



MARROONED *in* Mexico

STORY & PHOTOS BY MATT PERRIER

Regional Manager Matt Perrier got more than he bargained for on his quest to learn Spanish during his vacation.

"I'm on vacationnnnnnnn!!!"

As if to remind himself that he traveled to the "working ranch" under his own free will, Billy Crystal bellowed this statement as he bumped clumsily atop his bay horse in the movie *City Slickers*. Crystal's character had used his well-deserved vacation time to travel to a working ranch, where he was fortunate enough to deliver a calf, rope (and be dragged by) a feisty steer, and perform various other ranch duties.

During one week last July, I was not only reminded of this well-known line, but honestly thought I could write an entire screenplay regarding the turn of events during my week of vacation.

■ Getting set up

Over the past couple of years I have had a burning desire to learn Spanish. My

grandfather has lived in Mexico for more than 20 years, so this contributed to my connection with the Spanish culture.

However, due to the travel constraints of a livestock fieldman, it proved impossible to take a regular foreign-language class. When I talked with associates who had learned Spanish, they assured me that the most effective way to grasp a foreign language is to immerse yourself for as long as possible among people speaking that language.

I had been to Mexico twice — not counting a college road trip to Juarez City. During each of two summers I traveled to the *Confederación Nacional de Ganaderos* in Morelia, Michoacan, and Zacatecas. These meetings were the national conventions for Mexico's cattle industry, and we were all treated well. The food was always second to none, and the people were

as hospitable as Aunt Bea at a family reunion.

I spoke with a Mexican cattleman I had gotten to know at bull sales and stock shows last fall and winter. Last spring at the Houston Stock Show & Rodeo I told him my plan, then asked if he would be interested in hosting me during part of my stay in Mexico. He happily accepted my request, and I instantly began looking forward to this adventure.

■ And it begins

Not wanting to drive my car in Mexico, I contacted Cornelia Musquiz, whom I had met at the International Exhibition in San Antonio last winter. She lives in Eagle Pass, Texas, and graciously accepted my request to store my car at her house while I was south of the border.

The Musquiz family operates a ranch in northern Mexico, and Mrs. Musquiz speaks

Above: Since the people at the ranch had not seen cameras before, any picture in which I am present was taken with the timer on the camera. As you can see, most of the vaqueros weren't very large. Genetics or environment?

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fluent Spanish. She drove me across the border to Piedras Negras, Coahuila.

Once in Mexico, I climbed aboard with a young *hombre* named Isidro, who was to transport me farther into Mexico. We made our way to the town where I was to meet the cattleman, whom I will simply call *El Patrón*, Spanish for “the boss.”

Isidro knew a bit of English, so we were able to communicate, although clumsily. The drive was quick, as all of the scenery was new to me. The fact that we drove between 90 and 110 mph (not kilometers per hour — MILES!) most of the way probably helped speed the trip a bit, as well.

When we arrived at our destination, Isidro dropped me off at *El Patrón*’s office, and he returned to Piedras Negras. I was glad to finally see the familiar face of *El Patrón*, as my trip until then had been completely unfamiliar.

He took me first to a fly-filled grocery and meat market, where we purchased large bags of fruits, vegetables and meat. Twenty people shopped the aisles of this open-air building, which was void of any refrigeration for meat or vegetables.

As I was asking myself why we were buying in such volume, *El Patrón* looked at me and asked, “What else?”

I meekly asked, “Should I drink the water at the ranch?” He laughed and immediately ordered a frail young boy to place two 5-gallon bottles of purified water in the cart. He then shoved a grease-soaked paper sack full of fried food toward me. I grabbed the smallest piece I could find for a taste. The



Fresh tortillas were mixed, rolled and grilled each morning and evening. They were a staple food, along with extremely sweet “cowboy coffee,” potatoes and beans.

pieces resembled small, elongated chunks of fried chicken gizzards, but I was uncertain of their true identity.

“Tripe,” he said with a Spanish accent and a smile. The more I chewed, the bigger this “variety meat” became. If this was the kind of “variety” that was the spice of life, I decided I would just be bland.

Each type of vegetable, as well as the meat, was unwrapped, and each was held in individual plastic grocery bags. We threw all of the foods in the back of a mud-caked truck bed and began to drive north out of town.

