

# La Frontera:

## A Tale of Boojums, Boobies, and Birfields



It's my last night on the peninsula. I choose a spot in a sandy wash a few miles off the pavement and settle in around sunset. About then, three guys on quads come racing up the wash, slow down as they go past my camp, then continue. I'm a little concerned as I can't explain why they are here. Why are they here so late in the day? Are they looking for trouble? I'm hoping they have a camp further up the wash. Awhile later it's now near dark, and one of them comes down the wash back towards the

highway. He slows, I wave, he stops.

"Are you camping out here?" he asks, looking at my tent and other camp gear. Resisting a Bill Engvall comeback (here's your sign), I simply reply "yep."

"By yourself?" I look around and try to think of something clever, but simply reply "uh-uh, just me."

"Isn't it dangerous?" to which I reply with a question of my own. "I don't know - are you dangerous?" I'm somewhat serious and he gets my point, but he gets a sheepish grin and says "no, I mean snakes and coyotes." Frankly, snakes and coyotes are the least of my worries.

I admit it. I'm obsessed with Baja. Baja California. Next to Alaska it's one of North America's last frontiers. A place where one can still get lost ... on purpose. A place to escape, rewind, and refresh from modern life. A place where you can spend a life time exploring and never see it all, or learn it all. A place with its own culture, cultural history, and natural history.

Baja is many things to many people. It's a place where people come to party and shop. They spend their time in the border towns and never see the undomesticated Baja. There are the

expatriates that fall in love with the peninsula and move there for their golden years. Then there are the folks that just love the natural Baja. Of course it's not that simple, and there is an overlap in interest. It's the cultural and natural history that brings me back.

I've been making trips to the peninsula off and on for the last twenty years. First to the palm canyons of the Sierra Juarez. Then to Bahia de los Angeles. Now, anyplace my 4Runner will take me is fair game for exploration. The best places are those not documented on the maps, such as they are. Those roads you come to, you turn, and take them just to see where they go.

I must give a warning about Baja. It's not for everybody, especially metro girlie men afraid of just about everything. One must approach Baja well prepared - or not if you desire more adventure. It is a place of self reliance and a place one can get into trouble quickly. We have all heard the stories about trouble at and below the border and seen the travel advisories. Mexican corruption is well known. Add to that Baja's remoteness, and desert hostility, and it quickly becomes a place to be respected, if not outright avoided. Abbey once wrote that everything in the desert either stabs, stings, sticks, or stinks. This is true. So if you decide that between the corruption, fear of some of the locals, and the extreme inhospitability of La Frontera that you just can't go there, good. It will leave more room for me.

The places Baja aficionados don't discuss with strangers. This was my sixth trip in recent years. I usually travel down in spring in the hopes I will catch the desert in bloom. This year I succeeded.

I cross the border at Algodones early in the morning to miss the bustling of this little border town. My route takes me through the small agricultural villages and towns on my way to the Gulf highway, Mexico 5. I go this way mostly because I can't stand Mexicali and its chaos. Plus, I get a reality check. Most of the people in these villages and towns are clearly cash poor. But there is one thing I notice up and down the peninsula. The people, regardless of how much money they have, are happy. As I wind through the agricultural villages children are getting ready to board the buses for school. They are in uniforms, the boys in white shirts and blue slacks, the girls in blue plaid skirts and white blouses. I make one consistent observation. Even though I see women sweeping the dirt between the road and their home, in spite of some of the dilapidation, these kids are clean. They are bathed. Their white shirts and blouses are, well, very white. These are people with pride.

A few years ago I did a trip all the way down the peninsula. I made an attempt to travel on the dirt roads and avoid the pavement. I would travel through small ranchos deep in the mountains. The ranchos with water would be lushly planted with bougainvillea, date palms, figs, and citrus. The ranchos with a small well like you see in the old cowboy movies were not lushly planted. Their buildings were ramshackle with cars upside down in the "yard." I passed one of these ranchos and a child was riding a bicycle on the dirt road. He was smiling. He was happy. He waved at this gringo stranger as I drove by. I stopped at the rancho and the elders came out. I don't speak much Spanish, but the arm full of oranges I had spoke plenty. A few days before I traveled through Ciudad Insurgentes and saw a guy selling large bags of oranges from the back of a pickup. I would guess they weighed 40-50 pounds. I stopped and bought a bag, 40 pesos. They looked good at the time - they were good - but as I drove away I realized I would never eat all those oranges, and the inspectors at the border certainly were not going to let me across with them. So every time I came to a rancho, I gave a bunch away. And each time I did the folks were happy.



