

Meeting Danger Well South of the Border

Central American Migrants Brave a Risky Trek
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TECUN UMAN, Guatemala -- Mario Lobo stood on the muddy bank of the Suchiate River just after dawn, staring dispiritedly at the roiling current separating him from Mexico.

The slight, 22-year-old Honduran was still 1,500 miles from the U.S. boundary line. But for Lobo and tens of thousands of other impoverished Central Americans who sneak into the United States each year, the real border begins here, at Guatemala's frontier with Mexico -- and onward through the entire length of Mexico -- as they embark on a succession of ordeals of which the dangerous trek through the desert into Arizona or Texas is merely the final chapter.

Every step requires split-second decisions that can mean the difference between life and death. Should they ford a rushing river or spend precious pennies on a raft ride? Are the bandits on a remote path more dangerous than the immigration checkpoints along the main road? And will hopping a speeding freight train dramatically reduce the journey time, or will a slip and a fall permanently cut it short? Lobo had heard about these perils from others who had made this trip before. Yet as he contemplated the coffee-colored waves of the Suchiate, all other dangers paled in comparison with the one foremost in his mind.

"That water," he muttered to his two traveling companions, "looks very deep."

Most migrants cross the river on rafts built from two black inner tubes lashed to a couple of planks of wood. But the raft owners charge 10 Guatemalan quetzales per person -- about \$1.30. Lobo and his friends had only seven quetzales between them.

"We can wade across like him," suggested one of Lobo's friends, Francisco Quintero, 28, pointing to a sinewy man who was pulling his raft against the current with a rope tied around his waist. "See, the water only reaches to his chest."

"No," answered Lobo glumly. "Look at him. He's not wading, he's swimming. You know how to swim. I don't."

Quintero gave a sigh that betrayed a touch of impatience. A veteran of the trip north with wide scars across his body to prove it, he had left a construction job in Reno, Nevada, to help guide one of his nephews from Honduras to the United States. Lobo and their third friend, Juan Vicente, 24, had decided to come along, drawn by the promise of jobs that pay more than \$3 a day.

But Quintero's nephew had changed his mind on the bus from Honduras before the foursome ever reached the run-down border town of Tecun Uman, terrified by the stories he was hearing from fellow passengers.

Now it looked as though Lobo was going to bail as well.

"Okay," Quintero finally said. "What if I offer that rafter our seven quetzales to take only you? Juan and I can swim across."

Lobo silently nodded his assent.

About 20 minutes later the trio was standing on the opposite bank of the river, drying off with a towel supplied by a friendly Mexican woman. She watched from the doorway of her concrete-block hut as Vicente applied deodorant and Quintero carefully combed his hair. From this point forward, they knew, it would be crucial to blend in.

"Which way are you headed?" the woman asked.

"We're going to walk to Arriaga, then hop on the train from there," Quintero answered casually.

The woman clucked her tongue. "Very dangerous," she said with a shake of her head. "Lots of thieves about."

The Train From Arriaga

About 160 miles farther north, at a shelter for migrants in Arriaga run by the local priest, a different set of Honduran friends were bent over a map of Mexico taped to the wall.

"My God, you mean we've only gotten this far!" Carlos Pineda, 22, exclaimed in dismay to Rafael Valencia, 18.

About 20 days earlier they had set off for the train station at Arriaga -- the southernmost terminus in Mexico -- from the same riverbank that Lobo and his friends had just reached. The slashes through each pocket of Valencia's jeans offered a hint at what the pair had endured since.

Their troubles began, they said, when six masked men wielding rifles and machetes ambushed them on a quiet stretch of the dirt path the two had chosen to skirt immigration checkpoints along the main road. "The bandits made us strip naked. Then they ripped through our clothes with their knives looking for money," Pineda recalled.

The thieves found 600 Mexican pesos -- about \$50 -- that Pineda and Valencia, both bus drivers back in Honduras, had saved for the journey through Mexico. But the bandits missed an extra \$7 that Pineda had stuffed down one of his socks. So he was still hopeful a few days later when he and Valencia met three Salvadoran women walking along the same path.

The prettiest had hair down to her shoulders and told Pineda she had left behind a 2-year-old girl, he recalled. She reminded Pineda of the wife and daughter he'd said a tearful goodbye to in Honduras.

Their conversation ended abruptly when seven men armed with pistols suddenly popped out of the foliage.

Once again the migrants were forced to strip. This time the thieves found Pineda's \$7 stash, he said. One of them also stole Valencia's sneakers, leaving him with a pair that was too small and falling apart.

Then one of the bandits grabbed the woman Pineda had been chatting with and ordered Pineda and Valencia to get lost as he began dragging her toward the forest.

