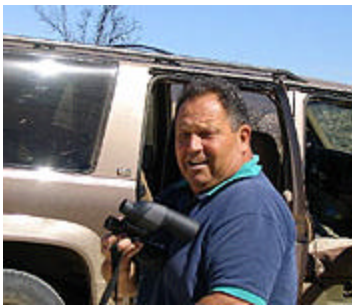


## Los Cuatro Caballeros Viejos

by Mr. Vince Landis

(Click on pictures in this article to expand)

It was unique venture into Baja California. The date was July 6 through July 9, 2004. It was a reunion of long time friends relaxing together, enjoying old memories and making new ones. The cast of characters was diverse. Eric Flourié, a Mexican native of French descent, was a chemistry student at SDSU in the late fifties and early sixties. His sister preceded him and was in my chemistry laboratory section in the mid fifties, and I became a friend of the Flourié family over the years. John Low was a fraternity brother of Eric (aka Kiki) during the early sixties and they have maintained their friendship and are neighbors now. The forth Caballero Viejo was Michael Healy oceanographer and bagpiper of some notoriety and renown. Mike was Eric's thesis advisor when he got his Ph.D. in Chemical Oceanography at the University of Washington. Now he is with NOAA. I will always be grateful to Mike because he sponsored the only oceanographic trip I have ever participated in.



*To initiate this adventure, we assembled in Mike's room at the Padre Trail Inn in Old Town promptly at seven AM on Tuesday, tiempo Mexicano. Would you believe nine? I arranged to leave my truck at the Inn parking lot. John and Mike drove John's pickup to Ensenada. Eric and I went in Eric's Chevy Suburban.*

*Those who have followed my travels will not be surprised to know that our first important stop was for brunch along the old road to Rosarito. If memory serves, it was Javier's Carnitas. It was Carnitas for sure! We ordered round after round of hot fresh carnitas tacos, we added the fresh garnishes, and washed them down with good brewed Mexican coffee. Eric surely knows how to pick eateries and is experienced enough to know that tacos must be ordered one at a time, so they are always absolutely fresh and hot. If you order three at a time, one is hot, one is warm and the final one is cold. We took a detour north to visit the lots that Eric and his sister have purchased on a hill looking out over the Pacific and the Coronado Islands. The coast was still overcast so we didn't get the complete view, but it has to be just beautiful. His sister's beautiful home is under construction but Eric has not broken ground on his yet.*

Then we headed for Ensenada. Even when the visibility is poor, it is still a beautiful drive along a dramatic and varied coastline. In Ensenada, we assembled in the parking lot of the Mission Santa Isabel Motel which was built by Eric's father and is still operated by the family. John left his pickup in the lot. After a mini-tour of the motel, we all loaded into the Suburban and started our Baja nostalgia tour in earnest. We changed dollars to pesos, \$11.20 pesos to \$1.00 dollar, at the Casa de Cambio across the street and started south. At the edge of town we sampled the tamales at Eric's favorite stand and purchased a dozen or so for the road. The growth of Mexican and vacation housing along the coast is somewhat overwhelming. We all want it to stay pristine forever, of course, but time marches on and more and more people want to enjoy the coast.

Our first stop was to see Eric's son-in-law in San Vicenté. This man is a real entrepreneur. He has a small hardware shop where he also fabricates assemblies, for instance electrical service heads, and he has constructed a small cannery for local vegetables like nopales (prickly pears). He is bright, energetic and outgoing. Then we went on to San Quintin where I lost my job as highway guide when I went right past the turnoff for the La Pinta Hotel and Celito Lindo Motel ([www.bajasi.com](http://www.bajasi.com)). After all, I hadn't been there since June of last year when I sat on that road for an hour waiting for our wet and muddy cyclists to show up. Another senior moment.



Due to my laxity, we were late for the sixty minute happy hour at the Celito Lindo Bar. I bought the drinks, was forgiven my errors and was reinstated as guide when off the pavement only. We had dinner at our patio table, but I forgot what we got. Then we retired to our four person room. Everyone but John Low got a pretty good bed, but John got a marginal cot with kind of stale bedding. Eric tried an experiment of trying to sleep without his sleep apnea pump. The Celito Lindo is on a generator, so the power is off from ten PM until 7 AM. He purchased a power inverter so that he can run the pump on twelve volts, but who wants to sleep in the car if there is a

nice bed handy. The experiment was basically a failure so he got a lousy night's sleep. Neither the toilet nor the shower worked in our unit and in the morning we grumbled our way over to the bar for morning coffee.

