

BACKROADS

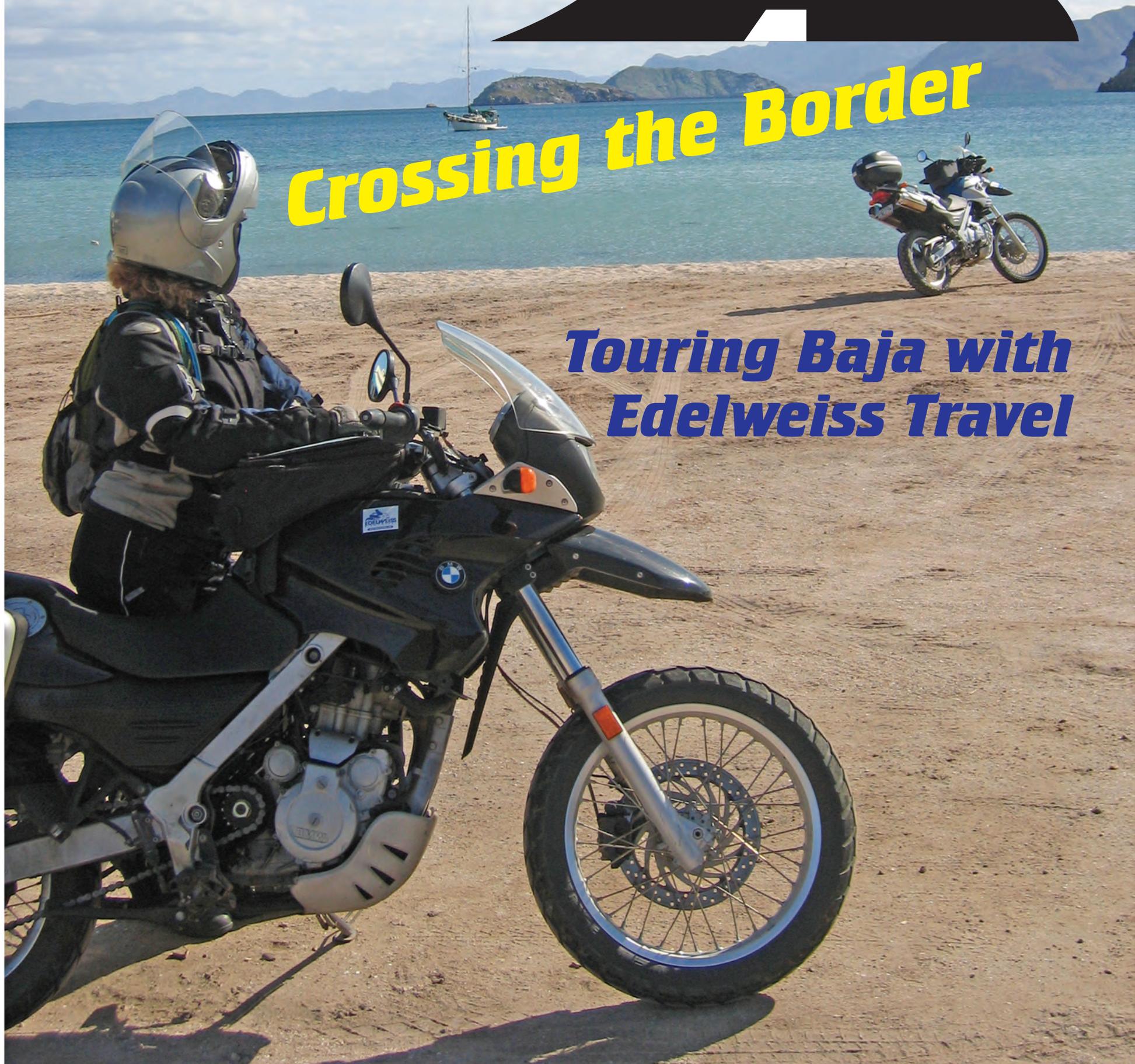
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Crossing the Border

***Touring Baja with
Edelweiss Travel***



Twice a year the racing world goes south of the border, across from San Diego and then south along Baja to the town of Ensenada for the beginning of the race down the peninsula - either 500 or 1000 miles.

We weren't there for the race; but it was a treat to pull the bikes into the locked paddock and then stroll into the San Nicolas Hotel, the official race hotel.

This was an off-road Mecca.

