

La Nostalgia Que Me Embarga

No trip in Peru would be complete without multiple transportation delays; when I arrived in Chalaco (a five-hour trip from Piura) only one hour late, I knew to be wary. Sure enough, my future means of travel did not disappoint. My friend Milagros and I had plans to spend the day in the mountain village of Chalaco and leave on the nightly 1am bus. When we arrived in Chalaco, however, we were informed that the 1am bus had been canceled due to unforeseen circumstances; we were left with few options. As Milagros and I walked out of the agency bemoaning the activities we would miss the following day, a jovial stranger offered us a ride in his car at 4am. I try my best not to do anything at 4am, ever, but staying until the 12pm bus left the next day wasn't appealing either. We took the offer.

At 3:55am I untangled myself from my fellow Volunteer Casey's hammock. At 4am I sat waiting by the door as my muscles pulsed angry cries up toward my brain; they had enjoyed the contortions of the hammock about as much as the cramped bus ride only 12 hours earlier. At 4:15am Milagros and I began to question the details of our arrangement with the chauffer. Perhaps we were to meet him at his house? At 4:30am we walked to his house. We sat outside in the cold, mountain air for the next 45 minutes. When our man finally stumbled out, he informed us that he had slept until past 4am. Thank you, Captain Obvious.

The thought of traveling in a car instead of a bus helped me to forgive the driver and our friendly relationship was cemented when he agreed to our request to stop by the side of the road and pick some eucalyptus leaves on the way down the mountain. He seemed out to prove his generous nature because instead of grabbing us a few leaves, he ripped off half the tree and stuffed it in the station wagon's trunk.

As the pleasant scent of eucalyptus wafted through the car, I molded my backpack into a pillow and tried to catch up on some much-needed sleep. Unfortunately, our road was so filled with violent twists and turns that every few minutes the side of my head would hit the window with a thud. The driver found this pretty amusing. I found it amusing that a grown man's cds of choice were Madonna and ABBA. (He might have been able to pull off the old "the-car-is-my-sister's-and-these-are-the-only-cds-available" ploy if he hadn't tried to sing along to pretty much every song.)

I eventually gave up on any attempt at sleep and decided to enjoy the rolling mountains. At times the scenery passed by so quickly that I wondered if the car's brakes were still working. This concern was put to rest when we stopped for EVERY potential passenger we passed on the road. The philosophy of transporting passengers down the mountain was not, "will we fit another person?" but, "where will we fit another person?"

Our first passenger came with cargo. As his beaten up 5-gallon vegetable oil containers were shoved in beside our wilting tree, the pliant aroma in the car was mixed with the sharp bite of cañazo. If chicha (corn alcohol) can claim the title of "nectar of the incas" I think cañazo can win "toxin of the Peruvian sierra." It's a strong liquor made from fermented sugar cane and nearly everyone in the sierra drinks it in large quantities.

The second person to climb in the car had convinced her friends to (literally) chase down our car screaming and waving while she readied herself in her house. Why don't my friends do this for me? When we picked her up, she settled in between Milagros and me and politely inquired if I was from the university. I wondered, "Was she thrown off by my backpack?" When I told her that I wasn't a student, she continued her line of questioning with, "Well, then are you from Argentina?" (Argentina? Are those the only possibilities for young women returning from Chalaco?) Her line of questioning ceased several moments later because it became difficult to communicate over the sound of our car horn. We had reached a particularly curvy section of the road and our chauffeur recognized the peril in taking turns so sharp that one couldn't possibly see the traffic coming the other way. To warn possible competition for the road, he honked his horn before and during every turn. My frustration with this commotion dampened as I realized that this annoying habit might be the only thing keeping me and/or oncoming traffic from hurtling over the side of the cliff next to us. When in my life, I wondered, had it ever made sense to use the car's horn more than the brakes?

Just as I began to reconsider the intelligence of choosing the car over the bus, I saw....the bus. It was broken down by the side of the road and had been left there since the day before, in the competent hands of the young man who was now flagging us down. Our driver was impressed that the *chico* had lasted the night alone in the bus. The source of his bravery became clear, however, when the boy explained that his friend (he introduced his 2 liter bottle of what I had previously assumed to be water) had kept him company all night. His "friend", cañazo, packs a punch strong enough to knock out even the most seasoned opponents. (You know this stuff is strong when even my boyfriend gets drunk off it.) This pungent companion had provided such faithful company that the guardian of broken-down buses was hesitant to deposit it in the trunk. Heaven forbid it should be accidentally grouped with the other cañazo and desert him forever.

Our final two passengers were of little consequence other than that they buried themselves in my eucalyptus tree in the trunk and randomly knew Milagros.

The moment we rounded the final mountain pass and my cell-phone beeped a signal, the driver replaced Madonna with cumbia from the radio. (Ok, maybe Madonna wasn't his first choice either). As our destination, Morropon, appeared on the horizon, one of my favorite Peruvian songs, Nostalgia, came on the radio. The singer softly intoned, "It's as if the wind can see the nostalgia grow, I will not resign myself to losing you, I refuse to forget you, I don't want to leave you." These stirring words, coupled with an exhaustion-induced bout of sentimentality, made me wonder if I would look back on my travels through Peru with the rose-tinted glasses worn by the abandoned lover in the song.

Perhaps 10 years from now the uncomfortable details of my time in Peru will be rubbed out so that only the green mountains and pristine beaches remain. I hope not, though. I would prefer the sharp, shocking clarity of cañazo; the vivid memories that burn a little but still leave that pleasant sensation afterwards. I could have spent the whole ride sleeping but maybe the hairpin turns that knocked me awake were good for something. The thought of those five hours that I spent in that rusted station wagon, crushed together with 7 other passengers, a eucalyptus tree, and a few gallons of cane liquor, leave me with a fond smile.