

Toll total \$407

Mexico 2024

exchange #1:17p

Sat, Dec. 30, 2023

mileage 34972
end 42727
= 7755

On the road at 8:20. 49° & light rain. In & out of heavy rain squalls all day. Arrive at Al & Marilyn's in Eugene at 2:30. Talked non stop until 8:30. Marilyn made chicken soup (with coconut milk), salad, homemade pizza with roasted cherry tomatoes from their garden, and pumpkin pie with whipped cream. Everything was delicious. Best hazelnuts ever, fresh from the drying company in a nearby town. She gave us a bag!

Sun Dec. 31

41° & fog. Breakfast at 7:30 of zucchini bread, yogurt, homemade granola. Tried to go walking with Marilyn but wood smoke in the air was bothering her lungs. She will be 80 on Tuesday. We played ping pong in her basement & it was really fun. Long volleys got our heart rates up. More exercise than I remembered. It's been many years since I played. On the road at 10.

At Roseburg we headed east on 138 to Glide. Nice wayside 20 miles east of I-5 for lunch. Ancient sarracan, lovely river with a horizontal falls. Had been thinking of driving scenic road to Diamond Lake & down to Medford, but it would have taken too long.

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so we went back to I-5. Instead, we did a loop from Canyonville down to Medford, which only added 30 minutes. Beautiful quiet road along a river, first through farmland, then up into the forest. The fields were such a bright green it was almost neon. Interesting mix of trees: madrona, oak, pine, cedar, fir.

Arrived at Mary Zuschlag's in medford at 3 pm. She & I went for a 3-mile walk on trails in her neighborhood, then out past pastures & vineyards to a pond with wiglons, ring-necked ducks, & shovelers. Also saw acorn woodpeckers gorging on nuts they'd stashed in tree holes.

Delicious dinner of teriyaki chicken with brown rice & steamed veggies. Crash & dash is the plan. Oh, mary told me this area is especially biodiverse due to unusual mineral soils, and is called the Klamath Knot. To bed at 9:30. Heard only a few muffled thumps in the distance as I fell asleep, but no other NY Eve festivities.

Mon, 1-1-24

Up at 6. 39°. Grant is sick with something. Gas up in Ashland. Cross Siskiyou Summit at first light, just after 7. Bare, dry, frosty, a bit above freezing. 29° at Hornbrook rest area. Grant napping. Foggy. Mt. Shasta hidden in clouds. We hit the "line in the sky" at mile 737, 5 miles north of Dunsmuir. Blue sky as far as we can see! Sundial Bridge at 10:45. 46°. I walked the trail while Grant napped. I drove most of the morning. It warmed right up. Started the walk with two coats, a scarf, & gloves. Didn't need any of those by the end. 57° at 12:30.

Stop for another nap at 3 (both of us this time). Slow progress today, but that's OK - no deadlines. Stop at Flying J south of Stockton to make dinner (cheese quesadillas) and decide to stay here for tonight. Grant's had enough for one day, and I don't like night driving. One truck idling. I sure don't like that deep low grumble, but I have earplugs.

Tues, 1-2-24

~~Q~~ Quiet night. Grant has Covid in first time. Some coughing, but mostly very tired. On the road at 7. Heavy murky overcast. The world is grey. I'm driving and we're stopping

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so Grant can nap. I felt terrible having to alert our recent hosts that they have been exposed. We made about 350 miles today, despite many stops. Grant drove the last hour, which was in the dark on unlit roads between Bakersfield & Palmdale. White knuckle for me - high speed, bright oncoming lights, hard to see road edge. I was grateful when we pulled into the Pilot truck stop at 6:15. Soup for Grant, quesadilla for me. I was driving and unable to take notes. We took highway 58 from Bakersfield. We were happy to see Joshua trees. We finally drove out of the San Joaquin Valley muck east of Bakersfield.

Wed. Jan. 3

41° & raining. The road stayed busy all night but the noise didn't bother me. A busy truck stop but we were able to park away from the idling trucks.

On the road at 7:30. Heavy rain & traffic on I-15, 35° at Cajon Summit. Rain stopped in Palm Springs. Grant is feeling much better today. We took one

Scottsdale

nap break. I went for a walk/jog around ⁵ the rest area & down a nearby road. I did a lot of the driving, which was a challenge for me. Had to stop at almost every rest area to wake up! Heavy rush hour traffic in Phoenix. Arrived at mom's at 5. She made us pot roast with potatoes & carrots. Rain in the late evening.

Thurs 1-4-24

41° but mostly blue sky. Grant had a down day & napped in the van a lot. Mom & I walked on the trail and took care of some computer stuff, including buying her a plane ticket for Kylie's graduation in May.

Leftovers for dinner. Mark stopped by to get a Covid test, as he's not feeling well. I worked on leaf blower stuff, as the hearing date just got announced. Today was warm in the sun but chilly when the sun went behind a cloud!

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Fri 1-5-24

39°, clear sky with quarter moon & stars. I spent the morning working on leaf blower bill paperwork, and went for a nice walk. Afternoon supply trip to Fry's. Mark is sick so we won't visit him. Mom went to Karl & Marta's for dinner. Grant & I made tuna & egg salad for the road and had ~~had~~ roasted sweet potatoes and pot roast for dinner. Grant is slowly recovering his energy. Still sleeping a lot.

Sat 1-6-24

37° and clear. On the road at 8:30. Gas only \$2.79. Stopped at a rest area near the Chiricahua mts. with rounded rock formations. A guy came up to our window and excitedly told us about an Allied Truck driver with "something" in his cab. When I walked over to look, it was some kind of flim flam man doing cards on the ground. A group of truckers stood around, apparently enjoying the entertainment. The day is sunny but cold.

Las Cruces NM

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Crossed into NM and the Chihuahuan desert and the scenery changes. Bleak, the mostly bare desert punctuated by scattered rocks & scraggly, Sessilian ~~yucca~~^{sotol?} Nap at Yucca Plains rest area. NM has many road signs about dust storm safety, and zero visibility. There must be lots of wrecks, and lots of storms. Truck stops advertise Indian food (East Indian, not American Indian). There are lots of Indian truck drivers.

