

Baja Adventure April 2003

Day One

I cross the Algodones border at 7:30am. Border staff just wave me though, but I stop anyway to ask about the Immigration Office. I know it's on the right, but don't know where. Well, it's right in front of me. The curb in front is red so I ask if I can park there. Yes. As I walk up to the door I see the office is empty, the door is locked, yet the sign in the window says open 06:00-22:00. Just then a bell rings and two guys come scurrying from the back and open up.

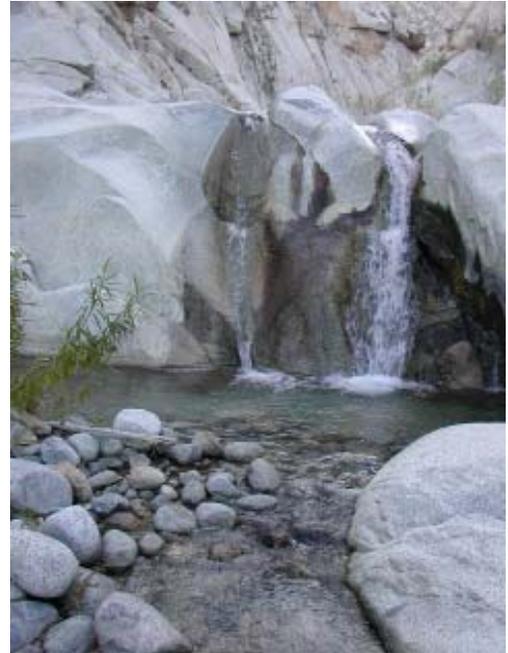
The FM card was easy. They ask me where I'm going and for how long. I tell them I'm going down to Puertecitos for 6 days, but would like the FM for 180. Well, turns out if you are in Mexico less than 7 days there is no fee. No brainer. Make it out for 7 days. Stamp, stamp and I'm on my way.

As expected there was a military check at the junction of Mex 3 and Mex 5. I'm not asked anything, but am quickly told out of the truck, open the back (shell). They look under the seats, glove box, behind the seats, under the dash, and inside all my bags. Even the case for my glasses was inspected. The search in the back was more abbreviated and he only looked at what he can see standing on the bumper (didn't drop the tailgate). He did become momentarily alarmed when he opened up one of the boxes and saw my timing light. Looks like a big chrome pistola. We both chuckled with that and finally he told me I could go. Fortunately, I've had good advice and really wasn't concerned. It's their country, they are doing their job, and they are extremely pleasant. Note for next time ... take off my sunglasses.

Next stop was San Felipe to top off and acquire cerveza (\$59MXN for a 6-pack with bottle deposit). Gas was \$6.34/L, again Premium. I'm now at full capacity, 36 gallons, and my rear springs are begging for mercy.

Leaving SF I head north on Mex 5 to the El Dorado Ranch turnoff. The road was in the process of being graded and was smooth through the development. That changed after awhile and my 30 mph speeds became 20 mph and eventually 15 mph. Time to air down.

The road over the Sierra San Felipe wasn't bad, but did require some slow driving. Following the SCORE route I dropped down into Laguna Diablo, dry, and start trying to find my way. A rancho was in the way and I needed to go around. I had lunch in a mesquite grove and finally found Rancho Santa Clara. The Almanac shows a road leading toward Canada el Diablo and sure 'nuf, it's there. I stop at the end of the road (N31°04.362, W115°21.957, 2001 ft elev, NAD27).



It's 14:30 so I decided to take a walk toward the canyon. I find a cow trail heading that way, and soon discover rock cairns. It leads through the "forest" directly to the edge of the massive wash, complete with running stream. I drop down and start the boulder walk up the canyon. I'm at the mouth in about 30 minutes. The canyon narrows into a series of granite falls. One becomes impassable, at least for me. It has a pair of cables attached to assist those who would wish to continue further. I stop, strip, and take a dip in the plunge pool. The water is quite refreshing and I take the time to cool off and soak. Life is good.

There are some things blooming in the canyon. Prickly poppy, phacelia, monkeyflowers, and I find a seep with bracken fern, maidenhair fern, stream orchids, and a single fan palm. Birds are everywhere. Flickers, ash-throated Flycatchers, canyon wrens, desert sparrow, white-winged dove, gnatcatchers, some kind of warbler, even a lone meadowlark clearly out of place.

