

Updated 4/2002

GETTING ALONG -- Mexico and Elsewhere

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This is **not** about where to go and all the usual "*touristy*" stuff you read in RV magazines. This **is** about how to get along well (usually without getting in trouble). Some of it is common sense. Some is simple "street smarts." Most of it is about common courtesy. All of it applies to **anywhere** you go. Outside the U.S., if you act like an "Ugly American," you'll get treated like one. Inside the U.S. we use a slightly different term-- If you act like an "asshole," you'll get treated like one. This is also about how Mexicans, American Indians and other peoples (including us) can be thoroughly nice if you don't act like a jerk.

So here's a short, true story:

I've spent a lot of time in Mexico. On one occasion, in a border town, my car's steering gear collapsed. A Mexican cop recruited several men to manually turn the front wheels and move my car out of traffic to a parking spot. The cop then took coins out of his pocket and put them in the parking meter. He then gave coins to me for use in a pay phone to call a tow truck from the U.S. He then arranged with a nearby hotel for car passengers to wait in its air-conditioned lobby for a taxi. Cop, men who manhandled car and hotel manager all refused any form of payment! (Car handlers did accept a round of beers.)

Later, when I was crossing border to U.S. in the tow truck, Mexican officials apologized for any inconveniences suffered while in Mexico and waved us right on through without any paper work hassles or hints at "mordida."

Once on the U.S. side, things changed. U.S. Customs and DEA officials treated me and tow truck driver like suspected criminals (smugglers). Once those characters were satisfied, they directed us to the "bureaucracy." It was apparently assumed that a car, being dragged by a tow truck, was an "import" and had to have the "proper paper work." After 15 minutes of trudging from office to office, where nobody knew what they were doing, the driver and I simply went out to the parking lot and

drove away. Welcome to America! I was tempted to return to Mexico and stay there. I returned to Mexico many times over the years and have never been mistreated. I didn't mistreat anybody either.

My opinion: The Mexican people are great! Mexico is wonderful! Mexico is different, in its own way, but getting along in Mexico is basically no different than getting along anywhere else--unless you do something stupid. Will you run into fuzz-nut bureaucrats in Mexico? Sure, just like in the U.S. A cop who wants \$10 for a phony traffic offense? Sure, just like in the U.S. Are there crooks in Mexico? Sure, just like in the U.S. But my experience is there are fewer in Mexico and, in general, they're not as vicious as in the U.S. Can you get robbed and murdered in Mexico? Sure. But mindless drive-by shootings, car jackings and such are far less common than in the U.S. (Obviously, I do love Mexico--Great food. Great scenery. Great fishing. Reasonable prices. Most of all, great people--if you don't act like a jerk.)

Tips: (some learned the hard way):

- Learning Spanish can be useful, but isn't necessary. In fact, your endless bumbling with a phrase book just wastes some Mexican worker's time and can be an annoyance and you can bet the Mexican will find a reason to excuse himself--and leave you there with one thumb in your phrase book and the other stuck in your ear (or someplace else). **People who are trying to make a living (and are having a tough time feeding their family) haven't got time to screw around and give you free language lessons.** So, if you want to learn conversational Spanish, do it on your own time.
- **Very Important!** Be generous with such courtesies as "please" and "thank you" (both in English and Spanish). Don't go overboard on the "señor/señorita/señora stuff though. (I realize señor means mister as well as sir and other things, but how often do you call your waiter "sir" here at home?) Generally, there's no need to do other than you would here, where you walk up to the Wal-Mart greeter and ask where the rest room is. No need to say "Sir" first.
- **ALWAYS ASK PERMISSION** -- to park (especially), dump trash, get water, whatever. (How would you like it if a convoy of 10 Japanese RVs

parked in front of your house and the people wandered off to take pictures somewhere?)

- **Don't** call people "hey you," "boy/girl," "chico/chica," "chief," or similar demeaning names. (Save "garçon" for your trip to France. In Mexico, they'll think you're an idiot--or a Frenchman, which is even worse.)

