

The Guide

CENTRO: BEYOND MUSEUMS

Inside México

THE ENGLISH SPEAKER'S GUIDE TO LIVING IN MEXICO

DECEMBER 2007 - JANUARY 2008

THE MIGRATION

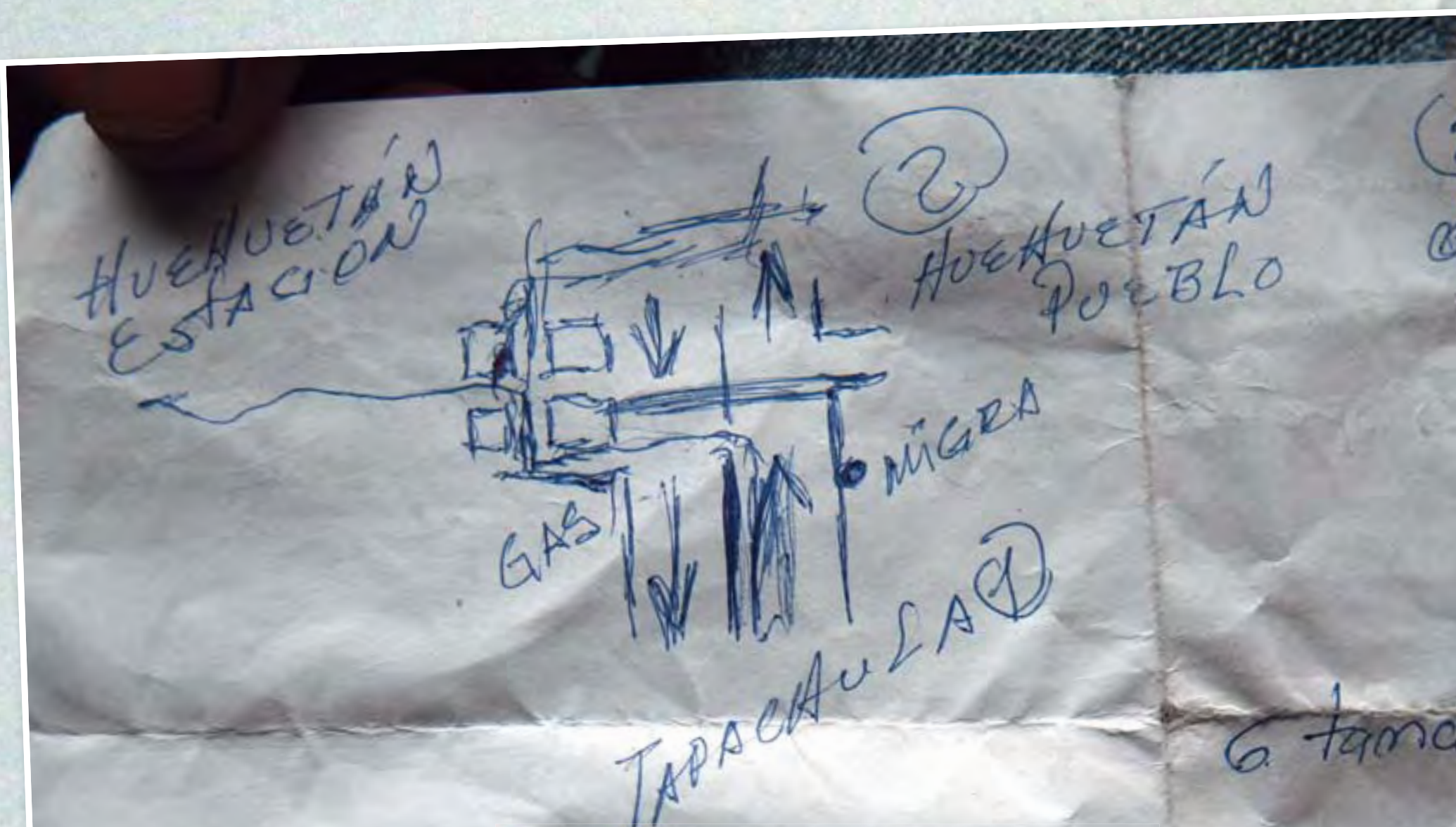
