

Lake Chapala stagecoaches (*diligencias*) - Tony Burton - 28 Jan 2025

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The dawn of stagecoaches

In the mid-nineteenth century, travelers between one town and the next in Mexico had only limited options: walking, riding a donkey, mule or horse, or taking an animal-drawn cart or carriage. The two most common types of carriage were *guayines* (smaller, light carriages with four seats, usually pulled by two horses or mules) and *diligencias* (larger, heavier stagecoaches, pulled by teams of horses or mules).

The first stagecoaches were imported from the US, and, according to some accounts, the first company using them in Mexico was US-owned, though soon taken over by a Mexican business. The earliest stagecoach routes connected Mexico City to nearby communities and to the port of Veracruz, via Puebla and Xalapa. Gradually, the network of stagecoach routes spread to cover much of central Mexico, with a few longer routes providing service towards the northern border.

Stagecoaches were more than twice as fast as walking: in mountain areas, stagecoaches could cover about 8 km/hour, and across flatter terrain could average about 11 km/hr. However, the average day's wage in Mexico could purchase a stagecoach journey of only a few kilometers. Traveling from Mexico City to Toluca, for example—a distance requiring two days to walk—cost, even on the least expensive stagecoach, about 10 days' wages for the average salaried worker.¹

Stagecoaches from Guadalajara to Chapala

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Guadalajara became the hub of an extensive stagecoach network, with different routes starting from different hotels or *mesones* within the city. Stages to Tequila, Ameca and Etzatlán, for example, left from Hotel del Museo, while travelers to Zapotlán el Grande, Tepatitlán and La Barca, departed from Hotel del Nuevo Mundo.²

The earliest mention of a Guadalajara-Chapala stagecoach service is a document in the Jalisco State archives about a regular stagecoach service beginning in November 1866. At that time, the trip took at least 10 hours, but usually required 12 hours or more. The route—known locally as the *Camino Real* (Royal Road)—left Guadalajara via Las Juntas, Santa Cruz del Valle, El Zapote (close to where the international airport is today), El Capulín, La Calera, to Santa Rosa. From Santa Rosa, the stagecoaches continued to the haciendas of Cedros and Buenavista, and then skirted the village of Ixtlahuacán de los Membrillos, before climbing over the hills to Santa Cruz de la Soledad on Lake Chapala.

¹ Arthur Schmidt. 1997. "Transport and Communications: 1821-1910," in Michael S. Werner (ed) *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, Vol 2, 1447-1453. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.

² José Rogelio Álvarez. 1980. *Diligencias, siglo XIX*. (Precise reference yet to be confirmed)

From Santa Cruz, the route turned west back towards Chapala via the Hacienda de La Labor. This route remained largely unchanged for decades; it was modified significantly once motorized traffic took over from mules.³

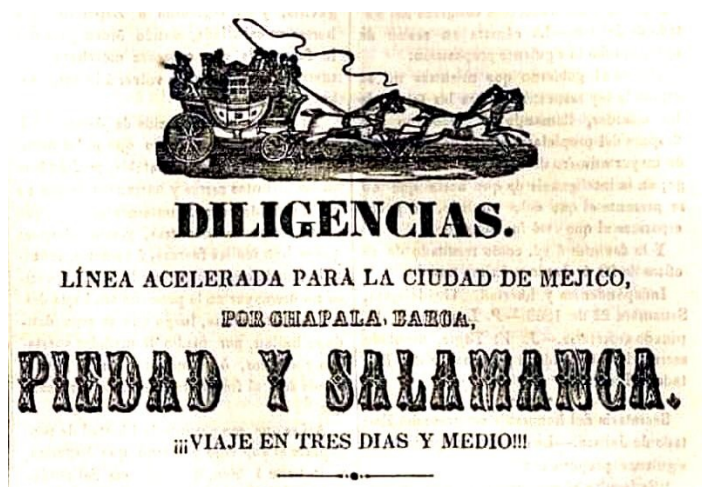


Fig 1. 1868 advertisement (Original source unknown).