- **Do** treat people with respect. That old, grinning fool hanging around a garage may well be the chief mechanic's father. Abuse him and you'll get abused also. The toothless, old crone outside a cantina, might be the owner's mother. Mexicans can't afford, and don't necessarily want, to put the elderly away and out of sight. Mexicans have respect for the elderly. (Now *there's* a lesson Norte Americanos could learn from!)

- **Don't** treat children with disrespect either. Patting a child on the head is demeaning, puts him/her on the same social plane as a "pet" and is a no-no. A simple hello greeting and a smile are just fine. Insert a couple of fingers in a child's hand and simulate a (gentle) handshake if you really want to be chummy. Generally, like in the U.S., it's best to avoid small kids or you'll be suspected as a pervert.

- **Don't** dick around with "pet-type" animals. Dogs, cats (and such) aren't pets so much as they are alarm systems, protectors and "critter" eliminators. Fool with one, get bitten or scratched and find yourself back in the U.S. getting painful shots.

- **Don't** summon people by beckoning with a curled finger. What are you? A conquistador? A rude tourist? (Both bad.) A simple raised hand will (usually) get waiter/waitress to attend you. In Mexico, locals, as well as tourists, often squat at a restaurant table for hours, just screwing around. When you want your check, get up off your can and go ask for it.

- **Always offer compensation** when you get something extra or a favor. Money is usually welcome, but sometimes awkward to offer. One trick (learned when boating in the Caribbean) was to keep a stash of "token" gifts that are hard for the locals to get: Ball-point pens (inexpensive, but not the el-cheapos that fail immediately; preferably with a logo or message that would cause people to remember you or your club), Butane lighters, Disposable batteries (AA size the most common). Inexpensive, digital sports-type watches for a real treat. Personal-care products are

valued in Mexico. Offering them can be awkward though. (Give a guy a bar of soap, and he thinks that you're offended by his body odor.) One way around this, yet help people, is to assemble soap, shampoo, toothpaste, tooth brushes, band-aids, etc., into a "goodie bag" and give it to the woman of the family with a simple Spanish phrase like "para (or is it por?--my Spanish is awful) los ninos." (meaning for the children). It will be appreciated, used by all and not be offensive to anybody. Check the coupon section in your paper and the specials at your supermarket. You can accumulate a huge pile of personal-care products for just pennies on the dollar.

●● **TIP WELL, BUT NOT LAVISHLY -- NOBODY LIKES A SHOW OFF** ●●

- Bargain when it's appropriate but don't act like a gringo jerk. Bargaining in Mexico is just like in the U.S. You bargain for cars and souvenirs. You don't bargain at restaurants, drug stores, super markets and the like.
- If you visit a church, don't act like ugly Americans. No short-shorts, bare midriffs and such. Men remove hats! Women *put on* hats or kerchiefs! Small donations are appreciated (and needed). Rome doesn't subsidize them (not that it shouldn't).
- **Don't** go where you're not wanted. Don't barge into a wedding, private party or picnic unless invited. Mexican parties can get a bit rowdy. Loud music (it's usually pretty good too), drunken singing and such often gets Norte Americanos to complain to management--Big Mistake! Best is to shut up and enjoy the festivities or just go in your rig and put on some TV or music you can listen to with a head set until it's all over. Often, if you're not a complainer, you'll get invited to join in. Enjoy it -- but don't fondle the women. You may find some guy passed out on your picnic table in the middle of the night. Cover him with a blanket and leave him alone. Offer him a "cuppa" or "hair of the dog" in the morning. When he sobers up he'll often go fishing (or something) and bring you a treat.
- Mexican rest rooms can be just fine, or pretty crude. Many Norte Americano men think crude ones are a good excuse to go wee-wee in the street--Big Mistake! This is what Mexican (and any other) cops see as an "easy bust and fine." Far worse, in Mexico, this is a criminal offense, called indecent exposure, and is pretty serious. You do NOT want to spend a few

days in a Mexican jail while your wife tries to find the American consulate!

