

At the first Pemex station inside Mexico with a good convenience store that you can find a Guia Roji road atlas for sale, buy it, because they're indispensable guides to the roads of Mexico. On the other hand, I made it all the way to the Costa Esmeralda on directions similar to these before buying one. I prefer Los Indios as the easiest and fastest border crossing, as it is one of the rare crossings where you don't have to go through a town on the Mexican side and can make haste inland. The border area is by far the worst place in Mexico for getting stopped by police and hit up for mordidas ("little bites" or bribes, though more often they're big bites these days). You want to put distance between yourself and the border as fast as possible. You can get your car permit in advance through an online application on Banjercito's website http://www.banjercito.com.mx/site/tramiteitv_ing.jsp, if you plan far enough in advance to let it be mailed. If you only pre-register and receive a sheet/code number for the permit, supposedly you can go to the Banjercito office at the border and just pay by credit card and receive your permit. This would save some paperwork time at the border, if in fact it worked that way, but at Los Indios they paid no attention to my pre-registration last time and started from scratch. The credit card also acts as a bond on your car, and it is highly recommended you have one or otherwise you are going to have to pay a large cash sum as bond to bring your vehicle in. Don't try to get too early a start at the border. The Los Indios offices are often not open before eight or nine in the morning. I left San Antonio at five in the morning and after some last minute shopping in Harlingen, got to the border around 10:30 am, which left me a good 8-9 hours of driving time for the day in Mexico.

If you want to change money, you can inside the Immigration/Banjercito building at Los Indios. There is also an ATM in Valle Hermosa, about 30 km's south of the border. To get to Los Indios, often referred to as the Free Trade Bridge, you can get there from Interstate 77/83. Get off the Interstate just south of Harlingen onto Hwy 345 where you see signs for the Free Trade Bridge to Mexico. Take this road until the end where it arrives at the US exit side of the border. There's a convenience store at the intersection just before the border where you can gas up. Once you pay the US to cross the bridge you will come to the Mexican border. You will drive past the Mexican Customs agents, just tell them you are going for car permits and they usually wave you by. The parking lot is there on your right. The building you want is the first one that you've just passed, not the second one, though perversely the Customs agents always seem to tell me to go to the wrong one. Your first stop will be at the Migracion booth to get your tourist cards/visas. From there you will need a copy made of your visa and car documents, at a window on the opposite side of the room that is also a money exchange and sells insurance if you need it. You need to pay 237 pesos for a tax/stamp on your tourist card/visa at some point, which you can do at the Banjercito window or you can pay it at any bank in Mexico later on. The Banjercito window is where you get your car permit. You give them all your papers, copies, and a credit card, and a six month permit should cost you about \$30 US give or take a few dollars on your credit card. After that they'll put your sticker on your window or they may have you do it - it depends on who is working. Also, they may have the Customs guy look at

your car - maybe not - there's another Customs stop about 20 km's from the border that you'll go through. The last time I towed a boat through filled with household possessions, the paperwork took so long due to a missing ID # on one engine, that by the time I was done with it Customs had long forgotten about me. I had initially been told to return to the Customs checkpoint when I was done to deal with taxes, but thought I'd just try pulling out of the parking area and see if anyone objected - "do a runner" as it were - no one did, and I succeeded in bringing in a wealth of my possessions untaxed

If you choose to go through Brownsville/Matamoros, another traveler offered this information.

"I think there are two or three crossing points in Brownsville. Be sure to go to the Veterans International Bridge crossing as it is fast and efficient - (the other crossings in Brownsville are much busier). We had everything done in 15 minutes at the Veteran's Bridge. When you enter, keep left for Temporary Car permits. We had one woman complete all our paperwork-tourist visa, car permit and she came out and put the sticker on our car. A young fellow in the booth beside her photocopied all necessary paperwork and only asked for a donation....he was very happy with 10 pesos....We didn't pay for our tourist permit here as the Banjercito wasn't open but paid it at the bank when we got to Puerto Escondido....no rush to get this done apparently....When we went outside to push the red/green button the fellow was getting his shoes polished and just waved us through!"

Heading south from the Los Indios border, cross over the bridge and ignore the highway with signs for Matamoros and Reynosa, and keep heading straight. Follow signs for Valle Hermoso, where the road will hook up with Hwy 101. Stay on 101 south and head towards Ciudad Victoria. There is the option of heading in a much straighter line south on Hwy 180 instead of going farther inland toward Ciudad Victoria, and I took Hwy 180 myself. It was upgraded and repaved in the last couple of years and is an excellent more direct alternative to 101.

