

## Where the Wall Worked

By SAM QUINONES

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**Tijuanans shrug at Donald Trump's proposed wall—because they already have two. And, for the most part, they've done the city some good.**



**TIJUANA, Mexico—In 1972, a 15-year-old named Raul** stepped off a bus at a depot near Coahuila Street, in the red-light district of Tijuana. Coming from an isolated village in the farming state of Michoacán, Raul had never heard so much noise, nor seen so many people in one place. He spent the next day afraid to leave the bus depot, until a janitor shooed him away.

Coahuila, teeming with people, was a legendary neighborhood a few blocks from the U.S.-Mexico border. Americans came here to spend money in the all-night clubs on booze and sex. By the time Raul arrived, it had also grown into a kind of Ellis Island for would-be migrants—a landing spot for poor folks from across Mexico who arrived on buses like his by the hundreds every day, headed, they hoped, to new and better lives in the United States. They rented cheap rooms in the hooker hotels, as did the smugglers they paid to herd them through a border of barbed wire or porous chain-link fence. Raul had hoped to cross the border and pick crops in California's Central Valley. But his uncles, whom he hadn't seen for years, had found work as immigrant smugglers. Instead of crossing into California, Raul stayed in Tijuana, and grew into the family business.

The immigrant-smuggling business was quintessential Tijuana in the 1970s and '80s: It was a seat-of-the-pants endeavor that young men, rural transplants, entered easily by learning from others, employing mostly their wits and bravado. In Mexico, they were known as *polleros* (chicken herders), and they were the kings of Tijuana, rolling in dollars and filling the cantinas after every trip. “So, I stayed, earning \$100 or \$200 a day as a pollero’s helper,” Raul told me when I met him in Tijuana a few months ago. “I went from helper to pollero, driving people across.”

All that changed beginning in the early 1990s, when U.S. authorities, responding to the chaos and open flouting of the law at the border, built a wall—followed by another over the next decade. The first, made of Vietnam War-era steel landing pads, begins in the waves of the Pacific Ocean and stretches east for 14 miles along hilly terrain that sidles against a string of working-class neighborhoods, the Tijuana airport and the Otay Mesa factory zone, stopping only when it meets the mountain known as Nido de las Águilas (Eagles’ Nest), on Tijuana’s eastern edge. The second, parallel barrier, made of fencing and prison-like stanchions, spans several miles east and west on either side of the legal crossing point at San Ysidro. Along with these structures came additional surveillance such as buried sensors and poles with cameras peering in every direction.

Today, nothing so embodies the tense relations between the United States and Mexico as President Donald Trump’s promise to build a wall along much of the 2,000-mile border between the two countries. Trump has spoken of a “big, beautiful” border barrier since his days as a candidate and, earlier this year, took a [trip](#) to San Diego to view prototypes. Many Americans and Mexicans alike have greeted the idea with disdain. A wall would be expensive ([\\$18 billion](#), by the administration’s own estimation); redundant (some 700 miles of wall and fencing already exist); and, to some Mexicans, offensive. The leftist politician Andrés Manuel López Obrador has described the impulse behind the would-be structure as “[neo-fascist](#)”; he is [leading](#) in the polls to become Mexico’s next president.

Tijuanans, though, tend to view the idea of yet another wall with indifference. “We already have two walls. I’m not sure what another one would do,” says Miguel Marshall, a young entrepreneur in the city.

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Tijuana has in many ways been a success story since the 1990s—and at least some of that success owes to the border walls. Over the years, the walls, along with bulked-up security, have imposed order on a chaotic border, where extortion, rape and robbery had been common. More broadly, the walls were the first nudge that forced the city to focus inward and wean itself, over many years, from its dependence on easy money from elsewhere. Eight former polleros I spoke with for this story, including Raul, told me that after the walls went up, their smuggling business began to taper off; they no longer facilitate illegal crossings. (Illegal immigrant apprehensions at the southwest border overall have dropped by more than 70

percent in that time, from well north of 1 million annually in the late 1990s to about 300,000 in the 2017 fiscal year.) Meanwhile, though for different reasons, U.S. tourism to Tijuana slowed substantially.

Over the past 24 years, including a decade living in Mexico City, I have made dozens of trips to Tijuana and watched the city slowly mature from a kind of wild west dependence on migrant-smuggling and American tourism to a more self-contained and economically viable metropolis. I grew fascinated by the emerging city that few in the United States seemed to recognize—a place with burgeoning opera and classical music scenes and a distinctive and high-quality cuisine known as Baja Med. In some areas, older buildings are being redeveloped and in-filled. Locals have created boutiques, clothing lines, microbreweries, small but striving tech and film industries, art galleries and more—all of which serve Tijuana's middle class and a new cohort of rambunctious, globally aware hipsters who have grown up since the mid-1990s. Bus depots that once deposited tourists or prospective migrants near the border daily have closed. The old hooker hotels are fading, and lofts and artist spaces have sprouted up. Today, Tijuana's economy is among the most robust in Mexico.