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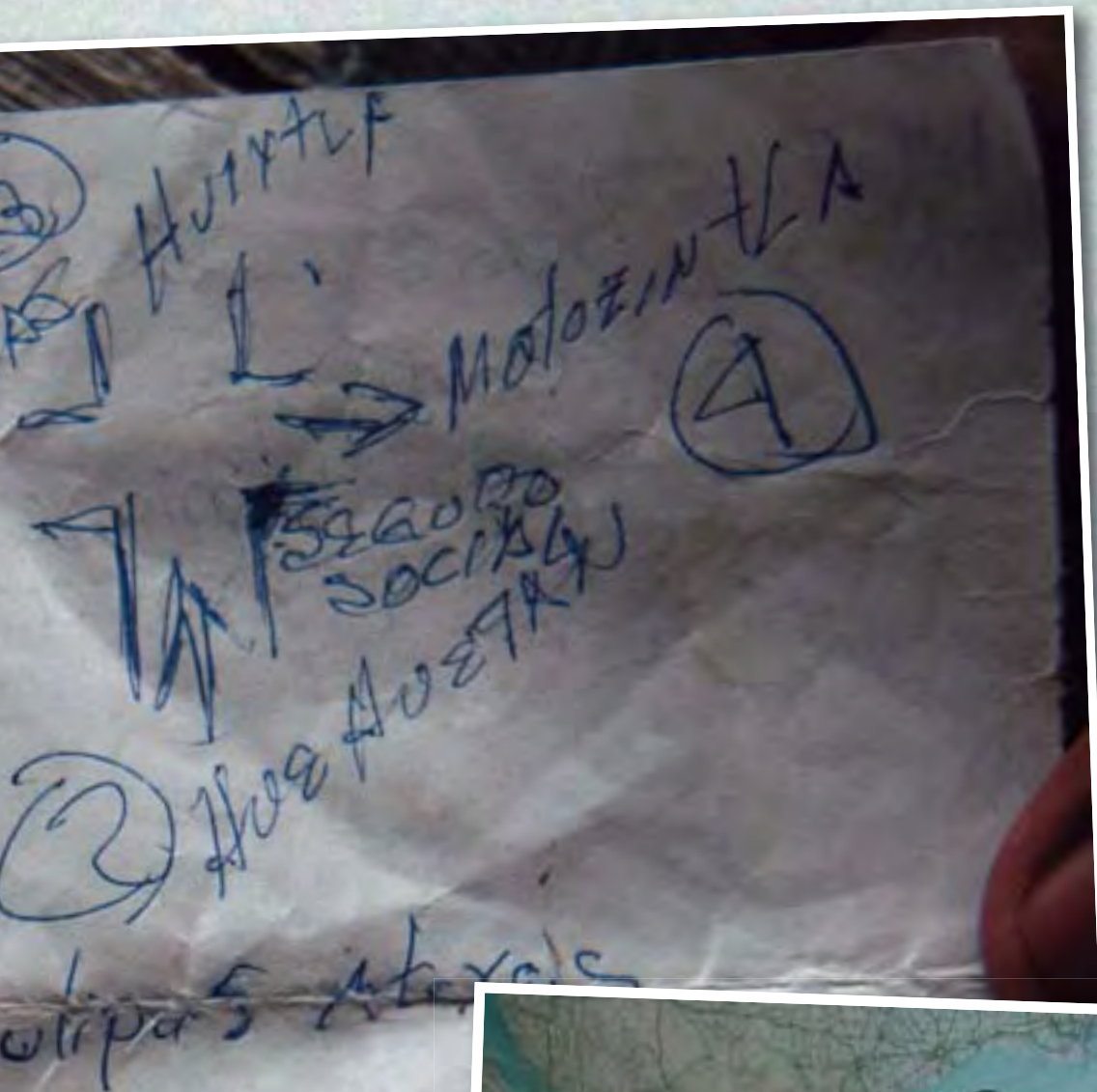
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Quest for the american dream



