

# Pajarito de los Montes

written by Guest Contributor | May 19, 2020



When the patrol car pulled to a stop on the dirt road two fields away and three Police officers piled out, we never imagined they were coming for us. A common sight anywhere in Mexico, the appearance of *la poli* that Saturday afternoon, merited no more than a passing comment from my friends as we rambled over the countryside looking for a shady spot to escape the midday sun and eat our freshly harvested *Pajarito* mushrooms.

It was a humid July day amidst the sub-tropical hills of Veracruz's Sierra Oriental. Eight of us, four Mexicans and four Foreign Exchange Students (FES), had set out that morning from the city for the village of Xico, a *Pueblo Magico* that had become a regular destination for weekend excursions over the year I had been studying in Xalapa. Locals flock to the *Pueblo Magico* every weekend to bathe at its scenic waterfalls, stroll along the cobbled colonial streets and sample the local *mole*. That Saturday's trip was extra special, however. My time in Mexico was coming to a close and my boyfriend, César, had convinced me that I couldn't go home without sampling the local fungi, which just happened to be hallucinogenic.

It would be my first and, to date, my only time trying any hallucinogenic substance, despite the abundance of shrooms in the damp, cow-pat ridden fields of my native Ireland. Earlier that year one of the other FES, Sarah, and I travelled north to the [Wirikuta desert](#) in San Luis Potosi where Peyote can be found. Beautiful and tempting as those little button cacti had been, I couldn't bring myself to eat one as, like many sacred indigenous plants, peyote is in danger of extinction due to the explosion in [peyote tourism](#). *Pajaritos*, on the other hand, are as common as muck, literally sprouting out of the dung across the Gulf Coast's cattle ranching territory during the rainy season. My qualms on this occasion were therefore practical, rather than ethical.

As the novice in the group I was worried we would get caught, about getting too high, or not getting high at all. César, a veteran consumer of hallucinogens, had assured me that everything would be "*chido wey*." I trusted him and the friends I had made over a year of *cotorreo* and other adventures around Mexico. María, Pancho, José and Carlos had welcomed me to their

community of students, artists and bohos the previous August, when this shy, 24 year old güerita, with a heart still bruised from the loss of my Mother a year previously, rocked up on their doorstep. Pancho, the designated group leader and resident expert had also assured me, "*todo chido.*" He had scoured those fields many times before in search of the humble *Pajaritos*.

After a forty minute bus ride, careening around hairpin bends, we disembarked at Xico just before midday. We stopped long enough to have a late breakfast of *enmoladas* (tortillas with egg or cheese bathed in local *mole*) before making our way north out of town. Our motley crew of güeros and local students received some curious glances as we walked in the opposite direction to the famous waterfalls, but no comments were made. The road turned from asphalt to dirt and all other signs of urbanity fell behind as we progressed into the countryside, flanked by barbed wire fences on either side, and beyond, a vast expanse of verdant rolling hills with the odd cow grazing in the fields. We did not have to go far before Pancho hopped a fence to head off on a one-man reconnaissance. He was back within five minutes: "Jackpot!"

We followed him over the fence, careful to avoid scratched skin or torn jeans, and through the shin length grass. Within minutes we had reached a field where there were abundant cow pats with little golden-brown mushrooms, *pajaritos*, sprouting out of them. Under Pancho's instructions we spread out, scouring the field in ones and twos, for maximum coverage. César took me by the hand and guided me in plucking the healthiest looking specimens directly from the crusty dung. Our hands were soon full and the group reconvened at the edge of the field. It was then that we spotted the police, but we barely gave them a moment's thought as we pooled our bounty into a grocery bag and made our way towards a shallow ditch under the shade of trees to have our lunch.

Everyone seemed to know exactly what they were doing and exactly how they liked their shrooms except me. They rummaged through the bag, selecting prime specimens, blowing off remnants of dung, and munched on them with their condiment of choice. María had her condensed milk. Sarah her peanut butter and Pancho his honey. César made a shroom sandwich with some white sliced bread. I, for as long as I can remember, have had an aversion to mushrooms of any kind that is so profound it must be etched into my DNA. I took pains to shred the *pajaritos* into little chunks, knocking them back whole with slugs of water, the way you would a paracetamol. My friends laughed at my exaggerated grimaces as I forced them down my throat, almost gagging a couple of times, and informed me that I would miss out on all those digestive enzymes released while chewing. This, however, was a small price to pay for not having to either taste or feel the texture of raw mushrooms in my mouth.

Our first dosage consumed, we left the shade to find the perfect panorama of the Sierra Oriental to pass our trip. We had only walked about five minutes when we saw that the three black uniformed, police officers, were now less than 50 meters away and marching directly towards us, their standard issue, semi-automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. Rollies, joints and other incriminating items were dropped on the spot, lost forever among the blades of grass.

