

Central America Ride Planning and Road Wisdom

I did something like this a few years back, on riding in Europe and how to handle border crossings. After posting it to the web, I received a lot of positive feedback for doing that. I thought I'd do the same thing now, on riding thru Central America, since we just got back from Panama. I know there are a lot of people in the forum who have spent a lot of time south of the border, and quite a few who live down there too. I'm not pretending to be the expert. This is just good stuff we learned in preparing for this trip, and while on the road. I hope it helps someone who might be planning on heading that way someday, because a lot of this I learned from other road veterans who freely passed their knowledge on to me. I am in their debt and want to pay their kindness forward.



I'm also going to post it in Adobe (.pdf) form for anyone who wants to download it and print. I've spent two months trying to edit it down to the 20 pages that it currently is, and there is tons of stuff that still got left out. I'll try to post it here in manageable chunks for the bandwidth impaired...

Hope this helps someone down the road.....

Jeff Munn

LANGUAGE ISSUES:

If you are going to be riding south of the US border for any extended period of time, learn Spanish and or have someone in your group who does. Don't expect to be able to get by speaking English "louder and slower". You are in their country, learn their language. It will make your life so much easier, and the experience so much richer. You will learn things from locals that you'll never find in a guide book. I made this last trip to Panama without knowing but 20 or so words in Spanish, but I don't think I would have made it without Chick, my riding compadre, being there to smooth out the tough situations and the border crossings. He was fluent in Spanish, so I just kicked back and relied on him. My bad. I won't do that again. For those with time, head south and find a place to take a week or two week long Spanish Immersion school. San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, MX, San Pedro on Lago de Atitlan in Guatemala, or Antigua Guatemala in Guatemala are known for their immersion schools. They are dirt cheap too. In San Pedro you can take a two-week immersion class with one on one instruction, and live with a local family (room and board) for the entire two weeks, for less than \$200. I imagine that San Cristobal and Antigua would be a bit more expensive though, since they are larger cities. You will have unbelievably more pleasant experiences and come home with much richer memories if you learn the language!

TIMING:

Central America's dry season is approximately from late September thru April. Most travelers heading to South America will depart in the fall, so they cross over to South America in time to still enjoy the summer season (seasons reversed below the equator).

You can ride south anytime you wish, but the wet season will greatly complicate your trip and render many regions inaccessible due to the conditions of the roads. You probably wish to miss the fall hurricane season as you might have a chance to experience both Pacific and Caribbean tropical storms if you don't.

Daylight (sunrise and sunset) will increase the farther south you go, so those cold, short winter days in the US, will grow longer and warmer the farther south you ride. This is a good thing! If you are riding south in the middle of the year, don't expect much change.

PREPARATION:

Before you depart, it is important to plan for the worst, and hope for the best. If you have thought about all the contingencies and have prepared for them, it will make life much easier on your family/survivors, should the worst happen. I'm not being morbid, just realistic.

1. Personal Affairs:

Will, Living Will, all in order? Executor or beneficiaries know your preferences? An adventure trip is a good reason to put things in order. Get it together. How are bills going to get paid while you are gone? What is the timing for bill payments? Can you or

someone else do it on line? Who has signature authority on your various accounts? Who can access emergency information or get key documents or other things in your absence (like back-up title documents, copies of passports, medicine prescription renewals and forwarding). Keep a record of monthly bills and develop a method to have them paid while you are gone. Some methods are a family member paying, automatic deduction, or prepaying for a specific period.

2. Money:

Credit Cards: Unless you are going to be in major resort areas, you will not be using your credit cards much once you cross the border into Mexico. Pemex (the national gas chain in Mexico) does not accept credit cards, and neither will almost any other fuel station until you get to Costa Rica. However, you still need to notify your bank or credit card provider that you will be traveling outside the USA. They need to know the countries you will be in, and the approximate dates you will be there, so they will not cancel your card the first time they see it used outside the USA. Also, ensure your PIN is set to a four digit number. Many ATM machines outside the USA will not accept a PIN that has more than four digits. If you are worried about loss of a credit card during the trip, get a new card with a low credit limit, specifically for use during the trip. Also make sure you talk to your bank(s) and know the associated foreign exchange fees that will be added to your bill every time you use it. My bank charges an additional 1% on every purchase in a foreign currency, but you will get the bank exchange rate on the transaction. This is usually much higher than you will get even if you were to exchange cash at a local bank.

Cash: This is what you will use for almost every purchase. I personally carry a large amount, secreted in several areas, both on the bike and on my person. I recommend an emergency stash of several \$100 bills, for major problems like an accident. But for day-to-day use, keep your money in the smallest bills possible. Do not ever show a large roll in public, and keep the smallest bills on the outside.

Travelers Checks: I don't recommend them. They won't be accepted by anyone other than a major bank, and even then you will receive the worst exchange rate possible.

ATMs: These were our primary source of cash, and give the best exchange rate available, in the local currency. Make sure you know how to use your ATM card or credit card for cash withdrawals. Also make sure you talk to your bank(s) and know the associated foreign withdrawal fees that will be added to your bill every time you use it. And as Lone Rider has pointed out, make sure you keep your cash supply flush, because ATMs are not easy to find once away from major metro areas.

3. Communications:

Email:

Internet café's are widely available in Central America even in the least expected places. Unless you are far off the beaten path, you can expect to find internet access every couple of days. Make sure you have an email account set up with a web based system so you can access it from anywhere. (yahoo or hotmail accounts are nice). Also, have digital copies of all your important documents sent to your email account so they are accessible from

the road, if your hard documents get lost or stolen. Update your online email address book with addresses and phone numbers of critical contacts so you can call them if necessary. This is an important data resource to have access to.

