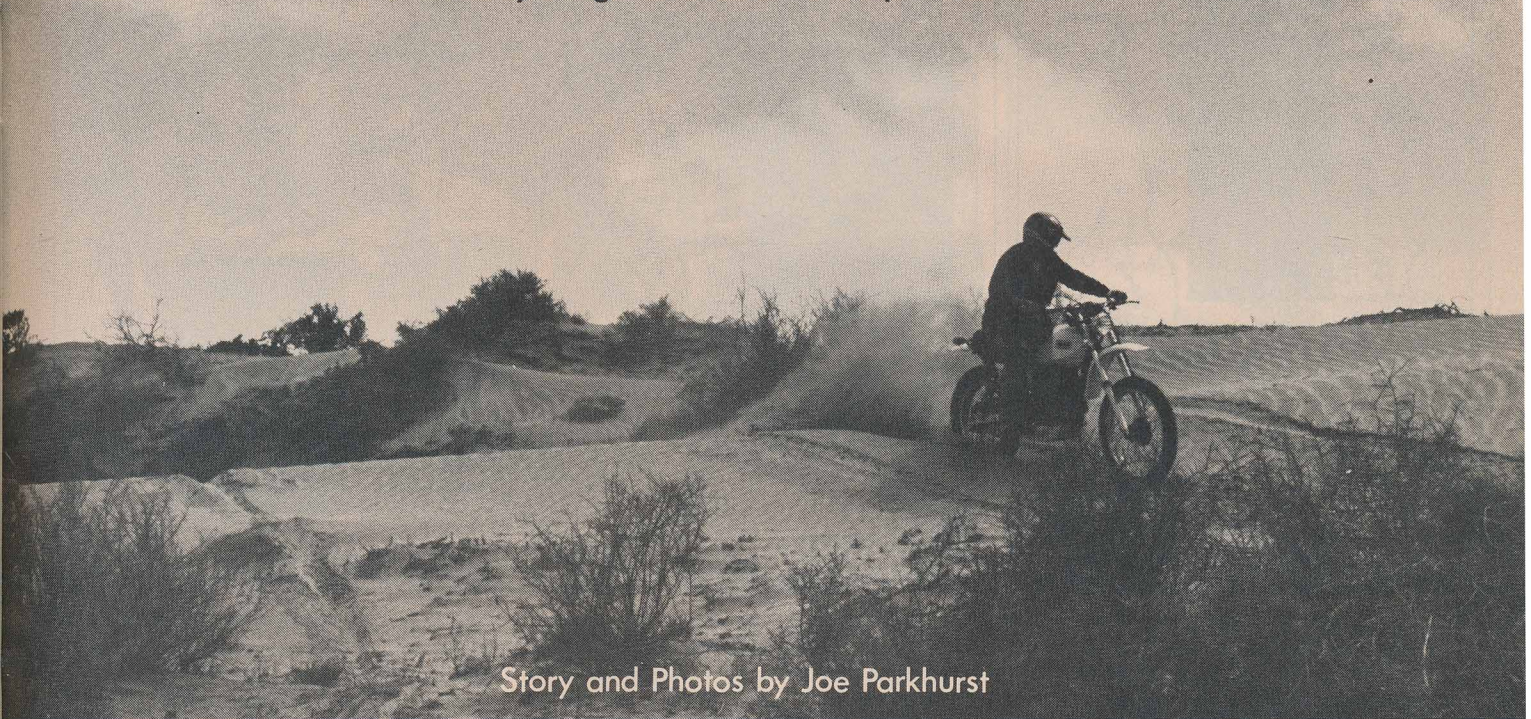


A BIKERS GUIDE TO BAJA

Three Different Ways to Get Into, and Out of, the Off-Road
Motorcycling Paradise of Baja California



Story and Photos by Joe Parkhurst

This story is a condensation of a forthcoming book, The Biker's Guide To Baja, to be published later this year by Parkhurst Publishing Co. CYCLE WORLD readers will be the first to know of it.