- The biggest reason American tourists get in serious trouble (robbed, murdered and such) in Mexico is because they insist on snooping around where they never should have gone in the first place! There are areas in your own home town where you'd never think of going. What gives you reason to presume you can do so anywhere else? Use your head! There's a place in Mexico that's very remote where they filmed a portion of the now-classic film "The Wild Bunch." I want to go there. Before I do, I'll check to make sure it's OK. With who? The insurance companies, old-time SKPs who live there, the people who run RV tours into Mexico, cops and the managers of Mexican RV parks. Here's the skinny: There are places in Mexico where the people can earn a living. Most are near tourist cities or where there are factories. Use your street smarts here; stay away from bad places and you're as safe (or safer) than in the U.S. There are other places in Mexico where the people are really destitute. Go there and the most honorable man, with no job and starving children, will be tempted to rip you off. Don't go around looking for trouble!

- In some Mexican cities, at about 5PM, you'll see Army trucks dropping armed soldiers off at street corners. It's not a coup! They're put there to protect tourists (and locals too). Too bad we don't have that in the U.S.?

- Watch your (English) language. Some tourists think they can say anything, in English, when in a foreign place, as if nobody could understand them. Calling out "Hey, Pancho, get your dumb ass over here." is not a bright idea. Neither are lewd comments about waitress's physical attributes, brain power, etc. More people understand English than let on. Rude remarks can get you in more trouble, faster, than in a red-neck bar in the U.S.

Even thoughtless remarks can hurt. A table of ugly americans in a Mexico restaurant were making (what they thought were) comical remarks about the quality of Mexican wines (horse piss and similar). A friend of mine at a nearby table overheard them (who couldn't?) and noticed the distress of the wine steward who was the butt of their humor. When the wine steward approached his table, my friend noticed the wet eyes and humiliation, but ignored that and politely mentioned that he'd heard there were some excellent Mexican wines, what would the steward recommend, etc. After a

friendly chat, my friend was very well treated.

- There are lots of public and private places to **boondock** in Mexico. Once parked there, you'll usually be approached in a day or so by a "cowboy" (really, often on a horse, no less) who will infer, tactfully, that he is the "local protector" or somesuch. Always offer him a beer and a place to sit in the shade. Sometimes this (it will usually be daily) beer is all he'll expect. Lucky you. In other cases, he'll hint at more. OK, give him a \$ or so a day if it's a nice place. In return, he'll keep other hustlers from bothering you because you're now his "client" and "under his protection." He'll stop (for that beer or whatever) daily or so and if he finds you with a serious health or vehicle problem, he'll usually summon help. If you cultivate one of these characters you can do well. He'll tell you where the good places are, arrange for fresh fish and vegetables, tell the cops you're OK--all sorts of stuff. Is this a shakedown? Sure. So what? This guy will tell the local thieves to go steal the TV from the RV down the road (who didn't make a payoff) instead of yours. Not a bad deal.

- If you park on a beach, you'll find kids pulling the same racket. If you fish, especially, you'll have several boys (always with a leader) offering to drag your boat from the RV to the water (and back out) for a very reasonable price. Go for it! Bargain. Then add on a tip to show you're not chintzy. In return (because of the tip), you'll get reliable boat service and, in addition, the little hoods will keep all the other little hoods in town from bothering you and stealing your stuff.

- When you park your car in a town you'll run onto a kid (or kids) also. One may have a bucket of water and a rag. He'll say, in English, what sounds like "wash your car?" and you'll be tempted to say "No!" What he's really saying is "watch" your car. Convince him (if you can in your nonexistent Spanish) that you DO NOT want him to wash it, but DO want him to watch it. (If this elaborate Spanish is beyond you, let him wash it. It won't look too good, but so what? Two minutes down the road and it'll be covered with dust anyway.) Bargain and tip as before. The kid will keep other little bandidos from ripping you off. He'll also (sometimes) pop Mexican coins in the meter so you don't get a ticket. He (and his gang) won't let other kiddie gangs let the air out of your tires or use a chunk of metal to scratch your paint (or won't do it themselves). Yet another shakedown? Sure. So what? These guys are just trying to make a living.

