

## Dave Cox on the road again, Nov. 7, 2009, in San Felipe, Baja California, Mx

Hello everyone. I am driving the Baja Peninsula over the next two months. I left Tucson Tuesday, spent a night in Yuma, and crossed into Mexico at Algodones. The first couple of hours in Baja I was following little roads south and west across the Colorado River Delta area; almost all agriculture, with intermittent sand dunes. Not very pretty. San Felipe is an old fishing village, now a US tourist town, across the Sea of Cortez from Puerto Penasco. The malecon is lined with restaurants and bars. The beach is full of small fishing boats. When the fishermen clean their catches in the afternoon, the area around the beached boat becomes a carpet of brown pelicans and the very dark Heerman's gulls, with a few giant yellow-footed gulls and small ring-bill gulls. The pelicans are taller, and with their gaping beaks catch most of the offal before it hits the ground. The pelicans, however, cannot swallow the food without opening their beaks and tossing their enormous heads up to bounce the food from the tip of the beak to the back, into the pouch. The Heerman's gulls have become exceedingly adept at going into the pelican's beak at this point to snatch the food. So after a pelican first catches food it heads immediately for the water, with a couple of other pelicans and a small army of Heerman's and other gulls surrounding it. The ensuing battles for the food are amazing (see pics).

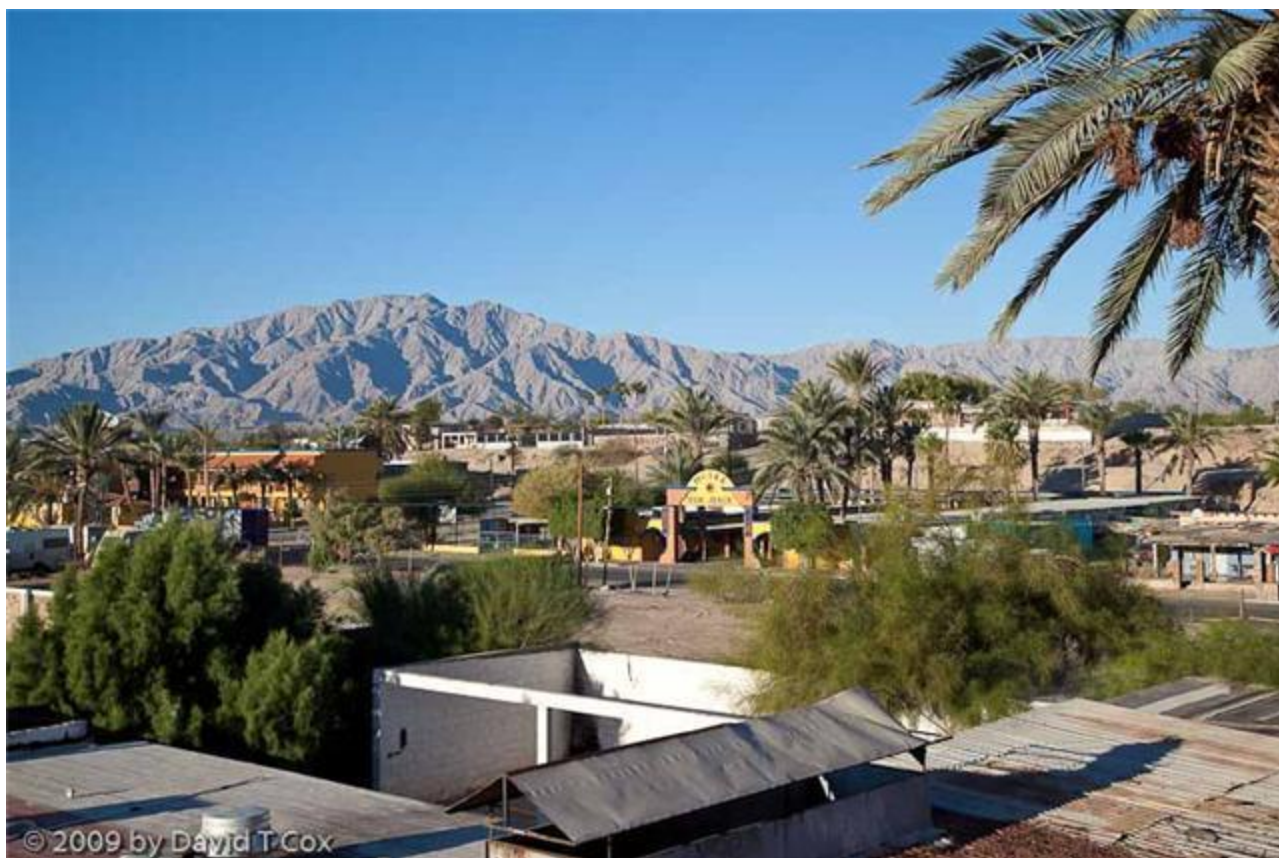
I arrived just in time for the annual Festival del Camaron (Shrimp Festival), and so decided to stay for the weekend to see the festivities. Many visitors from the LA area arrive each weekend, driving up hotel prices. The entire malecon is shut off to traffic, and vendors set up shop to sell bbq shrimp, tacos, and micheladas (beer mixed with lime, hot sauce and tomato juice – the best way to enjoy the otherwise always too bland Mexican beers; wish I had had the michelada makings in Australia). A small carnival lines a side street to provide the usual carnie games and kiddy rides. I have stuffed myself on way too much food, and make a really mean michelada myself so I can sit in the late afternoon on my third floor balcony watching over the festivities. Yesterday afternoon rock music was pumping so loud from down on the street my balcony was vibrating; I actually recall making sure there was a good handhold where the balcony joined the bedroom floor, which I thought I could grab if it should fall. When I went out for supper I checked to see which bar or restaurant was overloading us with sound – turned out to be speakers set up in front of the local tattoo parlor, "Baja Ink". A sign in the window announces "tourists treated same as home folks"; comforting. Across the street a sign advertises "typical clothes made by hands".

