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Bare-Bones Bivouac on a Baja Beach

Directionless, six friends on a road odyssey find aquatic pleasures near La Bufadora

By ROB DUNTON, Special to The Times

KENNEDY'S CAMP, MEXICO—On Labor Day weekend I had the good fortune to find myself aboard the Paradox, a 43-foot cabin cruiser, for an excursion to La Bufadora, on the Pacific coast of Baja California about 90 miles south of Tijuana. We motored all night from San Diego under starry skies and watched invisible fish cut phosphorescent trails in the water as they raced from our bow.



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We anchored in a cove just south of La Buf (pronounced "Boof") and enjoyed a weekend of scuba diving, hiking and shopping for kitschy tourist trinkets. As dusk approached on Saturday, Jim Frimodig, my host and captain, asked me to join him on a sunset cruise in his seven-horsepower inflatable dinghy. Hugging the jagged shoreline, we sped south across tiny coves and inlets, past barren islands the size of small city blocks and frosted with the guano of seabirds. We followed a soft booming sound to a miniature blowhole, then motored through a small rock arch.

A thousand yards farther, slumbering sea lions crowded a small island. Beneath the dinghy I could see undulating kelp, schools of sardines, bright orange garibaldi and the ocean floor 50 feet below. Small stone beaches had kayaks moored on them. Scanning the bluff, I spotted a few SUVs and tents and, more important, a dirt road carved into the hillside.

I knew I had to find my way back to this Shangri-La, though by more prosaic means: my automobile. Easier said than done.

Back in my San Diego home, I could find no reference to the place in any guidebook. No map detailed the dirt roads I had seen switchbacking up the hillsides. I could find no name. I had

no idea how many miles south of La Bufadora we had cruised that evening. But the more difficult it was to find, the more alluring it became.



After almost two months of searching, with my resources nearly exhausted, I asked the staff at the rental department of a San Diego sporting goods store.

A visiting kayaking guide piped up: "You've got to be talking about Los Arbolitos! It's awesome--one of our best weekend kayaking sites," he said.

"Can you tell me how to get there?" I asked.

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"Sure," he replied. "After the turnoff for La Bufadora, you'll pass this town... well, sort of a town," he began, and then rattled off the sort of "turn-right-at-the-stand-of-trees" instructions that exist in unmapped territories.

Two weeks later five friends and I packed ourselves into a 1991 Explorer and a vintage four-wheel-drive Subaru with a pair of kayaks strapped to the roof like giant spooning bananas. Inside we had stowed gallons of water, coolers of food and enough dive and camping gear to open a small sporting goods store. We were ready for a weekend packed with aquatic activities and car camping in the wilds of Baja--without toilets, showers or restaurants.

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"I know wonderfully little about where we're going," I admitted to my trusting friends, two of whom had stopped to visit on a circumnavigation of the continental U.S. by car. Their faces wore tight smiles.

"I've driven into Mexico 20 or more times over the years, and it's not like I haven't been there before," I reassured them, "but only by water. It is the most amazing place. It's like a giant rock garden in the sea."

"But you're not sure how to get there, right? Or if the roads are intact, if our cars will make it, or if it's private land?" asked my road-weary friend Dewey Webster.

"Well, a guide who goes there fairly often, towing a truck full of kayaks, gave me these directions. If he can make it, so can we," I said as I passed around the vague, indecipherable notes I had scribbled on the back of a flier. "If we never find it, at least we'll have fun looking around," I added encouragingly.

We crossed the border in predawn darkness on a Saturday, following signs for the Rosarito/Ensenada Scenic Route. We made our way past shanty dwellings in the barren, fenced border zone to the toll road just west of central Tijuana.

The toll road to Ensenada runs almost parallel to the original two-lane Baja Highway. Though the free rustic route offers fascinating diversity and is cheaper, we would have been stuck in Tijuana traffic if we had taken it.

Instead we kept our caravan moving toward the toll road. After paying \$2.25, we headed down Mexico's Highway 1-D. Gliding along the smooth, empty four-lane highway, I noticed that many new homes with ocean views had sprouted on the hillsides, making the area look more like Orange County than suburban Tijuana. Only recently have the *ranchitos* of local farmers, with their small plots of corn, chickens, horses and clapboard homes, given way to the developer's dollar, displaced by custom homes for Tijuana's burgeoning upper middle class and expatriates looking for a more relaxed life. Rosarito now sports high-rise hotels. Calafia has condominium towers. Puerto Nuevo, once a one-restaurant road stop, is now a bustling village with 30-odd lobster and seafood establishments.