When we were partially functional, we went about a quarter of a mile toward the ocean to the Gypsy Campground and had excellent burrito breakfasts at the elevated Wet Buzzard Saloon. It is elevated because that area is subject to flooding by high tides with a wind behind them.



This was the first time that I had seen campers in the camp ground surrounding the restaurant. As Eric and I walked up the ramp to the Wet Buzzard, what to our wondering eyes should appear but a naked girl facing us from behind a car door across the street. She was changing clothes behind the car door from other campers, but facing us. We didn't mind, but she quickly turned around and completed her change. There is always something interesting to see in Baja!

Thus alerted, we went up for a breakfast of machaca and egg burritos, and coffee. After breakfast we took a tour of the beach. After observing the same girl pleasuring her boyfriend between the dunes, we took the road which runs about four miles southeast along the spit which forms the south side of San Quintin Bay. There were only a few spots wet enough to make us feel safer with four wheel drive. On the tip of the spit there were several pickups, trailers and pangas belonging to local fishermen. There was also an abandoned house and a functioning navigational light. The spit on the Pacific side of the bay is only a little over a half mile to the west.

We back tracked to the Celito Lindo and then went north of San Quintin and around the north end of the bay. Our first stop was at several of the pits where the volcanic ash from the landmark cinder cones is recovered for roofing and other uses. The ash forms very distinctive layers from a fraction of an inch to several inches thick. The ash varies from dark red to black and some of the bands are separated by a white layer of caliche. Eric needed vesicular basalt of this type for his hydroponic tomato greenhouses, but the shipping from here to Santa Rosalia was prohibitively expensive and he found a source near Santa Rosalia.

Next we stopped at an oyster shed in one of the four oyster farms on False Bay. Because Eric speaks Spanish, he talked to the oyster men and translated for us. Two boys were using small hand picks to trim oyster shells to a palm size and to poke a hole in each. These shells will be hung, spaced out, on cords. Oyster sprat are shipped from Oregon and seeded onto the shells. The cords of seeded shells are hung from floats in the bay and about two years later, the oysters have reached almost a foot in length and are harvested. The two men were doing the harvesting. Eric declined to buy any because we didn't have a proper ice chest and large oysters are not the best to eat.

From the oyster farms we went around False Bay to the Pacific shore and the seven mile peninsula which separates False Bay and San Quintin Bay from the Pacific Ocean. We went a little way south on the sand, but the tide was in and we couldn't make a long safe drive down the beach, so we went back to the road north along the coast. Our first stop was at the little fishing village of La Chorera. This town is on a rough black volcanic headland where the surf crashes dramatically. The small iron crucifix which formerly adorned the rocks has disappeared. The last time I saw it, someone had placed a lamp shade on top as if to shade it from the hot sun. The road along the dunes north of town is all in relatively soft sand. Without lowering the tire pressure, the Suburban took us along without hesitation except on a couple of soft upgrades which required a little run for momentum. We looked down on the beaches covered with smooth rounded rocks which were being hand bagged for sale.

Then we came upon the ponds where salt is harvested. The source of the salt and of the water are not obvious because the ponds appear to be well above sea level. Our doctors of oceanography, Healy and Flourié, tasted the product and pronounced it to be good pure salt. Just north of the salt pans, I told them that the road ends in a marsh and we would not be able to go farther up the coast. Well, the drought had dried all of the shallow lakes and bogs, so we just kept going and going and going. Often we drove on the smooth margins of dried ponds. That was my second bad off-highway call of the day, so I was in jeopardy of losing my off-highway guide credential also. We came to a farm on a bluff and had to go quite a distance inland to get around it, but once we were up on the bluff, we shortly found a road which took us back to the cliff over the shore. We ate lunch on the cliff with a great view all the way up to Punta Camalú.

John had volunteered to bring the food and this was the first lunch from his grab bag. His shopping trip was to the ninety-nine cent store and the results were interesting, good eating and fun. He had ninety-nine cents worth of salami,

sliced ham, several cheeses, rolls, pickles, plastic ware and other essentials. It was a grand picnic. We had beer, of course. Mike and I are inclined toward stronger drink to fight off the chill, real or imaginary, and I happened to discover a fifth of Wild Turkey wrapped in my clothing bag. Between this and his flask of brandy, we staved off severe chills for the next three days.

Before long we were running along the beach to the road which comes down from Camalú. When we turned down this road toward the point, we were stopped cold by a US style sign which said, "Sidewalk out. Walk on other side". When we were done laughing, we proceeded to the point where we discovered a brand new motel nearing completion. It was the Cueva Pirata (Pirate's Cove). I bought a round of drinks to compensate for my bad call on penetrating the non-existent bog. We made reservations for a "room for four with two showers" and went on up the coast to Bahia Colonet.

