

BAJA'S SIERRA JUAREZ CANYONS

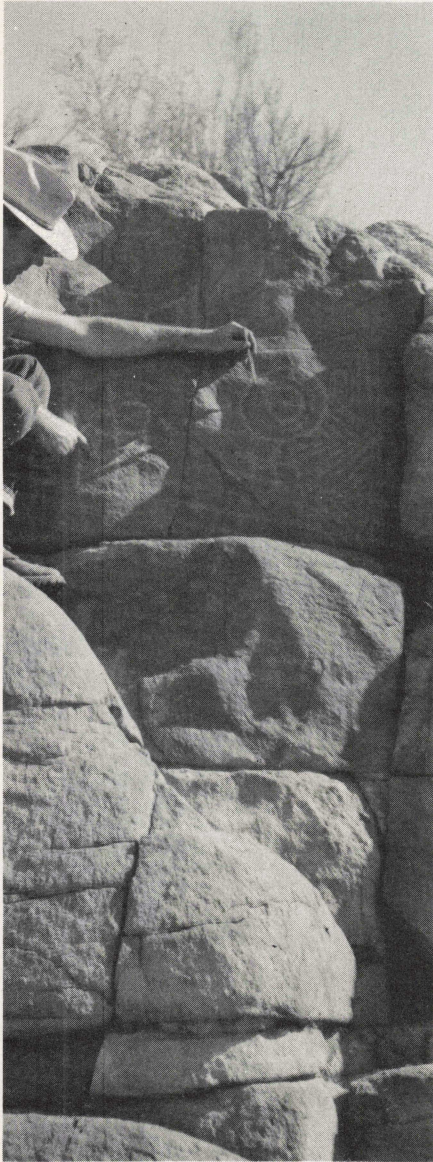


Editor's Note: This article is the first in a series of two by Roger K. Mitchell on Baja California. Next month's issue of the FOUR WHEELER will contain the second half in which the author and his friend journey to Canyon la Mora, Canyon Palomar, Canyon Santa Isabel, Agua Caliente and Portezuelo de Jamaa, a little known pass over the Sierra Juarez.

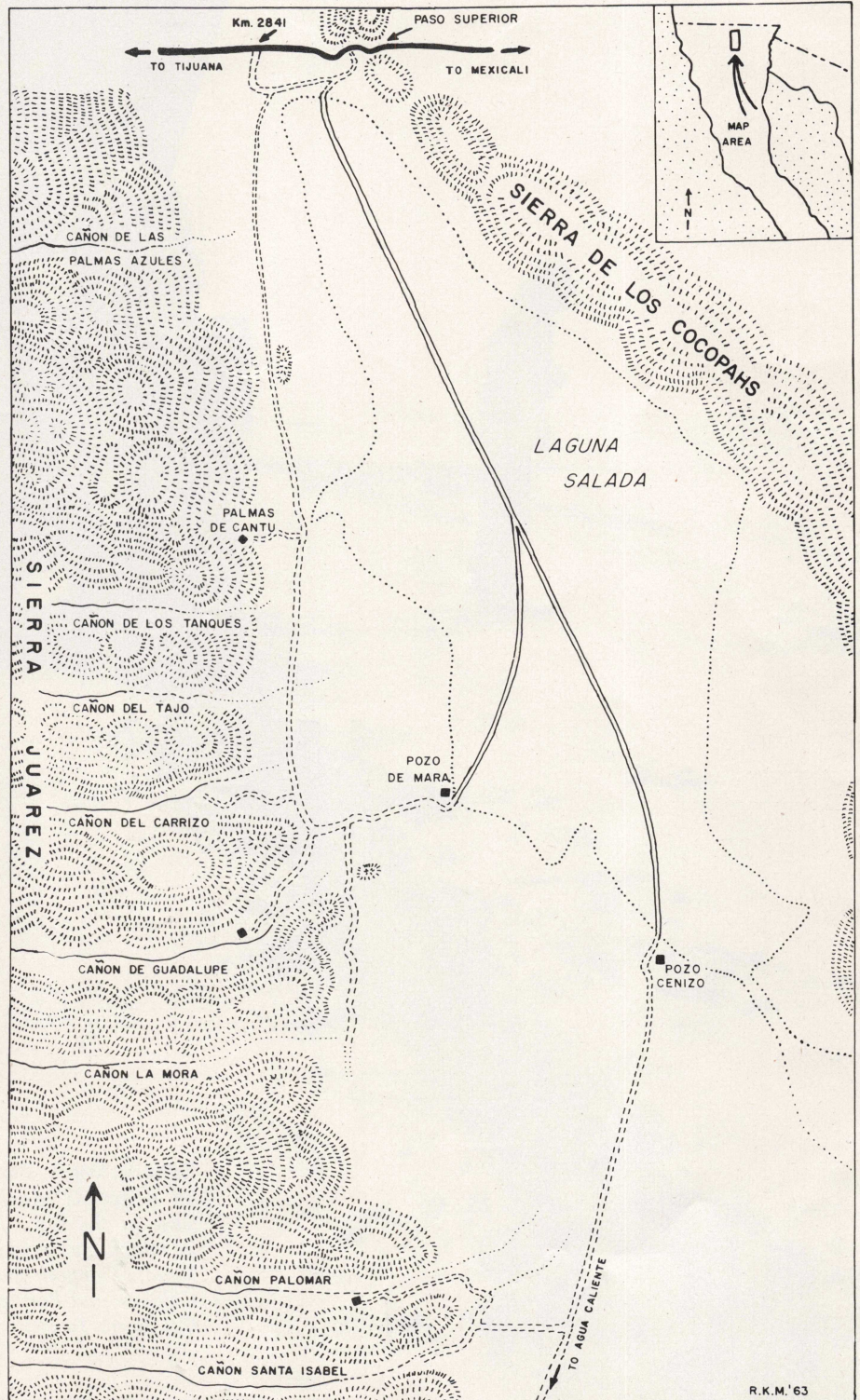
“Baja Fever” is a strange malady. Most people have never heard of it until they get it, and then they have it for the rest of their lives. The symptoms are an uncontrollable urge to jump in your four-wheel drive rig and head south. Alas, there is no cure. Only Baja’s vast expanses and its clear clear skies can bring relief. No, “Baja Fever” is not some exotic communicable disease, it is a state of mind; for once you see Baja you must return again and again to try and satiate the appetite which is generated by this wondrous peninsula.