Past the Bajamar golf resort we rounded a bend at El Mirador viewpoint, which has a vista that seems to belong on California's Highway 1 in Big Sur: windswept cliffs, a shimmering bay dusted in light fog, and the wide, endless Pacific. Sadly, this breathtaking stretch does not end in a quaint town like Carmel but crashes headlong into the jumble of urban Ensenada.



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By religiously following signs for Maneadero and La Bufadora, we worked our way through Ensenada and, about nine miles south of the town, turned off onto Route 23 at the exit for La Bufadora. The road cut west toward Punta Banda, the rugged peninsula that forms the southern base of Todos Santos Bay.

I pulled out my scribbled instructions. We passed Camp La Jolla and Camp Villarino, which appeared to make up the "sort of a town" the guide had described.

Skirting the camps' outer fringes we found what looked to be the dirt road he had mentioned, turned left as instructed and bounded up toward the ridge of the peninsula. The mildly rutted road was easy to negotiate in our high-clearance SUV, but could be impassable after heavy rains or in low-clearance cars.

We turned left about midway up, aiming for a distant stand of trees. Past the solitary patch of eucalyptus, we crested the peninsula and an austere landscape of rocks, cactuses, dry grass and cobalt sea opened before us.

Across the bay I spotted a boat ramp. Back past the grove of trees we traveled, up and over the crest. Then, putting the cars into four-wheel drive, we drove slowly down a rack of rutted, rock-strewn switchbacks toward a dilapidated RV and a clapboard-and-burlap outhouse perched on a bluff.

We had found my Shangri-La, also known as Kennedy's Camp. There were no other campers, and José, the camp's quiet, kindly caretaker, collected \$5 from each of us for the weekend, giving us an official-looking ticket in return. It was only 11 a.m., and we had made it, surprisingly with no mishaps or wrong turns.

After anchoring our tents against the shifting coastal breeze, we set out to play. Ericka Moody left to hike and explore Baja's unique desert ecosystem, which is home to hundreds of plant and animal species found nowhere else.

But I was more interested in what was under the water. Scott McLaughlin, Laura Romfh and I unloaded the kayaks and scuba gear. For the next five hours we snorkeled, dived and kayaked in the clear, calm, 64-degree playground.

On our first dive we swam out from the ramp and dropped to 40 feet. The visibility was between 25 and 50 feet. We coasted through a thin kelp forest inhabited by garibaldi and sheepshead. We kicked along the rocky coastline, inspecting inlets and overhangs littered with starfish, sea anemones and the populous sea urchin. During another 50-minute dive, we spied opaleye, kelp bass, scallops and the occasional spiny lobster.

As dusk approached, we cooked a dinner of angel hair pasta with grilled vegetables and marinara sauce, topped with s'mores for dessert, which we ate around a campfire. The stars were brilliant, the wind alive, and we slept well.



© Robert A. Dunton

An early morning mist hung over the water, and the sea air was intoxicating. Scott and I untied the banana-yellow kayaks, stowed our snorkeling gear and headed out to explore.

The tide was at a perfect height to let us hear the nearby miniature blowhole, spouting its mild *poom* with each rolling swell. We aimed for the rock arch--a tunnel about 4 to 7 feet high (depending on the tide and swell), 15 to 20 feet from entrance to exit, and 5 feet wide--barely enough for a kayak and paddle.

If a swell came in at the wrong time, our heads could be smacked against the jutting rock ceiling. If a rogue wave hit, it could chew us up and spit us out. But that morning, calm and with the tide low, we breezed through with little more than a blip in our pulse rate.

As we traveled across the bay, a pod of dolphins emerged, looping and diving alongside our kayaks for almost 100 yards before heading off. Agreeing that this was our peak experience for the day, Scott and I paddled back to camp.

Because only two in our group had seen La Buf or heard its namesake buffalo snort, we broke camp early enough to fit in a visit to it before heading for home that evening.