I hike back to the truck and decide it's cerveza time. Welcome to Baja, Bushrat! After a rest I hike back to the canyon with the cameras. The sun was going down over the mountain and the canyon was now in shade. As I drop into the main wash I'm surprised by something in my periphery. A buzzworm, *Crotalus ruber*, Red Diamondback. It sees me and we both decided neither are a threat and continue on our respective journeys.



The hike back up the canyon was quick, and I did find more stream orchids. I also found a dead horse and a dead cow, both very near the stream. Guess I won't drink the water, eh.

As I write this now it's dark and I've had dinner. Off in the distance I hear burro. Noisy bastards, probably screwing. Here in the dark I contemplate. I'm truly alone, nobody for miles. No lights except for stars. It's getting almost impossible to find solitude like this in the States. Development is creeping closer to the remaining open lands we have and more people are crawling into them attempting to find the allusive solitude, and their standards are low. And for people like me, with very high expectations, it's damn near impossible. Truly, I haven't felt this alone in probably 20 years. Even southern Utah is too crowded for me now days. Seems Baja is the last frontier. I guess this gawd forsaken wasteland is my last hope for maintaining sanity. Just don't tell anybody. They might come here too.

Day Two

I'm awoken to a Sonoran Serenade. White-winged doves, gila woodpeckers, curve-bill thrashers, scott's orioles ... to name a few. As I look around I notice the cardon have bloomed in the night, as

have the senita. It is a glorious morning in Baja. Ruby-crown kinglets and black-tailed gnatcatchers come to visit while I eat breakfast. Cholla are also blooming everywhere.

I pack up camp and hit the road early. It will be a long day exploring my way to Matomi. First stop, Providencia Canyon. Death came to Chevy here. As I climb up the road I notice an oil drip down the middle. As I reach the top the drops get larger. I pull around the corner and there sits a stripped S-10 2WD, nearly new. What a way to go. I turn around, not wishing to have its karma instilled on me. I take a different fork in the road, assuming it will lead to the road I was originally on. It does passing Rancho La Providencia.



Coming down the road I see a water spigot along the road. It's dripping. Um, could this be my lucky day. I stop and turn on the faucet. It works. After crossing the dry lake bed my windshield was in need of rinsing, but my washer rez was empty. I fill it up, then proceed to dump water on the glass, wiping with my hand to get the dust rinsed off. Visibility! Onward.

A little further down the road I'm approached by a truck with three gringos in the cab. They stop, exchange "holas" and proceed to ask me if I have a lug wrench. Seems the local in the back of their truck, who I just notice, needs to remove a tire. Si, I have something that might work. The gentleman hands out a lug nut and I pull out my tools. He drops it in. Perfect match. So, we turn around and proceed to a clearing at another rancho where I find a Chevy sitting on a rim and a buddy under a tree. No rubber, just a rim. The guy grabs a shovel and begins digging under the wheel. Seems the jack the gringos loaned them didn't raise the truck high enough. Solution, the high lift on the back of my truck. I get the truck high enough and he pulls the rim. How the heck he removed two of the five lugs is beyond me, but there were three on the rim and two in his hand.

I lower the truck and we exchange gracias and por nada. Of course I don't know Spanish, but I can get by. A hand shake and a grin go a long way.

The road continues south, dodging various ranches along way. Several gates need to be opened and closed. Just before Canon Parrel I cross a wash with tracks. I look at the Almanac and decide it's Canada el Berrendo. South I go. It's a broad sandy wash with many desert willow. I find palm debris, I smile, and continue. Blue palms are abundant here and on one rocky slope they go all the way to the top, lining the ridge. Several groves are also in the canyon and I stop to take a break. No water is found in any of them. Note for future, come back, camp, and hike up the canyon.