Tijuana continues to face its share of troubles. Drug trade-related murders have recently spiked, and as the United States sends undocumented immigrants back to Mexico, new flophouses have cropped up in Tijuana for deportees. Nor have illegal border crossings to the United States gone away, as has been made clear by the family-separation crisis at the U.S. border in recent weeks. But the time I've spent in Tijuana suggests that the walls at least were the first jolt in a citywide reinvention that has been largely positive. As the United States and Mexico face the prospect of a tougher border—whether Trump gets his wall or not—in Tijuana, at least, locals have stopped looking north quite so much as they once did.

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**Long before the walls went up**, Tijuana was a village along a river, across the borderline from San Diego, dependent on the United States even for electricity. Easy money flowed, but it was American dollars, not pesos, that fueled commerce for much of the 20th century. Los Angelenos looking to avoid U.S. prohibitions on alcohol and gambling in the 1920s and '30s, and later Hollywood partiers looking to have a good time, headed south over the border. In the following decades, the Avenida Revolución tourist strip developed into a place for Americans to get drunk and lose their inhibitions. For countless foreign visitors, this city was their idea of "Mexico"; people in the rest of the country, though, tended to view the town as barely Mexican.

**Looking Inward** In recent years, businesses in Tijuana have increasingly catered to a local clientele, and less to the American tourists who long flooded the city. | Guillermo Arias for Politico Magazine

As Mexico's economy stumbled through the 1970s, Tijuana also emerged as a crossing point for illegal immigrants who hoped to tap the massive job markets in Southern California and the agricultural Central Valley. Its city limits began to leap east and south, unplanned and chaotic, filling with the poor from the country's blighted rural interior. Back home, wherever they had come from, elites tended to blunt access to economic opportunity. But Tijuana, as it grew from a dusty village to a busy outpost of sin, was a blank slate where people could start small businesses and work their way into the middle class. Mexico's rural poor collectively injected huge amounts of money and energy into the city's economy.

The migrants seeking to cross into the United States supported a whole cottage industry of suppliers near the border selling them what they needed for the trip. According to the polleros I spoke with, one crossing area that was legendary became known as Las Canelas—The Cinnamons—for a spiced drink with a touch of alcohol to keep crossers warm at night. At Las Canelas, a marketplace materialized every afternoon as migrants congregated before crossing, and vendors came to sell them tacos, coffee, maps, shoes, coats, tampons, diapers and more. All this was abetted by the fact that, for decades, the border was simply a line that people crossed at will. By the 1980s, officials added a chain-link fence here and there, or strands of barbed wire, but both were easily breached. At times, Raul told me, Border Patrol officers had to push Las Canelas south—the vendors had unwittingly nudged into U.S. territory. The market continued through each night, he says, until, a few hours before dawn, when vendors would strike their stands. They would be back the next afternoon.

Officially, Tijuana grew from roughly 290,000 people in 1970 to close to 1 million by the 1990s. But even those figures seem conservative, given the vast river of people passing through the city during these decades, stopping for days or months before moving on. Over that time, the migrant-smuggling industry became a volume business; former polleros tell me they routinely herded groups of 20, 50, 70 people across the borderline, then crowded them into vans and trucks waiting a few hundred yards north that took them to Los Angeles and beyond, with each migrant paying a fee of a few hundred dollars.

Meanwhile, many people came to Tijuana intending to cross but stayed. They discovered new businesses they had never imagined back home. They sold hardware and building supplies to people, like them, who came and stayed. Others found work selling velvet paintings, serapes, plaster Mickey Mouse statues, tequila—and sex—to the Americans flowing south onto the Avenida Revolución every weekend. The money that came from crossing people or selling trinkets to Americans added little to the city's own productivity or entrepreneurialism, however. Tijuana was, primarily, a way station.

In 1986, Congress responded to the chaotic flow of migrants by passing the [Immigration Reform and Control Act](#), giving amnesty to some 3 million undocumented immigrants in the United States and enacting punishment for employers who hired undocumented workers. But the migrants continued to come;

American employers continued to hire them with virtual impunity; and the Mexican economy continued to be unable to channel the energies of its young working classes. By the mid-1990s, undocumented immigrants in the United States would number some [5 million](#)—equal to the number before IRCA.

The cost of crossing, migrants tell me, eventually skyrocketed to between \$6,000 and \$14,000 per person—perhaps the best measurement of how the border closed.

