



THE NEXT Wild West

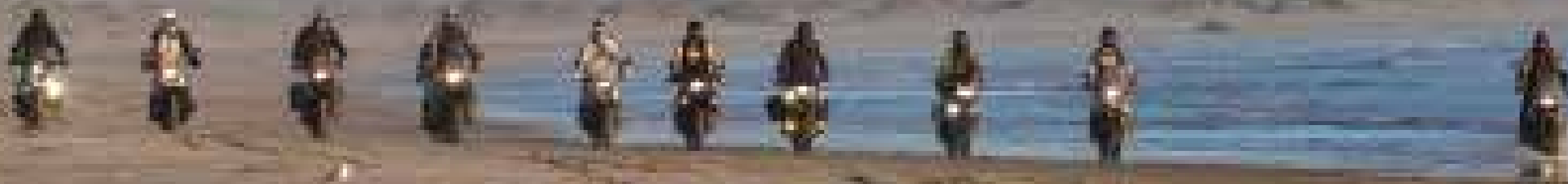
Don't Go There.
You'll Die.

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Tell anyone who doesn't live within a day's drive of the US/Mexico border that you're going on tour in Mexico and that's the reply you'll get: Don't go there. You'll die.

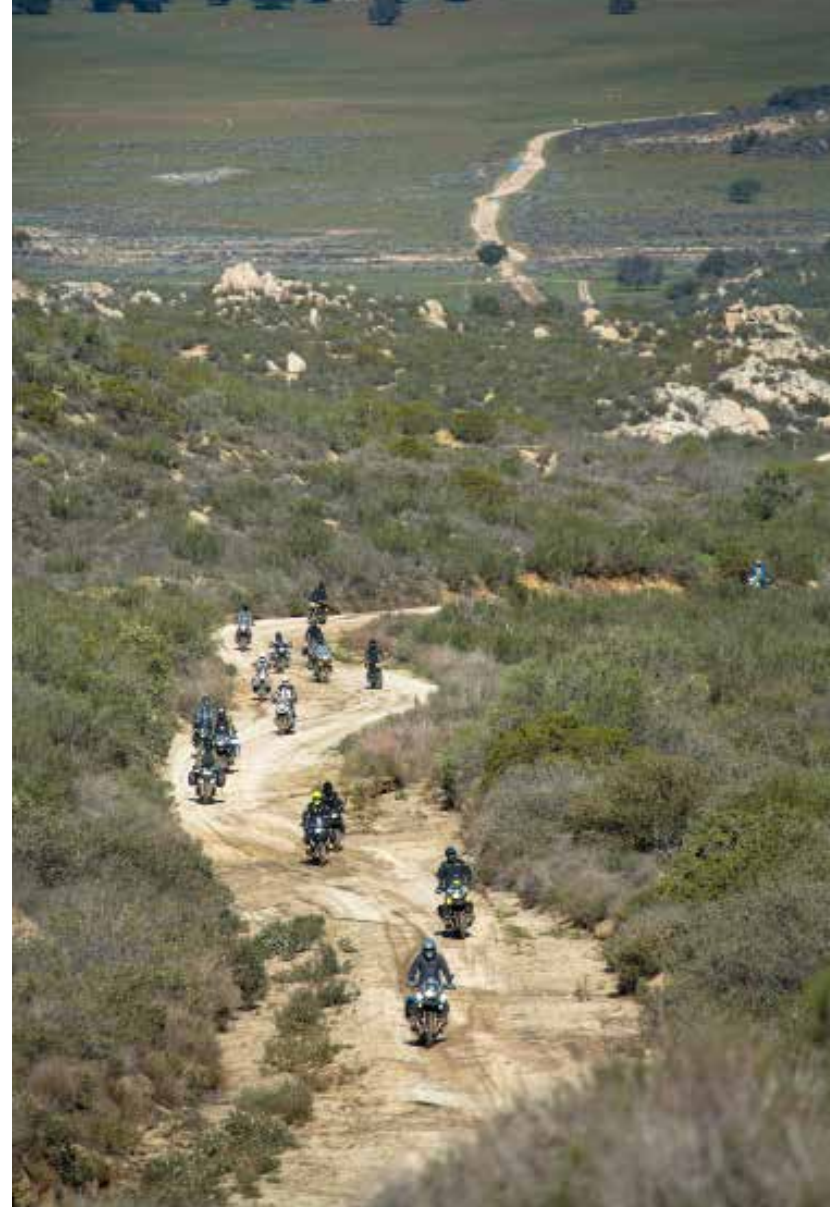
They couldn't be more wrong, however, and will probably expire their days wishing they bought that motorcycle when they were young and had taken that ride.

But even if they were right, this is Baja... just the part of California we don't own. One that isn't spoiled by commercialism, traffic, and attitude. Not yet anyway. It's what the deserts of the American southwest used to be 100-plus years ago: full of freedom and adventure with just a little bit of cell connection and a few modern amenities to keep you alive and kicking.



