Runway by the sea - "not a tree, not a single green thing"... except, of course, folding blue ocean. Your Baja adventure starts here, at Isla Del Niño.

THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE FILTHY

Words and photography Tor Johnson

I stood on a dirt runway, blinded in dust whipped up by the propellers of a departing Cessna. By the time I could open my eyes enough to squint at the receding plane, it was only a speck, disappearing into the hazy blue sky, leaving me alone. My brother, some good friends and my spare board were all aboard, heading home to California, land of safe water, hot showers and real beds...

I looked around and saw only dirt. Not a tree, not a single green thing. A plastic bag tumbled past on a gust of wind, snagged on low brush, and struggled to pull loose. Feeling the grit of dirt in my teeth, it began to sink in: I was stranded on a desert island in Mexico. Fighting back this distinctly uncomfortable, lonely feeling, I began asking myself: "What have I done *now*?"

I could hardly imagine a more remote place than this island off the coast of Baja, that monumentally bleak finger of desert extending a thousand miles from the California border to the Tip of Cabo San Lucas. At that moment, I had no idea how I was going to get off the island, let alone see any of the peninsular.

FIGHTING BACK THIS DISTINCTLY UNCOMFORTABLE, LONELY FEELING, I BEGAN ASKING MYSELF: "WHAT HAVE I DONE NOW?"

Baja has long been a frontier for surf exploration, a place of myth and legend for generations of California surfers. My trip was born out of a desire to see what Baja was really all about, to compare the truth with the myth. Of course, we've all heard the stories. They say it's a filthy Wild West, where you camp in the dirt on perfect pointbreaks; where all the police are corrupt, the *banditos* are everywhere and the roads are deadly; where the chances of getting diarrhea are better than the chances of scoring good surf. A staple of surfing lore is the wild night in Tijuana – you know, the one where the guys get out of their minds on tequila in nasty bars with nasty locals and nastier women, end up in jail and get sprung the next day by their mates. It's a classic... predates *Gidget*.

THE EASY WAY IS TO FLY – BAJA AIR VENTURES

From an airplane, you look down on endless miles of rough, hot, dirty road and feel pity for the poor sods trying to get anywhere on those winding tracks. Flying in to the remote reaches of Baja seems like cheating, but for those with more money than time, it can be the only option.

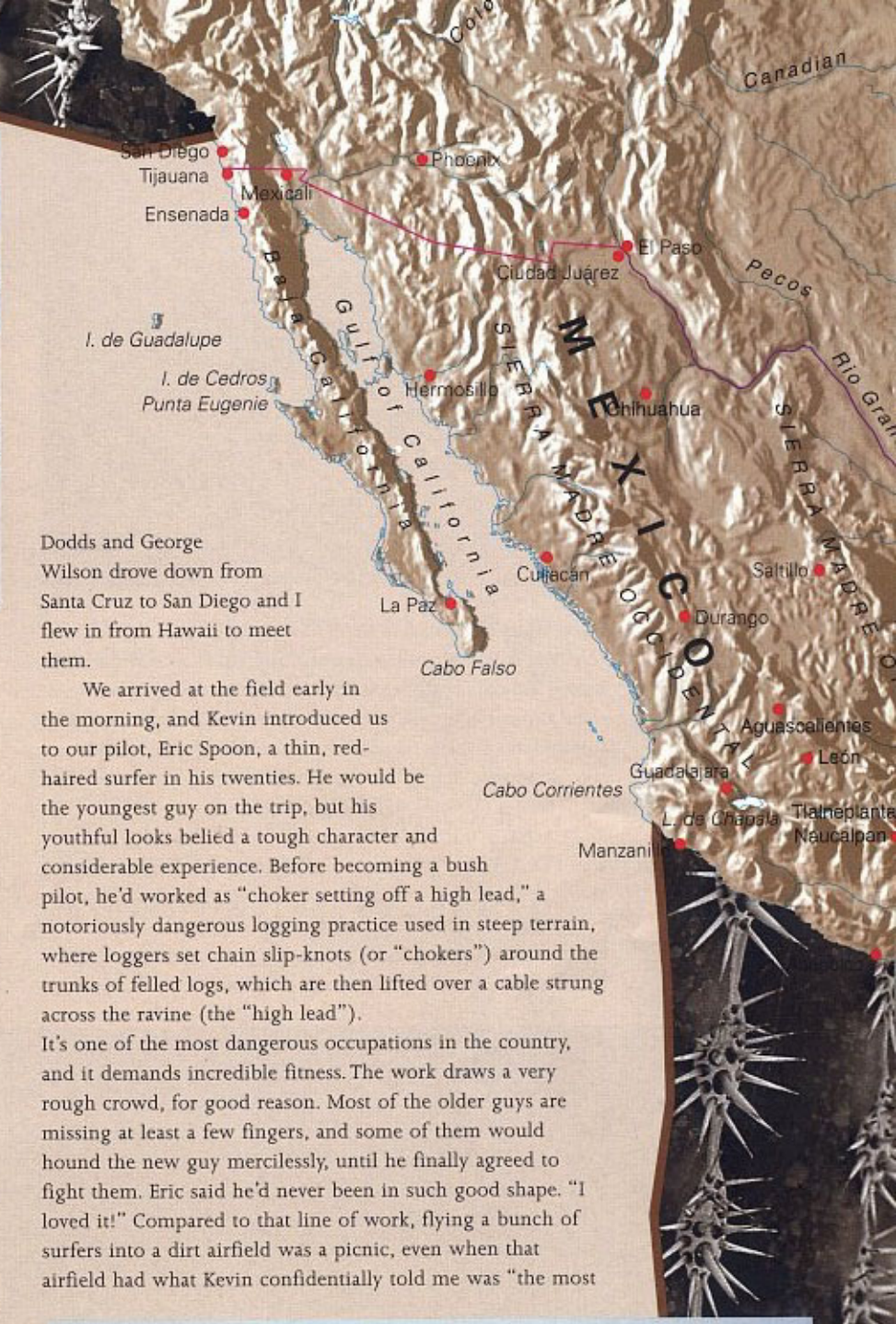
My brother Alex is one such surfer, a California realtor who rakes in six figures in the hugely lucrative Santa Cruz housing market. With family and work obligations, an ideal surf trip for him must be fast and furious if it is to be sellable to his wife. His idea was to charter a plane with Baja Air Ventures, timing our flight to coincide with a large summer south swell.

