



Where Fire and Water Meet

(and sometimes hold hands)

The skinny trail dipped through an arroyo and ground up through a forest of long-armed cardón cactus before dropping fast through the sand and sliding away into the desert.

We rode like happy hounds, loping along the trail and waving our toothy grins into the evening sun. If we looked up we'd have seen the red hills dropping into the green sea, the last sun rays winking around the peaks, or the frigate birds floating on the wind, but we only thought about riding. When darkness fell, we pedaled straight to a café, where we took long swigs of cold beer, sucked on limes, and tucked into fresh fish covered in sweet brown mole sauce. Isn't this what life is supposed to be like in Mexico?

The Sierras sweep south out of California's back door into Mexico, past

Story and photos by Nathan Ward

towns like Tecate, Ensenada, Mulugé, and Loreto before grinding down near the candy-colored condos of Cabo. This is Baja — an eight-hundred-mile-long needle of mountainous land splitting the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean and the serene Sea of Cortez. For the last three decades, Americans have flowed south into this mysterious desert to search for the perfect remote beach, to catch the silver-skinned dorados, or to hide from America and look for love in the eyes of a brown-skinned beauty.

Me too. The first time I turned pedals in Baja was a misadventure spawned from too much time watching the snow swirl outside the Colorado windows. An ex-girlfriend and I had been musing about places where the winter sun shone warm and fish tacos could be had on every street corner. Baja was nearby, foreign, and promised adventure. Plus we figured we would save money and just ride our bikes all the way south from the Mexican border with California.

A week later, after a thick slice of real-

ity pie, we sat in the scant shade of a scraggly tree as the sun beat down like hell's furnace. We experienced heat exhaustion, ran out of water, bonked hard enough to dream of licking the sugar coating off the Advil, and decided that biking the length of Baja was a stupid idea. We beat a hasty retreat north in the back of a old Ford pickup to find that over sixty heat records had been broken in the United States that week. It was hot.

Despite this trial by fire, the desire to mountain-bike in Baja stayed with me. Two years later, I sat in the little town of Loreto watching the whitecaps blow over the ocean. The mission this time around was just as simple: my compadre Brad and I would pedal from town into the Sierra de la Giganta mountains and ride virgin singletrack — mule trails winding from rancho to rancho. Simple, no?

Loreto nestles against the ocean beneath a western skyline of jagged desert peaks. It's a quiet town where dogs sleep in the shade and kids cruise the cobblestone streets in low-slung Chevys. Loreto's sig-

nificance in Baja dates back to 1697 when Jesuit explorer Juan María Salvatierra founded the Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto and gathered the indigenous peoples to convert them to Catholicism or else.

Over the years, the Jesuits came and went along with other religious explorers, ravaging the native population under the guise of Christianity. Today Loreto is a hub for outdoor enthusiasts who fly in from Los Angeles or drive the Trans-Peninsular Highway 1 to fish, kayak, snorkel, and mountain-bike.

Fresh off the plane, we oriented ourselves by sea kayaking, snorkeling, and talking with Trudi Angell, the owner of the oldest sea kayaking company in Baja. Trudi came to Baja in 1976 for an outdoor course and never really left, becoming, as she described herself, a "Baja bum," traveling and exploring the peninsula.

By 1984, she had founded a company, based in Loreto, and started guiding trips throughout Baja. She recently started guiding mountain-bike tours and gave us the

Nuts & Bolts: Baja California

- Baja is divided into two states, Baja California and Baja California Sur. Highway 1 goes all the way from Tijuana to Cabo San Lucas, paved the entire way. Drivers are courteous, but there is no shoulder and many big trucks.

- What to Bring: Unless you stay on paved roads, mountain bikes are the best choice. Make sure your equipment is durable, and carry the tools/spares to make any sort of repair. Brings lots of lube to keep the drivetrain running smoothly in a sea of dust. We used a 100-ounce water bladder and two 22-ounce water bottles each and still ran out of water on some rides. The more water, the better.