Tomorrow I will head west to the Pacific town of Ensenada, just south of San Diego. From there the Baja highway heads south and into the wilds. I note that the Baja 1,000 race commences in Ensenada in less than two weeks, and passes here through San Felipe. Looking at the map of

the race, I see it spends its entire length on trails through the interior mountains and sand dunes. It would be fun to stay for the start of the race, but of course all one can do from a spot on the course is to watch the racers shoot past - once. Later. Dave

























## Dave Cox in Guerrero Negro, Baja Calif. Sur, Mx, Nov. 17, 2009

Hello all. From San Felipe I drove northwest across the peninsula to Ensenada. Saw a neat coyote (the original, not human) in the central mountains, plus a number of red-tailed hawks. Ensenada is about what I expected. The malecon area is very built up with hotels, restaurants and a ton of curio shops, as well as all forms of late-night bars. The harbor had two giant Carnival cruise ships when I arrived; they spill all the passengers into the malecon area to keep everything thriving. Just out of the tourist area are some wonderful little restaurants with nary a tourist in sight.

From Ensenada I drove south on the trans-peninsular highway to San Quintin, a dusty vast ugly area. A few kilometers out on the Pacific coast one reaches the site of the Old Mill, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century mill powered by the tides. I have seen one tide powered mill before in Portugal, but this one functioned differently. It was located on the side of a long bay with a narrow opening, which had been partially dammed off to provide an even narrower opening. As the tides rise and fall, in order to fill and empty the bay, the water rushes very powerfully through the narrow opening. Decades ago this powered a flywheel which was set into the opening, and ran the mill. Pretty neat use of an endless free source of power (not quite an infinite source as the energy to mill the seed was stolen from the moon's orbital energy). This was the first place in which I tried some fishing. Caught small mackerel and some type of miniature perch; threw them all back of course. Then I snagged my only 3/8 oz Kastmaster lure on something and lost it; so I gave up in disgust. Got to see a relatively rare sighting of a peregrine falcon and watched a juvenile coopers hawk nail a dove in the tree right in front of my room.

From San Quintin I drove through El Rosario (stopping for a great breakfast at Mama Espinosa's), and then on into the central deserts of the real Baja. From El Rosario south to the border between Baja and Baja Sur lies the Valle De Los Cirios, a magnificent and wild central desert. It is filled with some of the harshest and barest sheer rocky mountains I have seen, but all the lower hills and valleys are filled with boojum trees (cirios), cardon cactus (similar to saguaro), elephant trees and all other manner of strange plant and cactus. This is the only tiny spot on earth for many of these plants, including the boojum, which some have described as the strangest plant on earth (see pics). North of Catavina I visited the ruins of Mision San Fernando, and was looking for some mentioned petroglyphs nearby on a rocky one-lane track when I met a truck coming the other way. I had to back a hundred meters to find a spot to allow passage, and stopped and spoke with the three gentlemen in the truck. They confirmed that petroglyphs were just ahead, but noted they were not especially worthy of a visit (which my guide book had intimated), but then asked if I would like to follow them to a much better

site. I noted the “INAH” on the side of the truck (it is the Mexican agency responsible for all archaeological ruins and museums in Mexico), and found the driver was the local archaeologist from Mexicali, showing two friends some of the local sites. I followed them for 20 kilometers of unmarked dirt track north and east into a canyon. After bushwhacking through some brush by a large arroyo we came onto the first of a number of large black boulder fields, with all the flat surfaces covered with petroglyphs. The archaeologist agreed to call them Cochimi petroglyphs (the indigenous found in the area by the first Spanish), but noted that studies on the patina dated some of the petroglyphs back 4,000 years. The designs are unlike anything I have seen in the southwest US. This magnificent petroglyph field is known only to the local archaeologists – and now by good luck known to me.

Just north of Catavina I visited a very small cave under a giant boulder with some painted pictographs of unknown origin and age – probably within the last thousand years – with interesting use of colors. I spent the night in Catavina, a dead town if ever I have seen one. It lies in the heart of the best boojum desert. The first hotel, bright pink and forlorn, was locked up, and the only life I could find was a friendly dog. The only other hotel was huge and fancy, but almost as dead – no cars or movement; I finally found someone who turned on the lights in the foyer and told me the price was almost 100 US dollars. I decided to camp and drove south of the village and found a turnoff to a supposed RV park. Drove in and saw the dusty barren ground on which one could park for \$6 US, and so I talked to the actual living folk I encountered here. They told me there was no power so everything shut down at sunset, but if I wanted a room and dinner I could follow them back into town where they owned the little pink hotel I had first tried. Spent the night in a shabby dark room that cost a fortune, but did get a nice dinner. The friendly dog stuck around until I went to bed, and was there in the morning.

From Catavina I drove on south through the gorgeous desert, and headed off to the Sea of Cortez side to see the Bahia de Los Angeles. It is a stunning bay, completely fronted by a number of all size islands. Prices were high, but I stayed a few days to try to see the whale sharks that are supposed to ply the southern end of the bay. I even used my newly purchased snorkel gear one day to paddle around the southern bay but had little luck. The water visibility is very poor (less than 10 feet), but did get to see some strange little rays, and something like dog-fish with bright orange eyes.