When Alex called me in Hawaii and ran his idea by me, summer had set in like a curse – nothing but disappointing, futile trips to Ala Moana to do battle with hordes of longboarders for the foreseeable future. I signed up

Below - Aerial reconnaissance expedites primal pleasures. "About a hundred miles to the south, we discovered a point that seemed to attract more swell than anywhere else."

Opposite top - Focusing in on a likely reefbreak.

Opposite bottom - Post-surgical strike, heading back to the plane with camp just 100 miles (less than an hour) away.



immediately.

Baja Air Ventures is a small charter operation that runs surfing and eco-tours into Baja. The outfit is run by an enthusiastic Southern Californian by the name of Kevin Warren. Thinking it might be a good idea to get to know the man who would be responsible for my life on the flight, I met up with Kevin in a rough but friendly border town airfield bar.

Kevin is a junkie. Like surfing, flying is a completely addictive thing, and Capt Warren was apparently born to fly. At age 12, he built a hang-glider out of bamboo and plastic for a school project and, to the shock of his classmates and teachers, actually flew the thing... "probably a lot higher than I should have," he says with a laugh.

He moved on to airplanes as soon as he was able and discovered that the uncrowded, remote perfection of Baja was now just a few easy hours away. Kevin and his surf buddies would cram their boards and tents into a tiny Cessna and take off, exploring more remote areas of Baja with each trip.

Word spread and Kevin started getting calls from strange surfers asking if they could come along. Already trying to log sufficient hours of flight time to get his commercial pilot's license, he realized there was a ready-made market right on his doorstep, so he went into the business of introducing surfers to his discoveries in Baja. These days, though he still runs a few surf charters, Kevin's main business is offering eco-tours like whale watching. But occasionally...

BAJA FROM THE AIR

I called Kevin a day or two before we were to leave.

"Oh, by the way," he told me, "the airport at Bahia Alacran is closed. We're going to have to fly to Isla del Niño instead."

Our whole destination had changed! According to Kevin, the official they'd been paying to facilitate their landing permit had absconded with the money and was nowhere to be found. Such is the way in Mexico, where pressure from the US to fight the drug trade can translate into a guy tossing truck tires onto a desert runway.

Our trip was to begin from Brown Field, just north of the California-Mexico border. My brother Alex and his friends Brian Dodds and George Wilson drove down from Santa Cruz to San Diego and I flew in from Hawaii to meet them.

We arrived at the field early in the morning, and Kevin introduced us to our pilot, Eric Spoon, a thin, red-haired surfer in his twenties. He would be the youngest guy on the trip, but his youthful looks belied a tough character and considerable experience. Before becoming a bush pilot, he'd worked as "choker setting off a high lead," a notoriously dangerous logging practice used in steep terrain, where loggers set chain slip-knots (or "chokers") around the trunks of felled logs, which are then lifted over a cable strung across the ravine (the "high lead").

It's one of the most dangerous occupations in the country, and it demands incredible fitness. The work draws a very rough crowd, for good reason. Most of the older guys are missing at least a few fingers, and some of them would hound the new guy mercilessly, until he finally agreed to fight them. Eric said he'd never been in such good shape. "I loved it!" Compared to that line of work, flying a bunch of surfers into a dirt airfield was a picnic, even when that airfield had what Kevin confidentially told me was "the most

A thousand miles of bad road (**above**) leads to hundreds of remote surf spots, but by air its all smooth and fantastically quick... and suddenly (**below**) you're slotted. (**opp left**) Guerrero Negro checkpoint – $20 por favor. (**opposite right**) If you're driving, twos are good.

treacherous crosswind in Baja."