We kept walking, trying to assume an air of innocence. The three officers, one man and a woman, came to a halt a couple of meters from us. Pancho and César, the self-appointed spokespersons for our crew, took a couple of steps forward, hands outstretched in a gesture of peace.

"Everything OK, *oficial?*" asked Pancho.

Their leader, a non-descript middle aged, mid ranking officer, responded, "What do you think you are doing here? This is private property!"

"We're just out for a stroll," said Daniel.

The officer didn't seem convinced. "Yeah, lots of people come out for a stroll, but others," he said, casting an appraising eye over our group, noting the collection of hipster high-tops, flannel shirts, thick-rimmed glasses and abundant facial hair. "Come to take drugs."

Pancho tried to appear shocked at the mere mention of illegal substances and shook his head, "Not us, *oficial, nosotros, puro paseo.*"

"The problem," said the officer, unconvinced. "Is that this is private property."

"We understand," said Pancho. "We'll make our way straight back to the road."

At this point the policewoman stepped forward and pointed an accusing finger at María, "Look, she has the *lechera!*"

María froze with the tin of condensed milk she had been sipping still raised to her mouth, trying not to smile at the absurdity of the accusation. Since when had drinking condensed milk become a criminal act? As the officers exchanged knowing glances, it became clear that they too were aware that *Lechera* was the condiment of choice for shroom connoisseurs.

"I'm afraid we'll have to search you," said the officer, and to his credit he did seem genuinely sorry about the whole matter.

There was no protest from our group, how could we possibly object without looking even more suspicious? Most of us had only small bags with nothing more than a few snacks and water bottles but José's backpack held the grocery bag of *pajaritos* we had been saving for later. He hadn't had a chance to dispose of them discreetly.

"Look at this," exclaimed the policewoman, holding the bag open for her colleagues to inspect. She gave a triumphant smile that clearly said, you're royally screwed now.

The main officer turned to José, "How do you explain this?"

He looked at us in dismay, but no one could think of a response. We had been caught red handed and just at the moment our trip was about to take off. Panic threatened to overcome the group.

"We, we," he stuttered. "We kept them because they were beautiful."

It was a valiant attempt but that wasn't going to convince anyone who looked at the bag of wholly unremarkable, brown mushrooms with bits of dung still clinging to them.

The officer came back to the front of the group to address Pancho, "I think we have a problem."

There was nothing more to say, how could we deny we were trespassing and in the possession of a controlled substance?

And yet Pancho once more came forward, hands outstretched once more, imploring for understanding. "How can we work this out, *oficial?*"

"Well, I'll have to bring you down to the station, I'm afraid." Once again, he managed to sound genuinely sorry.

With those fatal words it seemed that my worst nightmare might in fact come true and I would see out my first ever trip from inside a Mexican jail cell. How was I going to explain this to my university? To my family? Apparently I was not the only one in the group who had fallen down a panic spiral. However, while Sarah and I kept our heads down and tried to draw as little attention to ourselves as possible, Irene was having a mini melt-down. She began exclaiming over and over again, "*Soy Española, soy Española,*" as if somehow her Spanish passport was going to get her off the hook, rather than simply make things worse.

César stepped forward, and mimicking Pancho's gesture of peace, "I'm sure there is a way we can work this out?"

The police officer seemed to give this serious consideration. "Well, it would certainly mean a lot of paperwork."

Pancho and César nodded along, their brows furrowed in understanding.

"And it would probably take all day."

They kept nodding, "*Sí oficial*"

"Paperwork is very expensive, and, time consuming, especially for so many people." He gestured at the group.

We all nodded, of course, it was understandable, what a hassle we would cause down at the station, and on a Saturday as well.

César repeated, "I'm sure there is a way we can work this out?"

Apparently, three is the magic number because the officer, though it seemed to trouble him deeply, responded, "Well, perhaps. I mean all that paperwork and manpower, and on a Saturday as well. Perhaps, 3000 pesos would do it? For the administration fees, you know."

3000 pesos, that was more than two months' rent! I had enough for the bus home and some food on the way. I was sure my friends were under similar financial constraints. How would we ever pay our way out of this?

Pancho turned and hushed the meek protestations coming from the group and gathered us into a tight huddle so we could consider the offer. We began fishing out our wallets but he hissed and told us to put our money back.

"I only have 30 pesos," I said, a noticeable tremor in my voice.

"I'm the same," said Sarah.

"It's fine, it's fine," said Pancho. "Whatever you have, no more than 50. There's eight of us, let's see if they take that."

We handed him crumpled notes fished discretely from wallets, pockets and bags. Pancho approached the officer once more, head slightly bent and eyes lowered to the floor, "this is all we have, *oficial*. We're just students, you know."

He held the money out. The police officers glanced at each other and the main negotiator took the notes and made a show of counting them. He looked disappointed. We had only managed to scrape together 300 pesos, while still leaving ourselves enough to get the bus home. It was their turn to huddle as they conferred with each other, presumably to decide if it was worth trying to squeeze any more out of us.

