

**Last year Trump called these countries a profane name.**

**We sent a travel writer to celebrate them.**

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**I**n a presidency abounding with profane language, Donald Trump saved his most bitter remark for immigrants. You likely remember the comment. "Why are we having all these people from [shithole countries](#) come here?" Trump asked in a closed-door 2018 meeting with mostly Republican senators, as reported by The Washington Post later that day. He went on to identify Haiti, El Salvador and Africa as the countries in question — never mind that Africa is a continent — and he reserved special animus for Haiti. "Why do we need more Haitians?" he asked, according to people familiar with the meeting. "Take them out."

Trump would later claim he never used the s-word, but Raj Shah, then a spokesman for the White House, did not deny the slur, and when [Jesse Watters](#), a co-host of Fox News' "The Five," considered Trump's tirade, he embraced it as a populist manifesto. "I think it's either fake news, or if it's true, this is how the forgotten men and women in America talk at the bar," Watters gushed.

I had a different reaction. To me, Trump's descriptor dehumanized several million individual lives, and it carried a troubling logic: If Haiti, El Salvador and African countries could be dismissed with an expletive, why worry about their fates as countries, or about how their problems have been caused partly by U.S. policy?

As a travel writer, I try to regard other nations as hopeful places filled with intriguing surprises. But arguably, I was a little complicit in Trump's insolence. Though I'd visited 30-odd countries, I'd never been to Haiti or El Salvador, and my travels in Africa had been tentative, cautious. The president had denigrated places that even I deemed too broken for tourism. As he often does, he'd stirred the pot with an assertion rooted not in facts, but in something deeper: a widely held fear.

What if I responded to the president by packing my suitcase? Wasn't it time for somebody to take the "Shithole" World Tour? I developed a plan. I'd travel to Haiti, El Salvador and an African country to gauge how Trump's insult registered. I'd seek out, too, the complexity and the beauty that all slurs ignore — and I wouldn't just do this to push against Trump's worldview. I'd also do it for my own sake. Isn't the whole point of travel to go deep into the culture of a place, and then to return home feeling that you've enlarged and brightened your own small world?



## II. EL SALVADOR



There are no direct flights from Haiti to El Salvador. The world's two named "shithole" countries are both satellites of the United States, meaning I have to fly through Miami. The flights are not long, and when I land in San Salvador, the nation's capital, I'm briefly in culture shock. There are bright street lamps here, and the pavement is flat and smooth as I glide along in a taxi.

Still, I'm scared. El Salvador has been the most murderous nation in the world since 2014, according to the Igarapé Institute, a Brazilian think tank. The problem is gangs. From 1980 to 1992, the nation played stage to a civil war that became a Cold War proxy battle between the United States and the Soviet Union. Eighty thousand Salvadorans died, many at the hands of death squads and army units trained by the Americans, and afterward Salvadorans moved to the United States by the hundreds of thousands. Some young Salvadoran men felt so adrift and alienated that they got tattoos on their faces and, in Los Angeles, formed a street gang whose mantra is "kill, rape, control."

In the 1990s, as MS-13 lived up to its stark promise, the United States began deporting gangsters en masse. Today, as MS-13 fights another gang, Barrio 18, for control of San Salvador, the city is rife with invisible barriers — lines that delineate the turf of each gang. San Salvador's homicide rate has fallen dramatically since 2015, perhaps because its gangs are increasingly moving from murder to gun and drug sales, but it remains the most dangerous city in the world's most dangerous country.

Luckily, I've got the phone number of a local. I call him, and a half-hour later we're in a decrepit downtown billiards hall, La Dalia, where fluorescent lights flicker over the pool tables and the ornate tile floors bespeak a time, some 70 years ago, when the dons of El Salvador's wealthiest families gathered here for aperitifs.

Since the war, La Dalia has mostly been a gang-zone dive frequented only by calloused old men. In the last few years, though, the area surrounding Plaza Libertad, just outside La Dalia's window, has added a decorative fountain and benches. The Libertad movie house has turned on its blue neon Libertad sign, even if the theater's still closed, and art galleries have sprung up.