Our 'ride' was a 1969 Cessna Turbo 207. It was white with brown and orange stripes, a brown dash, and vintage plaid seats – the airplane equivalent of an old Chevy Suburban. I was told that this was actually the ideal plane for this type of flying: rugged, roomy, and perfectly suited for landing on dirt fields.

"Perfect for smuggling drugs!" I joked.

"Actually, this plane was used for drug smuggling," Kevin admitted. "We bought it from the Florida sheriff's department after a drug seizure."

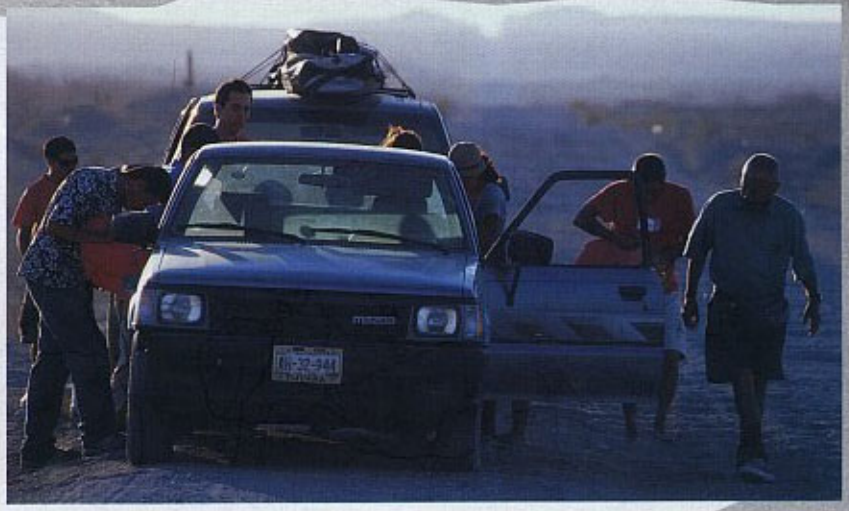
As Eric wedged our boards into the fuselage, we checked around for any stray bales of marijuana that might have been left under the seats by the previous owners. We then crammed ourselves into the tiny seats, and I shut the door, which felt so flimsy it seemed I could have ripped it off with a strong tug. Whereas a car door makes a reassuring *thunk*, this one had to be held shut while carefully rotating a tiny locking lever. I thought about how many thousands of feet in the air we'd be and made a mental note not to lean against the door.

Eric went through his flight checklist under the nervous scrutiny of his passengers and brought the plane up to power. The entire contraption began to shake and shimmy in a worrisome manner, then suddenly bolted down the runway and hopped into the air, leaving my stomach on the tarmac. We felt every lift and drop, every gust of wind. It was something like being in a small boat, with one big difference: I can swim.

Almost immediately Mexico's "Lower California" peninsula was below us – rugged buff-brown desert mesas and *arroyos* stretched into distant dry mountains as far as we could see. Apart from surrounding saltwater, there didn't appear to be a drop of water anywhere. The land looked immense, remote, and inhospitable. I half expected to see "*el hombre Marlboro*" riding through the scene, but there was no one.

We landed twice, once to clear customs and once to refuel, crossing the spectacular mountains of central Baja each time. Despite Mexico's reputation for corrupt police, we were treated respectfully by everyone we met, and we never paid a single bribe. Under the new government of Vicente Fox, drug interdiction has been handed over to the military, and some locals think this has lessened corruption among the police.

Eric set the plane down on the dirt strip at Isla del Niño, so smoothly it wouldn't have spilled a beer. We moved into our



new accommodations, cots lined up in one room of a local fisherman's family. Our hostess, Norma kept a clean and tidy house, not an easy task in a village with no paved roads and daily gale-force winds. She cooked like a demon while her two-year-old daughter Julisa kept us entertained. Sadly, the swell we had forecast was a disappointment; the best we got were some small fun waves, in freezing cold water

Isla del Niño is located off central Baja in an area of confluence of warm southern and cold northern waters. Due to upwelling and strong currents, water temperatures can change so drastically during the course of a day that it's not uncommon to be surfing in trunks or a springsuit in the morning, then find yourself needing a full wetsuit when the tide and currents change in the afternoon.

We managed to pull into a few tubes, but a 2-3ft shorebreak was not why we'd chartered a plane and flown all this way. On our third day, my brother Alex introduced the idea of flying south to a likely point. We weighed the factors: expensive gas and the risk involved in take-offs and landings on unpredictable dirt fields, versus the remote chance of finding bigger surf. Of course, we decided to fly.

Truly, flying is magic. We just threw the boards into the plane and the next minute we were looking down on the coast. Tenuous dirt roads snaked below us over rough desert, and we pitied the mere earthlings who'd have to spend hours in that dirt and grit while we winged over in minutes. Plus, our view was so good that we could see how the swell focused on points and compare at a glance spots separated by miles of harsh terrain. About a hundred miles to the south, we discovered a point that seemed to attract more swell than anywhere else. We landed safely and surfed two sessions, until we were exhausted. As the sun sank low, we loaded the plane and simply flew away, headed back to our island.