From LA Bay I drove 5 hours of rocky single track through the heart of the desert to reach the best preserved mission in Baja, the Mision San Francisco de Borja, paid for by the Borja family of Italy, built of giant cut stones without mortar, which means built to last. It is not much by central Mexican colonial standards, but still interesting, with a magnificent spiral staircase to the alcove and roof. Every step in the spiral was a single long cut stone, with the central part coming to a 12 inch disk such that each step stacked up into a single round stone column. Amazing to see, but a little scary to climb. For hours on this drive I passed no other vehicles or humans, and did consider what a breakdown would mean; I, of course, had plenty of water and food. Back to the main highway I continued south across the border into Baja California Sur and the town of Guerrero Negro, a relatively large town on the Pacific. It was



started as a company town to operate the largest evaporative salt plant in the world (still operating and still the largest). The main part of the town stretches for several kilometers along a single dusty street, and is filled with surprisingly decent and cheap hotels and restaurants. The town is the first in days with cell phone service and internet available in the hotel. It sits next to one of the best aquatic bird sanctuaries in the country, and I have spent the last two days wandering around the estuaries, salt flats and surrounding white sand dunes photographing birds. Nice. Tomorrow I head back inland to San Ignacio, where I hope to outfit a tour with guide and mules to go see some of the great mural rock art. Later. Dave









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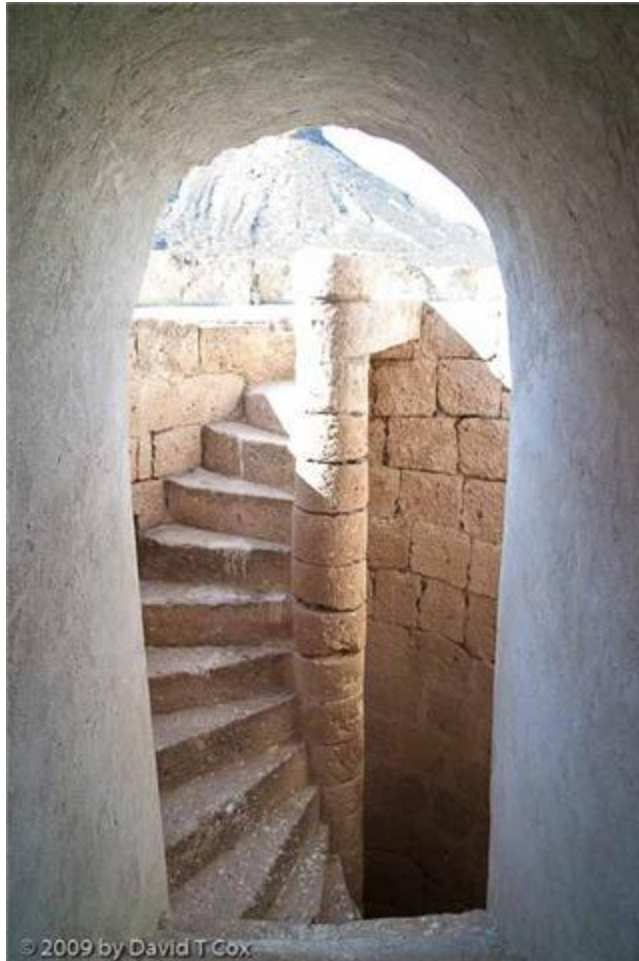




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## Dave Cox in San Ignacio, Baja Calif. Sur, Mx, Nov. 26, 2009

Hello everyone. I have been in the wilds a bit. I drove from Guerrero Negro to the little river oasis town of San Ignacio; it is a neat little town along a river among a forest of palm trees, and has one of Baja's missions on its very Mexican zocalo. My little hotel is owned by Don Oscar and his son Antonio. I have spent a fair amount of time talking with Don Oscar, 80 years old, who knows Harry Crosby (also now 80) who discovered most of the great mural rock art here in the middle of Baja. Don Oscar is in splendid shape (looks late 60s) and attributes his health to a beer before each meal, and 2 or 3 copas of whisky before bed. Wow. Outside the door of my room I have been photographing the male costa hummingbird which believes it owns the bougainvillea and chases away all other hummingbirds.

For my effort to get to the great cave paintings, I spent the first full day getting information, arranging necessary permits and buying supplies for my first adventure into the San Francisco Mountains. Three relatively small but wickedly difficult mountain systems in central Baja have been found to have over 600 sites (discovered so far) of prehistoric cave paintings, known as

the “great mural paintings”. These rival, if not better, the art of the other three areas of the world with great prehistoric cave paintings; those of Spain-France, South Africa and Australia. A recent investigation by archaeologists from Australia has dated the oldest paintings to 5,500 BC, the rest stretching over 6,000 years to as recently as about 1,000 AD. The most lifelike style and best grouping of art lies in and around the Santa Teresa Canyon system, where I have spent the last 5 days. The entire San Francisco Mountain system is a protected reserve, and in 1993 was added to the list of UNESCO world heritage sites.

On Friday I drove up into the mountains to the tiny village of San Francisco de la Sierra, at about 1,200 meters elevation, where I signed in with the village elder. The road to San Francisco starts out paved, switches to a graded one lane for 20 kilometers then turns nasty; the last 6 km took me an hour. Near the village I visited the only cave of the 600 which is accessible from a road; Cueva del Raton. It was named by an early European for what almost all agree is a black figure of a mountain lion, but apparently was mistaken for a really giant mouse. I stayed the first night in the little hotel which surprisingly exists near the town. It has three rather primitive rooms with walls constructed of large cut rock, and palm thatched ceilings. A few solar panels recharge car batteries lying on the ground outside the 3 rooms and, with wires running from the batteries up over trees and into the rooms, power 12 volt lamps at night; a gas cylinder is haphazardly connected to an ancient water heater, also on the ground outside, which is connected by a maze of half inch pvc to the barrel containing water on a rickety platform, and amazingly provides some hot running water into the rooms. The family caretakers made me a splendid fresh fish dinner that night.

Before sunup the next morning I drove a horrific 3 kilometers to Rancho Guadalupe, north of the village, where any semblance of a road ends. There lives Jose Manuel, proprietor of the ranch, and my guide for the next 4 days. I had to purchase and provide all food stuffs for both of us, and all my own camping gear. I paid for use of two mules which we rode into the canyon system and two burros (donkeys) as pack animals to carry our supplies. We loaded up and, after helping a family member translate a drug prescription written in English, we headed downhill. Traveling fast and almost without stops it took us about 3 hours on super rocky terrain and around sheer cliffs to reach the upper end of the Santa Teresa Canyon and the start of the San Pablo Arroyo. Most of the arroyo runs for kilometers winding through sheer cliff faces of dozens to hundreds of feet in height, and in many turns is filled with boulders and water and so is impassable. To travel we generally climbed part way back up the sides of the mountains and wound our way on tiny trails high above the bottom. The area was green with many thorny bushes and trees and a great many species of cacti. The arroyo bottom was filled with wild date fan palms. All the canyon walls were series of cliff faces broken by tiny 40 degree inclined ledges where any animal and human trails ran. After a couple of hours we eventually came back down into the sandy arroyo bottom and made our camp site among a stand of date palms by the small running creek. The east side rose straight up rock cliff faces perhaps 1,000 feet to a huge splendid rock outcropping named Cariso. Our entire view of the sky subtended no more than 80 degrees due to the steepness of the canyon walls.