Stop at Scenic View rest area near Las Cruces at 5pm. There's an eye-catching 20-foot tall roadrunner sculpture made out of old tires, shoes, and other landfill trash. Once it got dark there is a sweeping view of the Las Cruces city lights. It's supposed to get cold tonight! Rice & beans for dinner.

Sun Jan. 7

26° this morning! Two quilts & a heavy blanket kept us warm in the night. The propane heater warmed the place right up in the morning. I wore long johns & socks to bed. The rest area bathrooms are heated! Beautiful red sunrise and craggy mountains. On the road at 6:50.

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Cattle country out here. 7:30 on a Sunday is a good time to drive through El Paso. Light traffic and no active construction. Blue sky. CBP station at Sierra Blanca waved us through. Stayed on I-10 to Van Horn.

Highway 90 to Marfa. Peaceful & empty, but very windy. Tiring for the driver. Stopped to see the Prada store art installation. Such a fun thing to see in the middle of nowhere. Dust created low visibility for a few miles. Lunch at the Marfa Ghost Lights viewing area about 9 miles east of the town of Marfa. Marfa to Alpine is scenic, with trees & hills. Alpine is a cute town with an alive downtown and a real grocery: Lowe's market. Stopped for supplies. Stopped in Marathon for a nap (Grant) and a walk around the 27-acre Gage Gardens (me). Most of the gardens are a big field with a one-mile gravel trail loop. The other half is trees, shade, and wint spaces like gazebos. The town has a nice coffee shop and a ^{small} grocery store called French's (pricy). The hotel guy said the hotel is busy and is the town's main economic engine. Guests are mostly Texans and most of the rest are foreigners. He says the town

Sanderson TX

sits on an aquifer and has "plenty of water." ⁹

The road to Sanderson is lovely, with mesas, and no billboards. Way nicer than I-10. Saw no semis. One javelina and one deer.

Arrived in Sanderson, at the confluence of highway 285. Hoped to stay at the picnic area (i.e., rest area without restrooms) 4 miles east of town, but no cell signal. So we're at the Stripes in town. Quite a few trucks parked here, but not idling. High here today was 64° !

Mon Jan 8, 2024

Quiet night & much warmer. 43° at 6:30 am. The trucks are gone. On the road at 8.

This is Trump country. Lots of signs (Trump Won) & flags (F*** Biden). It's painful to see.

A wall of grey ahead, with sunrays angling down. Grant calls them "god lines." I've also heard them called "god's eyelashes."

In Langtry we stopped at the Judge Roy Bean museum & info center to use the bathroom, but didn't peruse the free indoor & outdoor exhibits, which look worth a gander.

Picnic area 40 mi. west of Del Rio has a nice view of the Pecos River. Cold wind.

I'm crabby today. Stressed about the leaf blower hearing on Thursday and the hours of work I'm doing to get ready for it - a challenge when on the road. I'm also stressed about driving in Mexico tomorrow. I always get nervous when we cross. So I'm a more nervous driver (passenger) than usual, and Grant got very mad at me. A few hours later all was well.

If we come this way in future, we should be able to make it between Phoenix and Eagle Pass in two days. Several rest areas east of El Paso could work for overnight.

Gas in Del Rio said \$2.48. Turned out that was the (unstated) ^{cash} ~~gas~~ price. We paid \$2.75. Bait & switch.

Grant's cardiologist called while we were driving. The results of all his recent tests suggest cardiac sarcoidosis. Doc wants a cardiac PET scan asap. It would mean aborting our trip, and Grant isn't willing to do that. If it is sarcoid, the therapy is steroids, which Grant can't take because of his diabetes.

At noon we arrived in Eagle Pass & parked next to San Juan Plaza, a

Eagle Pass TX

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Mexican-style park with trees, a gazebo, and lots of Christmas decorations. Spent the afternoon walking (very windy) and doing computer stuff. 66°. We are close to the border fence. So depressing to live in a country that puts up fences with its neighbors.

Later we moved to Walmart so we could use their bathroom. Heavy wind is rocking the van ferociously. We moved away from trees and into the lee of other vehicles. Gas \$2.39 here. Wind stopped. I have not seen a non-hispanic person in this town. Feels a bit like Mexico.

Tues Jan 9

41° at 6 am. Throbbing store equipment noises did not keep us awake. Dark & quiet night. Walmart bathrooms before heading to border. Leave Walmart at 7. Perfect timing light-wise.

Cross the border on International Bridge 2 at 7 am. \$4 toll. Brief inspection by a friendly young man. The usual potholes, topes, unmarked lanes, barricades, & confusion ~~at~~ ^{driving thru} the checkpoint. Just light enough to feel safe driving. Gas prices 17-24 pesos per litre, or \$4+ per gallon.

It took ^{about} an hour to drive the 30(?) miles to Allende, Coahuila. The Banjerito / INM office was easy to find. We were the only ones in

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tolls to San Pedro $130 + 48 + 75 = 253 = \text{\$15}$

there. Unfortunately my online FMM payment & application didn't work, but it was quick to get it at the window. They have a credit card machine. Lesson learned: don't bother getting it online; something always goes wrong, and it's so easy at the border. Even if you got it online, you still have to ~~go~~ wait in line to get your passport stamped. On the way out, Grant walked into a glass door (it looked open to me too) and said it almost broke his nose. On the road by 8:15. Toll booth 130 p.

Lots of industry & factories along this road, and bad air quality. Coal? electric plant with stack belching dark smoke. Also lots of dust, this being a desert.

Cattle ranches. Rough, degraded asphalt in many places. Bypass around Monclova. Appears to be an iron mining & steel smelting town.

Lunch at Valeo station by the toll booth (48 p) in Castaña. Several pretty stretches of road through low mountains. Layers of mountains on the horizon in shades of blue grey, like woodblock prints. The desert is lush & green. Low yellow flowers carpet the roadsides. Tall yucca trees abound.