NICARAGUANS LUIS OSORIO CASTILLO and his cousin Daniel (bottom right), traveling with little more than a bible and the clothes on their back; 17-year-old Guatemalan twins Efraín and Oseas López show the hand-drawn map they're using to guide them through Mexico to the US, where they hope to find work as kitchen hands.

Text & photos by
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THE JOURNEY

Luis Osorio Castillo can't remember which came first: the flash of metal, or the poke of steel against his ribs. The tall, 21-year-old Nicaraguan with gentle eyes and a thin moustache had been in Guatemala City less than half an hour when he was robbed. Three pistol and machete-wielding bandits, faces hidden by scarves, stole his wallet, his watch, and the \$40 USD that was supposed to take him through Guatemala and across the border into Mexico. His final destination: Miami, Florida, where his wife and newborn baby live.

When I meet him, he had just trekked seventeen hours through the low-lying jungles of Chiapas, slicing through scrub with his machete, traveling at night to avoid immigration officials and bandits, and getting soaked by torrential rains. Hungry and exhausted, he has finally made it to Mexico.

1. "YOU CAN'T STOP A RIVER FROM FLOWING," says Padre Flor Rigoni of the Central American immigrants heading for the US; Guatemala, where poverty, unemployment and the highest murder rate in Latin America drive migrants north to seek a better future; 2. in Tecun Uman, on Guatemala's border with Mexico, rafts illegally carry goods and people across the border in full view of immigration and customs officials (bottom right corner).



"I want to meet my daughter. I've only ever seen photos of her," he says, sitting on a wooden bench at a shelter set up as a safe haven for migrants in Tapachula, a border town in Southern Mexico.

I've traveled to the borderlands between Guatemala and Southern Mexico to pick up the migrant trail and learn about what drives as many as 300,000 Central Americans a year to risk their lives on a frightening journey toward a destination most never reach.

Moving north through Guatemala, across the Mexican border, and along the railroads of Oaxaca and Veracruz states, I meet young men from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador. The majority of the migrants are men aged 18 to 35, but about 10 percent are women, and a small but growing number are children. They wear jeans, t-shirts and baseball caps, and carry small backpacks with the most basic supplies: cans of tuna, a water bottle, and maybe a change of clothes. They are escaping poverty, debt, or urban street gangs; some come out of restlessness. All are running towards dreams of dollars in the United States, where they can earn more in a day than they can in a month back home.

For some it's their first time away from village homes; for others, already deported from the US and Mexico several times, it's their fourth, fifth, or sixth attempt to cross. Some are full of bravura; others are frightened, tired, anxious, and sick with longing for a bed, a hot meal, dry clothes, or the homes they have left behind. Many have been victimized along the way, preyed upon by bands of robbers, corrupt officials, locals and even other migrants. Most see the hardship as par for the course and press on.

"We suffer, but we keep going," says Luis, who left a job in a jeans factory that paid him five dollars for a 12-hour day. As he speaks, he clutches a small black Bible to his chest. Like so many of the migrants, who are often members of Central America's powerful Catholic and Evangelical churches, he sees his journey as a biblical journey of faith; on his way to the "Promised Land", he knows he will confront good and evil.

"It's a question of economic survival," says Padre Flor Rigoni, the barefoot and bearded Italian priest who runs the Tapachula shelter, where Luis is preparing for the next leg of his trip. For almost 30 years, he has been working in Mexico's borderlands. Both frontiers are a dangerous apex of economic need and opportunity, where migrants, humanitarian workers, government agents and criminals collide.

Rigoni likens the Central American exodus to other great migrations in history, like that of the Irish in the 19th Century. He believes that as long as there's poverty in Central America and a demand for cheap labor in the US, the migrants will keep coming. "You can't stop a river from flowing," he says, tucking an enormous silver crucifix, pistol-like, into the belt of his white robe. "You can try to block it, but it will find a way to the sea."

THE SOURCE

Touching down through rain clouds into Guatemala City, you might think you've landed in a war zone. Debris and dust cover the cement floor of La Aurora ("Day-break") airport, where billboards advertise: "Central America's most modern airport: coming soon!"

Guatemala is like a war zone in other ways, too. It has the highest murder rate in Latin America: more than 5,000 people have been killed so far this year, a rate of about 15 per day. Drug-related killings, vigilante death squads, and gang violence make it one of the most lawless places on the planet.

