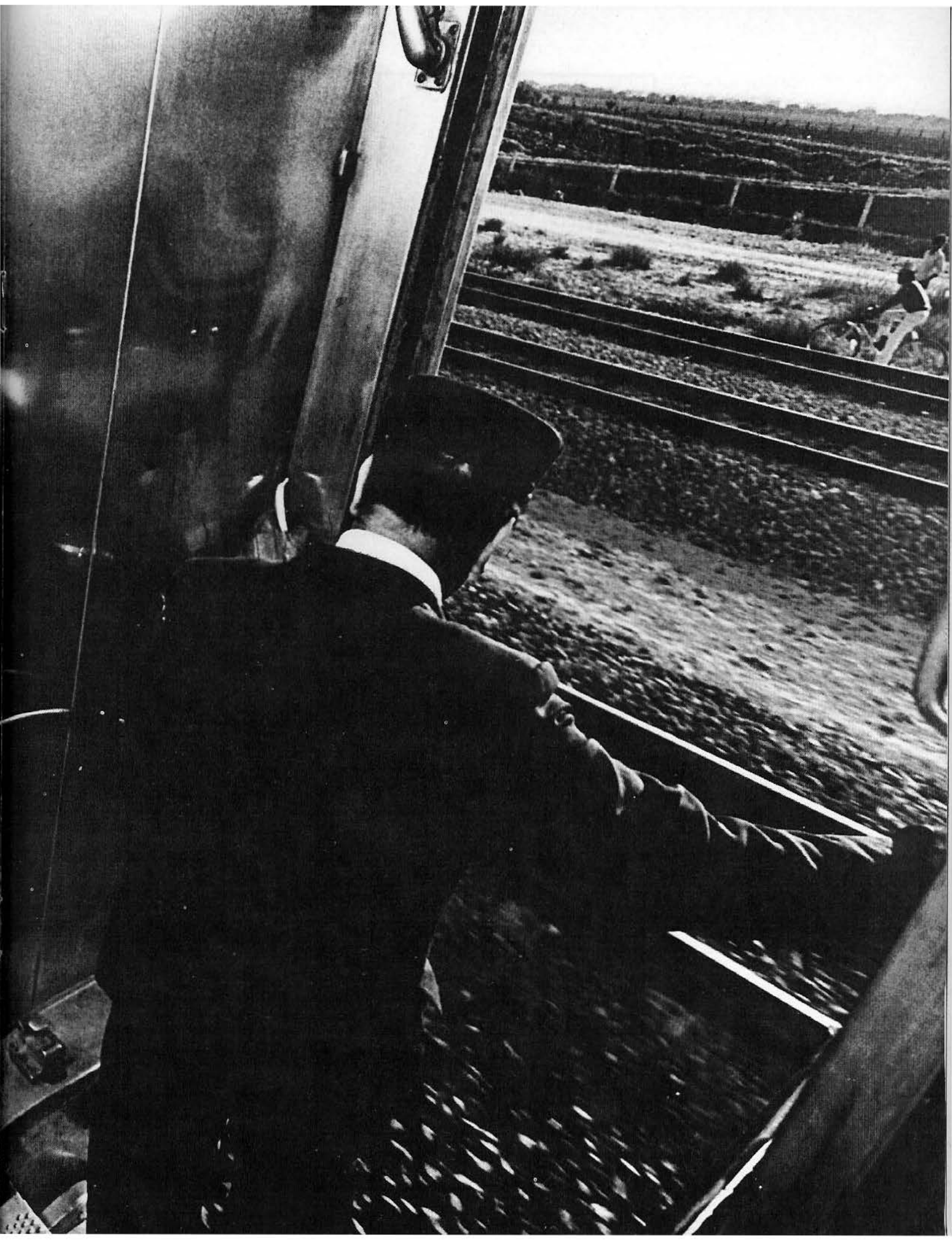


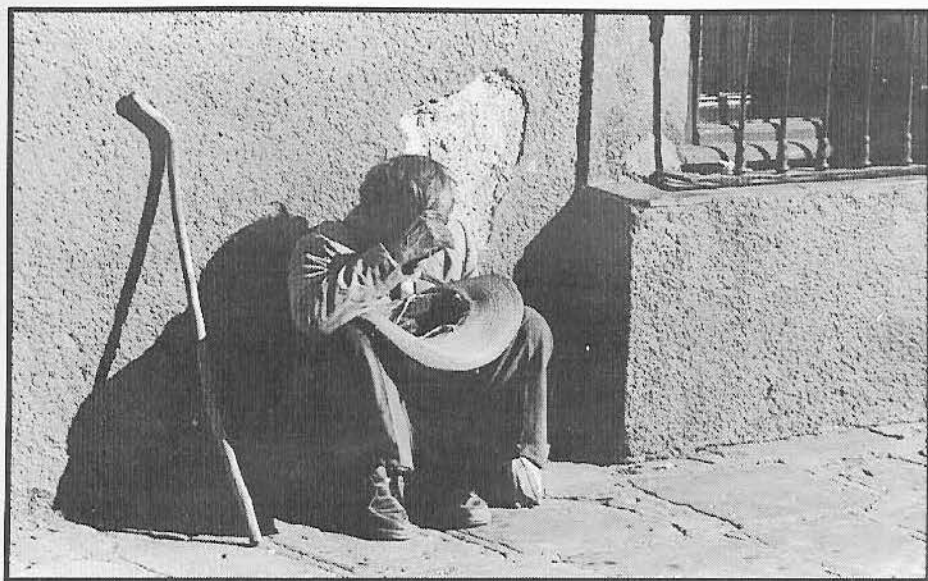
A black and white photograph showing the interior of a train engine. The view is from the driver's perspective, looking out through a window. In the foreground, a large pressure gauge with a needle is mounted on a metal frame. To the right, a dark, textured door or panel is visible. The background shows the train tracks and the surrounding landscape, which is slightly blurred due to motion.

MEXICO BY TRAIN

Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico runs a train from Nuevo Laredo to the capital. We sent our correspondents to investigate.

STORY BY ROB D'AMICO
PHOTOS BY MIKE STRAVATO





Above right: Grandmother and grandson at the train station in Nuevo Laredo. Above: Beggars in the main square at San Miguel de Allende are a common sight. Right: Narrow backstreets in Guanajuato provide pedestrian walkways through the city for access to houses and shops.



Outside the window northern Mexico blurs by. An hour has passed since we boarded the train in Nuevo Laredo, and now the photographer and I stare blankly out the window as the stretches of cactus spill

into dry desert grasses.

Abandoned railroad cars, some serving as small homes, sporadically appear near the tracks. Children bringing smiles or showers of rocks run through piles of trash to greet the train.

More cactus. Different varieties occasionally pop up, but they all share the painfully pointed spikes. This desolate landscape fulfills the expectations I had of a rugged railroad expedition to Mexico City, but the interior of the train flaunts its comfort and safety. Reclining seats, a diner car with a bar, and an observation car all stand ready to accommodate passengers for the eighteen-hour trip.

