

EXPLORING THE CANYONS OF THE SIERRA RA JUAREZ

PART II

by Roger K. Mitchell

In the last issue, Jim and I explored the canyons in the northern part of Baja's Sierra Juarez. We are now continuing our travels from Guadalupe Canyon.

One evening around the campfire Senor Loya told us of the other canyons to the south. As with the canyons to the north, the canyons south of Guadalupe Canyon have groves of native palms and springs of fresh water. On the average, however, they do not have as much water, and the streams tend to dry up sooner in the summer months, than those canyons farther north. Senor Loya

said the first large canyon to the south is Canyon la Mora. It may be reached by following the tracks which parallel the base of the mountains. The next large canyon south of that is Canyon Alamar. He said both of these canyons have natural "tinajas" or pools of water, surrounded

by groves of palm trees. Even with a car such as ours, however, he said, we must hike to reach the lowest growing palms. One of the largest canyons to the south is Canyon Palomar, which may be negotiated several miles by four-wheel drive vehicles.

The following morning we set off in search of the canyons Senor Loya had spoken about. We back tracked three miles and turned right on the road for Pozo Mara. After one mile we again turned right, which put us on the road that parallels the base of the Sierra Juarez. After a little more than two miles this road passes some large hills of solid granite rock. These monoliths are pocketed with thousands of little caves or depressions caused by differential weathering. Some of the minerals in the granite rock are less resistant to erosion, and have been eroded out by the natural weathering agents, leaving curious-looking hills.

At a point eight miles from the road junction we turned up a sandy wash coming from a large canyon. We entered the canyon and drove up about a mile.

One of the frustrating aspects of traveling in Baja California is that it is often impossible to pin down places with names. This is especially true with mountains and canyons. A certain mountain or canyon may have two or three different names depending upon with whom you are talking or what maps you happen to have in your hand at the time. We found ourselves in such a position. This could be Canyon La Mora, but on the other hand, we had passed several smaller canyons so this could be Canyon Alamar, or perhaps "un canyon sin nombre" — a nameless canyon.

Jim and I have a motto, "When in doubt — eat!," so after having lunch we decided to turn around and continue south.

Toward the south, the road became less distinct and at times we got off of it without realizing we had done so. Nine miles below the canyon where we had eaten, we came to a rather unimposing looking canyon. The entrance was relatively small but there was a rather large outwash of alluvial sand coming from it. We left the road and drove into the canyon which broadened out considerably after $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. Among the jumble of boulders we could see an occasional palm trunk sticking up through the rubble and knew there must be some palm groves up the canyon. We could proceed up the wash for two miles before the large boulders blocked further vehicle travel. We had passed two isolated live palms but had come to no groves. We were about to stop and hike up the canyon when it happened. For the first time in our many Baja travels we got the ole carry-all stuck! We happened to hit an especially soft spot while trying to maneuver around some boulders. The military mud-snow tires immediately dug in and in what seemed like an instant we were up to both axles in sand. There are many pros and cons about this type of tread. The dune buggy fan will swear by a smooth tread with low air pressure. However, we have found for general use in Baja, the military mud-snow tread can't be beat. The added traction this tread gives has pulled us out of several tight positions, whereas this was the only time it had gotten us stuck.

Obviously, the situation called for added energy, and after a second lunch we dug ourselves out and were on our way. It was







JIM ROBERTS INSPECTS NATURAL CAVE IN SCHIST ROCK. THIS WAS USED AS A RESIDENCE AFTER TOM DOWLING MOVED OUT OF HIS CABIN.

late in the afternoon and growing dark. We left the canyon and continued following the road we had started on (rather naively believing it went somewhere). After a couple of miles it gradually evolved into nothing and we were left in the middle of a trackless desert. About the only thing we knew was the way we had come, and that Pozo Cenizo, a reliable landmark, was somewhere off to our northeast. We decided to go down to Pozo Cenizo where we could properly get our bearings. We broke out the compass and started driving cross-country in that general direction. About fifteen miles later we came to a road running north-south. Following it about a mile north we arrived at Pozo Cenizo, an abandoned well and cattle watering trough. For the first time since leaving Guadalupe Canyon we could put our finger on the map and say, "We're right here!"

