

Baja Adventure: March 2007

Part One, Border to Bahia Asuncion

I'm about tenth in line just before the gates open at 6am. The crossing at Algodones is usually very easy. I proceed south, winding my way through the ag fields until I hit Mex 5. Onward to San Felipe for fuel and cerveza. The road south is now paved to Puertecitos so the days of the man-sized potholes are, at least for now, gone. As usual, the road from Puertecitos to Gonzaga Bay sucks. It's a slow drive, but I like what the Baja has to offer here, so I just take my time and enjoy the view. At Gonzaga Bay I stop at Alfonsina's for lunch, and top off the tank. There is an old rule that you never "pass gas" in Baja. You just never know about availability.

I proceed south to Coco's Corner, but don't stop, taking the road east toward Calamajue (pronounced Cal-a-ma-way). I had heard from a Baja Nomad about a road that takes off this road to a beach south of Calamajue. That was all I really knew, though I did find a road on Google Earth that gave me a rough place to start looking. Sure enough I find the road. It's a good road only requiring low range in a few spots because of a necessity to go slow, not because of any challenge. There is one hill climb, then a short drive on a knife ridge, then a steep drop into another drainage. From there the road follows in a wash bottom to the Gulf. A nice camp was found at the south end. This spot was identified as Ensenada Grande later by Sr. Coco.

The fishing here was great. I caught 4 cabrillo (?), one stripped bass, and two barracuda before dinner (second one bit me trying to remove the lure, bastard). They were all released. Ensenada Grande is a gravel beach, composed of medium sized cobbles. There were whale bones everywhere, along with lots of trash. Sea of Cortez was glassy calm.

During the night I kept hearing boats off the bay, mostly between 2-4am. Ummmm.

The next morning I'm up and try fishing with no luck. So I pack up and drive out. That one steep climb was not much, though the locker (ARB) was armed just in case. I arrive at Coco's Corner at 10am local time (PST). I walk in and Coco asks "coke or beer." I think a minute and reply "cerveza" ruling that it's really 11am MST, where my watch is set, and that's late enough. Coco saw me drive off toward Calamajue yesterday, and asked where I stayed. So I tell him. He looks perplexed, so I pull out the map and show him. He says the place is Ensenada Grande then proceeds to tell me it's used for narco drop-offs. I tell him about the pangas at 2am, and he said they were not fishing. Ummmmm.



Drive out was 9.65 miles to the Calamajue road. Took 1:07 hours with a moving average of 8.6mph.

After the cerveza, I proceed to Mex 1. The road from Coco's to the highway wasn't too bad, just some lousy washboard. I take the turn-off for Bahia de Los Angeles (BOLA) with the intent of camping off the Yubay wash road. This road takes off at the Laguna Agua Amarga dry lake bed, goes north across the playa, then drops into a wash draining into the Gulf. I've camped here several times, mostly at the northern end near Bahia Guadalupe. This time though I wanted to explore a sandy beach I could see from Bahia Guadalupe to the south. This place is labeled Ensenada Alcatraz on the map. Google Earth showed a road to this beach.



I turn south toward this beach, pass several other small bays, and realize that in order to get to the sandy beach on the far south side I would need to drive on a slightly wet playa. After getting stuck on Boca Grande last year, I was gun shy, and it wasn't going to happen. I turn around, and find one of the other small bays just to my liking. In fact, I liked it a lot, a whole lot. Water was calm and clear and there was a great view of Bahia Guadalupe and La Guarda. The fishing was not good, and there were sting rays swimming around me as I fished. Sunrise was great and I blasted a bunch of film and pixels here.

Birds were good too. Great blue heron, Pacific loon, some kind of merganser.

I start to pack up and realize my sandals, which I set out to dry yesterday, were missing. I notice coyote tracks all around the camp and sure enough they picked them up. I found them about 20 feet away on the dunes. I drive back out to the BOLA road and drive into BOLA for fuel and tortillas. Only one station was open, and they only had one pump working. It's too early for the Museo, so I continue south on the dirt road ... Boca Grande, El Arco, the pavement at Mex 1, then south to Bahia Asuncion.

