

The Gringos Are Coming! The Gringos Are Coming!

The Return Of El Camino Real

"The Gringos are coming, the Gringos are coming. That's what I keep telling everybody, and when that road is finished, they're not going to be ready."—Ed Pearlman, President of NORRA (National Off-Road Racing Association), in a meeting concerning the completion of Mexico 1, the new transpeninsular highway in Baja California.

Completion of Baja California's transpeninsular highway scheduled for the winter of 1974, will not only mark the long awaited connection of Upper and Lower California, but the restoration of the almost forgotten El Camino Real—the King's Highway. Created by an earthquake (over the San Andreas Fault), the Baja Peninsula was delivered of Mother Earth about fifteen million years ago. Separated from the mainland of Mexico by a warm sea, for centuries it has attracted explorers, and afforded them an abundance of challenges ever since it was discovered by an expedition dispatched by Hernan Cortes more than 400 years ago. In his maniacal search for the Aztec gold source, the legendary "Seven Cities of Cibola," he visited Baja California himself. Although he never found the treasure trove of the unfortunate Aztec ruler, Montezuma, the decline of whose empire he had so recently accelerated, Cortes did discover that the legends of great quantities of pearls were true. The local inhabitants had been successfully practicing their craft of pearl fishing for generations in the warm, tropical waters around La Paz. Cortes named the area "Calida Fornax," (heated oven) which later became "California." He sent three ships to further investigate the material possibilities of the area for his Queen. This expedition sailed around what he had thought to be an island, but found it to be a peninsula, some 750 miles long and separated from the mainland by a body of water which the commander of the expedition called after

his benefactor, "El Mar de Cortes." As the Great Captain bid his final adios to his discovery, he weighed anchor and sailed his exhausted fleet through the pages of history. As he tucked away sword and banner in his sea chest, his thoughts must have included: the decline of the Aztecs on his conscience, more debits than credits in the booty department, what to do with the map of a nearly uninhabitable land peopled with fierce aboriginals, and how to cure an incredible sunburn. Cortes could have been heard to mumble something to his companions like, "the great price of the pearls." Especially in Baja California.

Motivated later by the pearl stories, accounts of beautiful women and other great natural resources, speculators through the following years (from Viceroy to whale oil mass-merchandisers) overran the peninsula in their search to uncover its wealth. Few were successful, but the most determined emigrants eschewed the material for the

spiritual; the representatives of the Roman Church came by the galleon load, to claim the pagan souls of this wilderness for Christianity and to establish even further universal boundaries for the Holy See. Three orders of churchmen labored for more than 50 years constructing missions, all of which were abandoned by the time of Spain's final schism with Mexico, concurrent with the revolution of 1829.

And so it was the Father Junipero Serra and his well-done order of Franciscan friars, after constructing one mission in the Fornax, abandoned the project. Moving north, they established the now famous route of the missions, a monumental work for God and Country, second only to Disneyland and Forest Lawn Memorial Park in visitor interest.

El Camino Real napped. Hundreds of miles of the original route of the Padres lay virtually undisturbed beneath a spread of hot sand and thorny bushes, intersected only on occasion by a boojam tree, barely noticed, save for a glance from the quick eye of the red tailed hawk, in dedicated pursuit of the field mouse.

Early on, from the time that the news of Baja's wealth was thrown on the porch of the world, wild stories spread like a range fire. Its early history reads like an anthology of dime novels.

Francis Drake himself is said to have lurked around the shelter islands and coves of the Pacific with his Corsairs, waiting to pounce on the rich Spanish treasure ships as they slowly treaded water toward Monterey, like so many fat matrons learning to swim.

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In the middle 1800s, Gold Fever struck; horror stories and local legends were passed around the campfires of the victims like plates of frijoles. Storytellers rehearsed the atrocities of the cannibalistic Seri Indians, who with their wild painted faces attacked visitors and did other unspeakable things to them. Tall tales and tequila were the orders of the day (and night) at Hussong's Cantina, in the Port of Ensenada: "Pig Iron," the smuggler of Chinamen bound for the railroad gangs of the North, slipped out of the tiny fishing port with his tragic cargo in the darkness; it is said that the bottom of Bahia de Los Todos Santos is covered with leg irons and other grisly evidence of his trade.

El Camino Real stirred ever so slightly and slept on.

A connecting road from North to South does exist, and the whole peninsula is cross-hatched with unimproved roads and trails, all leading its people somewhere. These roads support a variety of traffic in people, animals, bicycles, and cars. And for the adventurous sportsman, the trails (or lack of them) are an infinite source of entertainment.

The same dust-based, serpentine mystery route that off-road enthusiasts brag about conquering is used by experienced, commercial truck drivers who cheerfully deliver the milk, frijoles, plastic baggies and baby food required by the fringes of urbanization that exist on the peninsula. Through flash floods, sand storms, and ungodly heat, these supermachos maneuver giant trucks and buses through an inconsistent pattern of chuckholes as big as bomb craters, across edges of sheer cliffs, and up and down a roller coaster of gravel-covered grades, with little more to assist them than an unwavering faith in the almighty; certainly not the mechanical excellence of their vehicles.

Urban life percolates at a quick pace in the border towns strung out across the top of the peninsula, resembling the Italian boot in a slightly larger size, with Tijuana as its strap. Tijuana, the most visited border city in the world, claims the largest share of the population of Baja; Mexicali (Mexico's more dignified capital) is next, with a reputation as an agricultural center and reasonably well-developed industrial community.

The boot's formidable "in-between," mainly mountains and the incredibly hot Vizcaino desert, supports few life forms, with evidences of a few villages, very few fishing "resorts," until one reaches La Paz and Cabo San Lucas at the extreme southern toe.

Urbanization, that nightmarish phenomenon that has turned the gateways to Baja into cerveza and taco jungles for sophomore revelers, has not yet touched most of the peninsula. El Camino Real, although perhaps not ready to awaken, is

nearly ready to be pushed out of bed, and get on with the work it was destined for. The road that has taken more than 400 years to build, will soon be finished. Hawk and mouse, already a little puzzled by the sound of excavating equipment, will very soon have to share their domain with humans—more humans than generations of fauna have ever seen, as one of the last true wilderness areas in Western America is opened for business.

"When we have a virgin wilderness with good fishing and hunting, someone wants to put in a paved road in order to give the people access to this sportsman's paradise. Then in no time at all, with a paved road scarring the mountains, we find the game has fled, fishing is no more, and we have a highway littered with beer cans, picturesque camping sports cluttered with old paper plates, shells of hard boiled eggs and discarded sardine cans. The streams have long been stripped of every trace of fish."

This paragraph by the late author and sportsman, Earle Stanley Gardner, is from his book, *The Hidden Heart of Baja*. It stands out as a clear warning against exploitation of this last frontier, acts that are surely in the making, right now. As surely as the perfect sun rises and spreads its mauve-to-rose-to-red glow over the desert, these acts will surely destroy the near perfect wilderness.

More than one million new visitors are scheduled to visit the peninsula during the first year of the road's operation, bringing with them enthusiasm for discovery as the early explorers did. But this time they will also bring motorhomes, motorcycles, boats, horses, firearms, fishing gear and the dreaded waste they will leave behind.

As Ed Pearlman so aptly put it, "The Gringos are coming, and they're not going to be ready."

In the January issue, in part 2, our story will deal with what "they"—the central Mexican government, the government of Baja California, the United States, and other interested parties—are planning to make ready for Baja California's future recreational land use. **LG**



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