- **What you need to understand**, and what few Americans do (other than those who have spent much time "south of the border" or in the far east or mid east) is that THIS is the way it really is in most of the real world. People get paid nothing, or very little, and must (are expected to) augment their wage with a little "bite," "mordida," bribe, payoff, tip, or whatever you want to call it. Oddly, it's only in the U.S. that people don't understand this as routine. (What a bunch of naïve boobs we are.)

- **Crossing borders can be interesting.** DO NOT try to sneak anything across the Mexican (or Canadian border). You will probably get caught. If you think Mexican officials are fools (from watching TV movies), you're in for a BIG surprise! Many of these people have been to the FBI (and other) training programs in the U.S. and know a lot more about hiding places in an RV than you do. DO NOT try to smuggle guns! Both countries are tough on that. Check with "Vagabundos" (see later) for advice on legitimate transport of hunting weapons. Getting out of Mexico is usually easy ("Thank you for visiting. Come again.") Getting back INTO the U.S. from Mexico can be a nightmare. The DEA and similar agencies have created a monster! Informants tell both (U.S. and Mexican) governments that a vehicle (often an RV) is carrying contraband (drugs). Sometimes the information is just inaccurate. Sometimes your RV is just similar to another. Sometimes the guy you didn't tip adequately, or otherwise offended, just does it maliciously. In any case, you may find the guys on the U.S. side pulling you off and (literally) tearing the roof (and anything else they feel like) off your RV. When they're done and don't find anything, there's no apology, no nothing (no kidding). Your U.S. government has just destroyed your home and they don't have to do one damn thing about it! (Earlier, I mentioned going to Mexico and staying there. See why now? Maybe a crooked Mexican cop will get a few \$ from me for a minor traffic offense, but at least he won't destroy my home!) On the American side, there's just you standing in a parking lot with your thumb up your butt and an RV that looks like someone put a can-opener to it. Do you have any recourse? No, you don't. Welcome to America!

- This is scary stuff, isn't it? Should it keep you from going to Mexico? Certainly not! Should it encourage you to go to Mexico and stay there? Maybe. It's your decision. It always is.

Border Changes. Since 9/11/'01, security has gotten a lot stricter. Expect

delays, more thorough questioning and searches -- especially on entering the U.S. (Still not as bad as at airports.) Make sure your paperwork is in order. Be patient. Don't act pissed off. Don't make "bomb" jokes. Cops now have explosive-sniffing dogs in addition to drug-sniffing dogs. If you've been reloading cartridges in your RV, think about it.

Here are more examples, closer to home:

I was in New Mexico on an Indian reservation. I found a trading post/service station, filled up with fuel and bought miscellaneous supplies. I asked "Indian" clerk if I could fill my water tank. Clerk said "OK" and suggested I use my own hose ("God knows what people do with mine," he said and "run water a minute to clear out the system"). I complied and then tidied things up the way they were. As I was finishing, up comes an RV with the stereotypical RVers, Durbert and Dora Dumbutt. Durbert, in shorts, garish shirt, big cigar going, yells at Dora and grabs water hose and starts filling his tank. Dora jumps out of RV and starts walking dog (who promptly poops on pavement). Dora doesn't clean up poop. About this time, clerk runs out of trading post, raises hell and runs the Dumbutts off. I, (some familiarity now with clerk) inquire. Clerk says there were two things that irritated him: One, the guy didn't ask permission. Two, while clerk's dogs poop where they choose, that doesn't mean "whitey" (or did he say "white eyes"?) can use his place as a toilet.

There are a couple of lessons here:

Mexicans, who we screwed hundreds of years ago, are more forgiving (forgetful) than native Americans. Native Americans, who we screwed long ago and more recently (genocide is the real term) have more recent memories--and tend to memorialize them. **Another lesson, the real one, is that neither of these peoples like being treated like dirt.** I have no idea where Durbert went. (Hopefully, back to the Interstate and off to California before he pissed more nice people off.)

