

## Baja California

Our exit from the United States began as would any cheerful California day. We passed sprinklered parks and shopping centers, tennis courts and ATM machines. We passed pleasant neighborhoods fresh with morning dew. We passed *Denny's*. We stopped for lattes. And we were really enjoying ourselves. And then, all at once... there was nothing. It was as if the development that spreads so rampantly over the rest of southern California were hesitating- intentionally keeping its distance from what lies just out of view to the south. The clean, green face of San Diego gives way to perfect *wild-west* abandonment- crumpled hills, tumbleweed, a torched mobile home- and after pausing briefly to say good bye, we watched everything familiar about the American landscape disappear over the horizon.

For two hours we followed the jagged line of a young mountain range while the landscape ahead opened to ever broader, emptier vistas. Noon found us perched atop a ridge, shouldering hot winds where the last of successive hills swept down, then out to the horizon. In the distance, shimmering vaguely through waves of rising heat, we saw what looked like a massive train wreck lying spread across some inexplicable, invisible barricade in the middle of absolutely nowhere- our first view of Mexico, and the small manufacturing town of Tecate.

For the first-time visitor fresh from the United States, Mexico can be a little unnerving. There is ample stuff for nightmares, if you believe everything you hear. We could be robbed. Or ransomed. Or caught in the middle of a blazing crossfire, the sort of thing that could presumably erupt without warning at any given moment. Or we could be drugged and have our vital organs stolen, which would apparently yield quite a pretty peso on the vital organs black market. True, Tecate was dirty and chaotic, and parts of it didn't smell so great, and there was real poverty here, and the surrounding barrios of cardboard, scrap metal and old tires were like nothing we'd ever seen before, but all in all, we managed to take these things in stride and keep our imaginations under control. For a while, anyway.

We had just arrived in the open square of the *zocolo* for a moment of repose when we sensed an odd disruption. On the bench immediately before us, a dozen people sat perfectly still, mouths slightly ajar, examining our every move. Beyond them were a dozen more, and beyond those even more still, and we realized, with horror, that we were in fact surrounded- by a vast audience completely seized by our appearance. For the longest time we just stood there, fidgeting nervously, but the moment wouldn't let go. Had our silly cycling uniforms and unusual transportation brought this upon us? Perhaps they were thinking we might break into song and dance? Perhaps they didn't know what to think. But perhaps they *wanted* us to feel uneasy. Perhaps we weren't really welcome here. Perhaps our belongings were being silently appraised! Or perhaps they just wanted to smother us to death with their overwhelming, merciless stares! I felt a hot flash of panic. Alarm bells started ringing and I was suddenly overcome with the impulse to run. A young boy approached from behind, giving us a startle. He had a sticker in his hand and asked if he could put it on my bike. *No doubt he had come to relieve us of our vital organs!*

There was no way we could have known it at the time, but this exact scene- this prolonged moment of mass bewilderment involving dozens, sometimes hundreds of people- was in fact a glimpse of our future, and would soon become as much a part of our daily lives as the surrounding slums, the noise, the filth, the crowds...hand in hand even with fish tacos and refried beans.

Somebody broke out in hysterical laughter. Another yelled "*Gringo!*". We smiled back nervously, hoping not to betray our discomfort, then beat a quick retreat to the nearest hotel.

Immediately south of Tecate lies the Baja peninsula- an odd appendage quite a world apart. Baja owes its existence to the San Andreas fault, which tore it free of the mainland some 5 million years ago. At present, Baja is roughly 1200 km long and joins continental Mexico just south of the United States border- but the San Andreas fault reaches north as far as San Francisco, and will eventually rip apart the state of California in much the same fashion.