Our ride had started just earlier that day - an Edelweiss Motorcycle Tour of Baja - from Tijuana all the way to Cabo San Lucas at land's end!

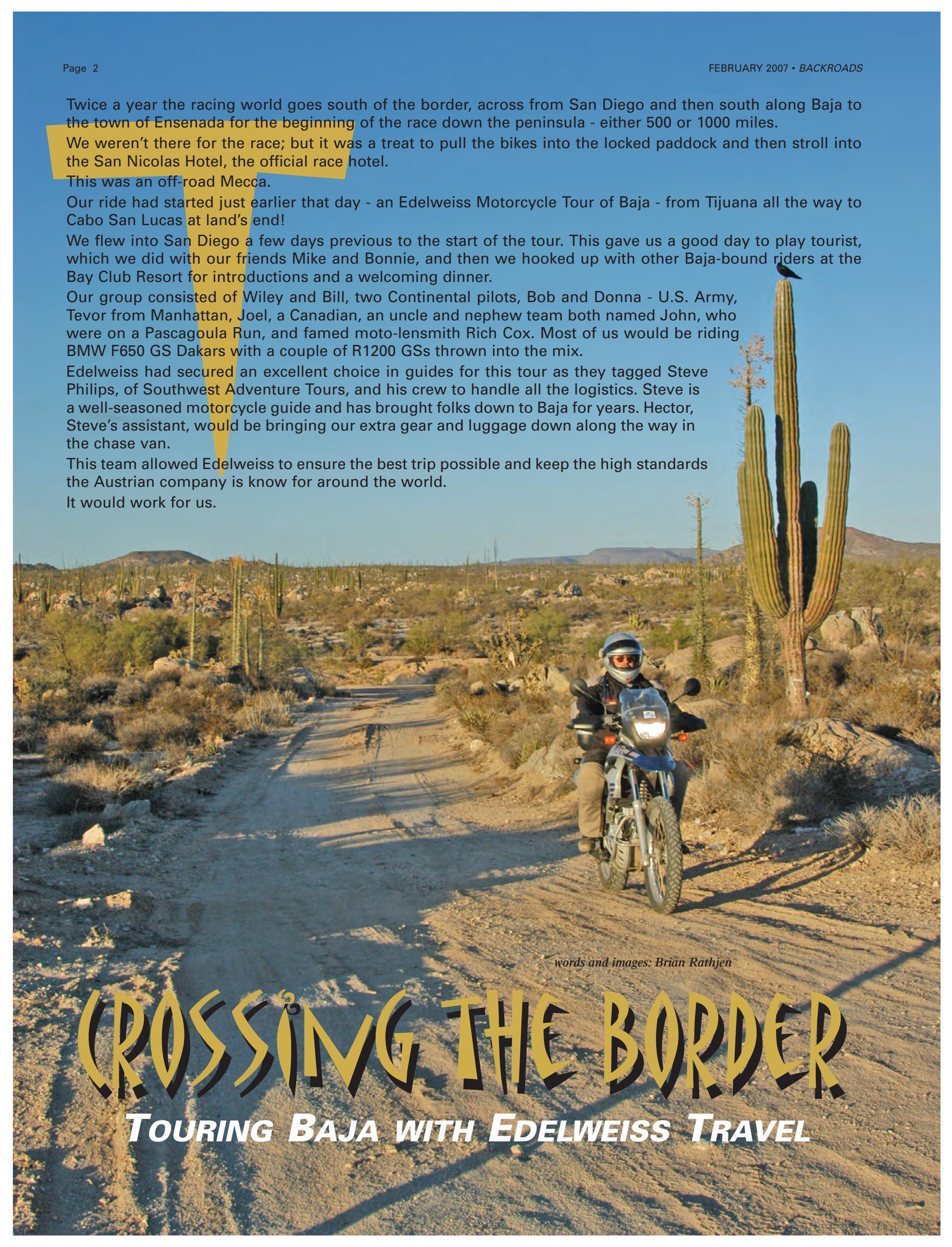
We flew into San Diego a few days previous to the start of the tour. This gave us a good day to play tourist, which we did with our friends Mike and Bonnie, and then we hooked up with other Baja-bound riders at the Bay Club Resort for introductions and a welcoming dinner.

