

Exploring Malarrimo Beach: Junkyard of the Pacific

by Vince Landis

The National Geographic recently added to the lore about Malarrimo Beach, the junkyard of the Pacific. It is on a stretch of shoreline which reaches about sixty miles west from Guerrero Negro, past Scammon's Lagoon and Malarrimo Beach out to Point Eugenia north of Turtle Bay. Just west of the grey whale breeding lagoon, this beach is noted for catching vast quantities of objects drifting in from the Pacific Ocean. Grandson, Joe, and I decided to go explore it.



He came to Lakeside Monday evening, June 21, 2004, and we left in the Toyota Tacoma at 0700 on Tuesday morning. We took the new 125 and 54 freeways to Chula Vista, and I-805 south to Tijuana. The new overpass in Tijuana took us directly to the border road leading to Playas de Tijuana and Rosarito. It was a beautiful morning. Two sailing ships are still on the movie set where the Titanic once "sailed". South of Rosarito, just north of Cantamar, we stopped to take a picture of the concrete nude sitting in a back yard in a residential zone. We don't know her history, but assume that the statue was

contracted for and the deal fell through, so there she sits with a detached hand on top of a garage. We arrived in Ensenada at ten o'clock and went directly to the Migration office to get our tourist visas. We told the friendly officer that we wished to enter legally this time, and he was happy to oblige. One must make a trip to the bank to pay the required \$20.00 each fee. On the way to the bank, we were approached by, what we believe to be a panhandler, who gave us a wild running story of being an American seaman from Seattle who was sent by his captain to deliver some abalone, but his car was impounded and his papers held by the police and I don't remember what all else. All he wanted was ten dollars for bus fare and a ride to the bus station. His story was so good that we did so. On the way back we passed a good bakery and Joe bought a dozen bolillos while I pretended to try to park the car in a space which was much too small. With Joe and the bolillos on board, we went to the bank and returned to the visa office.

We left Ensenada at eleven. There was heavy truck traffic on the highway because of the intensive vegetable farming south of Ensenada. We stopped for gas at San Vicente' (my town). The attendant was a particularly nice fellow who spoke excellent English. In San Quintin we found El Jardin restaurant which Bob Griffith had mentioned as excellent. It is located in a beautiful park-like garden with trees, lawns, shrubs, and flowers. There was a wonderful flowering artichoke with large purple blooms. Peacocks stroll the grounds. We had a great lunch while Beau slept on the lawn. Joe ordered garlic fish and I ordered fish in mango sauce. Both were done to perfection and accompanied by potato salad, seasoned rice, and lightly steamed broccoli, cauliflower, and carrot chunks.

Just beyond El Rosario the Cerio ([Boojum](#)) trees and elephant trees started dominating the sparse vegetation. Before long, the large granite boulders characteristic of Cataviña appeared. We stopped just below town and turned into an all year stream bed for some shade and rest. Here we saw the first of several wells pumped by power from a solar panel. Soon a police black and white turned in with ball gum machine flashing. The officers said that we had blown through town at 81 Kph. We wished that we had parked behind the bushes. They were courteous and gave me a 30% senior discount on the ticket. So we parted friends.

Shortly, we went through Villa Jesus Maria and saw the huge (ugly) steel eagle which marks the border between the State of Baja California and the State of Baja California Sur. This is where we needed to show the tourist visas. We also had to pay a fee for the man who squirts a bit of insecticide on each tire. A less effective method to prevent the spread of insects would be hard to imagine, but it is an excellent fund raiser. They checked us for chicken and beef, but we had grilled lamb and pork on this trip, so we were OK. We would have lied anyhow, of course. This is also the point at which one is supposed to set the clock forward one hour. Although one thinks the west coast goes south, Guerrero Negro, on the Pacific side of the peninsula is on the 114th longitude which is east of Yuma, all of Nevada, and Missoula. Joe and I decided to remain an hour behind the natives so that we would not suffer jet lag. Heck, I get jet lag flying to Seattle.

