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Banishing the Boogeyman

Pat Sherwood puts the lie to suspicions about all the evil people in other countries.

By Pat Sherwood

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While making our way from Big Sky, Mont., to Nogales, Ariz., Ian Wittenber and I stopped for fuel at a gas station in Jackson Hole, Wyo. One look at our bikes confirmed we were not just out for a day's ride to Starbucks.

Our side cases were packed to the gills, a big waterproof duffel of camping supplies was strapped to the rear, a bag on the gas tank held even more gear, and a GPS was mounted to the handlebars. The bikes look unusual: they are an on-road and off-road hybrid. All these factors came together to spark interest and curiosity whenever we stopped in any area.

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Such was the case at the gas station in Wyoming. An old dude in a tank top and his weather-beaten female companion eyeballed us from another pump. They were fueling up a massive, white Honda Gold Wing. As Ian and I checked some gear on our bikes, the couple walked over and struck up a conversation.

"Where are you two heading?" the gentleman asked.

"We are riding to Chile, but our immediate goal is to get into Mexico," I said.

His response to my answer was not shocking. I hear it often, and it's always disappointing: "Mexico? Are you kidding? Have you ever been there before? Those Mexicans are going to see your California plates, and all they are going to do is rob you and take advantage of you. It's terrible down there. Those people are such a big problem."

I stood there and listened to his rant. I smiled, informed him that I had indeed been there before. Several times actually. I mustered up some strength and refrained from calling him an idiot and telling him to fuck off. I simply thanked him for his concern and told him and his lady to enjoy the rest of their day.

Several days later, we were enjoying an iced coffee somewhere in the southern United States when we met a very interesting woman who had actually climbed Mt. Everest. As you would expect from such a person, she had done a fair bit of traveling. She asked about our trip and we gave her the lowdown. She was utterly shocked that we planned to ride through Guatemala and Colombia.

"Do you know what they do down there?" she almost shouted at me.

"No, I guess I don't. Could you please tell me?" I asked her.

She responded: "They run ropes across the roads and they knock people off their motorcycles and they rob them!"

I was not expecting to hear this as her first reaction to learning about our trip. I told her that I would duck if I saw a rope. She did not laugh. I thanked her for her concern and informed her that I had actually spent about three to four months of my life in Colombia without so much as a single negative incident.

If you assume this irrational fear of foreigners exists only in the U.S., you are dead wrong. It has come to my attention



Middle of the desert in Peru. There is literally nothing for hundreds of miles in the deserts of Peru that run along the coast.

that many countries do not particularly get along with their neighbors. It is actually a running joke amongst travelers on journeys similar to ours that in order to make a border crossing go smoothly, you should talk shit about the country you are leaving and sing the praises of the one you are entering. The chances are pretty good the border agent will laugh or agree with your sentiments, whether they are true or not.

Here's an arbitrary example: let's say we are leaving Costa Rica and entering Panama. When the Panamanian border official at the immigration office asks you how long you plan to stay in Panama, you could say something like, "Shit, I want to stay in Panama as long as I can. I could not wait to get out of Costa Rica. They think they have nice beaches? The beaches suck. The beaches in Panama are way better!" Then you just sit back and watch the official nod in agreement and stamp your passport.

Speaking of Panama, we met one very vocal Panamanian woman who had nothing but negative things to say about Colombia. She was appalled we would even want to visit such a country.

"You need to watch out for those Colombians," she warned us. "Watch out for them. They are smart and tricky. They will get you!"

I took the moral high ground once again and tried to convince her that Colombians were great people. She refused to believe me and simply kept repeating her gloom-and-doom predictions about the next part of our journey.

We have met men and women of all ages and races who have advised us against going to certain other countries. The best thing you can do is ignore these people. They are part of the problem, not the solution.

Now, there are obviously places in this world that are more dangerous than others. However, you can live in Los Angeles, Calif., in relative peace and harmony, or you can easily find trouble if you go looking for it. The same can be said for Bogota, Colombia, and other places in the world.

Over the course of our trip, we have received useful advice about areas to avoid or things to look out for. This info is not the lunatic paranoia described previously but rather accurate, actionable recommendations from locals. For example, we had to ride through the area of Mexico best known for being the home of the Sinoloa Drug Cartel. This was a real threat, not make-believe hysteria. One of

the local box owners told us if we were in a certain area and saw some extremely attractive women, the chances were quite good they were cartel members' girlfriends. He recommended avoiding them.

We found ourselves in the exact area and went to a very nice breakfast joint. Sitting at the table across from Ian and me were about a dozen women who were insanely gorgeous and clearly well taken care of. Because of the warning we had received from the affiliate owner, I at least felt in control of my own fate. I understood the situation and the danger involved, as well as the possibility of getting killed by a cartel member. So, I sat there during breakfast, smiling and flirting with any one of them who would look my way.

Some things are worth the risk, right?

We know the dangers and risks, but what have our actual experiences been? Today is Day 90. So far, we have gathered our data by riding through the U.S., Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Bolivia. Here is my quick synopsis: The people in Latin America are amazing.

The evil boogeyman does not exist.

Once, we were fueling up at a gas station in the middle of nowhere in the Mexican desert, sweating our asses off. A Mexican family walked up to us from their car and offered ice to us to cool off.

A guy we met while lost in Cali, Colombia, at about 10 p.m. stopped what he was doing and walked us to a hotel where we would be safe.

In Palenque, Mexico, the battery in Ian's bike died. The hotel staff made phone calls, found mechanics, and even ran into town to buy us food because the hotel restaurant was closed.

Taxi drivers in Colombia, Bolivia, Guatemala and Honduras (among others) gave us tips on what places to avoid, as well as what taxi drivers should and should not charge us to make sure we were not taken advantage of while in their country.

We have been lost in every country. Any time this has happened, I just walked up to the closest person and asked for help—cops, military personnel, old people, teenagers, store clerks, you name it. My requests for help have been met with 100 percent genuine kindness and concern.



Puno, Peru. We arrived on the birthday of Arequipa so there were masses of people partying outside in the rain.

We pulled into a small hotel in Ibarra, Ecuador, in the pouring rain after a hard day of riding. We were dirty and disgusting. The hotel owner (a motorcycle rider himself) upgraded us, for free, to a bigger room so we could be comfortable and well rested for the next day's ride. The hotel restaurant did not open for several more hours, so Ian and I were going to wander into town for a snack even though it was still raining. The hotel owner did not want us to go back out into the cold and get sick. He opened up the restaurant just for us so we could have a warm meal.

We have stories like this from everywhere we've been.

We have had mostly positive experiences everywhere we've gone. The word "positive" does not do justice to the overwhelming kindness, generosity, warmth and hospitality of Latinos.

And this would blow the minds of those naysayers: my top two countries for the nicest people on Earth are currently Mexico and Colombia. Yet those are two of the three countries we repeatedly heard horror stories about.

The lesson? Don't listen to the negative trash the news displays on your TV every day. Visit these countries. You will fall in love with the people, the culture, the food, the cities, the traditions—everything.



About the Author

Pat Sherwood works for CrossFit as a flowmaster and member of the Media Team. He's done just under 200 seminars all around the globe for CrossFit HQ and competed in the 2009 CrossFit Games. He hates HSPU and loves ice cream.