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Driving Through Mexico: Guatemala to the U.S.A.

Mexico Driving Guide, Northbound El Carmen, Guatemala to Brownsville, Texas

Since August, 2001 I have driven across Mexico both northbound and southbound many times. Occasionally someone will ask me for help with directions or tips concerning driving in Mexico. This guide isn't intended to be a comprehensive travel-log. However, if you put together some of the tips contained here along with a good road map of Mexico you should be well on your way to at least staying on the right road. Prior to Hurricane Stan I usually crossed from Guatemala in to Mexico at Tecun Uman. During Stan the bridge for private cars crossing at Tecun Uman was damaged and not reopened until mid 2007. From 2005 through 2008 I crossed numerous times at both El Carmen and La Mesilla continuing on to the United States. I have also crossed at Tecun Uman since the bridge has reopened. It has been my experience that the crossing at El Carmen is usually the least hassled. Hence, these directions are from El Carmen.

If your car is registered, (titled), in Guatemala with Guatemala plates, to get in to Mexico you will need either your **tarjeta de circulacion or your title**. I have used both on different occasions with no problem. If it's registered in the U.S. or Canada you will need your original title free of liens in your name. You will also need a **valid driver's license, your passport, and your Mexican visa application** which you will get at the frontier when you cross in to Mexico. You will have to post a bond guaranteeing that you will take the car out of Mexico at some point. This can be done with a **credit card** or cash. I always use my credit card and it costs about \$30.00 U.S. I don't know the procedure or how much it costs if you choose to post a cash bond. Some people like to buy Mexican insurance for the trip but this is not required. There is no place to purchase it there at the border and if you have Guatemala plates you may have some problem buying it online.

I have always driven my own vehicle which is titled in my name. If the car is yours you will not have a problem getting it in to Mexico. There may be some way to take a vehicle other than your own in to Mexico, but I don't know what that procedure is. If you do plan on driving a car in to Mexico and the owner will not be with you, do your research before you get to the border and be ready for a hassle. I have seen people

turned back by the Mexican officials even though they had a notarized permission letter from the owner.

You get your permit to import your vehicle in to Mexico and the window sticker at an office north of Tapachula and not at the actual border where you cross in to Mexico and get your visa. It is about a 45-60 minute drive from the frontier to the office where you get the car permit. At the frontier you will need a small amount of pesos, (50), to pay for your vehicle fumigation. There are money changers at the border who will change pesos, quetzales, or dollars. You might want to get a small amount of pesos there. However your best rate of exchange will be at an ATM where you can make a withdrawal on a U.S. bank account elsewhere in Mexico. There is an ATM at the Sam's Club which you will pass in Tapachula.

- This guide starts at the 280km marker leaving El Carmen. You will go down a hill and directly in front of you is the frontier. As you approach the exit from Guatemala there will be a lot of taxis and pedestrians. Stay to the driveway on the right and proceed on under the canopy. If you have Guatemala plates on your vehicle just continue carefully on through the driveway. You do not need to check you car out of Guatemala. Migration is about 100 feet ahead on your right where you will get your passport stamped out of Guatemala. The fee to exit Guatemala is Q10/person which you pay at the migration office. If you have U.S. plates on your car you will have to stop and go in to the building on your left under the canopy and check your car out of Guatemala at the SAT office.
- Get everyone in your party's passport stamped out of Guatemala and you are ready to pass into Mexico.
- Cross the bridge directly in front of you which is the international boundary in to Mexico. Immediately after you cross the bridge there is a building on your right where you have to get your vehicle fumigated in order to take it in to Mexico. The fee for this is fifty pesos, (\$50.00). **The dollar symbol, \$, is used in Mexico to denote pesos.** From this point forward in this guide when you see the symbol, \$, it is pesos and not U.S. dollars.
- After the fumigation pull forward under the awning and park in front of the migration office which will be on your right. You will have to go in to this office and get your visa for Mexico and your passport stamp. There is no fee at this office. Everyone in your vehicle will have to go in to the office and fill out a visa form. When you fill out the form, in the box for your destination in Mexico put "transmigrante". **Important Note!** You will obtain and fill out the visa form there at the frontier to get your passport stamped. However, **the visas must be paid for at any bank in Mexico, not at the frontier.** The fee for the visas is \$237.00, (pesos) for each visa. Sometime on your trip as you are travelling in Mexico this form must be paid for and stamped at a bank before you will be allowed to exit Mexico when you arrive at the U.S. border. If you are travelling on weekends or holidays plan accordingly so you don't have a problem paying for this visa. Most banks in Mexico close at noon on Saturday.

