



Road Trip

Traveling & eating GF on Pan-American Highway

By Stephanie Renée dos Santos

According to Guinness World Records, the Pan-American Highway is the world's longest drivable road. It extends nearly 30,000 miles, with only one 87-mile jungle portion left uncharted.

The route begins in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, 62 miles south of the Arctic Circle, and parallels the Pacific Ocean through North, Central, and South America, with two ending spots -- Quellón, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina.

While it might sound daunting to travel Central and South America gluten-free, that's just what I did along with a companion.

Our dream trip began with one of those conversations you and your beloved have while lying awake at night, discussing what to do with your precious lives. My long-term partner and I talked over the details and imagined the people, places and foods, if we could cut loose from our Oregon skate park construction company for one year to drive, explore and surf the historic highway.

The trip remained a dream until one February when, with business in a lull, we decided the time was right. We packed our laptops, a handful of concrete trowels, our one-burner cook stove, camping gear, six surfboards and skateboards, yoga mats and our one-eyed dog, Max, into a Toyota truck and set off.

Mexico

I am gluten intolerant, and for the entire trip, I ate gluten-free.

Not knowing what to expect and assuming that gluten-free foods might be hard to find, we stocked our truck with rice, tomatoes, green peppers, apples, oranges, dried fruit, eggs, olive oil, cocoa powder, dried milk, coffee, parmesan cheese, salt and pepper, and water. But after what turned into 18 months of road travel through 11 countries, I found our friends in the Southern Hemisphere have exotic fruits and vegetables, abundant fresh seafood, beer, wines and many other food surprises for the gluten-free traveler.

Plus, there were roadside staples I could eat like *ceviche*, a fish and lime juice concoction, fruits, vegetables, cheeses and omelets.

To get to the part of the Pan-American Highway in Central America that we intended to cover, we drove south from Oregon to the California-Mexico border and began our journey. On paved highway we crossed into Mexico. It's a land of surrealistic cacti, harsh desert and deserted coconut-strewn beaches for camping and surfing.

To my surprise, I entered a culinary world rich in gluten-

free treats: corn tortillas baked fresh off circular grills the size of a tire, thick chocolate *mole* sauces, *ceviche* and *huevos rancheros* with *queso fresco*. I also found I had to be careful with tortillas, watching for wheat flour that is often mixed in with corn flour.

Sometimes restaurants would say a tortilla was a "corn tortilla," but it was not totally corn. Despite the abundance of other gluten-free foods, the one item I most expected to be safe turned out to be one of the bigger culinary problems I faced. I also found people would just tell me what I wanted to hear, "no trigo, no wheat flour," but in reality the tortilla was made with wheat flour.

What did I do? I asked but I also observed and then relied on what I saw. Pure corn tortillas are small and have a stone-ground, corn-milled look to them, whereas the hybrid ones are larger and noticeably doughy.

After sleeping under the full moon and stars (with our finger on the pepper-spray can at remote camp spots), surfing turquoise waves, and discovering rarely visited fishing villages south of Puerto Vallarta, we continued down the coast to the state of Oaxaca.

When torrential hot rains turned the road into mud, we found solace at a market with infinite varieties of mole sauces. In Oaxaca, we deviated from the historic highway and headed to the mountains in the Chiapas region, home to numerous colorful indigenous groups. As we approached Guatemala, we were forced to stay overnight in a curious transplanted Italian city, hidden deep in the mountains of Mexico, while we waited for the border crossing station to open.

Guatemala & El Salvador

In Guatemala, high terraced mountain fields hung above us as we drove through deep gorges, and old women with little black hats sat meditatively weaving on front porches using ancient looms. I felt like we had entered another time, another world.

But soon we headed back to the coast, to mangrove coastal forests, black-sand beaches and waves. We sampled the popular Mayan dish *jocón* before heading south again for El Salvador.

El Salvador was another beautiful tropical land, but it was somewhat spoiled by hustling *tramiteros*, expeditors who insist they are at the border to "help" you with formalities. They produced the most angst for us along the highway, along with the endless varieties of *topes*, which are speed bumps. But the everyday people were pleasant, and the food was delicious, with multiple versions of *pupusas*, the coun-

try's gluten-free and chewy equivalent to the tortilla. We took in the roadside ocean views but didn't stay long.

Honduras & Nicaragua

Going south, we traveled through Honduras. We enjoyed glasses of cooling *horchata de arroz* and *agua de jamaica* alongside plates of Honduras' favorite foods, *tamales de elote*, *nacatamales* and fried plantains.

At this point in the trip I realized that black beans served in restaurants posed a gluten problem. I had hoped black beans would be one of my safe staple foods when eating out as they are easy to find throughout the Americas. But midway through Central America I stopped eating them because I continually had difficulty figuring out when the beans contained gluten-based "*consumé de pollo*," chicken bouillon, or "*consumé de carne*," meat bouillon. But we had our one-burner stove, and I contented myself with cooking my own beans.

