# The thrill of traveling on a long-distance bus in 1980s Mexico

## The nostalgia of a road trip: Vinyl, Noise and Stuck Windows.

Travelling on a long-distance bus in 1980s Mexico was a ritual. From the moment you boarded, the worn vinyl of the seats exuded an aroma of time standing still. Your soles crunched as they left the sticky floor, and the windows, almost always clogged with expired seals, let in the cold and dust as if the landscape wanted to seep inside.

It was a guessing game: who would occupy the next seat? Would they be quiet, talkative, or sleepy? The deep, vibrating roar of the engine marked the start of the journey. The whole bus trembled, like a wolf shaking off its dust.

The buses, each with its own company and personality, were part of the landscape. Rolling witnesses to the geography and the people. The only entertainment consisted of looking out the window, letting oneself be drawn in by the whims of the terrain, by the hamlets, the crops, the animals that seemed to ignore us.

**The people on the road.**

From the window, the human landscape unfolded like a moving mural. Peasant women wrapped in rebozos told the story of their origins through the colors of their embroidery: in the Bajío region, brown tones like turkey wings; in the indigenous areas, geometric patterns, deer, and birds that seemed to fly among the threads. The men, in worn trousers, white shirts, and sun-tanned hats, wore soil clinging to their clothes as a mark of their fruitful labor. Some still wore the old white cotton suits, as if time had stood still.

In the mountain villages, the ancestral languages were echoes of another Mexico. One could feel like a stranger in their own land. I remember my bewilderment at not understanding what they were saying, my fear of being singled out, the laughter of a group that seemed to conceal mockery or judgment.

The collective memory still held the chilling memory of what happened in San Miguel Canoa, that 1968 episode where fanaticism and misinformation merged into tragedy. Father Enrique Meza, using a loudspeaker, provoked a fatal confusion. Four hikers were killed, barely a month before the events in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco. Three more were wounded. All because of a suspicion, a false accusation, fear disguised as faith.

At that time, Mexico was experiencing a profound religious fanaticism, which was visible everywhere, and it traveled with us as well. Not in the seat next to us, but in the eyes of those who watched us from the side of the road.

**The difficulties and discomforts of the journey**

Every meter traveled on the bus was an uncertain adventure. The seats, worn out by time, offered only relative comfort: backrests that didn't recline, or that did so only to the point of no return; upholstery that creaked. Air conditioning was conspicuously absent, and on warm journeys, the heat became an uncomfortable, sticky, unavoidable companion.

The lack of modern distractions forced one to look inward. In those long hours, one thought

about what had been experienced, and what was yet to come.

In the absence of internet and screens, tolerance was necessary. Sometimes, the neighbor's music would intrude upon the entire interior like an involuntary soundtrack, and at other times, the nighttime silence invited one to take out their Chinconcuac sweater and wrap themselves in the gloom.

The windows, poorly closed, let in mosquitoes, dust, and the sounds of the road. I remember a swarm of mosquitoes that attacked us near Cuitzeo Lagoon. We tried everything to repel them: flailing our arms so wildly we looked like flamenco dancers, lit cigarettes like torches, deodorants used as makeshift insecticides. Someone suggested finding toads to swallow the insects. Another proposed lighting a candle. In the end, resignation won out.

The vast majority of the roads were narrow country lanes, not the wide freeways that were built after the nineties. Stops were frequent and unpredictable: cattle crossing the road, passengers unloading impossible loads, the driver getting out urgently to urinate behind a tree or on the bus tire. Everyone took advantage of the opportunity to do the same. The women, more discreet, disappeared into the bushes, making desperate gestures so the driver wouldn't forget them.

And yet, amidst the discomfort, camaraderie emerged. Lunches, laughter, and stories were shared. Sometimes, some kind of mysterious alcoholic beverage. Other times, an unexpected friendship. The travel companion's name was noted in a notebook, along with an address that promised future visits.

There was always the uncertainty of whether the bus would arrive on time, which filled the air with anxiety and resignation. Back then, time wasn't something worth saving, because frustration was a poor investment.

