

Crossing From Mexico The Old-Fashioned Way, Powered by Forearms

The Washington Post
December 14, 2007

GUSTAVO DIAZ ORDAZ, [Mexico](#)

The Rio Bravo makes a big, lazy turn through the cornfields, half its channel in Mexico, half in the United States. At the bend, the wind picks up speed and whips through the ebony trees, trees so hard and strong that their wood resembles polished stone.

It's quiet here at 8 a.m., just the wind and the giggly gurgle of the rapid current. A handful of cars sit idling nearby.

Miles away, in the urban clog of Reynosa, cars are lining up for blocks and hawkers are hawking and the border crossing into [Texas](#) is alive with noise. But here in Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, along the river also known as the [Rio Grande](#), the daily commute across "la linea" is slow and calm.

Gabriel Soto de Serra waves the first pickup truck onto a rusty, 45-foot barge where he has reported for work for the past 12 years. Two more follow, and Soto, a thickset man with calloused hands, pulls up the gate.

Two heavy ropes stretch from Mexico to the United States, anchored by the ebony trees that gave the town on the U.S. side of the border -- Los Ebanos -- its name. Smaller ropes and a pulley connect the barge to the two main ropes.

This is Mexico's most old-fashioned border crossing. No motorized craft takes cars from Gustavo Diaz Ordaz to Los Ebanos, a speck of a place with only about 400 souls. The engine is in the 46-year-old Soto's forearms. When passengers want the barge to move faster, they jump out of their cars and join him on the rope line.

Just 3,300 vehicles and 2,900 pedestrians crossed into the United States on the barge in October, a fraction of the 420,700 vehicles and 169,900 pedestrians who crossed in Reynosa. At a time when the biggest border crossings are perpetual traffic jams, gassy snarls without end, this tranquil crossing is a throwback. It is the only hand-powered border crossing on the rivers that separate Mexico from Texas, and it is Soto's great pride.

"Inaugurated the 22nd of December, 1950," he says without hesitation.

Minutes after 8 o'clock, Soto and five other men clamp their fingers around the ropes.

"Pull," Soto says.

Almost imperceptibly, the old barge glides silently into the Rio Bravo, the sun glinting off the tiny U.S. border patrol building, less than a football field away across the river.

Soto yanks the rope hard, leaning back on his heels, keeping time with a brother beside him and two cousins a few steps down the rope line.

By 8:30 a.m., Ismael Rodríguez has made his way onto the barge, one among a few pedestrians who join three cars on this two-minute trip to America. Rodríguez, a mechanic, lives in Mission, Tex., but he can't stand the tasteless tortillas at the grocery there.

Every two weeks, he steps onto the barge, nicknamed La Victoria, or the Victory, and comes back with a sack of handmade corn tortillas. Today he has two kilos, or about four pounds' worth.

"They're the best," he says to a man with a clipboard.

The man, his face weathered by a lifetime in the sun, is Alejos Baldemar Flores, and he has been collecting tolls -- \$2.31 for cars, 64 cents for pedestrians -- here for 15 years. Flores's eyes light up when anyone in his captive audience shows a hint of interest in his adventures.

He corners a young man at the railing at 9 a.m., and the stories of glory days start rolling out. Flores, 65, was a masked lucha libre wrestler in his college years, he says, known to his fans as the "Spirit of the University." Then he was a soldier, then a clown. There was a stretch in a U.S. prison, where he smacked around any inmate who gave him guff.

"I knocked some heads," he says proudly.

Like the others on the barge, Flores is puffy-chested about their hand-powered crossing. Once, Flores says, a whole group of priests "came all the way from Rome" just to see them.

"There's nothing to compare to this in the world -- in the world!" he says.

At 9:30, after numerous trips back and forth across the river, Soto throws up his hands as the barge pushes gently into the bank on the Mexican side of the river. Another crew member fishes a heavy metal mallet out of a container and lugs it onto shore.

Soto doesn't like the tension on the rope, installed just the day before to replace a rope that had lasted 4 1/2 years. Two men produce a white-barked branch and pound it into the shore, then tug the barge's main rope and tie it to the branch. The branch holds strong. Everything here is low-tech.

Half an hour later, at 10 a.m., Dolores Morales, 60, is waiting on the Mexican side of the river. Like almost everyone here, her life is spread almost evenly across the border. Last night, she had taquitos with her 78-year-old mother in their home town of Gustavo Diaz Ordaz; now she's heading back to her house in Texas. She and her seven siblings live in the United States -- one in [California](#) and the rest scattered around southern Texas -- but home will always be Gustavo Diaz Ordaz.

José Adame, 60, boards on the U.S. side. He has last night's leftovers, scraped off plates at his Texas home, in a plastic sack.

"For my daughter's chickens," he says en route.

Behind him, the wind gusts again, and the American flag unfurls.