The Unforgettable Peninsula: Travels on Baja California

By: The Hon. Roger J. Miner and Jacqueline A. Miner

[Sidebar: Judge Miner is a retired judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit].

Nearly 50 years ago, the American naturalist, Joseph Wood Krutch, described Baja California as the "forgotten peninsula." Now, thanks to the Transpeninsular Highway (Highway #1), completed in 1973 and permitting vehicular traffic for its full 1,059 miles of length, this peninsula is no longer a mystery to any motorist with a willingness to forego some creature comforts to reap the rewards of exploration. Such was the story of our trip in the winter of 1998 in our 1992 Ford Taurus.

Entering Mexico at the San Ysidro border crossing, we encountered a second customs inspection near Tijuana. Suspicions may have been aroused by our over-stuffed car or perhaps by our "USJ" license plates indicating ownership by a federal judge, but whatever the reason, we were cleared upon validation of our tourist cards. This was the first of many occasions that we learned the importance of having such cards available for unexpected inspections by the authorities.

Having no desire to pause in sordid Tijuana, we easily found the 4-lane toll road leading to Ensenada and providing a beautiful drive along the Pacific Ocean. There followed a series of condominium developments, apparently attractive to North American buyers because of their ocean front locations and breathtaking views.

Our first stop in Mexico was the old Rosarito Beach Hotel, a little over 20 miles south of the border. A holdover from the days of American prohibition when it assuaged the thirst of affluent gringos, the hotel is still in great shape, combining modern facilities with nostalgic ambiance. One gains access to the front entrance through a series of run-
down shops selling all kinds of interesting Mexican wares, and we browsed for an hour or so before returning to the highway.

Ten miles further south, we turned off at Puerto Nuevo to see the well-known Lobster Village featuring numerous seafood restaurants specializing in the tasty Pacific lobster. Originally a small fishing village, Puerto Nuevo is a "must" for all who savor the fruit of the sea.

Back on the highway, sand dunes beaches and resorts flashed past, many providing hook-ups and other facilities for recreational vehicles (RV's). A few miles north of Ensenada where coastal cliffs tower above the ocean, we reached El Mirador (The Viewpoint). A spectacular viewpoint it was with a vista that sweeps westward over the Pacific and south to Ensenada and beyond.

Leaving the toll highway, we arrived at Highway #1, the Transpeninsular, and thence to our destination, the Estero Beach Resort providing a base of operations for our trips into surrounding areas. With all the amenities of a first class hotel and excellent food, the resort has a fine beach on an estuary leading to the Pacific, but the water was too cold for bathing during our three-day stay in January.

The third largest city in Baja California after Tijuana and Mexicali, Ensenada is on the Bahía de Todos Santos (Bay of All Saints), so named by an early Spanish explorer who arrived there on All Saints Day. Its excellent harbor makes it a busy commercial and fishing port, and its proximity to the United States, coupled with its many attractions, make it popular for seasonal tourists and long-term American expatriates.

Here we first encountered problems associated with currency exchange. Responding to a guidebook recommendation of a bank that provided such service, we
stood in line for more than an hour before being told by the teller that the bank did not exchange foreign money. We later discovered that only certain branches of certain banks do so. On this occasion we wound up at the booth of a money changer (Cambio) where, in addition to having our dollars exchanged at a lower rate than the official one, we were charged an extra commission for the cashing of travelers' checks. Cambios are prevalent throughout Baja California.

After a delicious dinner at the resort dining room, we enjoyed watching the playful antics of sea lions and seagulls cavorting on an offshore rock. On another day we tried lunch at a well publicized restaurant, El Rey Sol on Lopez Mateos, but were somewhat disappointed in the cuisine. Throughout the trip, we heeded our Department of Agriculture's admonition to avoid all Mexican meat products except pork, but we found more than adequate sustenance in Mexican chicken, seafood and pork dishes.

Among the Ensenada tourist attractions are the Plaza de las Tres Cabezas (Three Heads Plaza) featuring enormous busts of the Mexican heroes, Juarez, Carranza, and Hidalgo; the Centro Social, a museum and 3-dimensional mural of the Californias in an interesting building that once housed a casino managed by Jack Dempsey; and a museum of early Mexican culture.

An interesting natural phenomenon south of Ensenada is La Bufadora, a tidal blowhole where seawater is blown high into the air through a notch in the rocks. The effect is spectacular as the water shoots up and then crashes down on a regular schedule.

As we left Ensenada heading south, Highway #1 narrowed in width and the road surface varied from excellent to terrible. Sometimes there are only two lanes, and the paving resembles a washboard. Often there is no shoulder at all. On many inclines the
road is banked in the wrong direction, and there are sheer drop-offs without any

 guardrails. The effect can be frightening, especially when trucks and buses travel at high
 speeds without concern for the safety of others or when livestock and people cross the
 highway in unlikely places. Driving at night can be lethal.