Despite an expensive decor of plush auburn seats and venetian blinds, the ticket is cheap. One way to Mexico City costs about \$21, and serious sleepers can get private beds for about \$45.

In the observation car a huge cloud of smoke stagnates the air as every passenger puffs on a cigarette. "It's funny," one man says, "I never smoke at home, but once I get into Latin America, I smoke like a dog."

An old lady opens the door, and the smoke rushes out like a frightened ghost. She walks slowly through the car and stumbles like a drunk as the train shakes back and forth.

A little girl decides to test the rocking train for herself. After briefly standing, she falls to the floor.

"Isn't she something?" asks the girl's father, a big-bellied man with a full gray beard. "No matter how many times she falls, she keeps trying."

Although the fall brings a confused smile to the girl's face, she begins to stand again as her father talks about past train excursions. "Mexico City is okay," he says, "but you really should go to San Miguel de Allende because it's a beautiful little town that Mexico regards as a showcase of the country."

My attention again turns toward the windows as hills appear in the background. The hills grow into mountains, framing the train on each side. Someday I'd like to stand atop the tallest peak, smoke a big, fat, rasta joint, and watch the shiny red, blue, and silver train creep through the valley. It would look like a little toy, splitting a path through an endless forest of cacti.

As the day stretches on, passengers begin to retire to their seats and sleeper cars. The conversation had been polite, but boring; and now I am left searching for something to do.