Driving up the dirt road in the hot sun, I wondered how long the meat would keep in such conditions. The answer, along with answers to many other of my questions, was a long time coming.

After an hour in the truck, *El Patrón* told me that he had some problems that he had to attend to at his office, but he would leave me at his ranch with his ranch manager until he could come back in two days. From this point forth to the ranch, I do not remember a thing — not the conversation, not the scenery, NOTHING. I now can admit that it was because I was as scared as a chicken on neck-ringin’ day.

■ A long ride

When we arrived at the south end of the ranch, we met *El Patrón*’s ranch manager, Manuel. He was a striking man with a rough beard who wore a straw hat showing



The *cabritos*, or “kids,” were tethered to yucca plants by one leg while they were young. This kept the nannies close to the ranch, so the group could be watched more easily.

years of hard work . Complete with Ray-Ban® aviator sunglasses and a lit cigarette, he would have been the perfect “Marlboro Man” of Mexico.

I was told that I was to stay in the house where *El Patrón* resided when at the ranch, but, because the shower head was broken, I would have to splash water on myself for a shower. This did not bother me too much, as keeping clean was the least of my worries at that time.



Drinking water was hauled to all of the houses on the ranch each week. Three men resided in this bamboo hut and cared for the *chivas*, or “goats.”

Manuel drove a 1978 two-tone blue Ford pickup. The bed was full of loosely piled Johnson grass, which had been cut from the road ditch with small scythes by three of the men. This, I later realized, was feed for some of the horses and mules.

After tossing my bag and the dust-laden sacks of food from the market on top of this Johnson grass, I climbed into the front seat of the pickup. Manuel drove, while José, a small 17-year-old boy, and I rode along. I introduced myself to both in my best possible Spanish, and then said, “¿Como esta?” meaning “how are you?”

“Bien,” or “good,” was the manager’s reply. Just *bien*, nothing more.

This was not quite the warm *Bienvenidos* welcome that I had imagined. So the 15-minute ride from the ranch gate to the house was a long one.

Five minutes into the bumpy ride over rocks and sink holes, I tried to ask (in Spanish, of course) little José what he had done that day. He looked at me with eyes bigger than tortillas, shaking his head in amazement. It was as if he wanted to say, “Gringo, I have never seen or heard anything like I am seeing and hearing right now.”

I questioned the ranch manager as he drove, “How do you say, ‘What did you do today?’” A slow half-glance over and an ensuing shake of his head told me that neither of these guys knew one word of English.

I strongly desired a Spanish-to-English translating dictionary, but I had assumed that *El Patrón* would be my personal dictionary. *El Patrón* knew enough English to help me. One simple problem arose — my translator had left me. I was drowning in the culture and the language I had so hoped to better understand.

■ Alone

We arrived safely at the ranch, and I was pointed to my bed in the house. Five *vaqueros*, or cowboys, unloaded the food and water in a corner of my room — and left. By now, all the food, meat included, had a good coating of dust and had been in the hot afternoon sun for more than two hours.

I thought it was odd that the meat was not put into a refrigerator, but a quick scan of the grounds showed that there was no electricity with which to run a cooling device. There was a propane bottle, but it was utilized solely for cooking on the gas stove. There were no phone lines, and the two-way radio tower was rusted like it had



Another self-portrait was taken with the assistance of the timer on my camera. This was shot after gathering a group of 50 Longhorn pairs. Out of breath from the sprint to my horse and barely in the saddle, it gave new meaning to a “Photo Finish.”

not been used in years.

My room was on the end of what used to be a beautiful house. It was the nicest *casa* on the ranch, as it housed members of the owners’ families when they visited the ranch. It was clean enough, but severely dilapidated. There was an unlit kerosene lantern on the nightstand, and a few plastic flowers decorated the spacious room.

Suddenly I noticed everyone was gone. Where there had been a flurry of activity from 10 people just five minutes before, now there was a silent desert.

It was now dusk, and knowing that Mexican “supper” is usually very late, I assumed that the *vaqueros* were eating. I wandered around the headquarters and finally saw a few doors along a long adobe structure perpendicular to my room. I assumed the ranch hands lived there.