I exit back to the road and finally come to Canyon Parral. I'm struck with confusion. The Almanac shows a road heading ENE from the mouth of the canyon. After driving up the canyon a ways, then back down I can find no road. I pull out the GPS and park the truck where the junction should be. It's

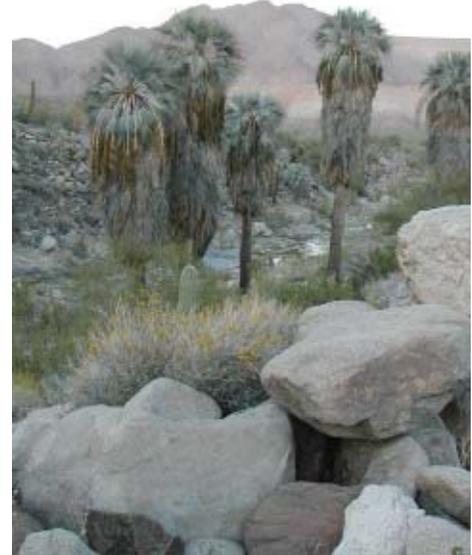
obvious where I need to go, but there is no route. Perplexed. I see a track going down to the wash into some trees. I take it and from there I guess and start down the wash. This leads to new Baja Pinstripes as the wash is brushy. It's also very rocky and sandy, and for the first time this trip I need to turn the hubs. Finally I find a two track and attempt to follow. Clearly I'm not on a trail, but the GPS indicated I'm going the right way. I push on.

After a few miles I notice a fresh set of tracks ... a set that come up and then turn around. Bingo, race route. I turn SE and start the slow drive on the course. It's full of woop-de-dooos and keep my speed below 15 mph. It's slow, but I'm moving in the right direction, toward Matomi. Thanks to the race I'm able to navigate without problem. At Matomi I drop down into the canyon, very slowly. It's steep and rocky. Once down in the wash I start up the canyon. It's rough almost the whole way up and I choose to keep the hubs locked. Thank gawd for low range.

About nine miles up the canyon I suddenly see the tops of palms. What ho, I'm there! I then see the shack ... and the four vehicles parked around it. I'm not alone.

Ok, Baja is suddenly not big enough. During my journey today I stopped to help the two locals along with three gringos ... passed a truck loaded with workers ... ran up onto a pair of vehicles while exploring Canada el Cajon ... now this. Well, after coming up that road I'm not going back down. I stop to say hello. They are gringos that came up the canyon from the coast. They stay at Santa Maria seasonally and make a trek up Matomi every year. I'm offered hot dogs, chili, and cerveza which I accept, and they are good, very good in fact. But, I'm here for solitude, so after awhile I pick myself up and drive up the canyon to a bare patch in the cholla. Home for the night.

My spot over looks the palm-lined gulch, and as I write this I hear tree frogs chorusing in the creek, crickets chirping, and poorwills calling. What a special Sonoran evening.



Day Three

I awaken to a Sonoran encore of white-winged doves, gila woodpeckers, and curve-billed thrashers. New members to the chorus include ash-throated flycatcher, gambel's quail, cactus wren, canyon wren, and what ho ... do I really believe my ears? I walk over to the gorge and look. Willows, we have a special guest soloist this morning, the least bell's vireo. Listed as endangered back in the mid-80's this species lives in riparian habitats, or at least what's left of them. My morning hike turns up at least four singing males. This is a special treat.

My morning walk is up the canyon about a mile. I follow cattle trails through the scrub and find several shrubs blooming ... Baja dalea with its sweet foliage, the red pompoms of Baja fairy-duster, yellow desert senna. On my return I hear my neighbors are up and they are starting their motors. We all must be getting close to departure.

I leave before them and stop to say good by, though I suspect they will eventually pass me. It doesn't take long and they speed on ahead. But the lead doesn't last ... carnage. The sand rail has broken a trailing arm, bad. They discuss options and finally decide to take one vehicle out to Santa Maria where they are from and bring back a trailer. Once again I say good by and wish them luck.

The canyon was not at all a problem. The soft sand kept my hubs turned, but only for that reason. There were several interesting sections. In two spots the canyon narrowed and the walls came up high on both sides. In another spot there were bands of sulfur-bearing rock which gave the canyon an interesting color. The original plan was to explore the road up to the El Apache sulfur mines and the trail that leads up Las Blancas. I find the track to Las Blancas, but can't find the route to the sulfur mines. Oh well, down the wash I go. It's warm and the beach is calling me.

Finally I reached the alleged pavement on Hwy 5. My Matomi amigos suggested I go up the road about two miles to Los Olivos, drop down to the gulf, then drive up the beach to a spot of my choosing. I end up at the mouth of Matomi Wash just as the tide is starting to go out. I fish for a few hours catching striped bass and one small trigger fish. I release all and wonder where their daddys are.