My first destination this trip was a palm oasis in the Sierra San Pedro Martir. There are several palm canyons on the Gulf side of this range, and the Sierra de Juarez to the north. When I arrived I notice the cabin at the end of the road is still unoccupied. It is clear it rained in the desert this last winter. Ever since I left Yuma the desert has been green and in bloom. On the dunes around San Felipe there was sand verbena, dune primrose, and literally “forests” of desert lily

making a great show. Here at the oasis the bloom was typical of mid-elevation rocky desert. Yellow brittle bush was along the canyon edge just above the palms. Camp is made here for two nights. Historically I’ve picked up camp each morning and explored a new place. This trip I decide to spend some time kicking back. Relaxing. Reading. Writing. Bird watching. Absorbing. Hiking around. The least Bell’s vireos are calling in the willows along the stream. The canyon tree frogs are vocal in the creek when the sun sets and rises. A coyote in the distance sounds off just as the sun comes up. Nature’s alarm clock.

Day three and I decide to move on. The next destination is Gonzaga Bay for a late lunch at Alfonsina’s, a notable hotel and restaurant right on the beach. This is my traditional stop for tacos de pescado (fish tacos) y cerveza (Pacifico). As usual, the tacos were exceptional, and sure beats my camp cooking and the road dust from the last few days. From there it is a skip to my next camp in the mountains. This canyon has a spring that spills alkali water for a distance down the rocky canyon. The floor of the canyon is a cemented rocky aggregate and the water flows down through a series of small eroded pools. As I make camp I notice the turkey vultures I had at my last camp have followed me here. They must be optimistic.

The next day I get an early start for the drive toward Bahia de los Angeles. There is a new beach on the Gulf side I want to explore and not knowing anything about the route I want to have plenty of time to get there. I’ve stayed on two other beaches nearby, but this one is more remote. Two and a half hours after breaking camp



I arrive at the dry lake bed, and turn toward my beach. The drive to the beach was easy, and only took two hours from the highway. It turns out to be a gravel and rock beach with a broad wash. On the slope to the south is a volcanic cliff covered with poppies.



On day five I decide I like this place so me and my 4 cylinder backpack spend another night. I'm starting to relax. During my stay on this beach I don't see another person either on land

or out on the water. This is unusual as I usually see somebody fishing, or see a shrimp or sail boat. Along this beach is a common plant growing in a strange form. Terote blanco, or one of the elephant trees, grows like a krumholtz pine. Related to almonds and poison ivy, this elephant tree, as the common name implies, has a swollen trunk that looks like an elephant's leg. Instead of growing upright like they do away from the coast these plants have been trained by the wind into a horizontal shape.

I kick back under shade for most of the day reading, writing, gazing. At lunch time a pair of sea lions feed just off shore in front of my camp. They would work together and corner fish which would cause them to boil to the surface. I watch brown pelicans skim just inches over the water, and cormorants dive for meals. Eleven pelicans fly overhead with a drone that sounded like a small model plane, followed by three more. Just off from camp there was a small rock island exposed by low tide. Pelicans and cormorants roosted on the rock until it was submerged by high tide. At sunset a coyote howls in the distance. I whistle back to keep it going.



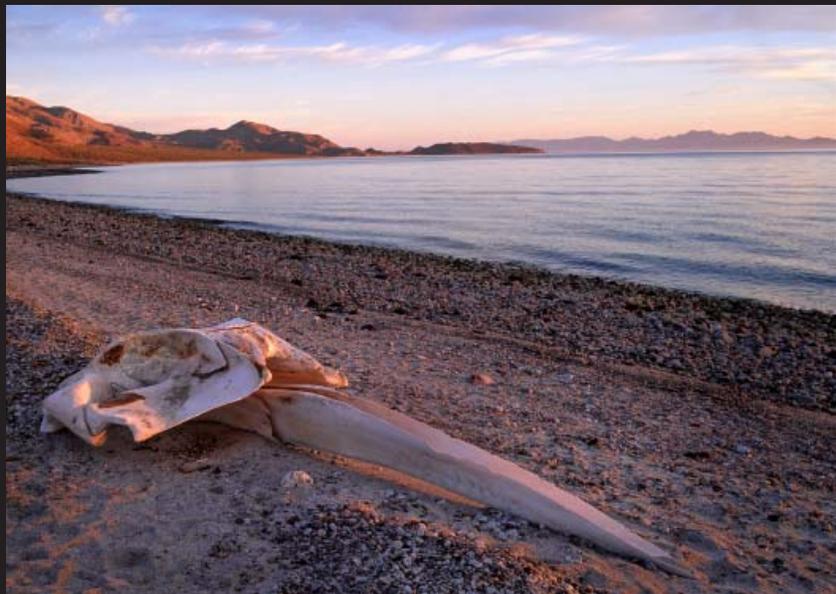
The next day I move to a beach to the south. I've stayed here before and really like this little bay. It's ringed by sand dunes which is not too common on the Gulf coast. The first day is peaceful, but by evening the winds start to pick up and I have some cloud cover. Looks like a weather system is blowing in. That night winds buffet my tent. By morning I'm tired of the blowing sand and move to a rock and gravel beach 10 miles to the north. The wind howls