The rest of downtown, however, is largely a crisis area where yellow police tape is common and chain-link fences surround both seedy parking lots and opulent but abandoned stone buildings with Doric-columned facades. The rickety open-air sidewalk bodegas have corrugated metal roofs and crude signs Magic Markered on cardboard.

Right now, on a Saturday night at La Dalia, a 20-something fellow in a crisp pork pie hat is chalking his cue stick. I meet a few painters, then a sculptor. I talk to a muscled photographer so exuberant about his tattoos that he strips off his shirt to show me his shoulder tat of a shimmering, silver '50s-era microphone. "Freedom of speech," he explains. "It's important."



Bus passengers in Soyapango, a suburb of San Salvador. (Fred Ramos/For The Washington Post)

As I mill through the crowd, I know the prosperity I'm seeing here might not last. In his isolationist fervor, President Trump is ending temporary protected status, a humanitarian program that has facilitated U.S. residency for war-scarred Salvadorans since 2001. The remittances that U.S.-based Salvadorans send home constitute 20 percent of their nation's gross domestic product.

Eventually I find myself standing behind a slight and boyish young man dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt wrapped, androgynously, in a black mesh singlet. He keeps shifting yogi-like in his chair, so that now he is sitting cross-legged and now he is kneeling on his haunches as he peers, oblivious to all others, into the cracked screen of his iPad. He has a wispy beard. Beside his beer glass is a formidable English-language volume, "[Erotism: Death and Sensuality](#)," by Georges Bataille.

Asking around, I find that the man goes by a nom de plume, Nadie, which is Spanish for “nobody.” He’s a poet and a visual artist, and he grew up — and still lives — in Soyapango, a San Salvador suburb, population 275,000, that is, with San Salvador, one of El Salvador’s perennially most violent cities. When I meet an American curator, Caroline Lacey, she draws me aside. “Nadie,” she says, “is the most interesting artist in El Salvador.”

When I approach Nadie, he is gentle and welcoming. He can’t hear me over the music, though, even as he leans toward me. It’s simply too loud, so he scribbles his phone number into my notebook and, beside that, he draws a small, squiggly heart.

**B**efore I meet with Nadie the next day, I do some research. His real name is Javier Ramirez. He is 32. He has a drag queen alter ego, Nadia. He is 5-foot-5 barefoot and, he will tell me with a wry lilt, six inches taller in heels.

Nadie’s work is conceptual, and at times it involves satirical pranks. Once, when the august tastemakers at the Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE) offered him a solo show, he didn’t display his own work. Rather, he thumbed his nose at the museum’s brass — “all elites,” in his sour opinion — and hung naive paintings of flowers wrought by his father, a mid-level bank functionary.

Another, more earnestly curated show now hangs at MARTE. “Where There Was Fire,” on display until 2022, presents work by 24 of El Salvador’s best contemporary artists and includes a three-minute video by Nadie titled “It’s the cumbia that rules my country.” The film purports to celebrate a danceable folk music, but as it delivers cheesy shots of purple-clad trumpeters swaying in unison, it’s brutally spliced with images from El Salvador’s war: a burning bus, snipers, a medley of corpses. When we reach the third corpse, a soldier in combat boots, Nadie lingers on the body for a full four seconds as the upbeat soundtrack goes silent. We know, watching, that it’s more than the cumbia that rules Nadie’s country. But what exactly is this guy saying about El Salvador?

“I ride the bus every day,” Nadie tells me when we meet, “and on the bus I constantly see people getting mugged. Meanwhile, all the drivers like to play pop music really loud. You could be getting killed, and the soundtrack to your murder is Cyndi Lauper’s ‘Girls Just Want to Have Fun.’ This is a f---ed up place. It’s hilarious.”

We’re in a wealthy neighborhood, Nadie and I, in a swank brewpub, Cadejo, a few blocks from MARTE. His black clothes are rumpled now, and his manner is droll — Andy Warhol with a tincture of sweetness. He tells me that in El Salvador violence laces every moment with tension. “In Soyapango,” he says, “if you’re on the curb waiting for the bus, the drivers will drive directly up to you, acting like they’re going to run you over. Then at the last minute they swerve and then laugh like, ‘Hey, that was nothing!’ A few months ago, I decided I was going to wear all white, but just as I was leaving my house, a bus came along. On purpose, the driver billowed smoke all over my clothes.”



