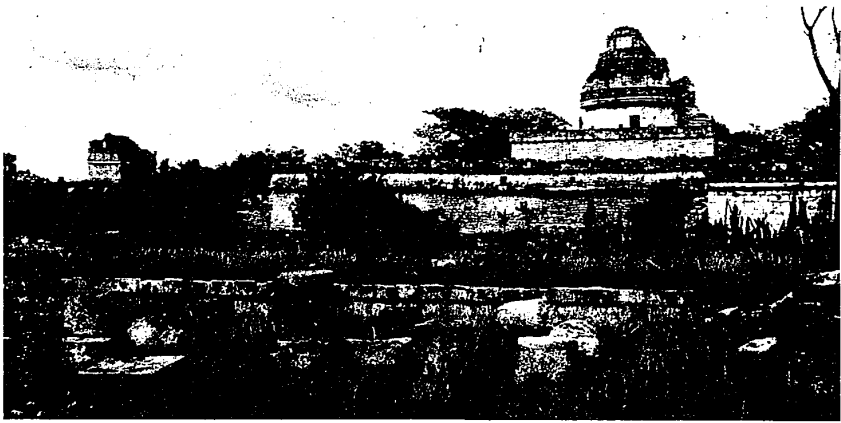


John McElroy and Roy Dudas, both 24, fulfilled a childhood dream last winter when the "Flight of the Monarch" got underway. The two Farmington young men rebuilt a 1965 panel truck over three years while attending Wayne State University, with intentions to head the truck south after graduation. They did just that, by spending five months in Central and South America for "one last fling" before settling into careers. Here is McElroy's account of their travels.



Sights like this—of the ruins of Tikal, the capital of the Mayan empire—brought the two Farmington youths in contact with another culture and ancient way of life.

Last fling leads 2 to adventure

By JOHN McELROY

The hardest step in taking a five-month trip to Latin America is the first one—the rest seems like a cakewalk.

When Roy Dudas and I told family and friends that we would be driving on such a trip, they incredulously asked: "Why?"

After all, why would two Farmington boys want to leave the comfortable confines of suburbia to gallivant about south of the border, risking snake bites, disease and natives with poison-tipped darts?

Did we have enough medication? What would we do for drinking water? Should we go armed? Those kind of questions led us to doubt our preparedness but fortunately never denied our resolve. On Nov. 3, 1977, minus guns, we drove south in the "Blue Bitch," a rusting hulk of a truck with 250,000 miles on the odometer.



With a goal to experience different cultures and find places untouched by 20th century civilization, we visited Mexico, Central America, and Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru in South America.

ALTHOUGH We cannot deny encountering some anti-Americanism, most people we met were friendly and curious. But they had as erroneous impressions about Americans as we did about them. Some would ask if the United States had mountains, if "our" ocean had the same type of waves, or even if it rained hard. The more educated expressed interest in racism, pollution, the Panama Canal, and Jimmy Carter. Though grave problems exist in their countries, they seemed to be more aware of the problems facing the U.S.

Anti-Americanism was most visible in Panama City, where political slogans promoting the canal treaties plastered every wall. But it is the Canal Zone, not the canal, which prompts the ill feelings. The average Panamanian can't go in or through the Zone, and many Americans living there act disgustingly colonial. One restaurant owner was pleased and surprised when I ordered lunch in Spanish.

"Most Americans that come in here just try to shout at us in English," he said.

Communication with little knowledge of Spanish is, however, fairly easy. Most Latin Americans have some working knowledge of English. Although you may not be able to discuss the socio-economic values of capitalist society, you'll be able to ask for directions and order in a restaurant.

But even a good grasp of Spanish didn't prevent me from inadvertently ordering a chocolate-covered fried pork sandwich.

GOOD COMMUNICATIONS didn't prevent culture shock. It hit us the minute we crossed the border into Mexico. The Mexican border guards saw us coming. They knew we were green, knew we were gringos, pronounced "green-go" for a reason: it cost us about \$7 in "tips" to get through customs.

But don't get the idea that all bribes are bad. Learning how and when to bribe came in handy in Brazil. Coming over a hill faster than the speed limit, I noticed a policeman and patrol car

parked at the bottom. The policeman waved me over. I pulled out my passport and driver's license and got into the patrol car.

"You were travelling 20 kilometers per hour over the limit," he told me.

"Yes," I admitted, "but so was everyone else."

"Not when they went by here," he said. "The fine is 250 cruzeiros (\$25), and I must hold your passport and license until you pay the fine and return with the receipt."

"Oh, jeez," I groaned, "isn't there any other way to arrange this?"

"You must be going to Rio, eh?" he queried. "Beautiful women, beaches and carnival. No wonder you were hurrying. Look, you were going 100 kph, so if you pay me 100 cruzeiros (\$5), everything will be forgotten."

I readily agreed.

Before driving off, he looked at me sternly but with a twinkle in his eye.

"There is a kind, loving God who looks over us all. Please don't go join him today. Drive safely." We parked amid smiles and friendly waves.