I'm not much on birds that frequent water, but I do recognize a few. Brown pelican, frigatebirds ... magnificent frigatebirds, Heermann's gull. It's a typical Baja sunset as I sit in the shade bare-toed on the beach.

Day Four

I rise with the sun and load the truck. Objective today is a day trip further south on Mex 5. On the way to the road I spook a great horned owl out of a palo verde and see an osprey on a post. I've always wanted to drive the road to Puertecitos. I arrive there before the chickens are up and figure what the heck ... Gonzaga Bay here I come.

I must admit the road to Gonzaga sucks ... its reputation is well deserved. Most of the time it was 15 mph in my leaf-sprung truck and 20 mph on the good parts. I air down some more. Unexpected was another military check point just before the Bay. Once again I'm out of the truck opening the back. The nice young man checks everything, include my cerveza count (three empties, three in the ice chest). His search is less intense than San Felipe, but he was still in everything. Note to self ... take off the dang sunglasses. This was a pleasant stop with smiles on both sides.

I arrive in Gonzaga Bay a little early for lunch, but I'm hungry so I find Alfonsina's and order tacos de pescado and a Corona, not in that order. The tacos come and they look fabulous. Also served are frijoles and a very mild salsa. The beans don't look



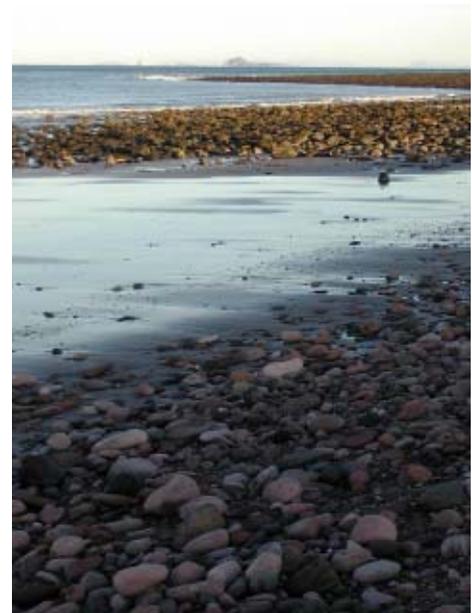
very good, but I try them anyway. I scrap out the bowl, lick the spoon, and would have licked the bowl, but manners dictate otherwise. Looks were deceiving ... those beans were fabulous.

I sat there at the table for awhile looking out the window at the bay, sipping another Corona. It's times like these when I could become a spiritual man. Looking at the bay I come to the conclusion that a Greater Being must exist to create such a beautiful place. Then I realize they also would have created us to screw it up. I give up on the thought. Total tab for 3 tacos and 2 Corona ... \$9. I give the nice lady 120 Pesos. She smiles, I think we are even.

I jump back in the truck and expect an easy pass through the check point. Har! As I pull up a truck load of solders is heading into town. Lunch time. The guys that checked me in before were on that truck so there are three new kids at the check point. I'm out of the truck again. This time the guy opens my bags, does a cerveza count, even counts my Pepsi, looks in the kitchen box. Again, not as intense as San Felipe. These were nice guys who's English was as good as my Spanish, i.e. almost none. We play back and forth and he finally makes it clear that he wants my last three Corona for he and his two buddies left behind. Not gonna happen! I say "you trabajo, no cerveza" and he seems to understand.

On the way down the coast I spied several beach accesses for possible camping. I check out a little bay near Punta Santa Isabel, but leave mostly because the day is still young and the fish don't bite. Next stop was on the south side of Volcan Prieto, but it's occupied so I leave. On the north side of the Volcan I find a deserted beach and make home for the night. I fish, but catch nothing but rocks as the tide is going out. The wind is also picking up so I delay dinner assuming it will quiet down after sunset. I'm wrong and cooking is done in the wind using the truck as a wind break.

Sunset was nice as usual. I take a few pictures of the rocks at low tide and the islands south of the Volcan. This beach is nice, but a little trashed. Over at one end is a pile of shells, mostly clam. Somebody has been busy. I notice at low tide that all of the oysters have been pried off the rocks. Too bad.



