

VAMOS A BAJA

By Sam Moses

WAYS TO RUN OUT OF GAS SOUTH OF THE BORDER

There are more advantages to living in Southern California than just the weather. Nearly every form of two-wheeled outdoor recreation is at your doorstep: winding country roads in every direction (providing you know where to look), mountains to the north, desert to the east, and to the south, Mexico. Mexico—a barren country which is a challenge just to drive through. Driving south on the Baja California peninsula, the only thing between you and your destination—wherever that may be—is a narrow road on an arid cactus-covered plain with short rocky mountains on either side of you, not to mention the varied assortment of rattlesnakes, armadillos, scorpions, and road runners.

But still, there is something alluring about Mexico, especially the Baja Coast. Despite the boring, uncomfort-

able, and sometimes hazardous (hazardous only because of the heat and isolation) drive to the good recreation spots, and despite the hassles at the border both going and coming, a weekend in Mexico with a good dirt bike sure beats cutting the grass or going to the laundromat.

There's a big difference between planning a trip to Mexico and actually doing it, and the only way to actually get there is by planning well in advance. If you wait until Friday afternoon to decide you want to go, you will always come up with a good reason why next weekend would be a better time. So I had been planning a weekend in Baja for two weeks, and was all set to leave one Friday evening. Well, almost all set.

I knew it was going to be one of those weekends when I went to pick

up my van after work that Friday. I had just bought it the week before, and due to the scarcity of vans had to settle for the only color the dealer had: kitchen appliance white. Now that's not exactly a color to set your heart a quiver, so straight off I took the van to one of Southern California's best custom paint shops, Dark Horse Kolor, to have Myron Burke do a conservative (for him) but colorful face-lifting. I was anxious to leave for Mexico—in a hurry in fact—but when I got to Myron's the van was still in his spray room getting its final couple of coats of clear lacquer. At first I was afraid that he was going to tell me to come back the next day, but fortunately it was about 110 degrees out, and the paint was drying as fast as Myron was spraying it on, his garage an oven. "Don't worry," he said. "In

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this heat it will be dry before you get on the freeway." It only took about an hour for him to finish up, pull off the masking tape, and put on the windshield wipers, and I was on my way.

When I got home it was almost dark and my wife was waiting patiently. (The way I could tell she was so patient was that she was asleep.) So I loaded up the van and rounded up my dog, after chasing her through the neighborhood, that is. She must have heard those stories about how they sell barbecued dog meat in Tijuana and didn't want to go anywhere near that place. I must admit that the thought entered my mind while I was screaming with pain after jamming my thumb while making a flying leap at her.

We were finally on our way, after one stop for gas and air for a flat front tire on the bike (praying that it was only low, and not really flat) and another for ice. We filled both chests, which left no room for the drinks. We may have had warm beer, but we had the coldest ice chests all weekend.

Getting into Mexico was no problem. (Getting out is where the biggest hassles arise.) Even though I had all her papers, I hid the dog behind the seat just in case the border guard was in a nasty mood and didn't want to let her in. Wouldn't you know my dumb dog popped her head up just as the guard was asking us how far south we were going? But he just patted her on the head and waved us on by. We got our Mexican insurance (an absolute necessity when you're driving in Mexico), carefully weaved our way through the Tijuana night life traffic (all I needed was to have someone in a '47 Ford pickup barrel into my freshly-painted van), and got on the toll road to Ensenada.

The toll stops came to about \$3, which is a bit expensive for the 50-odd miles, but worth it, considering the alternative. With a wife, dog, three motorcycles and a van full of related camping gear, no way was I going to drive over that twisty mountain road, even if it was free.

The drive took most of the night, and we arrived at our destination at about four in the morning. At least I thought we were there. I was following some friends' directions, and I was to meet them there later. Trying to pick the right dirt road in Mexico at that time of morning isn't the most confidence-inspiring thing. The directions were to turn right on the dirt road just before Santo Tomas, but the trouble with those directions was that the only way you knew where there was to get to Santo Tomas first, which is what I did, just to be safe. The road was the exact distance from the town as it was supposed to be, so I figured that must be the place.

