

A Gringo's Christmas

The last rays of the sun were slipping below the horizon as we felt the wheels of our Volkswagen van sink into the sand underneath us. My father and I looked at each other, knowing we were in big trouble.

It was the day after Christmas, 1973, and Baja California's shiny new Highway One had opened only days before to a great ballyhoo. "The new 2-lane, fully-paved, hard-surfaced highway is 7 meters wide," the brochures proudly proclaimed. Seven meters was barely wide enough for 2 motorhomes going in opposite directions to squeeze by each other. Hardly a highway by American standards, but it was sensational for an area that had only been accessible to 4-wheel drive vehicles and small airplanes before.

My father and I had the week after Christmas off since both the atomic energy research facility where he worked and the factory I had landed my first post-college job in were closed for the holidays. We both love camping and wanted to see Baja before it was spoiled by other *turistas* like us, so we had decided to try the whole 1,000-mile trip to Cabo San Lucas at the tip of the peninsula.

It was during the gas crisis (the Carter one), but we were assured that Baja had plenty of gas even if few filling stations. We packed up several gallons of drinking water and a few extra gallons of gas with our gear and took off. Everything had gone fine at first. We'd made it all the way to the halfway point, Guerrero Negro, before dark on the first day. As we left the town with our gas tanks full for the stretch of highway that crossed the desert to the East Coast of the peninsula, we noticed the sun beginning to set.

"Let's make camp down by Scammon's Lagoon," my father suggested. The lagoon, just south of Guerrero Negro, is the goal of the California Gray Whales' migration every winter. That sounded great. I checked the map.

"There's no road that goes there," I reported.

"Sure, there must be. I saw it on one of the maps. Besides, I keep seeing roads over on the right."

"The map doesn't show any road!" I insisted. What neither of us knew was that maps differed greatly in places because the new highway didn't always follow the old route, and the dirt roads we kept seeing were a maze of pathways made by Pemex, the Mexican oil company, in a search for oil.

The sun was fading fast, so my dad took the next dirt road, trusting his sense of direction to get us to the lagoon. The road paralleled the highway, so he turned right again on the next intersecting road. We knew we were in trouble the moment we turned. This new road was

made of sand with a foot high “curb” of sand on either side. We got only a hundred yards before we sank.

We got out and took stock of the situation. We were in the middle of the desert without a scrap of wood to put under the wheels. The dry lakebed next to us provided an ample supply of rocks, but those, we discovered sank into the sand under the pressure of our jack. We were 12 miles outside the nearest town, and that town didn’t seem big enough to be likely to have a tow truck. We decided to sleep on it, hoping the situation would look better in the daylight.

An hour’s work in the morning, however, only sank us a half-foot deeper into the sand. We had no choice but to send one of us back to Guerrero Negro and hope they had a tow truck. Because of my “superior linguistic ability” (I had once had 2 weeks of Spanish in summer school, so I knew 6 words of Spanish to my father’s 3), I was selected for the hike. I had only walked a half-mile before I managed to flag down the first vehicle that came my way. It was a definite stroke of good luck.

The Mexican family inside the old pickup spoke no English, but a pointed finger and the words, “Guerrero Negro” were enough. The pickup’s cab contained the parents and 2 young children and probably all of their worldly possessions. I squeezed my 6’2” 200-pound frame into the square foot of opening they were able to clear for me and rode into Guerrero Negro with them.

Now came the real test. “My car...stuck,” I explained to the gas station attendant. I pushed my hands downwards to indicate the car sinking into the sand. “Need tow truck,” I added.

“Gasolina? Over there,” he replied, pointing to the pumps. I tried again with no success, so I waited for him to finish filling his only customer’s gas tank. It then became obvious that I had no car and nothing to carry gas in.

“What you want?” he asked, probably exhausting his English.

“Tow truck,” I repeated, pulling an imaginary rope with both hands.

He showed me their hydraulic lifts, “Si?” he asked.

“No,” I answered. I picked up a chain I saw and did my pulling act again, saying, “Tow truck.”

