Chapter 13: Not Another Hostage Situation

People always want to know the scariest thing that's happened to me while traveling. Not all my wild stories involve dating or women. Plenty of mishaps happened on our guys trips abroad. Those hostage situations remind me of when my friend was almost taken hostage in Cancún, Mexico.

It started as a pretty normal trip. We spent most of our time enjoying the beach and sightseeing. One day we hired a driver to take us around. He was nice and offered to arrange a trip to see the pyramids at Chichén Itzá. We thought this was a better option than the big group tours, which left early in the morning.

The guy arrived at the agreed time with a very questionable van. I remember thinking, Hmmmm, not what I was expecting. My five friends and I looked at each other as if to say, I guess we're doing this. We climbed in and started our two-hour journey. About an hour in, something unexpected happened: the van broke down. Can't say it was a huge surprise. The fact that it made it an hour was a tiny miracle.

The driver told the one friend who speaks Spanish that something had overheated and we had to wait. We were all still pretty lighthearted, making jokes and laughing it off. After a short time, he gave the go-ahead and we continued. We did this stop-start dance a few more times before arriving, which turned a two-hour drive into closer to three. Our spirits were still high. We knew it wasn't really under his control, and we eventually made it.

While we enjoyed the pyramids, he told us he'd asked someone to bring a different vehicle and promised it would arrive before we finished sightseeing. We enjoyed exploring, and when it was time, we headed back to the meeting spot. I looked over and thought, huh, this new van looks exactly like the other one. Twins? That wasn't the case. It was the same van. At this point, we were starting to get a little concerned.

The group huddled up, staring at the questionable van. Should we go talk to the big tour groups? Maybe we could get on a bus and have them take us back. A breakdown on the way home would be sketchy since it was dusk and getting dark. We agreed to go with him, since none of us had the cash to pay him for the trip there.

Five minutes into the trip back, the van broke down again. It was almost comical how fast it happened. We all looked at each other like, Fuckkkk, this is bad. We continued this start-stop every ten minutes or so. By now it was night. Every abrupt stop escalated the tension inside the van. Six foreigners stuck on the side of the road in Cancún is a recipe for disaster.

On our third or fourth takeoff, we got another fun surprise: a flat tire. I let out an uncomfortable laugh, like, sureeee, let's add this to the list of things going wrong. You'd think he'd have a spare tire, but that would be too logical. He got on the phone and told us someone would come pick us up.

About an hour went by, and then a car appeared. Wait, it's a car, and we're six grown men plus the driver. How is this going to work? I still can't understand what happened next. After the car arrived, the driver got out. Then another person, and another. The last was a woman with a young baby in her arms. Apparently he'd sent for his entire family to come. I found it hilarious that a man would bring his whole family to the middle of nowhere. I wasn't worried about them. It was us or them.

Now that we had transportation, there was the problem of fitting all of us into a four-door car. We came up with a seating arrangement that Tetrised us inside. One friend and I had to sit back to back on another friend's lap. I don't even do tandem motos in Rio, so you can imagine my expression when this idea was pitched. We started the final leg home.

Once we arrived, I was exhausted. I asked the guys to take care of paying the driver and went to my room. The rest of the story is what I was told happened. On the way home, we'd agreed we weren't going to pay full price. Why should we? If this had been in America, we might have been refunded. But this wasn't the USA. The driver demanded the full amount, which none of us had in cash. Then a third car showed up after we were already home. It was basically the enforcer, there to make sure the money got collected. It took some of the guys to an ATM, and it was strongly implied that one of us, [S], would "stay" with the driver in the meantime.

We paid the full amount. A couple of the guys even got scammed at the ATM and were charged extra.

I actually regret missing this altercation. I'm told the third car had serious movie-gangster energy. What's wild about that day is that, apparently, there had been a shooting. Someone on a jet ski had done a drive-by at the beach. We didn't know it at the time, but maybe our driver was actually looking out for us.