Pothole dodging became our new driving game as we entered dirt-poor northern Nicaragua, where the paved Pan-American Highway dwindled to a dirt track. Ragged children lined the roadside, making this stretch heart wrenching. But leaving the north, we descended into a landscape of volcanoes and massive canopied trees.

We camped for days under a forest of trees at a renowned surfing spot and had our first encounter with howler monkeys, which do really howl and are quite large. We continued to enjoy the abundant fresh seafood along the route: *pescada a la tipitapa*, *camarones al ajillo*, and *ceviche*. Now on Central American time, we spent the days idly before the historic highway called us back.

Costa Rica & Panama

In the heart of the tropics, Costa Rica, a surfer's paradise, returned us to the familiar organization of North America, with shopping malls, large roadside signage, and multinational chains. This is what makes Costa Rica American's first choice for retirement outside the U.S.A., plus the charm of the local people and the lush vegetation.

Here we had a chance to relax and recoup after half a year on the road. I cooked mostly for myself, feasting on green salads and fresh tropical fruits and omelets. But I also tried the local favorite dishes: *gallo pinto* and *sopa negra*. After many waves and much downtime, we again motored south.

Like happy jungle birds we continued into the wonderland of Central America, Panama, a multi-cultured country that boasts old vegetation-filled volcanoes with public mud baths, hot springs, pristine untouched jungle, empty beaches and waves. It is also home to a vibrant capital, Panama City, with funky painted buses and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. And in the outlying areas one can visit the Kuna Indians or take a boat trip to the Darién Gap, a jungle thick with intrigue.

Thanks to its famous canal, Panama has a mélange of food traditions: Asian, Mexican, Caribbean, vegetarian and locally famous dishes *sancocho* and *arroz con guandú*. Blessed with a warm tropical climate, the country is inundated with fresh fruit, including purple-skinned mangosteen with white translucent inner

wedges like an orange, and the uniquely flavored lechee fruit are sold by the bunch along the highway. They instantly became my new favorites to eat while driving.

On The Menu

Throughout Central and South America many traditional foods are naturally gluten-free. Here's a description of some. (But always inquire about ingredients as you would when eating out in the United States.)

MEXICO

Huevos rancheros:

A classic Mexican breakfast dish of fried eggs served on fried corn tortillas and topped with tomato-chile sauce, avocado, or guacamole, and farm fresh *queso fresco*, a crumbly cheese, served with corn tortillas and refried beans.

GUATEMALA

Jocón: Also called *pollo en jocón*, made of chicken simmered in a green sauce made of tomatillos and cilantro, thickened with ground sesame and pumpkin seeds and accompanied by corn tortillas.

EL SALVADOR

Pupusas: A mixture of corn flour and warm water, the country's chewy equivalent to the tortilla. Multiple variations exist: *de queso* filled with grated cheese; *quesillo*, *queso fresco* filled with mozzarella, Swiss cheese or a combination sometimes with minced green chile; *de chicharrones* stuffed with fried chopped pork and a little tomato sauce; *de frijoles refritos* filled with refried beans.

HONDURAS

Tamales de elote:

A favorite breakfast and dinner food throughout Central America made of corn masa that is steamed or boiled in a leaf wrapper, filled with combinations of meat, cheese, fruits, vegetables,

chilies, and fresh seasonings.

Fried plantains:

A staple fruit that has sustained cultures around the globe for thousands of years. It looks like a banana but is less sweet and starchier. Plantains are normally cooked, mashed, halved, or cut into round pieces and fried in oil, topped with sugar or salt or other spices.

NICARAGUA

Pescada a la tipitapa:

Whole red snapper. Ask for it "*grelhado*," grilled, not "*empanada*," which is fish breaded in wheat flour and fried in oil or butter.

COSTA RICA

(Double check that both these dishes don't have gluten-based bouillon added.)

Gallo pinto: A classic breakfast food made with rice and, often, red beans and onion, garlic, and/or bell pepper. It contains more rice than beans. It is sold at restaurants called "*sodas*," often with scrambled or fried eggs and sour cream. *Gallo pinto* means spotted rooster in Spanish and derives its name from the multi-colored or speckled appearance that results from cooking the ingredients together.

Sopa negra:

A black bean soup made with onions, coriander, and

hard-boiled eggs.

PANAMA

Sancocho: A soup that is Panama's national and most popular side dish. It contains a root called *namé*, chicken pieces, and vegetables, spiced with *culandro*, an herb similar to cilantro, and served with rice.

ECUADOR

Patacones: Thick chunks of plantain, fried, bashed with a stone, fried again and served with salt.

Chifles: Thin deep-fried slices of plantain, like a potato chip.

PERU

Ceviche: My favorite ceviche throughout the Americas, made of local white fish mixed with onion, tomato, lots of lime juice, and topped with hard corn pieces much like "corn nuts" all deliciously placed on a bead of edible seaweed.

CHILE

Cazuela de ave:

Soup made with fresh broth stock, a piece of chicken or *vacuno*, beef, half a corn cob and peeled potatoes. It is a mild flavored soup found throughout the country.

