

MY JOURNEY ALONG THE WALL



It was a central plank of Donald Trump's election campaign: to build "a big, fat, beautiful wall" 1,000 miles long to combat illegal migration from Mexico. Now, as a caravan of thousands of asylum-seekers approaches, *Alex Hannaford* travels coast to coast to reveal life on this vast porous border



It's a brisk November morning in south Texas as Narcizo Ramos, a special operations supervisor with the US Border Patrol, walks towards newly installed razor wire that loops for a mile between green metal posts, spaced 5ft apart, along the Rio Grande river.

Here, in the town of Laredo, the river is shallow enough in places to wade across from Mexico. It's quiet, save from the low hum of vehicles motoring both ways across the Juarez-Lincoln bridge a few hundred feet to the east, and the Gateway to the Americas bridge to the west. Ramos says that as traffic increases in the run-up to Christmas, so will the number of Border Patrol agents — and for the past week or so they've been joined by the US army.

This autumn, President Trump ordered 6,000 troops to the border in anticipation of the arrival of large groups of Central American migrants who have been travelling north through Mexico, mostly on foot in a so-called “caravan”, heading for the US, where they intend to claim asylum.

A few thousand migrants have already arrived in Tijuana, the town directly across the border from San Ysidro, California, after boarding buses in Mexico. Other groups are still on foot and nobody can say when they'll reach the border — or exactly where they're heading along its 1,950 miles.

In November, a federal judge blocked Trump's attempt to restrict those seeking asylum in the US, but late last month, after a group of migrants in Tijuana attempted to storm the border fence, they were met with tear gas from US Customs and Border Protection officers. As a result, some army troops were reassigned to California, but the bulk of them remain in Texas.

“So far, [the migrants] have been very public and open in announcing where they're going,” Ramos says. “We're working with our partners in Mexico to monitor the situation.” Major Derek Wamsley, spokesperson for Task Force Griffin, the army unit in charge of the eastern portion of Texas, says the footage of migrants from the caravan crossing into Mexico from Guatemala in October “showed they were pretty aggressive. They shook gates down and crossed by force. And the message from Customs and Border Protection is that they're not going to tolerate that. They can enter our country in a peaceful manner.”

Wamsley says the razor wire is designed to deter them. Ramos, meanwhile, tells me he's mindful of how this looks — that the world is watching how they deal with a potential breach of the border fence. Fence is a key word. In Laredo, there is no sign of Trump's much-promised “big, fat, beautiful wall” — a key component of his 2016 presidential bid.

“WE HAVE FOUND THEIR TUNNELS, THEIR CESSNAS, THEIR JET SKIS — AND NOW WE HAVE FOUND THEIR DRONES”



THE GREAT DIVIDE
Previous pages: the US-Mexico border fence slices through the landscape near Nogales, in Arizona. Above: a gap in the fence overlooking Tijuana, Mexico. Left: thousands of Central American migrants head north from the Mexican state of Oaxaca

Trump maintains that a wall to curb illegal immigration is vital for national security — and in a variety of polls, between a third and half of America agree. According to a Gallup poll in June, a narrow majority of Americans (57%) are opposed. Trump has promised a 40ft wall 1,000 miles long, filling in the sections that are currently empty; he said it would cost \$8bn. Marc Rosenblum, the deputy director of the US Immigration Policy Program estimates it at more like \$15bn-\$25bn. With Democrats winning back the House of Representatives in the midterm elections, it'll also prove harder for Trump to get it funded by Congress.

Several months ago, when talk of the wall was at its most fevered, I decided to drive its entire length — 1,950 miles, across three time zones, from California through Arizona and New Mexico, to a national wildlife refuge on the Texas Gulf coast that marks the end of the international boundary. To put it in perspective, it's the same distance from Calais to the western border of Kazakhstan.

I wanted to hear from the people who will live and work in the shadow of the wall, should it ever be completed.

PRAYERS BY THE PACIFIC

My journey began by the roaring Pacific, on California's Imperial Beach in San Ysidro, just south of San Diego. The border is marked by a 20ft steel-mesh fence that plunges into the ocean. Today, thousands of migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have gathered here, sleeping on cardboard and surviving on donated beans and rice.