The administrations of Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton responded to the surge with a number of measures meant to keep out illegal migrants in the first place. They included the first wall on the California-Mexico border—the 14-mile steel structure—which the Border Patrol had completed by late 1993. In 1994 came “Operation Gatekeeper,” a federal initiative committing more Border Patrol resources to the San Diego area. That same year, California voters passed Proposition 187, which denied government services to those in the country illegally. A court later overturned the measure, but it was nonetheless a sign of American voters’ sentiments.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, forced heightened border security. The lines in Tijuana to cross legally into the United States grew to be hours long. The wall had already made it harder for Mexicans to jump the border northward; now the crossing was a hassle for American tourists as well, and their numbers began to dwindle.

But illegal immigration to the United States was still on the rise. So, in subsequent years, a second fence, roughly 100 yards into the U.S. interior, was constructed; it was largely completed by 2005. Around that same time, through a combination of federal and congressional action, the Border Patrol added more agents, sensors, lighting, cameras and other surveillance. Border Patrol apprehensions in San Diego fell from more than half a million in 1994 to [138,000](#) a decade later—and to just 26,000 last year. Over time, trafficking was no longer a game for independent operators; increasingly they had to leave the trade or join larger groups who could afford to pay Mexican authorities for protection or for more elaborate ways of smuggling individual immigrants across. Many polleros left the trade. Those who remained raised their prices. The mighty flows of migrants north from Tijuana ebbed. Las Canelas faded.

Then, from 2008 to 2010, savage drug-cartel violence erupted in a fight over territory between the reigning Tijuana cartel and its rivals. For a time, that, and the effects of the recession, all but extinguished the foreign tourism that had sustained much of the town since its birth. The Avenida Revolución tourist strip, which once buzzed with dollars and drunk Marines, was largely abandoned. The cost of crossing, migrants tell me, eventually skyrocketed to between \$6,000 and \$14,000 per person—perhaps the best measurement of how the border closed. Tijuana was left without the rivers of money from the south and north from which it had long lived.

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**At the same time**, a class of young entrepreneurs, bilingual and eager to mix with the world, was quietly emerging from Tijuana's middle class. Their parents had come in the 1970s and found work as vendors or, later, accountants in assembly plants, sacrificing so that their children could attend college and find more opportunity in the world.

Among them was Miguel Marshall. Marshall, 31, began his business career selling goods to American tourists on Avenida Revolución—rhinestone-studded T-shirts that he bought from Chinese and Israeli merchants in the Fashion District of Los Angeles. But as American tourism declined and the drug violence began to subside in 2011, a small hive of hipster bars and restaurants formed at Avenida Revolución and Sixth Street, and young artists crept onto the wasteland of Revolución, painting murals and provocative statements on the storefront shutters. Marshall, and other entrepreneurs of his generation, were “thirsty for a sense of being a Tijuana, people from a city that’s typically not recognized,” he says. Without the traditional, easier ways of doing business, he continues, “I had to become more creative, think of other ways to make money. Then we saw the economics: abandoned buildings, cheap rent. It was easy to do something that looks nice cheaply.”

**TJ Locals** Miguel Marshall, left, renovates old Tijuana buildings into co-working spaces, galleries and more. Cab driver Martin Gutierrez, right, is one of the city's many deportees. | Guillermo Arias for Politico Magazine

Soon they were transforming classic old Tijuana. Curio shops that once sold switchblades, velvet paintings and naked-lady playing cards to Americans became boutiques displaying fashions from local designers. Old taco shops became gourmet taco stands. Hotel Caesar's, which houses the restaurant where the Caesar salad was famously invented, has remodeled and now features Baja-Med cuisine of grilled octopus, French onion soup and tamarind margaritas. The corridors—*pasajes*—that in Tijuana's tourist heyday housed kitschy art galleries for Americans were abandoned for many years. They have now been reborn as gathering places for Tijuana. The main corridor—Pasaje Rodriguez—is thick with cafés with young kids smoking and playing guitar, a bookstore and funky galleries, which come and go quickly amid walls painted with the visages of revolutionary Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis.

Today, Tijuana's population is more than 1.6 million; its unemployment hovers around **2 percent** (compared with a national average of about **3.5 percent**); and the city is enjoying a **construction boom**. It has also deepened its economic ties with San Diego, which is connected to the Tijuana airport by a walkway. Residents of each city attend concerts and sporting events in the other. At the port of entry in San Ysidro, part of the city of San Diego, the Las Americas Premium Outlets bustle with shoppers, many of whom cross legally from Tijuana. Tijuana pharmacies and hospitals survive largely off Americans coming south for cheaper medication or

procedures. Meanwhile, San Ysidro remains the **busiest** land border crossing in the world—for legal migrants.