Our group consisted of Wiley and Bill, two Continental pilots, Bob and Donna - U.S. Army, Tevor from Manhattan, Joel, a Canadian, an uncle and nephew team both named John, who were on a Pascagoula Run, and famed moto-lensmith Rich Cox. Most of us would be riding BMW F650 GS Dakars with a couple of R1200 GSs thrown into the mix.

Edelweiss had secured an excellent choice in guides for this tour as they tagged Steve Philips, of Southwest Adventure Tours, and his crew to handle all the logistics. Steve is a well-seasoned motorcycle guide and has brought folks down to Baja for years. Hector, Steve's assistant, would be bringing our extra gear and luggage down along the way in the chase van.

This team allowed Edelweiss to ensure the best trip possible and keep the high standards the Austrian company is know for around the world.

It would work for us.

A person wearing a helmet and riding gear is on a motorcycle, positioned on a dirt road in a desert landscape. The road is flanked by saguaro cacti and other desert vegetation. The background shows a clear blue sky and distant mountains. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a clear day in a warm climate.

words and images: Brian Rathjen

CROSSING THE BORDER

TOURING BAJA WITH EDELWEISS TRAVEL

SAN DIEGO TO ENSENADA

Crossing the border into Mexico was far more brief and painless than I had thought it would be; I have waited longer at the Holland tunnel. It was a bit of a culture shock entering Tijuana, as it is far removed from San Diego, not in distance but in sophistication. As we headed south the Pacific coast, and the road, opened up and the natural beauty of Baja began to emerge.

Mexico is a very Christian country and in the distance I could see a huge statue of Christ atop the cliffs. As I got closer I couldn't help but think this was not the same as the Christ that guards Rio in Brazil. No, this one looked more like a massive "Buddy Jesus" from the movie Dogma.

The flashing aircraft light atop his crown of thorns did not help.

I know - it off to confession when I get home. Bless me Father, it's been like way long since....

Our first day's ride to Ensenada was a fairly short, riding into town in the early afternoon through its center and under the shadow of the largest and most beautiful Mexican flag I had ever seen. We grabbed an excellent seafood lunch before continuing on to La Bufadora, or the "Blow Hole." Here the Pacific crashes into a slim channel along the lofty cliffs and shoots a massive spray of water high into the air with a tremendous roar. The place, which has all the charm of the medina in Fez, was packed with locals and turista as it was Sunday and the walk to and from the Bufadora was ringed with dozens of little shops selling all sorts of trinkets, souvenirs and assorted crap. Such is the way in Baja.

We rode back to Ensenada and grabbed our rooms at the San Nicolas. We did dinner early and then hit the streets.

They say you cannot come to Ensenada and not have a few tequilas at Hussong's, which has gained legendary status as one of the top drinking spots in Baja. There have been some interesting stories about this place. Stories never scare me much as long ago I became the person my parents warned me about.

It was off to Hussong's.

ENSENADA TO CATAVINA

I think I'll have another glass of Mexican wine. - Fountains of Wayne

Hussong's didn't crush us too badly and we made it an early start, as today was one of our longer days on the road.

Again we would follow south along the Pacific till early afternoon and then head east and into the heartland of Baja.

The first day out we stayed together as one large group but this day we took off in smaller, easier to handle, posses.

All the towns in this part Baja are a necessary evil to ride through and they virtually all look identical - high packed paved road down the middle with a sharp drop off on to a wide dirt road following alongside the paved one.

Along the way you'll find shops, fuel stations and the ever-present pescado taco stand.

Once south of Ensenada the road began to gain altitude and what was once straight was now twisty as we rode into the brown peaks of the Sierra De Juarez which roll down to the sea. The road this morning would parallel the ocean and spend equal time along the coast and in the hills.