Baja is the playground of a few brave and adventurous riders. It is probably the least understood yet most maligned territory south of the U.S. border. It ranks as one of the least civilized and populated areas in the world and certainly includes some of the emptiest country in the Northern Hemisphere. Old time Baja freaks who knew the "old" days bemoan the single thread of highway that now wanders from the ugly border town of Tijuana to the tip at Cabo San Lucas. The president of Mexico at the time ordered the road paved to improve economic conditions of the land. It has certainly helped do that. It connected a lot of previously almost unreachable towns, ranches and villages, allowing thousands of American tourists access to some of the most unspoiled land anywhere. Most Americans go to Baja in campers and motorhomes, never really realizing that just over that range of mountains on their horizon lies country that is today exactly as it has been for centuries.

Spanish conquistadors, then priests and missionaries in the 15th century, were the first to explore this wild land and attempt to make Christians of the Indians whose descendants still occupy Baja. Their origi-

nal trails are difficult to find but several of Baja's most beautiful towns, like Loreto, San Ignacio, Muleje and La Paz were founded by them. Mexico 1 links them by pavement now, but only a short time ago it was an enormous challenge to reach these oases. In approximately 10 short years the challenge has been reduced to a far easier adventure, but one that still requires stamina and care.

Unlike most trail riding country, Baja has something for almost everyone. Pine forests and lakes in the north, arid and parched desert in the low country on the Gulf side, high mountains that are snow-covered in winter, rocky mountains rising out of sparsely vegetated plains, spectacular coasts on both sides that differ dramatically from each other, long sandy beaches with sand dunes sometimes hundreds of feet high, all help make up the character of this fabulous peninsula.

I have selected three separate areas easily reached by car or truck as jumping-off spots for loops that return to where a vehicle can be left in reasonable safety. All are in Baja California Norte, or North. With thought and planning each could be a two- or three-day to one-week ride with camping, ranches or hotels available. I have never been averse to giving advice, so some words on the kind of bike to take seem in order.

Motocross two-strokes are probably the worst kind of machines to take to Baja. Their chassis geometry is unsuited for long

