



## Roll with the Punches, Go with the Flow

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I laid my bike down in the debris-strewn shoulder of MEX-1 and hopped into the grassy ditch lining the road in search of a cardboard scrap. Back at my bike, I dug into my stuffed framebag and pulled out the red-tinted Chapstick I'd bought in some small town a ways back. I scrawled **NORTE** in big letters. Wearing a long dress I'd picked up earlier that day to give the illusion of *clean*, I stood up, faced oncoming traffic, and stuck out my thumb.

After six weeks of Baja bliss, my travel companion Adam and I begrudgingly turned our attention back toward home.

It was about 4:00 PM, and we were feeling doubt creep in that we'd be able to catch a hitch so late in the day. Golden light bathed the dusty highway as 18-wheelers barreled through Loreto, Baja California, Mexico. Our hearts leapt with a bittersweet pang when one finally slowed and pulled off the road 100 yards ahead of us. We were relieved for the lift but disheartened that our bike tour was coming to an end.

I let Adam do the talking. Even though I'd been laboring to cement as much Spanish as I could in my brain for the past month and a half, Adam was at a joke-making, conversational level of fluency. He explained to the truck driver that we were headed to the border. The truck driver nodded and told us he could take us all the way to Tijuana, happy for the

company. He threw open the roll door and helped us lift our loaded mountain bikes into the cargo space, surrounded by mountains of tomatoes.

When we piled into the cab of the truck, Adam took the passenger seat and I scooted back on the built-in twin bed with my tattered copy of *100 Years of Solitude*. As the truck engine roared to life and we pattered forward, I listened to the men up front chattering away in Spanish. I'd hitchhiked plenty before, but usually for shorter distances in the beds of pickup trucks. I peered around the sleeping quarters with fascination as I gathered information about a lifestyle I knew absolutely nothing about.

They say you learn a great deal of wisdom on every bike tour, and in my experience, hitchhiking is included.

An hour north of Loreto, I felt the truck slow as we turned off the highway and into a dirt lot in front of a small restaurant called Las Palmas. I recognized it as a spot we had stopped for breakfast with the rest of our touring companions about 300 miles back on the Baja Divide. We laughed at how quickly we reached the restaurant in a vehicle on the highway compared to the serpentine dirt roads we'd been weaving down as we pedaled across Baja. We graciously paid for our new friend's dinner and loaded back into the cab.



About an hour later, Adam relayed to me that we'd be stopping at a checkpoint momentarily. The driver shuffled through some papers on the dash, selected one, and bounced out of the cab. This happened several times during our trip up the highway — lots of checkpoints and presenting of papers.

It seemed a bit too early for a checkpoint stop the next time I felt the truck turn off the road. The sun had just dipped beneath the horizon and, after putting the truck in park, the driver turned and rummaged through his belongings scattered on the small shelving unit next to me. He became frustrated, even a little panicked, and started speaking rapidly to Adam and me.

Between words I didn't catch, I heard, "Una bolsita? Una bolsita?!"

"He's looking for a little bag," Adam said to me.

An expression equivalent to a shoulder shrug distorted my face. I began to sense that the man worried we'd taken something important from him.

After a few more minutes of searching, our friend located his misplaced *bolsita* and sat down on the bed next to me. Understanding that we didn't share a common language, he smiled and nodded at me as he reached into one of the shelves and retrieved a cloudy lightbulb. He flicked a lighter open and brought the lightbulb to his lips as if it were a pipe — a trick I had certainly never witnessed before. Our thighs were touching as he took a couple puffs and exhaled the mystery smoke into the cab. I shielded my nose and mouth by pressing my open copy of *100 Years of Solitude* to my face, wide-eyed as I searched for calmness in Adam's face. *What have we gotten ourselves into?* I asked myself, fighting off fear and regret.

Friendship and trust somewhat restored, he and Adam faced the road once again, and I was rocked to sleep by their melodic chatter and the rumbling of the truck.