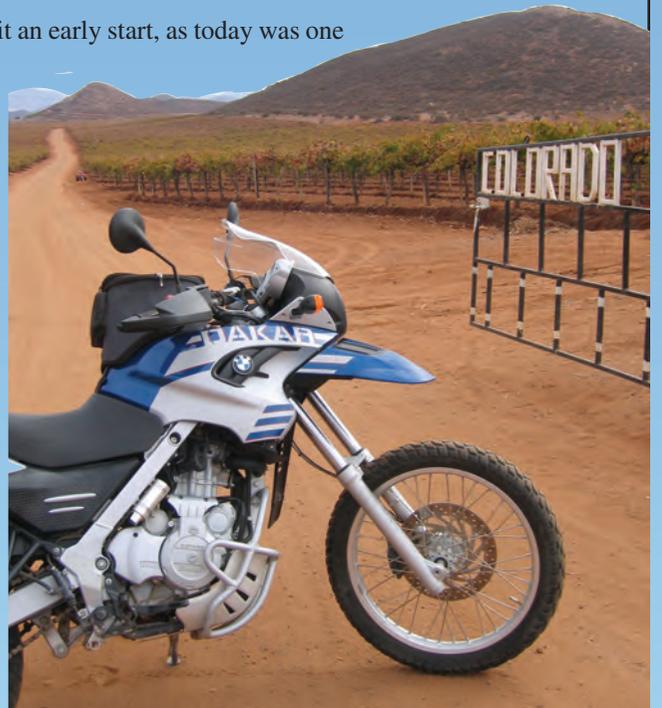
The regions we rode through was home to Baja's vineyard. In fact, 90% of all Mexican wine is grown here. It was a pleasant ride along vineyards, and I had heard such good things from this part of the west coast.

Shira and I spotted a sign for the shipwrecked Isla de Carmen, lying at a small point called Punta San Jacinto. We had read about this in Clement Salvadori's superb Journeys Through Baja book (www.whitehorsepress.com), which is a must read if you are looking to head into Baja. Not to miss something different, and being it was in Clem's book, we hit the dirt and headed to the sea.

The freighter Isla de Carmen had beached itself in 1981 and has become a bit of a tourist attraction. Today the once great ship has split in half and the ride to see it and the ship itself are worth each mile.

Back on pavement we grabbed a neat lunch at a small roadside fish taco stand and then continued south.

The plan was to fuel up at El Rosario, as the next real station was some 314 kilometers further down the road.





While at the fuel station the 'management' decided to check each meter and made us wait about half an hour. The good thing was it allowed the rest of our group to catch up and regroup, if just for a few minutes.

From El Rosario we turned east and into what I thought really was the heart of Baja. The road rose and twisted as it followed the gently hilly terrain of the land and cacti of all shapes and sizes replaced the scrub trees and bushes that we found on the coast. Two thirds of the world's cactus species are found in Baja and there were sure plenty to see this day.

Huge cardon cactus, thirty feet tall towered above. Some of these plants only grow inches a year, so these monsters were very, very old.

Nearing Catavina we rode into the Boulder Fields. This is about as striking as you can get, as giant boulders, a testament to Baja's violent beginnings, spread for miles in every direction. With the sun setting and our group, more or less complete, we stopped and explored around the big rock before heading the last few miles to our hotel for the night, the La Pinta, which was, in typical Edelweiss fashion, stupendous.

Now, I said that the next "real station" was a major hop away, but across from the hotel some enterprising Mexicans were there waiting with 55-gallon drums of high-test fuel, which they would sell at a premium.

Being a forward thinking capitalist I heartily approved, especially since they were the only game in town.

Yep, Baja has its own way of doing things for sure.

(CATAVINA TO SAN IGNACIO)

We split into two groups this day as half our crew were getting up and out at dawn for an off-road trip to the Mission De San Francisco de Borja and the rest to the ancient Indian paintings, not far from the hotel.

We stuck with the painting group as I am a sucker for this sort of thing.

The site was just a few miles north of the hotel and we had a short sandy ride to find Alex, who makes his survival taking folks to the paintings.

Alex is a hermit - literally, and he lives in a small make-shift shack with a tiny court yard he has built. He proudly called it his casa.

It's amazing to see what little we really need and gave me a different paradigm on necessities.

The hike up to the paintings was a tough one, up the side of a boulder-strewn hill, but the paintings, although small and faded, were still impressive, at least to me. I think others had different thoughts after the climb.

From here we took off south again and along the mountains that create the spine of Baja. At one point we came around a turn and the entire valley opened in front of us. If there is any question that Baja holds a strange magic this view would erase any doubt.

Further down the road we passed dry lake beds and a series of small mountains that were created completely by separate boulders. It was as if the gods had piled them up as markers. I had never seen anything like it before.

Continuing on back towards the Pacific, we made a short detour to a point of land called Santa Rosalita. We reached the bluff by the sea and a few of us rode the gnarly and rocky road down to the coast, while the others waited above. There was supposed to be a seal colony here, but they must have been on vacation this day.