Car permit check north of Monterrey.

Toll 135 = \$8 San Miguel

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Our RAM was made here at a factory in this area. Last toll booth of the day was 75p, south of Monterrey. There was a miles-long line northbound. Signs to watch for bears! A car spun out on a mountain curve & crashed into the guardrail, blocking the lane. We came around the corner fast & had to brake hard & were able to get into the other lane. Scary! That is why I ~~can~~ advise people to "drive slow in Mexico." You never know what is going to suddenly appear in your lane.

We arrived at the San Pedro Parador Turistico at 3:30. We took turns driving, but were both exhausted. None of the food in the restaurant looked good, so we had quesadillas. Dark about 6:30. High~~est~~ today about 66°, but still felt cool with a breeze.

Wed. Jan. 10

36° & high clouds. Up at 6:30. Lots of truck noise but it didn't bother us. Gas up and on the road at 7:40 (arrived in SMA at 2). When we first started coming to San Miguel, Pemex was the only gas station. Now they are the minority. This is a major truck route (57). Many new semis, and cool colors: lemon yellow, lime green, mandarin orange.

After being scammed at a station, our new gas protocol is: locked gas cap so they can't start filling w/o permission, I open cap and watch that they zero it, we pay cash, exact change (no credit card or change shenanigans). So far it's working great.

Lots of vibradores (rows of road bumps at crossings) in San Luis Potosí state. They get really tiresome! Still in yucca forest most of the way to San Miguel. Good road today. Gas prices rising as we head south. High 23.59 (\$5.50 a gallon).

Matchuata bypass toll 35 p. No more vibradores, yay! Tree cactus appear near SLP city. Toll south of SLP 100 p.

Windy day, with dust flying through the air. Google maps brought us to the campground via a very convoluted route on cobble streets. Arrived at the campground at 2 pm, exhausted. Steve & Bing are here, and Claudia & Erica from Switzerland. Cedric(?) the French photographer is here.

Australian couple named Amanda & Darren.
70°.

met my friend Debbie for dinner at Hecho in Mexico. Delicious milanesa for me and chile relleno for Grant.

SMA

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Thurs Jan. 11

50° at 6 am. Getting light at 7. 8:30 walk to La Comer. No bread this early. City Market ATM. Tried Panio bread. Pricy at 100 pesos for a large loaf (#6) but delicious. Chicken at Mercado Sano. Cabbage & mango at the little store around the corner. Back at 9:50.

The leaf blower hearing started at 10 local time here. To my astonishment they heard our bill first. Yasmin couldn't get there in time but luckily I was able to quickly log in. Stressful! The hearing went well, and I spent the afternoon doing followup. Also got camp set up and did a lot of housekeeping.

At 3, walked across to Antonio's store for an ice cream bar. 73° and breezy. It's nice to be next to the gazebo. The table worked well for computer work.

Delicious chicken stir fry for dinner, with a Costco brown rice-quinoa pack. Amanda has a cute little dog named Droopy. Turns out Darren is her ex and was helping her with van repairs yesterday. She's been traveling solo in the van for two years and loves it. She gave me lots of Yucatan tips.

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Fri Jan 12

51° at 6 am. Much warmer than previous years! We went for a walk to town. The town is ship shape, with fountains running and holiday decorations still up. The air is clear! (It wasn't last February.)

Back at camp we saw a female vermilion flycatcher in the tree next to our van. Lovely peach-colored belly. Computer, read, play uke, visit with new arrivals Chris & Katie Miller, who are building a house in San Joaquin, QTO, at 8200' feet in the Sierra Gorda mountains, a village with no other gringos. They did a beautiful van build.

Leftover stirfry for dinner. I walked into town to see the Friday night scene. Beautiful lights strung in the main square & side streets. Mariachi bands serenading. Walked to the market before I could find ice cream. Got piñon. It was pink & icy, more like sorbet. Didn't love it.

Sat Jan. 13

57° this morning! On previous trips in Feb., mornings have been in the low 40s. Met up with Alex, Willie, their friend Mike, and Debbie at the Tianguis TosMA at the Mercado Saro at 9. I had a carrot muffin. Grant had gorditas he said were delicious. Next year he says: only order one, and get one filling. Grant bought 1/2 kilo of mole fruta seca (300p) - pricey!

Debbie came back to see the campground, then we walked around San Antonio and over to Instituto Allende. They had a nice exhibit of photos taken in the '50s & '60s of artists who came from all over the world to study here.*

Sun. Jan 14

50° & overcast, Did my morning "routine": email, FB, Wordle, tai chi, breakfast. Did last night's dishes. Worked on the leaf blower report. →

* Wonderful concert at nearby Cafe Marmullo: Angela Kaset & Don Henry, two successful Nashville songwriters. Angela lives in SMA. I loved her voice & songs. Full house of 60 gringos. Debbie joined me.

Ate an early lunch and walked into town at 11. Asked at the tourist office and they said the busses to Atotonilco left at quarter after every hour. Met Debbie and her friend Claudette and we walked to the bus stop just north of the main market on Calzada de la Luz and Animas. Bus VII was there, we climbed aboard, and it drove away at noon (not 12:15)!

It was great - noisy, smelly, bumpy, and slow. Made one stop at "El Rancho," a busy pueblo 2 miles off the main road. It took 40 minutes and we arrived at Atotonilco at 12:40. It being Sunday, there were a lot of people and stalls. No other gringos. Mass had just started and we couldn't go inside, so we wandered a bit, people watched, and Debbie got some lunch. Mass got out about 1:30 and we went inside. The interior frescoes, wood flooring, and giltwork are just as stunning as I remembered.

Got ice cream (nuez = pecan) and it was delicious. Headed to the bus stop to learn that the 1:40 had been the last bus of the day. Claudette got an uber, 177 + tip (\$10 + tip). She wouldn't let me pay. (my share.)

Lovely young woman driver. So nice to chat with her in Spanish. She has a weekday job and Ubers on weekends, but not at night, as she doesn't feel safe. Took just over 20 minutes to get back to town.