Where is the drinking, laughing, and gambling? Maybe those revelries were left in the 1940's, when scores of Texans aban-

done their regular weekend plans to ride the train from San Antonio to Mexico City.

That route, which was abandoned in 1965, might be reactivated. Negotiations between officials of Mexican and American railroad companies began last September. A line might be extended through San Antonio to Austin, via Amtrak. It may open as soon as 1989.

An American who frequently travels the rails in Mexico tells me about a train that still runs there: "The night train stops in all these little places. They might load goat's milk, or the train conductor might stop, get off, and drink some tequila."

Tequila. Yeah, that would liven up these people. But dinner arrives, quashing all thoughts of partying. A conductor rushes by and tosses a Styrofoam container onto my tray. The container feels cold — a bad sign — but I'm surprised to find it holds a colorful, tasty crescent roll, corn, and green gelatin.

As the train rolls into the outskirts of Monterrey, passengers crowd into the open sections between the cars to get a better view. A body lays still beside the tracks, oblivious to the passing train and the impoverished living conditions that surround it. On the hood of an El Camino, a fat boy sits, flipping off passengers.

Twilight brings beauty even to this poverty, and the sunset above Monterrey highlights the towering mountain ridges. No cacti grow on those rugged peaks. I only see dark dirt. The soil contrasts with the white rock of the mountain cliffs, giving the mountain the appearance of a pile of chocolate swirl ice cream. Erosion has taken a few big scoops from the sides that loom above the uppermost houses of the city. The houses appear identical in shape and size, but each shines a different pastel color — green, orange, or pink.

The morning roar of Mexico City erases the sleeping sounds of the train as the passengers grab their bags and step onto solid ground.

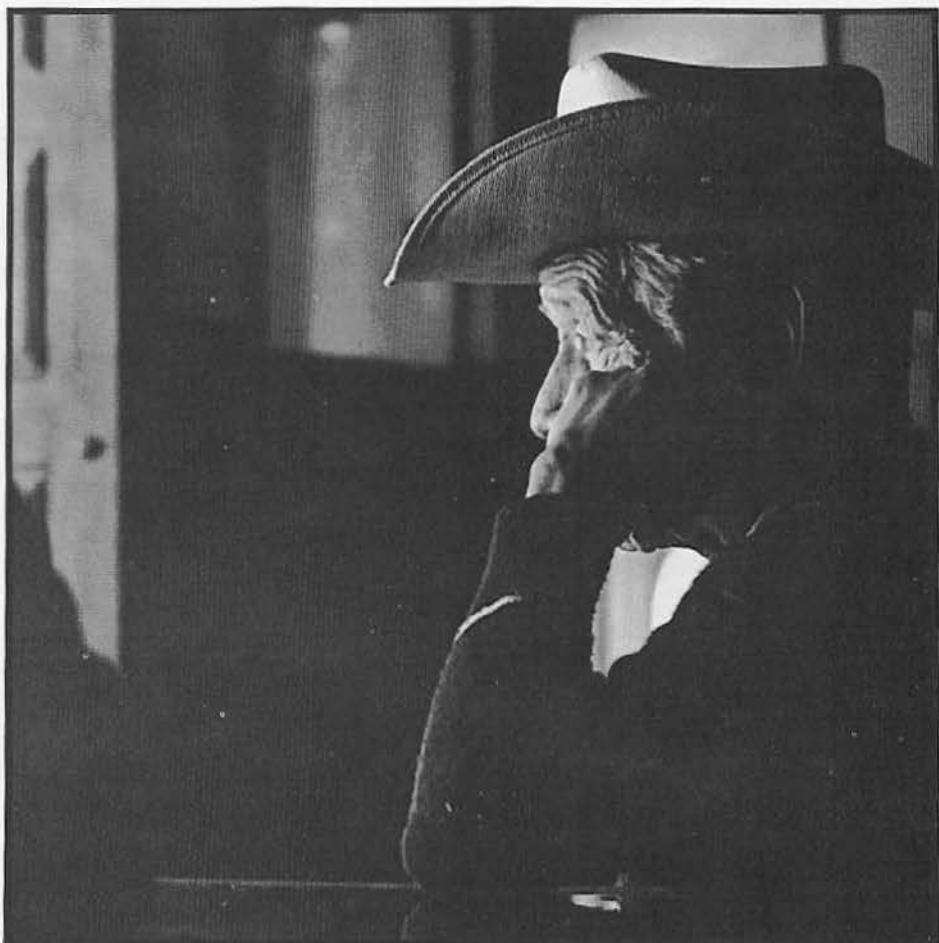
Sweet memories of Monterrey at sundown fade into a new vision of grime of the city. Smoggy fumes, an unfortunate result

