

# Should you go on a Mexico RV Caravan?



BY PAUL BEDDOWS

**First of all let me make this clear. I do work for a Mexican RV Caravan company, Caravanas de Mexico, which runs Caravans down Mexico's west coast, mainly aimed at retirees and those with more time to spare. I am also very good friends with Dan Goy who**

**runs Baja Amigos Caravans down the Baja peninsular.**

This year I decided to travel with one of our own caravans for part of the time, partially for experience as I will be the Wagon Master on our Fall Caravan this year, and for the opportunity to see it from another perspective.

We met in Nogales, Arizona and everyone showed up on time which itself was a miracle, considering three rigs, mine included, had various mechanical issues getting across the US. This is one of the major issues with caravans. You are on a schedule that is not necessarily your own. When you are in your own rig you tend to forget that you are in effect on a tour, and tours always have schedules. It is important to be at the departure point on time, or you may have to catch up with the caravan on your own. I suggest planning to be at the departure point a few days ahead to allow for the unexpected.

When entering a country without ready access to RV parts like Mexico, you must also prepare yourself by carrying a few essential spares, and one advantage of being in a caravan is that if you do not have the correct part, somebody else might. A good caravan company will advise you on how to prepare your RV, and what spares if any, you should carry. If you are traveling into Mainland Mexico further than Guaymas, you also require vehicle permits. (Not required in Baja.) Without going into details, this can be a daunting task and a good caravan company will ensure each participant knows exactly what to do and what they need, rather than blindsiding them at the border with some item of paperwork they neglected to mention. Depending on where a person lives and the likelihood of them backing out at the last minute, we will often advise and assist people to get most paperwork done on line which actually saves a lot of headaches, unless of course you change your mind. Cancelling permits is another matter.

Joining this season's caravan in person made me realize that too much information is as bad as too little. In my attempts to present a caring face, I bombarded our customers with all sorts of useful information, and later found that I had inundated them to the point they ignored some of the real important items. No disasters ensued, however. The key I have concluded, is to provide the information early on, all at once, in one letter or manual, and then simply be accessible to answer any questions. It is also very important to stress that a Mexico Caravan is an adventure, especially if you have not taken your RV down there before. That hopefully primes people's expectations to the point where they will expect some inconveniences like bad power and some rough roads, and look at the trip as something new and exciting rather than expecting "1000 Trail" type resorts. Although Mexico has a rapidly growing middle class, some facilities are, to put it bluntly, primitive. Joining a caravan with a positive attitude and reasonable expectations will make all the difference to your experience.

So, with all of this in mind and everyone showing up in Nogales on time, we ventured across the border where we met by the Green Angels, the Mexican equivalent of AAA. Since Caravanas de Mexico is a Mexican company and the owner is Mexican, he appears to have the means to arrange this. Local connections are always the key to a smooth experience. In fact for most of the caravan, it was escorted by two Green Angels, one in the rear and one in the front. They seem to have the authority to do things like block traffic, escort the caravan through red lights and all sorts of things like that, besides being excellent mechanics. In one instance, a lack of communication, for which I take full responsibility, worked against us in place known as Villa Corona. This town has an elevated main street with sharp drop offs at each side. I was there three days ahead of time and I intended to guide the caravan down a handy ramp at a gas station, but the Green Angels blocked off the road before that and directed the caravan down another side street, as I watched helplessly two blocks away. This caused some confusion, but it all worked out well in the end.

The Green Angels are resourceful mechanics. To call them versatile is an understatement. They spent hours sourcing out a new rear pickup window for a customer who popped his while backing up his 5<sup>th</sup> wheel, and a new gas cap lost by one of our motorhomes. They simply do not give up. On most segments they towed a cargo trailer full of parts. They do not charge for labour. They represent the best of Mexico and its people that most of us have come to love.



Green Angels

Most caravans include various tours and this is one of their big advantages over going solo. In our case it includes a 4-day tour of Copper Canyon, the Monarch Butterfly Preserve, plus several other full day tours. Most other companies are similar, some offer more tours, some offer less, and some are just basic escort services. When you join a caravan, make sure that it fits your needs with regards to tours. Make sure you understand what is included and what is extra cost. That cheap caravan may not end up as cheap as you expected when you find out that tours are extra. We always try to leave free days between tours and not do a tour either the day after, or before a long drive. A shorter caravan may not have that luxury and you may feel as if you are on the go all the time. Of course if you only have a few weeks vacation, that may be exactly what you are looking for. That suits some people, but not others. Check how many days you have to relax and do nothing, if that is important to you.

