

desert-dry wastes not in a ship, but in a battered red 20-year-old Ford Econoline with my girlfriend, five of her cycling buddies, our mountain bikes, and a bunch of camping gear. We were a motley crew — one Anglo guy (me), three Anglo women (girlfriend Jaana, Vicki, and Jill) two African-Americans (our hulking trip-leader, Wendell, and José, a full-on Rasta complete with dreads, Jiffy-Pop hat, and smoke-nimbus), and our Mexican bro Antonio. Each day, one or two of us took turns driving the van and setting up and guarding camp while the rest of us did our thing. Our mission: ride bikes hard over beat-up mountain roads from tiny town to tiny town, drink tequila and beers, and catch up on our sleep.

After a 15-hour drive from the border, we stopped and spent the night in Mulege, a tiny town on the Gulf side. At sunset, we loaded our bikes into an open boat (known locally as a panga) we'd hired to take us across Conception Bay to Point Conception, the tip of a peninsula that connects to the mainland some 30 miles south of the point. This first ride — back to the mainland and Camp Two on a rutted, sandy Jeep track — was great, but trying. While grinding through rocky, surreal forests of 20-foot-tall cacti and trees that looked like something out of Dr. Seuss, our group of six sustained 22 tire punctures from thorns. We'd used every last tube and patch when — with 10 miles still to go — a very cranky Wendell broke our backs with his 13th flat. After a misguided attempt at cheeriness (we were sure 13 flats in six hours had to be some kind of personal record — and we told him so), we sprinted out and sent the van in to get him.

The next day, we pointed our bikes west toward the mountains and pedaled up, up, up to La Purisma, a beautiful village with a deep, cool spring, many acres of date palms, and lots of suspiciously well-to-do citizens (when

queried, a local told us that the sweet water enabled townsfolk to grow a certain valuable herb with great success). It was a hot, stark, impressive place: In the narrow valley, with its coating of dust, its palms, and its ancient stone aqueducts, you'd swear you were somewhere in Morocco.

And so it went for the next several days as we rode to other equally sleepy and beautiful towns, drank beers, and praised Jah. At San José de Comondú our lush green campsite looked up at a cliff constantly shadowed by soaring vultures. In San Javier we set up our kitchen next to Baja's oldest church (400 years) and slept in an echoing adjacent vaulted antechamber. At the end of our last day of riding — spent swooping out of the mountains down to the Gulf and the town of Loreto — we celebrated with fish tacos, a swim in big, warm surf, and ring-side seats in a bar where we watched drunken American fishermen court a local prostitute.

The drive back took two long days: the malevolent magnetism of hot showers, fresh fruit, and perky stewardesses grew stronger with every passing mile, making us all crabby and confused. We wanted our creature comforts but were already missing the sweet simplicity of Baja. At the border, I bought a three-foot-long ceramic Jesus and a bottle of tequila to help ease my reentry into American society, but Jaana and I still couldn't handle flying home to Denver — not yet. We decided to overnight in a cheap hotel in San Diego. In the morning, we rented a car and drove up to the Lawrence Welk Museum and Theater in Escondido. I strolled the grounds, hugged Welk's bronze statue, and bought a tape and some postcards.

Walking back to the parking lot, we froze in a crosswalk as an elderly couple raced past in a golf cart. They disappeared around a corner, and I smiled in spite of myself. For better or worse, it was then that I knew I was home.

Go South, Gringo: Pointers on Getting There

- **Make sure your ride is reliable.** If it's not, be prepared to empty your car, abandon it, and hitch if necessary. Given the extreme distances between towns, the expense of towing a crippled vehicle to the nearest garage — let alone that of getting any needed parts or making repairs — could be more than your vehicle is worth. Be sure to carry extra fuel, as well as a good spare tire, tools, and extra drinking water and coolant.

- **Buy Mexican insurance before you cross the border.** Mexican authorities only recognize policies issued by companies authorized to sell insurance in Mexico. It ain't cheap — up to \$30 a day (scam alert!). You can buy insurance on either side of the border near Mexicali, Tecate, and Tijuana, but you're better off buying it here. The Automobile Club of Southern California (ACSC), a division of AAA, offers Mexican insurance, as well as maps, a Baja guidebook, and up-to-the-minute information on fuel availability and driving regulations. (800) 361-8496.

- **Pack wisely.** If you're bringing toys, double up on repair materials. If you're biking, bring tools, hardware, extra cables and chain, an extra set of tires, and at least 5 extra tubes and a couple of patch kits per person. Lining your tires with duct tape or Mr. Tuffys is a good idea. Any aerobic activity that takes you away from camp virtually demands a Camelbak or similar water-carrying system. Don't forget the first aid kit. And — F.Y.I. — many renter's-insurance policies cover theft in foreign countries.

- **Extreme extremes.** The weather in Baja varies dramatically depending on the season, your location on the peninsula, and your altitude. Be prepared for temperature extremes. As a rule, the Pacific Coast tends to be much cooler than the Gulf Coast, especially in summer. Inland, the summer heat can be downright Martian.

- **Respect the flora, fear the fauna.** Baja is home to a small but deadly variety of scorpion that packs a very potent, sometimes lethal neurotoxic venom. Secretive and nocturnal, these sand-colored arachnids usually lurk under bark and rocks, which means the tight spaces under tent floors and coolers and the like make for a groovy scorpion habitat. Be especially careful when breaking camp or gathering pieces of dead cacti for fires (though it's ecologically more hip if you don't build fires in the first place). Black widow spiders, fire ants, rattlesnakes, and all manner of spiny, thorny plants and cacti round out the mix. Be careful.

- **A few words about your hosts.** The year-round residents of Baja, as a rule, are hardworking, honest people. Respect them — you are visiting their home. Don't be just another superior Anglo asshole. Above all, be polite, accommodating, and respectful to Mexican lawmen, whatever form they may take.

- **Your papers.** You won't need a passport, but if you're venturing into Baja for more than three days or farther than Maneadero on Highway 1 or Mexicali on Highway 5, you'll need a tourist card. The free cards are available at border crossings, Mexican consulates, and most Automobile Club of Southern California offices.

— Jon Lowden