- Once you have your visa forms and your passports stamped you are ready to proceed on to Tapachula to get your car permit. It is a 45-60 minute drive to the office where you will obtain this permit. **Set your trip odometer to zero there at the border.**
- As you leave the frontier follow the signs to Tapachula.
- At about seven miles from the border you will see a Da Gas sign and filling station on your left. Just past the Da Gas there is a Pemex station. Before the Pemex turn to the left which will put you on the bypass around Tapachula. After you turn to the left at the Pemex station go a short distance and you will see road marker km16. This is a landmark that you are going the right way. It is several miles around the city so it takes a while.
- As you continue on the bypass you will come to an overpass/intersection with signs that say Mexico straight ahead, Centro right, and Puerto Chiapas to the left. You want to go straight to Mexico. There is an ATM in the Sam's Club on your right, however, if you need to get some pesos. This is a good place to do that.
- After you have bypassed Tapachula you will come to an intersection where you will have to turn either left or right. There is a sign that says Arriaga left or Tapachula right. Turn left toward Arriaga. Usually there is a lot of congestion at this intersection. Immediately after you turn left stay to the right side of the road and directly in front of you is the vehicle check-in point where you will get your permit to take the car in to Mexico. As you pull up to the office area on your right there is a small parking area in front of Comedor Doris.
- The business hours for the vehicle check-in office are Mon-Fri 7:00am to midnight, Sat 8:00am to 4:00pm, Sun 9:00am to 5:00pm. They have holiday hours also during a national holiday but I don't know what they are. This part of Mexico is in the central time zone, the same as Guatemala. However, Mexico does observe daylight savings time, same as the U.S. Up the steps at the office on your right at the sliding window you get your vehicle permit. Before going to the permit office go to the tienda past it on the right and get some copies. You need a copy of your passport ID page, visa paper, driver's license, and tarjeta de circulacion or title. This costs a few pesos. Once you have the copies go up to the window and get your permit. **You can also pay for your visa at this office, but you will have to ask. The clerk will probably not volunteer that information.** After you get the car permit and pay for the visa you are on your way! Continue down the highway you are on.
- The next major town on your journey is Arriaga. It is about 3 hours ahead on the road you are presently on. Follow the signs to Arriaga.
- As you come in to Arriaga there is an exit off the highway to La Ventosa. If you have no reason to stop, bypass Arriaga and take the La Ventosa exit. If you haven't paid for your visa, you need pesos, or you will need a hotel for the night

soon Arriaga is a good place to stop so continue on into town. One block from centro there is a good hotel called Ik Lumal. The rooms have hot water and an A/C. There is also a good restaurant in the hotel with secure parking. Two blocks from the hotel is a bank where you can pay for your visa if you need to and use an ATM.

- Tapanatepec is the next town past Arriaga. If you bypass Arriaga and take the La Ventosa exit it's about 45km to Tapanatepec. If you go in to Arriaga, when you leave ask for directions to get out of town to Tapanatepec.
- As you come in to Tapanatepec the road forks and it isn't well marked which way to go. Go around the curve to the left. The road to the right, (wrong way), is to Tuxtla Gutierrez. The highway doesn't go through Tapanatepec town center. You will go by the edge of town. However, there is a clean hotel with hot water and A/C just off central park, (not as good as Arriaga). There is a Banamex cajero ATM on the left side of the road across from the Pemex. You want to stay in the highway to La Ventosa.
- It's about 90 miles from Arriaga to La Ventosa. At La Ventosa you will turn to the right on the highway to Matias Romero which will take you over the isthmus of Mexico to the Atlantic side of the country.
- Note: As I write this, 12/2008, they are about ready to finish a bypass around La Ventosa. Keep in mind that your next major town is Matias Romero then on to Sayula.
- Around La Ventosa there are several concentrations of wind powered electric generators. After you go to the right at La Ventosa just a short distance you will come to road marker km242. Take a sigh of relief, your going the right way!
- It's about 30 miles from La Ventosa to Matias Romero. There is a Pemex and a hotel there.
- The next major town you will come to is Sayula.
- Stay on the highway as you go through Sayula and there will be a Pemex on your right. They have free restrooms and it is a good place to fill up with fuel as well. Just past the Pemex about 2 miles you will get on the toll road to Veracruz. Take the exit to the right that says "Mexico, Veracruz cuota".
- You will be on the autopista about three hours from the time you enter near Sayula until you exit north of Veracruz. There really isn't a good place to stay the night once you get on the autopista. There are a couple of decent hotels a short distance from Sayula down the road in Acayucan. They are both just off central park and have secure parking and good restaurants.

