

The Ugly Canadian
Eighty Five U.S. dollars per person
By
Mark Lawton

“Ray’s here,” Todd said. Todd, a twenty something American from Pittsburgh, and his Mexican wife, Flora, owned the Cabanas on the beach but that was about as far as Todd’s efforts went.

Todd ought to let Flora handle all the interactions with the guests. At one-hundred dollars a night the guests deserve a little upbeat chit chat. They want to be reassured that the nearest town, Barra de Navidad, is really more interesting than it appeared when they drove through on the way from the airport. Todd’s “There’s a decent panaderia on the corner, down by the docks” just didn’t inspire. Flora’s accent, if nothing else, gave us some hope. That is, until our day with Ray.

Ray was an insurance agent from Toronto. He retired for a more sunny and tranquil life on the hospitable Pacific Coast of Mexico. At least, that’s how his brochure read. Todd came to life when he told us Ray’s real story. Ray sold bogus insurance contracts to dot-com companies in Toronto in the late nineties. When they all went bust and tried to cash in, Ray left his wife and five kids and drove the blue family mini-van to the border in El Paso. From there he hitch-hiked for a week before landing in jail in Barra de Navidad for having sex with the police chief’s wife. He got out after ninety days but only because the police chief died of a heart-attack.

Now Ray runs a tour service for gringos. Half day tour to the mangrove forest, thirty-five U.S. dollars per person. Includes breakfast. Mangrove tour and tour of the brick factory, fifty-seven U.S. dollars per person. Includes breakfast and light snack. Or, the full day tour to the mountains, an art community, nature walk, and historical perspectives, eighty-five U.S. dollars per person. Doesn’t include breakfast but a rich and authentic lunch is the highlight.

Ray’s been giving these tours for years but still feels an obligation to point out the prices are quoted in US dollars. “I am, after all,” he says, “still a Canadian way down deep.” The Royal Canadian Mounted Police thinks so too and sent agents to Todd’s Cabana retreat last summer to initiate the extradition process. Todd said that he hadn’t seen Ray in weeks but maybe

the agents should check out the panaderia down by the docks. “Ray always takes the clients on the mangrove tour there.”

Ann and I and three couples from Canada paid the eighty-five bucks the night before in cash. We signed up for the all day excursion and since Mary Jane was a middle school Social Studies teacher in Ottawa, she was keen to learn the historical perspectives. Canadians are always keen for this thing or that.

Ray’s brochure had advertised a spacious and comfortable ride. He picked us up in a 1978 Ford station wagon with wood paneling.

Ray wore dark sun glasses. At fifty-eight years old and with thinning greasy hair, Ray really did look like Jack Nicholson. But when he took off his glasses, smiled, cocked his head to the side, and said “My friends call me Jack,” the eight of us made an international pact to, under no circumstances, call him anything but Ray.

Ray spent fifteen minutes instructing us on the proper procedures for the station wagon. “She’s got one-hundred-eighty five thousand miles on her. Not kilometers. Miles. We gotta do things right by her.” Doors. Close them smoothly and with firm but loving force. Visors. Keep them up so the folks in the back can see “They should get their money’s worth too.” Stool. “I’ll bring around. So don’t just hop out.” Air conditioning. “I’ll turn it on when we need it. Gas don’t come cheap in these parts.” Seat Belts. “It’s up to you. Meh-he-ko is like the wild west and it’s every man, and lady to him or herself.” He winked at Mary Jane. “Finally,” he said. “Every time we stop, I’ll need you to get back in the bus on time. I’ve got a tour to the mangrove forest in the morning with a group of Germans. I need to get my proper rest. Germans are very demanding clients.”

Ann took the first turn in the front seat next to Ray. I was in back with the Canadians. They each had their own roll of duct tape in case of an emergency and their hockey sticks were roped down on the roof. Ray charged extra for that.

Ray gave historical perspectives continuously for the first forty minutes but they disappeared after that. It took me a while to realize that “Here’s the brick factory. They burn palm fronds to heat the kilns” and “These two ranchers are engaged in a legal battle over the property line” were historical

perspectives. And why was Ray so loud. Todd had said something about Ray losing partial hearing when the police chief clocked him with his pistola.

Ann put the visor down for a second to look for a mirror. But that didn't become a standard feature on Ford wagons until 1979. Ray said. "Young lady, put that visor up. The folks in back deserve their share of the view too."

The morning was spent en-route to the art community where we had lunch. The only stop was for a five minute walk to get a view of the volcano. It's dormant now and looked the same as all the other nearby mountains. "She's sleeping now," Ray said. "But the last time she blew it must have been something spectacular." Nature walk and historical perspective done.

When the bill came for the authentic "Meh-he-kano" lunch, Ray instructed the waitress, in Spanish, to collect twenty-five dollars from each of us. Ray had the worst gringo accent ever and I had to hold back from bonking him with my leftover platano. The Canadians are very polite and only dissed Ray when we commiserated back at the Cabanas. Not Ann. She said, "Ray, you said lunch was included." Ray took off his dark sunglasses and tapped them against his Margarita. "Listen, young lady," he said. "I was very clear. The lunch is a highlight but is not included. If you want meals included, join the Germans for the mangrove tour." He put his sunglasses back on. "Jesus H Christ. Now let's get back in the bus." Ann was pissed.

The Canadians asked Ray if they could have some time to shop for souvenirs. They especially wanted authentic Mexican decals for their hockey sticks. "I guess," Ray said. "I'll give you ten, no thirteen minutes, to be back on the bus." Ann didn't join us. She went directly to the station wagon.

I joined the Canadians and Ray for the remaining eleven minutes and walked around the plaza. "Just about every town in Meh-he-ko has a plaza," Ray said. No extra charge for that. Ray pointed to a smokestack in the distance. "Nearly all the velvet paintings in the states come from that factory over there." Todd had told us that Ray used to offer a tour of the velvet painting factory but one of the tourists died from the fumes.

When we got back to the station wagon, Ann was sitting under a palm tree reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. “You missed a good walk,” Mary Jane said. She let her roll of decals unravel down to the ground.

“It’s time to get going,” Ray said. “You too young lady.”

Ann turned the page, “I’ll get in after you’ve had the air-conditioning on for five minutes. I’m calling the shots now.”

The station wagon wouldn’t start and Ann’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* became *One Hundred Pages of grinning and smirking* as Ray fumbled under the hood. “God damn it,” he kept saying. “We’re running real late now. Real late. I bet Jack never had to go through this.”

Ray didn’t let anybody talk on the way back and he charged an extra dollar for every person who used the bathroom at the gas station.

“Hey Ray,” I said when we pulled up to the sand dune next to the Cabanas. “Whatever happened to the tourist who died on the tour of the velvet painting factory?”

Ray stuffed his sunglasses into his shirt pocket. “Oh that stiff, we had to pack him in ice and drive him to the airport. The Mexican authorities charged his old lady two grand to ship him back to Des Moines.”

“I would have done it for fifteen-hundred,” I said. “U.S.”