Nine years ago, Imperial Beach didn't look like this. Families, separated either by birth or by economic necessity, could come here to hold hands, hug and exchange gifts. That all changed in 2009, when the US Department of Homeland Security, under the Obama administration, built a second barrier, running parallel to the border fence, and the authorities prevented people on the US side approaching it. As a concession, heavily policed by Border Patrol officers, Friendship Park (a small piece of land between the fences, and some say an oxymoron) opens just eight hours each weekend, allowing people to walk up to the inner fence.

It was there that I watched a man called John Fanestil peer into Mexico through

gaps, place his hand on the steel mesh, close his eyes and say a prayer — “We are all one people, brothers and sisters of one human family” — before a pastor on the other side translated it. “*Todos somos un solo pueblo.*” Two Border Patrol agents stood on a hill overlooking the beach while Fanestil and Pastor Guillermo Navarrete began their weekly interfaith church service.

I asked one — a heavy-set man, about 6ft 5in tall — whether he’d ever caught anyone attempting to swim around the fence. “If you can think of ways to do it, they’ve tried it and we’ve seen it,” he said. “Swimming, climbing, scuba diving.” He added that countless bodies have washed up there.

When the service ended, while Tejano music poured from speakers on the other side of the fence and the smell of Mexican food wafted over into America, lawyers were offering free immigration advice from a makeshift office between the pastel-coloured buildings. Fanestil, in jeans, hiking boots and a straw hat to shield him from the sun, packed up his things and walked towards the gate. A girl sobbed as she said farewell to someone on the other side.

“Most places along the border, you have a very large Mexican city across from a much smaller US city,” Fanestil said. “And that US town will be mostly Mexican ancestry, where almost everybody will have family relations on both sides of the line.”

An American who studied politics and economics at Oxford University before attending seminary in California, Fanestil said that until the 1970s, the border here was just barbed wire. “It was really after 9/11 that this notion of controlling the border in an absolute sense has become the orthodoxy.”

The southern border is now a group of relatively short stretches of fence that account for just over a quarter of the total distance. Although construction began in the mid-1990s, concerns that terrorists could transport weapons of mass destruction prompted further regulation from Congress. For almost a decade, US citizens have had to show their passports when returning from Mexico, something they never had to do in the past.

In 2006, President George W Bush signed the Secure Fence Act, authorising construction of more border wall, largely in New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Where there is no physical fence, along large swathes of the Texas border, there is a “virtual wall” of sensors, cameras, and aerostat hot-air balloons, tethered to the ground and monitored by Border Patrol, and which carry high definition cameras.

Interstate Highway 10 is the closest there is to a single road that roughly tracks the border east to west across the US, but for most of its journey it gets nowhere close. In order to see the border properly, you have to take the smaller roads that occasionally come within a stone’s throw of Mexico.

Border dash: Alex’s 1,950-mile journey



2 BREAKING BAD COUNTRY

Thirty-odd miles east of Imperial Beach is the tiny, unincorporated community of Tecate, California, population 200: just dilapidated houses and a handful of run-down businesses offering “money exchange, checks cashed” and insurance sales. There’s an international border crossing here — to the larger city of Tecate, Mexico (population 65,000) — and the “wall” separating the two countries is a mix of rusted, 15ft-high brown bars and ramshackle slabs of corrugated iron. I attempted to take a road that on the map looked as if it hugged the border fence, but it soon turned to dirt and was impassable.

Twenty minutes on is the town of Campo, California. I passed a lumber supply business, a now shuttered juvenile

detention facility and a large Border Patrol station. It’s remote, and parts felt like a ghost town. In the sheriff’s office, I asked how close I could get to the wall and was told to take a dirt road until it dead-ends. Once at the fence, there was a stone monument marking the start of the Pacific Crest Trail, the famed hiking route that ends 2,650 miles north, at the Canadian border. I didn’t see any Border Patrol agents near the fence for the hour I was in Campo. Today they use underground sensors and hidden cameras, so I assumed I was being watched.

