

Researching Your Novel...Can You Go Too Far? By D.V. Berkom (*originally written for Indies Unlimited*)

"So are you up for a little adventure?" my fellow indie writer asked, blue eyes bright with anticipation.

A little adventure. Sure. I'd recently quit my nine-to-five job and was living the *vida loca*, writing full-time from home, and figured I could use an adventure. Shake up the old synapses, give me some good material for the further escapades of one of the protagonists in a popular action-adventure series I write. What the heck, I thought. Couldn't hurt.

I was wrong.

A little backstory: I am a dedicated, full-on writer and love all things research. I will stay up into the wee hours searching for the most obscure reference imaginable for a story, even if it means only I and my character know that morsel of information. To me, it makes the narrative more realistic and I may use it later, somewhere else. I urge you to do the same, if you want to make your novel as believable as possible. As you are well aware, this can be done from the comfort of your own home in your jammies, perhaps with a glass of wine or cup of hot cocoa. Maybe a snack.

If you ever, and I mean ever, develop a wild hair and decide to help a sistah indie move from Washington State to Mazatlan, Mexico in September in a Jeep with no air conditioning hauling a trailer and large black dog to get new material for a book, DON'T.

Just don't.

No, not because of the dog. She was a big, friendly goober-pooch and endured valiantly.

No, it was the heat. The potholes. The fire ants. The mutant mosquitoes that laughed in the face of DEET. And don't get me started on the *topes* or buses or farm machinery (more on those later).

You'd think I'd remember what driving in Mexico was like. I mean, I did live there. But it was on a sailboat. On the water. I didn't venture into the interior in the swelter that is September in Mexico, with good reason. I also didn't spend a lot of time in Sinaloa during the monsoon season. It's gorgeous and lush and filled with color you can only see during the rains. It is also a giant party pad for mosquitoes that have never heard that straight DEET was supposed to render them senseless (I swear I saw one of them sucking down the last of a can of the stuff, wipe its mouth with the back of its wing and belch).

Many of my friends were horrified to hear I was considering driving through Mexico, especially into the dreaded Sonoran desert, supposedly filled with *narcos* who would jack your car without a thought, decapitate you, or worse. All I can say is drive an older model Jeep with no a/c hauling a trailer filled with household goods. That'll stop 'em in their tracks, I guarantee it. Who

wants to expend the effort to steal that set-up in 100+ degree heat? Of course, the goober-pooch probably helped. She looked like she could gnaw your leg off in under a minute.

More like lick your face off in ten.

No, don't worry about meeting up with a posse of nasty drug cartel members. They're going to stick to messing with higher value shipments. Worry about driving into a frigging steer or slow moving plow. Worry about being run off the road by a bus driver with a death wish. Worry about hitting a *tope*, or Mexican-style speed bump at sixty miles an hour.

That's gonna hurt.

And this brings me back to my original question: can you go too far in your research?

Ask the *Policia Federal* who declined to search the rest of our trailer at the temporary checkpoint, more than likely because he felt sorry for us. He just shook his head and sighed as the two sweaty *gringas* and friendly black dog bounced over the giant *tope* on their way to Mazatlán, narrowly missing a rear-end collision via runaway bus.

You can bet my character will be taking a little trip through Mexico in the next book, and run up against every obstacle imaginable. There's nothing like experience to make a story believable, right?