Most of us are used to traveling to the surf by car, so surfing from an airplane was a lot of fun. But there's a dangerous magic to it. Things can change quickly in the sky.

By the time we were on approach to the island, it was no longer an inviting, sunny evening. The wind had increased and fog had begun to envelope the island. Between clouds, we caught only occasional glimpses of our tiny speck of desert island. A gnawing feeling that we are not really meant to fly, crept into my mind. Small planes are statistically far and away the most dangerous. I tried to focus on Baja Air Ventures' perfect safety record.

Like a veteran, Eric found the runway and was making his approach, crabbing sideways in strong crosswinds, when we encountered a sudden downdraft and dropped out of the sky. The plane hit the runway hard, and Eric jammed the throttle all the way back to full and powered the plane right back up into the air. He looked around, checked the landing gear, decided there was no damage, stabilized the plane, then brought us back down and in, shaken and stirred.

THE PLANE HIT THE RUNWAY HARD, AND ERIC JAMMED THE THROTTLE ALL THE WAY BACK TO FULL AND POWERED THE PLANE RIGHT BACK UP INTO THE AIR.

Next day, my brother and friends flew back to California, leaving me stranded on this desolate dirt strip. I looked around and took stock of my resources. Allowed only one bag of personal gear on the plane, I had no tent, no stove, and no sleeping bag. I was alone in the desert with a camera, a duffel bag, and a surfboard.

THE GOOD

By incredible dumb luck, a Tijuana television crew had come to the island to research a film script about "four Mexican surfers who travel Baja in search of waves but end up finding something else". David Figueroa, a man whose face displayed a great kindness and refined humanity, was the director. His son, Jose Luis, manages the station. It wasn't until later that I learned that Jose Luis, a talented goofy-footer, was actually a criminal lawyer by trade and had recently shifted to the more civilized job of producing TV documentaries. As David put it: "I think I like this side of Jose Luis better... and I think he prefers it too."

There were seven others with them, the entire workforce of the TV station, secretary and all. They just happened to be heading south to Bahia Alacran and offered me a ride. There was

some question whether I could fit into the already overcrowded minivan they had left on the mainland. But, as they politely put it, "We rescued a victim from an accident on the way down and drove him to a hospital. You can sit where he was." They told me to be ready to board the fishing boat to the mainland at ten the next morning.

Promptly at 2pm the next day, we began loading into the fishing boat. It was the beginning of my lesson in Mexican concepts of time. Once in the minivan, my hosts gave me the front seat, the only place with any legroom. I looked around furtively, but there was no visible blood on the seat from the guy they'd rescued. We proceeded in our packed two-wheel drive vehicles (the minivan and a pick-up truck) over deeply corrugated roads at the blistering pace of about ten miles an hour.

My hosts were in no hurry and took everything at the proper Mexican pace. We stopped for lunch. We stopped for a rest. We rolled on for a few painfully slow miles then stopped for sightseeing in the desert. Finally, after many hours on the dirt, we reached a paved road. "Now we'll make some time," I thought gleefully. We stopped for a rest.

Although the roads were rough, we never saw a single sport-utility vehicle, let alone a monster truck like the ones so popular in the USA. It's ironic that American urban professionals commute on glass-smooth freeways in big immaculate gas-sucking 4WD SUVs, while the Mexicans are driving vintage '70s Ford Pintos over the Baja 500 course.

Somewhere in the middle of Baja, on the central highway that runs the length of the peninsular, we stopped for the night. Since there are still *banditos* around – thieves who prey on the unwary – my friends asked a shopkeeper where we'd be safe. He sent us to the town basketball court, where we could pitch camp right on the blacktop. "There's light, and there are trucks passing all night... you'll be very safe."

My hosts insisted that I use their best tent, while they slept out in the open. This was typical of these people, who amazed me every day with their kindness. The shopkeeper was right: the place was lit up like daylight, and big rigs rumbled right by our heads all night. Sleep was pretty much impossible.

Many miles into the bleak desert on a dirt road, we spotted a *campesino* rancher in threadbare jeans and worn shirt, waving at us from a cluster of shacks. A rusty car hood was propped up against the barbed wire fence. Letters scrawled in red paint proclaimed this "Rancho San Lorenzo". The *campesino's* face was so deeply lined by a long life in the desert sun that it had come to resemble the craggy *arroyos* and ravines of the parched land he inhabited. Although we were overloaded already, the Mexicans all squeezed together to make room for him. He held himself proudly, but seemed ill at ease among the comparatively wealthy city sophisticates.

"Are there many snakes in the desert here?" one of the girls wanted to know.

"Yes," replied the *campesino*.