Baja is nearly all desert. It includes great, unrelieved stretches of sand and sky that can be reduced to even further abstraction when shifting winds conspire to erase the horizon. It includes mountain ranges, young and severely crumpled, whose stark outlines stand out with added sharpness against vivid, cloudless skies. It includes a variety of vicious plant and animal life that blanket the landscape with remarkable texture, whose thorns, needles, stingers and fangs are always eager to remind a clumsy traveler, transfixed on vast horizons, that they had better keep an eye on where they are going. And like other landscapes that initially appear lifeless, given the chance, it will communicate its enigmatic message in surprising ways. A demonic cactus, alone by the side of the road, seems suddenly imbued with personality, stopping you in your tracks. Examining aerated boulders thrown from an ancient volcano, you discover, with astonishment, that they are as light as feathers- a landscape of sponge toffee. Standing perfectly still, one becomes attuned to thorns bristling in steady wind, the sound rising and deepening, until you can't believe you didn't notice it before. The desert can be vast, spare, and mute- as empty as you want it to be- but for those who seek an intimacy with it, it will fill you with as much wonder as you are prepared to receive.

The desert seems to take great delight in the remains of things long gone, of which it has collected a vast assortment. Most are stumbled upon with the greatest informality- such as the hundreds of failed ranchos that appear at every turn, lovingly possessed in small bundles of sand. Other times, it seems things are presented with a certain poignancy attached- as when you duck into the shade of one of these ranchos and discover (after breathing a satisfied sigh of relief), that you share this lucky spot with the skeleton of a large animal, stark white, lying unburied where a weary set of tracks vanishes from the earth. It's as though the desert were whispering: *"don't love me too much."* In 1973, the Mexican government constructed the Transpeninsular Highway to open-up and settle the Baja. Service stations, hotels, and even RV parks were built to foster growth, but few established any lasting hold on the place and now these too are falling into abandonment. The desert maintains it's grip on the Baja. The enduring force of sun, wind and time pushes everyone away, pushes everything down, dulls it, bleaches it, and preserves what remains for posterity. Near the town of Cataviña, the same force has reduced an ancient mountain range to a scattering of house-sized boulders. The same force leaves parched riverbeds helplessly stranded in places where there hasn't been water for years. From the crumbling pavement of the Transpeninsular we can see all these things- symbols of the desert's sublime determination- nameless, forsaken, forgotten.

Some people are afraid of the desert. Some are bored by it. There are still others who find everything they need there, fall in love with it, and disappear forever. The latter stake out hidden pockets far off the highway, selecting the company of an attractive cactus or some Godless mountain- 'perfect spots', depending on one's disposition. Not the types who stay attached to anything for too long, they anchor camper vans and mobile homes- suitable enough structures that can be moved on a whim, or abandoned without too much loss. Add a fence of old tires and you've got it all- which isn't much, but then that's sort of the idea. *"Absolutely No Trespassing- Will Shoot"*, *"Willy's Paradise"* and *"Go to Hell"* are just a few of the salutations posted along the Transpeninsular, where dusty tracks speed off into the middle of nowhere. Extreme measures perhaps, but for a little taste of such an escape, one need only spend a few nights camping in the Baja. The possibilities are endless. Even with a bicycle, it's nothing to wander a few hundred meters from the road to find yourself shrouded in a camouflage of desert plants, completely and utterly alone, enjoying the slow revolutions of day turning to twilight, twilight turning to darkness. We enjoyed many short evening walks- our gaze extending unlimited in all directions over a landscape of moonlight and shadows, while overhead, an icy field of scintillating stars, so crisp and clear in the cold December night. At these moments we felt Baja's allure most powerfully. The quiet

solitude dulls away all distractions, and in the soft celestial light, desert and sky take on extended dimensions, tempting one to look farther, deeper, and longer. Together, they lend infinite space to the imagination, clear the mind, and invite one to dream...

Which is all very nice- until you're cold as hell.

*"Shit, I'm cold as hell!"*

*"Me too!"*

But the winter nights were long, and we found ourselves stuck with a lot of time to kill. A lone coyote, perched on a ridge high above our tent, might have wondered over vague sounds carried on the desert wind- Mexican radio, harmonica, charades and singsongs, sock puppets and shadow puppets... But even these couldn't fill the hours. And once the candles were all gone, and our flashlight had dimmed to the faintest orange circle... there was nothing left to do but stare at the darkness, wide awake, and listen to the wind outside.