Mobile Phone:

Good idea to have a multiband mobile phone with a provider that roams to Central America (you can check that on their web site). A phone is useful for safety, important communication, and staying in touch via reasonably priced text messaging (SMS). Mobile phone coverage is widely available in major centers and along major transportation corridors (like in the US). GPRS service is available in some locations in Mexico and sporadically elsewhere so you can check your Email if you have that service. Text messaging (SMS) is cheap and easy. Have your key contacts know how to work SMS and know why it makes sense (a call is between \$2 and \$4 per minute, and is worthless if not answered, but a text message is about 35 cents, can be received at any time, and gives you a “hard copy” message with phone numbers, times, and whatever else that can be referenced later) We used text messaging many times between ourselves when we were separated. It is a reliable and cheap method of communication.

4. GPS:

I do not use a GPS, so you might like to consult elsewhere on this. One of our party had a GPS, but it was relegated to back-up, behind paper maps and common sense. GPS mapping of Central America is spotty at best, so I would recommend primary reliance on recent paper maps. If all else fails, knowing the language allows you to ask a local, but even that is risky because half the time we asked, the info they gave us was no better than what we already knew. Or in some cases (like being lost downtown in San Salvador or Teguchigalpa) paying a taxi, or a guy on a motorcycle, to get you through a large city is also a good option.

5. Emergency Data:

Make several 3X5 cards with all your personal information on them. This will not only help you plan for the trip, but might also save your life if you are injured. Keep a card in your tankbag, one on your person, and give at least one to a riding companion. Also, make sure your key contacts back home have it too. The intent is for someone to always have access to it if you are unable to communicate. The information should include:a. Full name, address, phone number (fixed line and cell), Email.b. Passport number, Issue and expiration dates, and place of issue. Give a copy of your passport to a companion and leave one with your key contacts at home.c. Drivers License number and state, name of vehicle insurer and policy no. and contact phone no.d. Emergency contact data: Who, relationship, where, how to phone, Email, office and home, more than one contact preferred.e. Medical data: Blood type, medications you are taking and why, health issues to specifically include drug allergies as well as food allergies.f. Medical Provider member number and contact data. They typically require notification of emergency hospitalization etc.g. Medevac Insurance etc. number and company contact data.

6. Copies of Information:I carry several back-ups of data with me. I have paper copies of important documents (Passport information pages, drivers license, vehicle title, vehicle

registration, Emergency contact data, medical insurance policy, credit cards, etc). I also digitally scan the same information into computer files and carry them on a 1Gb USB Flashdrive. If you don't have a flashdrive (they are very cheap now), you can also start a free online email account that you can access over the internet. Then send this data to yourself and it will reside online in cyberspace for you to access from anywhere you can find a computer.

7. Medical Issues:

Cover medical issues in advance is a reasonable way to protect a good time. Visit a doctor and tell them where you are planning on going. Get a check-up and make sure you are current on immunizations. Go to the Center for Communicable Disease Control in Atlanta GA website (www.cdc.gov) and check out their recommendations for inoculations and immunizations, medicines to carry, precautions etc. Depending on the experience of your medical provider with international travel you may have to guide them to the CDC website. Immunizations are expensive, but can be worth their weight in gold in preventing a major illness. Many of them are multi shot series over a period of time, so they cannot be put off to the last minute.

A basic immunization for an extended touring in the third world (or adventuring) trip should look like:

- Typhoid, paratyphoid
- Tetanus, Diphtheria (typically bundled)
- Polio
- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B
- Pneumonia
- Flu

Depending on what you plan to do and where you might add:

-Yellow fever for CDC recommended areas. An inoculation is good for 10 years. Be aware that some countries may consider other countries a Yellow Fever zone (like Panama) and if they see you have been there the country receiving you may require proof of a Yellow Fever inoculation (though Panama does not require it.) Note: to be valid at a border a Yellow Fever inoculation must have been given at least 10 days prior to entry. If you get a Yellow Fever shot be aware only certain licensed providers can give it. The CDC web site provides a list by location. This is usually a Public Health Service or an International Travel specialist service. They are hard to find in Central America. A properly signed International Certificate of Vaccination (Yellow form) is the only usually acceptable document to certify you have a valid Yellow Fever immunization, though a Public Health Service letter may work.

-Meningitis for CDC recommended areas. Not a problem in Central America again depending on what you are going to do and where you will do it.

-Malaria: The advice on malaria medication is area specific in Central America. Chloroquine is recommended – (start two weeks before and take for four weeks after visit) The CDC web site is specific as to the malaria medication recommended for each area by country and region in the country in question. Malaria is a serious event.

8. Medical Evacuation Insurances:

Most medical insurance carriers will cover emergency care in an international location that is being visited. Make sure your program does! You should advise them of your trip. It is also good to have in hand something like “medical evacuation insurance (medevac)” or international emergency medical assistance insurance. It covers among other things medical evacuation back to competent medical centers. For details check with www.dedexassist.com for an example. A full year costs \$163 or so. Many use www.Medjetassist.com as well. Worldwide medical evacuation back to the US, for around \$200 is a good investment if you ask me.

9. Vehicle Preparation:

Only you can really know your bike. Have it serviced before you depart, or do it yourself. Know the maintenance intervals for your filters and fluids and be ready to do those services on the road. Be sure you check and fill battery. Know the mileage you get from your tires. You may have to plan on a new set of tires depending on the length of the trip and the type of tires the trip will require. You may have to ship them ahead or make sure a local dealer somewhere stocks them. Match your tires to the trip to be taken or the pace at which you do the trip. For example, although Continental TKC’s are great tires in bad conditions, they wear out very quickly. Tourances routinely yield 10,000 or more miles for me, so I mounted them before departing on this trip. The set lasted the entire way. Don’t depart home with a half used set of tires, knowing you’ll have to replace them in a country that may or may not have them available.

