

BUMFUZZLE

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TRAVEL

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POST CARD
PART 3
CENTRAL
AMERICA

Travel in a Panel



Those mountain roads occasionally led to flats



A typical Guatemalan mountain road.



Only a chain link fence separated the bus from the ocean.



Our first camp back in Mexico.

With over 30,000 new miles on our '58 panel, it was time to really get going on our around the world journey. We'd had very few problems up to this point, needing only to replace a clutch and a leaky wheel cylinder. Other than that our 3,000 mile tune-ups seemed to be doing the trick and keeping the bus running happy and healthy.

Crossing back into Mexico was like visiting an old friend. We absolutely love the country and can't fathom why even more people don't visit it. For a camper it beats every other country south of the U.S. border, hands down.

This time our Mexican travels took us to the Caribbean coast, an area we'd previously spent very little time in. Frankly we didn't like it nearly as much as Baja and the west coast, but it did still manage to hold a few attractions for us. One big plus, for a couple of loners like us, was the complete lack of any other travelers. We had every single campground for weeks all to ourselves. On the beaches, in the cities, everywhere we went. Plus of course there is the fact that Mexicans love VDubs. We couldn't pause at a speed bump without somebody telling us how "bonito" she was.

We crossed into Belize shortly after heavy rains had flooded the country. With roads closed we had to make the tough decision to leave the bus in the care of a local campground owner and take a ferry out to the cayes for a few days of sun, sand, crystal clear waters, and surprisingly strong locally brewed Belekin beer. Like I said, a tough decision.

When the flood waters receded low enough to be underneath our cargo doors we returned to the bus and continued south to

Guatemala. The border was a friendly place with smiling officials eager to do their work and get us moving. It was the exact opposite of everything we had ever heard about Central American border crossings. Once through we drove along a terrible road to Tikal, the famous Mayan ruins, where we camped under the hot sun in the middle of a soccer pitch surrounded by howler monkeys and coatimundi, a vaguely raccoon type animal roaming the grounds.

Immediately upon getting settled a guy from London raced over to us. He was a '64 bus owner who'd just had to sell out as he was moving to Australia, where he had grand plans for his own epic Oz bus adventure. It seems not a stop goes by anywhere that we don't hear a bus related story from somebody.

Guatemala is a fantastic place with friendly locals, rough off the beaten track roads, and superb scenery. We drove many of the roads, not seeing another passenger car along the way. About the only vehicles we would pass were buses, or more accurately, jacked-up four wheel drive vans. The faces inside would gawk at us as we drove past.

In Guatemala it seems as if every day is market day. More than once we found ourselves driving along when suddenly the road would be choked off with market stalls and hundreds of locals. We'd idle through them slowly, buying a bag of nuts or fruit along the way.

We spent nearly our entire Guatemala visit in the interior, the

mountains. Though we did eventually find our way to the beach town of Monterrico, which is located at one end of a very long spit of land with a sort of mangrove lined canal running between it and the mainland. After baking on the black sand Pacific beach for a couple of days we packed up and headed for the ferry. Taking the ferry back to the mainland on this end would save us a couple of hours of backtracking. Little did we know what the term ferry would mean in Guatemala. Up to this point in our lives a ferry had always been a large gleaming white ship with a snack bar and a lounge. It was slightly different here.

Driving along the dirt road and following the ferry signs we suddenly ran out of room to go. In front and to the left of us was dense jungle and to our right was the water with a couple of



Volcanoes often loomed in the background.



Loading on to the Guatemalan car ferry system.

small flat bottomed boats pulled up in the mud. It wasn't until one of these boats came around the corner with a pickup truck on top of it that we realized this was the ferry dock.

After unloading the truck the fourteen year-old captain motioned for us to drive on. Ali wasn't about to sit in the bus for this, but was fine standing outside »

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with the camera ready to capture the calamity. Our captain adjusted a couple of thick wooden boards and I eased the bus aboard with twelve inches to spare on either side. The boat had a rough plank bottom covering a sloshing bilge of murky water. We were the only passengers for this thirty minute run across the canal and were soon on our way. The fifteen horsepower engine hardly made a sound hidden as it was between us at the front of the boat and the bus at the back. In fact, the bus took up so much space that we couldn't even see the driver and were never sure if we should alert him to the huge pile of weeds we were about to cruise right through.

On the other side we eased the boat up to the slight incline, laid out a couple of boards, and backed ever so slowly over the edge. Ali could breathe again.

Soon we were making our way through El Salvador and getting back into the VW bus surf lifestyle. Camping for a few days in the backyard of a local family who'd cobbled together a couple of concrete rooms and space for a van or two to park near the beach. The surf break was pretty harmless and the beach bar served up the best micheladas, a sort of icy-tomato-hot-sauce-beer drink, since Mexico. We also discovered papusas which just may be the greatest late-night street food ever invented, and at thirty cents each you couldn't beat the value. El Salvador was a great stop.