Every wash and brushy area was just loaded with dove, quail and rabbits. The hunters in the group were just drooling to be able to supplement our diet. Once again, the Suburban did a superior job of hauling our group of four over difficult terrain. One washout required great finesse to climb a soft bank at an angle. Both the Chevy and the driver received well deserved accolades on that one. We went out to the highway at Colonet and took the highway back to Camalú. As we went down the gravel road to Cueva Pirata, we came to a big water truck broken down blocking the road. Eric elected to do a bank shot and easily cleared the truck's bumper by several inches.

When we arrived at the motel, our room was ready. The room was not what we expected at all and we considered refusing it, but then we started to admire how clever it was and how great it would be for a family on a fishing trip. The modestly sized room had two concrete bunk beds on the back wall. There were steel vertical ladders to the two top bunks. At the head of the beds was the door to the bathroom. Sure enough, there were two showers, one on each side of the commode and sink, in an undivided room. The water pressure was extremely low so I would have been difficult to get wet under either shower, but there was both hot and cold water at the tap. Shortly, the disabled water truck was towed in, water pressure restored, and we got our most welcome showers. John spread the ninety-nine cent menu on the dresser, but the super tamales we purchased in Ensenada provided the main course. We had such a good day that nothing could deter us from having an enjoyable evening and thence to bed. The motel was hooked up to municipal electricity so we could keep Eric pumped up all night and we slept well. John found climbing into the top bunk very difficult because the right hand grip was removed, so he refused to get up for calls of nature and held it back until morning.

In the morning we pretty much skipped breakfast, got gas in Camalú and went up the highway to the turn off for San Telmo, Meling ranch, and Mike's Sky Ranch. This road is now paved for twenty four miles, well into the foothills. The goal of this paving is to provide easier access to the internationally respected observatory on the ridge to the west behind Meling ranch. We went over the ridge and dropped into the Meling Ranch. There have been many reports about the ranch being closed to guests and/or reopened. Eric has many wonderful memories of staying at the ranch in his youth, and we went in to find out for sure. We arrived about a quarter after ten and were greeted by two ladies of the Meling family, Blanca and Mili. They said that the ranch was open for business and they cooked us a wonderful breakfast of eggs, machaca, beans, tortillas, coffee & tea, and salsa. Eric chatted with the ladies in Spanish while we toured the grounds. Wonderful things about the ranch are the absolute freedom from traffic noise and the clear, clean air. Some of the guest houses seemed to be a bit behind on maintenance.

Eric wanted to talk to Andy Meling, one of the three original Meling children, about some property, and we learned that he was up at El Coyote ranch. El Coyote is on the ridge north of Meling ranch. I have been past it many times on the way to Mike's Sky Ranch, but had never gone in. Andy was, indeed, at home at El Coyote and while Eric talked to him, Mike and I talked to Andrea for a while. Then we went to a picnic table under a large pepper tree in the meadow and sat in the cool breeze. Again the peace and quiet of the area were wonderfully relaxing. Andy is building several nice duplexes on the property and planning to open a guest ranch. After this pleasant interlude, we went on up the road to Mike's Sky Ranch about fourteen miles away. Distance means little on this stretch of rugged road, it once took me three hours. It was in better condition this time and we made it in a little over one hour. Again, the Suburban showed it's versatility.

Just before we arrived at Mike's, a very large boulder had fallen into the middle of the road. We couldn't pass it on the bank side, so we carefully went around the drop off side. Mike Healy was sitting in the left rear seat and felt like his butt was hanging over the cliff. Eric said, "Healy, what is down there." Mike answers something like, "I d-d-d-don't know, and I d-d-d-don't want to find out." Shucks, Eric missed the boulder by a good two inches and the drop off by four. At Mike's we had a round of beers and learned that the motel is open 365 days a year.

I had mistaken the fact that the bar is only open on the week ends when Mike is present and thought the motel was closed during midweek. Lest one forget, each time we were stopped, and most of the time on the road, there was a steady flow of intellectually enlightened conversation. There were old experiences, new experiences, prognostications, adventures, conquests, business, science, arts and deeds of valor to keep the discussion constant and at an elevated level. Perhaps.