The bike: Anticipate the distance you will travel on the trip, and take those fluids, filters, or parts you will need for routine service. I ride an R1150GS, so I carry an extra fuel filter, oil filter, spark plugs, rear main bearing, rear main seal, and 1 qt of oil as my basic load. If I know I am going to be doing long distances off pavement, I also carry an extra air filter. I have gone thru my basic toolkit and supplemented it with a complete socket set, and the allen-head sockets and star-head sockets I need for my bike. Included are zip ties, JB Weld, hose clamps, a multi-meter, bailing wire and electrical wire, electrical tape, electrical quick connections, duct tape, fuses, spare bulbs, miniature jumper cables, 12V air pump, tire repair kit/plugs, air pressure gauge, siphon hose, etc. This is one more item that I would carry the next time I rode south, and that is a folding, reflective warning triangle. Twice we were asked to produce them by policemen in Nicaragua, but were able to talk our way out of it. Apparently it is a law that all vehicles must carry them.

Dealer Information: Research and write down the location and contact information for the closest dealership (of your brand MC) in the countries you will be traveling. There are BMW motorcycle dealerships in Mexico City, Guatemala City, San Salvador (El Salvador), San Jose (Costa Rica), and Panama City (Panama). If you have this info before you start, it will save time, and hassle, if you need it on the road. Also, develop a good relationship with your local dealer at home. Have their phone number and fax number, and/or email address. If you need a part on the road, they will most likely be the easiest to contact and the fastest way to get something in the mail/courier to you. Remember that courier services (FedEx, UPS, DHL) frequently have figured out how to easily clear

customs, which may be more difficult if you ship a high dollar part thru the postal service, so their extra cost may be a good thing in the long run.

Part Two: Documentation

DOCUMENTATION:

Visas: None required in advance for US citizens for short term visits (less than 30 days). You will require a visa and/or tourist card to enter all the countries along the route. They are obtained at the border of each country.

Passport: Required

- a. You need one for each traveler. Your passport must have a least six months validity or some countries will not allow you to enter.
- b. Have plenty of empty pages! If you go to Panama and back and make a point to get to El Salvador and/or Belize you will enter and leave 5 to 7 countries twice and two once. Keep in mind that in many cases your vehicle entry and exit is also noted in your passport.
- c. If you have a passport full of exotic Middle Eastern etc. travel you might get a new passport to avoid excessive questions at the borders.
- d. Make copies of your passport to carry in various places and give a copy to a companion and leave at least one at home. If you lose your passport and have a copy, replacement is relatively simple at a US embassy. If you don't have a copy to show the Embassy, it can take days to get a replacement.
- e. If you don't have a passport, start the process at least 2 months before you are to depart. Summer delays are significant. You may have to get documentation like birth records, naturalization papers, etc. together to get one.
- f. Carry extra passport pictures just in case.

Shot/health record: Highly recommended, and is required to establish the Yellow Fever shots validity.

You should obtain an International Certificate of Vaccination approved by the WHO and made available by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service (Yellow Card). Ensure your other shots are marked at the right place on the form, either do it yourself or have your health provider do it with stamps, seals, etc. Stamps and seals are particularly endearing to third world officialdom. Also enter in document your blood type, allergies to drug, food, histamine etc., a list of the medicines you take and dosages etc. as well as you eye glasses prescription. There are places on the form.

Drivers License: Required.

Make sure yours is valid for at least the period of the trip and has someplace on it a marking that shows you are licensed to drive a motorcycle. This will be checked at police

and military checkpoints.

International Drivers License: Optional but highly recommended.

The American Auto Association (AAA) issues them for a \$10.50 fee, and you do not have to be a member to get one from AAA. They require passport photos. The International Drivers license is not required but is very useful because it is printed in multiple languages, and looks more official than the little plastic state license.

I say, don't just get one, get two International Drivers Licenses !! (One can be used as a "throw-away" should a police officer insist on holding it hostage for money.)

You should plan to use an international drivers license –not your US drivers license- when you register your vehicle and yourself as a driver at the borders.

If you are traveling in a group, ensure everyone has an international drivers license, so that inspecting officers get the same type document from each.

Make sure AAA puts the stamp on the appropriate vehicle type validity blocks A (motorcycle) and B (light vehicles). Ask AAA to stamp the Spanish language section as well to avoid problems later. The International Licenses are valid for one year.

Vehicle Registration/Title document: One of these two is required

On our trip we found both the vehicle registration card and the title document work equally well. I would recommend you use the registration card and not carry the actual title document. An alternative is to have a notarized copy of the title just in case as a back up. I would not carry the original title, but any copy should have a raised seal on it to be considered official. Before departure, take your documents and go match the VIN on the registration or Title to what is stamped on the motorcycle. Do this before you leave home. This will be done along the way and if they are not exactly correct, your trip will end right there. I have heard of one person's trip ending in Honduras when they checked his VIN to his registration and found they did not match. They refused his entry to the country, thus ending his trip south.

Vehicle Insurance: Check with your current US insurance carrier. Most will not insure a vehicle south of the US border, so you have to assume your current policy will not work.

Liability insurance. I took a gamble coming home thru Mexico without it, but would not recommend that to anyone else. It is not required for Mexico, but if you are in an accident and do not have it, they may detain you (i.e. go to jail) until it is settled. You can buy liability insurance from Sanborns (and others) on a by day basis, if you know the exact dates you are traveling in Mexico. You can order it in online and pick it up near the US border or arrange to get it mailed to your home, etc. We had liability insurance on our way south thru Mexico, but neglected to get it for the trip home because it is set by date and we couldn't predict our return dates.