- Tour Baja has both good-quality rental



BAJA CALIFORNIA MEXICO
Pacific Ocean Sea of Cortez

- When to Go: Summer is deadly hot. The

best months for touring are November through March.

- How to Get There: There are daily flights from Los Angeles to Loreto. Most airlines in the United States will gouge you for taking your bicycle, but the Mexican airlines usually let it pass as just another piece of luggage. You can drive along Highway 1. Mexican auto insurance is required and is usually available at the border. You'll pay dearly if you don't have it.

- *Baja Adventure Book*. Wilderness Press. Peterson, Walt. A where-to, how-to book about Baja. Includes diving, fishing, boating, bicycling, hiking, cave exploring, and natural history .800-443-7227; 510-558-1666; www.wildernesspress.com/book35.htm

idea to ride the mountain trails. "You ought to ride the mule trails around Rancho Viejo and San Javier. As far as I know, no one has ever done it" she said. How could we resist?

Baja doses out experiences in extremes, and once you leave the coast and head inland, desert and mountains take over with a vengeance. After plates of chorizo and eggs, we started riding with Trudi's clients toward the Sierra de la Giganta and quickly became reluctant friends with dust and the taste of dried sweat on our lips as we pedaled toward El Rancho Viejo.

The road rose steeply past forests of cardónes, dry washes, and then bounded over stretches of washboard dirt roads that had some sections paved with flat rocks. The sun floated overhead, heating the ground, and dust devils spun crazily up and down the road. We traveled upward past an oasis of palms and a gorge with faint geometric designs on the walls, which were created hundreds of years ago by medicine men in tobacco trances.

Near the top, our companions climbed into their support truck while Brad and I shifted to our little chainrings

and made grunting comments on how incredibly steep the road had become as it switchbacked across the rocky hillsides.

We stopped to rest and treated ourselves to the amazing view unfolding behind us.

If you look at a topographical map of



Tortilla maker. Chari bard at work in her rustic kitchen of Rancho Viejo.



Arroyo oasis. Water-filled arroyos are home to palm forests and a haven for wildlife.

Baja, the land rises quickly from the Sea of Cortez, rising to a series of rugged mountain ranges before sloping gently down westward until reaching the Pacific Ocean. From our vantage point, we could look east down the steep face of the red hills that drop to the slim green plain of Loreto and fade into a deep blue ocean dotted with islands. It looked like paradise.

At moments like this, the allure and spiritual pull of Baja become clear: the proximity of rugged desert and soft, inviting ocean feels fat with possibility.

At Rancho Viejo the roosters started crowing at four in the morning just a few feet from my head, shocking me to consciousness. Once awake, the serenity of the high-desert morning swept over me — smooth, cool air vibrating with birdsong, sunlight streaming over the hillsides warming us as we sat with hands wrapped around hot metal cups of black coffee. Chari, one of the ranch owners, made tortillas. Slap! Slap! Slap! She tossed dough

balls from hand to hand and placed them on a hot tin sheet over the fire where they browned in seconds.

Chari placed a tall stack of tortillas in the middle of the table along with a bowl of refried beans, eggs, and shiny green jalapeños. For two days, Rancho Viejo became our base for day rides in the area and the place where we returned to sleep under the palapas at night. When Trudi's clients returned to Loreto, Brad and I packed our gear and spun down the road to the village of San Javier, following the migration of the area's most famous missionary.

In 1699, the Jesuit Francisco María Piccolo founded Baja California's second mission at Rancho Viejo. The priests moved to San Javier in 1720 and built Baja's most striking mission at the foot of a dramatic canyon. As we rounded the corner above the village, the mission towers stood out above the whitewashed buildings and gave the valley a mysterious feel.

The Misión San Francisco Javier stands at the end of a long, wide cobblestone street, its walls made of black volcanic rock and surrounded by green fields. The misión feels old and lies quiet beneath a canopy of palm trees. Water flows through a complex aqueduct system created by the Jesuits, its calming sound filling the air. It's easy to imagine that San Javier has changed little over the years. Children play in the streets, old people gossip in the shade, and lizards scamper along the stone walls.