Following the launch of the *Libertad* steamboat on Lake Chapala in June 1868, advertisements promoted a new “accelerated” route connecting Mexico City to Guadalajara via Chapala. Travelers from Mexico City took successive Linea de Occidente stagecoaches to Salamanca, La Piedad and La Barca, before boarding the *Libertad* to Chapala, from where they rode the local stage to Guadalajara. The entire trip could, allegedly, be completed in three and a half days.⁴

More realistic timings for stagecoach-steamboat trips between Guadalajara and Mexico City were advertised in 1872 by Empresa de la Posta de Occidente.⁵ The trip, including taking the *Libertad* across Lake Chapala, required seven and half days and cost 25 pesos, with two half-day breaks: one in Querétaro and the other in La Barca. Departures for Guadalajara left Hotel de la Bella Union in Mexico City every Tuesday, and the return trip left Guadalajara every Wednesday. This may well be the stagecoach line described by English writer Rose Georgina Kingsley, who traveled with the party led by General William Jackson Palmer to examine possible routes for a railroad linking Texas to Manzanillo.⁶

Stagecoach trips were hazardous. Kingsley recounted how narrowly her party avoided being ambushed, and a newspaper from about the same time reported that “a large group of bandits has stationed themselves on the road to Chapala, robbing and assaulting passengers and the stagecoach.”⁷

³ Javier Medina Loera. 1991. “Camino a Chapala: del trazo de carreteras a la autopista.” *El Informador*, 17 March 1991, 1-C.

⁴ Advert dated 12 Sep 1868, circulating on social media. Original source yet to be determined.

⁵ *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*: 7 Apr 1872.

⁶ Rose Georgina Kingsley. 1874. *South by west or winter in the Rocky Mountains and spring in Mexico*. London: W. Isibister & Co., chapter XVII.

⁷ *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*: 16 Sep 1873, 3.

Despite the danger, later that year Empresa de Diligencias Generales increased its service between Guadalajara and Mexico City via Lake Chapala (and its steamboat) from one to two trips each week, while maintaining the same fares as previously.⁸ Stagecoaches left Mexico City for Guadalajara on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Fares from Guadalajara were 1 peso to Chapala, 4 pesos to La Barca, 5 pesos to La Piedad, 6 pesos to Pénjamo, 7 pesos to Irapuato, 7 pesos 50 centavos to Salamanca, 9 pesos to Celaya, 10 pesos 50 centavos to Querétaro, 11 pesos 50 centavos to San Juan del Río, 13 pesos to Tula, and 15 pesos to Mexico City. Passengers braving the driver's seat (*el asiento de pescante*) were charged one third less than the interior seats. Each passenger was entitled to one free *arroba* (about 25 lbs or 11.5 kilos) of baggage, with excess charged at 3 pesos an *arroba* for the entire trip.⁹

De México á Guadalajara, por la Barca.

Sale los Mártes de cada semana á las seis de la mañana, en ocho jornadas.

1. º	de México á Tepeji.....	3 00	<i>El pescante</i>
2. º	„ Polotillan.....	6 00	<i>es una terce-</i>
3. º	„ Querétaro.....	10 00	<i>ra parte me-</i>
4. º	„ Irapuato.....	15 00	<i>nos, pasando</i>
5. º	„ Piedad.....	18 00	<i>de una admí-</i>
6. º	„ La Barca.....	21 00	<i>nistracion.</i>
7. º	„ Chapala	24 00	<i>El exceso de</i>
8. º	„ Guadalajara....	25 00	<i>equipaje á 5</i>
			<i>rs. por jor-</i>
			<i>nada.</i>

Llega á México los Mártes de cada semana.

Nota.—Sale los Viérnes de cada semana un carruaje extraordinario hasta Guanajuato por Tepeji en cinco jornadas, á 17 pesos asiento interior y 12 el pescante.

Fig 2. 1874 prices from Mexico City to Chapala and Guadalajara.

Prices rose very rapidly. An 1874 Statistical Almanac for Foreigners listed the Guadalajara-Mexico City service as only once a week (leaving Mexico City at 6.00am every Thursday, and Guadalajara every Tuesday), with prices of 24 pesos for Mexico City to Chapala, and 25 pesos for Mexico City to Guadalajara. The driver's seat was discounted by a third, and extra luggage was charged at 4 pesos 50 centavos an *arroba* for Mexico City-Chapala, with an additional 50 centavos charged for Chapala-Guadalajara. According to the same source, there were three stagecoaches each week in each direction between Chapala and Guadalajara.¹⁰

In January 1874, readers of *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* were informed via a display advertisement that they had a choice of routes from Mexico City to

⁸ Iberia: 20 Nov 1873, 4.

⁹ Iberia: 20 Nov 1873, 4.