“Ah,” the man sighed, “Jose Garcia, Guerrero Negro.” He pointed and gave me directions in rapid Spanish. I didn’t understand a word of his directions, but the town was so small, I had no trouble finding Jose Garcia’s shop with the tow truck. There were 4 or 5 men talking and sketching in the dirt near a half-dismantled auto. When they noticed me, I went into my routine again.

“My car...stuck. Need tow truck.” I pointed to the tow truck.

“Mecano?” asked one.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Stuck,” I repeated, pushing my hands down. At that, one man picked up some dirt and ran it through his fingers. “Mecano?” he asked.

“Si, si, megano, mucho megano,” I said, falsely assuming the word I heard as megano meant sand.

They all nodded their understanding—and went back to their discussion! I was completely perplexed. I had gotten them to understand, but now they were ignoring me completely as if their understanding the situation had solved my problem.

I must have looked desperate at that point because a man who spoke both English and Spanish was walking by and offered to translate. Yes, they understood, but the man who drove the tow truck was on vacation.

I was shattered. Everything had gone fine: I had gotten a ride into town; they **did** have a tow truck; I had gotten them to understand. But I was back at square one. All I had managed to do was tire myself out and waste half a day.

As I headed dejectedly out of town, I decided to pick up some of the loose boards that littered the road, so we’d have something to put under the wheels. I picked up one for each wheel and marched off along the road, sticking my thumb out hopefully at every passing auto.

After dozens of campers and motorhomes had whizzed past me, I decided people might be put off the somebody trying to hitchhike with some rotting boards under his arm. I took to throwing down the boards when I heard a car, but my efforts fared no better without them. I felt disappointed and annoyed at all the big American *turistas* who wouldn’t stop to help a fellow Anglo who was obviously in trouble. By the time I had hiked 3 miles, I had resigned myself to the long walk back, no longer bothering to stick my thumb out.

Just then, however, an old Chevy Blazer roared past. It went a couple hundred yards beyond me, screeched to a halt, and began backing up. A ride!

I was somewhat dismayed to find the Chevy occupied by 4 Mexicans who apparently spoke next to no English. I attempted to explain my predicament, but they just eagerly gestured me inside. As we headed off, the chubby, balding man in the front passenger seat twisted around and asked, “Your nombre? Your name?”

“Frank,” I said, “Paco,” I added, remembering the Spanish equivalent I had learned as a child.

“Paco,” he said. “Paco,” they all repeated, smiling.

“Nicholas,” the speaker said, pointing to himself, and continuing in a circle, “Armando, Ricardo, Alfredo.”

Armando, Alfredo, and Nicholas were obviously enjoying themselves, but Ricardo, the youngest of the group, seemed rather glum.

“Drink?” Nicholas asked, offering me a large paper Pepsi cup. I nodded and took a quick gulp. I hadn’t had anything to drink since I left our van. What I had thought to be Pepsi turned out to be Tequila. I tried to smile through my burning throat and noticed for the first time how the car seemed to weave quite a bit under Armando’s direction.

“You married?” Nicholas asked.

“No,” I said, and everybody except Ricardo laughed.

“We,” Nicholas began, indicating himself, Armando, and Alfredo, “not married. He married,” he added, pointing at Ricardo. They laughed again, and Ricardo looked gloomier. I smiled though I was getting a little dubious.

Just then, I spotted our van. “There!” I shouted, pointing. Armando hit the brakes and swerved off onto the dirt road. We came to the sand road that my father and I had gotten stuck on, and Armando was about to turn onto it when I shouted “Alto, alto!” using the Spanish word for stop that I had learned from signs at the San Diego Zoo.

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head, “megano, mucho megano.” I thought I was saying much sand when I was really saying something totally incoherent like great mechanical.” Since that made no sense, Armando decided to push on. He was 100 feet from our Volkswagen when the Chevy sank too.

My dad, meanwhile, had flagged down another Mexican, thinking, when the truck turned off the main road, that his truck was the tow truck that I was supposed to be bringing back. It wasn’t a tow truck, however, and I wasn’t in it. Unable to explain his mistake, he had found it much easier to communicate that he needed help.