Potatoes & eggs for dinner. Grant had a good day. Walked to La Comer, chatted with neighbor Steve. High today 75°.

Alex called at 2:30 am here to say we had a water leak! She wanted to know how to turn off the water. The leak was somewhere in the basement, so no structural damage thank goodness. It was hard to get back to sleep after that!

Mon. Jan 15

51° this morning. Waiting to hear from the kids before we call a plumber.

I finished my leaf blower report and sent it off. Then we walked to La Comer for bread. Long line at the register so we used self checkout, which kept saying we had to wait for help ~~at~~ from the attendant.

Grant's credit card chip wouldn't work.

Back at camp, both kids finally called at the same time. I called a plumber

who's booked solid for a week. The second guy I found on Nextdoor said he'd be there in 2 hours. He's Mexican and sounds nice, but asked if it's OK that he isn't licensed, bonded, or insured. His business partner, who holds the license, is out of town. He arrived within two hours, fixed the problem, and charge \$350, which we think is reasonable.

Feeling immensely cheered, I wrote a song called "Halfway to Somewhere (All roads lead to roam)". Grant and I came up with "halfway to somewhere" on the road the other day. I said, "We're halfway there," and he said, "We're always halfway to somewhere."

I told Claude, our neighbor, about our 2:30 am phone call, and he said, "Thank goodness it wasn't a health issue. Everything else is manageable." The wisdom of an 80 year old.

SMA

Danzantes most
Sundays at 7-8 pm

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Tues Jan 16

43° this morning, the first chilly one. I walked up to the mirador early, enjoying the sights, esp. the courtyard of the El Chorro church. Got to the mirador at 9:20. Perfect light, with the sun to my back. The sky above was clear blue, but the horizon was a brown haze. The trees seemed to be taller and blocking more of the view.

No egrets nesting at El Chorro terraces yet. As I walked I kept thinking about Angela Kaset's SMA song, about how easy it is to fall here. The refrain goes, "When you want to look up, look down." You can't safely walk & sightsee at the same time!

Juarez Park sure looks different without the early Feb. plant fair. It's nice. I walked by the pavilion and remembered when Ian & I saw the break dancers there in 2009. Can't believe that was 15 years ago.

The campground price has gone up to 500 per night (#30)! But old-timers like us get the old rate of 2700 per week (450 per night).

SMA is an expensive city. Parking is 50 per hour!

Lots of paid dog walkers out this morning, in the fancy neighborhoods.

After lunch Grant and I walked to Centro, through the artisanal market, to San Juan de Dios church. School was getting out about 1:30 and it was crowded.

Hot today (high 80) and Grant was not feeling well. After we left the church he got very dizzy. When we got back to camp he checked his blood pressure and it was very low (89/66?). He emailed his doc about dropping one of his blood pressure meds.

met Ashley & Tyler, a young digital nomad couple who are staying in the campground. She quit nursing during the pandemic burnout. Got ESL certification and was teaching remote to China, but the Chinese gov't. shut that down. She does some freelance writing and has a strong interest in psychedelic therapy.

At 5:30 we met Willie & Alex for dinner at La Frontera. My veggie burger with sauteed side veggies was delicious! Grant liked his brisket sandwich but wouldn't order it again. 310 + tip = \$20. Willie & Alex are really nice, and so easy to talk to.

Alex is volunteering for Patronata Pro Niños, which provides basic medical & mental health services to poor people in the pueblos around San Miguel. 40% of their funding used to come from historical tours led by trained volunteers. The gov't. said only Mexicans can give the tours & they have to get paid.

The water table is subsiding and many pueblos now only have "fossilized" water in their wells, which contains high levels of fluoride & arsenic. The fluoride eats tooth enamel and causes streaked teeth. Gringos are raising funds to install filters or reverse osmosis systems on wells.

Gringos have little to no say in any policy decisions.

Wed. Jan. 17

43°. Slept til 7. Doves cooing (a soundtrack of Mexico). People sweeping streets (!) & sidewalks with brooms. Some are city workers, some are businesses or property owner hired help.

Shortest walk to El Charco del Ingenio is past the jardín. Left about 8:30 and arrived at 9:20. Nice to do the steep uphill in the cool morning air. Birds this year: warbling vireo,

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cactus wren, shoveler, pintail, gadwall,
mexican duck (with electric blue side patches),
least grebe, avocet, vermilion flycatcher,
ruddy duck, nondescript wading bird on shore.
This year I walked across the dam to the
labyrinth stone tower "starlight house" built
in 2016. I followed the trail along the far
side of the lake, but didn't go all the
way. As usual, I ran out of time. Next
time allow 4 hours minimum door to door.
Great place to do tai chi too.

Bottom gate was locked so I had to
trudge back up the hill to the entrance.
It was pretty toasty in the sun.

It took 45 minutes to walk back and
I arrived at noon. 77° at 1:30.

Three new rigs here: two from
Germany, and one a family with two
little kids, towheads. (Also German.) A bigger
class C pulled in with a young couple.



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SMA, Day 9

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At 6 we walked into town for the mariachi concert. They had set up folding chairs, so we nabbed two. They didn't seem very far along in setting up, so we thought it might start very late, but they were fast and it started at 7:15, only 15 minutes late. I counted about 25 women and three men. It was a women's mariachi "monumental" or multi-group band! Each group had its own outfit—purple, green, or white, with sparkly decorations, matching boots, shiny black hair pulled back and tied with colorful rosettes. The whole front row was about 14 violins. The band leader was an elfin older man, short & wide, with a disturbing grin (he looked like he was grimacing). They profiled several singers. The youngest had a powerhouse voice. The oldest, a local "star," sang off key. We stayed for an hour. The setting, in front of the Parroquia, was gorgeous.

Thurs Jan 18

57° this morning. Went walking in the Guadiana neighborhood. Saw a nice fruteria and a polleria. Lunch at camp. Both La Comer breads delicious: granola 40p has seeds; entero (whole wheat) 25,50, tastes like sourdough.