I arrive in Bahia Asuncion late and I have no clue where the Blowhole is. I've seen pictures, and just start navigation by gut feeling. I ask a few local about Casa Juan Arce, and they have no clue. Finally a pickup is coming toward me, and he stops. He says "Shari" and I about come out my window. That was the magic word and he points me off in the right direction. I arrive just at the tail end of Juan's birthday party, meet his sister and niece, and Shari and Juan get me settled in. They market their place as a B&B, but in reality it's just their home. I stayed in Shari's daughter's room, who was off at school in Guerrero Negro.

The next day Juan takes me out fishing. Fishing was slow at first, then Juan moves the boat to the west end of Isla San Roque. Juan grew up on the island when he was very young. Again, things were slow at first ... then we both were hooked up. They were fighters and turned out to be bonita tuna. By the time the day was over we had reeled in 10 bonita, and one sealion who tried to take one from us. Juan had a fight on his hands with that one, pulling the fish in as the sealion would grab on and try to pull it away. In the end we had the fish, slightly scared up.

Juan's brother works as a caretaker on Isla San Roque three days a week (light house). On our way out he was fishing for calico bass off the north end of the rocks, and pulling in a fish every time. He talked with Juan and Juan agreed to swing by on our way in. Some of those fish were for his brother's family in Asuncion.

I told Shari the day before that I had no intention of keeping any fish, and anything Juan and I caught would stay in the village. I would guess that those fish provided about 60 pounds of flesh. That was a lot of fish! Juan took a bunch of it to his sister. I had some for dinner the next day.



The next day I went exploring along the beach north of Bahia Asuncion to Bahia Tortugas. There were several good beaches with camping potential. I also saw several plants that I had only seen in gardens. At noon it was 88°F. There was fog off and on all day.

Google Earth track at: <http://ratstew.home.comcast.net/bajamarch07.kml>
Slide show at: <http://ratstew.home.comcast.net/partone.pdf> (4.8mb)

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Part Two, Los Corrales



I leave Bahia Asuncion and start driving toward Los Corrales, which is on the Gulf side south of San Francisquito and El Barril. I hate to admit that I arrived in El Barril, but couldn't figure out which way to go for Los Corrales. I realized I was making it too hard and started down the wash. The road was sandy at first but not sandy enough for 4WD. Eventually the road became rocky and slow, with occasional washes. The road was also very twisty as it meandered between rocks and bushes. I quickly realized that the route on the map did not follow what I was doing on the ground. It took some navigation, and help from the GPS, to stay pointed in the right direction.

The map shows the road coming down a wash, which is now very rocky. It was later described to me as a boulder field. I have friends who came in using

this route a few years ago. It appears a new route has been graded in. There were a few steep hill climbs as the road crossed over drainages. None were difficult, but low range was needed due to the rough surface.

The road passes a small shrine, a now abandoned rancho, and an old church, all noted on the KML, before arriving at the beach. At the beach the palo blanco trees are dense in the wash and it's hard to see where to go. The road forks and I went right. After awhile I give up and turn around. From my GPS track it appears I turned around too soon as the road was getting close to the beach. I go back to the fork and head north, find a cut to the beach, and make camp. This was a nice sandy beach camp. I would be here two nights.

Coyotes howled off and on during the night and early morning. I enjoyed whistling back to keep them going. Fishing was not good. I did see a few sting rays that evening. In the morning it was high tide. I went down with the pole ... and there was no way I was going into the water. The sand was literally covered with sting rays, overlapping in places like shingles. I must have seen thousands up and down the beach. I've never seen them that thick before.

The mornings were chilly, but the afternoons warmed up into the 90'sF. At 7:30am PST it was 63°F and 48% humid. I spend the day mostly staying out of the sun. Reading, writing, looking at birds, pretty much doing nothing. I enjoyed a pod of about 10-12 dolphin off shore on a feeding frenzy. I went for a walk further up the road I came in on and found it ended not too far from where I camped. There was another camp spot, but I liked where I was better. At the north end there was a rocky point. A few gulls were there with a turkey vulture feeding on a dead sting ray. Shucks.

This road exceeded my comfort level. It was too far away from anything and I was very uncomfortable out there solo without another vehicle.