- The toll when you get on the autopista at Sayula is \$90.00 and there is a sign that says 247km to Veracruz. You will actually bypass Veracruz and exit where the sign says "salida Veracruz cuota", just past La Tinaja.
- About km84 marker after you get on the autopista you will come to the next tollbooth. The toll is \$150.00. Get in the line that says, "Veracruz, Puebla, Mexico".
- Go past La Tinaja and take the "salida Veracruz cuota" exit.
- Proceed on this highway about 50km to the "Paso del Toro" exit.
- At km88 get off to the right where it says "Cardel cuota". The toll is \$58.00.
- **Important: It is easy to make a mistake here.** After you exit and pay the toll go down to the end of the ramp. If you merge onto the highway and go right it will take you to Paso del Toro. That is the wrong way! You want to go the end of the exit ramp take a hard left and you will go on an overpass back over the autopista to Cardel. Immediately after you get on this road there is a sign that says "Santa Fe libre, Cardel libre".
- From the Cardel exit you go about 5.5 miles and there is a railroad crossing. This is a landmark you are on the right road.
- 2 to 3 miles past the railroad crossing you will come to a roundabout on the highway. On the left side of the road is a Pemex and there is a sign that says, "Cardel straight, Xalapa left". You want to go straight towards Cardel.
- A few miles past the roundabout you will come to a toll area. There is no toll for you here, just pass on through. Follow the signs that say "Poza Rica, Cardel". **Do not take the Veracruz exit to the right.**
- Cross over the highway directly in front of you and follow the sign that say "Poza Rica" to the right. You are now back on the autopista that goes to Cardel.
- Before you get to Cardel you will have your last autopista toll, \$37.00.
- As you come in to Cardel there is an exit to the left with a sign that says, "Cardel". If it is getting towards evening and you will want a hotel soon Cardel is a good place to stop. There is a hotel with hot water, A/C, and restaurant just off central park. This road to the left will take you to centro. If you don't need to stop in Cardel just continue straight toward Poza Rica.
- As you leave Cardel the highway splits with Xalapa to the left or Poza Rica to the right. Stay right towards Poza Rica. Poza Rica is the next major town, but you will not have to go through town. There is a bypass.

- The Costa Esmeralda is about 120km from Cardel. There are many hotels and restaurants there. It is a good place to stay over or take a break and go down to the beach.
- Toll bridge at Nautla is \$18.00.
- Toll bridge at Gutierrez Zamora is \$18.00.
- Twenty to thirty minutes past Gutierrez Zamora there is an exit to the right for the autopista to Poza Rica. Take this exit and get on the autopista. The fee is \$30.00 and you will bypass Poza Rica. A couple of hundred meters past the toll booth there are clean free restrooms on your right in the white buildings.
- At road marker 205 you will see a sign that says "Poza Rica, Cazones" to the right, or "Tuxpan" straight ahead. Continue straight ahead; do not go in to Poza Rica.
- Continue to km218. There you can go to the right to Tuxpan or go straight to "Mexico, Tampico, and Alamo". Go straight. Your next major town is Tampico, about 3-4 hours from here.
- Don't be concerned with the signs that say "Mexico City". You are going to turn off in a little while to Tampico.
- Take the exit to "Tihuatlan" at km225. The exit is to the right to Tampico, Alamo, and Tihuatlan.
- When you come into Tihuatlan at km0 there is an exit to the left to Alamo. Take this left.
- At km3 there is an exit to the left. Don't go left. You continue straight towards Tampico.
- Go straight through Alamo, follow the signs to Tampico.
- A couple of miles past Alamo there is a toll bridge, fee is \$7.00.
- You will come to an intersection about ten miles past Alamo with a sign that says "Tampico via corta, Tuxpan" to the right. Take this right.
- In a couple of miles you will come to another intersection where you will go left that is not well marked. There is a large concrete obelisk at this intersection where you go left to Tampico. Soon after you turn there is a sign that says "Tampico 145km". If you see this you are on the right road.
- In Cerro Azul there is a decent hotel/restaurant called San Carlos on your left. If it is getting toward nightfall this is a good place to stop. You are about 1.5 hours to

Tampico from here. But you don't actually go in to Tampico; you will bypass most of town.

