

How *Vampires of Bustamante* came to be

About twenty years ago, while researching Mexican cooking, I heard that the northern Mexican village of Bustamante produced an especially delicious candy and decided to go there on the way home from a visit to Monterrey. I followed a narrow two-lane highway into rugged sparsely populated mountains. After about fifty miles, the arid landscape was suddenly broken by a huge patch of green, nestled at the base of a particularly dominant mountain. Turning off the highway, I discovered that Bustamante, like some arid version of a rainforest, was covered by a canopy of towering pecan trees. Passing ancient adobe and stone homes, some in good shape but many going to ruin, I eventually emerged into the village square. At one end was a postcard perfect church and at the other were municipal buildings. In between them, on one side were small stores, and on the other a row of stately old homes.

Just off the plaza, I found Bustamante's only accommodation, the Hotel Ancira. I was thrilled to discover that it specialized in delicious food, especially *cabrito*, served with ice cold beer. The next day, the innkeeper told me that the mountain above the village was home to the world's third largest caverns, still largely unexplored. (Another source lists them as the eighteenth largest).

On a late night stroll I passed a group of twenty or so people preparing food in a ruined hacienda. The roof was gone as were portions of the walls. From the street it appeared that huge clay *cazuelas* were simmering over fires on an old stone hearth. Sensing my interest, the people invited me in. They said they were celebrating a wedding and included me in the festivities, which included delicious food, mostly vegetable stews with rice and beans, not to mention ample beer and tequila. The next day, wanting to record the scene, I returned with my camera and was astounded to find there was no evidence of last night's party — not even any ashes in the hearth!

I realized that I had found a unique and magical place, and that it had much more to offer than even the village's good-as-advertised caramel and pecan candy. During many more visits over several years, I learned a great deal more about Bustamante's history and that it, in many ways, is a microcosm of Mexico. There are a few wealthy landowners, some of whom raise exotic game animals, but most of the people are hardworking folks, scraping a living from the land, one that is increasingly supplemented by money from relatives working in the U.S.

My wife and I were supporters of [Bat Conservation International](#), and I had learned a fair amount about bats in general and vampire bats in particular. Over the years, the idea of [Vampires of Bustamante](#) was born. The mystery-thriller would use the magical setting of Bustamante to tell the story of Mexico's most important issue: the struggle for justice.

Like so many other places in Mexico, I am glad I went to Bustamante when I could — when it was reasonably safe. These days, the drive to Bustamante requires passing through some of the most dangerous cartel war zones.

