

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY RODNEY BURSIEL



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## Cabalgata a Cristo Rey

In the geographic center of Mexico, in the state of Guanajuato, on a mountaintop, there is a shrine called the Cristo Rey del

Cubilete, featuring a spectacular 65-foot tall stone statue of Jesus. In January of every year, thousands of people make a three-day pilgrimage to the summit on horseback. When Rodney Bursiel first heard about this journey, he knew in his heart that he had to go along and try to capture the essence of the event with his camera. Bursiel, a notable photographer, yet novice long-distance rider, was forced to postpone his adventure for five long years because of ill health, dreaming and planning the day he could at last join in. And finally he overcame cold weather, hard saddles, and a broken ankle to ride out and return with stories to tell and memorable photographs to show, as you will see...



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"First Mass"



"Pancho Horse"

We began the cabalgata (pilgrimage) at 4:30 AM. Such an early hour felt brutal to me at the time, but I would soon have new ideas about what the word 'brutal' meant. When we arrived at the ranch near San Miguel de Allende, our horses were saddled and ready to go. We ate a quick breakfast and headed out on a morning cold as knives. The first day we were a small group... about 25 people. As we pushed on, more and even more caballeros joined us; and by the end of the journey it was said that there were from 2,500 to 4,000 riders. The latter figure seems more accurate because the trail of people extended farther than the eye could see.

Not to mention it makes for a better story.



"Jen Jacques"



"Jen Jacques"



"Vaquero"

After ten hours in the saddle, I couldn't have been happier to see the first camp. Exhausted from the ride, it was hard to drum up much of an appetite, but I forced down what I could and went to get my bedding. Sleeping on the ground near horses, it turns out, doesn't make for an easy rest. There was no quiet; the sounds of barking dogs, men talking around campfires, and horses snorting and fighting never ceased. Between the noise around me and the pain in my body, I don't think I slept a minute.



"Jesus 3"

The next morning I didn't tell anyone that, during the night, looking for a private place to pee, I fell into a ditch and broke my ankle. I just ate breakfast and doggedly began Day Two. There was no way I was quitting. It had taken me five years to finally get here, and I could certainly stick it out for a day and a half longer. It was when I limped out to begin the second day that I felt I gained the regard of my fellow riders.

They may still be laughing about it but I know they respect me, too. These guys ride every day for a living. I was just a honky on a donkey.

At the end of the second day, with equal parts joy and relief, I saw the statue of Cristo Rey on the horizon. We reached the base of the mountain and rode on for three more hours to the summit—4,000 riders huddled together for a two-hour mass.



"Banner"

I didn't take part in the final day's ride back up to the top; my body simply said No. I stayed behind and considered the experience.... I could have followed the cabalgata in a truck like so many photographers have done, and I might have captured the same images, but they wouldn't have meant a damn thing to me. I believe it is a deep desire for meaning and discovery that fills the gulf between a good photographer and a great one. Making the pilgrimage, alongside so many, profoundly transformed the way I now view my subjects through the lens. For three days, I suffered to earn the privilege of knowing these people and of trying to grasp what this difficult journey meant to them; and while it's impossible to presume I could ever truly understand, I hope my photographs show the empathy and respect I feel for the riders of the Cabalgata a Cristo Rey.

*¡Adiós amigos! ¡Qué les vaya bien!* ☒