The countryside opened up as I drove east on Highway 94 and I could see bars of steel snaking for miles, literally slicing the empty countryside in two before climbing a mountain and ending abruptly a quarter of the way up — presumably because ➤➤➤

The long view: from delousing to drug wars

Like all lines in the sand, the American border with Mexico is steeped in a bloody history. When Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1821, its territory included California, Texas and all the land in between. In 1836, white Americans in Mexico formed the short-lived independent Republic of Texas, which the US annexed in 1845. After the war with Mexico that followed, the border wasn’t recognised in law until a peace treaty was signed in 1848. Then, in 1853, the US agreed to pay Mexico \$10m for a 29,670 sq mile portion of the country that later became part of Arizona and New Mexico. The border that exists today (above) was finally mapped between 1891 and 1896. Along it live two dozen Native American tribes who have always opposed any physical border.

In the early 20th century, American policy was to delouse immigrants from the south with gasoline and noxious chemicals. During one delousing session

in 1916 at a jail in El Paso, Texas, at least 19 Mexican men died when a cigarette ignited the bath fumes.

El Paso is now home to the National Border Patrol Museum. The agency’s earliest incarnation was a group of 75 men tasked with stopping illegal immigration from China. In the 1920s and 1930s, a much-expanded agency fought liquor smugglers and the Prohibition era would become the bloodiest in its history.

By the mid-1950s, Border Patrol had apprehended 1m Mexican nationals, mostly coming into the States illegally to work as farm labourers. Twenty years on, agents were seizing huge amounts of marijuana and cocaine — \$42m worth in 1975 alone.

Federally funded construction on a border fence didn’t begin until the 1990s, when 14 miles were built in California. The 653 miles of fencing that exists today was built after George W Bush signed the Secure Fence Act in 2006.

government planners thought it was too high for anyone to attempt crossing there.

That night I stayed in Calexico, a seemingly peaceful border town across from the Mexican city of Mexicali. This is the new Breaking Bad country: it's here, together with the California ports of entry at San Ysidro and Otay Mesa, that US Customs have seized the majority of methamphetamine coming into the States in recent years. A highly addictive man-made drug, "meth" was once produced almost entirely in the US, but after a crackdown on sales of the chemicals used to make it, up to 90% is now produced in Mexico.

In 2015, Calexico was the scene of what is believed to be the first successful seizure of drugs smuggled over the border by drone, when Border Patrol agents retrieved more than 28lb of heroin flown into a field not far from my hotel.

"We have found their tunnels, their Cessnas, their jet skis, their pangas [a type of boat]," one prosecutor said at the time, "and now we have found their drones."

Two years ago, authorities found a tunnel underneath a three-bedroom house in Calexico, a few hundred yards from the border. The other end emerged under a trapdoor in the floor of a restaurant in Mexicali, where police found 1,500lb of marijuana valued at almost \$6m.

3 IDENTISTS AND DEMONS

The geography changed as I headed east the next morning — the hills replaced by flat, sandy soil peppered with green creosote bushes, the border fence disappearing and reappearing as the ribbon of highway bent down to meet it. As I crossed the Colorado River, which flows from the Rockies down between the states of California and Arizona to the Gulf of California, the wide empty desert gave way to golf resorts, groves of palm trees and RV parks. This is the home of the "snowbirds": retirees fleeing the harsh northern winters. One Border Patrol agent told me they often take the opportunity to walk over to Mexico for cheap prescription drugs, discount dental work — and the odd margarita.

At the checkpoint at Liguarta, Arizona, drivers were asked their citizenship while panting Alsations made laps around each vehicle, sniffing for drugs.

From here, the highway makes a huge 200-mile arc around the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. On the map it looked impassable, but this is also home to El Camino del Diablo — the Devil's Highway, and the setting of Luis Alberto Urrea's bestselling non-fiction book of the same name. It's the account of 26 men who



MINDING THE FENCE Mexican soldiers patrol the border in the desert outside Sonoyta

in 2001 attempted to cross the border here into southern Arizona. Only 12 survived.