Half the population suffers from chronic malnutrition, and nearly three-quarters live in poverty. The average Guatemalan attends school for three and a half years, less than anywhere in Central America, and only 18 percent will complete secondary school. Add political instability, high unemployment, corruption and natural disasters, and it's clear why Guatemalans are leaving in droves.

Abel Córdoba, a Guatemala City taxi driver, traveled 48 hours through Mexico in the hollow pipe of a fuel tanker, eating apples and salt pills to curb his need to urinate. Seventeen-year-old twins Efrain and Oseas López Tebelon left for New York carrying a Bible and a crumpled, hand-drawn map with "USA" scrawled on it in childlike letters. Santos Joel Puzul, a diminutive 21-year-old Kaqchikel Mayan from the Western Highlands, bribed border guards all the way through Mexico, made it across the Río Bravo, and walked for 48 hours across the Texas desert before getting caught and deported (see sidebar).

According to the International Organization for Migration, out of about 14 million Guatemalan citizens one million live in the US. Around one third of those are undocumented, reports the US-based Pew Hispanic Center.

THE SOUTHERN BORDER

The 950-kilometer Guatemala-Mexico frontier is a wild, wet tangle of jungle. According to the Rand Corporation, a US-based non-profit, it's among the ten most dangerous places on Earth, increasingly under the control of gangs, smugglers and criminal organizations that exploit this virtually open border to move contraband. Every day, in full view of immigration and customs officials, rafts made from wood planks tied to inner tubes cross the narrow, brown Suchiate River into Mexico. For 10 Guatemalan quetzals per trip (about \$1 USD), a 10-year-old boy rowed me back and forth twice. No one checked my papers.

Guatemalan border town Tecun Uman is the kind of place where no one stays long; the whole town's economy caters to transients. Groups of dusty young men carrying backpacks shuffle past, heads down, while





Handwritten blue ink scribbles and the word "HUT" on a grey background.



Handwritten blue ink scribbles on a grey background.

Handwritten blue ink scribbles and the number "1150" on a grey background.



1. RIDING THE RAILS in Dos Ríos, the cheapest—and most dangerous—way to get through Mexico's vast territory; 2. 38-year-old Marco Antonio shows his US deportation papers; 3. Pablo Barragán opens his trackside kiosk for business; 4. Grupo Beta's orange shirts signal relief for many tired and hungry migrants; 5. two Honduran couples plan their route.



a boy shouts into a payphone: "Mama! I'm here. I'm fine!"

Stalls sell second-hand clothes and single rolls of toilet paper, small packets of shampoo, and tins of sardines and tuna. There are black market moneychangers, and touts offering to take you to Mexico in minivans with tinted windows. Anything can be bought here: drugs, arms, sex, passports.

Under pressure from the US, Mexico's president Felipe Calderón has stepped up measures to reduce the numbers of immigrants crossing the southern border and address crime in the area by increasing the presence of the army and federal police. Social workers and NGOs say migrants simply find new, often more dangerous, routes. This past October, the bodies of two dozen migrants washed ashore in Mexico near the town of San Francisco del Mar, 300 kilometers west of the border with Guatemala, an indication that smugglers are turning to boats to avoid highway checkpoints.

Others travel under false floors in truck trailers, often in groups of 20 or more: "They suffocate or get crushed by the weight of the cargo above them," says Francisco Aceves, the coordinator of the Tapachula office of Grupo Beta, a government organization that provides food, water and assistance to migrants.

The existence of Grupo Beta, an arm of Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM), illustrates the government's contradictory attitude to undocumented migrants. While one group of immigration officials works to apprehend them, another is handing them free tins of tuna, antibiotics and crackers. Mexico's treatment of Central American migrants' rights might smack of hypocrisy given complaints about the way the US deals with undocumented Mexicans, but there's a lot of sympathy for the government's plight.

"I would love to say to them, 'Go ahead, pass (through Mexico),'" INM Commissioner Cecilia Romero Castillo told Mexican daily *La Jornada*, "but the problem is that along the Northern Border a lid is forming, a plug... through which they won't pass. That affects our own development in Mexico, the social fabric in the border states, which becomes a grave problem for us."

RIDING THE RAILS: VERACRUZ

For most of the migrants, Mexico isn't the final destination, but simply two million square kilometers standing between them and their goal. The cheapest — and riskiest — route is to ride the rails, hopping freight trains that carry goods through Mexico to the US.