ARGENTINA

Matte: A green leafed tea. It is a good source of magnesium and produces a caffeine-like rush. Traditionally drunk from a gourd with a *matte* straw.

Before you go

The US Bureau of Consular Affairs provides information for U.S. citizens traveling abroad on its website, travel.state.gov/travel/travel_1744.html.

Before traveling along the Pan-American Highway, check for details about necessary travel documents and safety and security information for individual countries on the route.

In addition, the bureau advises U.S. citizens who are traveling to a foreign country to sign up for its free Smart Traveler Enrollment Program. The program allows you to enter information about your upcoming trip abroad so that the Department of State can better assist you in an emergency. For more information, go to step.state.gov/step/.

As all Pan-American Highway travelers must, we placed our vehicle in a shipping container at the Port of Panama when we reached the non-navigable stretch of jungle called the Darién Gap. With our dog, we then boarded a flight to South America.

South America

We soared into Ecuador, skipping the Pan-American Highway section in Colombia.

In Ecuador, it took 10 days to retrieve our truck from Guayaquil's port customs. I consoled myself with fresh sucos, juices and typical dishes *maduro con queso* and *bolones de verde*. The truck liberated, we headed to the seaside. At the coast we found colorful fishing villages and new friendships.

We then cruised down the desert coast into Peru, passing through numerous small fishing villages where we found remnants of ancient cultures, the Chan Chan and Moche, and their adobe ruins backed by the high Andes and mighty Amazon.

Life is vibrant and diverse in Peru. I found my favorite *ceviche* here and sweet *humitas*. After many years of not drinking beer I drank my first cold glass of corn-based beer, called *chicha*. Music filled the air and people were curious to meet you and engage in conversations.

Miles and miles of dry land and dunes stretch along the Pacific from Ecuador to Chile's Atacama Desert, the world's driest and largest. Ancient hieroglyphics dotted hills along the highway as we traveled a coastline devoid of human inhabitants but teeming with bird life. Then, slowly, scrub brush and cacti appeared, followed by a Mediterranean-like landscape, rich in grapevines and silver-leaved olive and citrus trees.

Central Chile is the breadbasket of the country, offering homemade cheeses, tasty wines, farm-fresh eggs, *cazuela de ave* soups and *cochayuyo*, kelp salads. With 6,213 miles of coastline, the Andes Mountains, steaming volcanoes, wild fuchsia canyons, waterfalls, hot

springs and exotic agave flowers, Chile's natural wonders seem endless, as are the camping and surfing opportunities.

Long-term friendships were developed on this leg of the trip, visiting over plates of grilled salmon and hearty French fries while sipping divine red wine late into the night. Grocery stores carry gluten-free cornmeal cookies that work well for travel snacks and day hikes.

We continued south in Chile to the island of Chiloé, a single-deck ferry ride away from the mainland and rumored home to *brujos*, witches and their caves.

What we found were cozy woolen hand-woven hats and ponchos, Jurassic foliage, seaweed collectors and some of the best camping in the world. The island houses a UNESCO World Heritage site of 16th century wooden cathedrals, and offers views of the snow-capped Andes.

It is one of the rainiest places on earth, with mystical mists rolling in and out like ocean tides. We loved Chile, and had many miles ahead of us to reach the Pan-American Highway's end. But an email from a seriously ill friend in Argentina took us off the highway for a visit to central coastal Argentina.

End of the road

We traversed an Andean pass, where we filled our 5-gallon jug with ancient glacial water and entered Argentina, land of the barbecue and *matte*. There we lived on European-style rich cheeses, chocolate, omelets, unadulterated fresh sausages and more meat than I would have liked, accompanied by bottles of delicious wines, which were cheaper than a U.S. latte. Italian-style espresso and coffee are available in most towns, as are handmade ice creams, sorbets and chocolate treats. In general, people in Argentina are helpful with gluten issues and will assist you in finding something you can eat.

We reached our friend's ranch, called a *fazenda*, and shared our stories from the road. Soon we unexpectedly had to return to our business in Oregon, and that brought an end to our epic adventure.

It was the trip of a lifetime, and I would encourage readers to visit this part of the globe knowing food will not be an insurmountable problem. With patience and fortitude, you can stay healthy and gluten-free throughout the Americas.

Stephanie Renée dos Santos is a freelance writer who now lives Garopaba, Brazil. She has been gluten free for 12 years. Also a fiction writer, she is currently working on her first historical novel.

Gluten-Free Casein-Free All-Natural Candy Bars



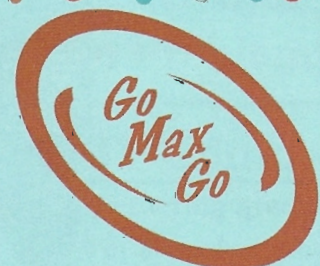
Coconut and almonds in a
rice-milk chocolatey coating



Creamy peanut butter in a
rice-milk chocolatey coating



Crisped rice in a
rice-milk chocolatey coating



FOODS

Candy Bar Evolution!

Available in Stores Coast to Coast

Find locations at:

www.gomaxgofoods.com