¹⁰ Juan Pérez. 1874. *Almanaque Estadístico de las Oficinas y Guías de Forasteros*. Tercer año.

Guadalajara.¹¹ In competition to the route already described, which included a steamer ride across Lake Chapala, an entirely overland route ran from Mexico City to Guadalajara via Querétaro, Guanajuato and Lagos de Moreno. This ran three times a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays) in each direction. But it cost 45 pesos for an interior seat, 30 pesos if sitting alongside the driver.

Seasonal changes in river and lake levels sometimes hampered travelers, with *The Two Republics* advising would-be Mexico City-Guadalajara passengers in 1876 that sometimes it was necessary for passengers to embark in Jamay, 4 leagues from La Barca, and that "sometimes the line was suspended."¹²

Traveling between Mexico's two largest cities became easier and faster after 1 May 1882, when the Central Mexico Railway was completed as far as Irapuato.¹³ It meant passengers could finally travel the Mexico City-Irapuato portion of the journey by faster, more comfortable means. Some newspapers gave passengers advance notice of the upcoming change,¹⁴ and within a few months it was confidently predicted that it would soon be possible to go from Mexico City to Guadalajara "in slightly over two days, with a pleasant journey across the lake by steamer."¹⁵

By 1884, a firm named Empresa de Navegación por Vapor en el Lago de Chapala y Río Lerma was promoting its vapor Chapala, in combination with stagecoaches and the Mexican Central Railroad, as the fastest and most comfortable way to travel between Mexico City and Guadalajara. Passengers took the train from Mexico City to Irapuato, then a *diligencia* to La Barca, followed by a sail aboard the steamer to Chapala, before catching another stagecoach to Guadalajara, all for no more than \$20 pesos first class, \$18 pesos second.¹⁶

Empresa de Navegación por Vapor was owned by the Hermanos Loweree, a company started by the four younger sons of U.S. businessman and Guadalajara resident Daniel D. Loweree (1799-1868), who owned the Rio Blanco textile factory in Zapopan, and his wife, Nancy Ana Howell (?-1863). All four sons—Francis (Francisco, 1833-1881), Robert (Roberto, 1831-1882), Edward (Eduardo, 1836-1904) and James (Santiago, 1838-1880)—were U.S. born, but lived in Mexico. Eduardo was the only one of the four still alive when the Empresa de Navegación por Vapor was first advertised.

1888: Completion of the Irapuato-Guadalajara railway line

The journey between Irapuato and Guadalajara became far easier and quicker once the Irapuato-Guadalajara branch line of the Mexican Central Railway finally opened in 1888. The station of El Castillo, about 20 kilometers southeast of Guadalajara, was conveniently close to the Juanacatlan Falls, the 'Niagara of Mexico.' Regardless of their direction of travel, rail passengers could disembark at El Castillo and visit the roaring waterfalls for a few hours before continuing their journey.

¹¹ El Siglo Diez y Nueve: 22 Jan 1874, 1.

¹² The Two Republics: 19 Jan 1876, 1.

¹³ Juan de la Torre. 1888. Ferrocarril Central Mexicano. Reseña Histórica, p 7.

¹⁴ El Siglo Diez y Nueve: 8 April 1882, 3.

¹⁵ La Patria: 22 December 1882, 3.

¹⁶ Manuel Caballero. 1884. Primer almanaque histórico, artístico y monumental... Mexico/Nueva York: The Chas. M. Green Printing Co., 191.

The new line also improved access to Lake Chapala for Tapatíos (Guadalajara residents) since they now had several options to choose between. The nearest station to the town of Chapala was Atequiza. Chapala-bound travelers who got off the train there could then either rent a horse or take a stagecoach for the final 20 kilometers to Chapala. Mexican diplomat Eduardo Gibbon, writing in 1893, describes how he took the Central Railway to Atequiza, and then opted for the services of a muleteer to reach Chapala.¹⁷



Fig 3. Winfield Scott. c 1900. Stage for Chapala.

Alternatively, passengers could travel slightly further by train, and alight at Ocotlán station, to connect with the regular steamboat from there to Chapala.