I took quite a variety of food not knowing what the guide would eat. We managed to carry 30 eggs, breaking only 3, and every morning I prepared 4 scrambled eggs, sausage and hot tortillas for each of us, along with several cups of coffee. We snacked during the day and at night Jose loved my jumbo size Mountain House freeze dried meals of beef stroganoff and chili mac. The water looked good, but with many humans camping upstream over the years, and our pack animals upstream, I filtered and purified my drinking water. At sundown the sandy and boulder strewn arroyo bed became alive with huge daddy-long-leg spiders; they seemed attracted to our camp, and would climb by the dozens over our gear and my tent. I have no idea what they ate. All night long up to 5 different species of frogs would get croaking, finally all in unison, which Jose likened to a grand concerto. It would reverberate off the canyon walls, and was mesmerizing. My tent top is all netting, and I did not use the rain fly, so at night I could become reacquainted with the constellations.

For three days I was led, on foot, on almost impossible to see trails up the steep slopes and along the ledges above cliffs. We often had to scramble up rock faces through clefts, and keeping out of the thorny plants became an issue. In all I got to visit 8 caves, Cuevas Pintada, de las Flechas and Boca de San Julio being the most famous and, by most, agreed to be the best, and so visited by the most people. These cave paintings are not as well known and visited as the other world cave sites, due to their relatively recent discovery by outsiders (almost all of the discovery expeditions were done in the 1960s and 70s), and the extreme difficulty of getting to them. To give an idea of how visited the art sites are, Jose explained that from San Francisco and the surrounding ranches there are 90 licensed guides who go out on a rotating basis, maybe twice a year each. Any visitors to the mountains are required by law to have an accompanying guide to see any of the sites. Last year there were a total of just 433 visitors to all canyon systems in the San Francisco Mountains, a majority visiting the most famous cave, Cueva Pintada. Many of the sites are not visited at all for years. We visited one site, Cueva Cacarisio, very high up a side canyon and extremely difficult to get to, which Jose had not been to for over 12 years. Because the caves have only been much visited within the last 20 years or so, simple math tells that Pintada perhaps has had around 6,000 to 8,000 total visitors in modern times, where many of the other sites may only have been visited by dozens of people in total; it adds to the experience that so few have ever actually seen much of the art work other than in photos.

The ultimate payoff for making the trek is staggering. The great murals are in various shallow caves of rock overhangs, usually painted on either shear back walls or on the ceilings of the overhangs. Most are painted in red and black, but they also used yellow and white, and mixtures of these. The common themes in San Francisco are “monos”, humanoid figures with upraised arms, no faces, but females differentiated from males, and a variety of animals, mostly deer and bighorn sheep, but also including mountain lions, canines, rabbits, various birds, fish and various other marine creatures. Almost all are painted in much larger than life size, often up to 4 times life size. Many animals are in action poses, and occasionally what seems surely to be the same animal is painted twice in a row in different pose to give an uncanny impression of movement. Also a number of scenes have animals pierced with arrows, and some have the humans pierced with arrows. Often scenes are painted on top of older scenes to give an

impression of a real jumble of creatures and action. Adding to the magic is the wondrous view from each site as one looks out over the very wild scenery in the canyon system. All in all, “incredible” or “staggering” as adjectives barely describe the experience. I hope some of the attached pictures convey a sense of the wonder these prehistoric paintings convey.

I am back in San Ignacio for a couple of days to recover, and expect tomorrow or the day after to move on to Mulege, on the Sea of Cortez, to possibly do some snorkeling and to visit some different cave painting sites done in a different style in the Guadalupe Mountains. Later. Dave