Costa Rica issues a standard obligatory liability Insurance when you are processed at the border. It has on it what you need to do in an accident. Nicaragua also requires a certificate of local liability insurance, and it is an inspection item when stopped by police. They sell it at the border when you enter Nicaragua, 30 days insurance for about \$12. Police will request it at checkpoints. We had been told that if we departed Nicaragua we would have to buy another policy on return, but this never was an issue. We kept the same document and it passed on inspection on the way back north because we were still inside the 30-day validity period on the policy.

Liability insurance throughout Central America supposedly is available but can be VERY expensive. We did not carry insurance for any other countries on our trip. Cold hard US dollars paid our way out of the one accident we had where the injured party demanded compensation. Everything is negotiable if you don't involve the authorities.

Additional documents:

Travel Guides: Having a good current travel guide like the Lets Go travel Guide to Central America or the Lonely Planet Mexico book provides a lot of good information particularly of points of interest and detailed information on hotels, banks etc. and summary maps. Guides like Michelin tend to be better for vehicle travelers and are worth considering

Maps: You should make an effort to get good country maps before you are on the road. 1/500,000 or 1/330/000 seems about right. There are good detailed road map books of Mexico, which you should get if you are planning extensive touring there. (Guia Roji).

Part Three: Border Crossings

BORDER CROSSINGS:

Attitude:

If you have signed on for the adventure of touring Central America with your own vehicle (your motorcycle) you have signed on for becoming an experienced hand at handling the clearance of individuals and personal vehicles at the borders of Central American countries. Live with it in as good a humor as you can muster. Be prepared for the slow, methodical (more or less), multi stage process it involves. Understand the process so that you can anticipate what is required, double check along the way and avoid repeated errors.

Guides and Helpers:

There are eager "guides" waiting to "help" you through the process for very large fees in some cases. Remember, the "guides" or "helpers" are not there to help you. They are there to extract as much money as they can off of you before you make it thru the border crossing. You will hear incredible lies and offers. At the Guatemala border we were told that for \$100 a bike, we could get the importation documentation that would guarantee us clearance for every border all the way to Panama! They'll tell you they can do the

paperwork for the next border too, if you just pay them now. Do not fall for it. If you have to hire a helper, agree on the cost upfront and tell them to their face that is all you will pay. If they refuse that price, there will be ten others there who will step forward to negotiate with you. Do not hand them large sums of money to get you special clearances, or to buy shortcuts. Your “special” payments will not get you anything more than the normal process. Only pay for receipted services from the officials involved. If you have to give any "helper" money, do not expect change back. Remember, you really don't need them, you can do it yourself.

Money Changers:

If at all possible, try to avoid exchanging money at border crossings with the local money changers. You will be screwed, pure and simple. Before departing on your trip, go online and determine the official exchange rate for every country you will cross. Write it down so that when you cross the border, you'll have an idea of what the exchange rate they will offer you SHOULD be. We had more than one occasion where we were offered less than half of the official exchange rate because they assumed we didn't know what it was. I often simply watched the locals exchange money and determined what rate they were getting. You will never get the local rate, but you should be able to negotiate close to it. Only exchange enough money to get thru the border process, then find a local bank or ATM and do your transactions. ATMs always offer the best rates, even better than exchanging cash at a bank. Be sure to contact your bank before you depart and notify them of the countries you will be visiting so they do not shut off your ATM card when they see a transaction outside the USA. The same goes for your credit card company.

General Rules:

Avoid the major crossing points: As a general rule, avoid crossing borders on the Pan American highway (CA 1 or 1), with one exception to that, the Mexico and Guatemala crossing at La Mesilla. For Honduras/Nicaragua we crossed in the south near Choluteca. For Honduras/Guatemala go for El Espino. You don't have a choice for Costa Rica/Nicaragua in the South, and the Costa Rican/Panamanian borders are fairly straightforward.

Sundays and/or mornings are best: Mondays and Fridays can be problems. Avoid mid-days as there usually are long lunch breaks. Tired officials, tropical heat, and long lines of truck drivers make afternoons difficult.

Always drive up to the front of the lines: There will be long lines of trucks at the border, some miles long. Just ride past them to wherever the barrier is. Park and start there.

The Process:

Two important administrative processes must take place. One, you are importing yourself, and Two, you are importing an expensive vehicle into their country.

Immigration/Migracion:

The first process is controlling the movement of people. This is done by the Immigration officials (Migracion; entrada (entry) or salida (departure)). This step the first step at all

entry points. Immigration has no interest in your vehicle and/or baggage. For entry they must review your passport and process a valid entry visa before you can proceed to vehicle importation. You must request the Entry form, fill it out, then get back in line to process it. Almost all the countries in Central America use the same form. You typically have to pay for the visa/tourist card, but not necessarily at that location. In Mexico it is paid by going to a bank, in Panama it is paid at the Tourism agency.

Customs/Aduana:

The second process is the control of the passage of goods/vehicles. This is done by Customs (Aduana) officers. They, upon verifying your identity document and that you are properly approved to enter the country, will proceed to register your vehicle by noting from your registration (or title) the VIN, make, model etc. of your vehicle. They note your license to drive (international drivers license works fine), and may physically verify your VIN and check your baggage etc. Interestingly in two cases (Mexico and Honduras) a bank is interjected into the process and in Mexico a bank Banjercito does the actual vehicle registration and related fee collection as well as the deregistration upon exiting the country. Customs officers in Mexico basically only look at luggage. (Later on Military checkpoints will also look at your luggage checking for weapons or drugs.) You typically have to pay (receipted) for the vehicle transit to the customs officer or the designated bank payment point (which may or may not be right at the border location). This fee is particularly expensive in Mexico (Peso 317 about \$32 @ US\$1/10 pesos) and in Honduras (about \$22 in Lempiras exchange rate about US\$1=15 Lempira) . Honduras adds a step in that you also have to pay the Ministry of Roads and Transport (at a separate office) a \$10 fee as well.