According to a 1888 directory, the stagecoach service to Chapala was run by Rafael Álvarez and left daily from the Hotel Nuevo Mundo. But, after the opening of the new railroad line, stagecoach services to Chapala did not normally start from Guadalajara, but from intermediate points such as Atequiza. Stagecoaches from Guadalajara all the way to Chapala were reinstated on some occasions during the Revolution due to fears of rebel attacks on trains.¹⁸

Lost in the mists of history are the details of who actually owned most of the stagecoach companies, including the ones linking Guadalajara and Atequiza to Chapala. The investment required was considerable, and it is unlikely that any of the stagecoaches were owner-operated. According to Antonio de Alba, the various stagecoach companies operating at the end of the nineteenth century included one founded by Federico Álvarez del Castillo, which ran coaches timed to meet the steamship Negrete, which connected Chapala to Tizapan and Tuxcueca, though the precise time period when this company operated is unclear.¹⁹

¹⁷ Eduardo A. Gibbon. *Guadalajara, (La Florencia Mexicana). Vagancias y Recuerdos. (1893) El salto de Juanacatlán y El Mar Chapálico.* Guadalajara, Jalisco.

¹⁸ Antonio de Alba. 1954. Chapala. Banco Industrial de Jalisco. p 116.

¹⁹ Antonio de Alba. 1954. Chapala. Banco Industrial de Jalisco. Note 29, p 174.

The Hotel Arzapalo stagecoaches

Following the inauguration of the Hotel Arzapalo in Chapala in 1898, demand for stagecoach service to Chapala grew rapidly. The hotel's owner, Ignacio Arzapalo Palacios, almost certainly also owned the two stagecoaches that the hotel advertised as serving the needs of its clients, as well as two smaller *guayines* for special trips. Depending on demand, one or both coaches left the hotel daily for Atequiza railroad station in time to meet the train from Mexico City when it arrived at about 1.30pm. Passengers from Mexico City had boarded the train at 9.00pm the previous day and traveled overnight. The stagecoaches usually had any arriving hotel guests safely in Chapala well before dinner.²⁰ The stagecoach drivers were two brothers—'Nicho' and 'Pancho' Alcántar—who were famous for never having any serious accident on their daily trips to Atequiza."²¹

The Alcántar brothers are believed to be Francisco Alcántar Domínguez (1867-1961) and Dionicio Alcántar Domínguez (1869-1944), whose remains lie in Chapala municipal cemetery. Francisco (and possibly his brother, too) was born in Santa Anita, Tlajomulco de Zúñiga, on the southern outskirts of Guadalajara. Francisco married Casimira Visenta (?) Aldrete in Tlajolulco in 1890, before (presumably) settling in Chapala. Dionisio, who married Francisca Sainz (1873-1937), lived much of his life at Calle Madero #245 in Chapala. Many of the brothers' descendants and relatives still live in the Chapala area.



Fig 4. Winfield Scott. c 1900. Stagecoach outside Hotel Arzapalo.

When *Mexican Herald* correspondent Owen Wallace Gillpatrick arrived at Atequiza en route to the Hotel Arzapalo soon after it opened, he opted for a saddle

²⁰ The Mexican Herald: 13 May 1899, 5.

²¹ Antonio de Alba. 1954. Chapala. Banco Industrial de Jalisco. p 116 (translation by author).

horse rather than a seat in the stage and proceeded to race the stagecoach from Atequiza to Chapala. He had to ride through about a dozen ranches, separated by gates, which were opened "at the rate of a centavo a gate, which is cheap as gates go." Despite stopping to converse with a *vaquero* (cowboy), dressed "in silver-trimmed, black trousers, slit up the side, high russet boots and a magnificent sombrero," Gillpatrick still arrived at the hotel long before the stagecoach arrived.²²

In December 1899, Swiss traveler Dr Wilhelm Schiess also eschewed the stagecoach on his way to Chapala and the Hotel Arzapalo: he and his brother took a small carriage from Atequiza station instead. According to Schiess's account, the only one I know that describes traveling to Chapala in a small carriage or *guayín*, they left Atequiza shortly after 11.30am:

"Behind the train station, an eight-horse stagecoach was already waiting, along with a half-open carriage drawn by five mules. We took our seats in the carriage, which we had entirely to ourselves. We galloped off, and although this road seemed smooth compared to those we had previously encountered, we were still jolted and shaken considerably and had to hold on tightly to avoid being thrown from the carriage. As we sped along, one of the postillions frequently jumped down from the coach, ran as fast as he could alongside the carriage, and urged the mules to an even faster pace with his whip and shouts. The second driver swung his endlessly long whip from the coach seat.