We saw lots of animals in Baja, and right up close too! Some had been turned inside-out. A few lay reclined in horrific poses as if planted by some psychotic taxidermist. Most had just been flattened across long stretches of pavement in dark, greasy stains. Yes, the volume of road kill on the Transpeninsular is impressive, and we're not just talking about gophers and snakes either- but cows, horses, burros and fully grown pigs. Big stuff. Everywhere. For motorists, it must come as a terrifying surprise. After all, there's really nothing out there, and you can see for miles in every direction, and you wouldn't be expecting to come across a cow anyway, least of all in the middle of the road. The truth is, you couldn't hit one if you tried. Which is why the whole thing is so puzzling. After a lot of thought, we could come up with only one possible explanation. Worn down by desert life, a desperate cow might not imagine another way out- tucked behind a roadside boulder, waiting for an unsuspecting camper van, until just the right moment, and then, without any warning...

*"What the he- OH MY GOD!!"*

### **Pacific Coast (Puerto Vallarta to Puerto Escondido)**

Mexico's Pacific coast includes long, empty stretches of rugged seashore, a sprinkling of hidden oases, and a collection of international beach resorts- Puerto Vallarta, Zihuatanejo, Ixtapa and Acapulco being the most well known. The latter live up to their reputations as indulgent, sometimes riotous enclaves, and are well worth a visit if for no other reason than to partake in a few way-over-the-top tourist festivities. Of course, there are always one or two 'authentic' offerings, but why settle for half-respectable when you can have cheap cultural mockery!

As night falls, the *Love Boats* empty, the Mariachi bars fill to overflowing, and the band parades on stage in ridiculous matching costume. First, a slow number, as margaritas circulate the room in copious portions. The band works the crowd like the seasoned professionals they are, keeping things low key until the first round is nearly finished. They know exactly when it's time...

*"La la la la la la- La Bamba!"*

A screaming, shoulder-shaking frenzy ensues and things get into full swing. Waiters are at the ready as bar sales go through the roof. The music is surprisingly good, though the repertoire is usually limited to three or four slower melodies punctuated (always) by another vigorous rendition of *La Bamba*. As the boozy celebration unravels, party favors appear, and the now inebriated crowd participates. Maracas, piñatas, sombreros- even rope tricks and plastic revolvers!... *La Bamba, La Bamba, La Bamba...* It's a hilarious spectacle, but after a while you can't help but feel overwhelmingly embarrassed for your fellow North Americans, who have fallen for a taste of Mexico as authentic

as Disneyland and who will finish the evening by staggering away at 3 am to throw-up on the beach. And you're embarrassed as well for the actors, who shame themselves with pom-pom sombreros and glitter pants, and surely can't wait to peel off those ridiculous mustaches, put on some real clothes, and go home. It's no wonder so many North Americans come away with such bizarre impressions of Mexico, and it's no surprise that the Mexicans have invented a name for these 'guests'- sometimes used with affection but normally not- the *Gringo*.

One cannot travel in Mexico without at some point encountering the *muchacho*. The *muchacho* is quite opposite to the agreeable *caballero*, though often around the same age. He stands miles behind any gentlemanly *abuelo*, and most certainly lacks the charm of a *chico*. And though the name *muchacho* can have broader definition, for our purposes, we will refer to our hero simply as the *muchacho*. The *muchacho* is harmless and friendly, but offensive in every way. He likes to talk in your face with his mouth full, and picks his nose before shaking your hand. The *muchacho* wears a very dirty t-shirt, although sometimes he wears no shirt at all, in which case he himself is normally very dirty. The *muchacho* is the embodiment of *machismo*- an exaggerated masculinity most often associated with socio-economic impotence. He lives in a fantasy world of deep delusions, where women exist for no other reason than to tribute his riveting sex appeal, and where his own sense of manhood hinges on impressing other men with heavy drinking, guns and posturing. For example: a man and woman are traveling, let's say, on their bicycles. A truck full of men are about to pass on the highway. They ignore the man entirely, but as they pass the woman, one makes a sucking/hissing sound and does something foul with his tongue, while another blows kisses with one finger up his nose as far as the second knuckle. We call this '*the full muchacho*'. We know about this because we experienced some form of it almost every day that we were in Mexico. Now let's say the same couple meet the same truck full of men hours later at a gas station. This time the men ignore the woman, but greet the man with overzealous camaraderie, dragging him off for several rounds of cervezas. As you can see, the *muchacho* will express himself differently depending on the circumstances. Ask him about it yourself and you may get a thoughtful response.

