

BAJA 2023

by Bill Darbon

Baja California is a Mexican State bordering the US state of California, the earth's second-longest peninsula. The landscape spans mountains and beaches on the Pacific Ocean and Gulf of California. It stretches from Tijuana in the north to Cabo San Lucas in the south (MEX 1). The main highway offers stunning views at every turn, runs through small villages between major towns, and winds its way through stunning scenery.

https://www.discoverbaja.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/map_cmyk.jpg

I was fortunate to be invited on a 21 day excursion by Ian Woolnough ; Ian had been twice before so knew where to go and potentially what to see, although it had been five years since his last visit and with environmental and cultural development some things had changed. He had scheduled a rough timetable but as with all trips to habitat nothing was set in stone, so together with four other first timers we ventured off on 4th January, meeting up at terminal 5 (Heathrow) with the other participants: Ian's wife Sarda, Ian Priestley (M/Keynes), and Alice Vanden Bon and Keith Flanagan (Reading).

We boarded our flight with lots of anticipation. We had to fly via JFK to catch an internal connection to San Jose Cabo landing on 6th Jan. After the normal customs and immigration formalities we picked up our hire cars (which we had previously booked) and grabbing some vital supplies we checked into our hotel and after an evening meal we retired early, exhausted after the long flights. I think for the purposes of this article I will keep each day short or combine it to the highlights and experiences over the time we spent travelling around.

We had planned to move most days as we had a long trek ahead of us, so up early the next day to set off on our adventure north up the west coast via Todos Santos. I should say that on our tour we saw

many *Cereus* plants, too many to count, mainly *Pachycereus pringli* at every turn on every hillside all shapes and sizes like rows of soldiers standing to attention. On our first foray along the beach headland we found mammillarias. I unfortunately got over heated but was able to recover by later in the day and we headed north to La Paz. Traffic was very busy and as we found out during the journey you don't leave Mexican drivers any space (or they will pinch it). Anyway we arrived safely at our Hotel and had an evening Pizza and a couple of cold beers and reflected on our first real day and the thoughts of what was to come.

We set off the next day through La Paz along the (malecon) sea front and Pichilique beach, to an area Ian had been to before, which was a conservation and protected area with a lovely lagoon. Our party split as some went exploring whilst the rest sat under the shelters on the beach (quite idyllic) and even decided that the water was very tempting and quite warm so went off for a swim. We could only stay for a short time (four-hour shifts) so we set off after a quick lunch north-east. *Cochemia* and *Mammillaria*, *Echinocereus* and abundance of cereoids and *Opuntia* (mainly *Cylindropuntia*) on the beach (we were to see many types of these throughout our journeys). Not to tarry we made north through sparsely inhabited areas to Ciudad Constitution.

Ian's car battery warning light had come on. We checked it over and there did not seem to be anything loose, but a decision was made to contact the hire company and arrange a relief car (rather than risk breaking down in the middle of nowhere) before venturing further on our journey. The next day was Sunday so things move even more slowly than normal. Fortunately a spare car arrived by 9 am, so after breakfast we were able to venture onward towards Loreto. The target was the creeping devils and we were pleased to find some with fruits; alongside were clumps of *Mammillaria dioica* and some *Ferocactus*. A quick visit to San Carlos, where there were Ospreys in nests on platforms on top of telegraph poles, and Caracaras. On the way back we made a couple of roadside stops to encounter large clumps of *Opuntia invicta*, as well as small clumps of *Mammillaria*. We had

planned a boat trip the next day so back to the hotel for a meal and rest.

The following morning we met our boatman for our planned trip. A couple of the islands were out of bounds, but we were able to see the plants on the side of the hills - lots of *Ferocactus diguetii*. A calm sea took us to the Isla Carmen and we were able to land and explore Puerto Ballandra, the normal cereoids (*Pachycereus*, *Stenocereus* and *Lophocereus*). There was not much marine life on the trip apart from a few sea birds and the odd Brown Pelican (we became more familiar with this bird on a subsequent trip). We enjoyed a wonderful restaurant specializing in sea food (which you can imagine as we were only a short distance away was very fresh and very tasty).

The following day another early start (it was cooler in the mornings and made travelling a lot more comfortable), north along MEX 1, stopping a couple of times to see if we could see any plants, then into Mulege for lunch and onward for more *Mammillaria*, *Ferocactus* and Stick *Opuntia* (don't get too close otherwise they are too friendly and attach themselves anywhere they can). Fortunately Ian W had a useful pair of forceps. We ventured into San Ignacio (which had a lovely old church from the early missionaries) and had coffee and cake before returning to our hotel at San Ignacio (two nights stay). We set off again early on the MEX1. Some parts of the road were under repair so progress was a bit slow through Viscaino, on to a rough dirt road toward El Arco - clumps of *Ferocactus fordii* (mental note made: must get one) some *Mammillaria doica* and *brandegei* then on to Guerrero Negro.

The next day was a day we had planned to split up as the four newbies had been recommended to book a whale-watching trip. Ian and Sarda had done this on their last trip, so headed off bird watching on the coast on their own. The rest of us joined two other folk from New Mexico on the boat trip to Laguna Ojo de Libre (this area that is renowned for the gray whales who come there every year to give birth.) The boatman appeared to be as excited as we were - and sure enough after a short time floating around the whales appeared right up along-side the boat, a real surreal experience bearing in mind that

approx. 80 years ago they were nearly extinct having been hunted: “The Gray Whale so named from the grey patches and white mottling on its skin migrates from the Bering sea each year to calve in this lagoon, it reaches a length of 14.9 meters (49 ft), a weight of up to 41 tonnes (90,000 lb) and lives between 55 and 70 years, Gray whales make one of the longest annual migrations of any mammal, traveling about 10,000 miles round-trip and in some cases upwards of 14,000 miles”. That evening we all met up again in the hotel and shared our stories over a nice meal.