It's a tough read. Halfway through the book, Urrea describes the slow but terrifying effect of heatstroke on the body. "Without salts, your muscles can't function," he writes. "Muscle cramps kick in. When you fall, you hit rocks, cactus, gravel." Here, even the fit faint — the brain's way of stopping the body in its tracks. "You are confused; your memories are conflated with your dreams. Walkers see demons, see God... Your temperature redlines — you hit 100, 106, 108 degrees. Your muscles, lacking water, feed on themselves... start to rot."

According to Customs and Border Protection, 7,216 people died crossing the US-Mexico border between 1998 and 2017. Of all the places you could reasonably suggest there needs to be a border wall — in built-up areas or where roads and highways come within a stone's throw of Mexican soil — this remote part of Arizona isn't it.

To the east of Cabeza Prieta wildlife refuge is the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, a 330,000-acre wilderness that shares 30 miles of international border with Mexico. I parked the car and hiked five miles along one of the trails.

In 2002, a 28-year-old ranger named Kris Eggle was gunned down here by members of a drug cartel fleeing into the US following a string of murders in Mexico. As a result, most of it was closed to tourists for more than a decade and it was dubbed

America's most dangerous national park. Today, it's open again and the visitor centre has been named after Eggle. But it's not just drug smugglers who tread the 150 miles of illegal roads in the reserve. In 2016, Border Patrol rescued 1,409 people, and found 84 bodies here.

Later, I drove along the border fence and peered through at the suburban neighbourhood of Sonoyta, Mexico. Many migrants use this town to make final preparations before the treacherous trek through the desert. It seems peaceful,

but just a year ago, 22 high-level members of the Sinaloa cartel, one of Mexico's largest and most notorious, responsible for importing millions of pounds of marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine into the United States, were arrested here in a sting.

A Border Patrol van slowed down as it approached me. The driver said I could drive about a mile along the fence before

I had to turn round. "Don't pick anyone up. Be careful," he said. Eventually, the tall fence ended, replaced by a rusting vehicle barrier — just piles sticking out of the ground, designed to deter cars and trucks, not people. I spent the night in the town of Ajo. The next morning, I met Julian Rivas at a nearby gas station-cum-casino called the Desert Diamond. Rivas, 67, is an elder of the Tohono O'odham Native American tribe (literally, "desert people"), who have lived on this land for more than a thousand years.

Rivas remembered as a child exploring this area — about the size of the state of Connecticut — on horseback, hunting for jackrabbit and deer. Not any more. For too long, he said, members of his tribe had been challenged by Border Patrol on their own property. "It's intimidating," he said.

\$25bn

Cost projected by Marc Rosenblum, deputy director of the US Immigration Policy Program, for building and maintaining Trump's wall

TWO YEARS AGO, CARTELS TOOK OVER OFELIA'S FATHER'S VILLAGE. THEY CAN'T VISIT HIS GRAVE. "IT'S TOO DANGEROUS"

We pulled into the driveway of a small adobe house, where a sign on the fence warned: "US Border Patrol: Do Not Enter Without a Lawful Search Warrant". Rivas's sister, Ofelia, who lives here, was sweeping the floor of a wooden arbour in her yard that the community uses for storytelling. Beyond that were garden beds in which she grows corn, squash and watermelon. The Mexican border is less than a quarter of a mile from her house. Ofelia told me that the Border Patrol was digging dirt roads everywhere, changing the habitats for animals, disturbing ceremonial burial sites and uprooting plants from which the Tohono O'odham obtain food or make medicine.

She told me the story of a group of agents who came to her friend's house, saying they had tracked footprints and wanted to know if she was harbouring undocumented migrants. "It was her own kids," Ofelia said. Another time, a young man who regularly jogged through the village carrying a small backpack full of water and snacks, "was chased down like a criminal and made to put his hands over his head".

Years ago, the Tohono O'odham used to be able to walk or drive to Ofelia's father's village, 15 miles south of the US border in Mexico, into which their tribal land stretches. Now they have to go through the official international crossing to visit communities or attend ceremonies in Mexico. "And some of us don't have papers. I'm 60 years old and I don't have a birth record because we were all born at home."

