

# ICWA LETTERS

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**THE AMERICAS**

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## Hell on Wheels

*—In Search of God on Guatemala's Public Buses—*

**GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala**

**October, 1999**

**By Chenoe Egawa**

Traveling in Guatemala can be frazzling. Sometimes I rent a car, because I love having mobile freedom, independence. There is a lot of comfort in knowing that I can come and go as I please. Besides, when I am driving, I know that my life is in my own hands, and not temporarily handed over to some other driver. Renting a car, however, does have its downside. Driving in Guatemala requires 100 percent concentration. Most major roads are two-lane highways, one small, patched up lane coming and one narrow, pothole-filled lane going. On the highway, there are trucks with loads of sugar cane, broccoli, cabbage and other assorted produce, semis with huge uncovered loads of gravel, sand and rock, trucks with written warnings that their contents are "inflammable," old tractors, old, old cars and pick-ups, and a few newer ones.

The most predominant, obnoxious and aggressive presence on the highway, however, is the old black-and-yellow 'Bluebird'-type school bus. At some point, all of these buses must have been retired in the States, shipped to Guatemala, painted up in nice bright colors, equipped with flashing lights and extremely loud horns and re-employed for a second term in Guatemalan public transport. Offensive and defensive driving takes on a whole new meaning here. One has to know who is in front, who is bearing down from behind, who is coming head-on and how much time there is to weave in and out of all of the above. So, freedom of mobility has a price. It usually means that I arrive at my destination exhausted, with a stiff neck and back from gripping the wheel so hard. Sometimes it is just better to take public transportation, especially when traveling long distances. As one friend put it, "You will be safer traveling with all of the people. It is not a good idea to be driving around the country by yourself. Besides, on the bus, it is much more pleasant, because you can relax and let someone else worry about the driving." Sounds nice in theory, but I would not call riding the public bus, relaxing; amusing maybe, perhaps even thrilling at times, but not relaxing.

To tell the truth, I have always tried to avoid going on public buses. I see what they are like every day; the way people are jammed into them, three or four to a seat. When the seats are already tightly packed, all other incoming bodies are literally wedged and stacked into the aisles. Some of the drivers are reckless as hell too. From the outside looking in, it is something to see, but from the inside looking out, it is an experience worth telling. My very first public bus experience, way back when, still stands out in my mind, and since it is a good representation of the public transport experience in general, I will share it with you.

I had planned to go to a conference near Chimaltenango, where small co-operatives from the highlands were meeting with a non-governmental development organization. I was hoping to catch a ride with someone from

Guatemala City. That option fell through. At the last minute, I decided to catch the bus. It was a relatively short ride — only an hour and thirty minutes — so I figured it would be a good way to test the public-transport waters.

A friend had told me that CENDEC, the conference center, was on the outskirts of town. I had never been there myself, but I was told that it was a well-known place. If that were the case, any bus driver would surely know where it was.

I had two choices for departure. One was the El Trebol bus stop along the heinous, permanent, toxic traffic jam known as *Calzada Roosevelt*, the main road in and out of the capital on the West Side. I had heard endless stories about how dangerous it was there, a place where robberies took place daily and where occasional dead bodies were dumped off after holdups and murders that took place somewhere else. My other choice was the bus terminal in Zone 4, a place that another friend warned me, “you should always try to avoid and if you cannot avoid it, make sure you never where any jewelry or carry any bags, because you will almost certainly be robbed.” Nothing bad has ever happened to me at either place, but so begins the journey.

I had the taxi drop me off at El Trebol. Two men were working there. They asked passengers where they wanted to go, helped them flag down the buses and made sure they boarded the right ones. Buses were pulling up every few seconds and you had to know which one to get on immediately, because none of them came to a real stop. They would kind of slide into the bus stop, brakes screeching, while riders hastily jumped on and off to get out of harm’s way. With the last incoming passenger hanging on to the door, the drivers punched the gas pedal, sending black smoke billowing out in a giant, choking cloud, dusting everyone and everything in its path.

“Where are you going?” One of the men asked me.

I told him I was going to CENDEC, the conference center outside of Chimaltenango.

“Your bus will say *Esperanza* (Hope) and it will be here in two minutes!” he said enthusiastically, holding up his pinky and ring finger.

