

Interlude - Tamazunchale Revisited

Some might wonder how I found the Mexican people I interviewed for this book. Sometimes it was serendipity, being in the right place at the right time, as it was with Laura Escobar. Other times it was through introductions from friends. But some, like Rudy you just read about and others you will read about later, are friends from long, long ago. Here's a story about Rudy and me, or more specifically about the effects of Tamazunchale on my life. Perhaps more touching and telling, part of this story is about a way of life that is dying. Some areas of Mexico, like Michoacán and Oaxaca encourage indigenous craftsmen and they are thriving. Here, the last two guitar-makers are eking out a living, with no heirs to their craft in sight.

Story

Have you ever found a place in Mexico that mirrors your own life? For me, it's Tamazunchale, San Luis Potosí.

Every bend of the road reveals a more stunning mountain panorama, gushed Nicki, a first-time visitor to Mexico.

Yeah. And there are lots of bends to this road, I muttered, trying to keep one eye on the temperature gauge, another on the road and another searching for likely spots to pull over so the radiator could cool down every fifteen minutes. I was driving a vehicle that had seen better days, even better decades. But, hey, so had I.

It's all a matter of perspective. A good Mexico trip will adjust your perspective.

Tamazunchale (pronounced Tam az un CHA lee, Huastecan for Place Where The Woman Governor Lives), is tucked away at the southern end of San Luis Potosí state (15 miles from the northern border of Hidalgo state)/ It's not a "destination" on most people's most-visited list. It's not even on most people's list. At 445 feet above sea level, it's surrounded by the Sierra Madre Oriental, with peaks up to 3,412 feet that are often shrouded in clouds.

I've been drawn here four times. Each time, it's taught me something new and touched my heart. My heart has beat with the pulse of Mexico since I was seven years old, when I first visited Cd. Valles, San Luis Potosí, a few miles to the north. I now have more than seven times seven years and Mexico still has room enough for me in her heart.

Your first impression, as you cross the bridge over the Rio Moctezuma, is not inspiring. Seek and ye shall find its charms. They include: more than 20 varieties of orchids, some right by the highway, 200-plus species of birds, huge butterflies, tree squirrels, wild boar, and wolf; camping in Nahuatl villages, real market days for locals not tourists and a generosity of spirit among both Mexican and Nahuatl locals unrivaled in Mexico.

Like me, Tamazunchale used to be more well-known. From 1936 until 1957, tourists drove down the old Pan American Highway (Highway #85) to Mexico City. Most stopped at Tamazunchale. They had to. The road south of Cd. Valles resembles nothing more than a snake wrapping around the mountains. This 62 mile trip can take anywhere from two to four hours. Ninety miles farther south towards Pachuca, the serpentine asphalt climbs to 7,900 feet with a six percent grade.

Nicki described it as taking the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the Green Mountains of Vermont, throwing them into a blender, then adding a dash of the south of Florida. You have winding roads, hills and valleys, with orange trees and palms in the foreground and mountains behind. Down the mountains are fields of sugar cane, *maguey* (from which *pulque* is made), bananas, palms, and mangoes. Hidden away are small coffee plantations. Some of the drop-offs have only the good wishes of the gods to stop you from joining them. Volkswagen-eating *topes*, which have been tamed in other parts of Mexico still flourish in their wild state in the towns you drive through. Passing on dangerous curves is the norm. Fortunately, most trucks use the new highway. Around each bend is another view. The road condition was fine, no potholes and animals are now either tethered or behind fences. Anyone who thinks Mexico is two beaches with a desert in-between needs to drive 85. The closer you get to Tamazunchale, the more tropical the vegetation becomes. Fog often covers it in late afternoon and early morning.

My first visit was in 1973. Recently divorced and without direction, three of us camped in the forests. We were hippies, yet we were welcomed. Our old car broke down, so I caught a ride with some natives with a truck. Though I spoke little Spanish and no Nahuatl, they divined that I needed to go into town to a *refraccionaria* (auto parts shop). It still exists, but there is no plaque memorializing my visit. They took me to their village where I learned the linguistic magic of homemade *pulque*. Around midnight, jabbering what might have been Nahuatl, they returned me to my own tribe. We spent several days in the mountains and were taken into the homes and hearts of everyone.

In 1994, I returned, at the height of my egotistical trip as author of the Sanborn's *Travelog*, contributor to Mexico guidebooks and the subject of profiles by the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Texas Monthly* and other publications with too much ink and too little editorial control. I was hot stuff, or thought I was. Like Tamazunchale of the 40's, my highway of fame was bypassed. Fame, as they say, is fleeting.

That's when I met Rudy and Hildeberto Torres and his wife Emelia, owners of the Hotel Tamazunchale. They hoped that I, the "famous" writer, would encourage hordes of tourists to visit. I was interviewed for the local newspaper. One of the greatest regrets of my life was that my eloquence did little to make Tamazunchale a tourist destination. Maybe I wasn't so famous after all. Then again, maybe (like most things) it wasn't all about me. My old friend, Allen Myerson, an editor for the *New York Times* went there on my recommendation and wrote a piece for the *Times* in 1995 which didn't send droves of tourists either.

Maybe Tamazunchale isn't for everyone. Thank God for that.