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At 12:30 met Willie & 10 other people for a village tour to Agustin Gonzales, an Otomi ejido about 30 min. west of SMA on the other side of the reservoir. In 1998 an expat helped the women learn to hook rugs and form a cooperative. The tour cost 750 p (\$44), and included transportation. The 12 of us (including the volunteer gringo guide, Patrick) piled into three cars, two with paid drivers. First we went to a house with a



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In the small village of Agustin Gonzales, located near San Miguel de Allende, MX, a group of rural farming women have been hooking rugs since 1998. Each woman designs and creates her own rug that reflects the vibrant color and life in Mexico. The village is a subsistence farming community and the money made through rug sales goes towards basic needs including: food, corn seed, school supplies, bus fare, and health care. The money from the sale of rugs is significantly improving the quality of life for the families of Las Rancheritas.

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You can make a difference in the lives of Mexican women

big courtyard. Two women showed us how they pull the kernels off dried corn cobs, boil them with lime, grind them using a stone (nowadays they go to the mill) and form them into tortillas and gorditas. The masa is less finely ground for gorditas.

An herb called micle makes a purple dye. They use a corn cob to rub the dye onto a wooden stamp, press the tortilla onto the stamp, and create a decorated tortilla. Only done for special occasions.

They served us a delicious lunch of potato patties (coated with egg & fried), chili rellenos, rice, beans, nopales salad, guacamole, pico de ~~g~~ gallo, tacos dorados, cheese, two kinds of fresh salsa, and guava juice.

The next house was even nicer. The owner has a green card and can go back & forth to work in the states. The women served us ^{winter} squash cooked in piloncillo sugar & water, jamaica (hibiscus) juice, and showed us how to make cucumber lime agua fresca (peel & slice cuke, put in blender with water, pour into more water, squeeze in limes, add sugar).

They showed us medicinal herbs.

Next we went to Doña Maria's. She is 91 years old. She had 11 children but only

only 5 are still alive. When she was young her family made clay jars from local clay and took them into SMA on donkeys to sell. She still has the last one she made 60 years ago. After that the reservoir drowned their village and the clay. The gov't. moved them to higher ground. Her courtyard has big trees and lots of chickens.

The hooked rugs, trivets, and potholders are not my thing and were pricey, but some were pretty. They get donated wool fabric and cut it into strips with scissors.

Doña Maria spoke to us in Otomi so we could hear it. It's a dying language, not being taught to young people.

I got back about 5 then walked into town to see the folk dancing from 7-8. Front row seat. I always enjoy the costumes. The music can get a bit monotonous.

Forgot to say that our last stop in the village was a viewpoint at the edge of town where we had a view of the desert, fields, and reservoir, with SMA in the distance.

Doña Maria told us the unusual process for making jars. They used an existing jar as a mold, cut the new jar off in pieces, let them air dry, then assembled them with wet clay. They used corn cobs and smooth stones for texture. Sometimes they added red clay for color. They fired six dozen at a time in a brick enclosure. When the smoke color changed from red to blue it was time to stop adding wood and let the pots cool.

Fri Jan. 19

54° and overcast. Walked to La Comer. Grant tried the pork chile en pasillo tacos at the carnitas place across the street. He loved them. He also loved their green salsa.

I finally succeeded in ordering a free 7-day Mexico City driving permit online. I had to use my gmail address, and wen then it got sent to trash (not spam)! Once I had the pdf on my phone, I took it across to Lulú on El Cardo, emailed it to them and they printed it. Two pages, 5 pesos (30¢).

72° at 3 pm.

Walked into town by myself for the "musica taurina" concert (music of the bulls). Got pistachio ice cream and saved seats for Debbie & Claudette. Two "wind" bands, one from San Miguel and one from Celaya. They were going to take turns, but most of the Celaya bands were delayed, arriving 40 min. late, so the SMA band played first. The church bells distracted, as did the mass being piped out of the church speakers! I liked the Celaya band better. Killer trumpet and clarinet soloists. I left about 8:15 and the concert was still going. A chilly evening with a bit of wind. Many women in sleeveless dresses and bare legs out for a Friday night on the town. They looked cold!

Sat. Jan. 20

50° and raining! A little after 9 I walked to the Rosewood Hotel to meet Rebecca. I went into the lobby looking for warmth and ran into Laurie from Shaw Island. She comes there for coffee every morning. We had a nice chat before I went out to meet Rebecca. There were 6 of us in her car,

plus seven people in two other cars, for a total of 13. We drove toward Atotonilco and met up at Mexico Lindo Vintage yard, which sells (sold; it's closed now) all kinds of outdoor "yard art" made of wood. Fun to look around - the items are still sitting there even though it's closed.

Our first stop was Los Guerreros, a tiny community with an old chapel (calvario) and church. We were met by Ana + Ana Maria, two of the women in the Salud Indigena cooperative. Rebecca gave ~~of~~ us an overview of local history. This land was taken by the Spaniards, became a hacienda, the indigenous otomi became landless laborers, during Independence the soldiers would rest in the old church as they were passing through (thus the name Los Guerreros - the warriors). After the Civil War some of the land was given back to the community as an ejido. The hacienda was called La Petaca. Some of the land is still privately owned and is an event hotel. I learned that not everyone who lives in an ejido is an "ejidatario" or ejido owner/manager. Only they make decisions for the ejido.

The rain had stopped but it was cold. I had on four layers! The ground wasn't wet, but you could smell the petrichor (new word

I learned from Rebecca - the smell the earth gives off after a long time of warm dry weather).

An old calvario (small stone chapel representing one of the 12 stations of the cross), once part of the hacienda, is now used for ceremonies several times a year.

Rebecca said there are 500 villages in the greater San Miguel area.

The women showed us the old hacienda church. It had fallen into disrepair (built in 1874). Ana Maria's family fixed it up. There's rarely a priest, so it's mostly used for ceremonies. Inside there were some old wooden crosses, an old papier maché (?) bull mask used during spring planting ceremonies to instill fertility, and a special saint icon they carry from house to house when they need to raise funds for the community.

