

[Tribeca Review: Which Way Home](#)

by [Erik Davis](#) Apr 28th 2009 // 1:02PM

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Which Way Home and the recently-released [Sin Nombre](#) would make for an excellent double feature, as the former -- currently screening in the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival -- is a riveting documentary that taps into the same concept and themes of *Sin Nombre*, except it's all real and it's all heartbreaking to watch. Like *Sin Nombre*, [Which Way Home](#) follows the stories of several children attempting to illegally cross the Mexican border into the United States by way of riding on the tops of trains. But while *Sin Nombre* works in a fictional plot involving love, friendship and gang violence, *Which Way Home* covers the topic from several different (and fascinating) points of view. From the boys and girls riding the trains to the kids who've already been caught and are on their way back home, the film brings us everything we'd expect from a solid, well-made documentary -- injecting passion, honesty and heart into a topic that certainly needs more attention drawn to it.

Director Rebecca Cammisa attacks her subject from every conceivable angle; the most central (and noteworthy) being the risky life-threatening adventure of two best friends, Kevin and Fito. Both boys, barely teenagers, have set out from their small town on a quest to make it to America in the hopes that someone will adopt them, give them work (so they can send money home) and provide a better life. This is no small task, mind you, as a map early on shows us just how long (hundreds of miles) and tedious the journey really is -- with the boys needing to ride on the rooftops of cargo trains from one town to the next; each carrying a heavier police force as they inch closer to the border.

But it's not like you can just ride a train into America, get off, high-five your buddy and be on your way. The trains only take you so far; at some point you must cross the border via a river and then somehow survive days out in a desert without the necessary food and water. More than half the people riding these trains will die before they reach their goal -- either by falling off the rooftop by accident (most fall asleep and roll off), robbed and murdered by gangs, shot by border police or suffer their fate in a desert where the odds of death by dehydration are extremely high.

And yet thousands of people risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones by taking on this journey each year. As the documentary shows, even those who are caught along the way and sent home eventually wind up heading back out for another go at it. Parents are often so desperate to give their children a better life that they'll pay gangs to smuggle them across the border, except more often than not the gangs leave the kids in the middle of nowhere if they're not keeping up a fast enough pace. Thus, it's not surprising to learn that most of them -- ages ranging from infants to young teenagers -- die of dehydration, alone, scared and helpless.

It doesn't help, either, that a lot of these border hoppers are kids. Kevin and Fito barely ever realize just how dangerous their journey is, as the camera often catches them running, playing and laughing on the top of a moving train while several hardened, scarred adults look on offering little help or advice. In one memorable scene, Kevin -- who's been caught and detained at a youth facility -- recounts the exact moment where he knew he was over his head; telling the camera with a small amount of emotion how he watched a mother and young daughter being gang raped by over 20 men on the train. That scene, which comes roughly 20 minutes after we meet a tiny 8 or 9-year old girl who's train hopping with an even smaller (and younger) boy, really brings an uneasy, nauseous feeling to your stomach -- and right away you wish the end of the film will carry safe updates on all these children.

But Cammisa, as the filmmaker documenting these stories, has the even harder task of keeping up with the children while trying to remain safe herself. Like Cary Fukunaga in *Sin Nombre*, Cammisa somehow manages to capture the lush, beautiful landscapes of Mexico while at the same time delivering the story of these young daredevils riding the tops of trains with little care or regard for their own well being. *Which Way Home* is a truly captivating documentary that doesn't carry an agenda; it doesn't ask for you to adopt a Mexican teenager or send money to help these kids cross the border. It simply drops itself into the middle of a growing issue in Mexico, documents every square inch of the situation and leaves you to carry on the rest of your day.

Will you feel emotionally exhausted afterward? Probably. But it's docs like this one that really do belong on the festival circuit and in theaters. Sure, there are elements here that make for good entertainment, but *Which Way Home* is so much more than buy-a-large-popcorn-and-sit-in-the-dark-for-an-hour-type fare. It's educational; it brings you to the front lines of a war we know very little about and turns the audience member into an expert. But, like with most documentaries, what becomes of that new chunk of brutal information is entirely up to you. My advice: Turn to the person next to you and tell them there's a great film they need to see.

That's what I just did.

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