We stared at these two keystone cops like they were the idiots, and said, "No comprende." They made signs with their fingers and kept saying, "Triangles, triangles."

Central America gets a bad rap from many for their apparently corrupt police forces. We actually found them for the most part to be on the up and up, happy to stop us for nothing more than to say hello and welcome us to their country. However there are always a few out there. We actually sort of looked forward to the run-ins with the bad

cops because they always had a funny ending. For us anyway.

In Honduras we were stopped a number of times by pleasant policemen who just took a quick look at our documents and waved us on. But the last time

we were stopped we could tell right away something was up. It's like when a little kid is lying and isn't very good at it, you can just tell. So it didn't come as a big surprise when the two cops, after looking over my drivers license, suddenly asked us, "Where triangles?" This is a fairly well worn scam for those who've been on the road a while, though we did hear of one not too savvy traveler who paid out twenty dollars at three stops in a row for the same stupid shakedown. What they were asking was where our orange traffic triangles were; the type of triangle you put out when your car breaks down.

We stared at these two keystone cops like they were the idiots, and said, "No comprende." They made signs with their fingers and kept saying, "Triangles, triangles." And I kept repeating in a very bored voice, "No comprende." This frustrated them immensely, so they told us to pull over.

At this point they called over their friend who spoke perfect English. He said, "They want to know where your triangles are." I calmly replied, "I'm just going to look at you and pretend I don't know what the hell you are talking about." This got a strange look, but he repeated it to the cops anyway. Then I said to the cop in Spanish, "Five police checkpoints, no problem. Number

six (pointing at him), problem." He understood this perfectly, handed my license back and walked away without saying a word. Then the English speaking guy said to me with a straight face, "They just wanted to see your title." A rather comical attempt to cover up their little scam.

After Honduras and Nicaragua we entered Costa Rica. We always go into countries with open minds, but this one we went in prepared to hate. Before we left on this trip we heard from everybody and their grandma how much we were going to love Costa Rica. What this said to us was that even old pensioners were going

here and enjoying it. These are the same kind of people who enjoy Florida for God's sake. There was absolutely no way we would like it.

However, the country soon won us over. Places to camp on the beach in the bus were everywhere. The surf was excellent, if not a bit crowded, the locals were friendly, and did I mention the awesome beachside bus camping. There were way too many gringos there, and we could hardly afford to eat our



Hanging out beach side yet again. It was the Costa Rican way.



Ali and I atop a colonial era church in Leon, Nicaragua.



Scouting out a route across yet another river crossing in Costa Rica.



Our El Salvadoran surf camp.



The modern Panama City looming up ahead.

one meal a day, but walking barefoot from the bus to the waves every day made up for all of that.

Costa Rica did surprise us in another way, by having the worst roads in Central America. Paved roads only link the major towns, anywhere else and our bus' high ground clearance was a necessity. We rock crawled for miles here. And then there were the rivers. One coastal drive took us through seven rivers. At each one I got out and walked it off. Most didn't cause us any issues, but one murky river was up to my thighs. By this time we'd been driving the road for hours and turning around was no longer an option. Ali taped up the doors and then walked across the pedestrian bridge to catch the action from up above. The bus dove in with me hard on the gas. Halfway across we were throwing up a bow wave nearly to the VW symbol, but the bus plowed through like the river wasn't even there. It was a relief when the front tires hit the far embankment.

With Christmas fast approaching we made a quick dash through Panama to Panama City to arrange our shipping to Cartagena,

A young boy would see us coming and start jumping up and down trying to get everybody else to look. They would all turn, smile, and wave as we drove past.



Loaded up and ready for the trip to South America.

Colombia. Our original plan to ship to South Africa didn't pan out, with the cost of a shipping container running \$5,000.

For a quarter of that we could find ourselves on the South American continent instead.

We contacted a shipping agent, arranged all the paperwork, booked our flights, and drove to the port to load up the bus. The day didn't go nearly as smoothly as it should have considering how much it cost us, but after spending eight hours standing around a guarded port parking lot in the sun and rain, we were finally

led to an empty container. Before we knew it the bus was inside, blocked, and strapped down. After 38,000 miles together it was ready for its first trip without us.

Central America had been a great adventure. Driving the bus down the road seemed to brighten everyone's day. A young boy would see us coming and start jumping up and down trying to get everybody else to look. They would all turn, smile, and wave as we drove past. We met nice people, had great camping, beautiful beaches, cheap beer, and lots and lots of mediocre food. Hey, not everything can be perfect. ☺

Next issue We head on into South America ...