We reached our pre-arranged meeting point at Rosarita, where we were to reunite with the off-roaders, right on time, but after half an hour wait we decided to move on. The group not showing did not sit well with us and we all felt uneasy about it.

The road from Rosarita south was very windy, and we made a game of passing trucks that were chugging along. The problem was that the winds were beginning to gust and each pass was made more and more difficult by the narrow roadway.

Eventually I could see a huge Mexican flag ahead with no trucks in front and I knew we were nearing the 28th parallel, the border of northern and southern Baja. Alongside the flag is the Eagle Monument celebrating the freedom of Baja. The bird has seen better days.

Here we would, for the first time, have to produce our passports. The official at the station was most accommodating, offering a smile and lunch suggestions before we went on our way.

We grabbed fuel and lunch in the town of Guerrero Negro at a great little restaurant that we found. Most of the food in Baja is your basic Mexican but, being so close to the sea, you can get fish variants of just about everything.

Guerrero Negro is also known for two things. The big salt flats where the locals dry seawater and harvest the salt and the whales which come to calve each year.

After lunch we headed back inland and along the Vizcaino Desert. It was a hundred miles of straight road with wide-open space to each side. It gave you a true feeling of just how vast Baja can really be.

As with much of Baja, there is constant road construction. Along this straight piece of asphalt, we encountered several 'works in progress' which acted as speed bumps to slow the pace of the otherwise spirited ride.





Tevor was definitely the most “New Age” of our group. In two seconds he went from meditate to medicate, with a shattered ankle and, as we would find out later, a broken rib and punctured lung.

His trip was done - but to his credit he never complained or burdened us for the two days before he cold switch his flight to get home.

SAN IGNACIO TO LORETO

Shira and I skipped breakfast the next day and got an early start, just the two of us. We do enjoy the group thing, but realized a long time ago we do our best riding by ourselves.

After fueling up at the local Pemex, the nationalized fuel stations of Mexico, we rode into the town centro of San Ignacio. Years ago date palms were brought to this region and have since flourished, making the place look like a desert oasis. Most Baja towns are in sorry shape but San Ignacio had the old-world look and feel which we thought we'd see more of. It also had the advantage of a lagoon, the first body of fresh water we had seen since we left the United States. The mission at the town square was both simple and beautiful.

From town we took off in the direction of the Sea of Cortez. Along the way the road rose up into the peaks and we had great views of the Volcan Las Tres Virgenes, or the Three Virgins, which totally dominates the landscape. Crossing over the winding road the vista opened up once again and we were reminded how stunning Baja can be.

Riding through the final mountains before the sea, the land had a strange and eerie, almost lunaesque, feel to it. Soon we could glimpse the sea as we rode down into Santa Rosalia.

I had wanted to travel to the Sea of Cortez for years and riding into Santa Rosalia was like a slap in the face. What a dive. But, to be fair, everybody needs an industrial center and this was it. I'm not too proud of New Jersey when the first impression is Newark upon landing.

We had planned to breakfast here but decided, individually, to get out of Vegas.

Further south, the land turned far more attractive and by the time we reached Mulege the taste of Rosalia was gone from our palettes.

It was here, in 1847, that the United States Army was defeated by the Mexicans and our plans of owning the Baja were crushed, finalized by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. I have a friend that thinks it's time to renegotiate!

We grabbed lunch at a sleepy hotel called Serenida, which had 50 rooms and an air strip. What a fantastic location.

Runing through the town is the river Mulege. A couple of miles long, on a good day with a high tide, it is the longest navigatable river in Baja.

High above it sat the town's mission which again showed a humble nature that was beyond charming - the Catholic Church and Rome should take note.

The river also had its share of date palms and with the towering mountains to the north it made for a fantastic view.

Continuing south we came to Bahia Conception.

Already this day the scenery had far surpassed anything we had seen before, but both Shira and I were blown away.

Just east of Las Flores, Shira pulled up next to me and signaled that something was wrong. She was pointing repeatedly to the left side of her GS. We found a small roadside restaurant parking lot and our group pulled over.

It seems that Shira was a victim of the elusive and rare Camouflaged Baja Road Tortise - basically a hard piece of road debris got kicked up and nailed her shift lever, totally bending it. The “CBRT” also got the top of her foot, which could not have been pleasant.

This could have been a day-ending disaster, but one of the Bajanians in the restaurant spoke better English than I did Spanish and soon a large steel pipe was found.