If you choose to stay on Hwy 101, do not go all the way into Ciudad Victoria. Stay on 101 going towards Ciudad Victoria until you are past Nueva Padilla (Eduardos has been recommended as a decent restaurant if you need to stop). There is a clearly marked bypass which will direct you towards Tampico/ Soto La Marina - it is Hwy 83 & you want to stay on it and it will take you to Hwy 81 which will go to Manuel where it becomes Hwy 80/180 and goes to Tampico.

Tampico is a mess and the only difficult part of the trip. First of all, traffic cops are going to be teeming on the edge of town looking for any infraction, real or imaginary. It was the only place in the whole trip my radar detector came in handy. Make no eye contact and try to get past them without getting waved down. Staying in the far left lane if you see them on the right is probably wise.

In Tampico, don't take the short cut - it's not short! (I learned this the hard way). Disregard the sign for Tuxpan/Poza Rica you see on your right offering a bypass around Tampico, it's much longer and slower than going through town. Keep on the main road, go past the Airport, and the road will eventually narrow out passing some small colleges on your right. Stay on it

until you come to a stoplight with a grey building that says Spa on it across the street. Turn right on to Ave. Lopez Mateos, follow the road as it goes past Church's Chicken and a big intersection. It will curve right, follow it and go past the hospital, keep going downhill and stay in right lane to big bridge - follow signs to Poza Rica & Tuxpan - curve to right up to huge suspension bridge, go to toll booth, then follow the signs to Tuxpan. There are many hotels to choose from in Tampico if you got a late start and want to stop here.

The road between Tampico and Tuxpan seemed the worst stretch of the trip going down, but not nearly as bad returning north to the border. There are a lot of *topes* (speed bumps) and towns, and some of the only winding hilly driving of the trip. If you haven't figured out by this point, the *topes* in Mexico are brutal and require nearly a full stop in most cases to avoid a nasty jolt. These are the types they put in shopping mall parking lots in the US, not the more gentle suburban neighborhood speed bumps we're used to. There is a very good and secure hotel called Hotel San Carlos in Cerro Azul, just north of where Hwy 180 turns east to go to Tuxpan, for about \$28 a night. That's about 8-9 hours from having cleared the border at Los Indios. Going through Tuxpan appears to be longer but is the much better way to go because it gets you directly onto the exceedingly nice and fast toll road that bypasses Poza Rica. Whether you go through Tuxpan or not I don't feel you can do better than the Hotel San Carlos for a good, secure, inexpensive hotel in this region, so I'd stop short of there in Cerro Azul.

South of Tuxpan is a good road that hooks up with the toll road bypass around Poza Rica and ends just east of Papantla and joins the regular highway south. The ruins of El Tajin are right by Poza Rica and are supposed to be fantastic, but that means backtracking a little to the west through Papantla, but no more than 10 km's. The "voladores", the flying Totonac dancers who soar in spirals off a high pole, are another great attraction of the area in Papantla.

South of Poza Rica, along the Gulf on Hwy 180 is the Costa Esmeralda. If you're not in a huge hurry, especially if you go to El Tajin, go down the Costa Esmeralda past Nautla and you will find hotel after hotel and many campgrounds/ RV parks. South of Cardel, watch for Toll Road 150 and follow it in the direction of Cordoba. You do not want to go all the way into Veracruz, there should be obvious signs for the bypass around Veracruz not too far south of Cardel. Though you will have had some experience with toll roads to this point, and certainly a lot of toll bridges, be prepared to get really walloped. After proceeding well inland on Toll Road 150, when you get to signs for Toll Road 200 (Acayucan/Minatitlan/Coatzacoalcos) get on it. If I remember right, the toll roads between Veracruz and Acayucan will cost you some \$30-40 (a lot more if you're towing a trailer) for less than 150 miles of driving

Exit at Acayucan onto Hwy 185, the Isthmus Highway. From Acayucan head out toward Salina Cruz on Hwy 185. It shouldn't take you more than four hours to cross to the Pacific, depending on the road condition. It's great in Veracruz state, but the last time I took it the road was horrific on the

Oaxaca side, endless washed out sections and potholes. Once you get toward the Pacific side, there is a toll bypass just south of Matias Romero (about \$8) which you should take. When it ends you will head up the coast to Huatulco. There are very winding roads on part of this route, so stay awake. At present you can expect two military checkpoints on the way. The first is just as you get off the toll road onto Hwy 200. The next one is at the Copalita bridge just before Huatulco. And you're here!