The book Baja Legends, by Greg Niemann, recommends the Malarrimo Motel-restaurant-bar-RV park, in Guerrero Negro as interesting, excellent and economical. Since we were headed for Malarrimo beach, what could be more

appropriate? Guerrero Negro is the home of the largest salt recovery facility in the world. Sea salt has been harvested from Scammon's Lagoon in harmony with the nearby breeding ground of the California Gray Whales for many years. We were only fifty miles east of our objective, as the crow flies, but it is about one hundred and fifty by road. While waiting for dinner, Joseph and I toured the bar. It has a nice collection of flotsam recovered from Malarrimo Beach. There were sand blasted bottles, fishing floats, wooden oars, round army containers about three feet long and eight inches in diameter, lots of construction helmets and a wooden ships wheel.

The walls had pictures of flotsam and of the nearby grey whales. Joe ordered crab for dinner and got a large crab body shell stuffed with delicious crab meet. To be different, I ordered the octopus plate. It turned out to be tender octopus chunks in about an equal amount of tasty small brown mushrooms. Rooms at the Malarrimo Motel were only twenty dollars and had all night lights, hot showers, drinking water in the room, coffee in the room, soap & shampoo, and a charming decor featuring whale and nautical scenes. This makes it a five star hotel in my book. The next morning an old Baja hand (www.Bajainsider.com) said, "And no loud music coming from the car wash next door!"

In the morning, I walked Beau and chatted with a friendly couple who had spent the night in their bus conversion in the RV portion of the Malarrimo complex. The bus advertised surf boards on the side, so I assume they are following their dream in a tax deductible manner. More power to them. We left at about eight o'clock, nine local, briefly toured the town of Guerrero Negro and turned south-east to the farming town of Vizcaino. This small town and the surrounding Vizcaino Desert are the sole heritage of the navigator who renamed most points of interest in the Californias in 1600. These include La Paz and San Diego and many other landmarks. We topped off the gas, and turned northwest toward our goal. The first forty five miles of blacktop was in good condition. Then started the really bone jarring washboard of an overused gravel road. There were very shallow extensions of Scammon's Lagoon which reached clear down to the highway and even south of it.

One causeway over a bay featured gobs of sea foam, like soap suds, blowing up the bank and across the road. Another had well formed cakes of pure salt on the shore and men were picking them up, presumably to take them to the salt plant to sell. There was a pipeline beside the highway and we saw a coyote resting in the shade of a large valve. The road had an abundance of fog warning signs like "Fog Area", "Dim lights in fog", and "Drive Slowly When Foggy". These are interspersed with signs to protect the rare species of antelope unique to that area.

It was twenty six miles from the end of the pavement to the turn off to Malarrimo Beach. The road out to the beach is a "virgin road" which has never seen a bull dozer or a road grader. My kind of road! We turned off at eleven and were at the beach at twelve forty two.



Along the road were quite a number of elephant trees with small bright red flowers on the brushy branches off of the fat grey trunks. A particularly enjoyable section of road went along a high ridge where one could see a very large canyon below and the ocean in the distance. Then the road went down a narrow crooked wash into the sandy bottom of the canyon, called Caribe Wash, and followed it to the coast. There was a lot of flotsam tossed onto the sand at the mouth of the wash. The flotsam was mostly plastic bottles and containers, lots of thongs from every beach on the west coast, glass bottles with caps or corks, and styrofoam floats. Unlike the Oregon coast, the driftwood was mostly huge timbers and pilings. We walked about a half mile down the beach and found nothing unusual.



The "prizes" were collected at rock piles or washouts in the bank. Otherwise, the beach was clear clean sand. We returned to the pickup and dined on burgers made of a large barbecued Portobelo mushroom on a bun. Joe gave them a gallant try, but decided to stick with carnivore burgers. Then a nap. The wind made even that a little tricky because it blew sand in your face if given an opportunity. We let the air in the tires down to twenty pounds and drove two miles east on the beach to a point where a small lagoon intruded.