THIS TYPE OF bribing works out to everyone's benefit. The offender must pay a fine, the law is enforced, but little time is lost and both parties benefit. This is different from the type of bribe we paid at the Mexican border. The guards wanted money even though we had done nothing illegal.

Our experience taught us to flatter those paying a single peso in those types of bribes. The traveler must learn to distinguish acceptable bribes from downright rip-offs.

Rip-offs also occur in the form of robbery. Pickpockets are everywhere, and the traveler must be on guard, particularly in a crowd. We discovered the hard way that anything more valuable than an old towel is subject to sticky fingers. A camera, passport and money were stolen from us in broad daylight.

It wasn't a great loss, but replacing the passport was a hassle, as well as time consuming. We learned to avoid carrying our wallets and only enough money for what we wanted to do. Many travellers carry their money and documents in a thin pouch inside their shirts.

"THE BIG PROBLEM" came when we crossed the border from Belize into Guatemala. At the border, we picked up a Canadian couple who had been

"The more educated expressed interest in racism, pollution, the Panama Canal and Jimmy Carter. Although grave problems exist in their countries, they seemed to be more aware of the problems facing the U.S."

waiting for the bus, and with them drove to Tikal, the ancient Maya ruins in the Guatemalan jungle.

The road was unpaved and the worst we'd encountered. On one particularly rough section we sheared the lugs and broke off a rear wheel. In the middle of nowhere, panic started to set in, but suddenly a mini-pickup with three men crammed in the front seat came bounding down the road.

They offered to take me to the nearest town to find new lugs. I grabbed all our loose change and a \$20 traveler's check, jumped in the back of the truck, and departed with an "I shall return" for my friends.

After 2½ hours bouncing in the truck, we stopped in front of an automotive parts store.

"I hope you find what you need here," said the driver, "because if not, you'll have to go to Guatemala City and that will take a week."

Unfortunately directions to two other stores was all the clerk in the store could offer. At the second store, I got lucky. A customer told me about an old man down the street who might have what I needed.

I found him asleep in a hammock. After awakening him, I explained I needed wheel lugs for a Chevrolet truck. He took me in the backyard to proudly display his '64 Chevy Malibu, which was missing lugs on two wheels.

"I may have what you want, but it's going to cost you. I had to send a friend to Guatemala City to get these," he said.

He had four lugs, which he agreed to sell for \$2 a piece. But the loose change I had hurriedly grabbed included coins from the U.S., Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala. With some pleading on my part and reluctance on his part, he accepted the money.

GETTING BACK to the truck and my friends was another adventure in itself.

By this time it was dark, and I had to find a hotel room for the night. But no one would cash my traveler's check. In my hurry to accept the ride, I had forgotten to bring any ID. After two hours of futile attempts at gas stations and hotels, I finally walked into a restaurant and ordered a meal.

When the time came to pay the bill, the owner was quite displeased to find I only had a check. He preferred to give me \$1.50 meal for free, rather than give me \$18.50 in change.

After some more pleading, he and the owner of the hotel next door decided to cash the check if I spent the night in the hotel.

Although traveler's checks are necessary, they come with their own problems.

The next morning I caught a bus for Tikal and got off where the truck broke down. Fortunately, breakfast was ready.

Roy and the Canadians had raided a nearby plantation for some sugar cane and plantains, a large type of banana which tastes like potato when fried. A passing farmer supplied some drinking water and sold them some eggs. Tales of spending the night in the jungle supplied the mealtime conversation.

Although most roads in Latin America are paved, they are not very smooth. Road signs may be illegible or non-existent. Navigating is difficult at best and comparable to hitting little-known territory.

Hiking on a trail in the woods one must look for overturned leaves and trampled underbrush to follow detours or distinguish the main trail from footpaths which branch off.

The same applies to driving in Central America, where the main road suddenly can branch in three directions without road signs for guidance. The marks, litter and a good sense of direction are the only guides to help unless someone gives directions. People were always willing to help, but the directions weren't always accurate. If we had any doubts, we would stop and ask for confirmation.

ALTHOUGH We anticipated making the entire trip in our rebuilt truck, gasoline at \$1.15 a gallon and cheap public transportation changed our minds.

In rebuilding the truck, we had persuaded several manufacturers, including Goodrich, Ohio, Monroe, Rapid Cool, Bendix, and Uniroval, to supply us with parts. We were fond of the metal machine and reluctant to abandon it. But we discovered we could leave the truck in Honduras free of charge until we returned from the South American part of our tour.

After listening to the Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Company, and Christmas programs from all over the world, we headed into the South American part of our tour.

WE FLEW to Argentina, the easiest country in South America to enter and spent about five minutes in customs before discovering the joys of Buenos Aires, which have no equal in Latin America.

It's like a transplanted European city. Beautiful architecture, parks, museums, and fountains, along with cheap steak, delicious wine cheaper than Coca-Cola and people partial to a very late nightlife were captivating.

From there, we took a 25-hour marathon bus ride to the Iguaçu Falls on the Argentina-Brazilian border. Looking into the "Mouth of the Devil," it's



Chichen Itza, a Mayan pyramid, looms over the Yucatan Peninsula.

easy to understand why the falls are one of the natural wonders of the world.