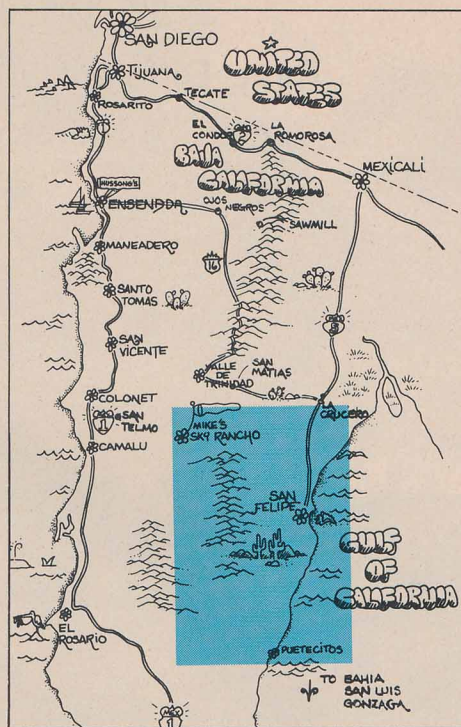
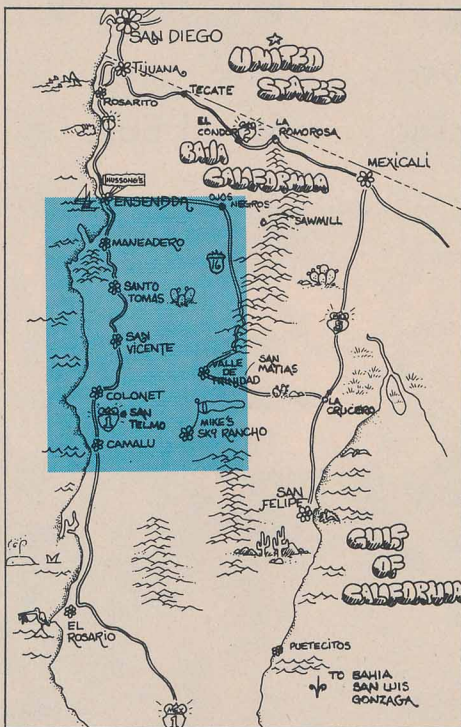
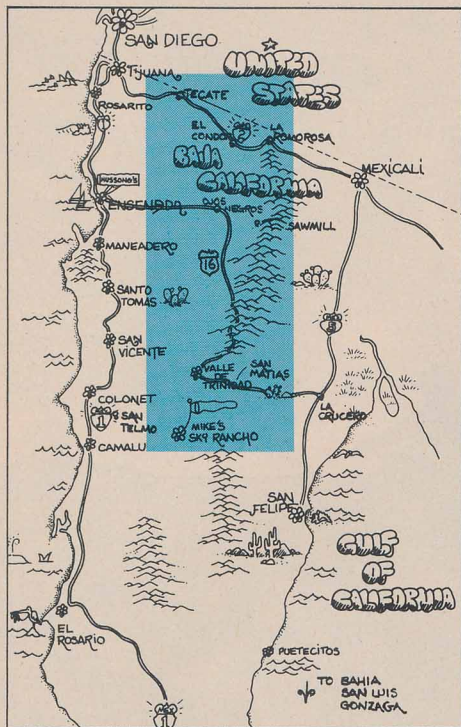
rides. Their engines are too highly tuned to survive long sustained throttle openings and they are usually too radical to run on the rather poor grade of gasoline available. Two-strokes won't idle. Now that may sound like a stupid requirement, but when fences cross roads as they do often in Baja, they have gates. Gates must be opened and if you don't decide from the beginning to close them behind you, please don't go. A luxury you will soon grow to appreciate is to be able to leave your bike idling away while gates are opened and closed.

Motocrossers are also probably the loudest bikes in the world. The noise fatigue from listening to a motocrosser all day for several days is exhausting. If you do take a racer, put a muffler on it. Show a little respect and remember the beautiful silence you are shattering.

Enduro-type bikes are by far the best for any kind of trailing, and are the best for Baja. Softly sprung, long wheelbase machines are comfortable and can handle the roughest going. They may not steer as well as a motocrosser or trials bike, but most roads contain a lot of straights and if you aren't racing you don't have to worry about making berm shots on every corner.

Though lights are not mandatory, I strongly endorse their use. Riding at night without lights is bad, but you won't really appreciate *how* bad until you are miles from any lights on a strange and often dangerous trail.

Fit the largest capacity gasoline tank >



you can get. The ability to go from 85 to 100 miles or more on one tank of gas is a necessity in most of Baja. To be able to go more than 100 miles on a tank is mandatory in some areas. Don Vesco, Malcolm Smith and Pacifico are only three of many makers of tanks that will hold from 3.2 to 4.5 gal., depending on the bike.

A word on two-stroke vs. four-stroke is also in order. I am an unabashed four-stroke nut, let's get that out of the way right from the start. Four-strokes are generally more dependable, will run on poor gasoline (if they haven't been radically modified), are quieter, will idle and generally deliver better mileage. I know, they are heavier than most two-strokes, but remember, you're not racing and will be spending a lot of time on roads and trails where you'll never be aware of the weight of a bike.

Four-stroke bikes suitable for use in the Baja outback are offered by each of the major Japanese manufacturers.