We then went down the civilized road from Mike's to highway 3 in the San Matias Pass. From there we went west over the pass and down to Diablo Dry Lake which is a fifteen mile speedway in good weather and hopeless mud after a rain. We stopped out in the middle because Mike requested to see a genuine hot barren desert. It was hot, dry and barren indeed. Eric said that San Felipe is visible from the observatory, so we studied the ridge north of Diablo Peak (10,541 feet) to see if we spot the observatory. It took a while to see the white dome, but once spotted, it seemed to dominate the ridge, even with the afternoon sun behind it. It is a poor day when you don't learn something. On the southern margin of the dry lake there was a small, apparently deserted, cabin with a runway nearby.

It is a little difficult to think that it is catering to the tourist trade. We did not stop to see what was stored in the shed. The road out the south end of the lake is a sandy uphill which has been seriously fluffed up by race vehicles speeding up the slope. The Suburban was really struggling to get our portly posteriors up the grade, but Eric crossed over to a very lightly used track made by others who preferred not to fight the sand. Before long, we were at Morelia Junction where I entered the Great Race in 1988. From that point, we were on a principal graded road leading northwest to highway 5 seven miles north of San Felipe. The weather was so clear that when we came over a rise we could see the Gulf of California and even the mountains of Sonora about eighty miles away.

After about ten miles, we discovered a smooth winding graded road going southwest. "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." so we turned and had a great time doing the grand slalom down the lazy "S" curves toward town. We stopped at Pete's Camp, El Paraiso, for a drink at the bar and to show Mike how the camps north of San Felipe sit on a high bluff with access to the seven miles of sandy beach below. Pete's has grown a great deal with nice permanent houses since I was first there in 1991.

Thus refreshed, we went to San Felipe to rest our nerves which were frazzled by having met two cars in 184 miles of off highway travel. Such traffic! We checked into two double rooms at the El Cortez Motel on the beach. So upscale, all night electricity, TV, air conditioning, drinking water, and a double bed for each of us. From the El Cortez we went directly to Tony's Loncheria La playa on the Malecón.

Malecón is defined as levee, dike or jetty in my Spanish dictionary, but in Baja it means sea wall. It would be the boardwalk if it weren't concrete. Tony's is my all time favorite source of fish tacos. We sat upstairs, looking out through the open wall, and had round after round of hot fresh fish tacos. The accompanying chopped onions, cilantro, radishes, guacamole, mayonnaise and cabbage were served just as fresh at eight PM as they were at eight AM. Thus satiated, we went to the motel for a good night rest.

I woke early in the morning and quietly dressed to go for a walk. When I knocked the flashlight on the tile floor, Eric about jumped out of bed. So much for a quiet exit. I decided to walk a couple of blocks inland and get coffee and drinking water at the AM PM, yes, AM PM mini-mart. As I went past the police station, the officers were coming on shift and manning, and womaning, their very nice fleet of black and white off-road pickups and SUV's. At the corner there is a big Hospital sign, I did a double take when I saw the name, St James Infirmary. This is the title of a New Orleans blues song written in 1928 and made famous by Cab Calloway in 1930. The name should help Americans feel welcome. The 24 hour AM PM had reasonable good coffee and I bought two gallons of water for the road.

After getting gas, we went north on highway 5 to the junction with highway 3 which we took to Ensenada. Near Ensenada we took a side road to the resort of Agua Caliente. This complex has a restaurant, motel and rooms surrounding a large hot springs pool. They were once renown for serving Tequila from a large jug containing a rattle snake. The complex is now shut down except for swimming in the pool by local people. There were about a dozen adults and children swimming in the pool when we stopped. It is a very pleasant valley with many large oak trees. In Ensenada, we decided to go up to Calle Once (Eleventh Street) where El Ferrocarril (The Railroad) serves wonderful lamb tacos. Eric was shocked that I had not discovered this gustatory gem previously. Then we left John and Mike at the Motel Santa Isabel where they were going to meet up with some more long time fraternity brothers for a week end of fun and frolic.

Eric and I came on up to San Diego where we were happy to find my pickup safely at The Padre Trails Inn, but disappointed to learn that the bar was closed because we had planned on an end of the trail debriefing. I suggested that we meet at Marietas near his home and on my way home. That turned out to be a fortuitous inspiration. We had an excellent dinner, very good Margaritas, and the privacy to talk some more. Then a lone troubadour appeared with his guitar and sang classic Mexican folk tunes. After this nostalgic trip to places of his youth with friends of many years, Eric was ready for his favorite old tunes to culminate a perfect four days. The fellow knew the tunes Eric loved and Eric sang along on some and quietly translated others for me. It was, indeed, a perfect ending for a wonderful adventure.

*Thanks to Vince Landis for this submission*

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