

The Trip of a Lifetime

It was an American friend who put me in touch with Alejandro. The plan was that we two should hire a four-by-four and spend three weeks exploring the cacti of Northern Mexico. Now Alejandro does not speak English, so we were glad to secure the services of a guide/interpreter who not only had a degree in English but who also claimed to have diplomas in Nahuatl and German. Alejandro collected the car and myself from Mexico Airport, and we headed north to Gran Paraíso where we were to pick up our interpreter.

Having established ourselves in the town's one hotel (one star, to be generous), we set out on a preliminary reconnaissance of the locality. Our guide proved to be impenetrably taciturn. While he was not looking, I asked Alejandro in my best Spanish what his name was and why he remained silent. This I did by pointing at him, holding my lips together between finger and thumb, then waving my arms about in an interrogatory manner. Alejandro spoke at some length to our translator, who did not appear to understand what was said to him, but pulled a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket and wrote the word *Sordomudo*.

Our first stop was a likely-looking rocky slope, so I jumped out with my camera. Alejandro put his hand into a pack-rats' nest, then leapt backwards screaming with a gila monster attached to his hand. Sordomudo immediately took charge, and he and I half-dragged, half-carried him to the car and we drove to the town's hospital. Sordomudo wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to the receptionist, who gave us the name of the hospital:

“Jesús María y el Burrito”.

An attendant with a wheelchair dashed in and rushed Alejandro away.

Next day we collected Alejandro, who had his hand bandaged and who still appeared to be a bit woozy. In spite of this he insisted on driving. He took us to a spectacular rock formation. I took lots of photographs, but cannot reproduce any of them here for reasons that will be revealed in due course. While I was thus engaged, Alejandro sat down on a rock, where a rattlesnake sneaked up behind him and bit him on the left buttock. (I took photographs of that, too). The same receptionist was on duty; Sordomudo wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to her. I don't know what he wrote, but it must have been very funny because she burst out laughing, followed by several doctors and attendants who all seemed to be in danger of splitting their sides.

The following day we collected Alejandro again. He really was not fit to drive, so we decided to stay near town and behave like tourists. A few drinks in a *tapas* bar in a nearby village turned into a tequila slammers competition, which I won, I am proud to say. Sordomudo would not let me drive back. Alejandro could not put any weight on his left side, so he sprawled on the back seat. For some reason Sordomudo drove straight off the track into the middle of an enormous clump of cholla (*Cylindropuntia imbricata* (Haw) Knuth). Alejandro suddenly shouted “Geronimo!” and leapt out of the car.

At the hospital I am sure that the receptionist said *burrito*, though to me it sounded like *borracho*. Sordomudo did not need to write anything down this time; there was no need. There was hardly a square inch of Alejandro that was without a piece of cholla hooked into him.

Next morning (our third in Gran Paraíso) Alejandro had so many sticking plasters attached to him that I felt it would be too embarrassing to take him back to the hotel. So I decided that we would travel a little further out and camp overnight. We saw some wonderful plants, at least I did, and I took lots of photographs. Alejandro sulked in the car, and Sordomudo remained as obstinately uncommunicative as ever. After a hearty meal of sausage and beer, I scouted round for a suitable place to pitch our tents. Alejandro had already chosen a spot, but I overruled him because of the close proximity of a hornets' nest. Not far away there was a dry river bed, and it was a matter of moments to drive our tent-pegs into the soft but firm sand.

As darkness fell, a spectacular thunderstorm broke out over the distant mountains. Incessant lightning turned the sky over the mountains a beautiful electric blue. Sordomudo jabbed his finger towards the spectacle and jumped up and down.

“Si, muy bravo”, I said. *“Molto bellissima*, jolly nice, what!”

Well, we drifted off into a well-deserved sleep. I dreamt that I was being carried along by a torrent. I woke to find that I was.

To cut a long story short, I was able to scramble ashore where the flood took a bend. I sat and shivered until dawn, then went in search of my companions and our belongings. There were no companions, no belongings, no tents, no four-by-four. All gone. I blundered in misery until I chanced upon a well-used track. There I flagged down an early farm truck, and said:

“*Jesús María y el Burrito.*”

This did not appear to mean anything to the dull-witted peasant driver, so in desperation I waved my arms about and shouted:

“Hospital Hospital Hospital!”

For some reason the peasant dimwit dropped me off at the police station in Gran Paraíso. Anxious about my missing companions, I strode up to the counter and explained in my best Spanish:

“*Yo.*”

Then I placed my hand as if to shade my eyes, turned my head from side to side several times, and continued:

“Lookee Lookee Sordomudo.”

“¿*Sordomudo?*”

“*Si, Sordomudo.*”

At this two policemen each took me by one arm, while a third propelled me into the street with the sole of his boot. I heard one of them say “*loco*”.

They could have told me that without being so offensive. As instructed, I made my way to the railway station, but it was completely unoccupied. Furthermore, there were numerous large *Ferocactus latispinus ssp latispinus* growing between the metals. Clearly trains were infrequent. So I walked on to the hospital (which, by the way, is not called *Jesús María y el Burrito* but the *Prohibido Estacionarse*), rang the bell at reception, and (it was a different receptionist) demanded:

“Sordomudo.”

“¿*Usted sordomudo?*”

“*Si.*”

Two burly orderlies were dragging me to the exit door when I had the presence of mind to shout:

“Alejandro Alejandro Alejandro!!!”

At this the receptionist and the orderlies burst out laughing. One of them escorted me to a room, in which Alejandro, still covered in sticking plasters, was fast asleep and attached to wires and tubes and a heart monitor. There was no sign of Sordomudo.

I never did find out what happened to Sordomudo. Feeling myself to be alone and vulnerable in a hostile environment, and concerned that the car hire company might start enquiring after their property, I hitched a series of lifts into Mexico City, where I was escorted to the British Embassy by two armed policemen. After many hours of bureaucratic idiocy and inquisition, followed by a great pantomime of signatures and rubber stampings, the Passport Officer reluctantly gave me a travel document and a one-way ticket to Heathrow.

I shall not go back to Mexico next year in case I am remembered. Because my French is almost as good as my Spanish, and because it lies on the other side of the world, I intend to visit Madagascar, where my presence will, I am sure, be better appreciated.