Knobby tires are best, but the trials tire will do fine in most cases. Baja riding today requires some pavement pounding and the trials tire is certainly safer. Large section tires are best, at least a 3.50-21 on the front and a 4.00 or larger on the rear. I prefer the rim saver rear tires like the Barum ISDT because they resist rock damage. The more plys the better. I use six-ply sidewall tires such as Barum and Metzeler, as they stand up better and will generally allow you to ride on them even when flat. Both my Baja bikes, a 400cc Powroll 350XL Honda in a C&J frame and my Yamaha TT500 with White Brothers exhaust and swing arm have 350 Cheng Shins in front and 4.60 Barums on the rear.

I suggest the use of a fuel filter, preferably of the paper element type. Baja silt puts dust into the air so thick you can write your name in it. If you don't want to have to rebuild your engine every time you go down, use a good air filter and seal it well.

My motto regarding tools is: If you think you might need it, take it. One truth shines through when going to Baja. If you break something and it can't be repaired, you are simply out of luck. Don't take a bike you have doubts about. Fit a new chain, tubes, tires, air cleaner, etc., if you are even the least bit concerned about their condition. Check all the nuts and bolts and spokes like you were going racing, use lots of LoTite or something similar. Carry a whole set of extra cables. Lash them alongside the operating ones if you don't want to carry a back pack or some other type of bag on the bike.

A word about cameras. Baja is loaded with magnificent scenery and if you want to capture it on film you have a problem. Large cameras are heavy, bulky and fragile. Yet if you want good pictures and can use a camera, what do you do? It is easy to carry a small, light, inexpensive Kodak or similar camera. In the long run they are probably the best for the job but offer only fair to poor picture results. I carry a miniature Rollie 35, and used it to shoot most of the photography illustrating this article. I've dropped it, fallen on it and generally abused it but it keeps right on working.

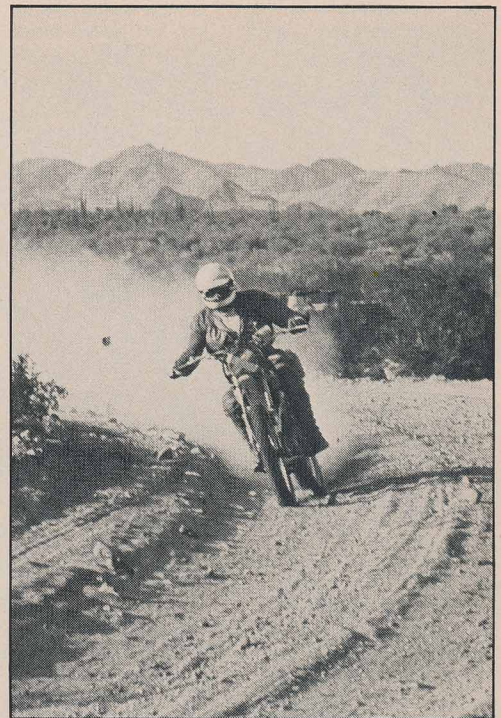
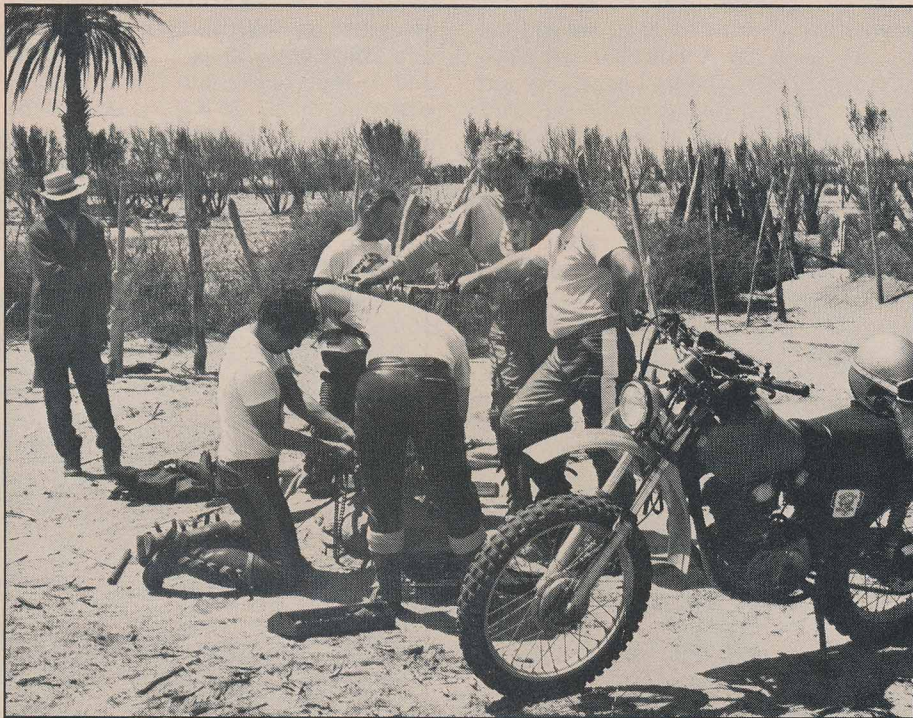
Enough details. Let's go riding.

