

# The Busses of Zihuatanejo

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Buses in Mexico are a form of folk art. Each one is an individual. The drivers have a secure position, and they apparently drive the same bus all the time. They invest a large portion of their spare time and wages in customization of their bus.

For example, all buses have a stereo system. This ranges from the simplest basic system to a full-blown stereo with amplifier, equalizer, CD player, LARGE speakers, woofers, synchronized flashing lights, and



more speakers in the middle and rear of the bus, lest any of the passengers be unable to hear what's playing. There is at least one rack for holding tapes and/or CDs. These systems are installed by sawing holes, roughly stereo- or speaker-shaped, in the dashboard or the overhead paneling of the bus above the driver. The stereos are held in place by different methods, sometimes luck, which means the driver will occasionally reach up and push it back into the hole to keep it from falling out on his head. Duct tape is popular, as is wire. Sometimes an actual

bracket and faceplate is used.

One purpose of the stereos is to warn would-be bus riders that a bus is coming. Usually this works up to a mile, or in the case of really good stereos, two. Watching for the cloud of dust is not always reliable. The stereo's other function is to keep people from boarding with musical instruments. Buses without stereos are prey to these folks, who, between Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo as an example, have a captive audience for 7 miles. After 7 miles, you will pay them anything to get them off the bus.



Immediately after the installation of the stereo comes the custom upholstery. No, no, this is not for the seats. It is for the ceiling panels and the walls surrounding the driver. It makes the stereo sound better. It almost always covers the dashboard, the engine compartment immediately to the right of the driver, and the overhead panels above the driver. As time and money permit, this creeps slowly toward the back. Adalberto Dorian's #75 bus

had 12 speakers and custom quilted vinyl on the ceiling, all the way to the rear. Considerable effort and, one presumes, cost, is expended on the leather or fabric used and the quilting, patterning, or designs worked into it.

Next is the window treatment. Some Park Avenue apartments would pale in comparison to some of these buses. The window I'm talking about is the front one. The large one. The one the driver looks out of. Or tries to. First let's dispense with the obvious requirement of writing the bus's route on the right front side of the windshield in white painted letters about 6" high. And then there might be a series of addendums to this original list scrawled in ever smaller and more skewed letters near the bottom. One should not take these too seriously as actual destinations. They are places the bus might go, or might have once gone, or might go on certain days, but not necessarily where it will go after you board it. The prudent thing to do is ask the driver what his destination is. He will tell you, if he knows. ("He" is always the correct gender for a bus driver in Mexico. There are no "shes".) Bus drivers in Mexico are, without exception, good guys. They are eager to help, very friendly. They will tell you where to get off, what bus to take next, how to get back. Routes, we have found, can sometimes be tailored on the fly. In Mazatlan, we had a very large, diesel powered, air conditioned bus divert two blocks off course to deliver us right to the door of the store we had asked about when we boarded.

But I digress. Back to window treatments. The drivers may be all male, but the driver's support crew is undoubtedly female. The windshield is usually draped with something handmade that goes all the way across the windshield from side to side, and drapes about half way down the window. It is sometimes a



simple rectangular shape, but more often is scalloped along the bottom edge, bedecked with tassels or balls, and frequently has a much longer part hanging down in the corners. It is very elaborate. It's the fuzzy-dice-on-the-mirror concept on a grand scale. It may be crocheted, knitted, painted on fabric, embroidered, made of leather or just a piece of plain fabric. Sometimes it consists of side by side sports team medallions, which seem to be very popular in Mexico and are about 9" square. Over the top of this, either

pinned to it or affixed to the overhead paneling just above, are various religious items such as rosaries, St Christopher medals, statuettes, pictures of Jesus, pictures of family members, girlfriends, favorite motorcycles, etc. All the way across the outside of the windshield, at the top, reading from the outside of the bus, is a decal that might have the name of the route, but more often has something like BAD BOY, or SPEEDY SANCHEZ or RICARDO GOMEZ in very large letters on it. A reference to the driver, no doubt.

