

One woman's mission to create a thru-hiking trail in Mexico

“The most magical part of thru-hiking is the community that we share.”

[Soren Frykholm](#) interviews Zelzin Aketzalli in the [March 9, 2022](#) issue



(Photo courtesy of Zelzin Aketzalli)

Zelzin Aketzalli is the first Mexican to complete what's known as the triple crown of hiking: the Appalachian Trail, the Continental Divide Trail, and the Pacific Crest Trail. Her trail name is Quetzal, which refers to the Central American bird of historical and spiritual significance for indigenous communities in Mexico. To date, Aketzalli has hiked 8,702 miles. She has a vision of creating thru-hiking trails in Mexico. This interview was translated from Spanish by the interviewer.

How do you define thru-hiking?

A long-distance, multi-week or multi-month hike. Often the term refers to someone walking a high-mileage trail from end to end, though sometimes people hike only sections of these trails.

How did you start thru-hiking?

After I finished my undergraduate program in engineering in Mexico City, I wanted to give myself a gift of time to do something. I originally wanted to bike from Mexico City to Patagonia, but when I did a training ride to Veracruz, my butt was in a lot of pain, and I realized there was no way I could be on a bike that long. I met two Americans who told me about the Pacific Crest Trail. I had seen the movie *Wild*, and I decided I wanted to try it.

I was especially nervous about the snow, the black bears, and signage issues. I was also very nervous about heights. I practiced with a compass; I bought crampons and an ice axe. I tried to practice on the volcanoes of Mexico, but all their snow had melted.

The biggest fear I had was that I spoke no English. I almost bailed in the last week because I was so scared of the language barrier. If I had let this fear get the best of me, I never would have had the best experience of my life or found my passion. Indeed, I realized that I had never had a passion before I began thru-hiking.

What do you love about it?

The most magical part of thru-hiking is the community that we share. I believe that thru-hiking's culture of acceptance and encouragement serves as a great example for society at large. Truly, anyone thru-hiking a trail anywhere in the world is part of my family. Pretty much all thru-hikers adopt trail names. Mine is Quetzal. Every time I come across a thru-hiker, even if I'm not currently thru-hiking myself, I pause to exchange names, which always come with stories. Thus the family grows ever larger.

It's very easy to identify a thru-hiker. They have an intermediate-sized backpack—not as heavy as one a weekend backpacker would take, but heavier than a day hiker's—and a fatigued but determined disposition. They usually smell very bad.

How popular is thru-hiking in Mexico as a sport?

It's not! No one even knows what it is; it doesn't really exist in Mexico as a sport or as a concept. That's why education and promotion are my first challenges and objectives in Mexico.

The trails have inspired me to share the experience with others. Mexicans don't have a lot of money, but we have a beautiful country. Why not have a trail in Mexico? It could also financially benefit communities along the route. I feel it's now my turn to pass on what I've learned and translate it into good for Mexican communities.

What are your hopes and plans for developing thru-hiking trails in Mexico?

In April 2019 I started hiking in Chihuahua on the Continental Divide, 136 kilometers from the US border. I started there because I wanted to see if it was possible to continue the route along the Continental Divide through Mexico and then connect to the Continental Divide Trail in the United States. I got a taste of what a Mexican portion of the CDT would be like.

But I realized that starting by creating an extension of the CDT would be too difficult. That part of Mexico is too dangerous for thru-hiking right now. I decided to focus on Baja California instead. My plan is to create a long-distance hiking trail of around 700 miles that crosses the entire Baja California peninsula, from the US border to the tip. The research stage is almost finished. One possibility is to follow the old mission trail, called El Camino Real. But the big difference with the mission trails is that the path I seek to create will be in the mountains and will not touch roads, so I have work to do to figure out exactly where it will go, what the water sources are, and so on.

I want to bring the trail close to indigenous communities, so they can benefit economically and hikers can learn from them. And I want to create more awareness in Mexico about the environment.

What are some obstacles this project will face?

I think the biggest obstacle will be introducing the people of Mexico to this type of sport. Another is getting support from the government for these kinds of trails.

How do you understand the spirituality of thru-hiking?

Thru-hiking is for me a lifestyle and a passion. It is a sport that is about not competition but improving yourself day by day, in addition to creating a great family among hikers, what is called your "trail family."

I have had many spiritual experiences on my hikes. For the Nahuatl people of Mexico, Mother Earth is called Tonantzin. She takes care of you because you take care of her. On one occasion on the PCT, I nearly drowned while crossing a river, but I know that something protected me.

One of the many important things I've learned on the trail is that fear is the feeling that you're alive. It's completely different from panic. Panic blinds you and doesn't let you think. But fear causes you to think. It can work in your favor that way.

What do you see as the significance of building a thru-hiking trail along an old pilgrimage route?

As many Mexicans are Catholic and very religious, I believe there is great potential for a thru-hike to be a spiritual experience. The mission trail in Baja California was created to bring religion to different towns. Today I see the trail as the end in itself, bringing people the spiritual fulfillment that missionaries intended to bring to the communities they visited along the route centuries ago.

Obviously, there is a complicated history in Mexico of Spanish conquest and subjugation of its indigenous peoples. Most Mexicans today have both indigenous and Spanish heritage and varying orientations to these histories and identities. Walking the Camino Real offers us a chance to explore and better understand our relationship to our land and history.

My parents are devout Jehovah's Witnesses. In their attempt to understand my thru-hiking vocational passion, they like to think of me as the apostle Pablo (Paul). Even though I don't embrace a Christian mission for my hikes, there's no denying the similarity in my "spreading the word." For me, the good word is getting out in nature, pushing oneself, developing lifelong relationships with fellow thru-hikers, and arriving at contentment and self-understanding. I can imagine, though, that the Camino Real may hold other religious connotations for many who hike it.

What does it feel like to be the first person to do something? Is it lonely?

Objectives are easy to accomplish once you visualize them. The biggest wall is with your own mentality. I don't feel lonely on the trail; I probably spend 90 percent of my time on the trail alone. For me, being alone makes me stronger mentally. I love it and enjoy it.

I feel lonely and depressed when I go back to Mexico because no one understands the freedom I feel while on the trail. No one relates to my experience. That's why I want to make the trail in Mexico. I love my country, and I want people to know what I have experienced.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Blazing trails."