Slide show at: <http://ratstew.home.comcast.net/losorrales.pdf> (3.1mb)
Google Earth track at: <http://ratstew.home.comcast.net/bajamarch07.kml>

The road from El Barril to the beach camp:

El Barril Jct: N28°17.925' W112°52.581' (miles start here and were logged on the GPS, not the truck)

Gate: N28°14.563' W112°56.443' (6.8 mi)

Right at: N28°12.708' W112°56.392' (9.5 mi)

Gate at top of hill: N28°10.749' W112°56.949' (12.4 mi)

Right at: N28°10.373' W112°56.467' (13.2 mi)

Left at: N28°09.928' W112°55.913' (14.1 mi)

Left at: N28°07.039' W112°57.493' (19.2 mi)

Gate: N28°07.668' W112°55.898' (21.2 mi)

Right at: N28°08.440' W112°54.173' (23.4 mi)

Right at: N28°08.265' W112°53.765' (24 mi)

Left at: N28°06.662' W112°49.225'

Camp: N28°08.728' W112°48.637' (34.7 mi)

Moving time: 3:40 hours; moving average: 9.4mph; odo: 34.7miles

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Part Three, Mission Santa Maria

From Los Corrales I head north to Bahia de Los Angeles (BOLA). This was a relaxed day as I didn't have far to go. On the way up I check out Bahia las Animas. It was nice and I later found out I didn't drive up the road far enough to some good camping past the fish camp. I arrive at BOLA around 3:00 PST and bought sodas and tortillas. The Pemex was closed and I hoped they were not out of fuel. This was a concern as I was going to need gas to make the drive to Mission Santa Maria then to Gonzaga Bay, my next chance for gas. I camp next to Red Mountain just outside of town and have the spot to myself. Happy birthday Bushrat! I kick back with a cerveza and enjoy the sunset. I plug in the MP3 and play Brooks & Dunn.

Oh when love dies
You can't bury those memories
Oh when love dies
It disappears but it never leaves
When love dies it don't rest in peace

Ya, what he said.



The next morning I'm up and head into town for fuel, then the drive to Mission Santa Maria. One the way I pass a nice FZJ80 Land Cruiser and we get to talking. I find out it's Chris, aka CPG at IH8MUD.com. He heard the Pemex was out of fuel, or out of electricity to pump, and there was a guy that will be selling fuel from drums at 7am. We head that way and sure enough, he is pumping from the back of his truck. I dump the 20L I have on the rear bumper into the truck and get the can refilled, \$160MXN. In theory this should be enough. I part, with Chris and his friend going south, and me going north.

I get to Santa Ynez (Santa Ines in the Baja Almanac) and decide to check if there is gas in Catavina. As hoped there is a women there siphoning gas from 5 gallon cans. Again I dump the gas from the bumper into the truck and have her fill up my NATO can, \$155MXN. I now have enough fuel to hit San Felipe if I have to. Life is good. I go back to Santa Ynez and stop at the restaurant. There are three Canadians there enjoying a cerveza who HIKED to the mission and proudly show off their blisters. I get directions to the road and talk with Ralph about the road. Ralph lives in the canyon, and is a Toyota guy too with a Gen3 mini-truck, modified for Baja. He is concerned about me going in solo. It's only 14 miles, well within my comfort zone so I'm not concerned. Regardless, I tell him if he doesn't hear from me by noon Tuesday to come looking. I plan to come out on Monday so Tuesday gave me a day grace.

I start down the road which is slow, but nothing exciting. After maybe 10 miles the road starts to descend into a valley and gets rough. Going down was not a problem, though I do hit a few rocks. The road into the Mission is somewhat infamous. Some folks consider the road to Mission Santa Maria to be the worst road in Baja. Personally, I didn't find it at all difficult coming in. It was slow driving, but more annoying than difficult. I would learn later that coming out was going to be a challenge.





I get to the Mission about 2:00PST, it's 99°F and 7% humid. I guzzle H₂O, set up shade, and park my hide in the chair. It's too hot to explore around so I wait until it cools off. My Engel fridge is working over time to stay at 39°F. The Mission is set in a palm oasis with Mexican blue palms and Mexican fan palms, though the Mexican fan palms look half way between Mex fan palm and California fan palm. The trunks do flare at the bottom, and they appear, for the most part, to be self-shedding, but the trunks are thicker than expected. There is a stream that runs along side the Mission and a large group of palms just down stream. Ralph said there are pools below the Mission. I will explore them in the morning.