The day could not exactly be called a success as we were not sure if we had made our objective, and Jim's reputation for never

having gotten his carry-all stuck was somewhat tarnished. We made camp that night, however, feeling that tomorrow would bring on new challenges and rewards.

From Pozo Cenizo we followed the road in a southerly direction. For over 10 miles the road is sandy but relatively straight and free from rocks, so we cruised along at an unbelievable 30 mph. Sixteen and a half miles south of Pozo Cenizo a road leads to the right. This is the turn off for Palomar and Santa Isabel Canyons. There is no sign, but someone has placed a four foot palm stump at the junction. The road goes west for a couple of miles and then forks. The left fork enters Canyon Santa Isabel (more palms). The right fork doubles back and goes in a northerly direction, then drops down into Arroyo Santa Isabel, climbs the northern bank and enters the next canyon north. Upon entering Canyon Palomar the road disintegrates into no more than a single track cow path (in the most literal sense). Occasionally, we could still see the



We found military mud-snow tires indispensable on Baja's rocky terrain, but not too good in sand.

faint depressions of vehicle tracks so we felt we were going in the right direction. The first palms started to appear shortly after we had entered the canyon. After getting off the "road" several times, our route took us up on an alluvial terrace where the tracks were better preserved. A little more than 12 miles from the palm stump marker, 28½ miles from Pozo Cenizo) the road ends at an abandoned cabin.

The cabin was the home of Thomas Dowling who raised cattle for many years in Palomar Canyon. When his cowhand died in the cabin, Senor Dowling moved to a cave ½ mile down the canyon. He would let his cattle graze in the canyon during the winter months and drive them up to the high pastures near Laguna Hanson (see FOUR WHEELER, Feb., 1963) for the summer months.

Today, the canyon is deserted, but some of the cattle still remain. The stream does not flow as far as the cabin, but there is a spring in a small meadow below the cabin. Here, about dusk, numerous kinds of wildlife congregate to drink. Dove and rabbits seemed particularly abundant. We walked down there after dark and the cieniga sounded like something out of a tropical rain-forest. I am constantly amazed at how much wildlife can thrive on the apparently parched and barren desert.

The following day we hiked several miles up the canyon to a hot spring for a refreshing bath. The palms of Canyon Palomar must number in the thousands for they extend along the canyon bottom at least six miles and they seem to continue far above

At Pozo Cenizo we viewed the abandoned well and watering trough and located ourselves on the map at an exact location.

the hot springs. As we were returning to camp we found several large boulders containing numerous metates. I don't think there is a single canyon along the eastern escarpment of the Sierra Juarez that doesn't have petroglyphs and these metates.

After relaxing a day in Palomar Canyon, and visiting Santa Isabel Canyon next door, we decided to continue moving south.

We had heard there were some Pai Pai Indians living in the next canyon to the south, so that was to be our goal.

The Pai Pai Indians are actually a branch of the Yuma linguistic tribes and are descendents of the original Indians who once inhabited these canyons. It is reported there are only 500 surviving today. They are scattered out between the Sierra de los Cocopas and the high plateau of the Sierra Juarez. For the most part they have become "Mexicanized" in that they speak Spanish, wear manufactured clothing, and the men occasionally work on farms in the Mexicali district. They still retain much of their folklore however, and the women still make ollas, much revered by pot hunters.

With reluctance we broke camp and made our way out of the canyon and back to the junction at the palm stump. The high gear road continued for several miles until the Sierra de la Tinaja began to appear on our left. These mountains are made up largely of volcanic rocks interbedded with marine sediments. As a general rule of thumb, whenever you have volcanic rocks in Baja, the road gets rougher. This time proved no exception and before long we had to slow down to our usual 10-15 mph. The volcanic rocks tend to weather to cobbles, making driving slow, whereas the older granitic rocks weather to a fine material which makes roads sandy but not rough.