Fumigation and related fees:

Additional processes that you may encounter at the border are fumigation (Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama) which usually requires the payment of a small fee (\$1 or 2, in local currency). In theory this fumigation certificate may be reviewable at phyto-sanitary checkpoints within the country but we were never checked. It never was requested by police or other officials checking us.

Municipal tax:

An occasional addition is the local municipality taxing you at the border either at exit or entrance. (New York does it when you fly into NY!) You may have to pay \$1 for a local municipality tax stamp at exit point (Nicaragua) or at entrance point (Panama). It takes place at informal looking kiosks in some places and people in civilian clothes wander up to you (or you go wake them up) to get their stamp on your visa application form so the Panamanian immigration officers will process your visa and you can then get your tourist card (\$5)

The need for copies:

Requiring multiple copies of documents during the border process is unique to the Mexico and Central America travel experience. I've ridden in over 40 countries worldwide and have never seen anything like it. El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama may require one or two copies of a single document, but Mexico, Guatemala and

Honduras seem to be trying to fund the livelihoods of the border officials by requiring repeated trips to the local copier. Can you save money by bringing copies of your documents from home? No. Don't waste the time. The reason you have to get copies there is that customs etc. will need copies of the documents they have just stamped and signed (like your immigration visa application) and these forms will be carrying forward to the next office. You can save money by taking your documents to the copier and paying for it yourself, instead of letting a "helper" do it. If you pay the copy guy, it is twenty or thirty cents per copy. If you pay your helper, it is dollars per copy, and you never see any change back either. In some cases you will have to make two trips to a copy office, I believe our maximum was three. Learn to live with it, it is part of the process.

Departure:

The border sequence to depart each country of Central America is more casual and much quicker. You have to be sure you clear customs upon exit (with the exception of Mexico when you are transiting south –see the special notes on this) In some cases as in exiting Costa Rica at Penas Blancas the customs clearance office sits alongside the road before you get to the immigration office. (You will remember it because you'll have processed thru it when you came south into Costa Rica). You also must exit immigration (with the unique exception of Mexico going south again see the special note on Mexico). In some cases you require a form to fill out to exit so you may have to wait in line at the exit window twice.

Paper piles:

While in transit keep all your documentation for the county you are in organized and safe. I generally try to keep each country's documents in one Ziploc bag. You will usually end up with numerous documents, some only tiny slips of paper, which must be surrendered to other people on your way out of the border, so keeping track of them is important.

Hints:

Know where the VIN is and have it wiped clean enough to be legible.. Make sure they get your VIN number right on your forms! If you are stopped by police, or checked at the exit of the country, and they discover your VIN is not correct, it will become a major hassle. Always double-check your information as they process you! On at least one occasion we found out they had typed the wrong VIN on our paperwork. Just like with any legal paperwork, always check every line before you sign anything they hand you at the border.

Part Four: Special Notes by Country

BY COUNTRY, SPECIAL NOTES:

Mexico: (US\$1=about 10 pesos) Mexican is a particularly unique country. You need to get it right up front or it gets expensive later.

Mexico is one of the few countries that do not rigidly control their borders, at the physical location of the border. (Along the US border is the 20 miles economic zone where you do not even need to do any administrative paperwork at all to visit.) But once you are about 20 miles into the country, you will hit the checkpoints. If you haven't properly done Immigration and Customs before being stopped there, then you get hammered.

I will offer this advice, even though it may not be completely legal. You can decide if you wish to follow it. Legally, you must export yourself and your vehicle when departing Mexico. However, if you are enroute to Panama, and plan on returning to the USA thru Mexico, you can avoid having to pay the visa and vehicle import fee twice, using this technique. We failed to do this and it doubled our fees for crossing Mexico. Pilot showed us this technique, and had no problems.

When you enter Mexico, you must specify how long you will be in Mexico. Your visa will be annotated with this number of days. So will your vehicle import paper work. You do not tell them you are transiting in a week and then coming back, or they may give you a 7-day visa to transit. A 7-day visa costs the same as a 180-day visa.

You want your visa issued for a period to cover both your entry into Mexico, your eventual return from Central America, and exit from Mexico back into the USA. This means you should tell the officer that you are entering Mexico for six months of vacation and touring. Your vehicle importation paperwork should be for the same six month period. Then, when you depart Mexico and head south, you simply DO NOT stop at the border and out process. Carefully store all your Mexican documentation in a safe place. Several weeks later, when you return from your trip, you simply ride thru the border into Mexico and keep going. When you are stopped and have your documents checked, do not mention that you have been out of the country. If you are still within the valid dates on your visa and vehicle import paperwork, you should not have an issue unless they see the stamps in your passport that you've been outside the country. Then you might have some explaining to do.... Only you can decide if this technique is worth the several hours of border work and approximately \$60 it will save you in fees. I know what I'm going to do the next time I go back. I will always tell them I am vacationing for the 180 days.

The other unique issue is that your tourist fee must be paid at a Mexico Bank, sometime during your stay, and prior to departing. These banks ARE NOT at the border, so make sure you find one, pay the fee and get the appropriate stamped documents before you head to the border to depart Mexico for the last time.

