

## So, we're driving north on Sunday and as we approach Catavina...

By Paul Kottler, [colonelwhite63.com](http://colonelwhite63.com) Alumni Columnist

So, we're driving north on Sunday and as we approach Catavina, in the middle of a desert stretch with no gas stations for 220 miles, it feels like my transmission has shifted to neutral. We coast into a little loncheria run by a lady called la Negra. A very mechanical family, the walls are covered with photos and awards of her desert racing sons. They decide I need transmission fluid, so she sends her daughter to hitchhike the 10 miles to town. She returns three hours later with the oil but upon further review, we all agree that is not the problem and the tranny is busted. By this time it is five in the afternoon with no possibility of help closer than San Quintin (gringo Ed. Note, not the prison) 125 miles to the north and no English speakers in sight so we continue muddling through with our pathetic Spanish. La Negra says "no problem all the truckers stop here all night. They are headed back north empty. Just flag one down and pay him to load your car and take you to San Quintin." Sure...

We have no faith that this is going to work, but are too embarrassed not to try. Vehicles are coming at the rate of about one every ten minutes and none of them are trucks. The good news is we can see them a mile or so away in the fading desert light. We finally see an 18 wheeler approaching and start waving wildly. Me, Bobbi and Mr. la Negra all jumping up and down doing the Baja Shake. And then, SON OF A BITCH, he stops. We explain the problem and he says sure he will help. Now the challenge is how do you get an SUV in a trailer with no ramps, winches or nothing. After a few false starts, la Negra has two of her friends park their cars blocking the highway. Now this is the only highway that serves 1000 miles of the Baja California Peninsula. While it ain't much, it's all we got and it's more than a major road, it is the only road and she blocks it. Then she has the truck driver, Salvador, (Spanish for savior, an appropriate name) back into the highway bar ditch and up against the embankment where the road was cut through. He is a foot too high but he bridges the gap with some old palettes he finds lying around.



Bobbi gets behind the wheel of the car and we all start pushing. Fortunately it's all down hill. She gets some momentum, hits the palette ramp and I hear a horrible cracking sound. I start pushing again as the right hand pallet collapses and she is somehow safe inside. Now, I had no idea how tight a fit it would be. Bobbi barely squeezes out of the car and then someone says, "Set the hand brake." I climb in via the tail gate, set the brake, and slide back out, nearly losing my pants in the process. Actually, I did lose them but in the dark, I was able to make a quick recovery. Salvador chocked the car wheels with some lumber, Bobbi and I sat on the bed on the tractor cab. Salvador and his amigo loaded themselves in and away we went with our new best friends and Salvadores.

Okay, now we got an 18 wheeler with our car inside, us huddled in the back like illegal immigrants being smuggled into the U.S. by coyotes, and no idea what the hell to do next, but at least we are moving and headed North. It turns out la Negra has a son, Eric, who is a mechanic in San Quintin and we hope that he will be able to help us when we get there. Our first problem is, how the hell do we get the car back out of the trailer. Second problem is how do we get it fixed promptly. Our last Mexican tranny repair took us four days in Guerrero Negro. Just to complicate matters, I have a \$500 USD. check I have been waiting 10 years for, that is only good until next Thursday (another long and bizarre story) and am under time pressure to “use it or lose it.” So we are driving along trying to converse with our rescuers. However, our understanding of spoken Spanish is minimal at best and the noise of the truck, compounded with our general fatigue and adrenaline induced giddiness makes matters even worse. Salvador asks us something, we understand 10% of what he says, and then answer whatever question we imagine he might have asked. I am sure that three hours with these crazy gringos convinced him to never help anyone again. Bobbi and I are giggling constantly at the absurdity of the whole thing and the never ending education provided by living in Mexico. La Negra gave Salvador her son's cell number. When we got service at El Rosario, 40 miles south of here, he called Eric and explained what was up. Eric met us in San Quintin. He had found another suitable dirt bank, dug out trenches for the 18 wheeler trailer tires to go in and built up the bank to trailer height. He also had brought timbers to span the gap.



Salvador backed the truck up and Eric and his kids pushed it out. He gave me directions to his house and said he would tow the car there and contact us Monday morning. I asked Salvador what I owed him for all this and he said whatever I thought was okay. I told him "No quiero ser codo" (I don't want to be cheap) but he still would not name a price. I ended up giving him \$1500 pesos (\$120 USD) and he seemed very happy. The Mexicans in Baja are the most helpful, generous people anywhere. I don't know how we would live here without them. Eric towed the car away and said I should see him early in the morning, so we checked into a nearby hotel. What could possibly go wrong?...

