned network of old country highways to help travelers through. Tough driving, but by 1:00 they were through Tampico.

But they couldn't find the only forty-mile stretch of superhighway on the entire Coast. It seemed to terminate somewhere in the middle of Tampico, and they stopped at a Church's Chicken to get directions. It was there that they met Frank.

Frank was built like a fire hydrant. Popeye arms, graying wispy beard, sharp brown eyes. Frank offered to guide them to the highway, after lunch. Said he had grown up in the US but had been deported. Escorted across the Matamoros bridge in handcuffs, uncuffed, and told to leave. Made good money in the States installing cyclone fence, but only made \$200 a week installing drainage systems in Mexico.

Finished lunch, followed Frank to his house. Car overheated in his front yard. He told them of a way to go over a dirt road (with a random 5 peso toll, taken by the Mexican trolls that lived in the barrio) and to the highway. And before they left, the last thing that Saint Frank said to them, eyes smiling, was "don't do business with me because I am a drug dealer."

How random is that? Thank God we used our judgment and didn't let him in the car.

After a final ½ hour search of their car by fresh-faced, fatigue-clad army personnel, our intrepid adventurers got to Matamoros.

For a border town, Matamoros doesn't have much signage. After following the main stream of traffic through town, they stopped at a gas station to ask The Fat Kid for directions to the border. Turn around, left at the traffic light, can't miss it.

Big line of cars. Fair enough. This is, after all, the gateway to The Promised Land. After ½ hour, Sam and Brad got to the post.

*Buenas Dias*, says Sam with a friendly smile.

*Como estan, where are you going?* says the border control official.

“The United States”, replies Sam.

“Congratulations. You are here”, says the border control guy.

What? Here, without passing through Mexican customs? We didn't even SEE Mexican customs, and here we are. Sweet. F\*ckin' A, we're in the US of A.

Play dumb, pretend we went through (as if the border guy was fooled, given our response), tell him that he may want to search our car because there is a lot of stuff (the old Jedi Mind Trick of offering it up, so that he knows you have nothing to hide and will let you go without checking), answer a few questions, and our weary travelers are on US soil. The border guy bought what we were selling, and didn't check our stuff.

Two more police checks later (“y'all got any illegals back there? Honduras? Wheye in thee FUHCK would anyone want to do that?) and they are in a Chili's, drinking Shiner Beer and a celebratory shot of Patron while munching on burgers and watching ESPN.

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Three days, Tegucigalpa to Corpus Christi, 42 hours of driving in all kinds of conditions and environs, fewer than three total hours at border crossings, lots of Guy talk about chicks, travel, and music, four countries....an epic adventure, planned less than a week before departure, by two old friends who hadn't seen one another in over two years.

Sometimes life gives you an unexpected opportunity when you are least expecting it. One week before the drive from Honduras to Maine, Sam was dreading the journey. Massive flooding in Tabasco State dictated that his planned route be completely changed. He had no partner with whom to drive. He was anxious about the border crossings.

But all of that changed. Instead of an awful trip alone, he got to spend quality time with a close friend that he had known for over a dozen years, experience a colorful cast of characters and laugh about all of them, and be part of a grand journey that he hadn't thought could be done.

It's good to be home.