



On the Plain of Snakes: A Mexican Journey

Paul Theroux

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With the confidence that Mexico's respect for people of retirement age would ferry him safely through the dangers hinted at by the state department, Paul Theroux set out to drive across Mexico, a trip recorded in *On the Plain of Snakes*. Imminently readable, wry, and informative, it is quintessential Theroux.

Following the border first, Theroux dips into Mexico at the height of the monarch migration: "For miles the rabble of butterflies batted along the road to Monterrey ... borne by the soft air and the sunlight." He records sunburned hills, high deserts, and hardworking people dreaming of more. Everyone seems to have an American story.

With awareness that Mexican travelogues previous have trended reductive, shallow, and safe, Theroux avoids easygoing beach days and sunny markets in favor of seeking the multifaceted soul of the nation, so different from state to state that it is almost a world unto itself. He spends a great deal of time in Oaxaca, one of the nation's poorest states, but also one marked by cultural uprisings and the preservation of traditions that predate Spanish invasions. He stops in Mexico City to teach writing courses and to seek out the shrine of Santa Muerte, and he goes in for mezcal tastings drawn from the barrel by a traditional producer.

Over much of this hangs the threat of the cartels, whose power depends on America's appetite for illegal drugs, as well as the specter of Donald Trump, regarded as a *mear fuera de olla* leader, tactless and offensive. The aftereffects of NAFTA are seen along the border that's pocked by divided towns, whose factories hopped the border to take advantage of cheap labor.

But Mexicans are resilient, and they welcome Theroux wherever he goes. The resultant impression is of a nation both vibrant and determined—at once subject to the whims of neighbors and strong all on its own.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2019)

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