The two of them quit working on getting the Volkswagen van out and came back to help our other would-be benefactors, but Armando, in trying to rock the Chevy, had managed to sink it to the fenders.

After several fruitless minutes of attempting to push the Chevy, we all went back to concentrate on the Volkswagen. My father and our other friend, who spoke no English and whose name we never got, had been working slowly but surely on an ingenious method of getting our van out. They would set down a rock and jack the car up until the rock sank then pour a little water over the area and put more rocks in. In this way, they had gradually built up an almost solid platform for the jack—good enough to lift the car a little.

Now that we had the rear wheels off the ground, we put one of my boards under the sunken wheel and pushed. The van surged forward—but only for a few feet. We were preparing to give it one more try, when Ricardo looked at me and asked, “You got push, push, push?” pumping his arms up and down as he did so.

“Si!” my dad shouted, hauling out an old bicycle pump he had thrown in the van as an afterthought when we’d left. Ricardo smiled and proceeded to let half the air out of our tires. We pushed again, and this time managed to get the car onto the dry lakebed. We all cheered, and Nicholas passed the tequila around.

The Chevy presented another problem, however. It was in much deeper, and Armando had no jack. We again let half the air out of the tires, but got nowhere. The wheels were in too deep. Our nameless friend then got us to rock the car sideways. When the wheel lifted momentarily, he would slide the board in an inch at a time.

Finally we had a board under each rear wheel. Armando got in to drive, and the other 6 of us found handholds around the car. Armando put the Chevy in gear, and we pushed. At first the boards seemed ready to fly out from under the wheels, but the holes were so deep that the sand behind the boards held them in place. We were all straining with all our might, but our feet were sinking into the sand, and we were going nowhere. Then, suddenly, the strain eased. The car was moving!

We all fell as the Chevy surged forward but got up and whooped as it pulled up onto the solid ground of the dry lake. At that point our unnamed friend took off for home with all our thanks. Armando then turned on the Chevy’s radio, and he and Nicholas danced with each other while Alfredo, Ricardo, Dad, and I alternated on the tire pump. When Alfredo finished off the tequila, we pulled out some cokes we had in a cooler, and that occasioned another round of dancing.

Ricardo got a few nasty looks when he turned off the radio to save the Chevy’s battery, but my dad pulled out his portable reel-to-reel tape recorder (like the kind they used on the old Mission Impossible TV show), and turned it on. I was grateful our friends spoke little English when, as fate would have it, The Yellow Rose of Texas played out to their dancing.

When the tires were all up to full pressure again, Nicholas gave us a meal ticket to his Restaurante las Globas and said to come see him anytime we got to Guerrero Negro. We thanked them all and parted as friends though we never understood more than a half-dozen words or each other’s language.

Epilog

It was past noon when we finally got on our way across the peninsula to Santa Rosalia, so we ended up pulling over to camp a little further south at Mulege. We realized that, after the delay, we couldn’t make Cabo San Lucas, but we could make La Paz if we just continued, even if it

would only be for bragging rights since we would have to turn back around almost immediately. So we pushed on to La Paz, where we took a few pictures and a stroll around town, then headed back north. On the way my dad informed me that a neighbor had asked for a rock from Baja for her garden, so he chose a 4-foot wide alabaster white mini-boulder we came across, just letting it rest behind the front seats.

When we finally got back to the border a day and a half later, we drove up to the Border Patrol checkpoint. We obviously presented quite a sight after 4 days of no showers and no shaving in our "hippie van." The exchange between the agent and my dad went like this:

"You Americans?"

"Si," my dad replied to my eyerolling.

"How far did you go?"

"La Paz."

"How long did you stay?"

"A half-hour."

"Got anything to declare?"

"One rock."

"Go on over to that lot."

After my dad parked in the empty lot, I stood a couple yards off to the side, trying to disassociate myself from the whole thing. A Border Patrol officer strolled up casually while my dad was pulling out our sleeping bags and whatever else was loose to prove we weren't hiding any contraband. The officer stopped by me, looked at the van's open sliding door to the big white rock.

"Is that the rock?"

"Yep."

"You could have picked that up on the beach right here."

"It's his rock."

"You guys can go on."