

Wilderness Danger in Mexico

The year was 1980: I was returning to Tepic from don Jose's village. It was late afternoon and I was traveling alone on a dirt road that was being cut along the river canyon. I was walking alone, which was not that unusual. I visited a remote Huichol village frequently, and had my own thatched hut there. Suddenly I came across a man on the side of the dirt road who had been recently shot. He was a fellow American and about my age. In his face was sheer terror; several local rancho children had come close to look and see what had happened. He asked me if he was dying: I said no. I looked closely at the wound in his stomach area, which was covered in blood, but it was not seriously hemorrhaging. By the size of the hole I guessed it had been a .38 caliber bullet that had entered, but had not exited the other side. A government (dept. of hydrology, dam construction) pick-up truck suddenly upon us and stopped as I waived to the driver. I explained that this person had been shot and needs to be taken to Tepic; the driver was scared and reluctant, but did allow us up into the back of the small truck.

As we started along the bumpy and dusty road we came across a couple, both Americans, who said they were friends of the man we were taking to Tepic. They were looking for his girl-friend who was missing. They were allowed to get on the truck as I explained (translated) to the driver more about the situation. This couple told me that all of them, two couples, had been rafting down the river together. They decided to stop here and buy food and soft drinks before continuing on. It was Sunday and some of the locals were drinking alcohol. One of the rancheros (ranchers/cowboys) decided he wanted one of the American girls, pulled a gun and demanded her at gun point. Her boyfriend objected and was shot. The other couple heard the shot and came to see the rancho running off with the girl, and her boy-friend lying on the side of the road, crying and yelling that he had been shot. His girl-friend was still missing and they asked if we could keep an eye out for her as we drove toward Tepic. About half a mile down the dirt road we saw her off to one side of the road, in the bushes, and we called to her. She came to us, saw her companions and got up into the truck. She had been raped, yet calm, and obviously was totally preoccupied with her boy-friend, who was possibly dying from the gun-shot wound.

I was a village “doctor”, a “barefoot doctor”, self- taught, who had been trying to help this small group of Huichols, and with a box of medicines (said to be sent via the INI and from Luis Echeverria’s wife). My experience with wounds was very limited. I told him the most important thing to do was stay calm, to breathe slowly and deeply, and not panic. He was bleeding, but I suspected that no veins or arteries had been hit, and it seemed to me that the bullet had missed any vital organs. The others talked with his girl, and found that she had been raped, and afterwards the rancho had run off.

Don Jose and his family had repeatedly suggested that I carry a gun when traveling between the village and Tepic. They all carried guns whenever possible (which was only part of the time) because in this area many of the rancheros had guns, an area that was considered very dangerous, especially if you are traveling alone. (Ramon Medina was killed [1971] not far from here, and also another shaman called Raquichi [1975]. There is a rumor that the primary cause of death for middle age male Huichols is homicide: if you add self inflicted-work related machete, axe and knife wounds this might be accurate. I recalled how a year before, when hiking alone to go and visit a remote pilgrimage site I had been apprehended by several rancheros. They had rifles and hand guns, and insisted I allow them to search my backpack, which they did. Nothing of any interest was found in my pack, and they allowed me to go on my way.

In Tepic, capital of the State, several of my friends seriously suggested that, as don Jose had, that I carry a gun while traveling out in the remote areas. They said that there is simply no way to assure one’s self defense; to go out there unprotected is very foolish, especially if traveling alone or at night. They said it might be possible to get me a gun permit.

After returning to Berkeley, California I heard another recommendation to carry a gun, when traveling alone in the remote Sierra Madre. This was from a close friend, and a person who had considerable experience with self- defense training. He paid for a course at Gunsite (Raven Corporation, Arizona) so that I could learn how to handle a gun safely. It was a course that lasted about five days: it placed strict emphasis on safety. I had fired rifles as a child when 11 or twelve years old, with a neighbor/adult in Palo Alto, California and thus I had some familiarity with guns.

The course at Gunsite was interesting. It was explained that when someone drew a gun on you, then you had about two seconds to realize it, and respond or not. These things happen unexpectedly, anytime and anywhere. That from one moment when everything is alright, to the next when you are looking at a gun pointed at you, or your loved ones This is a very brief period of time, approximately 2 seconds. Gunsite attempts to train an individual to recognize when this is actually happening, to correctly identify the aggressor, and respond in time to save your life.

On several occasions I tried carrying a gun when traveling in the remote Sierra Madre. It feels uncomfortable in several ways, physically and psychologically. True, for self protection it is probably the only practical approach in such a situation (similar to the Wild West of the late 1800's). Yet the bulk of the gun is a literal drag, and to constantly evaluate each and every person, and every move they make, always looking for a gun that could suddenly appear is tiring and difficult emotionally. There is a continual mind set required, a mental program. There are situations where this program will save your life, or of those that are close to you (which is what most owner's of guns believe). I recall Baba Hari Dass, a yoga teacher, who told me of a time when he carried a rifle, and helped train others in self defense, in the event of a Chinese invasion of India.

I met the man who was shot: I met him in Berkeley, Calif. at a carpenters shop. I was looking for places to make box containers for an electronic air purifier. While in the shop a man came up to me and asked if I was the one who helped him in Mexico. At first I did not recognize him: he looked so much better and not full of fear. He said that the breathing had been of immense help, and that it kept him from panic, that it kept him focused and alive. He had spent several days in the Hospital in Tepic and later flew back to the Bay Area. He told me that they had started the rafting trip south of Guadalajara, and had hoped to raft down the river to the ocean. The bullet had not damaged any vital organs, veins, etc. and as removed in Tepic. He felt very lucky and expressed gratefulness.

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The Tarahumara sierra mountain region also suffers from gun issues and serious events. See the accounts by the late ultra-long distance runner "Caballo Blanco".
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PS I had a conversation with a local sports shop manager and was informed that the only thing keeping their store afloat (during a recession) was gun sales. Conservative estimates are 50% of American homes contain guns, and less than 1% know how to use these safely.