Some of the migrants caught crossing here come for seasonal work, but Ofelia and her brother concede that cartel activity, be it people-trafficking or drug smuggling, does happen. "On the Mexican side it's lawless, which makes it easy for them to bring [drugs] up to the border." Two years ago, cartels took over their father's village. Members of the Tohono O'odham tribe living there fled and never returned. Their father is buried there, but they can't go to visit his grave. "It's too dangerous," Ofelia said.

4 EXTORTION

In the Arizona town of Nogales, a few hours east of the reservation, a steep hill rises from the small downtown area, overlooking its Mexican sister city of the same name, though they're divided by a 20ft steel fence set in concrete. I met Ramon Lopez, a 38-year-old heavy-equipment operator who has lived on the US side for most of his life. "In the 1980s it was just a regular fence," he said. "There was a big hole in it and you could drive back and forth. You'd tell Border Patrol you were just going shopping into Mexico for the day and they'd let you go. And people would come here from the Mexican side to buy groceries."

Lopez lives and works in the US, but his wife and three daughters live in Mexico. For seven years he's walked over the border crossing to see them at weekends. "I've fixed papers for them to come here soon, but during the week it's been very tough. She's pregnant with our fourth child, so the wall has affected us emotionally. It's like the divide between East and West Berlin. You used to be able to talk to family and friends through the fence — now you're told to stay clear. I see them through the fence, but it's hard. They can't hug me."

He said that undocumented migrants would find a way across regardless of whether the Trump administration expands the border fence. "It doesn't matter if you make it taller, bigger, or put more Border Patrol agents there, people are going to get through. Nowadays, the thing they do is walk further through the desert. It'll just waste federal money that communities like Nogales could use."

A few years ago I was on the Mexican side here, visiting a refuge run by a Catholic charity that provides food, drink and aid to migrants about to cross the desert. That time I met Ricardo Castro, a then 38-year-old from Guatemala City. He was living in the US illegally but had to return

to Guatemala after his father died. He left his two teenage sons, both US citizens, in New Jersey with his ex-wife. It had been a year since he saw them. He had spent weeks sleeping in parks and eating out of rubbish bins. Back in Guatemala he owned a seafood restaurant, but began receiving calls from gangs forcing him to pay 20,000 quetzals, the equivalent of £2,000, in protection money. He moved to a different town but they found him. He fled, afraid he would be killed if he stayed.

In his bag were tins of tuna, some tortillas and cans of drink for the journey. Ricardo said he had never crossed via the Sonoran desert before. "I have a friend who has done it, so I know you can do it. You have to move really fast at night. I'm confident. If God wants, hopefully I'll be there in 10 days."

I have no idea if he made it.

5 SMUGGLERS' TUNNELS

Mark Dannels is the sheriff of Cochise County, Arizona. His office — just outside Bisbee, a former copper-mining town that attracts visitors to its pretty Victorian-era houses and tourist shops — is responsible for policing 83 miles of the border.

Dannels, originally from Illinois, told me that in the 1990s, as part of the federal government's plan to secure the border, they targeted large ports of entry and populated areas — San Diego in California, Yuma in Arizona, El Paso in Texas. As a result, a lot of the smuggling was rerouted to the rural southwest. The thinking, Dannels says, "was that the organisations and cartels would not come through the mountains and desert, [but] we have become a flow-through county".

As a result, Dannels said ranchers rarely work their land without being armed. He put on a pair of wraparound shades and I climbed in his department-issued Chevy SUV, in which the barrels of several rifles pointed upwards from a rack between ➤➤➤

\$6bn
The amount President George W Bush spent on border fencing in 2006. Most of the existing 653 miles of steel fence was built under Bush



CHINK IN THE ARMOUR Separated families meet at Friendship Park, San Diego. Above: undocumented migrants are held at McAllen, Texas

the front seats. We drove towards the nearby border crossing at a tiny town called Naco. Near the border, he pulled over and pointed to a ramshackle house. “You see that concrete shed next to it?” he said. “In there is the end of the longest tunnel on the southwest border.”