Simón Vega's artwork.  
(FRED RAMOS, FOR THE WASHINGTON POST)



Miguel Angel Sánchez sells balloons in downtown San Salvador.  
(FRED RAMOS, FOR THE WASHINGTON POST)



Salvadoran artists Walterio Iraheta and Abigail Reyes at their studio in San Salvador.  
(FRED RAMOS, FOR THE WASHINGTON POST)



“I’m from Soyapango,” he says, shrugging, “and I’m a drag queen. The life expectancy for gender-nonconforming people in El Salvador is 35. I’m 32.”

Now, the brewpub’s stereo pipes up, so that we’re drowning in a corny English-language version of “Happy Birthday.” A well-dressed dining party nearby titters as they circle about a single candle. Nadie waits, impassive, until the song plays itself out, and meanwhile I notice that this brewpub, unlike its stateside counterparts, doesn’t strive for an antique cobbler-bench vibe. No, Cadejo is decidedly Vegas, with shiny plastic patio chairs and bright, stagy lighting.

“El Salvador is a cheesy country,” Nadie says. “Everyone here is just pretending. You have to do that to survive in a screwed-up society, but I’m interested in art that disrupts things, that provokes.” He tells me about a new project. He’s writing poems that explore the animal-like cruelty that drove a particularly brutal, U.S.-trained unit of the Salvadoran army, the Atlacatl Battalion, during the civil war. He plans to read the poems theatrically as a blurry backdrop video shows a mutant, two-legged cow hobbling about on its hoofs. “I don’t care if the art is ugly,” he tells me. “What matters is that it captures reality.”

Gingerly, I tell him that I’m touring Trump’s most hated countries looking for beauty. All sweetness drains from his voice. “I’m against beauty,” he says. “I don’t even know what beauty is beyond pretty flowers, beyond the superficial.” He tells me that for five years, with a friend, he ran a local arts festival that he called Fiesta Ecléctica de las Artes, so that the acronym would be FEA. “Fea” means “ugly” in Spanish.

**O**ne afternoon I go to what's called a performance piece at MARTE. A San Salvador arts collective, the Fire Theory, has brought into the museum a civil rights lawyer to convene with two soft-spoken older country women in a gallery space, where they'll discuss a real-life legal case involving their relatives, whom the Salvadoran military made disappear decades ago during the civil war. The "art" on display is the meeting.

The Fire Theory's Melissa Guevara, who helped coordinate the show, says of the women, "These people are treated like animals. We need the media to pay attention. We need the government to do something." But almost no one turns up to watch. And I'm reminded anew that, even now, 27 years into peacetime, El Salvador is still a polarized country.

I seek out Simón Vega, who, at 46, is El Salvador's most well-traveled artist, having shown his sculptures in Italy, Austria, Cuba, Dallas and at Coachella, the California music festival. Vega's work is at once larksome and deep. He makes spaceships — funky, fantastical, nonflying vehicles imbued with both the sleek glimmer of actual rockets and the ragged disorder of a street vendor's stall. His installation "Third World Space Explorers," now showing at MARTE, looks at first like a homeless encampment dumped mid-gallery. There are two wheeled carts and, beneath one, a massive, mysterious lump that is the size of a truck tire and wrapped in a wrinkled blue tarp. The carts are appointed with all kinds of jury-rigged shelves, and weird, junky gadgetry is affixed to them: a mirror, a Rubik's Cube, segments of garden hose.

When I travel 45 minutes south of San Salvador to meet Vega at his home by the Pacific Ocean one evening, he talks first about the Cold War and how it brought carnage to the streets of his childhood. “I wanted to do work about that time in El Salvador, about the Cold War, without being too literal,” he tells me.

Eventually, he began thinking about the space race between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. His meditations made him feel a little inferior. “We’re not good at technology in El Salvador,” he says. “We don’t make things perfect and shiny. We’re sort of broken. We’re seeking an identity.”

A few years ago, Vega began looking for the Salvadoran soul. Working as a sort of anthropologist, he traveled Latin America with a camera, making comparisons of how, say, Mexican and Salvadoran street vendors racked bags of potato chips. “We’re messier,” Vega tells me. “We’re living a life that can end at any moment, so we don’t organize. We just throw stuff down and get going.”

