

# *AMERICAS OVERLAND*

## *The Driving Handbook*

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*For self-driving journeys from the  
USA  
through Mexico, Central America  
and South America*

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# Latin America



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# Preface

In our opinion, many adventure books and magazines present the stereotyped image that a journey through Central and South America is an adventure way outside the boundaries of normal human life. That it should only be undertaken with many precautions and is one for which you need all kinds of specialized equipment. Yes, you definitely must be prepared, but truth be told, it is a fabulous experience that can be undertaken by anyone who does their research and knows what they want out of their adventure.

Fear of crime is probably the biggest deterrent to most of those who contemplate this journey. Crime exists everywhere in the world and you have to take the appropriate precautions to try to prevent it. That said neither we nor anyone we've met on the road has been the victim of anything but the same types of petty crime that can happen at home.

Yes, accidents do unfortunately happen – we have seen photos of unlucky drivers that have ended up in ditches or flipped their vehicles. We have personally experienced such high winds on one stretch of *Ruta 40* in Argentina that we had to drive on the wrong side of the cambered road to prevent being blown over. Accidents do happen and when you least expect them. Being diligent is the best way to prevent them.

Not being fluent in the native language also adds a whole different level of “survival” to your day-to-day experience. But it isn't too difficult to learn the basics – hello, goodbye, thank-you, how much? or I'm lost. Hand

signals also work really well. Learning the necessities will tell the locals that you are interested in their culture. What an icebreaker “How are you?” can be in a native language! Try it and see for yourselves.

This book is intended as a handbook to help you drive through the countries of Mexico and Central and South America. It is not intended as a guidebook for those countries and does not contain all the information that you will want to have at your disposal. Make sure to buy a guidebook such as Lonely Planet, Moon, Rough Guides, Brandt or any of the other guides available for your areas of intended travel.

Have a great journey!





# Chapter One

## Why A Self-Driving Journey?

- Driving Options
- What Type of Vehicle
- Four Wheel Drive or Two Wheel Drive
- Our Expedition Vehicle
- The Build Out

It started out as just an idea, a dream really. Wouldn't it be nice to drive our own vehicle around the world?

After many years of traveling the world on public transport such as buses, trains and boats, we had discovered that the times we had rented cars, motorcycles, boats or bicycles, we had been able to see and do more, stopping whenever and wherever we wanted to.

## Driving Options

There are four main options available for traveling into Mexico, Central and South America with your own transport.

**One**, is to join a caravan. There are several companies that lead trips into Mexico and there are others that lead caravans to Central America, but these all turn around once they reach Panama. As of 2007, there was only one company that specialized in leading self-drive caravans into South America. But it is not free or even inexpensive to join a caravan. Caravan travel is offered

not so much due to security issues but rather for the camaraderie of group travel.

**Two**, Overland truck tours are another option, but they really are not even close to the self-driving option. Overland trucks are generally little more than a private bus fitted on a truck chassis and filled with upwards of 35 people. Itineraries are pre-set and facilities are a combination of camping and inexpensive “backpacker” accommodations. Again, camaraderie is a major attraction of these tours.

**Three**, rental of a car or motor home works well if you will be visiting one country, unless you can obtain permission to cross borders with the rental. Moreover, if you want to travel for an open-ended period of time, a rental could get very expensive.

So if you want to travel with the unlimited freedom to go where you want, when you want and to spend as much or as little time in a place as possible, then self-driving is the way to go.

This leads us to the option we chose, **Four**, travel with your own vehicle. Having our own vehicle meant that there would be no more night buses, no more sharing seats with chickens and un-diapered babies. No more climbing over sacks of onions and potatoes to exit trains. No more live goats tied to the roofs of buses. No more hitching rides from the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. No more fighting to get on already overcrowded buses. No more maniac bus drivers. No more women going into labor in the back of a minibus. No more poorly tied cargo falling off the top of the bus. No more wondering if our bags would end up in the

same place we did. No more locked passenger compartments on ferries. No more drunks on minibuses. No more bus drivers behind locked doors. No more bus drivers leaving the rest stop while you're still in the bathroom.

Oh yes, there were many reasons to consider having our own vehicle. Not that most of those experiences didn't make for good stories, but we were ready for different types of stories.

## **What Type of Vehicle**

This book is written for those of you who want to travel by motorized transport. Self-powered transport, be it walking or bicycling, is covered in specialty books written by people who are enthusiastic about those forms of travel. Motorcyclists will find much of our information helpful, although you generally won't be primarily camping and your shipping experiences will generally be by air rather than by ship.

The first decision that we needed to make was what type of vehicle did we want? We like to camp, so we knew that we wanted a vehicle that could also be our "home away from home". We knew from past experience owning a small, slide-in, pop-up camper on a pickup truck that we would want a high clearance, 4-wheel drive vehicle. Our previous truck was a 4X4 and it could take us just about anywhere we wanted to go.

We also knew that it needed to be bigger than the pop-up, which was just too small for two people for extended periods of time, such as during long bouts with bad

weather. Small vehicles are weather dependant, meaning that since you will be spending large amounts of your time outside, good weather and a lack of bugs are necessary when considering your ability to set up camp. Privacy is also an issue to be considered when thinking about small vehicles and tent camping options – can you camp anywhere? A larger vehicle affords more privacy thereby allowing you to camp anywhere, in a service station or even right on the street.

**Your** vehicle needs to meet **your** needs. Based on your budget and what you need to make you comfortable, you might decide that you need a large, self-contained vehicle like ours. Or you may decide that you can be comfortable with a van or SUV. There are pros and cons for both. A large vehicle can be difficult to maneuver in the small streets of colonial towns and it can prohibit you from accessing some spots like beaches and trails when access is limited by height or width. Small vehicles can limit what you can take and where you can spend the night. But that decision can only be made by you.

Thus the process begins with soul searching and research, lots and lots of research. Thank goodness for the Internet. I don't think we would have been able to accomplish what we have, from the small town we live in, without it.

## **Four Wheel Drive or Two Wheel Drive**

So start off by asking yourself where do you want to go? Are you going with other vehicles or will you be by yourself? Do you want to explore off the beaten path or