ON TO BRAZIL. "The problem we have with Americans is that they only see us as a big country," a Brazilian told me. "We will be a world power."

Brazil is clearly the fastest growing of the South American republics and may be one of the fastest growing countries in the world. It is nearly as large as the continental U.S. and has large amounts of untapped natural resources.

However, like the United States, Brazil suffers economically because it must import oil. In order to reduce imports they have added 20 per cent alcohol to the gasoline. Alcohol can be produced from many renewable sources and a gasoline mixture of 20 per cent alcohol can be used without engine modifications. They hope to use as near 100 per cent alcohol as possible in the future.

Alcohol gets a liberal use during Carnival as well. Carnival is the biggest attraction in Rio de Janeiro. Like Mardi Gras, it is celebrated four days before Lent the fasting period observed by the Catholic church.

Before Lent, this city of 6½ million stops for four days and parties down. School parades called "Samba Schools," representing the various districts in Rio, compete for the honor of having their school named best in the city. Some of these schools have 5,000 persons dancing, singing, and playing instruments. Each school may take a half hour to pass the judges' stands.

The average fee for watching the big parades is \$25. We, of course, opted for the smaller, free parades. Besides, in those spectators are urged to join in the fun.

It was fun but dangerous. A person who has been imbibing for several days isn't very steady. When a crowd of hundreds presses around, it becomes hard to move and makes the person easy prey for pickpockets.

After Carnival, the Brazilian newspapers print the death toll just like we record our holiday traffic fatalities.

LAKE TITICACA, our next destination, lies between Peru and Bolivia. It is a direct contrast from the civilized decadence of Carnival. It is the highest navigable lake in the world. Several years ago while searching for a sunken city, explorer Jacques Cousteau discovered large carnivorous frogs living there.

People live on the lake as well on large floating islands they have built of dirt and reeds. Some of the larger islands may have 20 houses and a church built of reeds, while lifestyles go back hundreds of years.

The archeological ruins are another way to time-travel in Latin America. Tikal was the capital of the Mayan civilization in Guatemala. Huge pyramids loom from the jungle floor, marking what had been the downtown of the city of 50,000 inhabitants.

Sitting atop one of these stone monsters, one can see far out over the tree tops, while images of the surrounding pyramids fade in and out of focus in the early morning mist.

GETTING BACK to civilization with an eye for momentos and bargains, we

discovered Cuzco, Peru, the tourist capitol of South America.

Fattening our shopping savvy to work, we haggled until we found a room for \$2 a piece including a taxi ride from the train station to the hotel and hot water. Considering the price of a filet mignon steak dinner was about \$5 cents, Cuzco had more to offer than natural and historical beauty.

Haggling, however, isn't limited to that city. Anyone who wants to shop anywhere in Latin America must learn to haggle. It's expected, and most vendors will think you are foolish or don't know the value of your money if you refrain.

Buying from a street vendor is preferable to buying from a store. The former have little overhead and better prices. Most of the time the price of an article will drop the instant you hesitate to buy at the original asking price.

A measure of shopping savvy is how much you can talk the price down. Pointing out a loose thread, buying several articles or just plain haggling and hawing will get you a "discount."

I picked up a suede jacket for \$25 and several beautiful llama sweaters

"The problem we have with Americans is that they only see us as a big country. We will be a world power."

—A Brazilian

for less than \$5 a piece. It may take five minutes to reach what you're willing to pay, and you may spend 20 minutes haggling over the last 50 cents, but it makes shopping fun and you'll never argue them out of a profit.

Meeting fellow travelers, particularly the large number of European and Canadian tourists, was a highlight of the trip. It's easy to form a common bond, because as far as the Latins are concerned, foreigners are gringos. An American gringo is no different than a German one.

At one time Roy and I were camping on a beach in the Gulf of Mexico with six French Canadians, a Frenchman and a Mexican. Swimming, spear fishing, and snorkeling were our daily activities. Those who weren't busy lounging would walk into town to buy our staples: eggs, coffee, and teguila. But more often our meals were the result of fishing expeditions including squid, octopus, and fish of various types.

During the evening after a hearty meal, we would sit in the sand and let the waves lull us into a dreamy state of mind as the sun set. Memories of frozen winters melted from our minds.

"Ah, the good life," sighed one of the Canadians. "No problems."

Traveling through foreign lands, experiencing different cultures is a fascinating way to spend a vacation. There are some who go for two weeks and others who go for two years. We traveled cheaply, camping and living in inexpensive hotels. During five months, we spent a total of \$7,500, including air fares.

But there are others who opt for high living and first class travel. Any way you go, it is the good life.



When John McElroy (above, left) and Roy Dudas packed their van and headed for Central and South America last November, they couldn't have imagined what was ahead. Truck repairs, bribes and suspicion became a way of life. At right, Roy and a Canadian friend, Michael, work on the van—before it was abandoned in favor of public transportation.



GETTING BACK to civilization with an eye for momentos and bargains, we