

“Bullfight in Mexicali, Mexico 1-30-05”

Gringo in the Callejon True Adventure Series

By

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Part: 1

I was relieved from my photography studies by the news of an off season Bullfight in Mexicali, Mexico. It was featuring two outstanding Mexican Matadors; my new friend Rafael Ortega and Fernando Ochoa (the Matador of my 100th Bullfight year's back -who gifted me with both ears from that bull) and El Juli from Spain.

I had yet to shoot photos from the Callejon in the Plaza Calafia Mexicali and worried with the buzz surrounding El Juli it was out of the question. I pressed my contacts but to no avail. I resigned to skipping the Bullfight.

Thursday before the Bullfight I receive a phone call from my friend Raphael Castaneda. He asks if I would drive His Uncle Felipe and the mule harnesses to the Corrida in Mexicali through the Mexican side of the border. In return I would get in the Plaza and have a chance at a Pass to the Callejon. I was going! My instructions are to be at the Plaza el Toreo Downtown Tijuana 8 a.m. the day of the Bullfight.

At 8:15 Sunday morning I arrive at the gated side entrance to the Plaza. The worn yellow painted metal door is immediately dragged creaking along its track. I know what this means. From the porch of his house behind the Bullring Felipe is tapping his watch and shaking his head confirming my thoughts. Quick with a smile he shouts “Marcos” and points toward the equipment to be loaded.

The next question is music to the ears of those who travel on another's schedule. Felipe asks “You want breakfast Mark?” Nodding my head we step up into the truck. Felipe brings a monosabio from the Plaza who climbs in the rear seat. I soon find myself in front of a little café Mexicana. As many places in Tijuana, the outside of the building gave small hint to the warmth and charm of what was within. The interior is a bustling breakfast

café. A beautifully colored room decorated brightly with rich yellows and deep orange reds. Familiar breakfast smells fill the air, bacon, rich coffee with a hint of cinnamon, frying ham and eggs. Terra cotta pots are bubbling with beans, pork in red sauce and other side dishes. The staff is equal to the number of patrons, a dozen all dressed in white aprons and hats, chopping vegetables, mixing great mounds of dough for the delightful fresh corn tortillas and preparing everything for the day's service. The chef is spreading eggs into a thin film on the griddle, folding them over and again to form perfect omelets in seconds. Next to him is a pile of bacon stacked high. We eat to our content and head for the Tecate highway to start on our adventure.

Along the sides of the two-lane Tecate toll road are hills with huge boulders, small dirt roads and little communities carved out between the rocks and red earth. Small brightly colored Cantinas pressing against large boulders spring up every couple of kilometers. The recent addition of considerable rain added much green to the normally baked and hard landscape. The valleys, an agricultural region, are now more alive than usual. It is past this to the twisted mountain road of "La Rumarosa" that led to the desert floor which was to hold the greatest visual splendor of this adventure.

We begin to travel through the mountains that separate the inland valleys from the desert. The dry air has turned the sky from a milky color to a rich warm and deep blue that goes on forever. The pink and tan boulders gather in ever increasing volume. As we climb the turning road carving into the hills it is a grand and splendid view. The hills are more rustic and broken than the U.S. side. Dark purple and rusted reds cap the peaks. Millions of boulders and stones of all sizes fill the canyons - still the beautiful pink and tan tone. Among the stones above and below are thousands of small succulents. They aren't just huddled in the protected crevasses of the larger rocks but sit brazenly exposed dotting the entire mountain. The varieties are too numerous to take in while driving. I vow to come back for a photo study. I could spend some real quality time here with my camera. The eternal blue of the sky surrounding the intense, rusty and cragged peaks is an awesome site.

Coming through the pass I catch my first glimpse of the desert floor. Vast and low, it's not stark and sandy as in California. There is variety in the topography plus more greenery.

Leaving the stony mountains behind we notice great swatches of purple across the open sand-mixed soil. From our distance it looks like some sort of spill or artificially colored earth. These “spills” of bright purple were the famous desert bloom. Spreading out in all directions are fantastic little purple flowers. We all smile as we zoom down the arrow straight highway in the silver Ford pickup

The road brings us through the Mexican desert past worn, textured lone hills near and distant. Looking ahead we see the old red and white truck that is hauling the mules from Tijuana. Having left the Tijuana Bullring sometime before I arrived, I could only hope they would make it in time for the two o'clock Corrida. Felipe has me pull alongside the big truck. He rolls down his window and shouts something in Spanish (too foul to print) at the driver of the other truck. They both laugh and Felipe tells me to take off.