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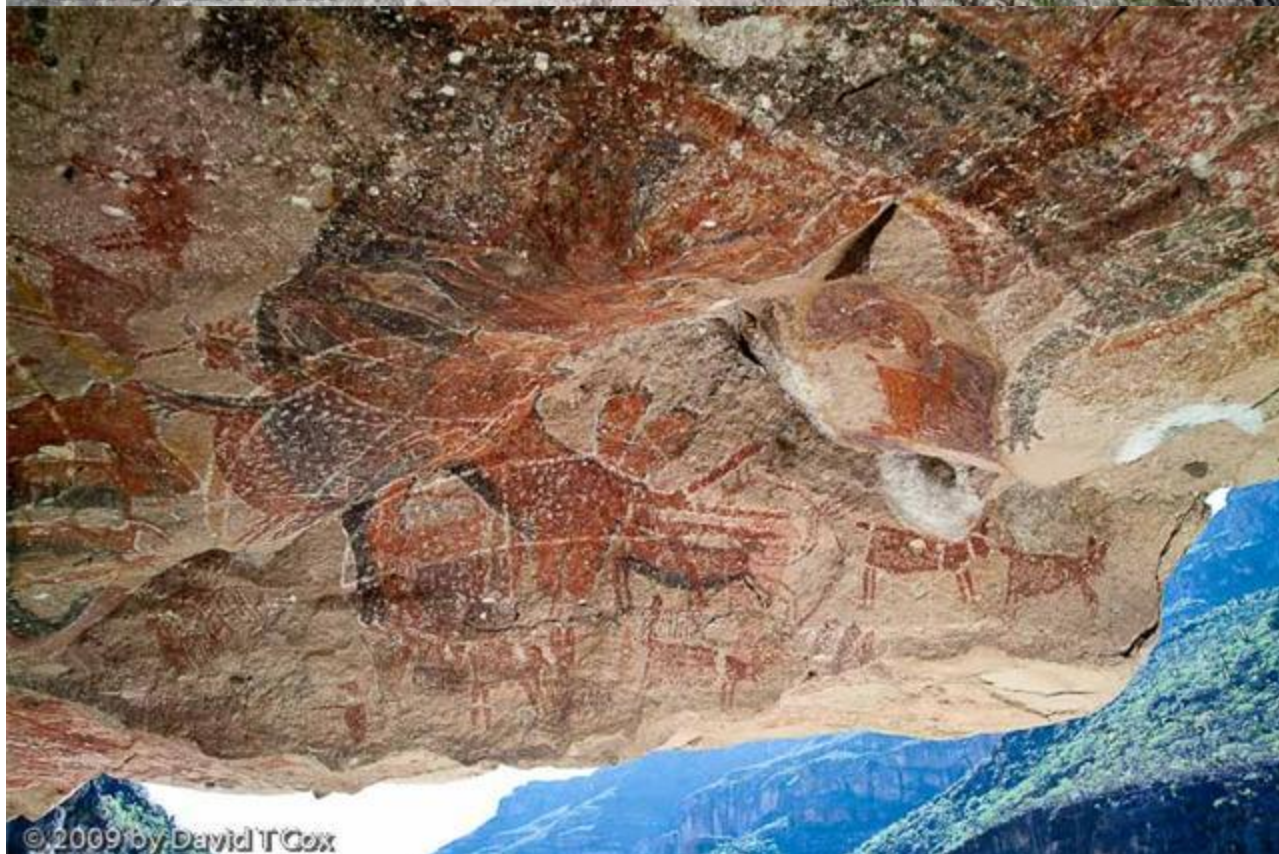
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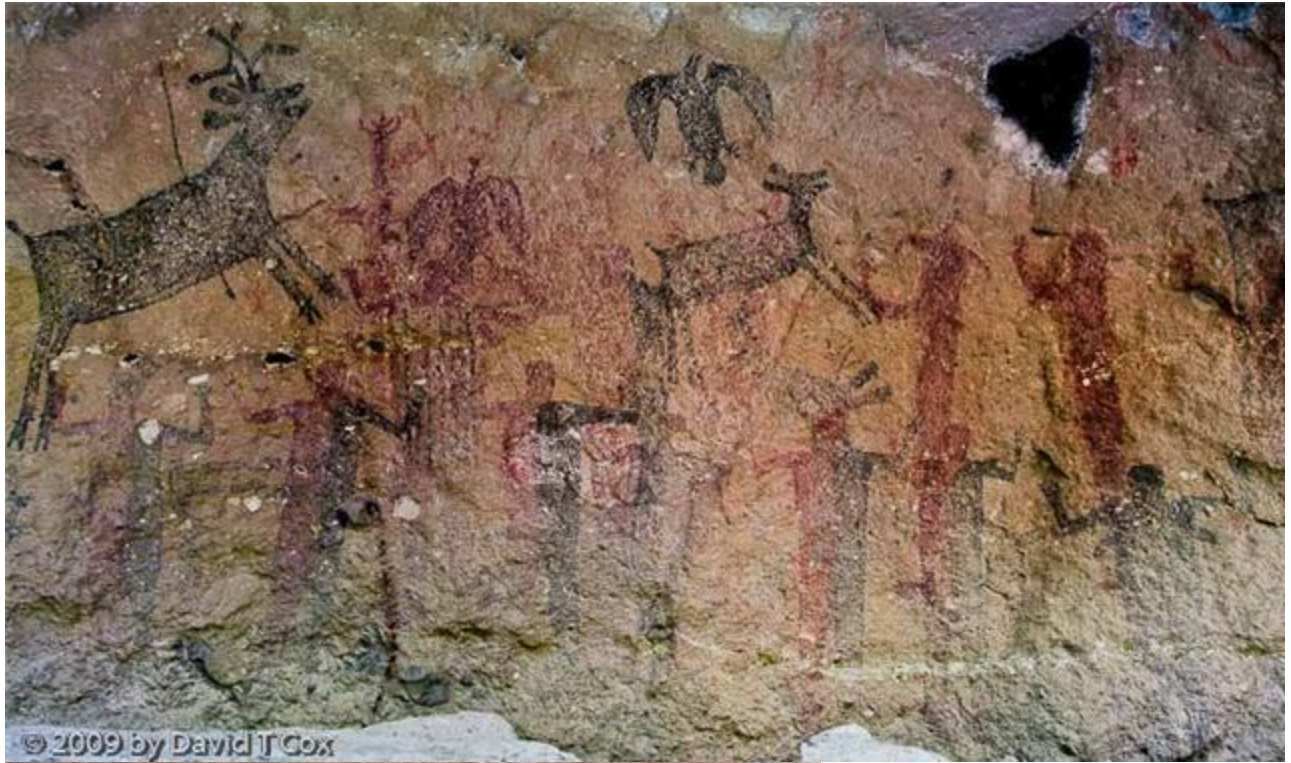