Desolation and desperation team up to challenge any ride through Baja. Long days in the saddle will be met with low fuel warnings and the darkness of night, but the seasonal rewards of swimming with a gray whale are well worth it!





Jim Hyde, ring leader and owner of RawHyde Adventures (right), is happy to lead you to and through the peninsula. Mmmm, tacos.



“Pack some pesos and your sense of adventure. Baja California is waiting for you to enjoy it! Leave your watch at home. Time is measured in days...”

Once thought to be one large island, and ruled together as one larger California, ours and theirs combined, the US offered to buy, stole, and warred over all of it until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Before that, legendary Amazons ruled Baja and its pearls, the Europeans took a crack at it for a while, and the natives were run out as usual. Less than 200 years ago, this land was the Wild West of Mexico and lives on today under relatively similar desolation with new borders and protection for much of the land. Today, the peninsula is a playground for desert rats and more recently the food and wine set. Just get there before progress takes over! Get there before the Escalera Nautica project brings millions into the southern state and gentrifies the peaceful port towns with its pegboard plan for water-based tourists.

As riders, and some of us skateboarders, we visualize ourselves riding in illegal—if not impossible places—on any given day. Up that mountain, around that curve, along that wall, or across that gap. With a mental fingerboard, our minds wander to places often restricted

from riding, especially in the US. But with a passport comes freedom, and riding in another country can be quite easy if you look south instead of east or west. The landscape might look like the American southwest, but this desert has a personality of its own.

Even as rugged individualists, we are right to be cautious about venturing solo into Baja; the conditions can be difficult, and your Spanish should be up to it. The Baja 1000 is as hard on man and machine as anything. They don't call it the Irvine 1000. But not everyone is ready to grab the passport, pack the saddlebags, and head for Baja. That's why there are events like RawHyde Adventures' "Big Bikes in Baja" event. The seven-day ride costs \$2,995 all-inclusive if you ride your own bike or \$3,795 if you rent one of RawHyde's BMW GSs.

After an evening arrival and a delicious welcome dinner at the RawHyde ranch in Castaic, California, our first day on the bikes is a slogging freeway ride toward the border. Situated only 200 miles north of the line, the day's ride begins on US soil and

ends at a remote country ranch in Santa Veronica, roughly 25 miles south of the border along the “free” way (MEX2) instead of the faster toll road.

The first night in Mexico is much like going to Vegas for the first time—drink, drink, drink! But remember that you ride again tomorrow. Tonight we settle in to cheap drinks and a whole new batch of friends we don't know yet.

Our second day on the bikes returns to the paved road but not for long. Our Mexican adventure begins with a mixed day of gravel and paved roads through the backcountry. Riding what they consider secondary roads (probably class five in the US), we connect the pavement of MEX2 to MEX3 dodging the occasional mattress in the road and knee-deep puddles. Tuesday is a great day to be alive and riding motorcycles! And if something really goes wrong, we're just a (long) day's drive in the back of a pickup truck, along bumpy and painful roads, to the border for help from an American doctor. Ride within your limits, or get some extraction insurance just in case!

Just as we begin to get used to the busted pavement of MEX3, it's time for the part of the ride to separate the men and the boys. The road up to Mike's Sky Ranch will prove to be the toughest part of the week ahead (unless you don't like sand), though it's relatively easy going at your favored pace, just rough with a few puddles from the week's rain.

Arriving and riding right into Mike's Sky Ranch was fun, with the group now separated into the high-speed crew and the cruisers. We arrived just before and just after dusk collectively. Those with aftermarket lights,

like the Clearwaters mounted on my bike, loved the ride. Those without the lights probably now have a few new products in their mental shopping carts. In Baja, it actually gets dark at night. And if you're a desert-racing fan, or just have friends who have been to Baja before, Mike's is legendary in the riding community and plagued with the adhesive disease, literally stickered from head to toe, toilet bowl to moose antlers.

Day three starts at the foot of Baja's highest peak, Picacho del Diablo, and returns again to the main road you came in on last night (MEX3). Like it or not.

After a regroup at the pavement and a moment for the support trailer to arrive with the rider's bike that wasn't too happy to return on that road, it's a top-gear burn for San Felipe. Speed limits? What speed limits? Just don't get caught. In Mexico, you're guilty first, and the jails don't sound any fun. Attempts to ride on the dried shores of the Colorado River as it feeds into the Gulf were

made, fuel tanks run dry, and some of us coasted into San Felipe... So this is what they call “adventure”? Cool.

