



The author and his motorcycle traveled 4,562 miles to his next post.

The motorcycle trip I took to my current posting, the U.S. Embassy in Panama City, began in Fairfax Station, Va., amid a 32-degree temperature and 30 inches of snow. Fourteen days and 4,562 miles later, I reached my destination.

In all, my trip aboard my venerable BMW traversed five states, eight countries and seven borders through temperatures as high as 104 degrees. I largely followed the Pan-American Highway, which runs from the United States to South America, and includes the Inter-American Highway, which passes through all the countries of Central America except Belize.

My journey began three days after Spanish language training at the Foreign Service Institute ended. I reached the Mexican border after three straight 500-mile-plus days and found myself worried about what lay ahead. Was my Spanish sufficient? Was I prepared mentally and physically for a trip that I would have to complete in 14 days, the time I'd allotted? Would the border crossings be as frustrating as I had heard, and what dangers might lie ahead?

Easy Rider

DS agent motors to next post

/// Story and photos by Erik Antons



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Useful Spanish

An answer to my language concern came near Tampico, Mexico, at a small farming community. The quiet, curious people were a refreshing change from the windy road, and when I asked the gas station attendant for directions to the nearest bank, I was delighted to see that he understood my Spanish and I

understood his. I rode to the bank without missing a turn. A day later, at a military checkpoint on my way to Veracruz, I found myself chatting about my motorcycle with a squad of Mexican soldiers. There would be several military checkpoints along the way, but the soldiers were usually just bored and curious about the Norteamericano who was

riding his bike across Central America.

As my confidence grew, I regularly chatted up truck drivers to learn of road conditions, speed traps, border-crossing techniques and good lunch spots. I learned that many of them made the entire grueling Inter-American drive as often as twice a week.

My preconceptions that the road would be

Driving—or Riding—to Your Next Post?

Do research. Identify travel warnings and restrictions, such as whether you'll pass through states requiring a helmet, and assess the risks posed by weather. Determine your route and alternate route, options for and costs of lodging, and how to make your vehicle and your body trip-ready. Identify your make of vehicle's dealerships en route, the cost and availability of fuel, and whether you'll need special equipment or documentation. Find out about the quality of emergency health care, needed languages and how best to communicate with those back home.

Make a plan. Include details about the size and composition of the traveling party and the details of the area of travel, including security concerns and weather. Specify each day's route, lodging plans and considerations about equipment and documentation. Establish contingencies for political violence, natural disasters, medical emergencies, kidnappings, theft and crime. Consider taking out evacuation insurance (<http://www.medjetassistance.com/>) and learn how your medical insurance provider wants payment handled. Place all personal information—including prescriptions, medical conditions and emergency contacts—on at least two laminated cards that you can carry with you at all times, one in your vehicle and one in a pocket of your clothes. Learn about your vehicle and find a place on it to hide cash and spare keys. Attach color copies of your passport, vehicle title, vehicle insurance and health insurance policies, driver's license and vehicle registration to your plan, then scan it and send it to three or four trustworthy people, telling them who does what in an emergency. Also send a copy to your e-mail account so that you can access it while on the road.

Expect complications but don't give up. The hard part is planning. Once it's done, stick to your plan and drive forward.

through the mountains and, at altitudes of more than 3,300 meters, took me over the highest point of the Inter-American Highway. The low-traffic road kept climbing until I was above the clouds and gave me one of the best days of riding in my life.

Another good ride had come on a cool morning a few days earlier on a narrow mountain road near San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico. There, I jockeyed for position with double-trailer semis, dodged potholes and bounced over speedbumps in an Alpine setting so lovely my neck grew stiff from stealing quick glances at the neat little houses, people along the road and expansive valleys below me.

Risks Ahead

However, there were also downsides to the trip. After my layover in Antigua, I found myself the next day in downtown San Salvador, El Salvador. I was stuck in traffic on a one-lane street and my greatest defense, mobility, was limited to inches. A young guy with tattoos on his neck and a predator's stare walked in front of me, stopped and stared me down while another one circled and ran his hands over the bike.

Just as another guy approached, traffic began moving and I gunned the engine and


wove my way out of the jam. It was my closest call on what was otherwise a trip where I faced few risks.

The other risk came four days later as I was exploring a back road in Costa Rica. The rocky one-lane road was littered with potholes and led to a narrow bridge that seemed unable to support my motorcycle. There were no guardrails, and I was limited to a narrow two-foot-wide section of loose lumber on one side. The man-sized gaps between the boards gave me a clear view of the rushing stream 20 feet below. I throttled the engine and quickly rode across and parked. I then walked back and noticed that only half of the boards that I'd ridden over were even nailed down.

My journey ended on March 6. Having passed through eight countries, my wallet looked like something that belonged to the World Bank. The sights, smells, sounds and people that I met along the way made the journey one of the most memorable in my life. I realized that a great benefit of Department of State life is moving to new places and seeing new cultures firsthand.

Now, I'm planning my next motorcycle trip, to Argentina. Who wants to join me? ■

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Left: The author crossed this dilapidated bridge while traveling to Golfito, Costa Rica.
Above: The Santa Catalina Arch in Antigua, Guatemala.

badly maintained were sometimes challenged. In Guatemala, the poor road conditions made me think I'd never make the next town, the colonial city of Antigua, by nightfall—and it's not a good idea to be on some of these roads after dark. But just as I began considering an alternate plan, the road widened into a beautiful new four-lane highway that snaked