Minutes later I was able to bend the shift lever back to near stock position and Shira was good to go.

A few miles down the road and we pulled into San Ignacio and the famed Rice & Beans - one of the pit stop/check points for the Baja 1000 Race. If there is a cooler place for miles around I'd like to know about it. The best margaritas and off-road racing up the wazzoo.

Unpacking my bike, I spied Rich coming down the hill into the hotel. Rich was part of the off-road “Mission” group.

As he took off his helmet I asked him what was up. He gave me “the look” - you know the one - that something bad, but not horrible, had happened.

It seems that two of the riders went down in a silt wash. Wiley just was bruised but Tevor had sustained some serious injuries.



We rode down to the beach, where a number of small bungalow shacks were against the sea. It is seldom that we say this - but we could live here. We just might one day. We have rarely been so moved.

The ride south from there to Loreto was a blast. The GS's are basically mid-powered dual-sport bikes, but they handle damn well and we made the best of the twisties for the rest of the day.

We pulled into Loreto, once the capital of our own California, by mid-afternoon, staying at a great resort right on the sea. We found Tevor, crutches and all, sitting in the hotel's restaurant checking e-mail.

I acquisitioned a Ducati red wheelchair from the front desk and with plenty of daylight left Tevor, Shira and I went in search of adventure.

LORETO TO LA PAZ

Once again Shira and I got on the road early, hours before the rest of our group. This day's journey would be one of great contrast. The first 30 or so miles brought us into the Sierra De La Giganta mountains that run hard along the coast with peaks that reach skyward like giant rocky fangs. Here the views were commanding and we stopped often to drink it all in. Although we were heading to La Paz, which is due south of Loreto, the Mexicans have the highway running all the way across the Baja to the Pacific and then back to the Sea of Cortez. What should have been a hundred or so miles turned out to be twice that. What was worse, after we rode out of the Sierra De La Giganta the road turned flat and straight. The towering peaks quickly vanished and the vast expanse of the Baja stretched for what seemed to be eternity. There was nothing else to do but hammer down the road first west and then east.

We did stop for a lunch of potato empanadas at a small place in the middle of nowhere, but soon we were droning down the road that went straight across the high plain. Right about that time the winds started to pick up and we were soon being battered from every conceivable direction, all at the same time.

Talk about being a "High Plains Drifter!"

By the time we made La Paz we were both done.

Right outside the city they have erected a monument that combines two doves of peace into a whale's tail - showing the serenity of Baja with its natural roots to the sea that surrounds it - a marvelous creation.

La Paz is the capital of Southern Baja and being it was still early afternoon we parked the bikes and did a walking tour of this harbor town.

We discovered a sweet little restaurant and later on our whole group returned for dinner. It was a great night made even better by a Spanish guitar that got passed around our unexpectedly talented friends.

LA PAZ TO CABO - LAND'S END!

After a group photo by the sea wall in La Paz, Shira and I left the group to do a little exploring of some of the out-of-the-way beaches that can be found along the point that shelters La Paz.

Soon after we rode south of the city and hooked a right off of the main road towards Todos Santos. We had ridden here a few years back on a Harley we had rented while vacationing in Cabo San Lucas, so I had a basic idea of the lay of the land.

These days, the sleepy little town is a bit more bustling and the famed Hotel California has been refurbished and made a great place for lunch with our group that had arrived a few minutes before us.

From lunch it was a short ride to land's end - Los Cabos.

As we got closer, with the road rising and falling with the hills and the shining Pacific on our right, my mind ran back to all that we had seen and done in this week of exploring the Baja from top to bottom. The stunning mountain vistas, endless deserts, uncountable cactus, wonderful town folk, beautiful bays, humble missions and superb riding all combined to make this a truly memorable tour. Edelweiss has this one aced!

The guides were great, our group beyond excellent, the accommodations fine and it was really a fantastic two-wheeled adventure for us all.

It has been said many times, by many people, that there is a magic about Baja. Maybe that is why so many riders return again and again. I am fairly sure that we'll be back. In fact, I am certain of it.

Prices for Edelweiss' Tour of Baja range from \$2190 to \$4500 with BMW F650GS Dakar, R1200GS and R1200RTs available.

For more information on this and the other excellent tours Edelweiss offers around the globe log onto www.edelweissbike.com.