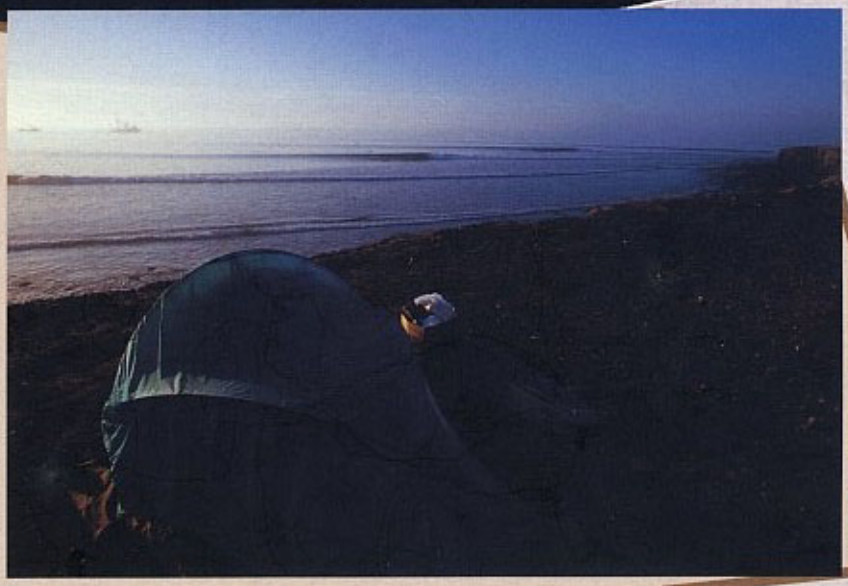
"Are some of them dangerous?" she asked.

"Yes," the man replied again.

"Umm... any particular *kind*?" she asked, at a loss for conversation.

"Yes," he replied gravely.

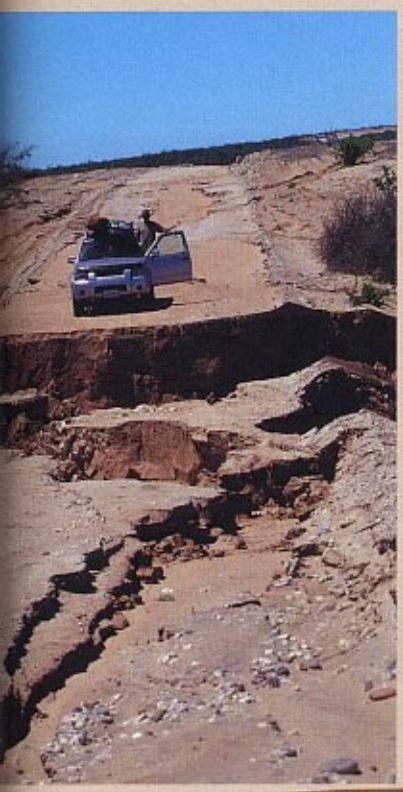
In the desert, conditions are extremely harsh, and the plants and animals seem to have developed equally harsh defenses. Just about everything that grows or crawls here either stings, gouges or bites you. The cacti have long spines to protect the priceless water they store for years, the scorpions and spiders sting and the snakes bite.



HURRICANE IGNACIO

As we neared Bahia Alacran, a layer of menacing dark clouds obscured the southern sky. This was the northern edge of devastating Hurricane Ignacio. The first drops began to fall while we were still miles from the bay, on a dirt road. If it started to rain hard, I knew we'd be stranded in the desert in these two-wheel drive vehicles. At this point, my friends decided to stop. A few of the crew wandered off to take in the desert scene. I looked up at the lowering sky and suggested as politely as possible to Mr Figueroa that we should really get moving. I wasn't wrong. By the time we got to the bay, the rain had begun and we were sliding all over the road.

That night someone turned the ocean upside down on us. Hurricane Ignacio dumped more rain on Baja than they'd seen in 50 years. My hosts once again insisted I stay in the one good tent, while they huddled under a makeshift tarp. There was room for two in the tent, but no one would join me. "Oh no, we're fine," was all they said. Later, when I tried to thank Jose Luis for his kindness, he shrugged and said that it was only luck that I was the one who stayed dry that night.



"If the wind had changed, you would have been wet, while we were dry," he explained gallantly.

All of the roads leading to the bay washed out. Ten-foot deep rivers charged across the main access road. It would be days before the *arroyos* dried enough to allow workers to begin the repair work. We were well and truly stranded at the point.

Since the storm passed right over our heads, there was no ocean fetch, so it produced no surf. I decided to take a look around the bay and found an interesting assortment of characters camped around the cliffs overlooking the waves.

CAMPING 101

There seemed to be as many ways of travel as there were travelers at Bahia Alacran. Some were fully equipped with huge 4WD trucks with a camper on the back, palatial screened shade tents to keep out the hateful flies, stand-alone gas barbecues, lounge chairs, even spray-misters to cool off on those hot days. Other crews were completely unprepared. One group of talented young surfers from Florida came down in a minivan with no shade, nothing to cook on, not even a chair to sit on. They were so clueless they didn't even know where they were. They just happened onto the point while fleeing the devastation of Ignacio on the southern tip of Baja, taking a random left turn onto a road that led to the coast. They may have been amateurs at camping, but they got their fair share of stoke when they came around the corner and saw a series of world-class right line-ups.

Of course, no one was as badly prepared as myself (board, pack and camera bag). When my TV friends finally left, Damon and Nick, two surfers from Los Angeles, adopted me and loaned me a spare tent. Still, I was otherwise without shade under that brutal desert sun, and this lack of shade became critical when I caught a powerful gastrointestinal virus.