all day and I don't even attempt to pitch the tent. Sleep occurs in the truck and I'm rocked all night. The next day I've had enough and decide to drive into Bahia de los Angeles. First two stops are for fuel and supplies. I then stop by the Natural History Museum to see Carol, but she is not in, so I get tee-shirts to support the enterprise.

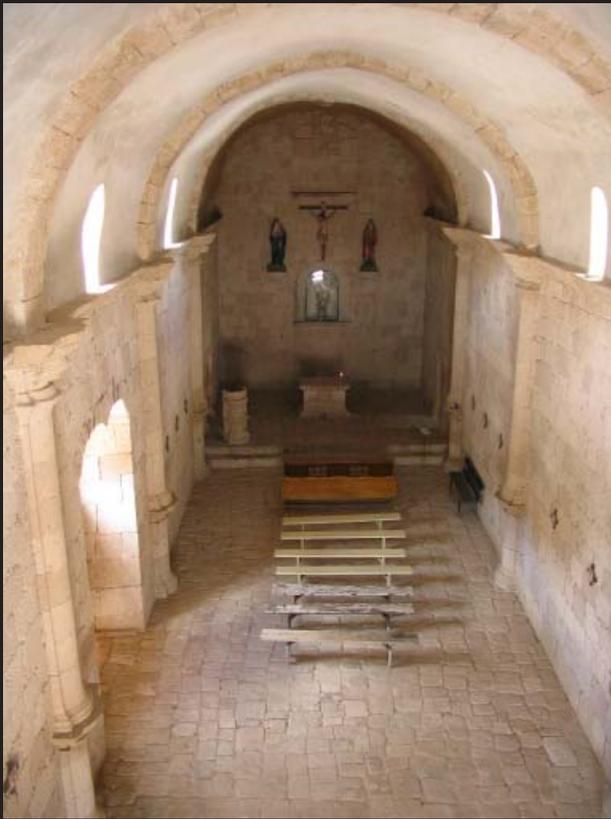
Feeling beat by the incoming weather I decide to spend the night at Raquel and Larry's hotel in LA Bay. This is a small accommodation on the beach that turns out to be a respite from the wind and rain that ultimately blew in that day. There were two big things this resort had going for it. The first, which I promptly took advantage of, was hot water showers. This was remarkable considering they were on solar and off the grid. The second, food upstairs in the restaurant and bar. For some reason the food in Baja just tastes better, especially when I'm not cooking it. I think it's day nine, but I'm not sure.

As much as I would like to have stayed another night at Raquel and Larry's, the budget said I couldn't. So fueled and stocked I start south on the rough road toward Bahia las Animas. I've not camped there before and find a nice spot across from an island at the far end of the road. I spend the day walking up and down the beach watching red-breasted mergansers surf by in front of my camp, and blue-footed boobies with cormorants in diving frenzies just off shore. The boobies fly by, circling over the Gulf. They tuck, wings back, and dive head first for meals below the sea. The dive bomb perfectionist, they hit the water with the skill of an Olympic diver who scores a 10 every time. Just down the beach is the bottom half of a fin whale skull. Lobster fisherman cruise past dropping their traps. I hear a familiar sound and walk through the desert to find it, in sandals, through the prickly pear, palo adán, and ironwood. The bird is an old friend, the verdin. One comes close enough I can see the red patch on it's shoulders.