 One of the dusty little villages through which we passed was Maneadoro where,
 according to some guidebooks, tourist cards could be obtained and validated, while
 according to another guidebook, its immigration office had been closed for five years.
 The latter information proved correct, and we were glad we had attended to the validation
 process at the border. (Of the seven different guidebooks we used on the trip, we
 concluded that the current edition of Magnificent Peninsula by Jack Williams is the most
 accurate and informative).

 Our destination in the San Quintin area was La Pinta Hotel, part of the La Pinta
 chain found throughout Baja California and usually the best in town. However, by U. S.
 standards, they range from poor to adequate. Each has a restaurant called Las Cazuelas
 (The Pots) where the food varies from decent to fairly good. Each also has a bar called
 El Rincon (The Corner) where the jumbo Margaritas are excellent.

 The La Pinta at San Quintin has a fine beach but the access road has potholes that
 can wreck a car. We also found disconcerting as well as somewhat dangerous the
 practice of duck hunting in the marshes adjacent to the beach. One other problem in the
 hotel itself: its one telephone operates on a battery with a tendency to lose power after a
 few minutes of conversation.

 On the next segment of our trip, moving into more inland country, we
 encountered interesting desert vegetation including the Cirio or Boojum tree, a plant
unique to this region. In the Sonoran Desert we saw prickly pear cactus used in the making of a tasty Mexican sauce, candelabra cactus, giant cardon, ocotillo and many other varieties of plant life. Shortly before arriving at Catavina, we stopped to explore and photograph a boulder field with massive granite boulders with elephant trees growing out of some of them, a fascinating spot.

The La Pinta Hotel at Catavina is an isolated desert outpost but also an oasis where once more the Margaritas were superb. However, other features of the place did not measure up to this standard. There was no telephone in town and we developed a frightening feeling of isolation. Also no gasoline was available either at the hotel or at a gas station in a neighboring settlement. Two entrepreneurs offered to sell lead-free gas from barrels in their pickup trucks, but we decided the risk not worth taking. This shortage of fuel caused us to eliminate from the itinerary our planned trip to Bahia de Los Angeles on the Sea of Cortez because we had enough gas to get there but not to return. This was a disappointment because we had particularly wanted to see the facility where the government conducts its sea turtle research program. However, we had no choice except to press on to Guerrero Negro, confident that on the way we would find a filling station with the good Mexican gas, Pemex Magna Sin. And so it was.

The next leg of the journey brought us from a high hilly area down into a valley where desert vegetation of all kinds abounded, and we were amazed by the profusion of so many beautiful flowers with vivid colors blooming in the desert. The road passes through a large forest of cardon cactus, and, in greater numbers further south, detalillo trees, literally translated as little date trees but unrelated to the date palm. We went through a long stretch of highway in the Desierto de Vizcaino (the Vizcaino desert) until
we reached the 28th parallel, the boundary with Baja California Sur marked by a tall monument in the shape of an eagle. We checked into the La Pinta Presidente Hotel, our base of operations for the next two days.

This hostelry is about average by La Pinta standards, the rooms being poorly lighted and the one telephone in the building located behind the lobby desk. Most of the streets in Guerrero Negro are unpaved and some impassable. On the plus side, we enjoyed two excellent seafood dinners, again featuring the delicious Pacific lobster.

A short distance south of town a side road brought us to Laguna Jlo de Libre (Hare's Eye Lagoon), also known a Scannon's Lagoon. There the California gray whales emigrate each winter from the Bering Sea to raise their young before returning north. Discovered by an American whaler named Scannon, this breeding ground became the scene of mass destruction as the whole whale population was almost exterminated. Now, the lagoon and its denizens are closely watched by the Mexican government and the area is a national park. Not far away we visited the Guerrero Negro salt flats, said to be the site of the largest salt manufacturing operation of its kind in the world.

The Transpeninsular Highway then took us toward the coast of the Sea of Cortez, known on most American maps as the Gulf of California. A well paved side road led us to the quaint desert town of San Ignacio, marked by dense growths of citrus and date palms planted by the missionaries. The local La Pinta Hotel featured pseudo-colonial Spanish architecture, a tiled courtyard, an unswimmable swimming pool, and, once more, inadequately lighted rooms.

San Ignacio itself is a small town of great charm with a typical public square bounded by a church constructed of lava stone in 1728 and still in use. Next door is an
excellent little museum containing reproductions of rock paintings made by prehistoric Cochini Indians. Mule trips are available for those wishing to visit the caves where the rock art may be seen in its original setting.