...

An hour before reaching Chapala, we occasionally caught glimpses of the lake far below us. At a furious pace, we raced down the hill, and... at 1.30pm we arrived in Chapala and stopped in front of the large, comfortably furnished hotel."²³



Fig 5. Winfield Scott. c 1899. Stagecoach on the eastern side of Calle del Muelle, with the turreted Villa Ana Victoria in the background. This photo was uncredited when published in Pauncefote (1900).

²² Owen Wallace Gillpatrick. 1911. *The man who likes Mexico*. New York: The Century Co., 185-187. [See also LCTTA, chapter 44]

²³ Wilhelm Schiess. 1902. *Quer durch Mexiko vom Atlantischen zum Stillen Ocean*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer. pp 143-144.

At about the same time as Schiess visited Chapala, a high society English lady—the Honorable Selina Maud Pouncefote, eldest daughter of the British Ambassador to the U.S. in Washington D.C.—arrived by train at Atequiza. She chose the stagecoach for the final leg of her trip to Chapala:

"A diligence awaits you such as is only seen in museums nowadays. Such a very odd old thing it is, immensely heavy, with gigantic wheels, and a body as big as a house, with leather straps inside to hold on to. It is drawn by eight mules. It goes back and forth daily to Atequiza station to fetch the mail, passengers, and parcels. The driver, a young "peon," receives the vast wages of fifty cents per diem for driving his very refractory mules, who frequently kick and plunge and are not in any way broken. Most primitive are his methods. Those he cannot reach with his whip he corrects with a well-directed stone from a heap lying at his feet. There is also a conductor on this great conveyance. He spends his time in jumping on and off the diligence, and in killing little birds with well-aimed stones when not engaged in mending the harness or punching a slow mule—little cares which frequently interfere with his amusements. That thirteen-mile drive is an experience—over such lovely country, with sudden views of the lake on turning a corner or arriving at the top of a tremendously steep climb. The wonder is how the mules ever get the old machine up the mountains. During the rainy season it is a marvel how it ever goes at all through the mud and over the swollen streams."²⁴



Fig 6. Photographer unknown. Published in Tweedie (1901), opposite p 249.

The risks and rewards (as well as the discomfort) of choosing the diligencia were vividly recorded in contemporaneous accounts. This description by Ethel

²⁴ Pouncefote, Hon. Selina Maud. 1900. "Chapala the Beautiful." *Harper's Bazar*, Volume XXXVIII #52, December 29, 1900, 2231-2233.

Brilliana Harley (later Mrs. Alec Tweedie), who visited Chapala in 1900-1901, is among the more colorful:

"We mounted to our seats eventually, and before us sat the driver holding six reins and a whip, his feet resting upon the brake; next to him was his "help" with two whips. The first was short, to tickle up the last two mules, the wheelers in fact; the driver's whip was long, to chastise the four mules abreast, and the help's second whip was some twenty-four feet long with a short handle. He amazed me by slashing so dexterously with it that he hit the two leaders quite easily, for our team consisted of eight mules.

... Every now and then something went wrong with the brake; down jumped the help, hatchet in hand, and with a block of wood about a foot square, of which we carried about a dozen; he hacked the old one off, and then proceeded to tie the new one on. No coach in Mexico ever proceeds far on a journey ere requiring some repairs of this sort, and the "helps" are wonderfully clever in arranging such trifles.

... The heavy old coach hanging on thick leather straps swung from side to side; boulders on the road, rivers across the path and suchlike trifles sent us flying from our seats ever and again; but nothing really happened, it was all in the day's work, and nerves are not permitted in Mexico."²⁵

It is unclear whether or not Tweedie stayed at the Hotel Arzapalo,²⁶ which, in any event, was not the only hotel offering a stagecoach service to and from Atequiza.

The Hotel Victor Huber stagecoaches

Across the street from the Arzapalo, the Hotel Victor Huber, managed at the time by Francisco Márquez, began offering daily stagecoach service to Atequiza on 1 December 1903.²⁷ In March 1904, Márquez asked the council for permission to park the stagecoach outside the hotel between trips, a request that was turned down on the grounds that it would create a precedent for the Hotel Arzapalo to do likewise for its two stages.²⁸

The following July, it was forced to suspend service, presumably on account of the state of the wagon road.²⁹ Victor Huber and Ignacio Arzapalo (owners of the eponymous hotels), aided by a local politician, Luciano J. Gallardo, worked together to enact repairs, and the road was expected to reopen on 1 October.³⁰ Repairing the road after the rainy season was an annual necessity for at least a decade, with the hotels footing the bill.³¹

²⁵ Mrs. Alec Tweedie (Ethel Brilliana Harley). 1901. *Mexico as I Saw It*. New York: Macmillan, 249-250. [See also LCTTA chapter 47]

²⁶ It is more than possible that she was a guest of one of the resident foreigners in Chapala, perhaps even Septimus Crowe.