Now for your vehicle importation. Remember the Vehicle registration validity period is tied to the visa period. You will have to pay the vehicle importation fee to a special Banjercito that will probably be several miles from the actual border (remember that free trade zone?). On departure, you MUST remember to find the Banjercito office at the ADUANA that will out process you. They will take back your vehicle importation sticker (the one you placed on your fairing), annotate in the computer that you have exported your vehicle, and give you a receipt that shows you have exported your vehicle from

Mexico. Put this documentation somewhere on the bike for the next time you visit Mexico. If for some reason their computers tell them you failed to do the proper paperwork on your last visit, you can pull it out and prove to them you did.

The important thing to remember is that Mexico will NOT stop you from exiting at any border. There is no mandatory checkpoint to depart the country. So if you do not take the time and effort to stop and do these procedures, you will be fined eventually, and refused entry to Mexico the next time you try to go there. It is all your responsibility to do the required documentation on entry and exit.

Guatemala: (US\$1=about 7 Quetzal) Avoid the main crossing points. We liked La Mesilla to and from Mexico. Fees total about \$15 to enter Guatemala.

El Salvador: (US\$1) The US dollar is official currency of El Salvador as of 2001. Just like Panama, we used US dollars the entire time we were there. All prices are in US dollars. El Salvador has a special visa which is valid for 48 hours, if you are in transit. The transit visa is FREE if you stay less than 48 hours in the country. If you stay longer you have to pay a fee. Ask for it if you are just zipping through. El Salvador is quite efficient, and the roads are great.

Honduras: (US\$1=about 17 Lempira) Honduras takes all the prizes for imaginative bureaucratic complexity. You get fumigated, have to pay a customs fee (\$32 in local currency) this fee is payable at a special bank office (if it is open) which requires you to go to that additional office and you must pay another fee to the Ministry of Transport (\$10 in either \$ or local currency) at yet another site. The special bank branch does not do foreign exchange but they require local currency to pay the fee. Thus either you got currency in advance or you buy it from the money changers. That is right. No nearby bank in the border zone. And then the copies!! Read below about copies.

Nicaragua: (US\$1=about 14 Cordoba) Ensure you get the liability insurance document valid for long enough to cover your return, but do not mention that fact to the border officials. 30 Days costs US\$12. The insurance sales people are usually young women with clipboards, who are standing alongside the road a few hundred meters past the border. If you miss them, there will most likely be a police checkpoint 2 miles down the road where they will stop you and demand to see the insurance document. If you didn't get it before, they will sell one to you on the spot.

Costa Rica: (US\$1=about 377 Colon) US dollars acceptable at some upscale places, ATMS give choice of dollars or Colons, but I'd suggest getting colons because you get a better rate) Of note, CR has a very good relationship with Panama. Because of this, when you depart CR, they have an option to hold your vehicle importation paperwork at the Aduana. Then, when you return from Panama you simply pick it back up. This saves a lot of time and effort at the border. If you are going to continue on to South America, you will still have to export your vehicle from CR. CR also has liability insurance you buy at the border.

Panama: (US\$1= 1 Balboa) Their currency is linked to the US dollar and US paper money is used, but there are some Panamanian coins) Panama has a tourist office separate from customs and immigration but nearby where you need to purchase a tourist card for \$5. Also there is a small municipal tax. Panama crossings are a breeze.

Part Five: Police and Military Checkpoints

POLICE AND MILITARY CHECKPOINTS:

You will encounter them:

Police and military check points are frequent in Central America, and particularly so in high tension areas (Mexico's Chiapas state, restive areas of Guatemala, and the Darien region of Panama. You should view them as positive events, because the more official checkpoints there are, the lower your own risk of falling victim to a unofficial criminal act. Except when heading north thru Mexico (when they stop every gringo to check for drugs), you'll probably be waved through the majority of checkpoints, but occasionally you'll be stopped because they are bored and want to check out your bikes. Again, official checkpoints, manned by dozens of officers/soldiers are very low risk. It is the random police road stops, most often made by one or two policemen, where you will be the most at risk. Be aware there are also sometimes phyto-sanitary (agricultural), and in-country customs (aduana) check points as well, but you will usually be waved through or ignored at these.

Almost all the Central American countries are aware of the possibilities of abuse of authority by police. Most are publicly trying to eradicate the practice because they are realizing that there is more to be gained financially by protecting tourists than by shaking them down. Nicaragua in particular is working hard to change this practice.

How to act at large, official checkpoints:

Some one should be a spokesman for your group, preferably someone fluent in Spanish, and with some gray hair (age is still respected in many locales). Always treat the officers with respect. This typically involves getting off your bike, removing your helmet and gloves, shaking the official's hand and exchanging formal greeting. If this is a checkpoint where there are official signs, traffic cones, and numerous officers involved, it usually will only involve checking your documents, license, and possibly a quick search of your saddlebags and tankbag. Smile, comply, be happy to be there, and be ready to answer a lot of questions about your bike; how big is the engine? How fast will it go? Where did you come from? Where are you going? How much did it cost? A good attitude and having your documents ready will help ensure it is quick and painless.

How to act at random police stops:

Let me preface by saying we were stopped at least 30 times on our trip to Panama and back. We rode by at least 100 other checkpoints, or police officers standing alongside the road who simply smiled and waved at us. Only two times did we encounter what I felt was an illegal shakedown. The one that cost us \$120 in Nicaragua, and another (again in

Nicaragua) where we used this technique and rode away smiling. It was explained to us by a Nicaraguan Bureau of Tourism officer, who consulted with the commissioner of Border Police at the Nicaragua/Costa Rica border after we had told him our tale of woe. I know it works in Nicaragua, your use in other countries may vary.

Situation: You look ahead and see a policeman step into the road and wave you over.