Ride One begins and ends near Tecate, a small town where the beer of the same name comes from. East of San Diego, California, take 8/94, follow 94 to the border turnoff which is well marked.

Trucks can be left for a few days with some of the filling stations and garages in town for a nominal charge per day.

Two ways south are available; both finish in nearly the same place west of Ojos Negros. Go east on Mexico 2, look for signs pointing to a right-hand turn south to Rancho Neji. You'll be on a high speed, smooth dirt road referred to as the Buffalo Ranch road, that continues south through some beautiful ranchos. It's an easy ride through lovely country.

Or, stay on Mexico 2, going east toward Mexicali to the village of El Condor, a few miles west of La Rumirosa. This is the starting and finishing point for the classic Tecate 500 enduro, run by the Los Ancianos club of San Diego. The trail south is easy to follow through some of the prettiest Baja country, passing through Constitución National Park and by Laguna Hansen. Going through miles of pine forests on well graded sandy roads you reach the sawmill at Aserradero; gas is available here. The road then turns in a more westerly direction and heads for Ojos Negros, just off the pavement on Baja California 16 which is headed toward Valle De Trinidad from Ensenada, then on to its ultimate destination at a junction with Mexico 5, connecting San Felipe with Mexicali. A mile or so past the sawmill a side road to the left takes you onto a less well maintained but equally easy dirt road heading south. You are now on the Baja 500 and 1000 course and will see their markers every few miles. The trail begins to lose altitude and leaves the trees entering the high desert country. Care must be exercised here in order to find the trail that continues in a southerly direction when



the 500 course turns east over the rocky mountains to the vast desert on the easterly side of the Sierra De Juarez. Not long ago several experienced Baja riders almost died in this desert when they missed this turn. Several motorcycle riders have gotten lost in this area and died from exposure.

The road continues south, heading toward the little farming town of Valle De Trinidad. The critical junction is called Neuvo and is not marked. Go straight, or turn right. Both roads lead to the pavement north of Trinidad to El Rodeo. After passing through Trinidad on the pavement you will come to a sign indicating a right turn to Mike's Sky Rancho. Gasoline is available at Trinidad and at a small village called Independencia, a few miles north. The road to Mike's is well marked and a gas to ride.

Mike Leon owns Mike's Sky Rancho. He races a Baja Bug in the SCORE Baja races. The ranch is located in the Sierra San Pedro Martir at about 4000 ft., so it's cool all the time. Rates compare with a good motel in the States, so take a little cash. (Dollars are OK here, but for the rest of Baja I prefer to buy pesos before I go.)

The ranch has nice rooms with heat, good beds and showers. There is gas and an arc welder—even a swimming pool, unheated! Food is served in the ranch-style dining room and you can forget all your aches and pains at the well stocked American-style bar. Ramon, the manager, can make any drink you can think of, but if you are like most dirt riders, beer will wash down more dust than anything else will.