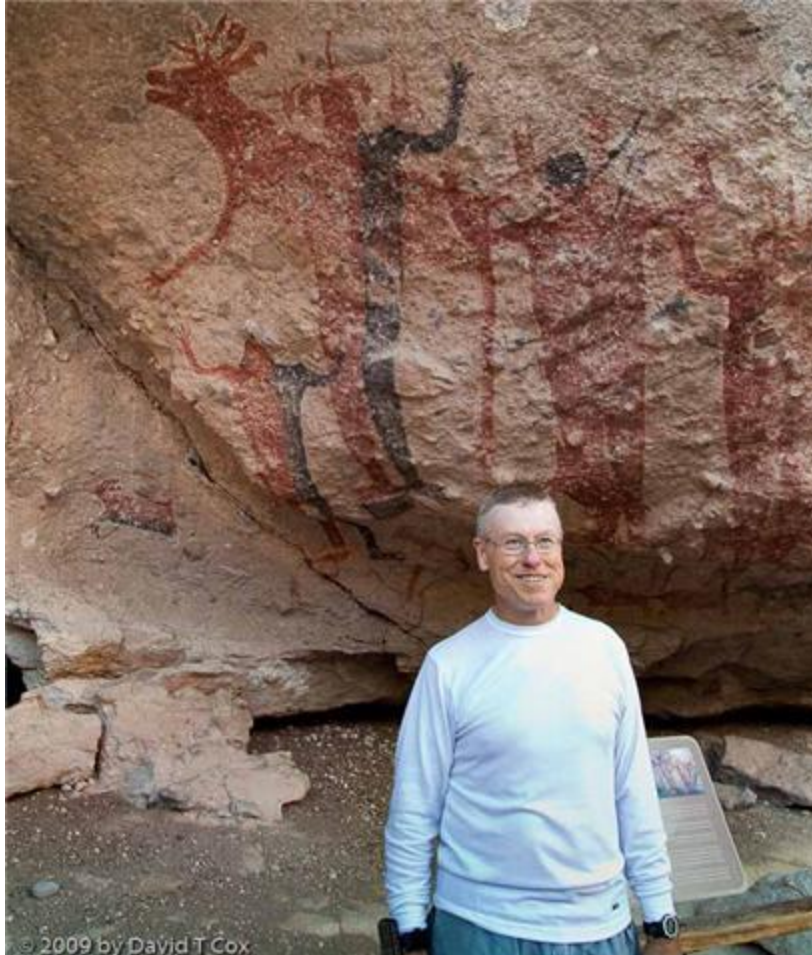
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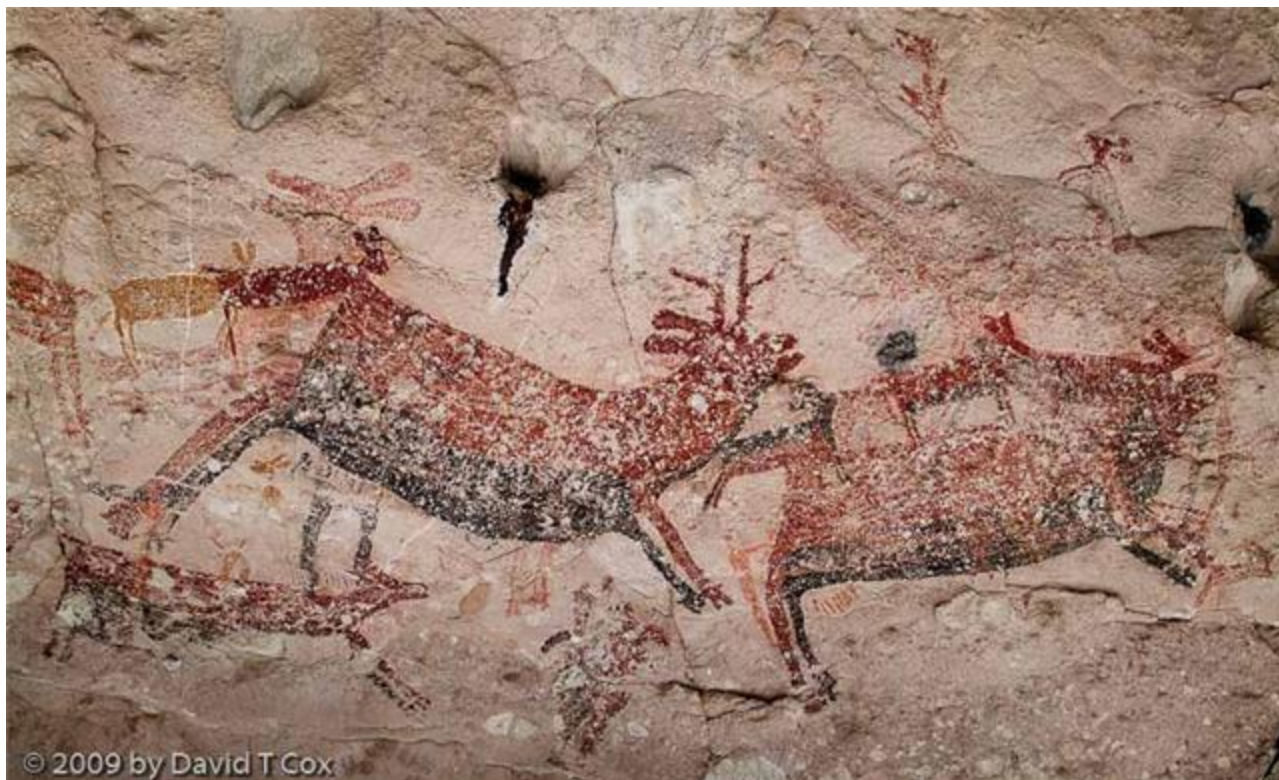


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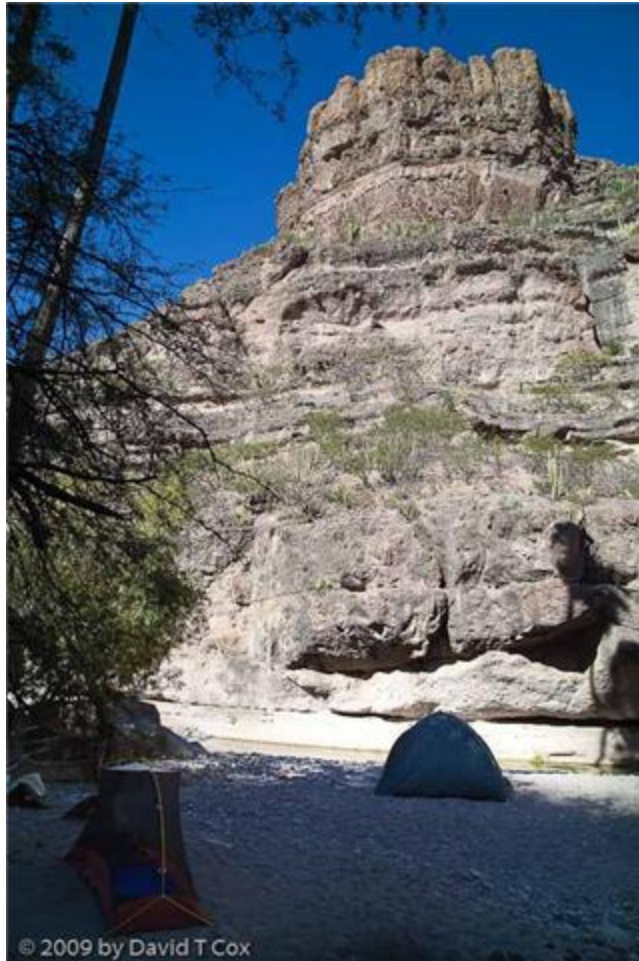