Okay, it is now Monday. I went to Eric's at 9:00AM. Not there, his wife answered the door. She got him on the phone. Turns out he has a morning job and said he will start on my car at noon and I should come back at 2:00. I Walked back at 2:00. Nobody there. Called him. Said come at 4:00. Four O'clock and he is finally home. His boss would not let him leave until he fixed the boss's car. I asked him to check on what is wrong and come to my hotel room at 7:00. At 6:00 we met a quartet of Canadian cyclists who forced alcohol on us. Eric showed up right on time at 7:00. He can fix the tranny (needs a new oil pressure pump) but it will take at least 4 days. Don't have 4 days. Plan B. Eric will drive us to Tijuana in the morning. We will cross the border and rent a car. We will drive to our Arizona vacation, then return the car and take a bus from Tijuana back to San Quintin where the newly repaired car will await our arrival. What could possibly go wrong?

OK, so enough suspense. You're probably asking yourself, "How did plan B work out?" Well, it started out fine. Eric showed up at the hotel on time, we repacked, leaving behind half our clothes, the heavy (and pre-broken) laptop, and anything else we did not want to have to carry when we crossed the border on foot. Eric stopped for a hot champorado (an atole based beverage. Bobbi's was cinnamon and sugar flavored. I passed) and burrito for breakfast, dropped Eric Jr. at school and drove the 200 miles to Tijuana. We thought for years that it was only the gringos who managed to get lost in TJ, but Eric showing some of that Mexican ingenuity managed to get confused also. But after asking directions a few times, he dropped us at the start of the line for crossing the border on foot and took off for the return to San Quintin.

We figured that to cross by foot, you navigated a short line, crossed a bridge, got inspected briefly, and voila, you are back in the old country. Hold on there a minute! This was not the end of the line, it was the middle. The whole line was estimated to take three hours for entry. On the other hand, there was a line of vans which promised they could get you across in only 40 minutes for \$6 USD a head. A no-brainer, so we piled in with 10 other people and our giant duffel bags. Bobbi sat next to a former cage fighter. He was covered in tattoos, had a face full of steroid induced acne, and spoke loudly and continuously, while shifting restlessly in his seat. In all, a delightful traveling companion. Except, we weren't actually traveling. We were mostly sitting in an un-airconditioned, overstuffed van that occasionally moved forward a car length or so. Two and a half hours later we emerged at the customs building, quickly showed our ID and were back in the land of the free and the home of the working cell phone. No more problems, yay!!! Never say never...

So, I took out that cell phone and called Enterprise to bring me a car as seen on TV. They said “no prob, just give us your credit card number.” I did. They said “that's a debit card.” I agreed, they said “No car for you. You can only use a debit card if you have a local address.” Annoyed, but not panicked, we arranged to take the trolley north and get picked up by our friend and San Diego resident, Lynn. She took us to two more car rentals where we got the same story, but the last one told me that Fox Car Rentals would accept a debit card. They would, but only after a credit check. Well, not having used any credit in twenty years you can imagine how well that worked out. Now panic and darkness started to set in so we decided to try the airport car rentals. Went to Avis, same story, but, he knew a guy who knew a guy who knew a guy, and we ended up at Cheap Fred's discount car rental, acupuncture studio, and fried chicken stand under a bridge in an undisclosed location. What do you know, we rented a lovely 1999 Toyota Avalon with out of balance tires, burn holes in the upholstery, and an obstruction in the filler pipe that makes you put a half gallon of gas in at a time. But, it ran and it got us to Arizona on time to meet our friends, cash the \$500 check that we have been trying to catch up with for years, and enjoy the beautiful weather and some baseball.

Yesterday was the first game. Fifty five degrees, howling wind, and game called after three very uncomfortable innings. Don't care. We are here, with our friends, safe, and equipped with a story we can use for years to come.

