

CONSULATE NOGALES' DEADLY DESERT

AS SECURITY TIGHTENS IN URBAN CENTERS,
THE FLOW OF IMMIGRANTS AND CONTRABAND
IS BEING PUSHED TO MORE REMOTE AREAS.

BY JIM BREDECK

As a first-tour officer on a consular assignment, I imagined my view of Mexico would be formed primarily from a visa interview window. What else would there be to do in this small, dusty post? As it turns out, quite a bit. What I didn't fully realize until I got here was the extent to which Nogales is quite literally ground zero for illegal migration.

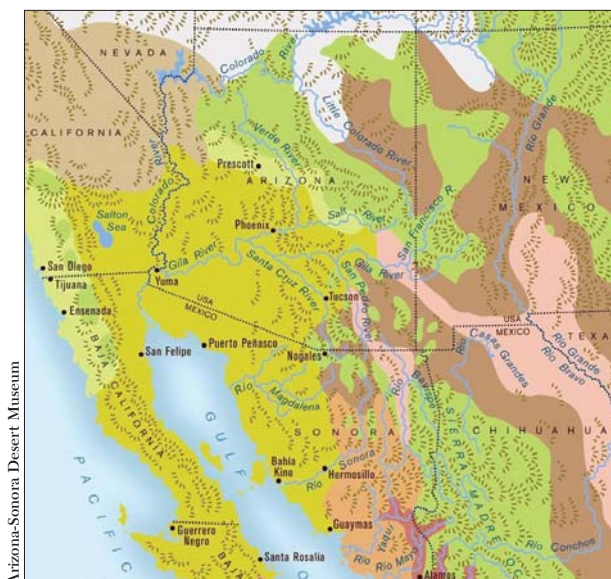
Shortly after my arrival, Principal Officer Cynthia Sharpe asked me to begin educating myself about the terrain and people of the desert corridor, so I could serve as a regional guide for interested private-sector and official visitors. Our consulate receives many requests from U.S. agencies for briefings on border security. In addition, we have worked closely with our public diplomacy colleagues in Embassy Mexico City to design tours of the region for journalists, editorial writers and academic opinionmakers, in an attempt to sensitize the Mexican public to the perils of illegal immigration via the Sonora-Arizona desert corridor.

With scorching temperatures during the day, freezing temperatures at night, scorpions and snakes, and cacti in a variety of shapes and sizes, the natural obstacles found in the Sonoran Desert of northwestern Mexico would

frighten off all but the most determined visitors. Illegal immigrants attempting to enter the United States are a very determined group, however. They have used the Arizona-Mexico border to enter the U.S. for decades, often with tragic results. Recently, an alarming rise in deaths of illegal immigrants has everyone wondering how much deadlier the desert may become.

As double and triple fencing is erected and the U.S. Border Patrol becomes a bigger presence in the urban

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A family waits outside a hotel in Altar for sunset, when the traffic to Sasabe picks up. Though the afternoon temperature is 70-80 degrees, they will need the heavy jackets for the frigid night walk ahead.



Benjamin Onsley

Cash is collected and vans are loaded outside a cheap guesthouse in Altar for the 100-kilometer trip to Sasabe.

areas of San Diego and El Paso, the flow of immigrants and contraband is pushed increasingly into the remote desert that lies between them. That trend has allowed several formerly isolated small towns to prosper.

Altar Call

Altar is a nondescript little town a few hours southwest of Nogales. Business there has boomed in recent years, with guest houses and market stalls catering to a new kind of tourist: undocumented immigrants heading north. The small square is filled with groups of intending immigrants waiting for word from scouts ahead to begin moving north. They lounge in the city square, make phone calls back home with instructions to wire money, and purchase dark backpacks or heavy clothing from the kiosks that line the square in preparation for their night walk through the desert. A sad, desperate air of fear and anticipation is everywhere. A Mexican Red Cross trailer is a feature in the square now, its personnel there to attend to the blisters and animal or spider bites sustained by those who have unsuccessfully attempted the crossing.

Along one side of the square is a line of battered vans whose seats have been removed and replaced with narrow benches that accommodate 20 or more passengers. These vehicles, marked "Altar-Sasabe," depart sporadically during the afternoon and then with increasing frequency as dark approaches. The vans depart and drive



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In Sasabe, the gravity of what lies ahead begins to impress itself on prospective migrants, who are transferred to heavy-duty pickup trucks for the journey to the final drop-off points near the border.

north along a dirt toll road on privately-owned ranch land toward the last stop in Mexico: Sasabe.

The End of the Road

Sasabe is many things. It is a no-man's land with the look and feel of a frontier mining town before the law arrived. It is the immigration delta at the end of a river of desperate souls that begins in southern Mexico or even

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further south in Latin America. And it is where the paved highways from the south abruptly end, and contra-band traffic fans out along dozens of dirt trails and cow paths that meander north to the border.

Sasabe is — thankfully — unlike any other place in Mexico. First-time visitors murmur, “It’s like a scene from ‘Mad Max.’” As your vehicle approaches town, bouncing and sliding along the rutted dirt road from Altar, there is the undeniable feeling that you have definitely reached the end of the line — yet turning back is not an option. The entrance to town is lined with the carcasses of rusting automobiles and the remnants of the only industry (now defunct) the region has ever sustained: brickmaking. This is the middle of nowhere, and the last place you would expect growth and new construction. But growth has come here with a vengeance in the form of brothels and bars fueled by illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Satellite dishes are everywhere, yet there is no bank or gas station.

In Sasabe the vans empty, and passengers transfer to



Benjamin Ousley

Before crossing the fence that marks the U.S.-Mexico border, migrants drop trash and unnecessary articles to reduce the load for the dark and perilous passage.

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heavy-duty pickup trucks. These will carry them along roads too damaging for a normal van's suspension to their final drop-off points, where they will wait for sunset to dash across the border. Armed only with gallon jugs of water, and whatever other meager supplies they've managed to fit into their backpacks, the intending immigrants begin walking north, led by their group leader, who is colloquially known as their "coyote" or "pollero." The coyote will quickly abandon the group at the first sign of trouble and often collaborates with the bandits who plague the immigrants as they progress northward.

The formidable desert that lies ahead has been described to the migrants as an "easy walk of a few hours," but the reality soon becomes jarringly apparent. The truth is that it will require a minimum of three days' hard hiking through challenging terrain before any sort of paved road appears, offering the chance of a ride in a pickup truck to a safe house.

Walking at night to avoid detection, travelers greatly

increase their odds of slipping and falling into a canyon. During the day, low-growing scrub mesquite and creosote trees offer little shade. The plastic gallon jug of water each migrant carries is emptied and discarded during the first day, contributing to huge piles of garbage that mark their increasingly desperate passage. It is a race against time, against the Border Patrol and, increasingly, against groups of criminals lurking among the hills.

This recent trend is an indicator of how frustrated the human smuggling and narcotrafficking industries are becoming at enhanced U.S. border security initiatives. As the passage across the border has become more difficult, opportunistic criminals have taken to poaching loads of drugs as they are smuggled into Arizona, and the coyotes sometimes attack the clients of rival human traffickers, holding them hostage for ransom.

Each part of the Mexican border has a different reality. My tour here in Nogales has been a true adventure, as well as a crash course in the heartbreak and dangers of illegal immigration. ■



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