There was more of the same materials, some of which was tossed high on the bank by winter waves. We also saw a dead seal and a dead dolphin. They were interesting and desiccated so that they didn't stink. Then we drove three miles south to a rocky point and returned. I only collected a small foam fishing float and a wheel from a Tonka Truck. Was it a flop? Souvenir wise, yes. But it was interesting and worth another visit after the winter storms and before a huge number of whale watchers have combed the beach.

The return trip to the main road was faster. On the way we saw a very interesting wild cat. It was about a twenty pound cat with a long tale and a fairly dark brown coat. It was too large with too long a tail to be a feral cat. It had no spots or other markings. The best match on the Internet was the Jaguarundi. It left at a leisurely lope, like a coyote, but did not stop on the ridge to look us over as a coyote would have. I drove most of the washboard main road fairly slowly with the right wheels in the reasonably smooth ditch. This required being alert for rocks in the ditch, and even worse, washouts to the arroyo below.

Finally my patience ran out and I joined the other vehicles in going fifty miles per hour. We were running low on gas, but, rather than get out the spare gas, we made it into Vizcaino on fumes. We went across the street to the restaurant with the most trucks out front and had excellent tortas. I liked the floor tiles which were ceramic squares about one foot wide. The pattern looked like a wood floor with inlaid wood diamonds. Next door was a twenty eight dollar motel which couldn't hold a candle to our twenty dollar on the night before. But we were not up to driving another forty miles to Guerrero Negro.

The beds were half inch plywood resting on concrete piers. There were good enough mattresses but no box springs. The towels had an abrasive quality. Our commode was baby blue with a white tank cover and a purple Walmart seat cover and floor mat. However, the motel was a quadrangle where we could back up right to the door of our room, and there was no objection to Beau - or us. Actually, it wasn't bad at all until the workmen started hammering next door at 0700 local time.

I made boiled coffee on the tailgate and we had bolillos for breakfast. We went back to the Pemex station and inflated the tires to highway pressure. Then we crossed the street to get ice and Tecate beer. We went the forty miles to Guerrero Negro and another twenty to Villa Jesus Maria where we planned to top off the gas tank. Typically, planning efficiently does not work in Mexico and the gas pump at Jesus Maria was out of order. Undaunted, we went another twelve miles up the highway and took the dirt road to the coast. It was an area of sparse vegetation and beautiful sand beaches separated by rocky headlands.

Typically the northwest winds blew sand from the beaches onto the headlands which then looked like they had a light coat of snow. We saw no vehicles until we entered the town of Santa Rosalillita. This town was to be the Pacific port for the ill conceived Escalera Nautica Del Mar De Cortes, a proposal to haul yachts from the Pacific Ocean, across the peninsula to the Sea of Cortez. The result is two large signs proclaiming the project, a deserted breakwater, and a large flat parking lot. A more useful project would have been a fuel dock because yachts typically have barrels of diesel on deck for the long trip from Cabo San Lucas to San Diego.

We followed the main dirt road north and shortly discovered the quarry which had been the source of the basalt boulders for the breakwater. There we turned west and followed an ever diminishing trail along the coast.

This was virgin road with more deserted beaches with sand frosted southern headlands. The road finally disappeared completely, so we retraced our path to the quarry and took the main road inland. Several times, we used the GPS to determine our position and to identify intersections. This was the first time I used the GPS this way. It was fun and very reassuring. The road went around a mountain and returned to the coast. The inland portion included some real dust basins where vehicles had tried multiple routes, all deep with dust.