"Uh?"

Followed by an open smile full of iguana taco and hearty slap on the back.

"Ayeeyaahaa!"

Dealing with the *muchacho* isn't always easy, but as a traveler in Mexico, you have no other choice. He is a cultural phenomena looming everywhere on the national horizon. A minority, certainly, and under pressure from modern influences- but ask him if he cares.

For many, the idea of long distance bicycle touring is simply out of the question. But think about it- imagine you're somewhere really, really beautiful- like Vermont, the Rockies, or the south of France. Sure there's some hard work involved, but the weather's fine, you can go at your own pace, there are plenty of nice spots to relax at along the way, and when you *do* arrive at the base of an imposing hill, you can always say to yourself: "*Fine. But tonight I'm checking into a swank hotel and I'm gonna order a big desert too!*". And when you do, you'll really enjoy this because you've earned it. Doesn't sound so bad, does it? Maybe it even sounds like fun. Now the Pacific coast of Mexico- that must be really beautiful too, right?- could it possibly be much harder?

Well yes it can! How about heat stroke? Lightning bouts of diarrhea? The same puddle of refried beans every meal of every day? Imagine the previous scenario, only now it's also hot- *really* hot. Between the pounding sun and convecting asphalt you suffer through the day in an airless, delirious heat. And of course you're also sweating- sweating a *lot*- and you're *really* thirsty so you reach for a refreshing gulp of water- and *gag!*- because your water is even hotter than you are! Now *try* to imagine the glowing rash that all this heat and sweat has hatched inside your lycra shorts. Oh, and also you're tired- *really, really* tired- not just from the heat and dehydration, but because you were stranded on the beach last night and at some wee morning hour a burro came to inspect your tent, and you startled the hell out of each other. So you collapse under a piece of shade with a view overlooking the ocean. The horizon draws you in easily, and the one

still lucid part of your brain calmly thinks to itself: *oooooh.....* But then you smell something- something *bad*- your eyes drop and- *aaaghh!!* At your feet is the rotting corpse of a horse, *covered* with flies and maggots, perched atop a landslide of garbage that spills right into the sea. After a long bout of involuntary gagging, you mount your bike once again and struggle up the final hill before town- the town you will finish the day in- and a filthy pickup full of pigs labours alongside you- pigs that have been soiling the back of this pickup for two hundred miles- whose filth seeps under the tailgate in a tinkling cascade, dribbling all over you as it passes- *slowly*. So you finally arrive in town, and you plunk down exhausted, wanting nothing more than to be left alone- to have just a few moments to yourself- but as usual, a crowd gathers and stands before you in silence. You want to go to a restaurant, or maybe find a motel rather than sleep on the beach again, but of course, there is none of that here. So you pull yourself up and stagger through the dirt toward a little store- the only store- but all they have are a few butchered chickens, bathing in hot sun and flies. And before long the combined weight of a hundred small discomforts, injustices, molestations, and depravations adds up to something just a little more than you can bare... at which point you ask yourself: *"why am I doing this again?"*

You ask your audience where the beach is and they point to a lightly traveled dirt path. You follow for a while, certain this is going to take you absolutely nowhere, when you stumble upon a deserted bay. A carpet of beautiful, white sand runs in a crescent, bound at either end by intimidating rocks that lend a wonderful feeling of intimacy. The surrounding jungle spills forth leafy, succulent plants, while giant palms hover overhead- all of it stirring in a slow, languid motion by what could very well be the most refreshing breeze you've ever felt in your life. You plunge into the surf, rolling and tumbling, suddenly invigorated. The sun hangs low in a towering orange sky. This really could be paradise. A bit later, you sink flickering candles into the sand and lie back to watch the firmament deepen, reflecting all the while on how unbelievable it is that you should have this all to yourself. Soon you're overcome by the day's hardships, and the last thing you are mindful of, before drifting into unconsciousness, is the thunderous pounding of the sea... Until your friend the burro arrives three hours later.

And that was the Pacific coast of Mexico- a hazy dream of muchachos and Mariachis; dead horses and delicate flowers; Pacific sunsets and piles garbage- sometimes wonderful, sometimes awful- but always baking and delirious under a blazing hot sun.