



**“Like many people, we don’t carry dental insurance. So when my husband Mark’s unusual primary tooth, which had not fallen during his childhood, suddenly began to chip apart in his mouth at age 53, we were afraid we were in for a big headache.”**

By Emily Fagan #99408

# A Mexican CROWN

The last time I had gotten a crown, some five years earlier, it had cost well over \$1,000 (of which my insurer covered only half). It would also be a frustrating procedure for us as travelers because it would mean getting an impression for the crown, being fitted with a temporary, waiting several weeks for the lab to fabricate a permanent crown and then returning for a second visit to have it installed.

We were boondocking with the Escapees Boondockers Birds of a Feather group just outside Yuma, Arizona, at the time, and we began asking the seasoned full-time RVers what they did about dental work on the road.

Almost unanimously we were told: We go to Mexico!

What? Going to Mexico for dental work sounded extremely risky. We have both had enough sub-par dental work over the years in our own backyards that trusting the health of our teeth to foreigners made us extremely uneasy.

### References from Fellow RVers

Day by day, Mark’s tooth disintegrated further. We began quizzing our fellow campers a little more earnestly, and individual recommendations for differ-

ent dentists south of the border began to trickle in.

One friend had a stack of business cards for a dentist in nearby San Luis that he swore by.

“I give these out to everyone. He is a great dentist.”

Our friend pointed to various spots in his mouth as proof.

He continued, “We were staying at KOFA Ko-Op SKP park in Yuma, and, after asking everyone down there who

they go to, my wife found out this guy received the most references.”

I looked at the card skeptically, wondering how to get there, what happens if things go wrong and why so many people were so emphatic that dentistry in Mexico is topnotch.

### Feeling Daring

The next day we decided to give it a try. We drove to San Luis, Arizona, the U.S. town that borders San Luis, Mexico, and parked the car in a dusty parking lot near the border crossing. It was 4:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, but we were feeling daring.

We walked down the main street and passed under a nondescript sign that welcomed us to Mexico. No one seemed to notice that we had just walked across an international border.

Checking the walking directions on the back of the business card, we took the first left and saw the tell-tale statue of an enormous tooth marking the dentist’s office. I took a deep breath and we pushed open the door.

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dentists had always chosen for their offices. The decor was, well, let's call it "warehouse back-office."

The waiting room chairs were metal and mismatched, the metal desk had a dent or two and there was no one sitting behind it.

"Hello?" we called out. Before I had a chance to realize we should have been more polite and called out "Hola?", a voice from another room called back.

"Be right there!" We took a seat.

A diploma hung on a bare wall. It was from Guadalajara University, which I found out later is not only one of the finest in Mexico but has had an AMA-approved accreditation program for American medical students.

### No Frills

A few minutes passed before anyone emerged from the other room, so I stepped into the bathroom. Yikes. No female frills here. I wondered if we were doing the right thing.

Back in the waiting room, three Americans had walked in and taken seats like they knew the place well. We started chatting, and I learned that this trio of husband, wife and friend had been here many times. A few years earlier, the husband had originally come here for extensive bridge work that cost him just a few thousand dollars as compared to quotes upwards of \$14,000 that he had received at home. The couple lived in Las Vegas and would rent a car and invite a friend or two along to share driving and expenses whenever they needed dental work done. Wow. What an endorsement for this dentist!

The door to the other room flung open and Dr. Sergio Bernal greeted us with a huge beaming smile. He led Mark to the dental chair, and I followed hesitantly.

The equipment was, well, not state-of-the-art. Mark opened his mouth and got a quick summary. "This is easy! There are several options here, but I'd suggest a crown. I can take an impression now and put it in tomorrow." My head whirled. Not just because this guy spoke English like he was my brother, but because tomorrow was Saturday.

"You work Saturdays?"

"I have to! This is my season. I don't get a lot of people in July."

He laughed a warm, happy laugh. "Do you want gold or porcelain?" Mark wanted porcelain—and a good color match, too, please.

Dr. Bernal made a quick cell phone call and looked at Mark brightly. "Is noon okay?" We were both wide-eyed. Sure, but this was all going a little too fast. The price listed for crowns in the reception area was \$130, and Dr. Bernal nodded when I asked if that was the

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price even for a porcelain crown. But he could see we were hesitant and suggested, "Why don't you go away and think about it. I'll be here if you decide to come back."

We left, our thoughts swirling. We wandered the streets for a while. We stopped in a few shops and let it all sink in. Suddenly, Mark said, "I'm going to go for it."

We returned. In no time, Dr. Bernal had prepped the tooth, shaved it down and made a blue plastic impression. As

we were leaving, he casually asked for a \$60 deposit. "Oh, and what's your name?" He wrote "Mark Fagan" on a yellow sticky note, put it on the blue impression on his desk and quickly got up to take care of the next patient.

We returned to our rig, still bewildered by all that had gone on. Where was the clipboard medical history questionnaire, the insurance paperwork, the appointment book that set you up many weeks in advance, the ill-fitting temporary crown, the crisply dressed

hygienists and receptionist, the intimidating white lab coats, the mandatory full-mouth x-rays? This was more like going to a small-town barber.

We were in Dr. Bernal's office promptly at noon the next day. The place was packed with a mix of Americans and Mexicans. Suddenly, the front door opened and a young man rushed in from the street carrying a blue plastic dental impression with a little crown perched on it. I looked at Mark, wide-eyed, as the

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man disappeared into the next room. A few minutes later Dr. Bernal appeared in the doorway and motioned Mark to the dentist chair. He held the impression and sparkling crown aloft with a grin.