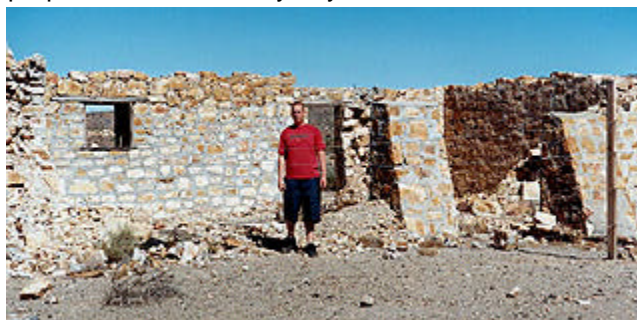


I made the mistake of stopping once and heavy dust came in the window and covered everything. Near the dust holes, we met a truck with a box bed pulling a panga accompanied by a van. In one hundred and seventy five miles of dirt roads, these were the only vehicles we met. Inland from Punta Lobos, we

saw a Cerio blooming, it was too late to see blooms in most of the area we had covered. Near Punta Vibora (viper or rattlesnake), we saw another Jaguarundi. This one was the same size and shape, but was a much lighter tan color. Soon it was getting dark and we decided to camp on an inland ridge. The coast was too windy and chilly to be fun camping. We found a relatively smooth spot and laid out our bedding.

The campsite was surrounded with Cerios, Joshua Tree like yuccas called datilillo, elephant trees, ocotillos, and chollas. Some of the yuccas had yellow blossoms. I dined on barbequed pork on Ciabatta rolls with hot sweet mustard but Joe didn't feel hungry. Beau stood guard as we slept under the stars. Breakfast was re-hydrated soup and coffee. We looked under the truck for loose bolts or other problems, and finding none, we put our ten gallons of spare gasoline into the tank and went on north.

In five miles we started to see the granite boulders characteristic of the Cataviña area, and seventeen miles later we joined the highway a few miles north of Cataviña. We went to Cataviña in case we could top off our gasoline so that we could safely make side trips on the way to El Rosario, which always has gas, except when it doesn't. An old man and a boy had a trailer full of five gallon metal army surplus gasoline cans and sold gas at \$145 pesos per can (about \$13). Not a bad price. The old man started the siphon going by mouth and emptied a can into the pickup. With the extra gasoline, we took the road in to El Marmol. The name literally means marble, but actually it is an onyx mine which operated successfully for many years. We saw a cow drinking at a watering trough made of onyx building blocks and a schoolhouse built of the same onyx blocks. This is purported to be the only onyx schoolhouse in the world. As we drove around the abandoned quarry area, Joseph repeatedly heard rattlesnakes warning us off. We never saw any, however.



When we stopped for gas in El Rosario, the old man and kid from Cataviña were filling gas drums in a pickup. I had been wondering how they made a profit selling gas at the purchase price. The answer would seem to lie in the fact that they sell out of metal gas cans instead of the usual plastic bottles. There was no way to tell how full the cans were. They were glad to see us and we were glad to see them even if they were congenial con men. It was only thirty miles up the road to San Quintin, and we had another wonderful meal at El Jardin restaurant. Joe and I had fish with mango sauce and chicken with mango sauce respectively. We traded bites, of course, and both were delicious.



from Long Beach.

The petite waitress recognized us and we got a friendly greeting in spite of the language barrier. I explained to her that we needed two glasses of water and one Margarita because I got to rest but Joe had to drive.

When she brought the drinks she looked most sympathetically at Joe and said, "Lo siento, Lo siento" (I'm sorry, I'm sorry) with exaggerated sympathy. I caught it and said, "Que lastima", (how sad), which Joe understood and he came back with "pobrecito" (poor baby), which put us all in stitches. On the patio a couple of older women were dining. One was an expatriate living in Vicente Guerrero and the other was visiting

Joe drove to Mike's Sky Ranch. The road is now paved twenty four miles in from the highway and they are slated to pave about ten kilometers per year. It is planned to pave the road all the way to the outstanding observatory on a high ridge of the San Pedro Martir thirty miles west of the Meling ranch.