We approach the agricultural area near Mexicali with its vast expanses of alfalfa and long canals feeding water to the fields. Seemingly out of place, large flocks of seagulls turn in the sky. Snow white egrets with their bent necks join the seagulls gathering around the canals. New and deep green fields dominate the landscape.

The building styles become familiar as we come closer to Mexicali, mostly industrial one story store front businesses. They gain in density as we near the Centro area. Mexicali reminds me more of El Centro, California than Mexico. Thank goodness the people have brought out the personal character in this non-colorful city.

A couple of turns and we find ourselves at the rear entrance of the Bullring. The Plaza Calafia has recently received a colorful two-tone terra cotta red paint scheme with the top rim showing a stripe of the original cement grey which had been the entire previous color. Great arches circle the Plaza. Parking outside the gate Felipe and I go around front to access the lower level of the Plaza. We arrived at eleven-thirty. On time and hopeful, is always a good way to start.

Descending the staircase to the lower sections in back of the Plaza you see flat, long, tan bricks that fill the walls of the lower rooms and Bullpens. They're nice to look at and have romantic flare. White capped walls and endless bricks make up the under section of the Plaza. The activity below is at full peak, the familiar “Huh Toro” and rising cloud of dust make clear

what's going on in the sorting pens behind the three meter walls.

Having left his assistant with the mule harnesses in my truck Felipe searches for someone to let us in the gate. I wait for his return by the Picador's horses. I love horses – especially the ones that live only to give platform for the lance. Felipe returns with a man bearing a smile and key. We drive through the open wooden swinging gate down a cement ramp to the dirt below. I still get a thrill from going behind the scenes. It is a great feeling to be a part of something you love so much.

Much to my relief Felipe immediately begins the quest for my pass to the Callejon. We pass the butchers room. It is clean, tiled and has modern working conveniences that the Tijuana Plazas do not. A large sliding door at each end, block and tackles hanging their hooks from a sliding track on the ceiling. To the right is the Picador's area, an open large room made of those brown bricks. On the wall is draped a bright yellow padded horses Peto with little pomp pomes of red dotting the burlap fabric that fills the center.

We pass through the tunnel to the Arrastre gate. The arena lay open before us. The golden sand is smooth, without the inner chalk circles and lightly dampened. The Barrera is freshly painted bright red and reflects the near noon sunlight. The green rails lining the lower seating look newly painted as well. There is nothing like the view from the Callejon. I tighten up inside thinking I would be up in the seats with my camera or worse maybe outside the gate trying to peer though a porthole. Pasting on a hopeful smile I follow Felipe through the Callejon. He is speaking to men with clip boards and walkie-talkies. No luck. We make one more turn around the Callejon but can find no extra pass. He tells me he will try again but in 10 minutes young Orteguita; a Novillero from Tijuana is going to have an exhibition bull and to at least enjoy the Callejon for now. I run to my truck and grab my camera pack.

Upon my return I hear sounds in the rear of the Bullpen of men moving a bull. Conveniently there is a platform ramp. I climb it and see one of the Los Encinos bulls. Wow, a lot of bull for the "Toro de Reserva". Number 235 is feisty and bright eyed, He seems only to want to hook the men waving empty feed sacks trying to distract it from the open gate on the opposite side of the pen where El Juli's second bull has just been moved. The men's task accomplished and the air filled with dust, I dash for the Callejon to find a good location to photograph this unexpected "Toro de Once".

I see Orteguita; he is in a light blue traje with small patches and wear marks one would expect on the suit of lights of an aspiring Matador. I say hello, pat him on the thickly padded shoulder and wish him “suerte”.

From the opposite side of the arena he enters strong and tight faced, strutting proudly on the sand. Placing himself ten meters in front of the Toriles the young “Matadores de Novillos” drops to his knees and lays his back to the sand. Rising and lowering he stretches and prepares for the bull. The gated Porton crashes open. We all hold our breath. The bull like a rocket, hurls straight at the stone faced Mexican. He begins a smooth, slow left turn of the cape around his body. The bull follows.