- At Tampico Alto set your odometer to zero because you will turn to the left in a few minutes and things get a little tricky.
- Go 4.5 miles from Tampico Alto and the highway goes from a two lane to a four lane divided highway. Proceed another 1.5 miles on the four lane highway and you will see a Pemex and a 24 Ever convenience store on the left. Make a U-turn and come back about 100 meters to the 1st road to your right. There is a sign that says "Hotel" and another sign that says "Ferro Electrica Benito Juarez". This is the bypass around Tampico.
- You will go down a steep hill and then angle off to the right. There is a sign that says "Pollo Asados" where you angle to the right.
- From Tampico Alto where you set your odometer go 7.9 miles and there will be a fork in the road. Go to the left at this fork up a small hill. There are a couple of bars on the left here with signs that say "Corona Extra" and a "Farmacia Jocy". At the top of this hill there is a bridge and you will be going over an inlet from the bay.
- At about the 10 mile mark on your odometer you should see some heavy construction on your right where they are making some offshore drilling rigs. You are on the right road. Presently you are still on the bypass around Tampico.
- You are on a toll road and at the 14.5 mile mark you will pay a \$7.00 toll.
- After you cross the bridge at the 15.5 mile setting on the odometer you will turn to the right towards Tampico. Right before you get to the overpass in front of you exit to the right towards Tampico.
- **Note; the police monitor speed, no passing zones, and pedestrian crossings the next 15 miles. Discretion is the better part of valor here in the Tampico area. You are not in Guatemala and you will be ticketed!**
- At about the 19.2 mile mark you will cross a bridge that will take you over an inlet. Directly in front of you is a roundabout that is somewhat tricky. You don't want to go to Ciudad Valle; you want to go toward Ciudad Victoria. Get over to the left in the roundabout, but don't take the first "Retorno", get off at the second which says "Altamira". Hang to the left where it says "Altamira, Ciudad Madero", continue straight through the intersection and you will see a sign that says, "Playa, Altamira". When you go just a few hundred feet you will come to a bridge with a sign, "Puente chairel II". If you see this you are on the right road!
- With 23.3 on the odometer there is another tollbooth. \$21.00 and go straight. Follow signs to Ciudad Victoria.

- At the 28.5 mark you will come to a large intersection. You will go left at the stoplight. For the next several miles you will go through a series of stoplights and pedestrian crossings. These are strictly monitored by the police and they target foreigners. Go Slow!
- At about the 30 mile mark start getting over to the right hand lane and follow the signs to Ciudad Victoria.
- There is a stoplight at exit to Ciudad Victoria at mile 31. Be careful that you don't get distracted by the traffic and run it if it is red.
- At about the mile 33 mark there will be another intersection in the road and you will go to the left toward Est Manuel. Do not go straight to Altamira.
- Follow the signs toward Ciudad Victoria.
- At the 36 mark there is a fruit quarantine check. Just proceed through it and keep going straight.
- At about the 66 mile mark there is an exit to Est Manuel, go straight toward Ciudad Victoria.
- At the 70 mile mark you get off the road to Ciudad Victoria and turn to the right (Hwy 180) to "Matamoros, Aldama".
- In Aldama follow the signs to, "Soto la Marina, Matamoros".
- At Soto la Marina follow the signs to Matamoros.
- As you enter Matamoros continue straight through town on the road you came in on. You will go through several traffic lights and see various signs for different border crossings. Go straight until you come to a shopping center on your right. It will have an Office Depot and Soriana Supermarket. At the traffic light just past the McDonalds but before the overpass turn to the right. This will put you on the freeway access road. Immediately after you make the right turn get over to the left and merge onto the freeway. Once you get onto the freeway get in to one of the center lanes. You will be on this road for a couple of miles.
- Continue straight until the road splits. Follow the signs to the left to Puente Internacional Ignacio Zaragoza
- Go in the middle lane that says, "Estados Unidos". Go straight through the light and proceed in the lane that says "Autobuses".
- Note; The vehicle checkout office closes at 9:00pm weekdays and 5:00pm weekends at this border crossing. There is a twenty-four hour crossing downtown

if needed.

- This is tricky so go slow here. At the second entrance turn to the left. There is a sign that says, "oficinas aduanales, oficinas conciones", go left in the entrance and then go down to the right and park. Walk around to the right of the buildings and enter through the front which is on the other side. Enter through the double doors and once in the building you can get your exit stamp on your passport to your left and check your car out at the window to your right. **Everyone in the vehicle will have to come in to get their passport stamped. You will need your passport, the visa paper that you had validated at a bank on your trip, and the temporary vehicle importation permit.** Get your passport stamped out first to the left then go to the vehicle check-out window on the right. The agent there will go out to your car and peel the sticker off your window.
- The toll booth leaving Mexico charges \$24.00.
- Bingo, next stop U.S.A.

If you found value in this guide as you made your journey north from Guatemala through Mexico we would appreciate a gift to our mission. Please send a check to:

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