Parked along the highway, at the



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beginning of the dirt road, was a car with a motorcycle trailer, and on the trailer was a stripped down and very ratty-looking Triumph Twin. Beside the car was this bearded guy who weighed about 240 pounds, and looked like a cross between Long John Silver and Big Daddy Roth. He waved us down, and came up to my window.

"Where are you going?" he asked, or rather demanded. Already I was on the defensive, and felt like telling him it was none of his business, but at 4:00 a.m. in the middle of nowhere you just don't go telling 240-pound giants to kiss off. "The beach," I said. "Why?" "Goin' down there to party?" he asked, ignoring my question. "Well, not exactly," I said. "I'm meeting

worse was that the road to the ocean was about 15 miles long, and at my 15 mph pace that meant it took nearly an hour. Each time I rounded a corner I expected to see water, but there would just be another mountain. When we finally got there it was beginning to get light, and I was glad. Now at least I would be able to see the enemy.

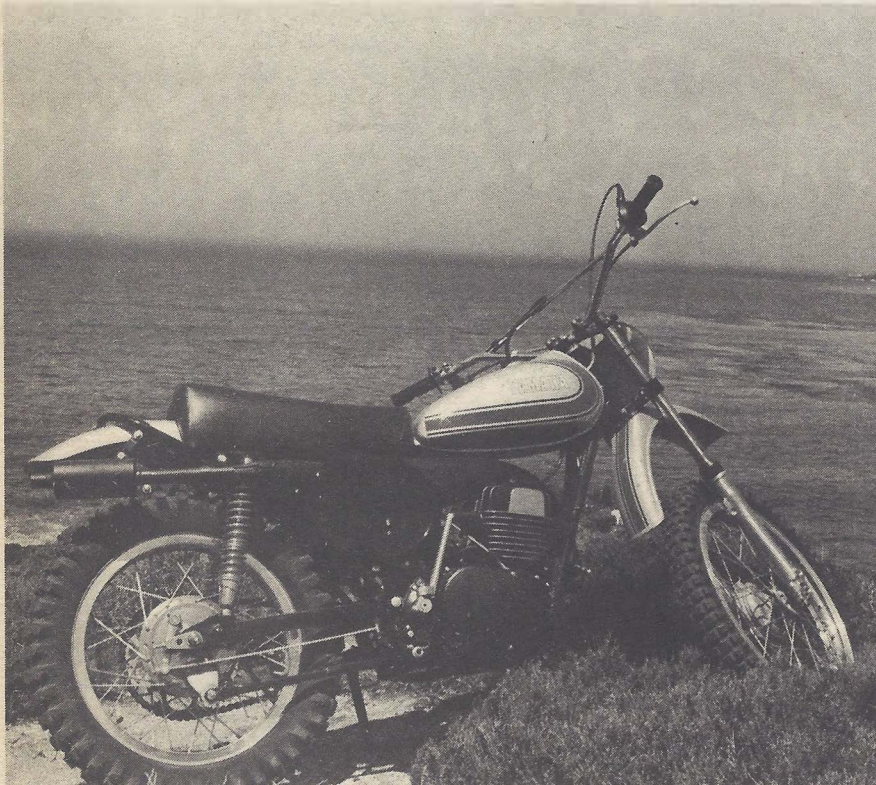
I guess I've just seen too many Hell's Angels movies. The "enemy" turned out to be a family motorcycle club, with wives and children. I felt even sillier when I saw one of its members, a 12-year-old-kid. He was wearing a club T-shirt, on the back of which was an iron-on angel, complete with golden halo. Just how Blackbeard the Pirate and his heavy duty weekend

has chased mine all over the campsite.

We had breakfast and went back to sleep until our friends arrived. They began trickling in one at a time, the unmarried ones last; after spending a rough night in Ensenada they hadn't been in very good shape for any early rising.