²⁷ Chapala Municipal Archives, Untitled document in "Box: Ind y Com de Chapala 1884-1998)." Unpublished timeline, entry for 1 December 1903.

²⁸ Chapala Municipal Archives, timeline, entry for 15 March 1904.

²⁹ Chapala Municipal Archives, Untitled document in "Box: Ind y Com de Chapala 1884-1998)." Service was suspended on 11 July 1904.

³⁰ Jalisco Times: 16 Sep 1904.

³¹ La Gaceta de Guadalajara: 8 Oct 1905, 11.

In 1907 the Hotel Victor Huber charged passengers one peso (US\$0.50) each way for its daily stagecoach from Chapala to Atequiza station.³²

The loading, unloading and turning around of stagecoaches from the hotels either side of the narrow dead-end street (Calle del Muelle) led to many grumbles about traffic congestion. Matters came to a head in 1907 with the completion of a third, even larger, hotel (Hotel Palmera) on the same street. To resolve the problem, the Chapala authorities opened a new street, parallel to the beach, to connect the lakefront end of Calle del Muelle with Calle del Templo. This allowed drivers to proceed along Calle del Muelle almost to the pier before turning left, and then left again, to take Calle del Templo north past the front of the church.³³

Hotel Victor Huber (later renamed Hotel Francés, and still later Gran Hotel Chapala) was one of several significant buildings demolished when Avenida Francisco I. Madero was created during the state governorship of Jesús González Gallo (1947-1953).

How reliable was stagecoach travel?

Travel, regardless of the means, always carried some risks, including the possibility of running into bandits. English-speaking visitors to the Lake Chapala area were reminded in the 1909 *Terry's Mexico Handbook for Travellers* that, although "the days of brigandage in Mexico are past," they could still expect to encounter guns and swords: "The *rancheros* one meets here obey the rural custom of going heavily armed; some carry revolvers only, stuck into silver-bespangled holsters, while others carry rifles and sabres." The book claimed that this was a significant improvement over "the times when *bandidos* haunted this same highway, stripped unfortunate travellers of every stitch of clothing and usually sent them into Chapala clad in rustling newspapers pinned together with *mimosa* thorns."³⁴ Ironically, Terry's sense that Mexico had become safer than previously was proved completely wrong by the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution only a year after his book was published.

In his entry for Chapala, Terry summarized stagecoach service to the town, while noting that it was sometimes suspended during the rainy season:

El Lago de Chapala. Chapala Village, at the N. end of the lake, is reached in $\frac{3}{4}$ hr. by a steam launch which plies between the village and Ocotlan. A popular method of reaching Chapala is to descend from the train at Atequiza station and travel thence by diligence (diligencia, stagecoach). Distance about 16 kilometers; time about 1½ hrs.; fare \$1 each way. A special conveyance (guayin) can be had for a small party (about 4) at an inclusive charge of \$5 for the journey. During the rainy season (June-September) horses are sometimes substituted for the diligencia, because of bad roads.

When British-born journalist William Carson rode the coach in 1908-1909, he too noted that the road condition left a lot to be desired:

³² El Correo de Jalisco, 9 January 1907.

³³ AHMC (Archivo Histórico Municipal de Chapala), unpublished time line, entry for 23 April 1907.

³⁴ Thomas Philip Terry. 1909. *Terry's Mexico Handbook for Travellers*. México City: Sonora News Company and Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 152.