He was all caught up in the excitement of El Trebol, the honking, the bustle, the steady flow of bodies and buses. It was nonstop action. Sure enough my bus was there within two minutes or less, and I jumped on quickly, thankful for my physical agility. The bus was packed and I moved down the aisle one-third of the way and stopped, foolishly thinking that I could not go any further. One of the guys behind me shouted, “Move it. Towards the back, you.”

“Where?” I asked.

That was a stupid question, and I realized it as I said it.

So I forged my way through the bodies, trying not to trip over people’s limbs that were sticking out in the aisle, occupying every last pocket of space. I kept moving, scanning the bus, looking for my own pocket to slither into. Luckily, in the second to the last seat, a young guy asked me if I wanted to sit in between him and another guy who was by the window.

“Sure. Thanks,” I said, realizing how fortunate I was to have a place to sit. I wedged myself in to the six or seven inches of seat space, contorting my body when and where necessary, so as not to crush the two guys on either side of me. Even my lungs were compressed, my shoulders almost touching in the front of my body. I took shallow breaths. There is no such thing as personal space on these buses.

Each bus has a team of two or three people. When there are three, one guy drives the bus, one guy collects the money and one guy hangs out the door serving as a second set of eyes for the driver, helping him to know when it is okay to pass other cars and buses. He also has the job of getting passengers and their bundles and baskets of goods in and out of the bus quickly. If someone has too much baggage to bring inside, he climbs to the top of the bus and straps down the cargo there. A lot of times he is on top of the bus when it is in motion, loading and unloading cargo. This guy has to be very agile, almost an acrobat. If it is a team of two, the acrobat also collects money.

There were only two working on this bus. The money guy/acrobat waded through the aisle collecting fares. I watched him to see how he managed to maneuver through all the bodies. One lady, who was a little heavy, could not quite move her right thigh far enough over to the side to let him pass. He put his hand on the big hip that was blocking the aisle and gave a good shove, sliding past her. In one hand he had a big wad of wilted, almost soggy five-, one-, and half-Quetzal notes. He made change by wetting his fingertips and separating out the correct amount of drooping bills for each passenger depending on their final destination.

I was anxiously waiting for him to get to me so that I could ask him where I needed to get off the bus. All I knew was the name of the place, CENDEC. I would not be able to recognize it by sight, and even if I could, I would not be able to see it through the masses. He finally worked his way to the back of the bus and I asked him to please tell me when we get to CENDEC, that I needed to get off there.

“Don’t worry,” he assured me. “I’ll tell you,” he said with a sort of wise smile.

I was hoping he would not forget, but I figured he must have a good memory in order to remember who has paid and who has not with so many passengers coming and