By early afternoon the group was together and organized—as much as 10 adults, two babies and two dogs can ever be organized—and it was time for a motorcycle ride, which is what the trip was supposed to be all about. Four of us took off; two on Yamahas and two on Bultacos. Before we left we got warmed up by playing in the sand dunes for half an hour. The sand was really deep and soft, and the rear tire spun three times for every yard moved forward, but it was fun nonetheless. With a running start it wasn't too difficult to clear the top of the highest dune, which dropped straight off, but there was no fear of a hard landing. The sand was so deep it was like landing in a featherbed, and jumping off a dune six or eight feet high wasn't the same as jumping off cliffs six or eight feet high with rocks below. Thoroughly warmed up (with the temperature about 100 degrees we were really warmed up), we ventured off toward the rocky and barren mountains.

We backtracked along the fire road that leads to the highway for about three miles before turning off and up into the hills. At the time we didn't really know where we were going; it was just follow the trail and turn on a whim or hunch, keeping our bearings by the ocean. Much of the ride was on smooth fire roads, but there was quite a bit on rocky parts with steep drop-offs, not even wide enough to pass on. As we continued we would occasionally come upon a wide-open area: smooth rolling plains that were almost green, which was a bit startling, considering everything else was brown and dry-looking. Whenever we came into one of these areas, it afforded the opportunity to go off the trail and flying through the fields. Once one of these fields suddenly narrowed into a tree-surrounded area, in the midst of which was a very old-looking one- or two-room house, with assorted left-over remnants in the yard such as bathtubs and old tires. Suddenly leaping out from inside one of the bathtubs was this mangy-looking dog, who stood in the middle of the path, just waiting, daring us to try and ride through his yard. We stopped and looked at the dog, trying to stare him down, then at each other when that didn't work, none of us wanting to go first. Finally I just gassed it and put my feet up on the cylinder head as I rode by him, my legs out of reach of



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some people there." I didn't want him to think I was alone. "What kind of people?" he persisted. Now he was really beginning to bother me. I felt like saying *big* people, but instead I just said "friends," rather testily. "Well I'm waiting for this here motorcycle club, the Lost Angels, and we're going down there to have a heavy duty wild weekend," he said, only he didn't use the word wild. He used another word.

When he said Angels all I could think of was Hell's Angels, and as we drove down the dirt road toward the beach I had visions of big ugly men on choppers jumping out of the bushes in an ambush, looting and pillaging the campsite. What made matters even

fit in I still can't figure.

We parked on a cliff above the cove where there was a small beach, rolled out the sleeping bags, and in about 30 seconds I was asleep. I got about two hours of sound sleep, except for the times when the dog woke me by barking in my ear at the seagulls. Just as I rolled over on my back, squinting at the sun in my eyes, I looked up and saw this solemn face with a skinny black mustache on it. The eyes above the mustache looked down at me. "You owe me one buck," the mouth below the mustache said. He was the campsite proprietor, or at least I think he was, because if he wasn't he ripped me off for a dollar. He left then, but not before his three mean-looking dogs

the dog's snapping jaws. The three others followed me through, and four motorcycles were just too confusing for the poor dog. He didn't know which one to chase, and by the time he decided we were halfway up the next hill.

The afternoon ride reached the halfway point a few more miles on. We came to the end of the trail, at an old abandoned mine. There was nothing there but a half-collapsed shored-up hole in the mountain, with a stone front marking it. Nearby was a well, with a pool of stagnant water about 30 feet below. Also down there was a ledge with an eagle's nest on it, and after dropping a few stones into the water we decided we had best head back down the mountain, lest the eagle think we were knocking on his front door.

The ride back was slower and more relaxed; it seems like motorcycle trail rides are always that way, starting out fast, but coming back slow. You always seem to be in more of a hurry to get where you are going than you are to get back. We came up on one more of those nice fields and galloping across our path at full chat were three beautiful horses, most likely wild. I gathered that they were a family, because sandwiched between the two big ones was a medium-sized colt, stumbling on spindly legs and trying to keep up with its parents. Even if they were owned by someone, they were for all practical purposes wild, and it felt good to think it.