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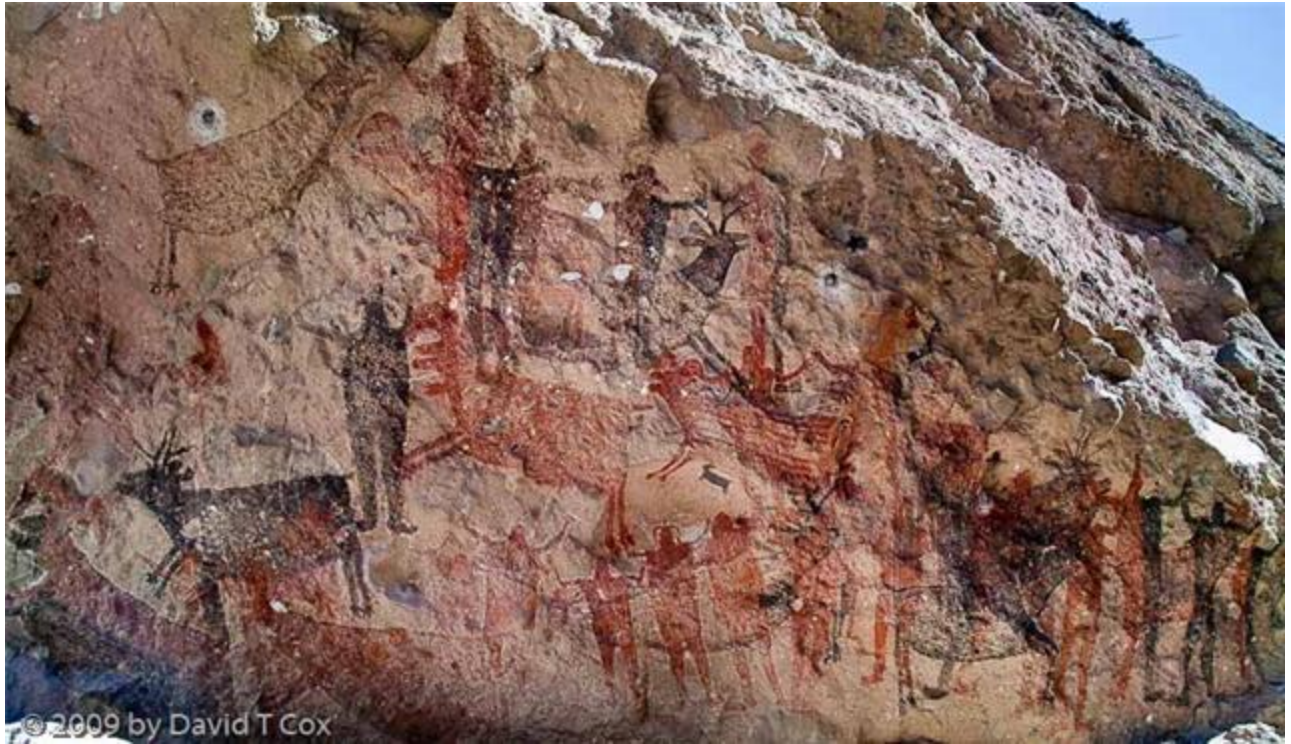
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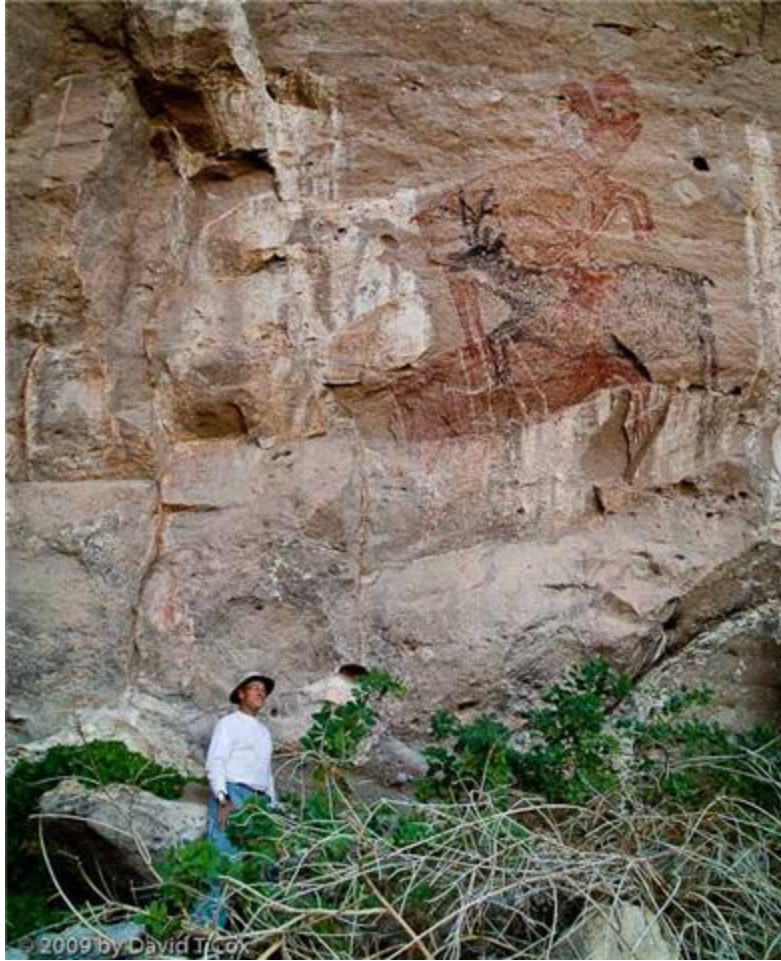