of fifteen million people living in a valley, fill the air. The fumes leave me teary-eyed and coughing and ready to seek cleaner air. A determined tourist can uncover interesting landmarks in this city, which boasts a marvelous national museum of anthropology, but the smog usually sends the intolerant ones to the Aztec pyramids that are just twenty minutes outside the city. Unfortunately, to reach the pyramids, you must go to one of the main sources of the noxious gases — the bus station. Here, hundreds of hideous hunks of metal rumble, drowning out mispronounced questions of "Which

way...?" or "Where is the bus to...?"

Finally, after asking fifty questions, we jump on the correct bus (the *blanco* bus) before it pulls into the congested traffic.

At the pyramids, breathing becomes easy and I hear only the hot breeze. The top of the Temple of the Sun provides a serene view, but the climb reveals a need for massive restoration and disappoints many tourists. Small fragments of original wall paintings and statues remain intact, but cement holds together large umber and red stones that form the structure's sides. Only the sheer size of the temples is left to be appre-

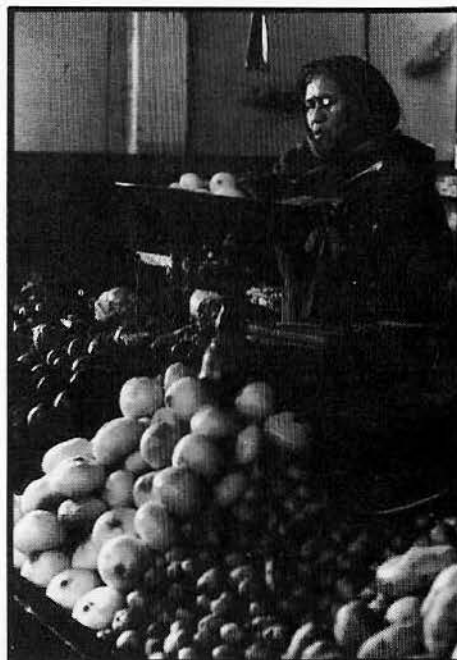


Above: Elderly man at El Gato Negro Bar in San Miguel de Allende. Left: Window view of mountainside between Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo.





Above: Covered market in Guanajuato.
 Right: Produce vendor in marketplace.



ciated.

The clean, hot air outside the city helps my photographer and me decide to catch the first bus to San Miguel de Allende, rather than return to Mexico City.

The bumps and noises of the five-hour bus ride remind me of how pleasant a train can be. Buses run faster than trains, so the tickets tend to cost more, but the trip from Mexico City to San Miguel de Allende only set us back about \$4.

Trains do have a definite advantage over buses in one respect. Buses have no bathrooms. Any long bus venture could turn disastrous for a tourist with *tourista*.

Mexico's buses do provide a glimpse of religion quite different from the majestic cathedrals. On this bus (nicknamed "Rambo" by the driver) tinted plastic replaces stained glass, and blinking lights, darting across a huge plastic cross, replace softly glowing candles. Drivers paste pictures of the Virgin Mary on mirrors and windows and allow fuzzy red carpet borders to adorn her — Catholicism at its gaudiest.

As the bus twists down the mountain road above San Miguel de Allende, it becomes apparent why almost 6,000 Americans, many of whom are artists, musicians, and retirees, have chosen the town for their home. Cobblestone streets wind around the hills, and although they are an annoyance to cars and bicycles, they complement the old stone walls and buildings. Many of the walls bordering the streets stand thirty feet tall. Various stringy plants often cover their sides like hanging spaghetti, with green leaves and vivid flowers. Markets with panchos, toys, and sweet candies line the streets. Burrows stand idly beside plastic tricycles marked "Policia."