I also saw a much older, but identical, building running in the same direction about 100 feet to the north of this first house. It housed the *cocina*, or “kitchen,” and various storage rooms, I later learned.

After walking around the older adobe, I saw Manuel outside one of the doors taking a long, slow draw on a cigarette. He didn’t look up, just nodded to the door as I approached. As I stepped up into the dark *cocina*, I saw six *vaqueros* sitting and standing in this dark, hot room, which smelled of 100 years of burning lard.

One young man was rolling out tortillas, while another turned them on the fire. A third peeled potatoes for frying. Not a word was said for 30 minutes. Then we sat down to eat in silence.

I wondered why we had not used the dust-covered, luke-warm meat from the



The ranch manager, Manuel, portrayed the perfect “Marlboro Man” of Mexico. With the last draw of each cigarette, he would hold the smoke in his lungs for what seemed like a full minute, before slowly exhaling. A low, raspy voice and dark, hardened skin showed years of labor in the hard desert environment.

market, but the hot tortillas were the best that I had ever had. I decided I might be able to live on them alone. It was a good

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thing, because, along with a few potatoes and beans, that was all we ate for the remainder of my stay.

I retired to my room immediately after the meal and lay awake as four of the *vaqueros'* children played soccer outside my window. In the seclusion of that small room, I prayed a lot.

Some might say that I found God that night. Luckily, I found Him years ago, but we were very close that first evening in Mexico! I simply asked that He keep me alive, healthy and sane enough to endure until *El Patrón's* promised return in two days.

■ A new day

I woke up that first morning well-rested, but anxious about my first full day on the ranch. I ate breakfast in the *cocina* about 8 a.m., then sat in the shade with the *vaqueros* for a few minutes.

A truck arrived that first morning, and each day following, with a load of hay from irrigated fields about 170 kilometers (105 miles) away. The *vaqueros* began stacking these light bales, and I decided to pitch in.

I thought these guys were going to fall out of the barn! I guess they had assumed I would not be helping with the work, but I was determined to do what was required to win their respect. They stacked bales a bit differently than I was accustomed to, haphazardly throwing them into loose, teetering stacks. I doubt some of the stacks are still standing today.

After unloading the hay, we loaded 10 ranch-raised mules into the same truck.



Carlos and Juan spent each day building dirt tanks, or ponds, across this arid ranch. The white trailer was towed behind the dozer between digging jobs. It came complete with cots and "girly calendars" for these heavy-equipment operators. All cooking was obviously done over an open fire.

They were bound for a new home in Puebla, south of Mexico City. Watching the *vaqueros* load these animals was my first opportunity to see them work with livestock. It was loud, abrasive, and far from what animal welfarists would prefer to see.

When the mule-loaded truck left, four of us traveled by pickup to a ranch where we spent the morning scooping years of dried manure out of a corral. After eating a taco consisting of a flour tortilla, fried potatoes, and beans in the tiny hut, home to that ranch's *vaquero*, we carried water and food to two other ranches.

I soon realized that this was a massive spread with six different ranches, but none of them had drinking water in this high-desert country. Therefore, the one pickup on the ranch served as the delivery truck for water and supplies once a week. This was no small feat, considering that two mountain ranges and only haphazard dirt

roads crisscrossed the entire spread.

However, no matter what we delivered, what time of day, or to which destination, there was one constant. There always would be "cowboy coffee" with lots of sugar already added, served lukewarm over a small campfire.

When we arrived that afternoon at a ranch consisting of 500 head of nanny goats, I was extremely thirsty. I had declined the continuous cups of water out of the barrels in the pickup, as I knew that my digestive system would not appreciate the microscopic bugs in the native water. I had neglected to pack my own bottled water that morning, unaware we would not return to the ranch until nightfall.

When I saw a pot of boiling water, ready for coffee, I poured myself a cup and backed away from the fire as others stirred in their coffee and sugar. They politely offered the coffee to me, but I declined. I had never drunk boiling water before, but as thirsty as I was, I did not care if anything was added to it! I am sure that they did not understand at the time why I didn't drink unboiled water, but later I explained the potential effects. My explanation was met with many smiles and chuckles.