In 2015, following a tip-off, Dannels’s deputies surrounded the building and discovered that traffickers had dug a 900ft tunnel under the fence from a small building in Mexico. The hydraulic system operating the cement lid was controlled remotely from the Mexican side. They arrested two cartel members and stopped a vehicle on a nearby highway carrying more than two tons of marijuana. Further up the road, he points to a small green house. “They were smuggling kids through there. It’s a vicious game.”

Dannels knows first hand what they are capable of. In 2014, his son Justin, also a police officer, pulled a car over. The driver attempted to run the younger Dannels down, so he opened fire and killed him. The dead man, it transpired, was connected to the cartels. “Within 24 hours, members of his family called my office saying they were going to kill me,” Mark Dannels said. Later that day, his neighbour spotted an intruder in his back yard.

He decided to send a strong message. They placed 24-hour security on his and his son’s houses, then “went after everybody we knew was associated with drug cartels. We knocked on their doors. We hit over 100 people in two or three weeks and made a number of arrests. These people don’t want any disruption in their business.”

But he says, it was hard. “Watching my daughter-in-law cry. That’s emotionally tough.” Dannels said he doesn’t like politics, but he thinks reinforcing the border fence would help. “I don’t care who is president, but 80% to 90% of all [illegal] drugs in our country come through our southern border.”

Not far from the border crossing at Naco is John Ladd’s cattle ranch. I motored down a long driveway to a single-storey home where Ladd, 61, a fourth-generation rancher wearing a denim shirt, jeans and a cowboy hat, greeted me. He showed me a piece of green carpet with holes cut in the edges and a thin piece of cloth threaded through them. “Border Patrol spends a lot of time looking for footprints,” he said. “So the illegals put these on their boots to cover up their trail... Everybody thinks they’re a bunch of dumb Mexicans but they’re not — and it’s a big business. It’s a lot of money and they’re very sophisticated.”

Ladd, who used pejorative terms such as “illegals” and “wetbacks” to describe undocumented migrants several times during our conversation, said that during



STEMMING THE FLOW Top: Border Patrol’s Marlene Castro surveys the Rio Grande at Roma. Above: a 520lb haul of marijuana

the mid-1990s Border Patrol was catching 200-300 people a day on his ranch; it’s 30 to 50 a week now: “It’s a lot better.” He believes Trump will follow through on his campaign pledge to secure the border. “Up until Donald Trump being elected president, building a wall was a publicity stunt. But he is serious.”

Although Ladd and his wife, JoBeth, travelled to the inauguration in Washington, he’s not your archetypal Trump supporter. He can remember people crossing from

Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s, but said it was a non-issue at the time. “You’d get maybe one or two a month. You’d feed them, let them spend the night, and next morning they’d want to do work for you, to pay you back. We sponsored three to be citizens and they were good people.”

He even conceded that America would suffer if every undocumented migrant was deported overnight. “Right now, our food system — from planting crops to harvesting to processing to distribution — is completely dependent on illegals. So if they got rid of them, we’d starve within a week.”

RAFTS IN THE RIO GRANDE

New Mexico boasts only a comparatively small section of border with Mexico — a 180-mile stretch, mostly empty of human habitation. Columbus, with a population of about 1,700, is a few miles from the border crossing, while on the Mexican side, Palomas (population 5,000) creeps up to the 15ft steel fence.

Residents here talk about the closeness of the two cities; that despite the security cameras, Border Patrol agents and fence dividing them, several hundred children — American citizens born in the US, but whose parents are Mexican — cross over to go to school in Columbus. It hasn’t always been a peaceful coexistence. Seven years ago, the former Columbus mayor Eddie Espinoza, together with the town’s former police chief Angelo Vega and another man, pleaded guilty to trafficking firearms across the border — selling guns favoured by the Mexican cartels.

It was late at night when I drove over the state line into Texas. In 2004, Mexico was experiencing historically low levels of violence as the cartels were operating with impunity, having paid off corrupt officials. The peace didn’t last. In 2006, a new president, Felipe Calderon, went to war with the cartels and border violence returned with a vengeance. Ciudad Juarez, a city of 1.3m across the border from El Paso, in Texas, became known as the most violent city in the world.

