

## Jim Huff's Honeymoon Adventure

*This first-person account written by Jim appeared in the March 2008 edition of the "Alfanatic" and is certainly worth repeating here. Jim is a true Alfista.*



*Scan of the original Alfanatic front page photo. Please excuse the poor quality.*

June 1961, I traded in my 6-month-old VW for a new Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider (normale) at the now defunct World Cars Ltd. Dealership in Highland Park, Illinois. Just out of college, I asked my father, Andrew, to sign the note and later transfer the vehicle to me. At the same time, marriage plans were developing which culminated in our wedding, October 21st of that year. Naturally, a honeymoon was indicated. Not too long out of college, and working as Export Sales Manager at a machinery company in Chicago at the time, I planned to use the two weeks of vacation available to me and another \$200 of savings (wow!) to dedicate to the honeymoon. Maria and I decided, "why not Mexico?"

And so on that following Monday morning after the wedding, we packed two suitcases, stuffed them into the fairly generous trunk of the Spider and headed south, arriving in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, on Wednesday of that week. Driving onward, our first evening in Mexico was at the Fonda Santa Rosa in Monterrey, (very much like Milwaukee) the beer capital of Mexico (Carta Blanca cerveza) plus much heavy industry.

Dinner that evening was "Cabrito al Carbón" which is barbecued kid with lots of salsa (actually, quite delicious). The recent days' travel in the Alfa was uneventful and most of the time on the open roads, as we limited ourselves to 80-90 MPH. With only the standard 4-speed transmission and the 1300 cc engine, revs were constantly up there — 5,000 to 6,000 rpm—but the little Alfa ran flawlessly and handled beautifully on those revolutionary (for that era) Pirelli Cinturato tires.

Traveling now in Mexico, I was a bit nervous about using the low octane Pemex gasoline. Pemex

was nationalized by the Mexican government in 1938 and they were. having great difficulty keeping up with the rest of the industrialized world. As a result, most gas available was quite low octane (mind you, no knock sensor to electronically retard spark in those days). Whenever available, we chose the “super grade” Gasolmex which was 89 octane! But the little Alfa seemed to run just fine on whatever gas we could purchase. The next evening we stopped in San Luis Potosi, approximately 100 miles north of Mexico City, Distrito Federal. S.L.P. was a nice town with interesting local cuisines (e.g., enchiladas potosinas).

On Friday of week #1, we arrived at the capital, Mexico City, D.F. With no reservations (no computers nor Orbitz in those days), we just trusted our luck and enjoyed the freedom and flexibility. However, arriving in that metropolis we were apprehensive about finding affordable and decent lodging in the clamor of a large, foreign city. No sweat. For \$4.00 a day we secured a beautiful room at the Hotel Polanco on Calle Edgar Poe No. 17, just one block from the wide and beautiful Paseo de la Reforma (modeled after the layout in Paris) in a posh, shady, residential area. That region called “Colonia Polanco” is still one of the most fashionable areas in Mexico City. Moreover, we were within walking distance of Chapultepec Park, a very impressive park containing the palace of former emperor Maximilian who ruled for the French but was later executed by the victorious Mexican army during their Revolution. Did you know that the Mariachi style of typical Mexican music developed during the French occupation? These musical singing bands entertained primarily at weddings. The name of wedding in French is “marriage” (marr-ee-ahzh), and thus the name became a Spanish corruption of the French pronunciation.

The capital is nowadays the largest Spanish-speaking city in the world estimated at 24 to 30 million people (number two is Los Angeles, California!) and was (still is) a very cosmopolitan city with lots of history and interesting sights such as immense artifacts of the Aztec past, and possesses many international-quality dining spots and world class entertainment including Flamenco dancing from Spain. We tried to take in as much as possible, including the Ballet Foclórico at the Palacio de Bellas Artes and the Zona Rosa, the upscale “Pink Zone” of fine restaurants, stores, and hotels). Driving in traffic was exciting, to say the least. Woe unto the timid, especially with few traffic lights, and lots of “glorietas” (large traffic circles now becoming fashionable in the U.S.) and lots of “Mexican stop signs” called “topes” which are a series of bump strips in the road which slow traffic under penalty of tearing out your undercarriage. Traffic, in general, was reminiscent of Italy, but with a feeling that Italian drivers were a bit higher caliber of talent (better cars, too) but, still equally daring. In Spanish, the translation of their saying was “he who hesitates is lost”—their rationale for not being too timid in the traffic circles or at various stops.

Meanwhile, during the entire trip I either parked the Alfa in private paid parking areas or on the street. In that era, we didn't have too much concern with anybody just tearing through the canvas top with a knife to take whatever was in sight, or worse, stealing the vehicle. How blissful those days were. I wouldn't even do that now in certain areas of our “fair city.” Also, amazingly, Alfa Romeo was not an entirely unfamiliar name in Mexico, with several new car dealerships and some Alfas visible on the streets and highways. And no, not one problem so far with any of the mechanicals of that era, including “Father Lucas!” Lucas would seek his revenge several years later during several Chicago winters.