Okay, more drama building... will the maiden be rescued? How many must die before the villains evil lust for murder is sated? Did Paul and Bobbi ever get their car back? The story concludes shortly:

Well, after a week of Arizona baseball, we headed back to California on Thursday morning and arrived without further ado on Thursday afternoon. A little internet research revealed Greyhound provided a service from San Diego to the Tijuana central bus terminal. From there we could catch a bus to San Quintin and our (sure to be repaired by now) car. I could only assume it was repaired since I managed to lose the mechanic's phone number. Since everything had gone so smoothly so far, I decided to leave nothing to chance and went down to the Greyhound station... Yup, it was where it was supposed to be. I found out how to buy tickets and how long the voyage would take. Then I called the car rental and verified that they could take me to the bus station when I returned the car. Man was I cautious, nothing could go wrong now.

Friday morning at 7AM we arrived at San Diego's great DZ Akins deli to fortify ourselves with some bagels and cream cheese. We also took some rugelach to go, as emergency rations. Then we returned the car without incident and they delivered us to Greyhound at 8:15 as promised so we could ride the 8:30 dog to Tijuana. What the bus company failed to mention was, that they only took you to the border where you changed buses for TJ. OK, no prob, only when the other bus comes it is filled with those wanting to go to the TJ airport, and those of us wanting to catch a bus south would have to wait for the next conveyance. Again, only a minor annoyance. Although we were never able to find the bus schedule out of Tijuana, it seemed that they ran frequently. All righty then, we are settled on our own private mini bus to the TJ bus station. As we pull out, the other bus guys wave frantically at us. There is a giant puddle of bus goo under us. I know enough car part Spanish to understand the driver to acknowledge that his power steering hose has busted. So, we turn around, drive a few blocks, and

transfer to a hopefully healthier bus. As we enter TJ the driver asks where we are all going. Surprisingly, the majority say "the airport" and we thought this was a bus for the bus station only! Then he asks where we want to go first, and the applause meter gives the victory to the airporters. In any event, he gets us to the bus station (camionero central for all you Spanish aficionados) in time to catch the 10:30 bus for parts South.

The bus was generally great, although there was an apparently unnecessary stop in Ensenada for 45 minutes. There was plenty of leg room and the seats were quite comfy and reclined almost into beds. In fact, mine reclined whether I wanted it to or not. Pretty disconcerting until I learned to hold the locking lever into the fixed position with my leg. Then there was the TV. The bus had a 13" television showing the same exciting fare you would get on an airliner, only in Spanish. It turned out that this didn't matter. While the right side of the bus had the stereo speakers carrying the dialog track, all we got were the special effects. You could see peoples' mouths moving and hear a murmur of very soft and far away Spanish. Then an explosion or car wreck or alien invasion (they showed Cowboys and Aliens) would happen and our speakers would cut loose at 120 db. The shock wave would cause my leg to move, which in turn would cause my seat to recline to the max and leave me in the back layout position.

Now the bus not only stopped at official stations, it also stopped in the middle of nowhere to accommodate those who live in the middle of nowhere. As we approached San Quintin, Bobbi noticed that one of these unscheduled stops was right where we unloaded the car from the trailer, which means it was right by our hotel. I would have noticed but my seat being over reclined left my head below window height. We asked the driver if we could exit there also, he said we could and retrieved our bags for us. We walked to the hotel, got a room and wonder of wonders we had made it back unscathed.

After checking in we walked to Eric's house to pick up the car. The four jacks under it and drive shafts and bolts littering the ground were a bad sign. Of course, he wasn't home but his wife gave us his cell number and we called from the hotel. Yes, he had the part, no it was not installed. Since he does his repair work outside, the 3 days of incessant downpour (remember the AZ rainout? Same storm) had put him behind schedule. It would be ready Tuesday (this was Friday). So, we arranged with the hotel to stay here at least 4 more days, had a dinner in the fabiola restaurant here (Raviola Bolognese, Salmon in cilantro cream sauce, and adult beverages for about \$25 USD), and prepared for several days of boredom and anxiety, a savory combination that pretty much defines my life. Saturday morning we slept late, then went to breakfast and since we had nothing else to do, returned to our room for an auxiliary nap. At noon, the room phone rang. Eric had stayed up all night and finished the car. He would bring it over, but we had to get him home quickly as he had to be at work in an hour. The car runs fine, is clean, he checked and added oil, and generally took care of everything for the price of a transmission inspection in the old country. I arranged with the hotel to cancel the extra nights I had just paid for. Tomorrow we will head back to Mulege and arrive in the afternoon. What could possibly go wrong?

Mexico - they may not have everything you want, but they have everything you need, and a simple trip can turn into the adventure of a lifetime.