Pull over and stop. Be very polite and remove your helmet. Smile, look them in the eyes and ask what the problem is. Don't offer anything. When they ask you for your license, politely ask to see their badge number and official identification. They will ask why. Tell him it is because you were warned at the border, by the border police, (in our case we actually dropped the name of the commissioner of Nicaraguan Border Police, Carlos Mora) that there are criminals in the country who pose as policemen to rob tourists. We were told that in Nicaragua it is the law that policemen must show their badge and identification to anyone who they stop, and if they refuse to show their identification, they are to be considered criminals and to refuse to listen to them. When you tell them that, it puts them between a rock and a hard place, politely. To refuse to produce it means they have labeled themselves a crooks, and confirmed your suspicion. When they produce it, you immediately take out a piece of paper and write down their names and badge numbers. You then have the information needed to file a complaint later, if there is need to. They know that. They also know that they cannot ask for money now, for the "fine". If they still demand your license, then go to option two, but once you have their information they will most likely smile and return your documents. This worked like a charm for us during our second shakedown. (smile)

Option two on police shakedowns:

Get an International Driver's License from AAA (you do not need to be a member of AAA to get this license from them). In fact, get several, a couple weeks apart. They only cost \$12, they are printed in multiple languages, and the best thing is they are disposable. I carry several of them. Why? Because if you run into a crooked policeman who takes your license and says you can't get it back until you go to court, or pay a "fine" to him, you have a choice. Smile, politely ask for the ticket, promise to go to court, then ride away. You leave him without his bribe, and it only cost you the license fee.

If you are traveling in a group, make sure everyone has an International Drivers License from AAA. Why? In our case in Nicaragua, one of us was using his plastic State License. Because of this, the policeman refused to accept the other's International Licenses when he stopped us on a trumped up charge. We lost our advantage when he demanded all our State licenses, and it cost us \$120. If we had all had the AAA International Drivers Licenses, and had rehearsed the scenario ahead of time, we could have avoided paying his fine. It was a lesson learned the hard way.

The bottom line is it is illegal for any policeman to ask for money on the spot. Their favorite shakedown is to take your documents and say you'll have to go to court tomorrow or the next day, delaying your trip and making you find a place to stay for the night. They KNOW every tourist will then ask if there is any other way it can be settled

without going to court.... If you ask that, they've set the hook because they haven't asked you to pay a fine. You have just offered a bribe and now you are the one breaking the law. Don't ever offer money on the spot. Call their bluff and ask for the written ticket with their badge # and name on it. Once they know they aren't going to get any money, they'll pitch a fit, but they'll have to ticket you officially, or give your stuff back. Either way, they have lost the cash they were expecting to make off of you. If they do ticket you and keep your license, go back to option two above and take another route home, avoiding that town.

Finally, in the absolute worst-case scenario where there is the threat of arrest if you don't pay them, then pay them. Immediately go to the closest town with a police headquarters and report them. Where, when, what happened and how much money they took. File an official written report. If for nothing else, everyone in the headquarters will know how much they took off of you, and then the crooked cops will have to split it later or face the consequences. In either case, the guy who got your money is going to lose some, if not all of it, and there is a good chance they may be arrested and fired. Do the right thing and report crooked cops. Who knows? It might just work. If you are afraid of going to a police station, keep all the information you can, and report it to the Tourism Ministry at the border. They will be happy to try to help you out, as long as you have a name, date, location, and/or a badge number.

Part Six: Road Wisdom

ROAD WISDOM:

Road Hazard warning signs: We all know that there is a sign for everything in the USA. Other countries don't have that kind of money to waste on signage, so they've developed an informal way of warning you there is a traffic hazard ahead. The most common warning is a bunch of large rocks placed in the road, usually around the corner from the hazard. The second most common is a bunch of branches cut from a tree/bush and placed in your lane. So if you are zipping along and see ANYTHING in the road ahead, reduce your speed and start looking for the hazard. It could be a broken down bus, logs rolled off the back of a truck, or a 10 foot deep ditch where the road has washed away. Just be on guard for anything placed in the road.

Topes/Tumulos: In America we call them speed bumps. South of the border, in Mexico they are called Topes (or sleeping policemen). In Guatemala they are called Tumulos. You will learn to either love them or hate them because they will slow traffic down to 10-15 mph at the entrance to, in the middle of, and coming out of almost every little town you pass thru. I personally love them because they bunch up all the traffic at one location and make it easier to pass long lines of cars queued up behind a doble remoulage (double trailer semi). Technically passing trucks and busses in town is illegal, but almost everyone does it. If you don't learn to do it, you will take forever to cross Mexico. Heck, I've even seen TOPES on a four-lane divided highway outside of Poza Rica. Explain that to me please. But these speed reduction devices are pretty much confined to Mexico and Guatemala. I don't recall seeing them used much south of those two countries.

Animals: You will see every conceivable species of animal on the roads as you head south. Cattle, horses, donkeys, dogs, vultures chickens, pigs, if it walks, it will be on or near the road. Some will be tied up and grazing, but most will not be. Ride as if every single animal is going to bolt in front of you. Give them lots of lee-way. I had never seen bulls, cows and horses dead alongside the road before I went south. Now I have.

Night riding: Don't do it! There is a reason you hear horror stories about riding at night below the border. Combine very poorly maintained roads, no signage or warning markings, large animals, pedestrians, and vehicles with no lights or reflective markings and you are playing Russian roulette. I am not kidding. We rode after dark for the first two days we were on the road in Mexico. When we saw what we had ridden thru on the morning of the third day, we stopped doing that for the rest of the trip. **IT IS NOT WORTH THE RISK.** Stop and find lodging well before sunset.