Chatting later, clerk asks me where I'm going. I says something stupid like "down the road and ask somebody if I can stay there." Clerk says "Not a chance if they don't know you. Stay here if you want." I ask, "How much?" Clerk says, "Nothing if you don't want electricity." I stayed two days. I ate great fry bread, talked to folks and found that I was welcome to stay in the middle of nowhere (perfect) at "an uncle's place" for a \$ a day as long as I

wanted, if I didn't need electricity or water. Good deal. When leaving, trading post clerk told me to feel free to stay anytime. A good deal received just for being courteous! (As opposed to Durbert, who got run off for being a typical, loudmouthed American tourist.)

Here's another:

I was driving the RV on the U.S. side of AZ border. I saw a pickup truck parked along the road with "SON MEX" (Sonora, Mexico) license plates and a whole family of Mexicans sitting under a tree. Hood open and steam rising from radiator. Most "anglos" would pass without stopping. I stopped, chatted with driver, hooked up hose from RV and pumped some water in guy's radiator. No big deal. Weeks later, I was in a nearby restaurant on the Mexican side. A guy from a nearby table starts waving at me. It's the guy from the truck. He invites me to have drinks and dinner with he and his friends. It was marvelous! This guy was a businessman? land owner? drug lord? Who cares? He invited me to stay at "his place" anytime with a "Just tell anybody my name, they all know me and they'll tell you how to get there."

- Getting along in Mexico (or most anywhere) is mostly a matter of simple courtesy. That doesn't mean you shouldn't take precautions. Wallet in front pocket so you can stand around with hands in pockets and just look casual instead of fearful. Keep a few loose quarters and single dollar bills in pocket for tips and beggars. Pay off beggars judiciously. Don't scatter money like some potentate or you'll have a bunch of bums following you around. On the other hand, a quarter or two to some needy character isn't going to break you--and might get you some good advice (warnings?) on the local situation. Couples should split their resources so a theft doesn't cost you all your cash and credit cards. Women should avoid using purses for important stuff and keep just the necessities in a pocket. Keep an eye on each other (and on others in your group). Going in a group (even just two couples) helps. If parking your RVs where you can't see them, it's smart to leave a watchman behind. Don't leave your RV unattended in the boonies (even if you've got a protector). Two (or more) RVs in the boonies is smart. Someone always stays behind. Save cantina parties for when in a secure camp ground.

- **Going south with a commercial tour/caravan** (at least the first time) is a smart move. Don't just blindly follow the herd. Watch how your guides

operate--how they "get along." Look on the price of the tour as "tuition" for lessons learned in the school of RoVing. There are lots of commercial tour operators. Most are good. Only a few are bad. Send for their literature. At least three are usually represented at Escapades. There's plenty of time at Escapades to visit with them and get a "feel" for the personalities. Personalities are important. You're going to be close to these people for weeks. You need to feel comfortable with them. They'll be checking you out too. If you come off as a loud-mouthed Durbert, they'll be "full up" or find some other excuse to avoid you. Good tour operators want their clients to be happy. They want a convivial group. Ask people who have been on various tours. Consider, though, who you're asking. Some people (the Durberts) are impossible to please.

- **Caravan informally** with someone who's been there. But do it with someone who knows what they're doing. There's no point traveling with people like Durbert and Dora. There are lots of people who have been to Mexico many times and haven't learned anything. They still do the same stupid things they did the first time. You don't need to be a part of that.
- **The people who know as much or more** than anyone about how to get along in Mexico (and will make an expert out of you too) are members of the club **VAGABUNDOS DEL MAR**. Escapee-like, the "Vags" are a mix of boaters and RVers who concentrate in Baja and the west coast of the Mexican mainland. Organized tours as well as informal groups. Very social. Very sharing. They range up the west coast to Alaska and into the U.S. waterways also. Most knowledgeable.
Most highly recommended. A dandy insurance program also. Too many features to list here. Get their free Info Packet! (800) 474-2252. 190 Main St., Rio Vista, CA 94571. Dues are inexpensive. You need to join the "Vags" at least a year before you go to Mexico. You need their newsletters. All the latest info on road conditions, fuel, water, etc. Most valuable.

Return to list of [Poop Sheets](#)