It is a common belief that a large crowd adds much to the atmosphere of a Bullfight, but there is magic to the ears in an empty Plaza. First, the sand. The grit can be heard as clearly as a soft shoe dancer sliding his feet. The Matador’s small and delicate zapatillas slide and stop slide and stop. The bull rends the earth with each thrust of its muscled legs. Hooves tear the through the sand to the hard soil, kicking small explosions of dust. The crisp sound of the hooves sliding is beautiful music and gives rhythm to the dance. Every breath from the bull is heard. Angry snorts and long breaths give way to the intense drawing of air that only combat produces. Men shout instructions to the Matador from the Callejon, Mozos slap at the Barrera wave capes and cry “Huh Toro” drawing the Bull’s gaze at the appropriate times. All can be heard, even the matadors talking aloud or complaining to themselves if a move is missed or sword badly placed. There is no need for a band when your soul stirs from the symphony before you.

The weather is still perfect. A deep indigo cloudless sky, bringing a whisper of wind that keeps the electricity fresh and alive. Young Orteguita jumps to his feet and meets the bull at the edge of the arena passing it deftly before it completes a full turn. Some standard Veronicas are performed and in comes the Picador wearing blue jeans and short sleeved light blue shirt, it’s not a romantic image, but the smooth Quite by Orteguita is all that’s really needed. The fresh, young bull hits the horse low and fast. Leaning in hard with the lance the shaft arches in the Picador’s grip. The Blonde and tan patterned horse wearing a red mask and green Peto with red pomes stood firmly. Three stiff jabs and the lance’s held in repose. The Novillero occupies the bull as the horse and rider depart.

I don't know or put much concern in what moves others to think that any Matador is truly complete that does not, or has not placed his own sticks. I love Eulalio Lopez "El Zotoluco" Miguel Espinosa "Armillita Chico", Eloy Cavazos, but time or personal choices have conspired to lead them to skip the Banderillas. When you watch a complete torero it is understood what words are, versus how real men risk their lives. You know it when you watch one man complete all the tasks required on foot in the arena. Can you imagine Pablo Hermoso de Mendoza riding off the sand so that a fat bellied man could poke one stick at the bull and run? Inside you know the satisfaction of complete work when it happens, at any skill level. The specialists with the capote and muleta are still very much appreciated by me; it is just not the same.

Orteguita leans over the barrera and takes a pair of brightly colored Banderillas half red and yellow and turns to the bull. It's standing ten meters from him with its head facing the sun. He begins to call out in short huh's raising his arms to the sides. Looking as a great bird he turns and dances in small circles. The Novillo ignores him, so he presses closer until he spins in front of the bull dragging the rough gold needle-work on his back against its soft nose. The bull is interested now and hooks for his left side narrowly missing Orteguita's ribs. Hot in pursuit, and on his heels. Orteguita leads him in, tightening the arc of his turn. Suddenly he leaps and pirouettes through the naked dangerous gap that separates him from the horns and sticks the Banderillas in the hump dead on and tightly grouped. Glistening from sweat, blood and shining black the bull's grunt overpowers the simultaneous audible pop of the sharp metal barbs piercing the thick hide. Clear of the horns, Orteguita bounds on the balls of his feet to the next pair of sticks held out for him.

Down falls the Mozo in a pile of magenta and yellow cloth while trying to hold the bull. With obvious embarrassment he recovers his cape and releases the bull to Orteguita armed with fresh half green and yellow sticks. The bull with new found hot blood needs no encouragement to hunt down the young Matador. Running ahead, leading bull in a slow curve to the center of the sand. He turns, and races head-on to the rushing bull. Stretching tall, the black rubber soles of his Zapatillas grip the earth as he places a flawless second pair touching the points of the first. The curved tan and black horns a hands width from his chest, miss their mark as he slips past them with the grace of a young man brave and skilled in his craft. As if this were not enough he nearly repeats the performance with a red and orange pair.

Small beads of sweat show on Orteguita's forehead, his long sideburns begin to shine. Stoic and stiff faced he exhibits only skill and agility. Muleta in place he struts to set himself near the waiting bull. Smooth and practiced naturals pass the eager bull again and again. Suddenly on a rapid charge a banderilla bounces forward and pierces the gap in his traje, deep into the left shoulder of his Chaquetilla. Orteguita's expression changes instantly. He is jerked savagely sideways and with great luck the brightly colored green and yellow papered stick pulls free from his jacket. He recovers his expression and placement. The handsome and talented Mexican calls the energy filled deep black bull back to the dance.

To be continued.....

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