After the entrance to El Coyote ranch, the quality of the road deteriorated dramatically. Joe really enjoyed driving this section, it was reasonably smooth, but washouts in almost every interior corner require that one hug the mountain to prevent a wheel from dropping into the ditch which seems to be reaching for victims. About five miles from El Coyote, a side road comes in through a thicket on the right. This road is a longer route to Mike's Sky ranch, but is picturesque and comes down San Rafael creek to the ranch. It previously had an abandoned appearance, but racers and other vehicles

have discovered it and really torn it up. It was a nice challenge for Joe to pick his way through dust, rocks, whoops, and washouts; and he met the challenge well. There were dips where both the front and rear bumpers hit the ground. Every valley was loaded with beavies of quail. We left the highway at 2:25 and arrived at Mike's at 4:45. It was sixty miles and forty of those miles were on pavement or pretty good gravel. Mike had not arrived when we got there, but the lady assigned us to a room in the row of rooms on the hillside above the principal building.



Being less than athletic, I drove the truck up close to the room. We indulged in showers at this point, Beau included, and went down to the pool area where the off-highway folks were gathered in the cool evening discussing (exaggerating) the day's exploits over beers and Margaritas. Beau, the mildest of dogs, decided that he should exert authority over Mike's resident boxer. It was not a fight, just a bluff, and the boxer yielded, and they were shortly playing. By dinner time there were thirteen dune buggies, three motorcycles and one quad in the parking lot. At dinner there were twenty three people including three women. The dinner was the usual marinated

flank steak, carne asada, barbequed by Mike by the pool, with a small salad, rice and beans. It always tastes wonderful in the clean mountain air after a day of rocks and dirt.

We slept well and rose for the group breakfast which was served at 0700. Coffee, eggs and chorizo (sausage), with beans, and fresh tortillas made a great way to start the day. Before we left we established Mike's as a fixed point in the memory of the GPS. It was twenty miles north to Highway three. About two miles from Mike's, we picked up an old rancher who needed a ride to Valle de la Trinidad. Between his English and our Spanish, we conversed very little. The poor man had to share the back seat with Beau, but each time I asked, he said that he was fine. We delivered him to a house in Trinidad and went to the new Pemex station to fill the gas tank and add some air to the tires for fast highway driving. As we pulled out of Valle Trinidad, we saw that there were racers and pit crews parked all along the side of the road. Obviously there was a race on, but very little of it was on the highway. However, between crews for this race, and a lot of motorcycles in pickup trucks headed for some event in San Felipe, there was a lot of traffic for a couple of guys who had spent two days on isolated roads. I had planned to take the dirt north from Ojos Negros, but did not want to stray on to a race course. A very friendly race participant at Ojos Negros told us that their race went no farther north, so Joe and I proceeded north on dirt roads as planned. The road was in medium poor shape as we went past La Huerta & La Rosa de la Castilla, but then it became evident that a bulldozer had recently taken out some bad spots and really moved dirt in others. The drought is really serious and the idyllic little creek crossing had no water for picnicking children to play in. When I reached Rancho Los Compadres, the biggest bulldozer I have ever seen, a Cat. D10N, was sitting under the oaks between the picnic tables. A roadgrader rested nearby. On up the road, we stopped for a picnic lunch at one of my many dream houses. I don't want to own them, I just want to dream of owning them. This one is on a bench high on a hill with a view of the Mexican pines to the south and all the way into the US on the north. It always seems to have a gentle breeze.

Before some non-dreaming clod pulled it down, a log cabin stood on the slab. The unique feature of the log cabin was that the four to six inch diameter logs went perpendicular through the walls. In other words, it was cordwood cemented into place. It had a window with a superb view of a long fertile valley and on into the United States near Tierra del Sol. Thus refreshed, we got on the toll super-slab to Tecate. On this journey we had listened to the Books on Tape version of Breaking Point, by Jonathan Kellerman.

Joe remarked that in all of our travels, this was the first time he had ever heard a book all the way through. There was only a one block line at the border, so we called Ilean and Kim to let them know we had returned to Tierra Cognita. All in all, it was a wonderful trip. There was little interesting flotsam at Playa Malarrimo, but we hope to return right after the winter storms some year. The onyx mine, beaches, restaurants, roads and wildcats were a fabulous reward. So here we were, home again, tired, dirty and contented, even Beau.

Thanks to Vince Landis for this submission

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