Next, Maria and I thought “why not a side trip while we’re here?” And so we decided to take off for Acapulco one afternoon since it was “only” 120 miles south through the state of Guerrero. Proceeding slowly at first, we jaunted up to Taxco and looked at native silver crafts. Taxco is a colonial town off the main highway, up in the hills. The roads were devised for the Spider, with wonderful twisting asphalt connecting Taxco to the main highway. That Alfa was poetry in motion. Unfortunately I had to finally slow down a bit as Maria was getting nauseated from a ride better than any that Great America had to offer!

We had been previously warned “don't drive at night in Mexico” due to open range, maybe bandidos, etc. Dismissing this thought we left Taxco at about 6:00 p.m. (This was late October and the sun was setting earlier.) We continued south towards Acapulco—a twisting descent all the way to the coast, with the climate changing from cool high plateau to subtropical. We were starting to miss that cool, crisp air of Mexico City (about 7,300 feet altitude surrounded by 12,000 ft. volcanoes) as the humidity and temperature crept up. Now, passing through Chilpancingo at 4,500 feet, we were getting close to Acapulco, with the Alfa purring at “modest” 90 mph. The area was quite dark as I asked Maria, “What's that shadow in the middle of the road?” It was a horse just standing there, which resulted in a severe test of the Alfa’s large brakes. We came within two feet of hitting that animal! Now we knew why it was risky to drive at night, especially at those speeds.

Arriving in Acapulco around midnight with the tropical heat bothering us, we explored the city still much alive with people, bars, hotels, and lights all over, but after two hours driving around, we decided to head back to Mexico City at about 2 a.m. On our way back, passing through Chilpancingo at 4:00 a.m., we noted the same outdoor party still going on from the prior evening! Arriving now back in the capital at 7:00 a.m., we were understandably a bit groggy from our various explorations the previous day and evening.

On the Friday of our second week, we turned back north, leaving Mexico City at 10 in the morning. I had to be back to work in Chicago that following Monday and we were over 2,000 miles from home. After various stops for gas, food, etc., we finally reached the border at Laredo, Texas at 10 p.m. that evening, a distance traveled of 762 miles in 12 hours (less stops) for an average speed of 62 mph. The Alfa was so easy to drive that amazingly I wasn't tired at all! When in motion, except through towns, we cruised at 90 mph (about 5000 RPM in 4th gear). At night, during that first leg back to the border, I had many excellent reflex-conditioning tests, such as driving briskly in light, mountain fog on the twisting roads of Mex. Hwy 57, which varied from white concrete to black asphalt and mostly lacking a painted white centerline. Thus, it was a constant guessing game as to which way the road might veer! The responsive Alfa made this task relatively easy and enjoyable.

Leaving Laredo, Texas, with two more days to arrive in Chicago, we spent Saturday night in the Dallas area after a relatively more “relaxed” 400 miles’ distance. But now Sunday morning, with that last leg of approximately 1,000 miles still remaining, and with thoughts of returning to work the next morning in Chicago, we weren’t too concerned since that Alfa just wanted to run. And without serious concerns about speed traps or radar in those days, we kicked the throttle down and sped on our way. However, as nighttime approached, fatigue was beginning to set in around Springfield, Illinois. But with much black coffee, occasionally slapping the face for a wakeup

“jolt,” and with the flawless performance of the Alfa, we did make it back to Chicago before starting time that Monday morning. But, since we really didn't have much rest, I confess that I just called in and said I'd be there Tuesday.

Nowadays, I wouldn't dream of making such an ambitious trip for a variety of reasons. One might be the much higher narco-traffic crime in Mexico. The city of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, has gone through 6 police chiefs in the past year assassinated by narco-traffickers. The Mexican Federal Police have gone in to “disarm” local police forces such as in Tijuana since their corruption can no longer be trusted. That highway through the state of Guerrero to Acapulco is a very high crime area. The number of journalists murdered in Mexico is second only to Iraq! You get the picture. But for Mexico aficionados there are still lots of safe, beautiful tourist places to visit, and their new patriotic president Calderon is a good man who is intent on bringing some real progress to Mexico. *(Editor's note: Felipe Calderon served as president 2006-2012. By some measures things didn't go all that well during his term.)*

Looking back to nearly 50 years ago, that was a really great trip! I'm glad we didn't wait till retirement to do that, because we never would have in this era. By the way, I still have a Giulietta—now a 1962 Spider—and the same wife! *(Jim Sold his Giulietta in Fall of 2013.)*

¡VIVA MÉXICO!      ¡VIVA ALFA ROMEO!

Jim Huff