A long-time friend, Jim Roberts, and I have the fever,

so whenever the opportunity arises, off we go — usually in my World War II weapons carrier or Jim’s G. I. carry-all. Last fall we had made a rugged hike from the crest of Baja’s Sierra Juarez down the scenic Tajo Canyon to the Laguna Salada Basin almost 6,000 feet below. During our descent, we explored a canyon seldom seen by white men. In it we found magnificent groves of native palm trees, pools of cool clear water, and evidence that this had been the home of Indian tribes of long ago. Canyon del Tajo is just one of many such canyons in the steep eastern escarpment of the Sierra Juarez. With this under



Jim Roberts examines Indian petroglyphs carved in rocks above Guadalupe Canyon



This map drawn by the author shows the area covered during his tour of the Canyons of Baja’s Sierra Juarez

R.K.M. '63



We sought a campsite in one of the un-named canyons along the way. Soon we were dining amid the elephant trees.

by Roger K. Mitchell

our belts, we had little trouble then deciding to explore the canyons of Baja's Sierra Juarez.

Our camping gear is permanently stored in three mobile field kits so all we had to do was remove the rear seats from the carry-all, load the boxes, and we were ready to go. We also loaded our spare parts kit which we take on all trips into Baja. Our two vehicles differ only in body style and the parts are interchangeable, therefore we have been able to pool our spare parts thus saving a little money. Jim's parts are for the chassis and power train (ie. springs, axle, universal joints) and mine are for the engine (fuel pump, coil, carburetors, etc.)

Our route took us south on U.S. Highway 101 to the international boundary at Tijuana. Here, we turned east on Mexican Highway Number 2. Nine miles east of Tijuana the road crosses Rodriguez Dam. (In recent years the lack of rain along with the population explosion in Tijuana has all but dried up the lake behind the dam. This has led to an extremely critical water shortage in Tijuana.)

The road continues through rolling farmlands and after 30 miles reaches Tecate. This is a second border crossing point, but Tecate is essentially an agricultural community. It is probably best known, however, for the brewery located there. East of Tecate the road passes through valleys of olive groves and vineyards which gradually give way to scattered ranches. The western side of

TRAVELING ACROSS COUNTRY IS SLOW GOING. MANY ROADS IN THE AREA ARE MADE BY WOOD GATHERERS.





PANORAMIC VIEW OF LAGUNA SALADA TAKEN FROM PROSPECT ABOVE PALMAS DE CANTU SHOWS INDIGENOUS PALMS.

the Sierra Juarez rises very gently and 40 miles beyond Tecate the summit is reached at La Rumorosa. This small village has several restaurants which are favorite stopping places for Mexican truck drivers. We had lunch and filled our tank and jerry cans with gas. For travelers using this route to the Laguna Salada Basin, La Rumorosa is the last place to obtain gasoline.