"She was crying, begging him, 'Please, don't do this. Take everything you want. But don't do this,' " Pineda recounted in a miserable whisper. "The bandit punched her in the face and shouted, 'Shut up, stupid dog!' "

By the time a third gang of robbers accosted Pineda, Valencia, and another man on their path a few days later, Pineda recounted, they had nothing of value left. Enraged, the thieves began hacking at the third man with their machetes as Pineda and Valencia sprinted away.

"I knew this trip would be hard," Pineda said in a choked voice, blotting tears from his eyes with his white T-shirt. "But not like this."

Valencia, meanwhile, was more preoccupied with a rumor spreading through the shelter that a freight train would be leaving that night.

He pulled Pineda aside to share some train-hopping tips he had learned on previous trips north.

"See, when the train is moving, be careful not to run too close alongside it," Valencia explained, using his right hand to simulate a train moving along the dining table and his left hand to show a little man running toward it at top speed. "Otherwise the air will suck you right under the wheels."

The little finger-man slid under Valencia's right hand and collapsed on the table with a splat.

Pineda gave a weak chuckle. He looked like he wanted to vomit.

Yet as the afternoon gave way to evening, it was Pineda who seemed most eager to set out for the grassy expanse around the train station a few blocks away.

Several hundred migrants were already huddled there in the dimming twilight, waiting to stake out positions on the freight cars that rail workers were linking to form the train.

At about 10 p.m. the last car was rammed onto the back of the train with a bang that echoed in the pitch darkness. Migrants were now packed into every nook and cranny of the train.

For a moment there was total silence. Then the locomotive roared to life, and the train began to lurch forward with gathering speed.

Pineda and Valencia cheered from their perch atop a tanker car. "Woo-hoo!" the two friends could be heard yelling as the train thundered out of the station. "God is with us! To the North!"

The Shelter at Tapachula

Alan Delgado gripped the edge of his mattress and clenched his teeth in agony. His right leg had been amputated above knee. Yet the nerves in his thigh continued to tingle and spasm as though it were still there. His friend Julio Cesar Lambert gave him an understanding smile from the next bed over. Lambert was missing his left leg.

Twelve days earlier the two Hondurans had boarded a 10 p.m. freight train from the same station in Arriaga that Pineda and Valencia had just left. Now they were the newest wards of the Shelter of Jesus the Good Shepherd, a refuge for injured migrants in the town of Tapachula, back toward the Guatemalan border. Police and hospital workers send at least 40 mangled migrants a month to the shelter, a collection of whitewashed concrete-block rooms.

Delgado, a short 22-year-old with impish features, said he could still remember the relief he'd felt as their train pulled out of Arriaga. But his optimism had been tempered by the pouring rain and his awareness of the 11-hour ride ahead.

About an hour-and-a-half into the journey, Delgado said, four masked bandits armed with guns emerged from a hiding place on the train and began leaping from car to car. One migrant apparently refused to give them his money. Three more simply had nothing to hand over. Delgado said the bandits grabbed each man by the shoulders and hurled him off the train.

The next morning, at the train's last stop in the town of Ixtepec, Delgado and Lambert said they hopped on a shorter train containing only a few freight cars. Soon afterward it rounded into a sharp curve so fast that the cars began to buck and sway with a sickening squeal. Sensing an impending derailment, Delgado tried to leap off.

The next thing he knew he was lying on the ground, a chunk of his right foot still stuck on the ladder of a freight car several feet away, the rest of his leg dangling from his thigh by a bloody shred of skin.

Lambert's leg had been severed completely. So was that of a Honduran woman also brought to the shelter.

In the distance they could see the torso of a migrant whose body had been sliced in half. Two more migrants were crushed to death by a freight car, blood pooling from underneath.

For the next three-and-a-half hours Delgado and the other wounded waited for help under a broiling sun, wracked with a pain Delgado said was "indescribable, just unerasable from your brain."

Delgado remembered screaming over and over again to keep from slipping into death.

When he came out of surgery that evening, Delgado said he wondered why he had struggled so hard.

"I looked at this stump and said, 'I'm a useless person now,' " he recalled. " 'What will I do in the world?' My American Dream ended on that train."

A few beds over, Hanibal Rodriguez, 28, had other plans. A burly Honduran headed to a landscaping job in New Jersey, Rodriguez said he was robbed and shot in the leg three times several weeks earlier by uniformed police near Arriaga.

But his wounds were healing nicely. He'd be ready to return to Honduras in about a week.

"I'll stay for two, maybe three months to recuperate," Rodriguez said. "After that," he added, flashing a toothy grin, "It's back to the north."