Most of these buses are primitive things. They are basically farm trucks with windows and seats. I have never yet seen one whose dash instruments work. The speedometer will either have its needle broken off and lying at the bottom of the glass, or there will be no needle at all, or it will be stuck at something like 100 kmph. (Optimistic in the extreme, except perhaps going down the hill into Zihua. See below.) Frequently there is just a hole where the speedometer used to be. The same holds true of the other gauges. Most of the buses have after-market oil pressure, temperature and battery gauges affixed to the side of the panel, or stuck into an unused hole, say where the speedometer was. They are put there by the drivers, but are rarely hooked up except for the lights inside. The lights always work. But when you think of it, there is little use for the gauges anyway. After all, the bus smells bad when it overheats or the oil pressure drops; if the battery is low the stereo won't work, and there is certainly no value in quantifying what speed you're going. From the perspective of the driver, the bus is always going too slow.

OK. Persons who are unfamiliar with how vehicle transmissions work can skip this part. You can pass the quiz by simply knowing how this relates to the technique known as "passenger-packing", described below. Automatic transmissions are non-existent. The buses in Mexico use stick shift transmissions with straight-cut gears. What we call synchro-mesh, that invention that allows even stick-shift klutzes to shift without grinding the gears, is unknown. Double-clutching, the technique that was made obsolete by synchro-mesh, but does the same thing, is also unknown. The technique employed is to press in the clutch, push or pull the lever until the noise stops. Most of the smaller buses are gasoline powered and have 4 or 5 speed transmissions. Most of the larger buses are diesel and, because of their limited engine rpm range, have 6 speed transmissions with a two-speed LO/HI rear axle for a total of 12 gears. They use them all. They will start out in First-LO, then First-HI, then Second-LO, then Second-HI, and so forth. The bus goes about 100 feet in each gear.

The stick shift itself is an objet d'arte. In accordance with the window treatments, the stick shift, a lever about 3 feet long protruding up from the floor, is garnished with a variety of tasteful appointments, such as women's hair scrunchies, hand tooled leather covers, strings of lights, wrapped cordage, crocheted sock-like things and many others. This seems to be a requirement, right after the stereo.

The bus grinds along out of Ixtapa Marina, bound for Zihuatanejo. It usually takes about 20 minutes end to end. At quitting time, around 5 pm, it takes longer. The bus picks up maybe a half dozen people at the Marina, then more and more, bumping along in low gear past Hotel Row. Here's a peculiar Mexico thing: Mexicans invariably take the aisle side of the two-person seats, forcing new passengers to crowd past them to the window seat. Gringos usually take the window seat first, or slide over to the window if an incoming passenger approaches, leaving the more accessible seat free. On the other hand, younger Mexicans spring to their feet instantly if an "old person" of the female persuasion is forced to stand. This caused Donna's jaw to clench noticeably the first few times, but she has gotten used to it now.

About mid-way along Hotel Row people are standing in the aisle and the bus is full. Wait! Did I say full? No, no, no. Impossible, mi amigo! There's no such thing as a full bus in Mexico. I've told you that before. There's no more room but it is not full. As the bus approaches the hill on the South edge of Ixtapa, more and more people get on. The bus starts up the hill and gravity naturally packs people toward the back. Driver technique helps too. Revving the engine and dumping the clutch in low gear will gain a space or two near the front. The hill gets steeper. The bus groans and creaks, accelerating slowly, and just as it reaches cruising speed, another stop for a passenger. Now the hill is so steep and the bus so loaded

that revving the engine and dumping the clutch is not just for passenger-packing; it is necessary to get the bus moving.

But finally, we get to the top of the hill. There are no more opportunities to pick up passengers for the downhill stretch, and this becomes the E-Ticket part of the ride. Accelerating down into Zihua with 10,000 pounds of sweating, swaying Mexicans and Gringos aboard, I am usually glad that the speedometer is broken. The driver gets extra credit for accelerating past slower traffic, then cutting abruptly to the curb and stopping. This is particularly effective if the back end of the bus can be left sticking out into both lanes to block all the cars he just passed. Passengers can participate, too. Wait until the bus is going at a good rate of speed in the left lane with a bunch of traffic on the right. Even better if there's a traffic light on a long, stale green just ahead. The driver is accelerating to make the light. Time it carefully, now. Your stop is coming up, but wait.... wait.... now! Call for a stop. He makes the light, veers to the curb, slams the overloaded bus to a complete stop in 2 bus lengths, cutting off all the traffic behind, which now blocks the incoming cross traffic -- all while simultaneously changing tapes in the stereo. Good show! We passengers would all applaud if only we could move our arms.

**The End**