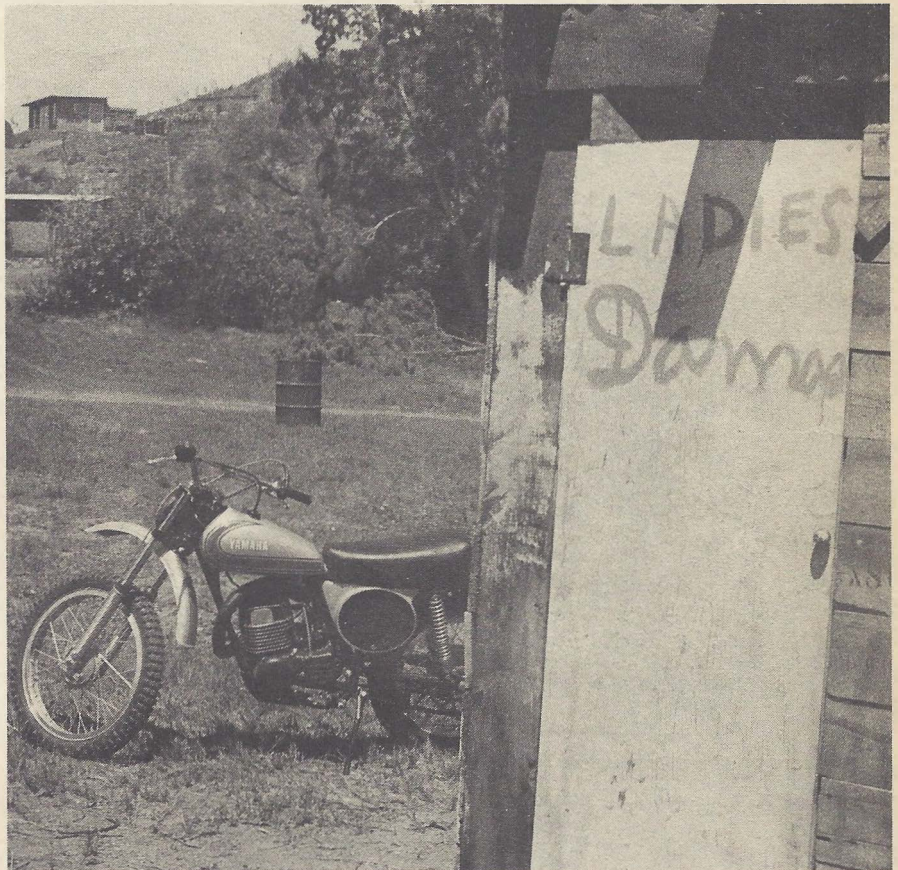
We were now following a different trail to get back, again using the ocean as our guide. Whenever we came to a fork or intersection we would always turn west, keeping the ocean to our left, as our campsite was north of us. We had done quite a number of miles already that afternoon, probably 30 or 40, and were beginning to think about the gas situation. There could be no back-tracking now—each time we made a decision as to which trail to take it would have to be the correct one. We were following this one rocky trail downward as it weaved into the bottom of a canyon when we came to a halt. The trail had been washed out, and dividing it was an eight-foot deep trench, about 40 feet across, and with trees and shrubs growing at the bottom; apparently it had been that way for years, and no one ever used that trail. For a while it looked as if we were in trouble. We didn't have enough gas to turn around and go a longer way, and we couldn't see any way of crossing the gully. Finally after an inspection on foot we found a way, only it was a bit tricky and would have to be taken one rider at a time, with the other three men posted along the way to help hold back large

bushes and push if necessary. All four of us made it without incident, and we all heaved a sigh of relief and continued.

But not for very far. Blaine, the youngest member of the foursome, had been over-exuberant with the throttle all afternoon long, and now had to pay for it. About six or eight miles from the camp his 250 Yamaha quit, not a drop of gas left in the tank. The trail back still included a considerable amount of difficult riding, at least difficult enough so that riding double was out of the question. And since it was too far to push, the only alternative was to leave him and go back with gas after we reached the camp. Fortunately he had run out of

camp.