Just beyond La Rumorosa the road makes a rapid sinuous descent to the desert floor 4,500 feet below. This is the Cantu Grande named after a rather colorful ex-governor of Baja California. In the early 1900's he ordered his engineers to construct a road from Sonora to Ensenada on the Pacific coast, using the shortest possible route over the mountains. The original road was constructed for

mules pulling wagons and consequently had numerous hair-pin curves. Today, these curves have been straightened out somewhat, but the basic route has changed very little since the original survey.

The road across the Laguna Salada Basin turns south at kilometer 2841. (On all the main roads in Mexico there are periodically small white signs with black numerals. These numbers indicate the distance in kilometers from Mexico City.)

A fair dirt road goes under the recently constructed power line and, after a little more than a mile, forks. *Only approximate mileages will be given since not all speedometers give the same reading.* Take the left fork. This was the original road crossing the valley. A mile

This sandy road (at right) parallels the eastern base of the Sierra Juarez. Below, Jim Roberts inspects metates used by Indians to grind nuts.



beyond, another road turns south across the sand. This road follows the base of the Sierra Juarez for approximately 40 miles.

For those who wish to take a closer look at the Laguna Salada palaya, continue straight for about two miles, then turn right on a side road. The palaya surface is usually dry about 11 months of the year and speeds of 40 mph may be held while crossing the hard flat surface. There is a good road to Pozo Mara (ranch) and Pozo Cenizo (abandoned well.) After periods of rain, however, the Rio Hardy, 70 miles to the south, will occasionally overflow its banks and the basin will be inundated. The northern end of palaya is about three feet below sea-level and about 10 feet below the level of the Rio Hardy, so the water collects at the northern end of the basin. If this occurs, the lake bed turns into a quagmire of mud, and travel across it is impossible.

To explore the canyons of the Sierra Juarez, turn right. We had been driving on this road for a few miles when we came upon a Model "A" truck loaded high with cords of iron wood. We stopped and chatted briefly with the driver. He was a lenero or wood gatherer who collects firewood from the desert bajadas. He said it had taken him two days to gather the wood and he was on his way to Mexicali to sell it. Many of the roads in the basin are made by leneros in their search for firewood, and it is not unusual to follow a road for many miles only to find it ends at a stump or hole in the ground.

The road crosses the sandy outwash from Canyon de las Palmas Azules so named for a fine grove of Blue Palms *Erythea armata* located in it. About 10 miles from the paved highway a series of low hills rise on the left side of the road. Here, next to the road, is Calera Concepcion, an abandoned lime kiln. The hills east of the kiln are granitic, but there is a 40' lens of bluish colored dolomite which in by-gone days was mined, crushed, and used in the kiln. Small crystals of garnet are abundant in the granite on either side of the dolomite. On the west side of the road, light brown granitic rocks are covered with black to reddish brown volcanic rocks.

It was getting late so we started to look for a campsite. We continued a couple of miles further and then

turned up toward an un-named canyon. Near its mouth we found a level spot and camped amid the elephant trees. Shortly after dark the steaks were sizzling and the coffee was brewing.

The following morning before breakfast we hiked up the canyon to work up an appetite. We had gone about a mile when we came upon a small spring. On a large rock above the spring were several dozen figures or symbols. It is very difficult to estimate how long ago these doodles were chipped in the rock. Prehistoric Indians had inhabited this region for thousands of years. In the wash below the spring we also found several metates or grinding holes.

When we got back to camp, we discovered that a whole loaf of bread was missing. Sometime during the night, one of our "friends of the desert" had visited us and had a feast at our expense. The area around the camp was very rocky and we found no tracks. Whatever it was remains a mystery to this day.

We made our way back to the road and continued south. Eight miles south of Calera Concepcion is an abandoned well and a crossroads. The left fork goes out across the Laguna Salada back toward Highway Number 2 and Paso Superior. The right fork goes up a little over a mile to Palmas de Cantu.

Here at Palmas de Cantu is a spring and several groves of palms. We found an apparently abandoned miner's

another crossroads is reached. The right fork goes to Pozo Mara, a sometimes occupied ranchita on the edge of the Laguna Salada. To the left, the road enters Carrizon Canyon, and after 2.3 rough miles ends at a small cattle tank. Two hundred yards beyond the road's end is a small perennial stream lined with palm trees. Vandals have recently burned the palms, but the damage is superficial and has not actually killed any of the trees. A trail follows the stream up the canyon for several miles.