They turned back to us and their spokesperson cleared his throat, "This will do, but you need to get moving, now."

Our group let out a collective sigh.

"Of course," said Pancho. "And thank you, we're terribly sorry for the misunderstanding."

"That's fine," said the main officer. "Just get moving."

We picked our stuff from the ground and filed passed one by one, muttering "*Gracias*" to the officers as if they had somehow done us a favour rather than just extorting money from us. The policewoman stood by scowling, our bag of *pajaritos* in one hand and the tin of *lechera* in the other, apparently unconvinced that we should be let off so easily.

César fell into step beside me but we didn't dare hold hands with the police still watching us.

"Are you ok?" he whispered.

"No *mames*," I half hissed, half laughed. "I didn't know that in Mexico even the *mordidas* can be haggled over."

He winked and we kept walking in silence until we got back to the edge of the road and hopped the fence. The patrol car passed us in a cloud of dust five

minutes later but they made no sign of having seen us. I had no doubt that our 300 pesos would fund nothing other than the afternoon's round of *caguamas* down at the station.

We began to make our way back to Xico, resigned to spending our trip walking along the road rather than sprawled in the grass, basking under the sun. The fields on either side taunted us as we passed but we were afraid to push our luck by hopping the fence. We only had enough for one bribe that afternoon.

As the shrooms began to kick in, so did our relief at our narrow escape from a night crawling the walls in cell at the local precinct, producing an effect that was close to collective hysteria. We laughed our way along the road for what seemed like hours, going over and over our encounter with the police, the exchange seeming more absurd and surreal with each retelling.

It was not quite the hallucination I had expected, rather I felt a sense of heightened perception. The surrounding hills shimmered with emerald clarity, as if I could see each individual blade of grass and distinguish every tone of green on the spectrum, from lime to moss. Rather than the *pajaritos* pulling me down into the shadowy depths of my still raw grief, as I had feared, I realised that I was in control of the experience. I had the power to decide whether I was going to let myself be pulled or simply enjoy the ride. Some wiser, higher consciousness opted for the latter, and as the conversation moved on to the more mundane aspects of the meaning of our existence, I found myself unable to articulate even a semi-coherent sentence. Instead, I marvelled at the absurdity of my friend's chatter. It seemed clear in that moment that all the words we ever utter are meaningless sounds, that we humans just spend our time using up air. Everything they said sent me into fits of uncontrollable, bellyaching laughter. I had not experienced such mirth since the afternoon, almost two years previously, when my mother had phoned to tell me it was cancer.

It was the release that I needed, and though my grieving was far from over, it was a moment that helped me remember that there was still joy and love to be felt in the world. I fell deeply in love with everyone on our trek back to town and much, though not all, of that complicity remains for those of us who are still in touch.

It was a moment that was never to be repeated. I would soon be on my way back to Ireland to finish my undergrad degree. César and I tried to make long distance work, with a two month sojourn in Ireland and plans to spend the next summer together in Xalapa. We barely made it to the following March, however, before breaking up. Despite the broken heart, my friends were waiting for me in Xalapa, so once my finals were over, I headed back. Lost love and crushed expectations were still preferable to a summer at home where the only thing awaiting me was my Mother's empty house, unemployment and coming face to face with the dark abyss of my grief.

Our shroom adventure had achieved legendary status among my friends and there was many a laugh over beer as we reminisced about Pancho's negotiation skills. Xalapa, 10 months later was, however, almost unrecognizable and such a carefree adventure unthinkable in a state which had finally [succumbed to Mexico's drug war](#) and where the brutality of the infamous Zeta cartel had

already left blood on the streets the length and breadth of Veracruz.

Each time I have visited Xalapa since 2011 the situation feels more tense. My friends whisper about the disappearances of young people, [girls into trafficking](#) rings and boys into the Narcos' cavalry, freedom of the press is non-existent and journalists are in exile, [running for their lives](#). We're getting older, more responsible and settling into a more cautious middle age we would have thought impossible when we hopped across those fields in search of *pajaritos* ten years ago. We have "steady" jobs, some of us have kids and we're all too aware that you don't go messing around in *Narco* territory if you know what's good for you.

### For Dani Cruz, artist, friend and co-conspirator

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**Aisling Walsh** is a freelance writer and translator based between Ireland and Guatemala. She writes reports, features and essays on human rights and social justice for a variety of publications with recent by-lines including: *The Irish Times*, *The Sunday Business Post*, *Open Democracy*, *The Establishment* and *Dismantle Magazine*. She is currently a doctoral candidate in sociology at the National University of Ireland Galway, where she is researching healing justice processes in Guatemala.

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/axliwrites>, Website: [www.aislingwrites.net](http://www.aislingwrites.net)