Ironically, while an estimated 10,000 people lost their lives in Juarez in the space of five years, its sister city El Paso was ranked the safest in the US for its size by the FBI — an inconvenient truth for some lawmakers pushing for federal funds to improve border security.

Texas presents different problems, both for migrants and smugglers wanting to get into the US, and for Border Patrol. The Texas-Mexico border makes up more than half of the total border, and it’s delineated by the Rio Grande, America’s fourth largest river, which in Mexico is known as the Rio Bravo. West Texas is remote, with vast swathes of private ranch land, and east of El Paso there’s the mountainous wilderness known as Big Bend. It’s dusty and dry, and summer temperatures often exceed 40C.

Big Bend is one of America’s most remote national parks. Peaks up to 8,000ft offer incredible views of the Mexican Sierra del Carmen range beyond the Rio Grande. The tiny Mexican town of Boquillas sits across the river and for decades, tourists were rowed across and taken up into the town on horseback, where they could enjoy a beer and tacos while children hawked trinkets.

After 9/11, the border crossing was closed and didn’t reopen again until 2013, during which time many of Boquillas’s residents moved away. Today, the town is enjoying a renaissance and tourism has returned. Miles of 20ft-high fencing would undoubtedly scar this landscape, and environmentalists here say animal migrations would be impeded.

From Big Bend, the border curves upwards, before plummeting south towards the Gulf of Mexico. Fifteen minutes east of the bustling city of Laredo, a stone’s throw from the river, I see a young man in

225

The number of tunnels discovered along the US-Mexico border between 1990 and 2016, according to the DEA

a polo shirt and baseball cap sitting under a tree, sipping water from a plastic bottle. There's nothing for miles around, just ranch land, and I wonder if he's come across the Rio Grande. Maybe he has. Maybe he hasn't, but there's the problem: it's so easy to profile people here.

The Rio Grande Valley is the name given to the four counties that lie in the southernmost tip of Texas. In Roma, just across from the Mexican town of Ciudad Miguel Aleman, I met up with the Border Patrol agent Marlene Castro, a 20-year veteran. We drove to a viewing deck overlooking the river behind the town's pastel-painted chamber of commerce. It seemed peaceful, with several men fishing on the Mexican side and children's laughter echoing from the town in the distance, but Castro said Roma is one of busiest places for Border Patrol in the valley. She said it's mostly families and unaccompanied minors who are ferried across the river in inflatable rafts by traffickers. Bundles of marijuana make their way across in much the same way, but cocaine usually arrives in larger shipments via the ports of entry.

From our vantage point on the viewing deck, we saw a young man a few hundred feet downriver pushing a small raft into the water. Two people climbed in and sat on the sides while he lay, belly down in the middle, and swiftly paddled across. The chatter on the radio got louder, we jumped into Castro's SUV and drove at speed towards him. She pulled up on a dirt patch at the side of the road and ran towards the bank, disappearing into a thicket.

The two men who had been ferried across had disappeared and the man who paddled them was now standing waist-deep in the water, tattoos on display across his upper chest, holding on to his raft. He and Castro spoke in Spanish and I asked what he was saying. "He wants to show me his 'big' private parts," she said. "I told him if you're such a man, come up here and show me."

I ASK HER WHAT THE MAN IN THE RIVER IS SAYING. "HE WANTS TO SHOW ME HIS 'BIG' PRIVATE PARTS." SHE CAN'T DETAIN HIM

He won't. The law dictates you can't detain anyone while they're still in the water. Instead, he paddled back to Mexico. Castro spent 10 minutes searching for the other two people, to no avail. "You see he didn't deflate the boat, so you know he's going to try again," she said. "It's a game for them. A game for all of us. But we get paid for it."

Castro was born in McAllen, not far from here, and has never left the Rio Grande Valley. She worked for the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Department before joining Border Patrol. When she started, she said most of the people she captured were unarmed. "It's a different population today. You still have people who are coming across looking for work or a better life, but you also have the criminal element. Now you've got smugglers, gang members, people with criminal histories, rapists."