It's a great, homey place to go and, as far as I'm concerned, the capital of Baja. Tell 'em I sent you. Don't be surprised at the

copies of CYCLE WORLD all over the place. They know the best magazine when they see it.

The map takes you out of Mike's on a different road than the one you came in on. It also follows the SCORE race course and returns to Valle De Trinidad through the Simpson Ranch. There is yet another way back into Trinidad, and it's more fun. Just follow the map and you will see the route re-traces the way you came in but go straight ahead when you come to the sign that points you to San Felipe, a right turn.

From Trinidad back to your truck at El Condor or Tecate, can mean using your original route, or a slight variation: Stay on the pavement out of Trinidad until reaching Independencia. Follow the dirt road out paralleling the pavement north until it crosses a wide, well graded dirt road heading almost due west. This will take you to El Alamo, a gold mine village that has been there since the turn of the century when gold was first discovered in Baja. Continue to bear north and west to Rancho Tres Hermanos. It isn't marked so if the map doesn't make it for you, ask.

I haven't said much about language in Baja. They speak Spanish, obviously. If you don't, try English, again obviously, but don't count on much of an intelligent conversation. Remember, *you* are the foreigner, not them. With very few exceptions I have yet to meet a rancher who wasn't as kind and helpful as he could be. We are strangers, at best, in Baja. The Mexicans are a dignified and civilized group of people, especially in the back country. Show human consideration and we will all be riding in Baja long after we're all too old to be able to enjoy it.

From Tres Hermanos the trail is a little hard to find but it leads to Rancho Escondido and on to Ojos Negros. From there take the super wide, well graded road going back up into the mountains and back to the sawmill. Now you know where you are.

Ride Two begins farther south in Baja but is one that is easy to reach. Starting in the port town of Ensenada is the easiest way to enjoy several different loops out into the back country. Ensenada is also the most pleasant area of the civilized part of Baja. Several excellent hotels are available. I prefer the La Pinta. It is part of the government-owned El Presidente chain of hotels situated on Mexico 1 running the full length of the peninsula. They have a good dining room and are located at the south end of town where it is easy to pick up the roads leading out. They will give a 10-percent discount to anyone with an American Motorcyclist Association membership card. The staff is one of the nicest and most efficient I have ever met. They have radio contact with the other hotels and Mike's Sky Rancho. Telephones are still something for Baja's future, only the border towns and Ensenada have them.

A few miles south of Ensenada the pavement goes through Maneadero where there is a government tourist checkpoint. Everyone must have a visitors permit to go any farther south. They are issued to Americans just across the border in Tijuana. You need only show proof of U.S. citizenship. I have found it much easier to obtain a permit from the Mexican consulates in San Diego or Los Angeles. AAA offices in California issue them to members through the Southern California Au->

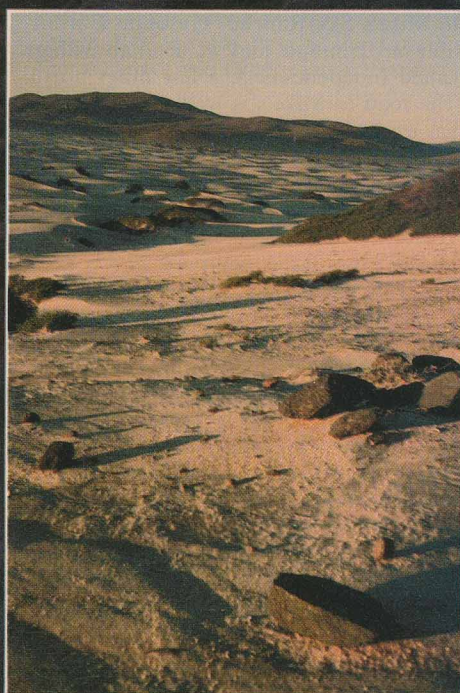
tomobile Club. On the east coast of Baja you can travel clear to San Felipe without one but they are needed to go below.