For many, El Salvador’s chaos might be a negative. Vega has embraced it. “We’ve got a different kind of technology here, a different kind of beauty,” he says. “If you look at our shantytowns, there’s an ingenuousness in the way people make do with cardboard, with scraps of metal. There’s color to it. There’s life.”



**Left:** Artist Nadie on the banks of Las Cañas River in Apopa, El Salvador. “Apart from the violence,” Nadie says, “everyday life here is very mundane.” (Fred Ramos/For The Washington Post) **Right:** Salvadoran artist Simón Vega in La Libertad. “We don’t make things perfect and shiny,” he says. “We’re sort of broken. We’re seeking an identity.” (Fred Ramos/For The Washington Post)

**I** persuade Nadie to take me on a tour of Soyapango, which lies a half-hour east of San Salvador. Caroline Lacey, the American curator, drives us, and Nadie turns the trip into a vocabulary lesson, teaching me an adjective endemic to El Salvador. “Grencho” can mean “cheesy” or “kitsch,” but it also nods, Nadie tells me, to the darkness underlying El Salvador’s good cheer. Nadie regards nearly everything in his orbit as grencho. The cumbia is grencho, as is his dad’s artwork, and Salvadorans’ ardor for toy guns.

“In one way,” he continues, “I don’t like things that are *grencho*. In another way, I’m obsessed.” As we pull into the streets of Soyapango, past swarms of small schoolchildren laden with backpacks, he seems *grencho* himself, sentimental. “Apart from the violence,” Nadie says, “everyday life here is very mundane. I’ve never seen an empty street. People use the public space in a very normal way, selling bread and fruit in the street, playing soccer, eating pupusas. It might not look like an advertisement, with people walking their dogs and smiling fake smiles, but there is happiness here. There is joy.”

Nadie still lives in his childhood home, along with his dad, and he tells me, “All I do here is sleep and make art. I go into San Salvador every day.” He and Lacey are poised to open an art sales space — the Only Gallery — downtown next month. But even as he claims that Soyapango is unimportant to him, he’s protective of the place. He won’t let me inside his house, for fear I’ll be judgmental, and when he talks about the Barrio 18 gangster who lives five houses down, his tone becomes fond. “He’s very nice to me,” he says. “He always asks how my day’s going.”

Earlier, in discussing his life as a Salvadoran artist, Nadie told me, “I feel very privileged that I get to do what I do — and that I live here. I can be myself more here than I could anywhere else. I never want to move.” The human mind, it seems, wants to believe in the safety of home.



Sonia Isabel Aguilar dances in downtown San Salvador. (Fred Ramos/For The Washington Post)

In El Salvador, the mental gyrations that citizens must go through just to fall asleep can be extreme, and Nadie's cumbia video explores these gyrations. It lampoons Salvadorans' grencho wishful thinking amid darkness, and also revels in it. His work isn't going to save El Salvador, of course, but it might help Salvadorans know they are possessed of a strange, unique hope — one that is there every moment if you just look for it.

As we turn back onto the highway, Nadie lets up on his boycott of beauty and says, "There *are* certain things in Soyapango I think are beautiful, like when the streetlights come on at dusk — very grencho, I know — and once I remember this crazy street lady came up to me in the driving rain and asked me to help her lift a manhole cover, to rescue a cat that had gotten down into the sewer pipes. This woman lives on my street, and I think she's homeless. She makes money throwing away other people's garbage. I'd never talked to her before, but now she was afraid the cat would drown, and so we tried to lift the lid off the manhole. We tried, but it was impossible. The cat died."

On his iPad, Nadie shows me a picture of the woman kneeling on the wet pavement, her head pressed against a sewer grate as, desperately, she peers downward. “She acted like that cat was her child,” he says.

“So what was so beautiful to you?” I ask.

“Just that the woman cared so much,” Nadie says. “I come from a very stigmatized place, but the stigma does not define who we are. Everyday life goes on here — very human experiences. Here was this crazy old lady out in the rain in Soyapango, and still there was something she loved.”