After parking in an unpaved lot near a collection of restaurants and curio stalls, we fanned out.

A stroll through the bazaar at the entrance to La Bufadora is a walk through classic Mexican border culture. Local families were dressed in their Sunday best. Papas bought sugarcoated *churros* for their children. Food vendors called out their specialties as the aromas spilled into the street: *Carne asada!* *Cerveza!* Scores of peddlers hawked trinkets, from fine silver jewelry to knockoff watches, velvet Elvis paintings to Bart Simpson piñatas.

Beyond the spray and mist, pangas full of scuba divers headed out from Dale's Dive Shop to the Pinnacles, near the peninsula's tip.

Guidebook: At La Bufadora

By ROB DUNTON, Special to The Times

Getting there: Tijuana is 90 miles from La Bufadora. The only map I found with the necessary detail to get to Kennedy's Camp on the Punta Banda Peninsula is in the Baja Almanac Norte (\$12.50; P.O. Box 94318, Las Vegas, NV 89193). For complete directions to La Bufadora, check out <http://www.bajahouse.com/directio.htm>. If you are going off-road, a high-clearance vehicle is strongly recommended.

Telephones: To reach Mexican numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international access code), 52 (the country code), 6 (the local area code) and the number.

Insurance: Though Mexico does not require drivers to carry auto insurance, buy it. If you have an auto accident in Mexico, you must submit proof of financial responsibility by showing you have either a Mexican automobile insurance policy or enough cash to cover all damages. Most U.S. policies are not valid in Mexico. You can purchase insurance through your local AAA office. Collision, theft and \$80,000 in liability coverage typically run about \$12-\$24 per 24-hour period, depending on the value of the vehicle.

Entry requirements: A validated tourist card is required if you will be in Mexico for more than 72 hours or are traveling south of Ensenada. The cards are usually available at the immigration office at the border or in Ensenada. To get a card, you must present a passport or U.S. birth certificate, purchase the card, then pay an authorization fee of about \$21 cash at a bank. A teller at the border provides this service.

Hungry and thirsty, we spotted Celia's inviting rooftop patio and stopped to drink a few beers, eat and wait for sunset.

Driving home that night, I asked Ericka if she had liked her first camping adventure in Baja.

"It was awesome!"

All photos shown © Robert A. Dunton.

Where to stay: I prefer to camp, but a pleasant hotel about 15 to 25 miles from La Bufadora is the Estero Beach Resort, Ensenada, B.C., Mexico; 176-6225, fax 176-6925,

<http://www.hotelesterobeach.com/home.htm>. Doubles \$60-\$100 per night midweek, \$70-\$110 weekend. Mail reservation requests to PMB 1186, 482 W. San Ysidro Blvd., San Ysidro, CA 92173.

Camp Villarino, Km 13, Carretera La Bufadora (mailing address: P.O. Box 2746, Chula Vista, CA 91912); 154-2045, fax 154-2044. This beachfront campground was recommended by a Baja veteran I know. It has warm showers, RV hookups, electricity and campsites. Rate: \$7 a day per person. Fishing trips, horse rentals provided on site.

Rancho La Bufadora 154-2092. Mailing address: Apdo. Postal 102, Maneadero, B.C. This is the only place to camp at La Bufadora. It has basic campsites (\$5 a night per vehicle with two people, \$1 for each extra person) on the bluff past the restaurants and Dale's Dive Shop.

Equipment rental: Dale's La Bufadora Dive, Apartado Postal #102, Maneadero, B.C., Mexico, 154-2092 (after 6 p.m.), <http://www.labufadora.com/dales/Dales.htm>. Dale arranges boats with guides, rents dive gear and kayaks.

Where to eat: La Bufadora is a designated tourist area with rules about purifying water used for beverages and ice.

Restaurante Celia's has consistently fine meals in a laid-back atmosphere. Try the superb nachos.

Los Panchos, in a parking lot near the blowhole, has been frequented by locals for more than 30 years. Specialties include octopus in a rancho sauce.

For more information: Mexican Government Tourism Office, Mexican Consulate, 2401 W. 6th St., 5th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90057; (213) 351-2069, fax (213) 351-2074, <http://www.visitmexico.com>.