Near midday on a Saturday, Pablo Barragán opens his trackside kiosk for business in Dos Ríos, Veracruz. He unlocks the window of the green and orange shack, hangs sweaters outside, and places a small potted fern, with a Mexican flag stuck in it, on the counter. Already, a few migrants are escaping the harsh sun under the small

corrugated iron shelter he's erected alongside his shop. Their clothes, soaked from a rainy night spent riding on top of a freight train, are spread on the tracks to dry. A group of young men shave, sharing a disposable razor and a hand mirror. Another group sit under the shade of a hibiscus tree, waiting. There are no schedules, and no one knows when the train will pass.

Pablo's kiosk caters to the thousands of migrants who get on and off the freight trains that run to the US border through Dos Ríos in Veracruz State. He sells dry crackers, tins of sardines, tubes of superglue for repairing shoes and backpacks, and gloves, jackets and balaclavas for cold nights. The train, known as "The Beast" and "The Train of Death", passes his store every day, bearing hundreds of illegal migrants literally risking life and limb. "Once I saw something bouncing along the tracks as the train went by," he says. "I thought it was a ball, but after the train had passed I realized it was somebody's head."

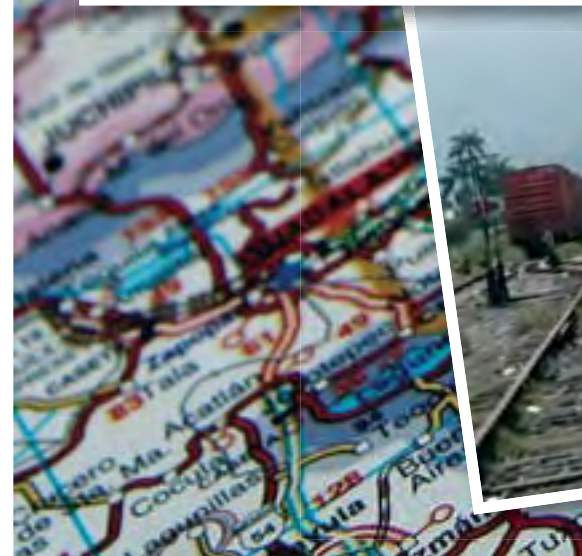
Sitting alongside Pablo's store studying a map of Mexico is a couple from Honduras, Roberto and Maribel. Roberto has lived in the US, and speaks a few words of English he learned watching sitcoms: "I'm losing my mind!" he jokes, in a mock US accent. They traveled by combi van from Tecun Uman to Iztepec in Oaxaca, where they caught the train for the 17-hour ride to Dos Ríos.

No one had slept a wink on the train. It wasn't just the rain: it was the fear of falling off, getting caught by "La Migra" (immigration), or being robbed by gangs of thieves or even other migrants.

"It's dangerous. Anything can happen: You can fall, you can be assaulted. If three or four guys come at you with pistols and machetes, there's nothing you can do," Roberto says, referring to the notoriously violent Mara Salvatrucha gangs ("Maras") who terrorize the trains.

Traveling with Roberto and Maribel is a 38-year-old Honduran, Marco Antonio, who could easily be mistaken for a Mara; he's missing front teeth and has tattoos and scars on his back and face. He wears a Philadelphia Eagles beanie and a Virgin of Guadalupe amulet around his neck, and carries a crumpled US deportation document from his pocket. He's been riding the trains for 10 years, he announces. Everyone listens: "When you jump on, you have to pull yourself up to the level of train quickly, or your legs will get pulled under," he says. As he speaks, the ground begins to vibrate. The trackside fills with people, who run alongside the moving train and jump on, pulling themselves up by ladders and bars. Some strap themselves to the ladders with belts and ropes while others climb up to the roof.

I run after them with my camera. Some whoop and make the thumbs up sign. As the train gains speed, the trackside empties. I look up and there's Marco Antonio, leaping from car to car, waving and yelling for me to take photos.





1. AT A MIGRANT SHELTER IN TAPACHULA, southern Mexico, travelers get a hot meal and a bed; 2. A Salvadoran woman and her daughter at the shelter.