Mision Santa Maria de los Angeles was founded in 1767 by the Jesuits. It was abandoned in 1818. There is a picture taken in 1905 that shows the end walls still standing along with one side wall, and a second building standing with all four walls. Now about the only thing left are the eroded end walls, a pile of mud from the side walls, and really nothing left of the second building. It won't be long before nothing is left of this historic mission. There are some rock corral walls near by.

The wind picked up in the afternoon and my sunshade was having a time staying up. I hoped it would die down

after sunset, but this would not be the case. Finally after sunset I collapse the sunshade and climb into the tent, only to have the wind pick up and start dumping sand on top of me. I take the tent down, empty out the truck and climb in. Finally, the wind does die down.

I get up at first light and the wind is very calm, though it didn't stay that way. The sun shines here late because of the mountains to the east and sets early because of mountain to the west. I decide to hike down to the oasis below the Mission and look for the pools for future reference. I find several worth dipping in and decide to come back after it warms up. At 10am PST it's 94°F and 9% humid and I decide it's time. I load up lunch, agua, camera, GPS, and a towel and hike to the big pool for a [skinny]dip. This pool was deep, bottomless, big, cool, clear but slightly green from the algae, and smells slightly of soda. It's feels good. I soak for awhile then crawl out onto one of the flat rocks on the edge to air dry and contemplate how, at this moment, at least right now, life is good. Yep.

I gather my stuff and decide to explore further. I want to see where the water is coming from. The spring. I thought this was a small side canyon, but this was a major addition. This canyon runs to the north and opens up from the junction at the pools. Palms, both blue and Mex fan, continue up the canyon, though are widely spaced. The water flowed all the way up. I hike up a mile from the pools and decide to turn around. This canyon will have to wait for another day as it's longer than I thought.



I stop again at the bottomless pool for a cool-down dip before hiking back to the Mission. Back at camp it's 102°F and 93% dry. As I'm writing I notice small blisters on my thighs. I seem to remember climbing up through a spurge (*Euphorbia tomentulosa*) on the way out, but didn't think it caused reactions. Guess it does. The blisters were

thin, and weren't spreading or recurring after they broke. File this knowledge away.

Silence is broken by the noise of engines. Sounded like motorcycles, but turn out to be four couples on side-by-side 4x4 ATV's. Looked like a nice way to explore. They stop and chat, and some wander down to the pools for a dip. They are at the Mission maybe an hour, then decide they need to get out before sunset.

That night the wind howled again and I retreat to the truck for a second time. This time, it doesn't calm down and blows all night. I was hoping to run down to the pools in the morning with the camera and take some nice pics, but that didn't happen. The wind was too strong for a tripoded camera. Guess I'll need to come back.

That next morning I get up to tackle the road out. As expected it was a challenge. There were maybe three or four steep rocky climbs. The 4Runner is built for this stuff, but it was still not easy. Between the super low gears and the rear differential locker I was able to get out without too much effort. There was one climb where I didn't think the locker was needed and didn't turn on the compressor. WRONG. I start up the climb, get almost to the top, and the tires break loose and I start to bounce sideways. The truck stalls and I sit there awhile just to think. I turn on the compressor and the locker, left foot on the brake, right foot on the gas, and turn the key to let the starter crawl me forward and fire the engine. For the next climbs I had the compressor running just in case.

Mission Santa Maria to Santa Ynez:

Moving time = 2:23 hours; moving average = 6.0 mph; odo = 14.2 miles.

Pics at: <http://ratstew.home.comcast.net/santamaria.pdf> (5.1mb)

Google Earth track: <http://ratstew.home.comcast.net/bajamarch07.kml>

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Part Four, The Final Days



After checking out with Ralph, I head for Coco's Corner. I stop, chat with Sr. Coco about Ensenada Grande again, and despite the risk decide to head back. In hindsight this was probably foolish. I make the drive to the beach. It's high tide. I grab the pole and catch nothing. I decide I'll try later, and go for a walk up the beach to look for more whale bones, finding lots. The wind was blowing here, but not like at Santa Maria. There were also clouds, high and thin, and I was starting to wonder if weather was blowing in.