Two paved roads lead out of Ensenada. One is Baja California 16 which I mentioned in the first ride. Mexico 1 leads south out of town, through Maneadero and our ride turns into the mountains at the town of Santo Thomas. Gasoline is available here and there is a Baja institution called El Mirador. Souvenirs, a motel,

good food and gas are its wares. You can leave a truck behind the store/motel for a dollar or two a day. A trailer park is located across the street. The trail is an easy dirt road traversing a perfect, unspoiled coast. There are many ranchos and a few fences. Gasoline can be had at Ejido Erendira, a rather nondescript farming village right on the coast.

Don't miss the several spectacular blow holes located right on the road south of

Erendira before the road turns up into the mesas that run down into San Antonia Del Mar. Sand riders will have a ball here; the sand is wide, hard and dry, backed by windswept dunes. It is easy to take the main road out of San Antonia Del Mar up to the pavement at Colonet where gas and food are plentiful. It is more fun to stay on the trail on the beach and follow the road out on to Cabo Colonet. Don't miss the trail over to the pavement and the turn-off

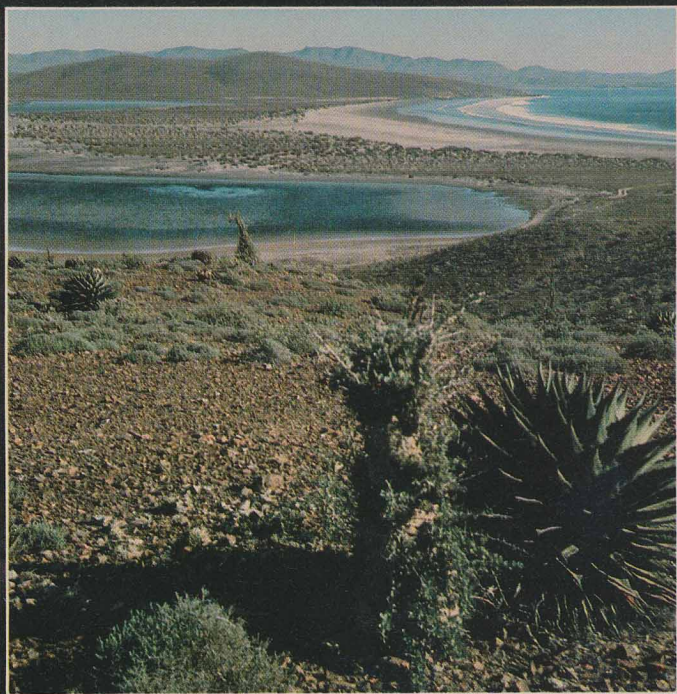


for Mike's, which is marked as Observatorio road. Its main destination is the observatory on top of 10,126-ft. Picacho Del Diablo, a joint America/Mexican installation. It is rated as one of the best in the Western Hemisphere because of the clear air and lack of city lights on the horizon. Several years ago the town of San Felipe wanted to install mercury vapor

street lights but the government wouldn't allow it because it would hamper the observatory's work.

A few miles down this road you will come to the quaint village of San Telmo. Gas is available, as is cold beer and canned food. From here it is a fast and easy graded road up a well farmed valley and past

handsome ranch houses. The road splits at a junction marked for Mike's or the Meling Ranch. The trail to Mike's is harder but a lot more fun. The trails come together again not far from Meling's. Meling's is an old ranch that caters to tourists and the people there don't like motorcycles. They >





won't let you ride them into the ranch, but you can walk. Why bother, though, when Mike's is just a few fun miles away and you are welcome. This section of the ride is neat because of the spectacular views of the coast and mountains. Most of the little rain that falls in Baja falls here so plan on spring or summer for your attempt. The roads can get pretty gruesome.