Of course, Tijuana's growth is the result of more than just the city's new entrepreneurial spirit. Assembly plants—making televisions, car parts and more for the U.S. market—have long employed much of the city's working class. And Mexico's economy, with a rising middle class, has grown overall in recent years, particularly in the industrial north, at least in part due to the North American Free Trade Agreement. What's more, large parts of Tijuana remain shantytowns, with residents who might be surprised to hear that the city is changing at all.

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But in places like Pasaje Rodriguez, there is a palpable sense of reinvigoration, with businesses that serve a local clientele. A block away, the Sara building once housed a discount-clothing emporium. On the ground floor now is Baristi, a café of dark rough-cut wood offering coffee, wine and Wi-Fi. A floor above is a co-working space, and above that is a terrace reception area where Victor Rangel often works. Rangel, now 37, told me he was deported from the United States when he was 25, in the middle of studying to be a chef. After years of traipsing around Mexico, he has settled in Tijuana.

“We do have bars for gringos, but it's started to die down,” Rangel says. “Now it's more like bars and cocktails directed at the bicultural Tijuana kids.”

Marshall, meanwhile, started a co-working space called Hub Stn, in one of the very bus stations that used to transport thousands of Americans to Tijuana every weekend. When that was bought and razed for a movie theater, he turned to other properties. He has renovated a gas station—Estación Federal—near the borderline into a mix of apartments, co-working space, a café and offices that house an art gallery and more. Marshall also recently purchased one of the old hardware stores that sold so much of what built Tijuana for decades, and he is redeveloping that into a mix of lofts and retail.

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**Tijuana's border walls haven't been all good.** The city's inward turn has left behind many who devoted their youth to developing skills the informal smuggling economy demanded. Ex-polleros who did not die of murder or cirrhosis of the liver did a generally poor job of saving for their old age. Some are now taxi drivers, security guards or supermarket baggers; Raul caretakes vacant land near the coast owned by wealthy people who want it protected from squatters. It's humbling work for men who ruled Tijuana back when it seemed the river of migrants would never end.

**Bridging the Divide** San Diego, California, seen above in the distance, has recently deepened economic ties with Tijuana, shown in foreground. | Getty Images

Despite enormous U.S. investment in border security, the flow of drugs, particularly heroin, continues at a time of widespread opiate addiction in America. Heroin, and now fentanyl, can be smuggled in small quantities—on one's persons or by car. Today, the Baja region remains a major conduit for drug traffickers. The violence that subsided in 2011 has recently returned, as two cartels have competed for control of the local retail drug trade. Last year was Tijuana's [deadliest](#) on record.

Today, the city is grappling with a different kind of migrant: deportees ejected from America and from the families and lives they built there. The Obama administration deported as many as [2 million](#) people in eight years, many of them to Mexico; the Trump administration has continued this policy. Many of these deportees know no one in Mexico and, without Mexican birth certificates, drivers' licenses or voter cards, which they have either lost or never possessed, they are truly "undocumented" in their own homelands. So, they stay in Tijuana, figuratively pressed up against the fence, unable to imagine not going back to their family members in America and unwilling to move into Mexico's interior, which is a foreign country to them.

Many of them clump near the old Coahuila red light district, living on the street, mired in drugs and alcohol and often, they tell me, the target of police assault. Some deportees stay, when they can, in the hooker hotels where optimistic migrants once rested before crossing north. In the past few years, new flophouses have opened catering to deportees. On a Sunday morning recently, outside one such place, fittingly called the Hotel del Migrante, worn-out men in faded baseball caps, dirty jeans and dilapidated shoes stood in the morning sun, some with hands raised, as a group of Christian missionaries held a praise service in the street before feeding the men.

"They have a whole lot to give," says Martin Gutierrez, a cab driver who was stopped nearby. "[Tijuana] needs to get all these deportees and channel them." A deportee himself, Gutierrez, 53, told me he had overcome homelessness and alcoholism. "It's them who need to change their walk and their ways," he adds, "to make things happen for themselves."

These are strange exhortations for men whose lives have been built on making the most of the few assets they possess. But it's the lesson Tijuana has had to learn since the 1990s, when that first wall changed so much. A city that grew on the energy of migrants coming north every year in hopes of a new life now must absorb many of those same people returning, often worn out and sometimes even clinically depressed. Finding ways of inspiring deportees to productivity stands as one of the city's most daunting challenges.

Still, the city of Tijuana has managed to redefine itself, and this set of people—arrested in America, sent back to Mexico, starting over—are going to have to do the same. "Over here in Mexico, you're a whole new person," Gutierrez says, watching



the missionaries sing to the line of deflated men. “You don’t have no prison record. You have your ID. You can use your name. You don’t have to hide. You’re a whole new you.”

*Sam Quinones is a journalist in Los Angeles and author, most recently, of Dreamland: The True Tale of America’s Opiate Epidemic.*

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