Like many other places, the world has almost passed over San Javier. A lovely woman, Rocina, sold us tortillas and coffee and said all the young people left for the cities. "Look around you," she said with a sweep of her arm. "What would anyone do for work here?"

Luckily, we just wanted to ride bikes and set out for a huge canyon at the edge of town where people promised there were mule trails. We found a trail without problem and started riding up it — for about thirty seconds. Behind every beautiful flowering desert plant in Baja is a sea of thorns, espinas. The most delicate-looking little poppy presents an arsenal of



Hard hiking. *The trails around San Javier take a toll on Brad's shoes.*

razor-sharp thorns for protection.

We'd ride a short way and stop to pick the thorns from our bleeding skin, victims of teddy bear cholla, chainlink cholla, ocotillo, barrel cactus, and countless other spine-covered plants. Quickly we abandoned our bicycles and hiked the trail. After serving as our own guinea pigs, we found that mule trails were extremely rough, loose, and not very suitable for bike riding.

After giving up on mule trails, we adopted a new tactic of riding from oasis to oasis. Leaving San Javier early in the morning, we pedaled south along the main road from the village. The road isn't paved; in fact, it's a dusty track full of rocks and sand that passes flower-strewn ranchos and dry stream beds and winds into the hills. Our only map was a simple hand-drawn affair, so we had only a vague idea where to go. We turned east at La Mesa Santo Domingo and followed a brackish creek high into the Giganta.

Arroyos split the dry mountain landscape, offering water and lush, green environments. This back road cut through an amazing cardón forest thick as pines on the mountains of Colorado. The higher we

rode, the more the vegetation exploded into a sea of palm trees. There the creek flowed and hundreds of tiny frogs hopped along the shore. In these green areas, we came across settlements where ranchers wrestled a living from this difficult land.

The ride back to San Javier taught us even more about riding in Baja. After just thirty-seven miles, our bikes were dry as a bone and it sounded as if the metal were grinding away each pedal stroke. The ride completely drained us, even on a cloudy, cool day. If we had attempted this ride on a sunny day, Baja would have undoubtedly taught us a more severe lesson. As Brad pointed out, "Sometimes Baja seems like nothing but dry and dusty roads."

Touring the back roads of Baja with a full trailer or panniers is very possible; however, it will take a toll on body and equipment unless you bite it off in small pieces and keep your distances reasonable.

The next day we packed our gear and pedaled over the Great Divide and then down the brake-smoking descent back to Loreto. In Loreto, we met Fernando, one of Trudi's guides and a local mountain bike racer, who showed us the singletrack near town. Finally, perfect trails made by mountain bikers that swept along the ridgelines, descended into steep arroyos, and took advantage of the landscape there above the sea. It was some of the best singletrack I've ridden anywhere and the perfect way to end our trip.

Before heading to Baja, I harbored reservations about traveling to a place so close to the United States, sure that thirty years of American tourism would have created an "ugly American" sentiment there. I was very happy to find that Loreto is nothing like the condo-littered beach-party areas of southern Baja. It's quiet and laid-back. *Muy tranquilo.*

What impressed me about Baja was the unwavering friendliness of the Mexican people everywhere we went, despite the long years of tourism. Everyone we met was open, friendly, giving, and laughed loudly at all the funny things going on around us. It was refreshing to travel in this atmosphere, especially since I hadn't expected to find it so close to home.

In Baja, the close proximity to the sea, mountains, and desert opens up the possibility of adventure around every corner. The only limit is your time and energy. How can you go wrong with a land that embraces fish tacos, cool tile floors, good tequila, ice cream, and siestas during the hot, sunny afternoons? Baja is waiting for you. Grab a friend and go live the adventure! **AC**

Nathan Ward is a photographer and freelance writer living in Salida, Colorado.