

Horsing around the Sierra Madre-1974 Style

A journey on horseback across Mexico's great divide...

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“A horse trip across Mexico's wild west- you gotta be crazy! What about Pancho Villa and all the bandits” said a citified friend? “ Remember what happened to Humphrey Bolgart!”

The summer was 1974. I was running Bear Basin Ranch in Westcliffe, Colorado, a remuda of half locoed Appaloosa horses and a string of rangy long horn cows while occasionally guiding educational programs for Outward Bound in remote canyons of the Sierra Madre. I was very much ready for a good winter adventure. Thinking about the Sierra...

I contacted horse friends who might have interest but the team boiled down to a game gal named Monica. We worked together on the Westcliffe ranch in the Sangre de Cristo range that year. Monica was a very talented horse woman who introduced me to dangerous activities, fearlessly jumping hyper city horses, show rings and dry martinis. I showed her cool mountain mornings, cow horses and perhaps slower cowboy ways.

Dick Spencer, a friend and publisher of Western Horseman Magazine agreed to sponsor the trip, putting us in contact with *charro* friends in northern Mexico for help with finding horses. Finally, yearlings off to market and the summer packing business wound down, we threw two old double rigged, Texas half seat saddles into the back of Monica's ancient station wagon, a *cucaracha* my Peruvian friends would call it, driving the long road over Raton, through El Paso to Chihuahua. At a rancho outside of town, we popped down \$300 for two trail experienced geldings, Colorado and Moro. They were grade horses, tall, lanky, long straight heads like the ones in the old Pancho Villa photos. We would travel light, only bed rolls and no pack horse. The old half seats with narrow tree fit them perfectly. Leaving *la cucaracha* at the ranch, we set off westward toward the distant Sierra Madre. Riding from rancho to rancho across the rolling plains and foothills, we made good time. We cut and mended a gate-less fence now and then but generally followed cow paths and back road tracks that kept on course westward.

This was before the drug years and associated violence that would now makes travel there too dangerous. We had wonderful experiences, treated like honored guests at each village and rancho that we passed through. We were fed, horses cared for without charge, much like it must have been traveling across the US West in the 1800s.

Eventual, crossing back and forth across mountain passes, we arrived to stay with friends at the small *Tarahumara* settlement *ejido* of *Areponapuchic* (*Arepo* to the locals) overlooking the deep Urique Canyon or Copper Canyon to tourists. This was long before the coming of the road and the big hotels. We stayed long enough to rest the horses, treating them to abundant corn. Meanwhile, we feasted on fresh tortillas, refried beans and roasted goat, putting a few needed pounds back on our skinny frames.

Then, came the real challenge... Monica and I decided to descend into and cross the big canyons. I had been to the 17th Century mining town of *Batopilas* some years before. This would be our objective. I knew some of the old Spanish mule routes from our hiking trips with pack burros. Local friends agreed that with extreme care and luck *mucho suerte*, we probably could get our horses down, cross the rivers and up to the high country on the other side. Most of the routes were seldom used and had been made difficult by floods, slides and lack of repair. The *Tarahumara* used them as foot trails or perhaps as pack burro routes between distant ranchos.

Riding was out of the question. We led the horses carefully along steep narrow tracks, around washouts and down slides. Rocks were moved and drop offs shored up as required. Eventually, we reached the river making camp on a broad sand beach. Beans, campfire coffee and a shot of *tequila* never tasted better. The horses grazed free, not picketed on a long line and a stake as we do in the Colorado mountains. From past experience following tracks, searching for escapees, we never use hobbles. They don't keep a horse around who wants to leave. In this case, there was no place for them to go as they feasted on lush, green bunch grass in a small wash beside the river. Besides, now we all had bonded such that they considered themselves part of our human herd and we weren't going anywhere far from the campfire.

This was a time before available topographic maps and Google Earth. Finding a way out proved to be near impossible. We crisscrossed the river back and forth, both up and downstream looking for a way out, finally, seeing a track upward that seems to have been used recently. Two days later, we had climbed the five thousand feet to reach the eastern rim only to find yet another deep canyon that unfortunately had to be crossed. I had not been anywhere near here and it had not been mentioned by the locals back at *Arepo*. One again on foot, we picked our way down. Several days later we reached impassable cliffs of yellow stained rhyolite pinching off the canyon. The walls were pockmarked with old shelter caves, smoked pots, corn grinding stones *matates* and wall carvings. We had come upon one of many ancient *Mogollon* culture, archaeology sites common throughout the canyons. Here's where the term short rations comes into play. Down to the last tortilla and the coffee pot gone over a cliff, we started back the way we had come with a stiff upper lip and empty stomachs. The cliff dwelling were left for another day. Somewhere in the deep canyons they are still out there.

About this time Colorado needed shoes, I dug out the set purchased in a Chihuahua hardware store, horseshoe shaped flattened metal, three holes to a side, formed from construction re-bar.

I fitted them close to right by pounding with a large rock. Monica's fancy horse friends would have had a seizure. Colorado may have been ranched trained but apparently no one back at the rancho had been able to shoe him right side up. After a long fight with his feet which he won, I made a picket rope into a running w, an old cowboy trick, for pulling a horse's feet out from under him, putting him down on the ground. The end result was new shoes nailed on, Colorado completely pissed, upside down, and me totally exhausted.

When the dust settled several days later, we were back in the high county following a traveled rim trail. A passing *Tarahumara* pointed south at distant ridges as the way to go. Soon, a stop at a small rancho produced beans and better directions. A week or so later, following an old mule track built to haul out silver from the nearby mines, we rode tall in the saddle into historic downtown *Batopilas*.

The story goes on. Some days later, I went over, tangled up with my horse, in the flooding *Batopilas* River, saved by a boot knife. Leaving town we crossed what I through was the recommended river ford. *vado* This was before the coming of the road and modern bridges some years later.

It may have been the *vado* but a December storm had dumped wet snow in the high country and an inch or two of rain upstream. The raging torrent was too much. Like a scene from an old John Huston western, Colorado went over. I caught a foot in a line coiled amongst the clutter tied to the saddle. He ended on top and I ended down as we fought to flee the rapids for high ground. As the story goes, I eventually cut loose and swam free. Since then, I always carry a handy knife which has saved my bacon more than once. Sadly our camera and most of the film in the saddle bags when down the *Batopilas* to the Pacific. The only photo that I now have is a water stained negative of Monica on a skinny horse which, like Richard Nixon's files, should never see the light of day.

So the story ends my friends as an old Ian Tyson song might say. We made our way, round about to the rail line, sold the horses, caught a ride on a locomotive back to Chihuahua on Christmas Eve. Monica and I threw the worn saddles and ourselves in the battered *cucaracha* and headed north. Pass the tequila por favor...

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