The next time the driver exited the cab to present papers at a checkpoint, Adam translated a conversation they'd been having about the mysterious *bolsita*. "He said it's somewhat common for truck drivers to carry a small bit of drugs to help them stay awake as they drive up and down the peninsula — and they don't get in trouble for it if it's a small enough amount. It's how he's able to make this 13-hour drive in one go." Accepting this, I added the tidbit to my small but growing list of knowledge about long-haul truckers.

When our friend returned, Adam and I switched seats so he could get some sleep in the back. Ten minutes of awkward silence later, I pointed to the radio and said the only thing I could come up with: "¿Tienes 'La Bamba?'" He laughed, obviously not understanding my request to listen to "La Bamba."

Instead, he pointed out the window into tenebrous darkness and said, "¡Mira las vacas!" I noticed the hefty black lumps on either side of the road hurtling past the truck like comets as we flew down the twisty cliffside highway. Our headlights illuminated the absence of fencing to contain the cows. I checked his speedometer: 100 kilometers an hour.

*Holy shit, this is how we die.*

Distracting myself from certain death, I looked up at the multitude of stars sprayed across the pitch-black sky. Many

things about Baja are magical, and the stars near the top of the list for me. Counting shooting stars and concocting imaginary constellations was like a nightly Netflix routine as we cozied up in our sleeping bags without tents. I've seldom been in a place where so many stars were crisply visible.

The driver's voice brought me back to the present. Taking his eyes off the road and directing them to me, he asked something I didn't understand. He held his hand near his jaw and made a dancing motion in his seat, then pointed to the small aisle between our seats. Sensing my confusion, he put his hand on my bare knee, sliding it towards the outside of my thigh. *He wants me to stand up and sexy dance for him? As we speed down this treacherous, cow-dotted highway in the middle of the night?!* Spanish wasn't the only language we didn't have in common.

I jerked my knee away from his hand and told him, "No," sternly, followed by an involuntary disarming laugh. It astonishes me how incapable I am of standing up for myself in situations like these. My insides grew hot and my outsides felt paralyzed.

Attempting to further communicate my discomfort with body language, I turned away and shifted my posture as far into the cab door as I could. This unexpected threat spun me into a search for a new plan. I heard Adam's soft snores floating through the drawn curtain that separated us. When a long row of bright streetlights appeared, I squinted through the window to see where we were. I quickly recognized Vicente Guerrero, a town we'd spent a rest day in weeks before.

The driver pulled over at yet another checkpoint. Once he was out of earshot, I pulled back the curtain and roused Adam. "Dude touched my leg and I'm not feeling comfortable anymore — what do we do?" Without needing further explanation, Adam expressed mild disappointment and offered, "I'll tell him we have friends staying here and they've offered to host us for the night." Desperate for any decent excuse, I agreed.

When the driver reentered the cab, Adam held up his flip phone and delivered our story. Dejected, the man's shoulders slumped, and without a word, he led us back to our bicycles and the tomatoes. Once we had our bikes, he held a hand up as goodbye, climbed back into the truck, and disappeared down MEX-1.

Bummed about such a weird hitchhiking experience, we rode to a familiar motel and booked a room.

As I sank into the safety of the bed and sorted through my maze of thoughts, I flipped back to something I wrote in my journal preceding the tour: *Just calm down, breathe slowly, and go with the flow, Ally. It will take you where you need to be.* Our bike tour may have felt over as we watched the truck pull over that evening, but with 170 miles left to reach the border, we'd have to wait until tomorrow to see where else the flow would take us. **AC**

**I checked his speedometer: 100 kilometers an hour. Holy shit, this is how we die.**

Adventure Cyclist Art Director Ally Mabry rode most of the way down the Baja Divide in 2017 with a throng of strangers-turned-friends. This is only one of her spicy hitchhiking stories from that tour.