In any caravan there are always a portion of people with large rigs. This means that the caravan has to book RV parks that can handle them. In Mexico this creates a problem where there may be some long stretches with no suitable RV park, and some long driving days as a consequence. You have to be prepared for two to four of these days at some point during the caravan and be prepared to drive at the speed limit or close to it, especially on toll roads, which are similar to US Interstates. Toll roads lower your chance of having an accident or damaging your rig significantly, so we use a lot of them on our caravans. Fuel is also no longer cheap in Mexico. You can expect to pay about the same as you would in Arizona. Add tolls to that, and traveling in Mexico has become expensive. Fortunately, some other costs are still lower than in the US, notably alcohol. However, the weather is certainly better and that is why most people come.

The most important person on any caravan, bar none, is the Wagon Master. A good one can make it the trip of a lifetime. They have to have a rare combination of patience and firmness, and since most are couples, that has to be times two.

We are fortunate in having the most experience ones in Mexico, Yves and Francine Currier, who have led over 130 caravans. On top of that Yves is also a qualified RV technician, a huge bonus.

On any caravan you have a mix of personalities and you may have complainers, people going through relationship difficulties, those who venture off for days on their own without letting us know, you name it. Unless those negatives are controlled, they can poison an entire group.

A Wagon Master sometimes takes on the role of councillor and sounding post, whether he likes it or not. Ironically, the larger the group, the more chance you have of having somebody in one of those categories, but on the other hand, the larger the group, the less chance there is of it becoming a negative for everyone else.

Keeping all the customers happy is sometimes a huge challenge for a Wagon Master, so creating a tight cohesive social group early on is important.

### So, WHY would you want to join a Mexican Caravan?

There are, in my opinion two reasons not to, and those are cost and lack of flexibility. On the other hand there are, I believe, seven very good reasons, especially for first timers.

- 1) **Wagon Master:** Many people, especially retirees, may not want hassles and prefer to be taken care of. RV Parks booked, route planned, etc.
- 2) **Security:** While I believe RVing in Mexico is quite safe, all the bad publicity is bound to make people apprehensive. The feeling of safety from traveling in a group cannot be understated. Furthermore, if you do break down, you do have some level of assistance available.
- 3) **Paperwork:** The paperwork involved with taking a vehicle into Mexico can be daunting the first time. Traveling with a Caravan will teach you the ropes on that one.
- 4) **Discovering where you can, or cannot take an RV:** Mexico is full of physical hazards, especially for larger rigs. A caravan will help you discover the limitations of where you should or should not take your rig.
- 5) **Tours:** Most caravans offer tours to attractions and places that can be difficult to access with your RV. Most attractions in Mexico do not come with large RV parking areas.
- 6) **Camaraderie:** Traveling alone in a country with different customs and language can be a lonely experience.
- 7) **Something different:** If you are unlikely to venture into Mexico on your own, then try a caravan. You may be surprised at what you have been missing all those years you spent in places like Yuma.

### So WHO are running Mexican caravans these days?

**Baja Amigos** and **Baja Winters** are the two main players exclusively doing the Baja. **Adventure, Fantasy** and **Caravanas de Mexico** do the Mainland caravans.

Some cater to those who have more time, others to those who have less. You can expect to pay far more per day on shorter caravans than longer ones. You really need to compare websites and see what you get for your money.

Some companies do their own tours as we and Baja Amigos do, some others outsource them, or a combination of both. This also can affect the cost.

You should also keep in mind that there are two main classes of attractions in Mexico, beaches and colonial sites. You may want to checkout the balance between those two offered by various companies and choose the one that most suits your tastes. If you have mobility issues, for example, a caravan that has tons of walking tours is likely not going to be for you, but one that offers a lot of beach time may be. Also check as to what is included. Some companies, that appear cheaper, may not cover your RV park fees or only some of them, or tours may be extra.

Here are the [Websites](#) for the main companies:

#### BAJA:

**Baja Amigos** – [www.bajaamigos.net](http://www.bajaamigos.net)

**Baja Winters** – [www.bajawinters.com](http://www.bajawinters.com)

#### MAINLAND MEXICO:

**Caravanas de Mexico** – [www.mexicorvcaravan.com](http://www.mexicorvcaravan.com)

**Adventure** – [www.adventurecaravans.com](http://www.adventurecaravans.com)

**Fantasy** – [www.fantasyrvtours.com](http://www.fantasyrvtours.com)