We also saw the old train bridge across the Laja River (dry now for 28 years). The mesquite trees used to produce fat, juicy fruits that were used to make all kinds of foods & beverages.

One of the gringa women wouldn't stop asking questions. I got tired of standing around and listening, so I talked to the Anas.

One has 12 kids and one has 7. Both have kids living in Dallas. Other kids commute into San Miguel to work construction. One said that when her kids were little they often didn't have enough to eat.

Next we drove to nearby La Cuadrilla, a bigger town with a school and 210 houses. (Population here seems to be expressed in number of households, not individuals). The women have built a cooperative building where they make and sell their plant-based products and medicines. Soaps, shampoo, creams, tinctures, oils. Other women sold lovely aprons & bags with sewn fabric designs. I bought a small jar of calendula cream for 60 pesos.

They served us a delicious lunch of potato patties, lentil soup, rice, beans, mole, garbanzos, guava juice.

On the way back I chatted with Avery, a young woman who is joining the merchant marine in May.

Back to camp at 2. The tour cost 350 (\$20). It was nice to get some time with Rebecca. She is working on a short documentary about the village women.

High 67 today. Grant has mild diarrhea

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and is still feeling tired from Covid.

At 7 I walked into town and met up with Debbie, to watch the torch parade commemorating Allende leading the peasant uprising. The parade came down from the mirador to the plaza: marching band, men on horseback in period dress, then campesinos in their huaraches, homespun clothes, and straw sombreros, shouting "Viva Allende!" It was very cool.

Sun Jan. 21

47° and overcast. Grant and I walked to Dulceria Regaliz to get him a bag of hard candies (just as effective as cough drops for a cough). I continued on to centro for the parade. The sun came out. A dozen marching bands, costumed insurgents on horseback, a darling group of little ones in folk costumes, cute little kid spectators, and two horsedrawn carriages carry Miss SMAs (?) in sparkly gowns & tiaras. No elders in a carriage this year. Sad to see the snare drummers wearing no ear protection. It's really a wonder that everyone over 30 in Mexico isn't deaf.

Showers, laundry, music. My nose is so dry that there's always blood. Saline- aloe nasal gel helps. Chatted with Steve Webster about the horrific poverty in the Phillipines (his wife, Bing, is Phillipina). They have sponsored 20 of her family members to come to Canada (and send money back home).

After dinner I walked into town for the concert + fireworks. The Guanajuato symphony played from 7-8:30, and then they had a phenomenal fireworks display with the church as a backdrop. Debbie + Rana came for part of the music, but Rana was asleep on her feet after an all-night flight. Claudette stopped by for a few minutes as well. The fireworks were supposed to start at 9. First time I've ever known anything in Mexico to start early!

Mon Jan 22

Met Debbie + Rana in the jardín at 11. Walked to the main market. Bought 15 palenquetas at the dulceria (got a discount - 30 each instead of 35). They were heavy in my backpack! Walked through the market then through the artisanal market.

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Grant was hungry & they weren't, so he headed back to the market to eat. We ate there a bit later. I had milanesa de pollo with rice, beans, & fries. I brought the rice & beans home and asked the staff to give the fries to a poor woman beggar who had come by the table. 130p (~\$8).

I showed them the library, then headed back to camp about 2. on the way I bought a tin Kleenex box cover that Grant wanted. 120p (\$7).

Lots of new rigs in camp. We're up to 8 now. Ron & Laurie from North Carolina are really nice.

Tues Jan. 23

55° this morning. Walked to Debbie's on Atascadero. She's renting a really nice one bedroom. She and Rana and I walked up to the mirador. They continued on to the Tuesday tianguis. They said it was chaotic and crowded with lots of made-in-China junk.

Started packing up camp. more rigs pulled in. There are now 10, including two from Germany and one from Switzerland.

SMA

Tolls SMA to Teotihuacan
534 p = \$31

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We had planned to go to tacos Santos for dinner but it's closed on Tuesdays.

We invited Amanda to come with us to Cafe Rama. Nice atmosphere but a bit noisy. My chicken pot pie was delicious, but there were a lot of peas to pick out! Grant said his arrachera (flank steak) fajitas were only OK. 540 + tip = 600 p (\$36). A splurge for us. It was nice to get to know Amanda. She's quite lovely. Took a digestive stroll around Parque Juarez and back to camp at 7. High today 75°. It's warm in the van.

Wed. Jan. 25

52°, on the road at 8:00. Climb the big hill toward Queretaro and stop for gas. We haven't seen grass fires this year (one reason the air is clearer). The first part of the 570 is rough roads and lots of semis. Air pollution is bad around Queretaro. After the Las Palmillas toll booth the road got smoother, and less crowded. Tolls 534 p (\$31) today. After a few stops for stretching and lunch, we arrived at camping Teotihuacan at 1:30. We couldn't fit in the gate to access the grassy area, and had to park in a dusty field. It was depressing. Francisco is

very friendly and speaks a little English. There are clean bathrooms, power, and wifi. We took our chairs onto the grassy area. It was windy. After a short while, Francisco said he'd made an opening in the fence and we could drive onto the grassy area. What an improvement! We're parked on grass in the shade, with no dust blowing around. There's an adorable brown puppy with up-and-down ears, two months old, and two older black dogs, both friendly. An Italian couple in a pop-up camper returned from the pyramids about 3. High 78° today.

Two Quebec couples pulled in with RAMs also (Travato-like motorhomes). One has a great license: Vangelina.

Potatoes & eggs for dinner. Cohetes exploding in town. Francisco says it's for ~~the~~ Candelaria (9 days from now).

Francisco rents 4-wheelers (cuatrimotos) and has quite a collection. Most look like they don't run anymore, so it kind of feels like a cuatrimoto junkyard.

Someone knocked over a power pole in town and the power went out, but not for long. The wifi here is good. We're at 7500 feet.