In addition to the ancient beauty, the city offers a myriad of excellent hotels and restaurants, all of them cheap. For an expensive hotel on the main square, expect to pay about \$15 for a room with two beds. Other hotels scattered around the city charge as little as \$5 a night. Gourmet meals with a couple rounds of drinks will total about \$6. Thirty cents is the going price for four greasy bean tacos at small food stands.

During fiestas (especially those in September, when Independence celebrations take place almost every day) many activities surface, such as bull fights, cock fights, firework displays, and dancing exhibitions. On nights without fiestas, nightclubs offer the best entertainment. Of course, smaller dives like El Gato Negro offer only a jukebox and posters of Madonna, Elvis, and large-breasted women.

The morning mountain chill leaves me with wisps of foggy breath and an occasional shiver, but by midday I shed my coat, and the skin on my arms begins to tingle and burn from the sun.

After two days of exploring, we decide to move on to the city of Guanajuato, an hour's bus ride to the north. Guanajuato manages to keep its streets relatively traffic-free by using a system of underground

stone tunnels. Some of the tunnels run and curve just enough to scramble even a map-maker's sense of direction. Narrow sidewalks accompany the roads through the tunnels to provide access for pedestrians, but the walk is risky. My photographer swears that a car purposely swerved to clip him. About \$2,000 in camera equipment tumbled into the soot-covered streets, but a dented lens cover and skinned knees were the only proof of his terrifying ordeal.

The one-way tunnels caused another problem for one American who had rented a car to explore the city. "I went the wrong way down one of those damn things, and all I saw was headlights coming toward me," he says. "It was terrifying. I had to back up the whole way."

Back above ground, the streets remain relatively quiet, but sharp narrow corners force buses to hug the curbs. Sometimes their outstretched mirrors come within a breath of my head. One joke tells of a man who saw the terror on his own face moments before a mirror's impact.

A tour guide offers us plenty of things to do in Guanajuato (such as trips to abandoned mines and extravagant *haciendas*), but the town is best enjoyed by watching life from the iron benches on the main square. Boredom feels pleasant here. Teenagers smoke, and children lick ice cream. Dogs ignore the food stacked high on market tables and instead limp and sniff toward trampled orange peels.

I sail a large hunk of leftover pizza toward a big spotted hound, bringing an outcry of protest from normally passive residents sitting in the main square. Figuring I made a mistake, I gently place the remaining two pieces — one pepperoni, one sausage — in the pruny hands of an old man crouching with a small cup of change.

Because Guanajuato has no train station, we take a bus back to San Miguel de Allende, where a train to Nuevo Laredo leaves twice a day.

Unlike the luxury railroad cars which travel to Mexico City, this black and dusty train shows the wear of twenty years on the tracks. Brown vinyl seats, ripped and patched, are the only choice of seating — this train has no dining or sleeping car. The price for a one-way ticket is only \$9.

The old windows show the same scenery as the fancy ones. A carousel horse shares cramped quarters with two live horses. Children still wave, and everywhere the green, white, and red logo of PRI, the ruling political party in Mexico, can be seen painted on walls.

Old women constantly amble down the aisles to sell food and drink. Cold, twenty-five cent beer is everywhere, and so is my \$3 bottle of Jose Cuervo Gold tequila.

"Let's make a deal," bellows a cheerful Mexican man. "A beer for a shot!"

Tequila gains popularity. "It makes the ride so much smoother," says a Californian, who then offers to take two Austinites and me on top of the train for some sight-

seeing. "We have to be careful because they get real pissed off if they catch you. And you have to know where the tunnels are," he says with a swig of tequila.

Protests from the prospective adventurer's girlfriend kill the expedition, so we move to the rear of the train, where the wind rushes against us. An accordion and guitar can be heard from inside, but the roaring and clicking of metal wheels is better music for the intoxicated view of tracks left forever in the distance.

"If you come again, go out west," says one girl from Austin. "They have a beautiful train route through the mountains, and you can find beaches that are practically uninhabited."

As the mountains block the sun, the tequila causes my eyelids to droop. During the cold night, the sound of snoring brings back faint memories of the monster buses of Mexico City. A rat scurries down the aisle. This is the train. This is the way to travel.



Above right: Students from Denton enjoy the passing scenery on route to Monterrey. Above: Passengers relax during train ride.