Near by is a naturalist camp where people come to see Baja. I get the feeling they disapprove of me experiencing the peninsula on its own terms. Nature should come from the Discovery Channel, or experienced while spending the night sleeping in the safety of a yurt with three square meals a day, two attending naturalist, and 24 hour security. Nature should be taught, not experienced. The moon is up and getting fuller. It's so bright I can't make out four of the stars in the big dipper constellation. The wind is starting to pick up, and the glassy Gulf is starting to get choppy.



The next day I head back to LA Bay, top off the fuel tanks, and take a detour to Mission San Borja for a quick tour of the vineyard and stone block mission. It has been about 18 years since



I've been to the mission, and Henry is there to show me around. The inside of the mission is as I remember it, but Henry treats me to the view from the roof. The grounds have changed, more people live there, and there is stabilization work in progress on the old adobe part of the mission. My visit there is short as my destination for the day was not Mission San Borja, but Mission Santa Maria to the north near Cataviña.

One of the worst roads in Baja is the road to Mission Santa Maria. Getting in is usually not a problem - getting out is. The road to the mission is rough and takes some time with two steep, rocky, loose climbs to get out of the canyon. When I finally get to the first palm oasis my travel is blocked by a 40 foot palm log across the trail. It's dusk and at that point I decide to retreat to a ridge above the oasis of blue palms and call it a day. I'll deal with the log in the morning.

The next morning I'm up after a chorus of tree frogs in the creek sound the morning alarm. I drive down to the log and decide I can get around it, and hope I can pull it out of the way from the other side. This was a failed attempt, and the palm log is probably still there. The tool of choice, which was not in the truck, was a bow saw. Next trip. I decide to explore below the mission for other camping options. The trail continued below the mission for about another mile. The canyon has an intermittent stream and was lined with both blue and fan palms. While the camping would have been acceptable in the wash, I decide to camp on the mission grounds. I spend the day walking around the canyon enjoying a fine spring day. Unlike previous years it's not miserably hot. In fact, the nights have been chilly.

The mission grounds are actually in a side spur from the main canyon. Hiking up the main canyon takes you to several nice pools. Some shallow, some deep, all cool and refreshing on those hot spring and summer days. The water at nose level has a faint smell of soda. This is a remote place where one does not need to worry about modesty. After the pools the canyon becomes drier, but is still lined with a mixture of blue and fan palms. My day is spent hiking up this canyon, and kicking back in camp.

The next morning, before the birds can say "sunrise" I'm up, packed, engine lit, and I'm on the trail to drag myself out of the canyon. The climbs out are rather infamous. I claw and scratch my way up to the top of the canyon. At the top of the grade I pull out a Pepsi and a package of tortillas - the breakfast of champions. Celebration for getting out. The first two and a half miles out of the canyon takes me a smidgen more than an hour.

In the preface to *Flora of Baja California*, Dr. Wiggins in several places thanks his companions for



enduring the “discomforts” of Baja, including the “dust, heat, swarms of gnats, travel over rough, dusty, unpaved roads ....” This gets me thinking, and I realize that his experience is still true today. Not much has changed in 50 years. The discomforts are still there and for some reason people keep going back. Getting from point to point is sometimes an ordeal and once you get there you have to deal with the heat, cold, wind, blowing sand, bugs, policia, military, and banditos - though some would argue the last item is comprised of the two before it.

Baja is changing. Back in college I had a chance to travel to the peninsula before the main road was paved all the way down. I didn't do it, and regret the decision to this day. Highway 5 from San Felipe to Gonzaga Bay and beyond will be paved some day soon. They are doing it now. It's an old saying that “bad roads

bring good people.” All the best roads in Baja are rough. I hope the road never gets finished because it would mean the end of the desolation. Best to see it now, while you can.

I'm often asked why I keep coming down here. I could give Ed Abbey's response and just say “to be alive is to take risks; to be always safe and secure is death.” But I think it's more than that. Steinbeck in his *Log from the Sea of Cortez* comes close,

“If it were lush and rich, one could understand the pull, but it is fierce and hostile and sullen. The stone mountains pile up to the sky and there is little fresh water. But we know we must go back if we live, and we don't know why.”

As I head east down the wash toward the highway on my final morning I have an auburn moon setting behind me in my rear view. I think of the poorwill calling at dusk yesterday evening, the great horned owls that hooted all night, the pair of coyotes that came into camp and starting howling at 3am, the diving boobies and hunting sea lions from the days before, and the carpets of wildflowers. Why do I keep coming back?