Dinner was the same that evening, tortillas and potatoes, with a bit more conversation than my first night. I didn't understand a word, but again enjoyed the handmade hot tortillas. I was happy that the silence was broken.

■ Conversation pieces

On my second morning, breakfast had an extra treat, in addition to the tortillas and potatoes. The meat purchased two days prior was finally used for *carne asada*, a spicy beef stew of sorts. I hesitated to partake of the food, knowing how long the meat had been unrefrigerated. However, as



A band of 50 high-quality mares roamed the best pasture on the ranch. These mares produced all of the saddle horses and were often mated to burros, resulting in extremely good mules.



Fifty-gallon barrels full of gasoline and diesel fuel for the pickup, dozer and truck were unloaded in primitive fashion. The tire was positioned on the ground to decrease the sudden impact; but judging by the numerous dents on the barrels, it did not totally solve the problem.

I dared to try it, I realized that it was very tasty after two days in my room — possibly a “new” aging process for red meat!

After breakfast Manuel approached me and asked a question. The only word I understood was *caballo*, which means “horse.” Remembering that the night before I had asked if I could ride with one of the *vaqueros*, I assumed that today was the day. I was pointed toward a 15-hand-tall roan appaloosa. They stuck me with the quietest steed on the place, but he sufficed.

José, a 17-year-old boy who was the cousin of the other José, guided me into a beautiful canyon in the Sierra de Salsipuelles mountain range where we checked the pasture’s one source of water. We only saw eight cows, but plenty of beautiful country.

José was a well-spoken young man and was a spitting image of actor Lou Diamond Phillips. I found that I could understand him better than any of the rest. He was willing to answer my questions about words in Spanish, and I learned more that



José, a well-spoken 17-year-old *vaquero*, saddles a *mula* for the day’s ride. Mules were used alongside horses, as they made terrific mounts for the mountain country.

morning than in the two days prior.

It was during that morning ride that I realized there was hope in my quest to learn this language and enjoy this trip.

This was the day when *El Patrón* was to arrive at the ranch. When the daily load of hay came that afternoon, Ricardo, the truck driver, said *El Patrón* would be here *mañana*. Remembering that my grandfather once told me that *mañana* sometimes means “later,” not necessarily “tomorrow,” I did not get my hopes up.

After unloading the hay, we also unloaded six 50-gallon drums of diesel fuel and gasoline for the ranch. These barrels were dropped from the high truck bed onto the ground, then stacked in one of the barns. To utilize the fuel, the men sucked it through a siphon hose into a 5-gallon bucket, then poured it through a funnel into the pickup.

After unloading the fuel, we all went to the corral. Three *vaqueros* roped one of the colts and started him on the halter. Again, these folks would not make Temple Grandin or Monty Roberts proud. Their way of working with animals seems rough to us, but it works for them.

■ Biding time

Day 4, and still no *Patrón*.

We made another food and water run to the west side of the ranch. On this occasion we also carried along six barrels of diesel fuel. On our way across the ranch I noticed several newly built dirt tanks, or ponds. We soon arrived at a D4 Caterpillar dozer with a Mrs. Baird’s Bread truck-turned-camper-trailer set up alongside.

Two men, Juan and Carlos, operated this machine, building tanks all over the ranch. They lived in the small, old box trailer, which was pulled behind the dozer between tank jobs. The pliers scabbard on Juan’s

belt, coupled with the “girly calendars” inside the trailer, told me that similarities between groups of folks in Mexico and the States are more numerous than I had realized.

The food, water and fuel were unloaded, and we sat down for — you guessed it, COFFEE.

Day 5. No *Patrón*.

This evening was like every other — crystal clear and 60° F. After dinner about four of us stood outside talking and looking at the stars. I tried to point out the Big Dipper and other constellations, but it was clear that the men were not familiar with constellations.

As we talked about their past, my previous assumption held true. Most of these men grew up on this ranch or in a small town of 3,000 people 60 miles south of the ranch. Some of the *vaqueros* had been to other ranches where they had worked, but few had been many other places.

They went to school for only a few years and worked after that. They knew nothing more than ranching, and they did not have need for much else. They knew that the hay truck would come every few days with necessary food, and if they were needed, someone would send word.