I gulped and realized I had never thought about how crowns were transported between labs and dental offices. FedEx? Special delivery? Packaged? Under glass?

### A Perfect Fit

I trotted into the room behind Mark. A beautiful young woman was standing to one side, and I discovered she was Dr. Bernal's daughter, on vacation from college in the Bay Area in California. She and I were so caught up in conversation, I missed the big moment when the crown was put in place. Mark's smile as he ran his tongue over it told the story. The color was a perfect match, and it fit flawlessly without needing any tweaking.

As we waited in line at the border, Mark couldn't stop grinning. "This is the best crown in my mouth!" All his other crowns, and mine, too, had required lots of sanding and filing to get them to fit right, and two of mine never had. My bite had just changed shape over the years to accommodate them. I stared intently at his smiling mouth. "Hey, which one is the crown?" I asked. He pointed, chuckling. What a match!

It has been 18 months since Mark got that crown, and he still says it is the best one in his mouth. Like our friend who recommended Dr. Bernal, we grabbed a stack of his business cards and have eagerly passed them out. I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to return to him. However, if he closed his practice or retired, I now know that there are many outstanding dentists in Mexico. Although we have the names of several dentists in border towns that friends have given us, the most up-to-date information would best be found by parking with or near Escapees at SKP parks in border states and ask for recommendations and most recent stories.

If you need dental work while traveling in the southwest, we suggest you consider Mexico. 🇲🇽

## When You GO:

**Border Crossing:** Crossing into Mexico can be as simple as walking down the street from a U.S. border town into a Mexican border town. As long as your stay is less than 72 hours, you do not need a visa. On the U.S. side, slightly more signs and conversations are in English. On the Mexican side, slightly more signs and conversations are in Spanish. Crossing back into the U.S. is more complicated as there are border officials who check passports. It is likely that almost everyone in line with you will be American retirees sporting new glasses, healthier teeth, prescription medication and/or a bottle of liquor. Prepare to wait in line for an hour or more, especially if you return after noon.

**Liquor:** You can bring one liter of alcohol per person into the U.S. without paying any taxes on it, and most border towns have many liquor stores that sell liquor inexpensively.

**Medication:** You can purchase prescription medication without a prescription in Mexico and legally bring in up to 50 dosages as long as it is an approved FDA drug (i.e., not an illegal narcotic). There are many pharmacies ("farmacias") in Mexican border towns that sell both brand-name and generic prescription medications for a fraction of their cost in the U.S. We did not know the 50-dosage rule and purchased a 100-tablet bottle of the antibiotic amoxicillin for \$10, just to have on hand in the rig in case of emergency. I showed the customs officer the vial, unsure if it needed to be declared, and he waved us on.

**Money:** Almost all vendors in border towns will accept U.S. cash and/or credit cards, so there is no need to change U.S. dollars into pesos.

**Safety:** Unfortunately, Mexico has been suffering from drug-related violence and outbreaks of the H1N1 flu virus recently. However, small border towns like San Luis and Los Algodones near Yuma, Arizona, are relatively self-contained and distant from the trouble spots. Both towns are accessible by a short walk, and the dental offices are lined up on the very first streets as you enter town. A night on the town in a major U.S. city or a visit to a grandchild at an elementary school could expose you to similar risks.

**Specific Dentists:** The best option is to ask for up-to-date recommendations from fellow Escapees staying near Mexican border towns. We have heard of people visiting Mexico for dental work from California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. However, without offering a formal endorsement or guaranty, I will say that the following three dentists have provided good experiences for us and our friends:

#### Near Yuma, Arizona:

- Dr. Sergio Bernal, Family Dental, #118-9 First St., San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico. [familydental\\_dr.bernal@hotmail.com](mailto:familydental_dr.bernal@hotmail.com), Call from U.S.: 011-52-653-534-6651
- Dr. Liliانا Lopez, Angel's Dental Clinic, Los Algodones, Mexico  
Web: [www.angelsdentalclinic.com](http://www.angelsdentalclinic.com), Call from U.S.: 658-517-3346
- Guadalupe Montoya Garcia, DDS, Los Algodones, Mexico  
Web: [montoyadental.com](http://montoyadental.com), E-mail: [montoyadental@aol.com](mailto:montoyadental@aol.com),  
Call from U.S.: 928-941-1054

**Travel:** Traveling to Mexico requires a U.S. passport or passcard. Check these Websites: [travel.state.gov/passport/passport\\_1738.html](http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html) and [USimmigrationSupport.org/passport](http://USimmigrationSupport.org/passport). A good introduction to travel in Mexico is with Chapter 8's Mexican Connection rally to Bahia de Kino, February 14-26, 2010. Consider joining this fun Rendezvous.

**What's it like?:** Small towns on both sides of the border can be shabby and unkempt. Liquor, dentistry and vision care are such great products for the Mexicans to sell to visiting Americans (since they can make a decent profit while still offering us significant discounts) that some small border towns, like tiny Los Algodones near Yuma, Arizona, seem to sell little else. These towns, like their U.S. counterparts, aren't the "real Mexico" or the "real U.S." However, you can still get a taste of the real thing. While you are there, ask directions to the nearest tortilleria and pick up a package of freshly baked tortillas. Ours were so yummy (still warm!), the package was half gone before we got back to our rig.

**Vision Care:** Mexicans offer excellent vision care. Many SKPs we have talked to have purchased their eyeglasses in Mexico, again at a fraction of the cost in the U.S.