23 March 2008

"Bad roads bring good people." – Mama Espinoza.

That's the most famous quote from the most famous woman of Baja California, a land of some pretty bad roads.

Ruta 40 (Route 40) in Argentina is a long, and in many places, at least by urban standards, bad road. By one measure it is 4,332 kilometers / 2,692 miles long, most of it across the steppes along the eastern flank of the Andes.

Ruta 40's vast expanses of emptiness get to many city people who travel it.

Photo by Stephanie Hackney

And if that doesn't get to them, the road surface will.

The legend of Ruta 40 is grounded in these two characteristics, vast emptiness and brutal road surface.

That is the common bond that unites the travelers of Ruta 40, the fear of being stranded, isolated and alone, in all that emptiness by the rough road.

By rural standards, however, Ruta 40 is a pretty decent gravel road.

Sure, it's got its shortcomings, but that's what gives it character.

Along with endless washboard it has its knife point cattle guards.

It has its hidden traps.

It has its random head size rocks in the middle of the road.

It has its sudden bottomless sand pits.

It has its rows of loose gravel that are often up to a meter (3.3 ft.) wide and/or so deep that I can't straddle them or they will grind off our bash plates that are 31.8 cm / 12.5 inches high.

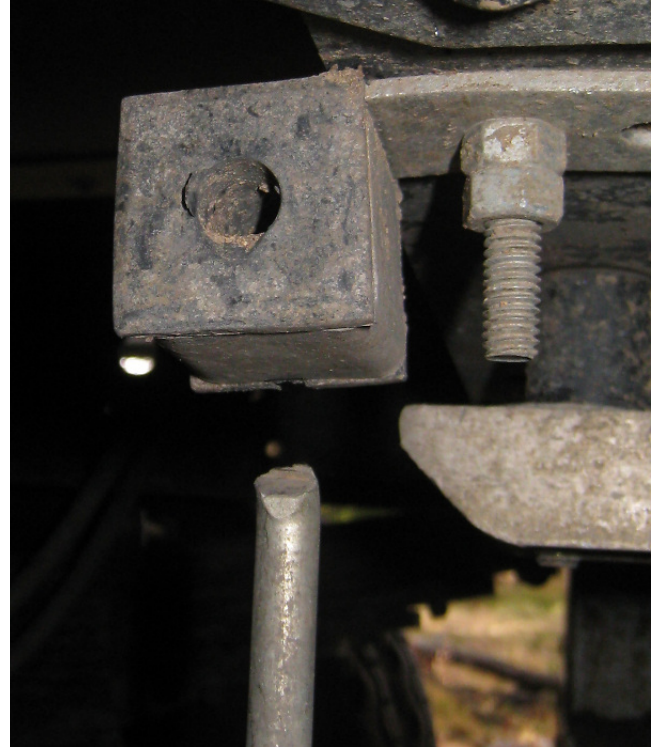And always, just when you've glanced at the scenery for a second or two, it has more embedded rocks.
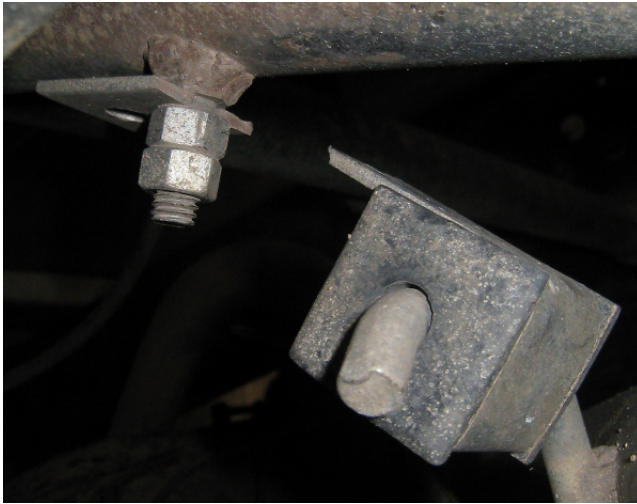
But all those things serve a purpose – to find the weak.

Ruta 40 seeks out the weak.

Ruta 40 breaks the weak.

Ruta 40 chews up the weak and spits them out.

Bad roads, by their very nature, cull the weak, the idiots, the unprepared, the uncommitted, the casual, the negative, the transients and the lost.

It takes perseverance, ingenuity, adaptability, commitment and a durable positive attitude to arrive on a bad road.

If you make it to the end of a bad road, you've not only earned it, you'll find others there like you.

Of course, not everyone appreciates the natural selection aspect of bad roads.

A few years back Mr. Kirchner, the governor of the Patagonian province of Santa Cruz, was elected president of Argentina. And, being a politician, he did what politicians do, and brought home the pork to his home province and region.

Ruta 40 is being paved.

All along the route, charming, character building bridges are coming down.

Photo by Stephanie Hackney

The rugged, rock studded Ruta 40 is going away and surveyors' stakes and wide, flat, billiard table smooth finish-grade are taking its place.

Photo by Stephanie Hackney

The asphalt is being laid, inexorably eating up the gravel, kilometer by kilometer.

Ruta 40, the legend, is dying.

The new asphalt's stripes mark the end of the line for one of the world's most famous bad roads.

Ruta 40 is being turned into a good road.

"Bad roads bring good people." Is the quote most people know, but it's only half the story.

The complete quote is, "Bad roads bring good people. Good roads bring all kinds of people."

All kinds of people are coming.

I, for one, prefer the bad roads - and the good people.

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Unless otherwise noted, all photos by Douglas Hackney

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Mama Espinoza is the matriarch of Mama Espinoza's restaurant in Baja California. One of the downsides of leaving North America for this travel was missing her 100th birthday celebration.

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I did not put the head sized rock in the road but I did remove it after I took the shot.

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All Ruta 40 photos were taken on a single, contiguous 120 kilometer / 75 mile stretch of the road, a section considered to be one of the best on the route. Because of the harsh mid-day light for most of the photos, they do not begin to do justice to Ruta 40's assets.

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The broken exhaust brackets and bush repair shots are from our Fuso.

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Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition. You can learn more about their travels at: http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index.htm