AGAINST THE ODDS

According to official estimates only one in six Central American migrants crossing Mexico succeeds in reaching the US.

Back at the shelter in Tapachula, Estela Madariaga, a 26-year-old Honduran mother of two, looks into the distance as she speaks, as though telling a story about someone else.

A few weeks before — she can't remember exactly when or where — a policeman boarded her bus in the middle of the night to check identity papers. Estela and the other undocumented Central Americans paid a bribe, but the policeman pointed at her and three other women and ordered them off the bus. He took them to a dark office, where three men without uniforms waited. The bribes they'd paid weren't enough, he said. When Estela tried to argue, the policeman slapped her face. "Don't play the innocent," he had told her. "You know this is part of the payment. If you don't agree, you won't get back on the bus," where her children, aged four and five, were waiting.

"It made me sick, having to give myself to the guards," Estela says, "but the thought of my children gave me the strength not to kill myself right there."

Some women on the migrant trail use their bodies like automatic tellers, "cuerpo-matics" they are called, dispensing sex instead of cash. They prepare for their trips by taking the Pill. Estela knew that as an undocumented migrant she would be easy prey. For this reason, she had sold everything she owned to pay a coyote, a human smuggler who had been recommended by her brother-in-law, to help her get to the US. It was turning out to be a mistake.

The next time guards got on the bus, they picked out a pretty 14-year-old Honduran girl who was travelling with her family. The girl's parents followed her off the bus, shouting and crying and offering money. The coyote said they were making too much trouble, and told the driver to move on. "These are the risks of travelling without documents," the coyote announced, as the bus sped away.

A little later, Estela discovered the Honduran family's other daughter, a seven-year-old, hiding under a seat. "She was scared and trembling. I lifted her out, hugged her, and promised to take care of her until we found her parents."

They got as far as the US border, where Estela paid the coyote \$6,000 to take them across the desert. The coyote took her money, told her she'd never make it with so many children, and then simply disappeared. Stranded at the border with no money, she tried without success to find work. Desperate, she turned herself over to the authorities: the seven-year-old girl was taken to a shelter, while Estela and her children were deported back to Honduras.

When I meet her in Padre Rigoni's shelter, she has just eaten a hot meal of beans, rice and coffee. She's on her way north again, this time without a coyote. Despite all that's happened to her, she's determined to seek a new life in the imagined paradise of the US. "I'm not going back to Honduras," she says. "I've sold everything I have there. For me there's nothing left." *—JM*





THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF MIGRATION

By Vivienne Stanton

In October, Santos Joel Puzul was deported to Guatemala after spending a month in high security detention facilities in the US, sharing cells with narcos and murderers. To pass the time, he watched Schwarzenegger movies and worked in the kitchen until he was flown home, his first trip on an airplane: "I'd been in a Ferris wheel before. It was a bit like that." His family thought he had died in the desert: when he called from the Guatemala City airport they cried.

His hometown, San Marcos La Laguna, is on the shores of Lake Atitlan, one of Guatemala's prime tourist attractions. It's a spectacular bowl of water 1,550 meters above sea level, hemmed in by volcanoes. The lake water looks blue from afar, deep jade up close, and a pale, chalky green-grey in the afternoons, when the xocomil, "the wind that carries away sin", blows in from the coast.

For tourists, it's paradise, but for the young people who live here, the future offers little hope. Many of the Mayan villages that surround the lake are empty-

ing as the greenback entices young men away from the highlands.

A dusty track divides San Marcos. Lakeside, foreigners have built fancy cabanas, yoga schools, holistic healing centers, organic cafes and vegetarian restaurants, linked by a network of shady paths. On the other side of the road, where Santos lives, the houses are adobe shacks. There's very little work for the locals, and when you can find it, it only pays \$6 USD a day, or about the price of an organic falafel burrito at the lakeside Moonfish cafe.

Santos will go back to waiting tables in a foreign-owned hotel, where he'll have to work for two years to pay back the US\$2000 he borrowed to pay coyotes to take him north. He'll live with his parents—subsistence farmers who grow coffee, corn and beans—and six siblings. He had hoped to earn enough in the US to return to Guatemala, study Mayan anthropology, and get work as a tour guide: he already speaks Kaqchikel, Spanish and English. He has had to give up that dream for now.