My last visit was in 2005. My ego had been leveled. My rented house in Austin had burned to the ground a month before. Fluffy, my elderly dog and I escaped with our lives and nothing else. I was homeless, penniless and once again directionless. Mexico has always been there for me. Nicki read my web site and asked me to show her "real" Mexico. We rolled into Tamazunchale in my junker car in late afternoon, spewing steam. Through her eyes, I saw the true wealth of the area. That she appreciated Tamazunchale's charms induced me to ask her to marry me.

The region around Tamazunchale is called the *Huasteca Potosina*. with a humid, mostly mild, climate (50 degrees Fahrenheit for an average winter low, though it can get much colder in the mountains, with mostly upper 80's in summer). The native peoples are the Nahuatl. Many still wear their traditional white clothing on festival or market days, and live in the mountains in scattered villages, accessible (with permission) by 4-wheel drive vehicles, burros or, for most of them, by arduous walks. They are kind, reserved and live simply.

You won't be able to wander into the villages and meet the people without Rudy. He bridges the gap between the modern and the ancient.

Rodolfo Jonguitud Reyes (rudytam50@hotmail.com), is the only guide. His mission is to teach his people (he is a Nahuatl) to balance respect for the ecology and their traditions. Rudy is involved in both cultures. He teaches English, is a volunteer fireman, and works to help others not for money, but what he gets out of it- which is nothing but the pleasure of helping others. He knows everyone, and they all smile and wave. Being with him is like being escorted by the mayor, but I'm sure he's more loved than any politician. He can take you on birding & butterfly tours, ecological tours, camping and hiking. He can get you entry to the Nahuatl villages, Calling him a guide is like calling the Beatles a band. He is *un tesoro*. His stove project is worth mentioning.

He found the forgotten designs and parts for an energy-efficient wood stove in a government office years ago. It's made from cement, straw, cow manure and dirt. The advantages of it are that it consumes one-seventh the amount of wood for daily cooking, saving the forest, and produces less smoke, saving the lungs of the people. He makes and sells them for \$10-\$15 to villagers. He works with 245 Nahuatl villages in the area. Demand outstrips supply. Although Rudy spends a big chunk of his income on them, he needs donations from outsiders to do much more. That's where you and tourism come in.

He can take you to the Nahuatl villages, meet the people or even stay with them. The trip requires a 4-wheel drive vehicle, or if you prefer, a burro. Camping with the villagers will give you a different perspective. Or, you can camp solo on the vista pictured in this article, where you can truly get away from it all and nest with the eagles. It is in places like this that you are likely to find yourself. I did.

Rudy took us in a jeep up to the top of the mountain looking down on Tamazunchale. There is a cross on the top, erected by locals who carried the cement on their backs - their way to pay back for the strength to stop drinking. *We are a short, strong people. We can easily carry 80 kilos on our backs.*

The concrete overlook balustrade is purple and white and there are orchids and avocado trees, *agave*, maize, cactus, marigolds and other plant life along the way. From this panorama, you can look down on the rivers where they meet, see the whole town and the other mountains in the distance. Often parts of the vista may be covered by clouds.

Drinking to excess is still a favorite pastime of the Nahuatl. In the 90's I warned drivers to be careful on Sunday and Monday mornings, as revelers occasionally passed out on the highway. Today, the highway patrol or local cops give them a ride to the trailhead to their homes in the mountains.

Another attraction is to visit Epigmenio Hernandez Ramon and Evasto Santos Hernandez who make guitars by hand, out of red cedar. Another maker uses pine. It takes 2-4 days to make one. They sell for about 500 pesos plain or 700 pesos with intricate inlay design around the center. Most designs are in form of a star, which according to legend brings luck. Yeah, a beautiful handmade guitar for 70 bucks! This is less expensive than many I've seen in Paracho, and some guitarists have told me that these sound more mellow.

There is one person left, Ignacio, who makes violins the same way for 500 pesos. It's a local trade handed down, but the younger generation is not learning it and will be lost when these men die off. There used to be woodcarvers who made animals but the last one, Rudy's cousin, died a few years ago and the tradition went with him.

The Nahuatl still have their own Gods - they thank them for everything in the Indian way, and then go to church. They see no conflict in this, figuring it can't hurt to get all the blessings they can. When they are sick, they are likely to try local herbs first, and a doctor at the IMSS clinic as a last resort.

While there are plenty of wild orchids to see for the adventurous, Rudy's botanical garden (which doubles as his back yard), has more than twenty varieties. Besides orchids, he has dozens of local plants around the patio.

On the other side of town, we stopped by the river, which is good for swimming (at one spot near the bridge, before the pollution from town enters it). On the other side is Tenquesquicitla, a village where whole families make *piñatas*. I believe the motto of the village is, "*The family that makes piñatas together stays together.*" [Actually, I made that up, just in case someone takes me literally]. These *piñatas* are sold all over the Republic. This industry came to be when the government actually sent someone to teach them how to make *piñatas* out of newspaper and glue made from flour. On the way back, we passed a *paneton* (cemetery), where, if you want to stay longer, you could be interred for about \$40. I'm not ready just yet, but at least now I have a plan for my future.

Perhaps as a precursor of good things to come, as we returned to town, Rudy spied a couple of reporters for the local paper. Though I was not the “Mexico” Mike of old, the reporters were too young to know the difference. Once again, I got my mug in the paper with promises of bringing tourism to Tamazunchale. Perhaps this time it won’t be an empty promise.

End