The ensuing drive to Santa Rosalia rewarded us with spectacular scenery. All the petty annoyances, inconveniences and uncertainties of travel on the Transpeninsular pale into insignificance as one marvels at the strange geological forms and vegetation found nowhere else in the world. We traveled in the shadow of the 6,500 foot Volcano las Tres Virgenes (Three Virgins Volcano) that last erupted in the distant past and were able to walk on its solidified lava flows. Elephant tree grow out of the lava rock and Datilillo trees and various colorful plants are found in profusion. This part of the Highway winds through the steep mountain descent known as "The Devil's Grade." It is said to be the most dangerous section of the Transpeninsular, but after a perilous descent, we were rewarded by a magnificent view of the Sea of Cortez.

Our next destination was the Hotel El Moro, touted in the guidebooks as the best in town, but we had a number of complaints: the rooms were unclean, the light fixtures broken, the swimming pool filthy, and most of the time there was no hot water. The hotel's location on a high bluff above the Sea of Cortez is its best feature, causing us to fantasize as to how much fun it would be to convert it to a first class establishment if given the opportunity and the money. On the edge of town we found the restored Hotel Frances, an immaculate facility where the food is excellent, the pool clean and the history alive. We planned to make it our base of operations on our way home.

Another local attraction is the Iglesia Santa Barbara, a galvanized iron church designed by Gustave Eiffel of Eiffel Tower and Statue of Liberty fame. It was
prefabricated in France in 1895 and shipped to Santa Rosalia for reassembly. Still another French influence is the Panaderia El Boleo (the Boleo Bakery) producing French pastries as good as any found anywhere.

Back on Highway #1 heading south, we approached the many beaches of the beautiful Bahia Concepcion on the Sea of Cortez, believed by many to be the loveliest in Baja California. As usual, we found difficulty in leaving the highway, the paved portion often being significantly higher than the surface of the dirt road. Fearful of damage to the Taurus, we left the car and hiked down to the beach where we found the beauty of scenes impaired by numerous recreational vehicles parked cheek by jowl. What a pity.

Returning to the highway and proceeding further south, we were treated to close-up views of a large cluster of giant cactus and more of the Sierra Giganta Mountains before reaching our destination at La Pinta Presidente in Loreto. Undoubtedly the best La Pinta facility on Baja California, our spacious room was in a detached building with a large balcony overlooking the Sea of Cortez. The hotel restaurant offered a tasty bill of fare, but our favorite place for dining proved to be the neighboring Tiffany’s Pisa Parlor featuring delicious Italian dishes.

Mission Nuestra Senora de Loreto was established by a Jesuit priest in 1697 as the first permanent European settlement in Baja California. From here Junipero Sierra started his expedition to upper California, and Loreto was the seat of government for the entire peninsula until 1829. A restored government building on the lovely town square bears the inscription, "Historical Capital of the Californias".

Loreto is a clean, industrious and charming place. Prices for Mexican art after, of course, the expected bargaining, are among the best in the peninsula. Adjacent to the sea,
a beautiful malecon (walkway along the shore) leads to a dock where fishing and touring boats are available and one can watch with fascination the pelicans catching fish off shore.

Our next port of call was La Paz where we stayed for four days at La Conch Beach Resort Hotel. Its accommodations were excellent, our room featuring a large balcony that commanded a sweeping view of the Sea of Cortez. As an alternative to beach bathing, not recommended because of pollution, it offered two beach jaccuzis and a large swimming pool.

Leaving La Paz, we continued our southern journey, stopping for photographs as we passed the concrete sphere marking the Topic of Cancer, a superfluous reminder that we were in the tropics. A few hills, some sharp curves and a few more miles brought us to the terminus of Baja California at Cabo San Lucas. There we rested from our labors in the lap of luxury for a full month in the Salomar Suites Hotel, a world class facility. The 2-story building of Spanish architecture provided us with a room on the second floor with a wraparound balcony overlooking the Pacific Ocean and the point where it meets the Sea of Cortez. Sometimes called Land's End, this point is marked by a series of great rocks including the great landmark known as El Arco (the Arch).

The town of Cabo San Lucas did not appeal to us—it is overbuilt and much too honky-tonk for our taste. More appealing was the neighboring town of Jose del Cabo, a less frenetic place where we enjoyed shopping and general exploration in a more relaxed setting. The church on the plaza was founded in 1730 and the mosaic over the entrance depicts the death of a mission priest during an Indian rebellion.
Our return trip to the States retraced many of the same steps we took on our southern journey, as we saw from a different perspective many of the same vistas that had thrilled us before. We reentered the United States through the border station at Tecata with only a few pesos remaining in our pockets and three unused coupons for two jumbo Margaritas at any La Pinta Hotel in Baja California.

We close this journal with an admission that not all travelers, especially those who place a high priority on luxurious accommodations and service, will want to follow us on this excursion. Still, there must be others who will be lured as we were by the lovely sunsets, the magnificent mountains, the fascinating desert, the fantastic flora and fauna, the thrilling trail of the Transpeninsular Highway, the warm and sunny days, the cool and starry nights, and the wonderful people who inhabit this part of the world. To us Baja California will always be the unforgettable peninsula.