Just before the sun sets a flock of brown pelicans flies over. I count about 80 birds, but the binos show a few frigatebirds mixed in. They circle high over the water moving mostly south. New this evening are the hawk moths, or white-lined sphinx. I hadn't seen any primrose blooming so I have no idea what they are feeding on. They started coming out just as the sun was setting and were actually getting in my face. Right now they are buzzing my lantern.

I retire after dishes. With this wind it could be an interesting night. I choose to sleep in the truck.

Day Five

What a sucky night. The wind that postponed my dinner blew all night long, only stronger. There were times when I thought the truck was actually moving up the beach. Just before sunrise I decide I've had enough and I'm not waiting for the alarm. Before 06:00 I'm packed and on the "road" to Puertecitos. It's the same 15 mph road I came in on, but I'm not in a big rush. Puertecitos is reached at 06:30, still sound asleep. I continue on.



Finally I reach the good pavement and at the resort of Santa Maria I pull off to air back up. As I'm waiting for tire #2 one of the Matomi group is pulling in after a trash run. We talk and he asks if I made it to the beach the other night. Of course I did and told him about the fishing. He needs to get back and I need to change to another tire, so we say good by.

Aired up I start down the great pavement toward San Felipe. As I come over a rise I see it ... another military check point just before the airport turnoff. I remove my sunglasses and put on my regulars. I pull in .. exchange "holas" ... and get ordered out of the truck. Damn! These guys are not as friendly as the others. They search the cab, glove box, under the seats, behind the seats. I then unlock and open up the back (learned tactic to keep them from searching the cab and the back at the same time). They open my clothes bag, ice chest, food box, kitchen box, but not the side boxes. Go figure. I'm free to go and still not in jail. I'm trying to be positive.

In San Felipe I stop for gas at the same Pemex, at 09:00. Gas is still \$6.34/L and I take 78.86L (21 gallons). I do some quick math and figure that's about right. Pumps are good. I continue through town, then out of town.

Next is the planned military stop. Screw the sunglasses, they are staying on. I have the feeling these guys are not looking for guns, ammo, or drugs. They just want to look at my stuff. Either that, or I look like the criminal element.

This time ... open the hood, they search the fenders. Two of them search the cab. Under the dash, they pull everything from under the seat and leave it out, search behind the seat, but don't open the first aid kit or the Safety Seal kit. My CamelBack gets attention for the first time hanging off my head rest. "Open it." He figures it out real quick and shares his discovery. Smiles all around. They walk around with a golf ball on a stick and tap the fenders, auxiliary fuel tank (full, one reason I stopped!), tap the Blitz can (full), tap the side of the truck bed, but don't tap the side of the cab that I have stuffed with fiberglass (whew). Next is inside the bed. Same routine. Ice chest, food box, kitchen, clothes bag, sleeping bag. Then they start on the side boxes. Ammo can gets acknowledged, but not removed or opened. Timing light, only this time the kid has no idea what is it. He pulls it out, looking at it from several directions. He becomes alarmed! Schit, I'm in trouble. Others come to

look, and one knows what it is, whew, again. He puts it back, but unlike before there are no smiles or chuckles. (Note to self, put it in one of the boxes further toward the cab that they never checked).

Adios, I'm outta here. Coming back to the border the Policia are out in force. I keep my speed down. Coming through one town I didn't notice the Policia that snuck in behind me. I thought there was a Suburban there and it looks like the cop pulled in when I wasn't looking. It doesn't matter since I'm following a piece of farm equipment in tow. We pull up to a red stop light. Farm equipment goes into the left turn lane while I go straight. Traffic in front of us has a green light, but we are still red. Farm equipment makes the left on red. BUSTED! Policia peels off my tail and goes after him. That's when I realized he was there. I'm still outta jail.

I make one last stop for fuel hoping to make it home without any more petrol stops, plus I wanted to burn up more Pesos not wanting to take them home. Fuel on Mex 2 was \$6.36/L for Premium and \$5.66/L for Magna. More than San Felipe, and their pump seems correct. I continue on and cross the Algodones border at 12:57 after only an eight minute wait in line. Not sure it was worth it since the two lane roads through those little towns was mentally exhausting, especially since every single one seemed to have a swap meet going on causing traffic jams.

I'm now in a motel room five hours from home with a raging headache. Guess I'll go down to the truck and get some of those drugs I have stashed in the first aid kit behind the seat.

