

Traveling on Principle

Dylan Cate is a 23 year-old Vermont native who grew up in East Montpelier, attended EMES and graduated in 2004 from U-32. He majored in Urban Studies at Vassar College, is currently studying on a language-study fellowship in Guadalajara, Mexico, and will return to Vermont this summer. You can check out more travel stories and photos from Mexico and drop him a line on his blog, <http://dylbeano.wordpress.com>.

Being a big advocate of environmentally-responsible travel, I decided to return from Christmas vacation in East Montpelier to my apartment in Guadalajara Mexico (where I've been living and studying since September) in the most carbon-efficient way possible: long-distance bus. More than anything, I wanted to prove that the three-thousand mile journey was possible, if not enjoyable, in a bus. I was tired of the hypocritical dissonance between my climate-change idealism and my insatiable appetite for travel (usually by plane). I wanted to prove that what I've always advocated theoretically — avoiding flying as much as possible — was practical for a long-distance trip in the real world. And, admittedly, I didn't want to back out on my roommate Andy's personal challenge to travel the 3,000 miles by bus. So off I went!

I cheated from the start, taking a train from Montpelier to New York City to save a few bucks and five hours. After three great days catching up with friends in New York, I woke up at 4 a.m. on a freezing Thursday morning to make it to the Port Authority terminal for my 6 a.m. bus. I got my ticket, an accordion of perforated glossy sheets, from a desk attendant whose cheery manner was almost grotesque, and certainly artificial, in comparison to the perforating darkness and biting cold outside. The ticket folio, shaking in my cold and excited hands, read like a bluegrass band's reunion tour through the south: stops in New York, Washington, Richmond, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Duncan, Atlanta, Birmingham, Jackson, Monroe, Shreveport, Dallas, San Antonio, Laredo, and finally Nuevo Laredo and Monterrey, Mexico.

The next week and half was a bumpy ride of travel highs and lows. There was the surprising conversation with Dustin, a young Iraq vet-turned pacifist on the bus from San Antonio to Nuevo Laredo. There was the anxiety-inducing run from the bus station to my hostel in the freezing early-morning darkness of Zacatecas, a city I'd never visited, using only a hand-drawn, unlabeled map I'd picked up at another hostel, and a bumpy, smoggy commuter bus. There was the quiet wonder of hiking alone in the mountains in Chinpinque park, outside Monterrey.

But there were also the drivers' terse, early-morning wake-up calls blasting from scratchy loudspeakers as we rolled into depressed Southern towns in fluorescent-lit, jam-packed buses. There was the physical discomfort of days without a shower or real food, and of wearing socks that were both permanently clammy and hardened by a pungent mixture of sweat and dirt at the soles and toes. There were the desperate-looking riders waiting, sleeping, or sometimes just swaying in place in shabby Greyhound terminals. And there was the

sobering moment when I crossed the border into Mexico with just my passport and a signature, while hundreds of people die every year of exposure and thirst trying to do the exact same thing, but in the other direction, in the surrounding deserts.

Coming back to Guadalajara was like coming home. The warmth of re-living memories and re-kindling friendships from last year was enveloping and comforting. But the letdown of not being on the road anymore, of not being in motion, in emotional and geographic flux, made me feel idle and impatient. Living life on such a wide emotional spectrum is addictive. After two weeks on cramped buses and dirty terminals, I discovered that, sometimes, coming home is the most uncomfortable part of a trip.

--Dylan Cate is the son of EM residents Nancy Disenhaus and Tom Cate