We encountered several forks in the road but always took the fork showing the most signs of use. Nineteen miles south of the palm stump, the road again turned into a cowpath. Jim insisted we were following the wanderings of a cow, but after another mile we climbed a small hill and below us we could see a small ranch with several palms. This was La Palmita, the entrance to Canyon Agua Caliente, right where it should have been!

La Palmita consists of a house, a corral, and a spring with several palm trees. A few horses scampered off as we drove up but the ranch had obviously been abandoned for some time.

From La Palmita four-wheel drive rigs can go up the wash five miles to the hot spring from which the canyon gets its name. Agua Caliente is another Pai Pai rancheria, but La Palmita was deserted. Perhaps these rancherias have been permanently abandoned or perhaps they are only occupied seasonally. We would have liked to have stayed in Canyon Agua Caliente and explore the upper portions, but our time was running short and we had to think about starting back for home.

I had heard of an abandoned road constructed during WW II that was supposed to have run from Mexicali to Ensenada. In theory, it should be somewhere south of us within 20 miles, so after a decision-making lunch we decided to continue south and search for the old pole line road.

We back tracked almost a mile below La Palmita and then found a road going south across the wash. On the other side of the wash it turned into a relatively fair road but was going east and we wanted to go south. We followed the road $\frac{1}{2}$ mile and found some extremely dim tracks leading off south. The road looked as if it hadn't been used for years and at times we weren't sure we were still on it. After $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles we entered Arroyo El Saiz, which, according to my map, would take us to the pole line road. We drove up the wash for four miles and sure enough, the pole line road appeared. At this point we could turn left and eventually come out on the paved Mexicali-San Felipe road, but we decided to turn right and see if the road over Portezuelo de Jamau was still passable to wheeled vehicles. This pass over the Sierra Juarez is little known and does not appear on most maps of Baja California. The ascent begins immediately upon leaving the wash and grades exceeding 20% were frequent. There were many loose rocks on the road and on the steeper portions, these caused a real loss in traction. Our mud-snow tread really helped this time and shortly we had negotiated the 2.3 mile climb. When we reached the summit, we were at an elevation of about 4,000 feet and the ground was covered with about six inches of snow. It was late in the afternoon and the cold wind made us glad that our four-wheel drive rig had a top. We followed the road down a small valley almost five miles when we came to Alamito, a sometimes occupied cattle camp. A brief survey showed the camp's only cabin to be deserted. The watering trough was still frozen over but we decided to make camp rather than drive on in the dark.

While I gathered firewood, Jim did what he could to fill in the holes in the cabin's walls. The wind persisted through most of the night and at times I felt it couldn't be much colder outside. We had not expected such cold temperature and had not added anti-freeze, so as a precaution we drained the radiator. It is probably a good thing we did because the temperature was already in the low 20's at 10 o'clock when we went to bed.

The following morning broke calm and sunny. This was to be our last breakfast in the "back country," so we threw everything into the frying pan. The result was a scrambled egg-hash-sausage-cheese-cake, topped with a layer of maple syrup!

The road continued down the little valley for several miles and then the country opened to a broad plateau. 10.5 miles from Alamito we reached the "main" San Felipe-Ensenada road at the small village of El Rodeo.

For Baja, the rest of the route is relatively good road. We made the 70 miles from El Rodeo to Ensenada in about four hours, including a stop for gas at Ojos Negros. Between the last possible gas stop at La Rumerosa, and the tienda at Ojos Negros, we logged 275 miles.



Once a cattle ranch, today Palomar Canyon is deserted, though some of the cattle still remain. The spring, at dusk, attracts numerous varieties of wildlife.

SIERRA

A cowpath led into "La Palmita," a one-time Pai Pai ranchita, now abandoned. Four-wheel drive rigs can drive five miles farther to hot springs. Note snow on far distant mountain.