But there was no way I was going to sit down and wait for my "friends" to bring back gas; I made up my mind to push. As it turned out I couldn't have run out of gas at a much better spot. I had only pushed about one-fourth of a mile when I came to a small cement factory along this oceanside fire road. For a minute I thought it was a mirage, and then when I got closer and realized it was real I told myself it was deserted, because I didn't want to build myself up for a letdown. But then I saw this old dump truck and two Mexicans—one fat, one skinny—sitting in the shade on folding chairs, and my hopes soared.



gas near a little house with a family of Mexicans, so he could at least get shelter and water. So with tears welling up in his eyes, we rode off, calling behind us, "Be back tomorrow morning, Blaine. Have a good night!"

There were only three of us now, and we were riding faster, eager to make it back before we all ran out of gas. Soon there were only two; I was next. I was on a 360 Yamaha, and exuberant riding or not, it only stands to reason that if you have a 360 and someone else a 250, and you ride the same distance at the same average speed, there's no way the larger motorcycle will go much farther. I was lucky to have made it as far as I did, and was almost within shouting distance of the

I pushed the Yamaha up to them and they just looked at me with blank expressions as I stood there panting, feeling like a fool. I pointed to the gas tank. "Gasolina?" I asked. One of them—the fat one—nodded once, but did it so without any reaction of any sort, and I was sure he didn't understand. "For me?" I asked, pointing to myself. Another nod. I still didn't think he had gotten the message, but put down the side stand and took off the gas cap anyhow. Slowly and still without any change of expression he got up and walked over to the old dump truck. He climbed in the cab and pulled a lever and the big bed began tilting back. When he got out of the cab he had with him an old piece



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of garden hose, and dropped it in the gas tank of the truck, which was under the bed. He put his mouth to the other end and sucked as hard as he could, and after getting a mouthful of gas put the hose into an old five-gallon paint can with no top and a crust of dried paint in the bottom. He let it fill with muddy looking gas until I said "alto."

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(I learned that Spanish word from the stop signs; that was about all I knew.) Then he carried the paint can over to the Yamaha, dropped in the hose, and siphoned the contents in the reverse direction. He still hadn't said a word, and the skinny one still hadn't moved.

All I could do was shrug, thank him, give him my only dollar (Before I

left I debated over whether to bother taking any money—after all what use would I have for money in a Mexican desert?), and ride off. When I pulled out I gassed it as hard as I could, half in joy at being going again, and half to get some reaction from either one of them, only I never bothered to look back and see if I had succeeded.

The couple of miles back to the camp were over smooth fire roads, and I kept the Yamaha at about 70 all the way, with my finger poised on the clutch lever just in case the combination of the temperature and low octane gas should cause a seizure. When I got back the other two guys had already washed their faces and were having a beer, but I knew it would be their turn before long. They still had to go back out and get Blaine. (Chuckle.)

After everyone was finally back on the beach, we made a fire that night and had lobster which we bought on the beach from a Mexican fisherman at about one-tenth the price that it would have cost in California.

The night was completely clear and the sky filled with stars, and my wife and I slept in the sand dunes on the beach, falling asleep to the sound of the soft tide.

The next morning after everyone had breakfast we took another ride, only this time we headed in the other direction and stayed along the main fire road than runs along the oceanside cliff. The Sunday ride proved much less eventful; the high point was the small fishing village of Puerto Santo Tomas. Small is an understatement. The village consisted entirely of one cantina and three or four houses, although the tiny port had over a dozen small boats in it.

When we got back people were loading things back into the cars and vans and campers, anxious to beat the regular Sunday evening jam at the Tijuana border. Except for the one flat tire and one van stuck in the sand, we all got out without any snags, and made it back to our respective homes, barely even missing dinner.

Packing for a weekend of camping and motorcycle riding is a chore in itself, but unpacking on a Sunday night is sheer misery, and requires the determination of a Boston Marathon runner. My wife and I got home hot and tired (It was my van that got stuck in the sand, and we had spent half an hour in the sun pushing it out), and neither one of us had that much determination; all we felt like unloading were our weary bodies. After briefly (very briefly) weighing the question of "should-we-or-shouldn't-we?", we made our decision: Lock the van and leave everything inside. Who knows? Maybe we don't even have to unload. Maybe we'll go again next week. ■