I have dinner and decide to try fishing again. It was maybe an hour before sunset, and the tide was further out. Just like before the fishing was great. I had a hit just about every cast, though the fish were different. Mostly stripped bass, with

one fish I didn't know. It had a bump on it's head, long dorsal fins, and a pair of nasty teeth top and bottom. It was a real fighter too.

The sun starts to set, and a panga heads north ... then suddenly cuts onto the beach north of me. I reach for the binoculars, but by the time I get them out, he has already pushed back away from the beach. OK, now I'm a little concerned. It didn't look like he dropped somebody off, but I wasn't sure. He speeds off, gets to the rocky point, just in view, stops, then speeds off. I'm not camping here tonight. I load up and move up the canyon to camp in the wash.

It was a very calm night, full of stars with the cup of the big dipper just in view over the mountain. I sleep well. This was an excellent camp. The dust of the last two weeks is finally starting to catch up with me and my sinuses are getting cranky. At 2am I wake up and notice the stars are gone, covered up by clouds. It's very warm.

I take my time getting up in the morning. I hit Coco's at 9am PST. He is up, but not open yet. He grabs his keys and starts unlocking. Again, he asks "coke or beer?" It's early, but thinking ... New Mexico is now on Daylight Saving Time. That means it's really 11am in New Mexico. Cerveza I reply, again, feeling justified. We talk and I again inquire about Ensenada Grande. I tell him about the panga yesterday evening. I ask him if the beach is safe. He says no, I was lucky they didn't shoot me (!). I ask him if there have been incidents there before. He asks if I saw the dead car. 'Nuff said, I change the subject.

I leave Coco's for La Turquesa Canyon. I get there about 11am, under partially cloudy skies. The goldfinches are very happy. Two ravens hang around all day. The turkey





vultures continue to follow me. They circle in over the spring, land, then take off one at a time, but don't go far. It feels warmer than it is, 88°F and 12% humid, and it feels good when the clouds block the sun. It's calm, for now. Later in the afternoon the wind picks up fierce. Since there is no place to pound stakes I have to use the truck and rocks to hold down the shade.

La Turquesa is a rocky canyon with a spring that flows into a series of pools. I like this canyon because it's very desert, rugged, though it's drier this year than other visits. The shrubs, for the most part, are leafless and brown. The ocotillo are bare but bloom, and the hooded orioles feed on the flowers.

This will be my last night in Baja. A great trip, though the weather was not kind to me the last few days. It howls all night long, very strong winds, and I sleep in the truck. The next morning I'm up early to make my way to Algodones and the crossing. It gets warm. As I pass through San Felipe I see a Nissan truck stuck in the sand. I pull off, realizing I had not earned any Karma Points this trip. This was a young guy with a young lady, very, very stuck. I hook up the strap, and tug them out to the pavement. From there I'm off to the Pemex for my last fuel stop before the border. At the border the wait is about 40 minutes, rather long for Algodones. There was a long line of walk in traffic too, and they said the wait for them was three hours. That's insane as warm as it was.

Observed Birds

I saw more than this, but either didn't write them down, or was unable to ID them.

Pacific Loon
Magnificent Frigatebird
Brown Pelican
Blue-footed Booby
Double-crested Cormorant (?)
Pelagic Cormorant
Cattle Egret
Great-blue Heron
Brant
Merganser (Common?)
California Gull
Ring-billed Gull?
Caspian Tern?
Turkey Vulture
Red-tailed Hawk
Harris' Hawk
Osprey
Prairie Falcon
Gambel's Quail
Ring-neck Pheasant
Mourning Dove
White-winged Dove
Greater Roadrunner
Great Horned Owl
Common Poorwill
Gila Woodpecker
Northern Flicker (Red-shafted)
Ash-throated Flycatcher
Black Phoebe
Say's Phoebe
Violet-green Swallow
Common Raven
Bewick's Wren
Canyon Wren
Rock Wren
Cactus Wren
Black-tailed Gnatcatcher
Logger-head Shrike
Northern Mockingbird
Phainopepla
European Starling
Audubon's Warbler
Savannah Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Brewer's Blackbird
Scott's Oriole
Hooded Oriole
Lesser Goldfinch

