

August 7, 2006
International Edition

A Bang-Up Business in Illegals

The United States tightens its border. And 'coyotes' couldn't be happier--or richer.

By Monica Campbell

Newsweek International

The town of Altar has all the trappings of a way station on the underground railroad that ferries illegal aliens from Mexico to the United States. Located 80 kilometers south of the Arizona border, the grimy community of 14,000 is host to flophouses, wire-transfer outlets and general stores stocked with backpacks, sneakers, hats and those most indispensable items for the migrant preparing for a trek across the desert--gallon-size plastic jugs of water. A pay-phone center near the main plaza is packed with migrants asking their loved ones to wire half the fee a local people smuggler will charge for safe passage to the Other Side, as the United States is widely described inside Mexico.

One of those smugglers is Javier, a sinewy 22-year-old Mexican in jeans and baseball cap who got his start in the trade when he was still a teenager. Javier, who didn't want his surname published because his activities are illegal, says he earns up to \$40,000 a year as a "coyote," a healthy income in a country where the average citizen makes about \$12,000 a year. "Don't think this is easy work," says Javier. "[But] no matter how tight they make the border, I'll find a way through it." It isn't getting any easier. Earlier this year President George W. Bush ordered the deployment of 6,100 National Guard troops to back up the U.S. Border Patrol in its losing bid to stem the tide of illegal immigration. Unmanned drone surveillance planes, not to mention private vigilantes known as minutemen, further complicate Javier's work.

As a result, demand for coyotes' services has never been higher, particularly in the vicinity of Arizona, whose parched hinterland took the lives of most of the 473 immigrants who died crossing the border last year. "Years ago a coyote was a luxury, somebody you paid so that you didn't get wet crossing the border," says David Kyle, an expert on migrant trafficking at the University of California, Davis. "Now it's too dangerous for people to attempt crossing alone."

As the obstacles confronting migrants become steeper, so too do the going rates for their desert guides. In the mid-1990s Juan Pablo Tucumán paid a coyote \$600 to get him into Nogales, an Arizona border town that sits directly opposite a Mexican city of the same name. In July of this year the 32-year-old auto mechanic shelled out \$2,000 for a three-day hike from the international frontier to the state capital, Phoenix. "I was shocked by the price back then," he says, referring to his first-ever border crossing. "But now it's a bargain."

As coyote fees rise in tandem with the amount of money Washington spends on border-control programs, what was once a moderately well-paying line of work has become a very lucrative way to make a living. In the span of a decade the median fee charged by human smugglers nearly tripled, from \$613 in 1992 to \$1,783 10 years later, according to Wayne Cornelius of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego. By driving up those fees, the Bush administration's crackdown is producing an unintended consequence. The soaring cost of entering the United States is forcing growing numbers of migrants to borrow money, says Cornelius, and to pay off those debts many end up staying in the United States for longer periods.

Fee scales today vary from \$1,500 to \$5,000, depending on the migrant's nationality and final destination. Furnishing the customer with bogus documents like a falsified U.S. Social Security card boosts the price still higher. Javier, a swarthy native of the northern state of San Luis Potosí, escorts about 20 Mexicans

each month and charges each \$1,500 for the journey on foot from Altar to rendezvous points inside the United States, where they are collected by waiting vehicles. Javier pockets between \$150 and \$200 of each fee, with the remainder being divvied up among his uncle, who heads the family business, and four cousins who serve as lookouts and drivers. "When you compare what smugglers are charging per immigrant to their overhead costs, the profit margins come out high," says Armando García, a veteran agent with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Arizona.

Like any illicit activity, people smuggling attracts more than its fair share of unscrupulous practitioners. But Javier rejects any attempt to compare his livelihood to the shady world of drug trafficking, and he shuns the flashy jewelry and Chevrolet Suburban SUVs favored by drug lords. "Narcos are a whole other category, far more dangerous," says Javier, who dabbled in marijuana smuggling. "That's a downward spiral, and if you get caught up in using drugs you'll end up blowing all of your earnings." For the time being he seems content to build a new house in Altar with some of his savings, and he hopes one day to move up the ladder and establish his own network of coyotes. "It's either this or factory work back home," he says with a shrug. And hiking through the Arizona desert pays a lot better.