Feeling like the new kid in high school who would do anything to fit in, I had followed the lead of all the *vaqueros*, wearing the same shirt and jeans each day since I had arrived. However, thinking that *El Patrón* would surely arrive today, the sixth day since my arrival, I decided to put on a different shirt than the one I had worn the past four days.

In addition, I thought that I would finally take a shower (again, no one else had bathed, so I wanted to conform). However,

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Angus bulls are being used on heifers for the first time on this ranch. Neighbors of this ranch are watching, doubtful that black cattle will survive the environmental conditions. If the bulls survive and if the calves perform respectably, I believe many area ranchers will follow suit.

upon inspection of this “shower with a broken head,” I immediately decided against my plan. Not only was the shower broken, but there were about six inches of moldy water standing inside the tub. I walked outside to the spicket off the windmill and rinsed off my hair and face. I was certainly clean enough for my *compadres*.

■ A no-show

Once again, *El Patrón's mañana* meant later.

Three days had passed since he sent word that he would be here the following morning. Six days had passed since he had said that he would return in two days.

This day Ricardo arrived with another load of hay and handed me a crumpled handwritten letter. *El Patrón* wrote that he had experienced some more troubles and would not make it to the ranch. However, he said that I was to ride back to his office in the hay truck tomorrow.

Fortunately, I was getting along fine and actually enjoying my time on the ranch. Otherwise, the turn of events might have really enraged me.

Five days later than I had planned, I departed from the ranch. I was actually sad to say good-bye to these folks, knowing that I probably would never see them again. After a few pictures, I said, “*Adios*,” and prepared to depart for *El Patrón's* house in town.

Since there was no more hay to be hauled for now, the truck driver told Manuel to bring me to town in the pickup. I had not planned on changing clothes,

thinking that I would take a much-needed shower once I got back to civilization.

However, when I saw Manuel walk out of his house with a jet-black pair of Wranglers, a multi-colored Western shirt, and a clean straw hat, I knew I had better put on some clean rags. I realized this was the first time Manuel had been able to go to town in months, and he was ready! I changed my jeans and shirt, threw my bag in the truck, and we were ready to go.

When we arrived in town, Manuel and I received word that *El Patrón* was called away on business and was not at home. However, he had reserved a motel room for me, and tomorrow I was to ride with Ricardo, the hay truck driver, to Monclova, where we would meet *El Patrón* for my trip north to our meeting in Sabinas.

To celebrate their time away from the ranch, Manuel, Ricardo and I enjoyed an icy-cold Tecate-brand beer. A cold beverage had never tasted so good, after a week with no liquids served less than room temperature.

The motel did have a working shower, and it was AWESOME! It wasn't anything fancy and had very little water pressure, but it was the best shower I had ever taken.

■ A new outlook

After finally meeting with *El Patrón*, we traveled to Sabinas, Coahuila, where we met and ate lunch with Lionel Chambers of the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers' Association; Juan Hernandez, of the Texas Department of Agriculture; and three other Mexican ranchers. They were planning a



Although there were limited pieces of machinery, there were still plenty of breakdowns on the overly stressed equipment. Here, Ricardo, who was soon to be my ride back to civilization, works on the hay truck.

future ranch tour for northern Mexico.

The meal provided the first meat I had consumed in nearly a week and the first English I had heard or spoken in eight days. I immediately realized how many things I had taken for granted before my vacation.

As I returned through the U.S. Customs checkpoint in Eagle Pass, Texas, with my fellow Americans, Lionel and Juan, I reminisced about my nontraditional vacation without a shower, electricity or any other so-called necessities.

Happy that I had made it through this adventure, and even happier that I was now back on home ground, I thought of a new line for the next *City Slickers* sequel. “I'm OFF vacation!”



Worth a thousand words

As I cautiously pulled out my camera for my first picture at the ranch, all of the people looked on with curiosity. It was the first time most of them had seen a camera. By the end of the trip, they loved being “shot,” and they even asked to see the pictures after I had them developed.

After returning from eight days of primitive living, with not so much as a clock or a telephone anywhere, I dropped off my film at a Walgreens Drug Store at 6:45 p.m. Fifty minutes later I picked up these pictures, perfectly developed.

Ahh, technology.