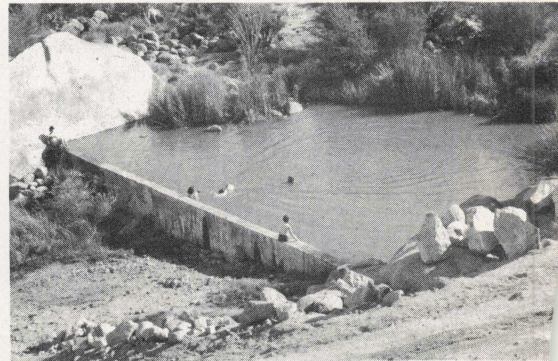
The road leading straight ahead continues toward Guadalupe Canyon. After a little more than a mile the road forks again. We took the right fork following the mountain front. From here it is about three miles to the road's end in Guadalupe Canyon, a total of about 33.5 miles from kilometer 2841 (not counting side trips.)

Guadalupe Canyon is one of my favorite Baja camping sites. Here, among the dense groves of native palms, two streams flow — one is hot, the other cold. The hot water stream flows from a hot spring, about 100 yards to a large pool. The pool was constructed by Senor Jose Loya Mario who owns the lower portion of Guadalupe Canyon. Senor Loya owns a ranch near Mexicali and only occasionally stays in the canyon. When he is there, he charges a small camping fee and in return tries to maintain the road and pick up the trash left by thoughtless campers.

I have spent many delightful days in Guadalupe Can-



Driving through the north end of Laguna Salada following a recent rain is tricky. Low, low area collects water.



Hot springs feed this pool in Guadalupe Canyon, making it pleasant for swimming.

shack. There is a mineral prospect about a half mile up the hill above the spring. Here, pegmatite has come in contact with marble, producing a small mineralized zone of iron stained quartz. Of greater interest to us, however, was the pegmatite. During its formation, this granitic rock cooled very slowly, allowing the minerals to orient themselves and form large crystals. "Books" of muscovite mica were everywhere, as were large hornblende crystals. I found one that measured over two feet long!

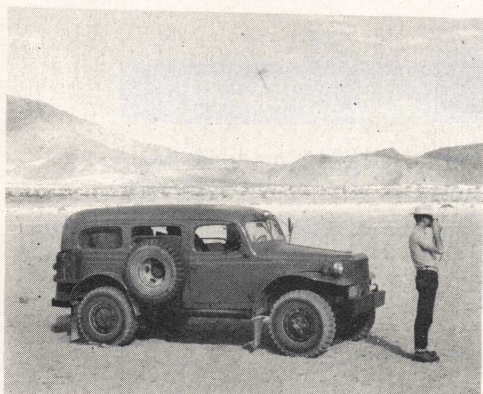
The road continues south across a wash containing numerous half buried palm trunks. These had washed out of Canyon de las Tanques during a cloudburst. Just before reaching a series of low hills with sand blown up on the east side, the road crosses another wash. This wash comes out of Tajo Canyon. This is the canyon Jim and I had explored last fall. The canyon drops almost 6,000 feet in just a few miles and is inaccessible to all but the hiker. Tajo is probably the most scenic of all the canyons and, like the others, has groves of native palms, water, and was the winter home of ancient Indian tribes.

About 5½ miles beyond the entrance to Tajo Canyon,

yon, doing nothing in particular but soaking in the desert atmosphere. Most of the two thousand some native palms in the canyon are *Washingtonia filifera*, but there also numbers of Blue Palms *Erythea armata*. Less than ½ mile below the hot spring is a large rock covered with Indian petroglyphs. A search of the immediate area will also reveal several large boulders containing numerous metates.

Many years ago, probably long before the Spanish conquest, Guadalupe Canyon was the part-time home of relatively large numbers of Indians. They hunted small animals, ate certain roots and shrubs and collected nuts from the high country. These nuts were ground in the metates to make meal. From the hot springs area there is an old Indian trail, still used occasionally by cattlemen, that leads to Laguna Hansen (see FOUR WHEELER, February, 1963) in the pine forest above. Another trail leads three miles up the canyon where the stream flows into a natural pool. During the warm days this pool offers a refreshing opportunity to cool off. The ambitious hiker may follow the canyon up several miles beyond the pool, but ropes are almost a prerequisite.

*Two streams flow from
Guadalupe Canyon — one
hot, the other cold. Below,
this rock trail leads down
into Carrizo Canyon.*



*The view southeast from the
north end of Laguna Salada
may vary with the weather.
This time the lakebed is
dry and powdery.*