Teotihuacán

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Thurs. Jan. 25

Quiet night. Chilly. Woke up, closed roof vent and put on blanket. 43°.

Francisco let me know when the hot air balloons were up. There were about 30 of them right over camp! It was a gorgeous site. The sun was rising. He says they go up every morning, as many as 50. The quebecers from the campground went and said it was amazing.

Francisco gave us a ride the short distance to Gate 2. 95p entry fee (\$5.60). We arrived at 8:45 and it was open (website says it doesn't open until 9). The Pyramid of the Sun is big! Looks like a mountain. Hardly any people when we arrived, and it never got crowded. The north end is the best, with the pyramids of the sun and moon. We especially loved the graceful pyramid of the moon. It's over a mile from one end of the complex to the other. About 11 we decided to find a restaurant. The Gate 5 guard & vendors suggested La Gruta, a short walk across from the entrance. It was amazing! Tables with white cloths and multi-colored chairs inside a grotto with ~~candles~~ candles & Andean-flavored instrumental music. We split "cornfield soup" (corn kernels & beans in a flavorful broth) & ~~the~~ quesadillas (one

yellow corn with cheese, one orange tortilla with quelite greens, one green tortilla with mushroom, onion, and greens). Also chips and salsa. Everything was delicious and there was plenty of food. \$4.00 p (\$23) with tip. The waiter told us the Legend of the Gruta and gave us a lit candle to leave on the grotto steps. An unexpected and lovely experience.

Workers climb the steep sides to pull weeds off the pyramids. There are many souvenir vendors. I bought obsidian bracelets for Alex & Nicky. Jaguar "whistles" (sound like a screaming jaguar) are popular.

After lunch we visited the artifact museum, which had some cool stuff, and the adjacent small botanical and sculpture gardens. Then we headed south along the "main" street, called the Avenue of the Dead. It's a series of places with steep stairs between them. It was getting hot in the sun and we were getting tired. Happily, there was a nice breeze.

Finally we came to the big Ciudadela plaza and the small temple of Quetzalcoatl. This is the only pyramid you are still allowed to climb, but it was too steep

Tolls 518 p = \$30

Orizaba

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for me. The last site we wanted to see was the mural museum, but it was at the north end. We couldn't find a taxi so we ended up walking. The first part was along a flat, shady path. I got a strawberry popsicle (literally frozen pureed strawberries). Very refreshing! The last part of the walk was in the full sun. We were tired. The museum itself was nice and cool. We were the only ones there. Some nice frescoes from the site. We took a taxi back to camp (40p). Very nice driver. Back at 3 pm. High~~est~~ today 77.

Fri, Jan. 26

45°. Say goodbye to Francisco. On the road at 8:12. We decided to take the toll road instead of the libre. Libre takes longer and has topes but saves \$36. We ended up doing some of each, because Google maps wanted to route us around slowdowns on the cuota. Summary: parts of the libre were great and parts were endless topes; the cuota was fine when I was driving (the last $\frac{2}{3}$) but scary when Grant drove. He did not like the Arco Norte. He felt he was doing battle with trucks.

I don't mind the trucks, as long as you aren't in a hurry. We arrived at 2:30 p.m.

The Canadians, who left just before we did, arrived about 4. They said the libre was nice all the way. We ended up paying \$30 in tolls. Would have been \$36 if we'd stayed on the cuota the whole way.

Finally saw some solar farms near Puebla and wind turbines on highway 150 east of Puebla. We haven't seen any electric cars or charging stations, and there are a lot of new gas stations.

We took highway 132 D from Teotihuacan to the 57 D (nice road); 57 D is the Arco Norte. Great views of Popocatepetl billowing smoke. Then highway 150 D to Orizaba, with two stints on libres. Great views of snow-capped Orizaba. One section of the libre was through small towns in pine trees. One had an entrance portal with elaborate designs + bright colors. Another had a church with a beautiful woven straw archway. We saw a shepherd with a flock of goats, a young man.

We arrived at the parking place in Orizaba at 2:30. It's a lovely little neighborhood

with a big parking area, a small park with a playground, a little store (that mostly sells junk food), and a semi-circle of houses. Escamela mt. rises up behind the neighborhood. We're behind a Walmart commercial center, but it's not audible or visible.

We took a taxi into town - for 50 pesos (#3). First I asked a taxi that was parked here, but he said he wasn't working. Then he saw Grant open the hood and came over to ask if we needed help. Typical Mexican friendliness. *

It was 78° and 86% humidity. On the edge of comfortable for us.

The center of town was a lovely surprise. Beautiful "Iron Palace" designed by Gustav Eiffel and shipped here from Paris in 1892, a 17th-century cathedral with a colorful tiled dome, a classical theater from 1875, a pedestrian street, and a 3-km river walk lined with animals in cages (all born in captivity, but still it's depressing). There's also a cable car that takes people up a mountain for views of Orizaba. Other than the animals in cages, the river walk is delightful.

* Good thing Grant looked in engine compartment, because a hose had come loose!

The river is clean, there are big trees with shade, some murals, a cool breeze. Back in the center of town we found 30 peso (\$1.75) tortas near the square. milanesa de pollo on a fresh bolillo with refries, lettuce, tomato, and potato chips. They were good. We didn't want a heavy meal. Then we found an ATM. Grant waited on a park bench while I walked 4 crowded blocks to a fruteria for bananas, cucumber, and carrots. A taxi back to "camp" cost 45p (\$2.60). Lots of people out enjoying Friday evening. We didn't see a single gringo today. We got back to camp about 6 and the Canadians were here.

Sat Jan 27

58°. On the road at 7. Orizaba is at 4000 feet. We climbed up a wall of green mountain on a bumpy road, trucks grinding slowly upward, cars trying to pass. I'm guessing there are accidents! Oh, and it was curvy too. Saw trucks packed with logs cut into short sections not big enough for construction. The view from the mirador was spectacular. You could

Oaxaca

Tolls Orizaba to
oaxaca 422p = \$26
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see mt. Orizaba peaking over the hills, and 4200 down the steep mountain to Orizaba city. In between was verdant green, fields, and the serpentine highway climbing up. Two Guardia Nacional trucks with four guards who appeared to have spent the night. We saw several other trucks stationed along the highway.