After two nights in the Baja desert, it was a nice change to roll into a fully developed town for a night, even a Mexican version of one. There was an ATM in town, plus it had tons of restaurants, pharmacies, and a fun little *malecón* to explore before dinner in the Barefoot Bar, on the beach, at the hotel. Others twisted a throttle on the sand hill overlooking the hotel and Gulf of California, a.k.a. the Sea of Cortez. Thirty-peso margarita anyone? That's \$2! The buffet dinner of Mexican food was plentiful and delicious—but they just call it “food” down here.

By now we're confused as to which day it actually is, and today will be our hardest day in the saddle as we continue south all the way to San Ignacio. Leaving San Felipe, dips in the road (MEX5), or *vados*, keep us popping out of our saddles, setting a few wheels in the air as we race along the coast. A most placid and

mellow day so far, heaven on two wheels. A stop to visit some friends in a bayside community populated by expats, vacationers, and a few locals brought us to lunch in Alfonsina's. Refueled and rolling again, the remote Sea of Cortez side of the peninsula sees very little traffic, and as we approach the end of current progress in road building, we turn off into the desert for a 30-mile stretch of pure Baja.

MEX5 might someday connect all the way to MEX1, and by that point, the original spirit of the eastern coast will expire much like that of our Route 66. Places like Coco's Corner might just get rolled over into obscurity—if not buried in automobile tourists from that point on. For now, it's a remote pit stop that's known worldwide and something you have to see for yourself. Don't be surprised to see a big rig coming the other way, though, as this hard, gravel road is also the main road.

Through saguaro groves and mountain passes, over dry lakes and rim-crushing potholes, MEX1 is next! Left turn and go! There are more than 120 miles of parkland along this part of the Transpeninsular Highway, through the Valle De Los Cirios, until the 28th parallel, the dividing line for the southern state of Baja. Although there's a support truck hauling both your luggage and some rescue fuel—because, well, that's the RawHyde way—mind your gas consumption down here. And try not to get any flat tires. Get two and be dinner conversation tonight.



“¡Andale! The beach is open! And when you get back to the hotel, there’ll be a margarita waiting for you!”

Jay flats the same tire twice before finally reaching the restaurant/motel called Rice & Beans in San Ignacio after dark. It’s a long and possibly painful day, but tomorrow will be worth it all!

On our “rest” day, we rode across cactus deserts and man-made trails plowed through the oceanside lagoon for a whale-watching excursion with Antonio’s Eco Tours. Wow! Definitely well worth the extra miles. Hop on a boat, pat the surface of the water, and wait. In the right season, these 30- to 40-ton pussycats come up to play. Just try not to dump everyone out of the boat to take a selfie. “Be balance,” they say.

Not only did we get to pet (and kiss!) more than a few gray whales on migration, but the best food experience in Baja was right there in that little shack on the beach. Fresh scallops, fish tacos, cold Cokes, and blazing sunshine. What could be better?

Nearly 750 miles later, San Ignacio is (sadly) our turnaround point, but we hardly mind, as there is still plenty of adventure to come. With landscapes often looking like parts of Death Valley National Park, the desolation is its beauty, for thousands of miles! The ride north was more about throttles than tacos, long and desolate, but well worth it as tonight we rest in an American-style place with big beds, tons of food, and a foosball table in the bar. Plus it’s right on the beach—one you can ride on!

And, yes, we can do that at home but barely. Want to ride on those dunes before dinner? Put down the fingerboard and get to

it... ¡Andale! When you get back, we’ll have a margarita waiting for you!

Our last day was the worst. Not only was the ride coming to the end, but the rains came. All damn day. After Ensenada, we turn inland onto MEX3 north, through the Valle de Guadalupe, 60 miles of transformation. Technology and tourism is turning this

Riding with RawHyde, you’re only alone in your helmet. The rest of the time is spent laughing and learning with new friends.

stretch into a destination for food and wine travelers, no longer attracting just the dirty motorcycle people. We don’t see much more than rain in our faces however.

Crossing the border again as the sun sets over Tecate, the rest of the ride back to the Castaic ranch was direct and on familiar freeways. We did it! Cross that one off the bucket list! Thanks to the first-rate planning and execution of RawHyde, Baja can be exhilarating *and* easy.

BEFORE YOU GO, KNOW...

First, you won’t die. Second, the water won’t make you sick. Unless you make yourself sick thinking about it. After that, it’s easy.

- Get your bike some Mexico insurance, as the US coverage you might have will not cover you there. “It’s a different world down here.” Via InstaMex, you can get coverage online for \$160/week to cover a new BMW R1200GS.
- Then get yourself some insurance just in case you get hurt when you’re out of the country. While the riding is awesome, keep

in mind the hospitals are not consistently first-world. An annual extraction plan through Medjet will run you about \$250, or just \$90 for the eight days on tour.

- Pack your bike’s original title, but have photocopies on hand for the border crossings. If you have a lien or loan on the bike, get a notarized letter of release from the bank to carry in lieu of the title.
- Gas will find you.
- Lastly, bring your passport and your patience.

