

TEXT AND PICS: ANSON STEWART

1. Imported ex-school buses lined up in Antigua, Guatemala. Guatemala's fleet looks younger than many of the others in Central America, partly due to the national government's laws against the importation or operation of old buses, and partly due to operators' pride in outfitting their vehicles with new lights, grilles, and accessories.



Following the migrations





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As researcher Anson Stewart has discovered, school buses in the US don't retire once they've come to the end of their original purpose. They reappear, re-purposed and recycled, in the global south.

The seven nations that make up Central America are a diverse mix of different histories, languages and economies.

One thing remains constant across all of them – the widespread presence of former school buses from the United States. There are nearly half a million school buses operating in the US, and a surplus of these buses makes them an affordable and readily available option for transport operators in developing countries. Student transport vehicles must meet stringent crash-test standards, and their resulting durability means that they often operate for more than 15 years in the States before seeing 15 more years of use in Central America. For decades, droves of these buses have been migrating southwards, finding a second life in warmer climes. Arriving in Central America by the long roads of Mexico or sea transport, they are reused as the backbone of urban and inter-urban passenger transport systems.

I set out to learn more about this practice of vehicular recycling and its implications for personal mobility, urban form, global sustainability, and environmental justice. Countless people are involved in these used buses' migrations, from the dealers who drive convoys of them southwards to the scrap metal harvesters who finally dismantle them, and

the millions of drivers, conductors and passengers on board in between. From July to December 2010, I had the opportunity to speak with many of these people throughout Central America. Their stories were fascinating and surprising, leaving me with more questions than answers. One fact was confirmed – whether called chicken buses, *buses amarillos* (yellow buses), or *diablos rojos* (red devils), these buses have left an indelible mark on the history of Central America.

Yet their time is drawing to a close. Governments across the region, concerned with the condition and safety of the buses, are moving forward with ambitious plans to scrap their fleets, replacing them with new vehicles and BRT systems. In August, Guatemala City began operating its second BRT trunk line, the Transmetro Corredor Central. Nicaragua has plans in place for a system called Metrovía and is already replacing hundreds of old buses with new buses manufactured in Mexico and Russia. Panama's Presidential Transport Minister has announced that their new Metrobús system will eliminate all of the city's infamous *diablos rojos* by the end of this year. These new systems will bring significant changes for the riders, mechanics, drivers and owners I met; the era of school bus migrations is coming to a close. 🚌

2. (opposite, bottom) An abandoned bus serves as a garden ornament in the Maya village of San Jose, Belize. While Guatemalan scrap metal dealers have recently harvested many of the abandoned buses in the southern part of Belize, they have not yet reached this one.

3. A former school bus driving along Panama City's Coastal Beltway. The National Government has purchased new buses and offered to pay existing owners for their old buses in a scheme called Metrobús, but few owners have agreed. Some critics are worried that replacing the Diablos Rojos will amount to a lamentable loss of public art.



Mr Sho's early morning bus from Na Luum Caj unloads at the Punta Gorda market in Belize. Maya villages like Na Luum Caj generally only have bus service to town on market days, four times per week. On these days, two buses leave the village, at 3 am and 3.30 am, early enough for vendors to set up their market stalls. This limited service is still a vast improvement over 20 years ago, when only bakkies ran to the villages. A surplus of school buses in the US has made durable used buses like these affordable for people like Mr Sho. His brother has applied for a permit to purchase and operate a third bus for the village, offering service later in the day.



4. Old buses are scattered around Froylan Gilharry's bus yard in Corozal, Belize. Gilharry once operated a number of bus terminals and the country's largest fleet of buses, but deregulation and corruption have shattered the industry. Froylan's son Ravei leads teams of drivers up to the US every couple of years to purchase school buses at auction. On a standard trip, they buy four midibuses and four full-size buses, which they use to tow the midibuses through the US and Mexico to Belize.



5. Blue Bird All American FE with the Arenal Volcano in the background in La Fortuna, Costa Rica. The country's main intercity routes are served by luxury coaches, but the smaller regional routes are served by former school buses such as this.



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6. Former school buses, manufactured between 1985 and 1995, lined up at Panama City's National Bus Terminal.

7. A 25-year-old bus picks up passengers at Panama City's Metromall. The city's aging fleet of Diablos Rojos (red devils) are intricately painted and decorated to attract customers.

8. (opposite, above) The final resting place of a Blue Bird All American, most recently in the service of James Bus Lines. Unlike the Northern and Western Highways, which are served by many different bus companies, the Southern Highway is essentially served by only one company, James Bus Lines. The founder, James Williams, was very well regarded by those in Punta Gorda. One person told me it was his morning routine to drive to a bus stop known as The Dump, where residents of San Antonio transfer from village buses to the early morning northbound express, just to talk with them. A local resident claimed that passengers in Punta Gorda simply will not ride another company's buses. While much has changed since the 1989 bus report I read in Belize's National Archives, the following still seems to apply to James Bus Lines: "Bus owners take great pride in their business and acknowledge the importance and responsibility in providing public transportation. In turn, passengers reciprocate through loyalty to specific bus firms."

ANSON STEWART IS ORIGINALLY FROM SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. HE GRADUATED FROM SWARTHMORE COLLEGE, PHILADELPHIA WITH A DOUBLE MAJOR IN ENGINEERING AND URBAN STUDIES. AS A 2010-2011 WATSON FELLOW, HE HAS BEEN TRAVELLING THROUGH LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA INVESTIGATING HOW THE REUSE OF BUSES AND MINIBUSES RELATES TO QUESTIONS OF PERSONAL MOBILITY, URBAN FORM, GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.



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9. A passenger transfers from boat to bus along Haulover Creek in Belize City. Belize City, founded by British lumber harvesters, has a population of about 70 000. It is the commercial centre of Belize, though the government moved to Belmopan in 1970 after a devastating hurricane. The buses, Blue Bird All Americans that were school buses in the US, left the town of Sarteneja in the morning, and will make the three-hour return journey in the afternoon.



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