One night I woke up at 2am with my guts in a vice. I grabbed my flashlight and ran for the toilet at the *cantina*. The bulb on my light immediately burned out, leaving me wandering around the desert among the cactus, groaning. Earlier, I'd seen a huge, hairy brown spider that the locals told me was *muy peligroso* (very dangerous) crawling this very path. Shuffling my feet in an effort to warn any venomous night-crawling insects of my approach, I finally located the toilet and evacuated myself thoroughly. Then I crawled weakly back into my filthy little tent. Still, sleep was not for me. I crawled back

Opposite top - "I looked up at the lowering sky and suggested as politely as possible... that we should really get moving." Hurrying, as Hurricane Ignacio approaches.

Left - In the aftermath of Hurricane Ignacio, the road out of Bahia Alacran was truly "canyonesque."

Above - Stranded, nothing to do but camp ... and surf in relative isolation.

out and threw up into a Ziploc bag (so as to avoid a fly infestation when the sun arose). Panting between bouts of spewing, I looked up at the sky – beautiful and bright with stars – and wondered what the hell I was doing in this place.

The evening before at the café on the point, I'd seen an older surfer checking the Internet and asked him if there was anything coming up in the way of swell. Without bothering to look up from the computer, he told me, "Nothing coming. Might as well go home."

I heard someone snicker in the background, then a surfer at the bar told me the guy was actually Sean Collins, founder of Surfline, the definitive surf-forecasting service.

The following day, the swell finally came up. I watched every surfer on the point riding long, perfect walls – racing fast and clean down the longest point I'd ever seen. I was too weak and sick even to surf. I ran across Collins on the tip of the point, taking video of his son having an absolute blast in the perfect surf.

"Hey," I said, fighting the urge to throw up, "aren't you Sean Collins, the surf forecaster from Surfline?"

"That's me," he replied in a quiet yet cocky manner.

"So, what? How come you didn't you see this swell coming?"

"Yes I did," he said. "I saw it coming."

"Well, last night at the café, I remember you saying there was nothing coming. I think you even told me I might as well go home."

"Oh, ahh... I think we were just teasing you," he said, not quite so cocky now. Then he proceeded to divulge his forecast for the rest of the week – free of charge. The swellmeister was calling for good surf for the whole period. At the moment, I may have been too sick to surf, but at least I knew there was a wave or two in my future.

Although the point was fickle and had a narrow swell window, on a good day (like that one), it wouldn't be inconceivable that you'd get the longest wave of your life. Luckily, within a few days, I was out in the water, where the surf was even better than it looked – a perfect performance wave, ridiculously fast and long, peeling along sandbars built up around rock points that formed a perfectly even bottom – like the longest rivermouth in the world.

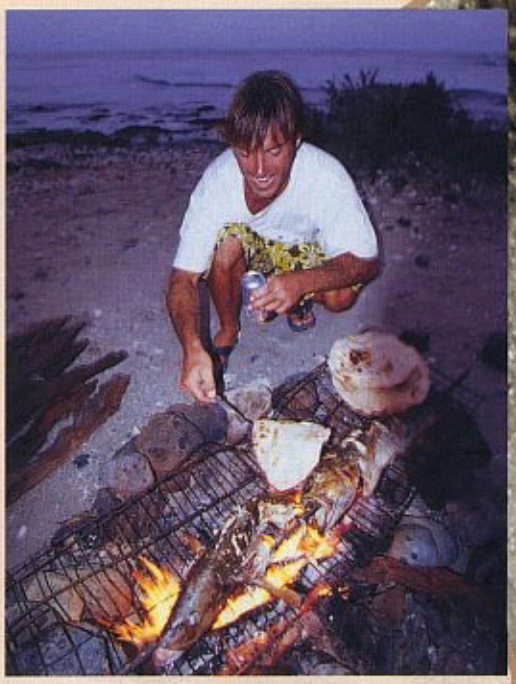
I gradually recovered my strength until finally I was surfing normally. The point turned out to be one of those waves that's easy to surf well. Looking far down the line for the next section, setting it up and pumping the speed, it felt like fluid magic. I was surfing about as well as I ever had when one of the campers (a young surfer named Matt from Oregon) looked over a shoulder at me and started laughing.

ALTHOUGH THE POINT WAS FICKLE AND HAD A NARROW SWELL WINDOW, ON A GOOD DAY, IT WOULDN'T BE INCONCEIVABLE THAT YOU'D GET THE LONGEST WAVE OF YOUR LIFE.

"You look like Chevy Chase," he said.

Later, paddling back to the line-up with a huge grin after I'd caught my best wave of the day, ripping off maybe ten hard snaps in a row as I raced down the point, Matt told me, "You look like my Dad."

Waves this good, even if they only rarely arrive, can turn a surfer into an addict. Add to this the relaxed, easy Mexican pace,



Opposite - Not perfect, but perfectly fun, the point was what you might call "productive."

Above - Locale cuisine, the bounty of this desert by the sea.