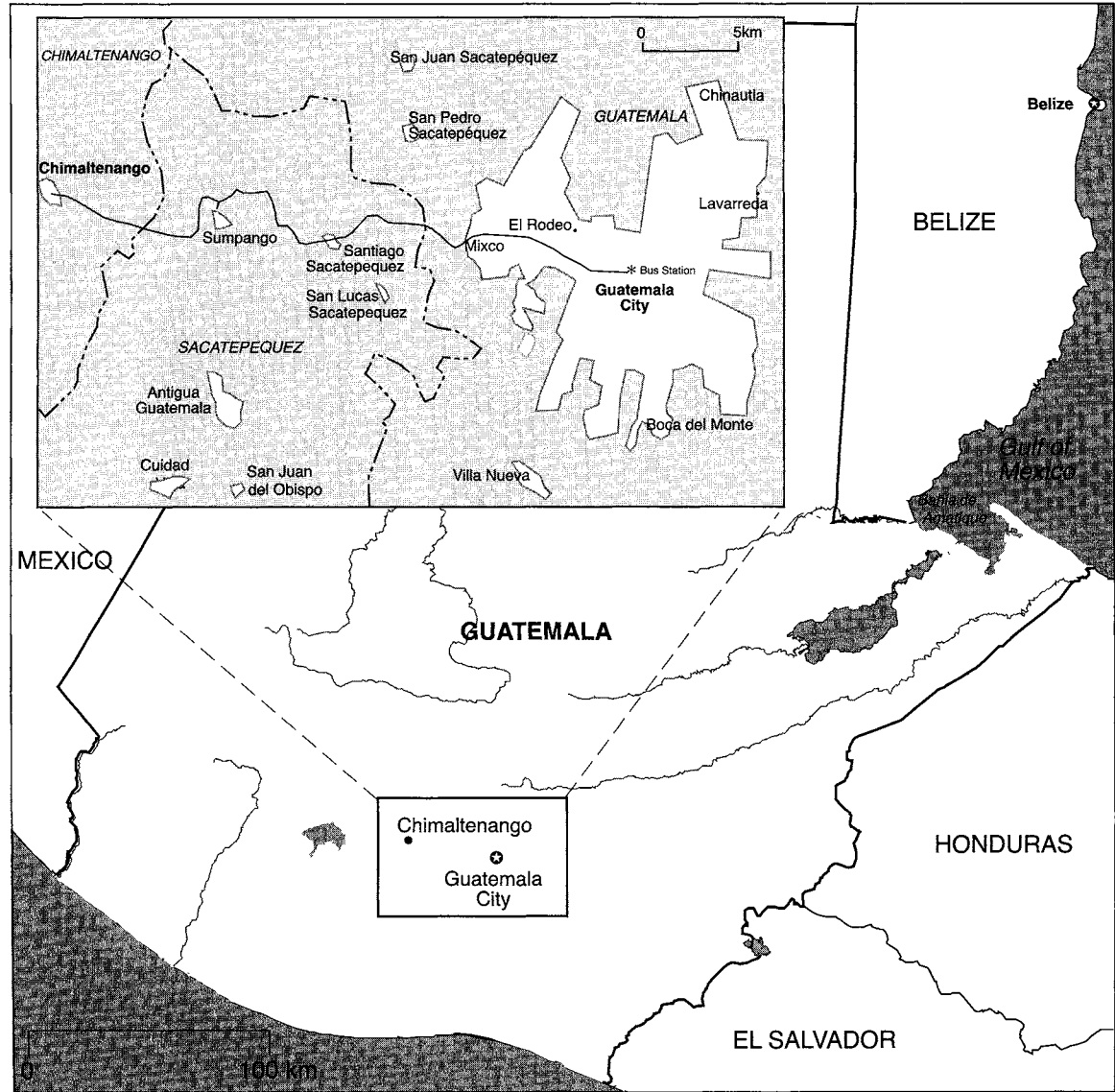
going. It would take a little over an hour to get there, so I tried to relax and enjoy the ride.

At one point, some people jumped off the bus through the back door. The guy who was supposed to tell me when to get off was one of them. When the bus jerked and bounced back into motion, I searched for him frantically, trying to see if he was still on board. A couple minutes later, I caught sight of his legs as he lowered himself through the front door from the roof! Apparently, he had opened up the door for those who exited out the back, then as the bus pulled out again, he climbed the back ladder to the roof, ran across the top and crawled back in the front.

In Chimaltenango we stopped at the market, and almost everyone got off the bus. *Great*, I thought. I knew that my stop was somewhere on the other side of town, so I was almost there. This was not so bad after all. My mind wandered off as I relished my personal space once again. I did not know why it was taking so long to get

back on the road. From what I had seen, the driver hardly ever came to a complete stop, and now we were just sitting there. All of a sudden and all at once, hordes of people started pouring into the bus from both ends. People with baskets of produce, small children, all in a panic to grab a seat, shouting and laughing, pushing and shoving. I snapped out of my daydream and saw my personal space dissipate once again. I started to get panicky, almost claustrophobic as people wedged themselves in on all sides of me. Is there no limit to how many bodies we can take, I said to myself out loud in English? I unconsciously let out a big long sigh, only realizing it was coming from me after it was already out.

How could I be so stupid, I thought? I should have taken those moments when the bus was almost empty to get up to the front by the door. Too late. Anyway, it would be a useful bit of knowledge for the next time. Smells filled the bus, all kinds of smells. We were on the road again. That, at least, was good. Fifteen minutes later, the money collector shouted out, "CENDEC!" I looked



around, not sure if that was what I heard. Between all of the people, the loud rumble of the bus' engine, the bumpy road vibrating the windows and banging the bus' metal frame, I could not distinguish what the shouting voice was saying. Again, I thought I heard him, "CENDEC!" I turned to the guys behind me and asked, "did he say CENDEC?" "Si," they answered. I jumped up out of my seat and moved to the aisle. My legs immediately got stuck in all the other legs. I looked to the front, to the back and to the front again, my legs so firmly planted, that only the upper half of my body twisted and turned frantically. I had to make a move, and quick, but I did not know which way to go. The people in the back started yelling, "you have to get off at the front!" The ones in the front said, "Go to the back!" The back was closer, and the door had already been flung open, just waiting for me to take flight. The bus driver had come to a stop and was revving the engine, meaning, get off quick! Again I called upon my physical agility and started climbing up and over seats and bodies like a wild monkey. I heard some people laughing, and I started laughing too. I hit the pavement and was blanketed in black smoke as the bus left me in its wake.