Double Semi-Trailers: These are double (tandem) trailers pulled by semi trucks. They are marked with a sign on the back of the last trailer, which I think says "Doble Remolque" (fixed). This is critical to remember when you pull out to pass one on a tight two lane road. You now have to pass a vehicle that is almost 75 feet long, or roughly twice as long as what you are use to passing. This could become a fatal error if you don't realize it before you start your pass. Always check to see if this sign is on the back of the tractor trailer in front of you before you attempt to pass.

Turn signals: I still don't understand this, but let me put it simply. Do not believe any turn signal you see in use, anytime, anywhere. Turn signal use means different things in different countries. Sometimes a truck or car will put on their left turn signal in an attempt to let you know it is clear to pass, but sometimes it just means they are turning left in front of you. Other times it will be an attempt to tell you the road ahead is NOT CLEAR to attempt to pass. For these reason, I completely ignore the turn signals of the vehicle in front of me, and watch the road until I can decide myself what I can safely do. Do not allow someone else to decide for you when it is safe to pass them. Ignore their attempt to be helpful with their turn signals.

Lodging:

Auto Hotels: Throughout all of Mexico and down into El Salvador, you can easily find along the major roads, a type of hotel called an "Auto Hotel". They usually have signs that advertise they are open 24 hours. They are typically walled compounds. They usually have a gate that prevents passing travelers from seeing inside the compound. Inside the compound each room generally has its own garage with door, or curtains that can be drawn across behind the car. The object is complete and total privacy to the clients. These hotels are cheap, but almost always have only one bed, and trust me, the clients don't go there to sleep. We were quoted \$20 for a night at one, but when we found out none of the rooms had more than one bed, we elected to more on. Don't think I could sleep between the sheets at one of those places. Your standards may be different than mine, and often mine are fairly low, but even I'll pass on one of those places.

Real hotels: They are around, and are fairly inexpensive. Always ask to see the room first, and ask about hot water, and air conditioning. Mostly you will find this readily available, but on occasion you might not even have electricity all the time. There were many days where we did not have any of the above in our room. Most places do have a large black water tank on the roof, so the water will at least be tepid for a shower.

Hospedajes: These are little “motels” that usually are not even marked. Sometimes they are actually a family’s home. If you have to stop and ask for lodging in a remote area, this is probably what you will be directed to.

Fuel:

Do not worry about fuel on your trip. Okay, do not worry about the quality of the fuel, or about finding unleaded fuel. You do need to pay attention and ensure you fuel when you need to, based on your own fuel tank capacity and fuel economy. I actually found that my fuel economy went UP once I started filling up with Pemex gas. There is also no need to remove the catalytic converter on your BMW for riding in Central America. However, you must be prepared to pay for your fuel in cash. Credit cards are not accepted by gas stations in 98% of the places you will be riding.

Crime:

It happens. It is part of the danger of travel. Use commons sense, keep aware of your surroundings, and travel with a partner or group if possible. If you feel uncomfortable in a place, do not stop. Gut feelings can be fortuitous. I’ve traveled to many potentially dangerous regions and have minimized my risk by not putting myself in a position where I had no escape. I also try to minimize my value as a target by reducing the temptation I offer to a criminal.

Bike/gear protection:

I’ve found that most theft is usually caused by easy opportunity. Soft saddlebags, or a tent, casually tied over a seat of a bike, or a tank bag held down by a nylon strap are easy to grab, or cut off. They can disappear quickly. I’ve always used hard, lockable saddlebags, and packed my camping gear inside a Pac-Safe wire-mesh duffel which is then wired and padlocked to the bike. When I get off the bike, I lock it, then walk away with my tank bag in hand. Nothing is left on the bike that is not secured against anything but wire-cutters or bolt-cutters. But most thieves don’t carry those around, so I’ve never had anything stolen.

At night, ask your hosts if there is a secure place to store you bike that is out of sight of the street. I carry a thick Kryptonite cable and lock the bike to an immovable object, then cover it with a travel cover. If they can’t see what is under the cover, it removes the temptation. A cover is a very good idea, and doesn’t take up much room.

Personal protection:

As mentioned before, stay aware of your surrounding. That includes not imbibing so much of anything that you become an easy target. I do not carry the majority of my cash

on my person, and what I do carry I have in a couple of places, one of which is my throw-away wallet. Yes, a throw-away wallet. It is my normal wallet, purged of everything of value, except a few dollars, some local currency, a couple expired credit cards, an old AAA card, and several generic credit cards that say "Your business name here" on the front. It is designed to give a potential thief something that appears to be legit, making them happy, and to buy you enough time to get away before they realize they don't have much. I've never had to use it, but I do carry it. My actual credit cards, license and important stuff is wrapped with a rubber band around my cash, in another place on my person.

I also suggest that you carry a couple of emergency credit cards and some type of identification, stored in a safe location in case you are robbed, or lose you primary ones. It does happen occasionally and back-ups can be a life-saver.

Conclusion:

I would do it all again in a heartbeat, but take two weeks along the way to learn Spanish. That was the most important thing I learned. I envied Chick with his ability to draw a crowd and tell the story of our ride along the way. He made my trip very easy, but I still think I missed out on a lot.

There are a million other things that I've forgotten to capture. I'm hoping those with their own riding experience in Central America will come forward and help build this into a worthwhile document. I've left out entire portions on Cuotas and Libre roads in Mexico, not to mention road-side vendors and beach resorts. There is just too much to try to capture in one document, so you'll have to go south and learn some of it on your own!

Hope this helps. I look forward to meeting many of you on the road. I'm going to try to make the Horizons Unlimited gathering in Creel this fall. Maybe I'll see you there.