Finally the road smoothed out and we made the transition from the semi-tropics to the high desert. Healthy century plants with flower buds looking like giant asparagus. Leafless trees with big white flowers.

Because I get scared on Mexican roads, and my fear is stressful for Grant, I did most of the driving today.

We drove through ~~the~~ columnar cactus forest (part of a biosphere reserve). Beautiful! Large yellow-flowering shrubs. Folded rock formations & canyons. Pulled over to take pictures and could hear the whup-whup of wingbeats as ravens flew by. This is a gorgeous drive. We climbed up and up and up.

We had to drive through Oaxaca city to get to El Rancho campground in Santa Maria del Tule. Dense traffic but it wasn't too crazy. Arrived at 2 pm. 85°. We're on the west

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side, which gets morning sun and afternoon shade. Our neighbors are Federica + Luigi from Italy. It's windy. Took nice hot showers. Rice + Beans Godfrey for dinner (rice + beans with sauteed cabbage + onion, sour cream, and green salsa for Grant). It was good. 66° at 8 pm.

Sun. Jan. 28

57° this morning. A comfortable night. The campground worker's name is Cali. He speaks Spanish very fast. He works hard. He keeps the bathrooms clean, and stocked with soap, t.p., and paper towels. They recycle almost everything, including organics. There is a pool, communal kitchen, washing machine, clothesline, and families with kids. Mostly Europeans (German, French, ^{Italian} Swiss). The language barrier makes it challenging to socialize.

The rear backup sensor service warning came on yesterday. Turns out it had rattled loose and was just hanging down. Very tricky to snap back in. We'll work on it when the back of the van isn't in full sun.

We walked into ~~the~~ Tule to buy cheese + yogurt from Lydia at Cremeria

Oaxaca

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Lopez, near the tree. Mennonite cheese (200 p for one kilo) and the only plain yogurt they had (Greek, 60 p). Windy again today.

Back to camp for lunch. Then we walked out to the road to catch a colectivo. These are red taxis. They were all full when they got to us. The private taxis wanted 150 to 200 p (collectivos are 15). Then the bus came along (8 p). We got off by the stadium, not realizing that the bus actually goes closer to centro. We walked to the zócalo, arriving one hour after getting on the bus. (The bus takes 20-25 minutes).

Nothing happening in the zócalo, even on a Sunday at 2 pm. There's no comfortable place to sit. Walked to 20 November market so I could ~~scr~~ scratch my chocolate con leche itch with a bowl of Oaxacan hot chocolate. We didn't enjoy being in the market - too crowded, and we've seen so many markets. Back to zócalo to sit for a bit, then up to Conzatti Park for an early dinner at Tortas la Hormiga. Pork milanese for Grant and chicken for me. Yummy, but Grant said not as good as he remembered. Mine was a bit spicy - next time ask for no escabeche. A hungry man was looking through the garbage can for food. I offered him the

rest of my sandwich and he smiled.

6 or 7 young people in Spiderman costumes also eating tortas in the park.

It's a short walk from there to the baseball stadium, where we caught a bus at 5:20. We got out near Tule church and got a pecan sorbet to share. A candelaria procession was winding through town setting off cohetes. It was getting cold. Back to camp at 6:15.

On the way we saw a flock of parrots! They were ~~squawking~~^{squawking} and scattering when a cohete went off. Today's high 75°. I slept almost 10 hours!

Mon. Jan. 29

44° this morning. We're at 5000 feet. Warm days, cool nights. We popped the sensor back in.

Left camp at 9:30. Waited about 10 minutes for a bus. Halfway to town the transmission gave out. The driver transferred us to another bus a few minutes later.

The bus turns left onto Vasconcelos. We got off at the ISSSTE (social security office) and walked down Curtidurias, a new street for us. It has murals, local

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eateries, and gringo hangouts. We liked it.

Short walk to the Oaxaca Lending Library (OLL) on Pino Suarez, just south of El Llano Park. One hour door to door. We arrived at 10:30, one ^{half} hour before the intro session was starting. 82-year-old Bill Pumphrey gave us a whirlwind tour of the facility. He's been involved for many years and is bursting with pride. They have thousands of books, ~~and~~ an army of volunteers, and information about activities and life in Oaxaca. Wifi, computers, bathrooms,

^{hangout space} The info session was from 11-12 and covered transportation, town geography, and how to find out what's going on. Grant looked through their kiosk listings and found a ukulele group and a birdwatching group. I learned about librosparapueblos.org, which has created children's libraries in over 60 villages. They'll be taking volunteers to read with children next week but it costs 800 p (\$48), a bit steep for me.

Lunch at El Biche Pobre nearby. We didn't like it. Boring Hayudas. Loud music from a TV playing Lawrence Welk-like Mexican singers doing overly-emotional ballads with orchestras. Waiter sweeping + mopping around our feet. 250p with tip (\$15).

Back to the library to finish perusing all

the information. Walking back to the bus we saw a restaurant called Isabel on Curtidurias that looked good.

Caught the bus across from ISSSTE. Heavy traffic. Dropped us off right across from the path to the campground. Got to camp around 3. After two trips to town we've concluded that we need to allow one hour door to door when we go into town.

High today 75°. It cools off fast when the sun goes below the trees, and the breeze is cool too. Had a nice chat with Federica and Luigi, who are leaving tomorrow.

Leftover tlaxudas with rice & beans for dinner. In the van by 6:30 and closed the door for warmth by 7.

Candelaria processions with music and cohetes, audible from camp.

Notes from the OLL intro:

The city of Oaxaca is in the Y-shaped Valle Central. The main ethnic groups are Zapotec & Mixtec. There are 8 regions in the state. Use the Cerro San Felipe mountain north of town to orient. You can either "walk, talk, or gawk" but never more than one at a time. "Don't ask why, ask how" in Mexico.