The following day (Friday 13th) we made for Santa Rosalita and the Catavina boulder fields. We had a long drive along the windy Mex 1, and the scenery was amazing as we entered the “boulder fields“, large granite lumps on the side of the road. We stopped off a couple of times trying to find Mammillaria and of course there were large Agave and stands of cereoids. Alice was feeling a little unwell so the other car left for our accommodation, a lovely but isolated Hotel “Mission Catalina”. Despite being given directions “IT’S THE ONLY HOTEL IN THE AREA” we managed to drive past it, but after a while we realised we had missed it and turned round. The hotel was wonderful and had its own swimming pool. After being chastised for our lack of observation “how could you miss it - you drove past it too fast, etc”, we all sat down for a lovely meal and admired a wonderful sunset and the night sky. The constellation of Orion shone brightly.

Onward the following day for more excursions into the boulder hotel in El Rosario. Sadly we had a rather disturbed night as a Mexican party went on until 4am; even the heavy rain did not interfere with the celebrations. So slightly bleary eyed we set off North. It had stopped raining but was very murky. We found *Ferocactus viridiscens* and a cristate *Cylindropuntia* on the side of the road. We ventured on to the coast road and found large *Dudleya brittonii* growing on the hillside (the green form). By this time the rain had returned so we abandoned any further ventures and found our accommodation in Ensenada (when it rains it really comes down).

Again we had a lot of overnight rain and it was still a bit wet in the morning - we had decided not to venture any further north - so undaunted off we set for our next destination. We drove a quite winding road and had to negotiate any washed down rocks in the road from the overnight rains. We made a couple of stops and we managed to find *Echinocereus engelmanni* and nice *Ferocactus*, sadly over the fence so not to venture in case someone is watching. We set off again, lots of *Fouquieria*, some in flower, and on to San Felipe for a two night stay. Ian W selected a B & B on the beach which had its own restaurant. Over dinner we discussed our planned boat trip to the islands the next day.

At 9am our boatman Sergio arrived alongside the jetty. We sailed off on the Sea of Cortez on a calm sea. On route we saw a basking sealion and several sea birds, we passed several islands and landed on the Isla Ventura to explore, *Mammillaria*, *Ferocactus*, a golden form of a Teddy Bear Choya and of course large *Pachycereus*. After the four hour jaunt we landed back at the hotel. As we still had a good part of the day left, we headed inland on a fairly twisty road and found *Mammillaria dioica* and *insularis* on rocky outcrops. Back to our B & B for a meal and light refreshments overlooking the sea; tomorrow was going to be a long drive so we retired.

Heading South from San Felipe on the coast road (which we were pleased to find had now been tarmacked) we made some stops as we travelled south, again wonderful scenery, via Baha de los Angeles and back to Guerrero Negro via the road to San Borja where we encountered *Ferocactus gracilis* up to 6ft high, lots of *Dudleya* and *Mammillaria brandegi*, Boojams, *Fouquieria* and the usual *Cereus*. We made for our accommodation for a nice evening meal. The following day we headed East making a couple of stops to see *Mammillaria hutchinsonia*, *dioica* and a couple of large *brandegi*. We made for Mulege and found a nice hotel and visited a lovely restaurant in the evening. It was Keith's birthday so he treated himself to a T- bone steak.

The following day, venturing further south via Loreto and San Vincent, we stopped for coffee. There was a lovely old Church in

the square probably from the first missionaries. We then set off on the dirt road out of the village hoping to get to our intended destination. Sadly after crossing three fords at the last water crossing we decided it was not possible to pass in our saloon cars, also the way forward was a bit unknown, so we re-traced our steps back to Loretto and our hotel.

We travelled on the following day back via Ciudad Constitucion making a few stops en route to La Paz where we had intended to stay for two nights and planned to re-visit the beach we had been to earlier in the trip. Ian and Sarda left us and the other four to wander around in La Paz in the morning, and we planned to meet up again in the afternoon. Sadly when we tried to get into Pichilique beach there was a very long queue so the boys managed to walk in and tell the others of our plans and we arranged to meet up again the following evening for a meal and watch the sun set over the harbour.

Sadly the next day was coming to the end of our journey and we had quite a long drive to get back to Cabo San Lucas hotel. We made a few stops on the Mex 19 on route via Cabo San Lucas and found our hotel (the one we had stayed on the first night). We ventured into town to a very busy restaurant for our final meal of the trip and reminisced over a couple of beers about what we had done and seen, before retiring, having planned to get going early the next day.

So the last day an early start to the airport to get the hire cars sorted. We had booked a flight back via Forth Worth (Dallas) but we were concerned that we may not have enough time between landing and getting the connecting flight, so after consultation with the Airline clerk we managed to get on an earlier flight. Two subsequent things now occurred - first our bags were booked straight through to Heathrow so we would not have to worry about collecting them in again etc., and we then had a text from BA to say that the connecting flight was going to be delayed (so a lot of bother for nothing). Anyway we were pleased to get to Fort Worth with enough time to relax before the journey home. Well what can one say - you never know what you will see or encounter on such a journey, stunning scenery, wonderful plants some larger than a house, numerous birds

and wild life. Good company varied food and accommodation made it all a truly wonderful experience with grateful thanks to Ian W for his guidance and patience (particularly when yours truly got lost).

Many Many Thanks!