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## Dave Cox in Loreto, Baja Calif. Sur, Mx, Dec. 4, 2009

Hello everyone. From San Ignacio I first drove the unbelievably wash boarded road to Laguna San Ignacio, on the Pacific side, to photograph sea birds, including the attached least sandpiper, killdeer and finally, for me, the marbled godwit (I will not soon forget the godwit distinctions pounded into my head by ancient birding legend John, on the Cairn's shoreline in Australia, where I would repeat all the species of waders he had pointed out, including the godwit, at which he repeatedly interrupted to insist "not just a godwit, it's the bar-tailed godwit"). I then headed to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French mining town of Santa Rosalia across the peninsula on the Sea of Cortez. Somewhat crude around the edges because of the rather ugly giant mining equipment, rock piles and mills around the hills, but in the little 2-street town many of the buildings make you think you are on another continent in a different time. For the third time in my world travels I have come across an iron building designed by Eiffel (who designed the Eiffel Tower), this time a little iron church he designed for the 1889 World Fair, which then was purchased by the mining company and assembled here; I previously have seen Eiffel designed

iron buildings in Iquitos, Peru, on the Amazon, and in Maputo, Mozambique. Whew! Eiffel buildings really are located in the far reaches of the world.

From Santa Rosalia I traveled an hour south to Muleje, on the banks of the Muleje River which spills into the Sea of Cortez. Muleje was hit just a few weeks ago by its third hurricane in several years; this time it was terrible, with the river cresting something like 16 feet above flood level. Many Canadians and Americans have built homes on the south bank of the river; basically all were destroyed by the raging flood waters which submerged most of the homes. Up on the hillside in the old town, the winds ravaged many roofs; my hotel, with 27 rooms, had only 7 functioning rooms. Businesses catering to tourists are in precarious positions. The town is geographically closest to many San Borjitas style prehistoric cave paintings, located just south of the San Francisco range I visited, and I had wanted to visit several sites. All dirt roads leading into the mountains were completely washed out, and there currently is no access to the caves. A major disappointment for me. I spent several days photographing birds, including the attached yellow-footed gull, blue-footed booby, magnificent frigatebird and zone-tailed hawk. The town is known also for its diving and snorkeling in the Sea of Cortez and in the Bahia de la Concepcion. I passed a couple of days snorkeling in the best locations, along Punta Prieta and at Playa Burro on the Bahia. Unfortunately for my timing again, turns out this is precisely the worst time of year because the cold winter waters are overturning the ocean layers, and visibility has dropped to something like 15 feet. Awful. Still, the area is beautiful, and I relaxed some. The attached marine photos include the balloon fish, the torpedo ray and the sergeant majors.

From Muleje I have driven another two hours south to Loreto, the major tourist town (population all of 12,000) between Ensenada, 1,100 km to the north, and La Paz, 300 km to the south. It is bordered on the east by a marine park and coral reefs with the best diving and snorkeling (and non-commercial fishing) in the Sea of Cortez. Unfortunately, the same visibility conditions apply, but it is supposed to be a little better than Muleje. I will do some snorkeling. All the great sites are off shore around the islands, requiring taking out a boat, which is extremely expensive without others to share the cost. It is several weeks before tourist season really hits, and so few tourists seem to be around, but I am looking. Will report later. I probably will make this my turn-around point as I previously have visited La Paz and Los Cabos in the south. Later. Dave







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## Dave Cox back home in Tucson, AZ, Dec. 14, 2009

Hello everyone. I gave up on snorkeling in Loreto as it remained windy, and I could not find anyone to share the price of hiring a boat to get out to the islands. Tourism in Baja is either late this year, or will be very poor. I did get some decent photos of seabirds diving for fish, including the blue-footed booby, royal tern and double-crested cormorant, as well as the spotted sandpiper and common ground-dove. I also went three times to the little Super Burrito Restaurant located on a dirt road in Loreto. They open on a little patio at about 6:30 in the evening, and routinely are full thereafter. A number of middle-age to elderly women, hair tied back in scarves, produce the finest burritos I ever have had in Mexico; giant fresh hand-made corn or flour tortillas, stuffed with big chunks of chopped arrechera steak and melted cheese. On the table comes a huge plastic condiment dish with five different toppings to further stuff the burritos until hand-holding one becomes a dangerous and weight-lifting exercise. The first night I actually tried to eat two; I failed.

I started my trip home on Monday, and took 4 days of decent driving. I did stop three times for rock art sites I missed on the way down, including a Cochimi petroglyph site near San Fernando, a weird rock art site including petroglyphs and paintings just south of the California-Baja border near Rumerosa and a terrific petroglyph site at Painted Rock east of Gila Bend, Arizona.



The transpenninsular highway running the 1,000 mile length of Baja is all single lanes, often winding and often very narrow with no skirting. It is traveled fairly heavily by tractor-trailer rigs which haul all the goods into and out of Baja. These are routinely involved in single vehicle accidents, generally going off the highway at corners or upon hitting cattle, and overturning (as I said, no skirting, and generally 2 – 4 foot drops). I think I saw the less-than-1-day-old results of at least 3 such accidents while driving south, and again 3 more upon returning north. Keeping speed under control is important on this road. Six military check points spread along this only paved route in and out of Baja did not slow me down much; but the US border crossing at Mexicali had cars lined up for miles, and I drove on to tiny Algodones thinking it would be faster. I had to drive around a number of streets to find the back of the line there, but took only about 1 and ½ hours to get across. I am back now in Tucson, weathering cloudy weather, and considering my next trip options. Dave



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