After a colleague informed her over the radio that agents were pursuing a black truck on the nearby highway, Castro hit the lights and siren and we joined 15 other vehicles in pursuit. It had been seen picking up two people who had just crossed the river. We swerved off the road as they disappeared into a neighbourhood, then re-emerged onto the highway. After five minutes, the truck dived down a dead end and was surrounded. Somehow, he'd ditched his human cargo.

An hour later, we were called to the side of the road near the river where three men, a woman and her 10-year-old son had been detained after crossing. The mother wouldn't talk, but one of the men told me he was attempting to get to a horseracing stud in a different state, where he worked every year. I asked how long he'd likely be detained. "A week," he said. Then what? "Then I try again."

1.6m

The number of apprehensions of illegal migrants by the US Border Patrol in 2000. That figure had plummeted to 303,916 by 2017

Castro listened to more chatter on her radio; a group of men had been seen loading bundles into a truck near the river a few miles east. "They're going to go for splashdown," a voice said. "That means they're about to swim the bundles of drugs back to Mexico," Castro explained.

Later that night, I watched a Border Patrol truck pull into a car park next to an agency substation and two agents unloaded 520lb of marijuana, wrapped in cellophane bundles, from a flatbed truck. Each bundle had "Flaco" (Spanish for skinny) scrawled in marker pen — presumably the nickname of the person who thought he'd be getting a delivery that night. The room was thick with the smell of weed as the bundles were weighed. Later, they would be incinerated.

7 "MASS ENTRY EVENT"

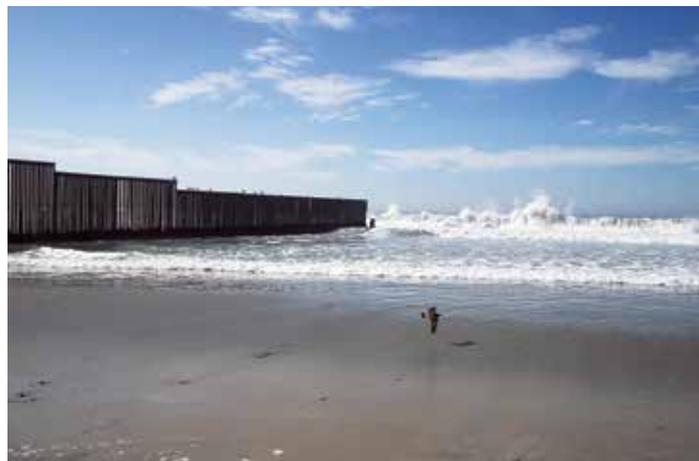
It was the final stretch of my journey. I took the road from the large border city of Brownsville — the last main urban centre before the border ends — to Boca Chica Beach on the Texas coast. An isolated road led past empty, loamy fields. I passed a Border Patrol checkpoint in the other lane, stopping vehicles heading west.

The road dead-ends at the Gulf of Mexico and I pulled up on the sand, then began the hour-long hike south to where the Rio Grande river finally empties into the ocean. Seagulls pecked at the sand between plastic bottles and decaying shoe soles in the rain.

The mouth of the river isn't wide — maybe 50ft. On the US side, two cars were parked near the dunes and a handful of people cast fishing lines into the water, hoping to land a blacktip shark. Over on the Mexican side of the river I counted three trucks, five cars and maybe 20 people fishing, while kids played in the sand and music blared from a truck's speakers. Before long there could be a steel fence here too, slicing through the sand and extending 300ft into the ocean, like it does in San Ysidro, California, where my journey began.

In Laredo, the soldiers who were installing razor wire have now headed back to base camp, three hours' drive away. The Border Patrol's Narcizo Ramos told me his colleagues are trained to deal with what he terms a "mass illegal entry event", but he concedes they don't have the facilities — in Laredo at least — to deal with thousands of migrants needing food, water and shelter, should they come across.

"Space is finite," he said. "As far as facilities, we lack them and we don't have them. It would bog the system down... we've had meetings with NGOs and the City of Laredo regarding the humanitarian aspect." Right now, all he can do is wait ■



SEA WALL
The steel border fence runs into the ocean between San Diego and Tijuana