Below - Not the author (who surfs like Chevy Chase), but Dylan Fish having a blast in Baja.

Above - Shredding another right point, #$#$#who???#$#$#

Right - There seemed to be as many ways of travel as there were travelers in Baja.

Opposite top - "Bring shade" is, the author discovered, sage advice.

Opposite bottom - Travelers come more or less prepared, but more prepared is best.

and it's not hard to see why so many expatriate *gringos* (read "Americans") have built their own spreads here.

THE BAD

One crusty surfer told me: "The thing to remember is that its flat and windy here, flat and windy".

That's two things, I thought. But he was right, much of the time it was flat and windy. Still, I had to ask him:

"Well, why did you build a house here, then?"

He considered this for a minute, searching for a response.

"Because I don't like people," he replied.

Considering it gets so crowded here that there are camps two rows deep for miles along the entire series of points, this didn't make much sense either. But then, I didn't really expect him to admit that he was drawn like a moth to a flame to the rare natural wonder of one of the best right pointbreaks in the world.

Most of the gringos I met here felt strongly that the roads should remain unpaved and that the airfield should remain closed. I could understand how they felt. Having waited months, through seemingly endless flat spells, it's hard to watch truckloads of hungry surfers and several planes arrive at the same moment as the waves.

However, there's another side to all this. For instance, I had overheard Mr Figueroa, the director, telling the local fishermen how they needed to work together to get their airfield open and fix their roads. I asked him why he felt this was necessary. He looked at me as if I were a bit slow, then said, "Medicine. Doctors. Supplies. Books."

I thought about how I'd feel if my family or I needed medical care in a hurry, and had to admit he had a point. All the gringo talk about "protecting the place" was just rhetoric. The reality was that they simply wanted to keep their slice of paradise for themselves.

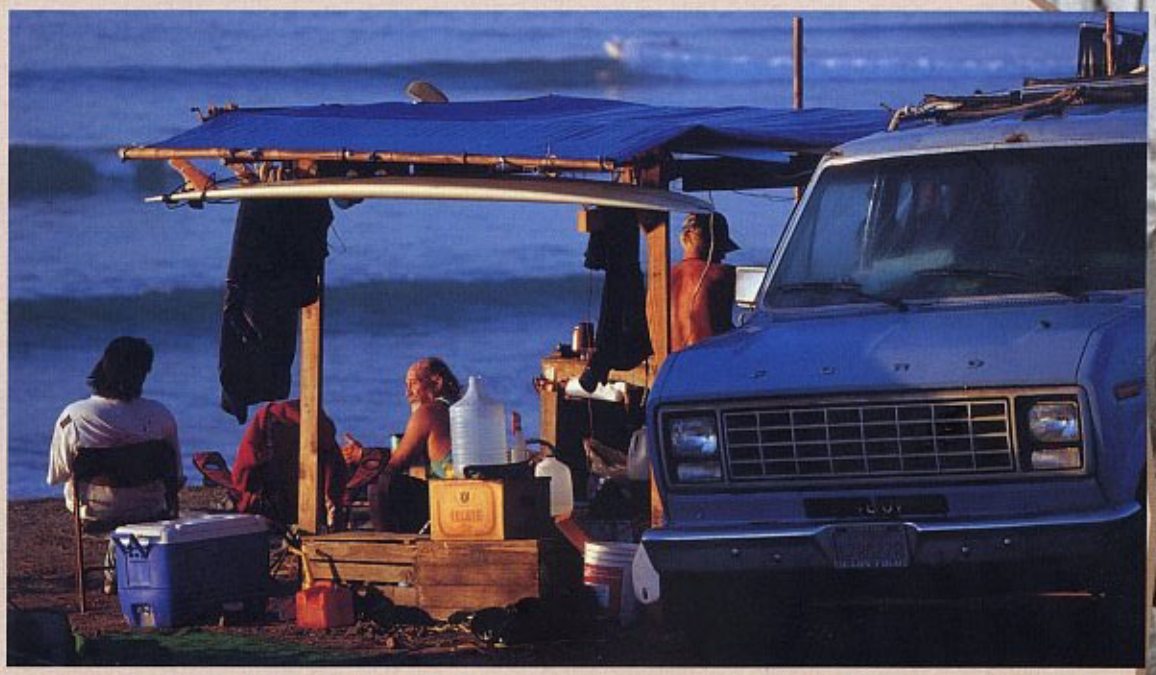
Late one night in the *cantina*, I was finally sitting down alone to an eagerly awaited plate of rice and beans, when a surfer came up, slammed his beer on the table in front of me, and sat down. "I know you!" he slurred. "You're here to exssssshploit this place!"

He'd heard that I was writing an article

and assumed I'd be exposing the spot. He went on to tell me that the "owners" (actually the expatriate gringo *cantina* managers) didn't want me there and might ask me to leave. I patiently explained that I don't exploit anything, I wasn't drawing any maps, and asked him if he'd ever read anything I'd written. He couldn't name anything, so I filled him in on the fact that I try to keep a secret spot a secret, which this certainly was not (I've changed the names of all the spots in this article anyway). This place has websites devoted to it, complete with maps and directions, and T-shirts advertising the place are on sale. The very people who make their living off the travelers are in no position to criticize anyone. This guy was so obnoxious that we nearly came to blows and I spent the night stewing over his rudeness.