"The road from Atequiza to Chapala, like most Mexican country roads, is not macadamized, but is full of rocks and ruts which toss the old coaches about like ships in a stormy sea. Lucky are those passengers who get outside seats, for those who ride inside are almost choked with dust before the journey is over. Recently some steps have been taken to improve the public highway from Guadalajara to Chapala, and although the road would stagger most American motorists, several cars come over it every week from the city to the lake."³⁵

If getting to Chapala was fraught with problems, then returning to Atequiza from Chapala was just as difficult, especially since delays were frequent and the train did not wait for latecomers. In 1909-1910, Vitold de Szyszlo, who was documenting a 10,000-kilometer trip through Mexico, left Chapala on the Hotel Palma (= Palmera) stage early one morning. They were still well shy of Atequiza when the stagecoach driver's "drunken habits and inordinate taste for tequila" suddenly sent the stage hurtling towards a ravine. De Szyszlo, sitting at his side, was barely able to control the mules and send the coach into a tree instead. The passengers survived. But, needless to say, they had to walk the rest of the way and arrived too late to catch their intended train.³⁶ The Hotel Palmera, like the Hotel Arzapalo, was owned by Ignacio Arzapalo Palacios, and the two hotels would have shared the stagecoach service operated by the Alcántar brothers, so the claim made decades later that they never had an accident might be somewhat suspect.

A few years later, with the Revolution underway, even the uncertainties engendered by that unrest did not deter such adventurous travelers as Harry Franck who hiked his way across the country. Franck was well aware of the risks. He armed himself with a small "vest pocket" automatic, and chose to walk from Atequiza to Chapala, noting as he set off that the stagecoach was almost empty:

"This primitive bone-shaker, dark-red in color, the body sitting on huge leather springs, was drawn by four teams of mules in tandem, and before revolution spread over the land was customarily packed to the roof and high above it with excursionists to Mexico's chief inland watering-place. Now it dashed back and forth almost empty."³⁷

When Franck finally arrived in Chapala he found that the decline in visitors had also affected the town's hotels. The Hotel Victor (Huber) was the only one open for business but at least the manager was friendly:

"But once in the cobble-paved village I must pay high in the "Hotel Victor"— the larger ones being closed since anarchy had confined the wealthy to their cities... But at least the landlord loaned me a pair of trunks for a moonlight swim in Lake Chapala, whispering some secret to its sandy beaches in the silence of the silver-flooded night."³⁸

³⁵ William English Carson. 1909. *Mexico: the wonderland of the south*. New York: Macmillan, 350. [See also LCTTA chapter 52]

³⁶ Vitold de Szyszlo. 1913. *Dix mille kilomètres a travers le Mexique, 1909-1910*. Paris: Plon-Nourrit et Cie., 242-244. Translation by Marie-Josée Bayeur. [See also LCTTA chapter 55]

³⁷ Harry A. Franck. 1916. *Tramping through Mexico, Guatemala & Honduras: Being the Random notes of an Incurable Vagabond*. New York: The Century Co., 130.

³⁸ Harry A. Franck. 1916. *Tramping through Mexico, Guatemala & Honduras: Being the Random notes of an Incurable Vagabond*. New York: The Century Co., 135-136.

The demise of stagecoaches

By 1908 the days of stagecoaches were clearly numbered. The automobile was taking over.

The first automobiles were imported into Mexico in 1903. In 1906 a prominent American dentist, Dr. John W. Purnell, who resided in Guadalajara, drove his Reo from Guadalajara to Chapala in 3 hours 49 minutes, and made the return trip (including an 11-minute stop in Tlaquepaque) in 3 hours 39 minutes. The following year, Alfonso Fernández Somellera took just 63 minutes out to the lake and 65 minutes back to complete his round trip from the big city to Chapala (about 130 kilometers in total) in his 30-horsepower Packard. By 1910 several motorists a week braved the rough road crossing the hills between Guadalajara and Chapala.

Motorized modes of land-based transport—including the motor-car and motor-buses—were already proving to be more efficient, safer, and cheaper to run than stagecoaches. By the 1920s, when the Mexican Revolution came to an end, stagecoaches had become, essentially, a relic of the past, unable to compete—in speed or comfort—with motorized vehicles and train services.

Additional images of Chapala stage coaches

Additional images of Chapala stagecoaches, in approximate chronological order, are included in "Dating early photos of Chapala stagecoaches (diligencias)."³⁹ At least ten early photos of Chapala stagecoaches are known. Some were published in books or magazines, and several were mass-produced as commercial picture postcards in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Among those known to have photographed stagecoaches in Chapala are two American photographers: Winfield Scott and Sumner W Matteson. Guadalajara-born photographer José María Lupercio almost certainly took some of the other published photographs of stagecoaches.

³⁹ <https://lakechapalaartists.com/?p=13160>