I made it to the meeting, and as it came to a close, I knew I had to get back on the bus to go home. *Okay, motivate yourself. You can do it, or better yet, you have to do it, unless you plan on staying here forever.* I walked down to the *Cruce*, the crossroads, where all the buses going to Guatemala City passed through. The first one to come was heading my way and I jumped on. Almost all the bus drivers decorate the dashboard with pictures of Saints, Virgins and/or Jesus Christ with a crown of thorns. Along with pictures are quotes from the Bible, "Jesus is King," "Jesus is the one," "Dear Lord Protect Us," and so on. Often times there are also rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror. This bus only had one tiny sticker with a cursive scribble that said, "Jehovah is my shepherd." No cross, no saint, no rosary. The driver was a young kid and two of his buddies were his teammates, one of them collected the money and the other one just acted crazy. They all seemed high to me. Their eyes were blood red, their eyelids hanging and every now and then they would all look at each other and break into big, cool, cheesy grins. They were waving, honking and flashing their lights at every bus driver that went by, making some kind of gang sign with their hands as we flew by the oncoming buses.

He bounced us along at high speeds, threatening to ride up and over anyone in his path. Every bump and pothole lifted us completely off our seats, slamming us back down again, throwing us from side to side as we rounded corners and wove in and out of traffic. Techno music blared through the two speakers in the front. Our driver was flying high. I could see his face in the rearview mirror. He was cruising this rickety old repainted school bus as if it were a top-of-the-line sports car. It seemed like he was seeing the road as a video game and

he was playing for points, driving as fast as he could, passing as many cars as possible, each one raising the score on his personal best. Every now and then he would reach up and shift the visor of his Miami Dolphins baseball cap from back to front, front to back, his hands cloaked in fingerless, black-leather gloves.

I was trying to figure out how to best position myself in case we crashed. I knew that if we did crash, at the very least, my knees would be ruined, driven through the back of the hard metal of the seat before me. At the next stop, a space in the front opened behind the driver and I quickly jumped up and took it. From there I could see what was coming and try to prepare for it. My knees were free and clear of metal, too, and there was a hand-rail before me that I could grip to support myself. A middle-aged woman sat next to me. I could see she was not happy about this boy's driving, but she held herself steady, emotionless. I looked around to see how other people were reacting to this maniac. Some people looked nervous, but it almost seemed like it was normal, just the luck of the draw. These people took the bus all the time and sometimes, a lot of times, they had to put up with guys like this. Nobody paid too much attention. When we would have a close call, a potential head-on collision, some of the younger kids would laugh. Myself, I was pissed off. I thought about how this young brat was taking the lives of all these people into his own crazy hands. He raced on, riding up on people from behind, laying on the horn and weaving back and forth trying to pass them as we rounded blind corners. An image flashed through my mind. I saw myself on a ride, a really old ride at a fair a long time ago. The ride was thrilling and scary, because the machine was old and the track was rough. At any point it felt like the cart would detach from the machine, tumbling, rolling and crashing off the track. How would it roll? Which way would we fall?

We descended into Guatemala City on the last bit of highway, which is a long series of steep curves. The bus driver accelerated even more, bracing himself by holding onto the window frame with his left hand and holding onto the wheel with his right, always in time with the *bump, bump, bump, bump* of the fast, heavy techno beat. A noxious smell of artificial car freshener wafted through the bus.

Once we were on *Calzada Roosevelt*, I began to believe that I was actually going to survive this experience. I was still a good way from home, but I decided to take my life back into my own hands and get off this bus from hell. I would catch a different one the rest of the way. *And when I board the next one, I thought, I will look at the dashboard upon entering and make sure that there are plenty of Saints, crosses, rosaries and blessings displayed there. If the display is insufficient, then I will simply step back down and wait for the next bus, for a driver who, at least, pretends to have a little closer relationship to God and Jesus, and not just Jehovah. Because, when riding the bus, you need all the help you can get!* □

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