The night landscape, barely illuminated by the hallway lights, became a breeding ground for fantasy. Outside, the silhouettes of the trees suggested goblins, witches, or beings from the underworld. More than once I thought that this darkness was the true image of hell: a field inhabited by lost souls, suspended in the cold of eternity.

**Mexican geography seen from the window.**

From the first turn of the steering wheel, the country unfolded like a living tapestry. Each curve revealed a facet of Mexico: mountains that rose like giant guardians, valleys that breathed in silence, jungles that lost

themselves in their labyrinth. A spectacle offered itself, as if the landscape knew the traveler needed company.

A stark and fascinating diversity. Just close your eyes for a moment, and when you open them, the surroundings have changed: from the thick humidity of the jungle to the dry dust of the desert; from a majestic ceiba tree to a solitary barrel cactus. Mexico is a country where the terrain is never the same, where every kilometer is a new page in the same book.

The villages along the road were like snapshots of time. Tiled roofs, colorful walls, cobblestone streets that invited leisurely strolls. Today, many of those corners have been replaced by rows of gray bricks, houses that look like shoeboxes. I miss the bright colors, the walls

steeped in history, the yards with fruit trees, and the free-roaming chickens.

The silhouette of the mountains against the sky served as a reminder that some things are unchanging, that they withstand the test of time. José María Velasco understood this better than anyone: his landscapes are not just paintings. They are like Alice's rabbit hole: an invitation to the curiosity to leap into a world inhabited by beings lost in logic or its absence. They are the temptation to lose oneself in a matter that dissolves into beauty.

What have we done to this land? What remains of that Mexico that offered itself unfiltered, unhurried, without aluminum and concrete? At times, the bus seemed to move not only along the road, but through a film that showed what we were, what we are, and what we can cease to be.

**Endearing characters: Anselmo and his insurrectionary merchandise.**

Boarding a bus with passengers wrapped in wool and cotton blankets, with cords that were pulled up into their nostrils, was a terrifying experience. The travelers looked destitute after enduring several hours of travel. The smell emanating from their bodies, soaked with night's sweat, was unpleasant.

Some of them were merchants who traveled to cities to deliver essential goods to their small towns. Such was the case with Anselmo: a robust merchant with an easy smile and a shirt always adorned with the marks of his latest whim. He used his trousers as a napkin and his tongue as a sales pitch.

He was the most anticipated figure in Chicontepec, bringing the wonders of the big city to its eager inhabitants. He sold everything: musical boxes with magnetic ballerinas; costume earrings; nylon stockings for the young ladies and compression stockings for varicose veins; hair ribbons; tools for the town mechanic; plastic eggs with a bouncy chick inside for the children; medicinal soap for the grandmother; bags of sweets that were only seen on television; and a sealed envelope that held, with liturgical secrecy, a risqué magazine featuring nude models or models in provocative acts.

That merchandise, as coveted as it was forbidden, caused a scandal when a group of schoolchildren discovered it. The pages were torn out and distributed like trophies, until the school principal was notified, and she, in turn, informed the mayor. Upon receiving the

evidence of the crime, he hastened to burn the material in the public square, along with other copies in his possession.

Following this, the youngsters were reprimanded in front of the entire school and parents, and a series of small fires broke out throughout the town.

Anselmo didn't just carry goods from the city. He also carried treasures from his community: amulets made with alum stone, colorful pebbles, and plover feathers, all kept in small leather pouches. He gave me one of them, assuring me that it warded off enemies and attracted abundance. With a knowing wink, he told me that several politicians were among his most loyal customers.

Sharing a seat with Anselmo meant sharing stories, laughter, and secrets. Amidst the discomfort of the journey, he offered a pause, a respite, an anecdote that stuck in your memory like dust on a windshield. In this way, the trip became less about traffic and more about storytelling.

**The flavors of the road: Tamales, corn on the cob, sopes, and sweets.**

At every stop along the route, the country generously offered itself to the palate. The bus only had to pause for a few minutes for vendors to crowd around the windows and fill the air with aromas: steaming stews, freshly toasted corn, salsas that seemed to sting just to look at. The cooks, with skilled hands and protective jargon, carried baskets overflowing with tamales, cecina, corundas, bocoles, zacahuiles, burritos, chapulines, piloncillo

bread, and carnitas tortas that seemed to contain the entire map of Mexico in every bite.