The next day, he searched me out on the far point, just so he could apologize. He said he'd thought about what I'd said and agreed with me, and that he should never have said what he did. I accepted his apology because he was man enough to make it.

One of the first gringos to move to Bahia Alacran was Terry Hanson. He and his gorgeous wife built themselves a house out of adobe, the traditional Mexican mud bricks, surrounded it



with lush jungle, and finished it in classic beach-house style. Terry is as much of a local as a gringo can be, but he has a certain perspective. He isn't the youngest guy in the line-up but, as one of the first gringos here, he has the place completely wired and gets more than his share of waves. As Terry put it, with his trademark sardonic smile: "If there is a hell for surfers, it's full of guys who surf just like me."

Few things set Terry off in the line-up more than surfers who show up with a large crew of buddies and invade all at once. Most everyone knows that bringing a large group isn't the best way to blend in at any surf spot, but at a place as inconsistent as this, it's a good way to become despised.

But jealous gringos are only a small part of the scene, and, as with most locals (or, in this case, transplanted locals), they're mostly bark, not much bite.

ON THE ROAD

The swell lasted as long as Sean said it would. When it finally died, I wandered the point until I met a friendly couple from Los Angeles who worked in film production and drove a nice Nissan Pathfinder. They offered me a ride across Baja to Loreto, on the eastern coast of the peninsula, where I caught a bus for California. The 17-hour bus ride wasn't a problem; the worst part of the trip was waiting alone in the open terminal on a Loreto backstreet at 2am for the late bus, while being eaten alive by mosquitoes and wondering when someone would stop by to slit my throat and relieve me of my expensive camera gear. I've never been so happy to see a bus in my life.

Back in California, I reveled in soft beds and hot showers. But strangely, once I'd washed off the dirt, I started to miss Baja. I conveniently forgot about the rough times when I'd been horribly ill. As my girlfriend put it, it's a wonder the human race survives, with our inability to remember pain. And as another friend added, that's precisely why we survive. We keep doing things that are incredibly tough, like bearing children. (I'm not sure how this relates to surf travel, but I have a feeling it does.)

So, yes, I wanted to go back down, but this time I wanted to do things right. I'd have my own car. I'd be self-sufficient, comfortable, and mobile. I could surf anywhere I wanted, and I'd never have to wait for a ride.

I heard from a friend, whose brother works at a surf forecasting service (ironically, it was Sean Collins' Surfline) that there was a large New Zealand swell due to hit Baja in about a week. All I needed was a car. By chance, my sister had her Suzuki 4WD truck up for sale. I bought the thing, went to the camping store, got a tent and a lantern, borrowed a stove and a cot and drove straight back down to Baja.

OPEN EYES

Three days of solid driving later, I was set up and waiting for the swell at a point called Abreojos – 'open eyes' in Spanish. Early sailors gave it this name because of the many dangerous hidden rocks just under the surface surrounding the point. When there is swell, you can see waves peaking and throwing in random places, stirring the bones of the unwary sailors of the past.

It pays to keep your eyes open in the line-up as well. Barely concealed rocks on the inside regularly shredded bottoms and removed fins. Then there's the wave called Razors, a fast tube that breaks only when the swell is well overhead, and it's only worth the risk on a low tide when it moves out far enough from the barnacle-encrusted ledge that gives it its name.

The swell arrived – nice and large, exactly as my friend Sean said it would be. I caught Razors pretty flawless and logged some tube time, but it took its toll on us campers, and nearly everyone carried home scars from the barnacles.

On my way north, I drove through the town of Abreojos, where the locals are friendly and it's customary to wave at everyone you meet, even to the point where your arm gets tired from saluting your way through town. I stopped in Tijuana to see my friends from the television station, but I got lost in town, and a macho in a Cadillac with smoked windows yelled and flipped me off with a hairy fist. It seemed like a far cry from Abreojos.

Below - Another lucky traveller riding along the sharp edge, Razors.

Top right - Portraits of the peninsula by Patrick Trefz.

BACKGROUND IMAGES BY PATRICK TREFZ

Jose Luis rescued me and took me to the TV station, which was on a hill overlooking town. I cooked some fish that had been given to me by the generous Abreojos fishermen, and we all sat together and ate lunch, drank wine and the Mexicans all danced to intoxicating *salsa* and *cumbia* music. Jose Luis looked across the border toward California and said, "See those orderly rows of condos? That's California." Then he pointed down at Tijuana. "And that mad jumble of roofs?" he said. "That's Mexico. We go about things differently, but it's the same land. We share the same weather, the same sea and the same air. The birds and the fish, they come and go without a visa."

Tor would like to thank the crew at Tijuana's Bulbo TV for kindly adopting him on a desert island, and Baja Air Ventures for giving him a lift to Baja. Baja Air Ventures can be reached at: (800) 221-9283 or bajaair@cox.net