The last mile or so into Mike's is down a spectacular grade with a breathtaking dropoff. Treat it carefully and always be aware of the possibility of meeting another vehicle coming the other way. This bit of advice applies to riding anywhere in Baja. Slide only in corners that you can see around and stick to the right of the road when you can't see ahead. Baja roads follow the contours of the land and abound with blind crests. They are great for high speed wheelies but check them out before you go sailing off the top of a blind crest. (Getting hurt can be a genuine problem as the hospitals in Ensenada, Tijuana and Mexicali are a long way off. Incidentally, they are excellent hospitals and if they can't take proper care of you they will have you whisked off to the States.) We covered the routes out of Mike's in Ride One. When you reach Ojos Negros or the junction near the sawmill it is simple to either jump on the pavement or take the tough road out of Ojos Negros down the long canyon into the back yards of Ensenada. This is the route the SCORE races take so it is fairly easy to find.

Ride Three is to and around the Gulf town of San Felipe. The paved Mexico 5 leads south out of the border town of Mexicali, just across the border from Calexico, California. The road was built by the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during WWII. The road has been just barely maintained since. San Felipe exists as a fishing town. Most of the Gulf shrimp comes from here. This coast of Baja is worlds apart in character from the west coast. In the summer it is as hot as the hinges of hell. The beaches are a blast to ride, thanks to the extremely high tide which bares miles of hard-packed rideable sand. Several camps are here. I prefer Reubens. The hotels are not worth mentioning. Reubens serves great food and is run by nice people. Gas is available, of course, as is most everything else you will need. Many Americans maintain trailers or houses in the camps along the beach north of town and a few to the south on the road to Puertecitos. The country is a desert with miles of sand and cactus. It hardly ever rains so it is dry, dry, dry. During the popular holidays the town is jammed with tourists, motorhomes, campers, bikes, etc., and the locals are used to us.

The road into the mountains goes west just outside of the north end of town. It crosses Laguna Diablo and has been used in the past for SCORE and NORRA races. It is spectacularly beautiful country and easy riding. The trail joins the main paved road running from Valle De Trinidad down to the junction with Mexico 5 at a place called Crucero De Trinidad on the map, but known as The Poles to all Baja riders. It is an easy ride to Mike's from a village called San Matias and is well marked. North of where the road from San Felipe to Trinidad crosses, is wild and open country. This is where motorcyclists have gotten into deep trouble. SCORE's two races use this territory, as has the Tecate

500 enduro. It is not easily navigated and I do not recommend it to anyone other than experienced desert riders.

South out of San Felipe the coast is dotted with beautiful camps like Bahia Santa Maria. The riding is easy all the way to the fishing village of Puertecitos. Gas, good food, water, etc., are available.

From Puertecitos you jump off into what must be regarded as the "real" Baja. The road crosses one of the rockiest mountains anywhere, creating one of the toughest rides. The old Baja 500 went over these but few vehicles do nowadays. The Cuestas are famous in Baja lore and were a problem even for the noted Baja explorer/author, Earl Stanley Gardner. The trail goes to Bahia San Luis Ganzaga and offers riding at its best. Ganzaga has two camps, good food, gas, etc., and is well worth the effort to reach. The way back is either over the same road, or south/west to Laguna Chapala and the pavement of Mexico 1. As mentioned, this road leads north back to Ensenada. Some might like to have a truck meet them there since a good dirt bike usually is awful on pavement. The country south is virtually endless but requires time to see. Ruins of one of the old missions lies far off the beaten path at Calamajue and is worth seeing. This is wild country with few ranches and little water or gas, so go prepared if you feel adventurous.

San Felipe offers a wide variety of riding possibilities. It is also a pleasant place to camp and fish. Seafood is abundant and superb. The loop up to Mike's and back is fun and easy. It gives you a good taste of Baja and a number of advantages most Baja riding trips lack. ☐