Corn on the cob, simple and ubiquitous, reigned supreme on the road. Roasted, boiled, or crowned with piquín chili and salt, it had the power to redeem any discomfort of the journey. Its aroma, wafting through the window, was an invitation impossible to refuse.

Sweets were another world altogether. Each region had its own treasure: sweet potato candies from Puebla, fudge from Guanajuato, jericallas from Jalisco, cajetas from Celaya, glorias from Nuevo León, chongos from Michoacán, cocoyoles from Yucatán, coyotas from Sonora, custard from Querétaro, and melcochas from Zacatecas. Sweets that not only sweetened the journey but also told

stories of grandmothers, fairs, and wood-fired kitchens.

And then there were the muéganos and charamuscas: double-edged sweets. They were so hard that they could be used as projectiles in a fight or as an emergency tool to break a window. They were sweets with a civil defense purpose.

Along the roads of Acolman, chickens wrapped in foil, as big as ostriches, appeared, accompanied by prickly pear cactus and spicy broth. On the Huasteca route, children offered fruit in exchange for sweets or urban curiosities. Once, I traded a panda bear keychain for a zocol: a strange creature with the body of a shrimp and the face of an alien, which stared at me reproachfully the whole way until I released it into a stream.

The sopes, humble yet hearty, arrived wrapped in brown paper, with just a touch of beans, salsa, lettuce, and grated cheese. I remember a vendor who, noticing my indifference, stood for a moment in front of my seat, staring at me, which made me feel uneasy. Then, defiantly, she placed three samples of her wares on my lap and, in an authoritative voice, informed me that the next ones would be placed directly in my mouth. In the end, I was satisfied with the treat... and a few cents less in my pocket.

Thus, between bites and bartering, the journey became a feast. Because you should know that in Mexico, the journey itself is also a feast.

**The bus: A class issue.**

Not all buses were the same. Some promised luxury: reclining seats, clean curtains, air conditioning that worked (sometimes), and a driver in a tie and shirt who looked like he

might explode from his belly button or attack someone's eye with the push of a button.

Others, more democratic, welcomed passengers indiscriminately, including chickens, turkeys, cats, goats, and stowaway bees that buzzed among the luggage as if they too had paid a fare.

The class of bus dictated the type of trip. On "First Class" or "Plus" buses, you could expect a pillow and a poorly folded blanket. On "Economy" buses, there was a constant risk of someone sitting on your backpack. Luggage, by the way, was a matter of faith: you had to keep a close eye on it at every stop, or risk losing a sack of tomatoes, a crate of chickens, or a suitcase full of clothes recently bought in Tepito.

Some buses seemed to be in no hurry. They stopped at every bend, every town, every shadow that hinted at a stop. Others, on the other hand, raced as if time were the enemy. Their unspoken motto: “I’d rather die than be late.” I greatly value the former, because more than saving time, what’s truly valuable in life is pausing to savor every detail of existence.

Regardless of the type of vehicle, the captain was known for his prowess in matters of love. It wasn't unusual to see him emerge from the cargo hold in the company of a petite woman. Nor was any explanation needed to understand the phrase, "an old lady on every trip," painted on the bus's bumper.

The lady's companion exuded coquetry, so much so that it was a blessing that the vehicle arrived safely at its destination, with a chauffeur busy attending to his Dulcinea.

The adventure of a bus trip was an experience for which I would trade all the memes on a social network and any current mobile device for an upside-down turkey.

Today, modern buses offer amenities that isolate. Rolling capsules where the passenger becomes a fish trapped in a bag of water. There's no more brushing arms, no more exchanging glances. The screen imposes its cheap fantasies, erases the pleasure of listening, and extinguishes the desire to converse. The palate is tamed with chips and soda, and the only sound that matters is the rustling of cellophane.

The gaze becomes stingy when it excludes the other senses. And the same thing happens to buses as to people: when luxury stifles experience, the breadth of existence is lost.