

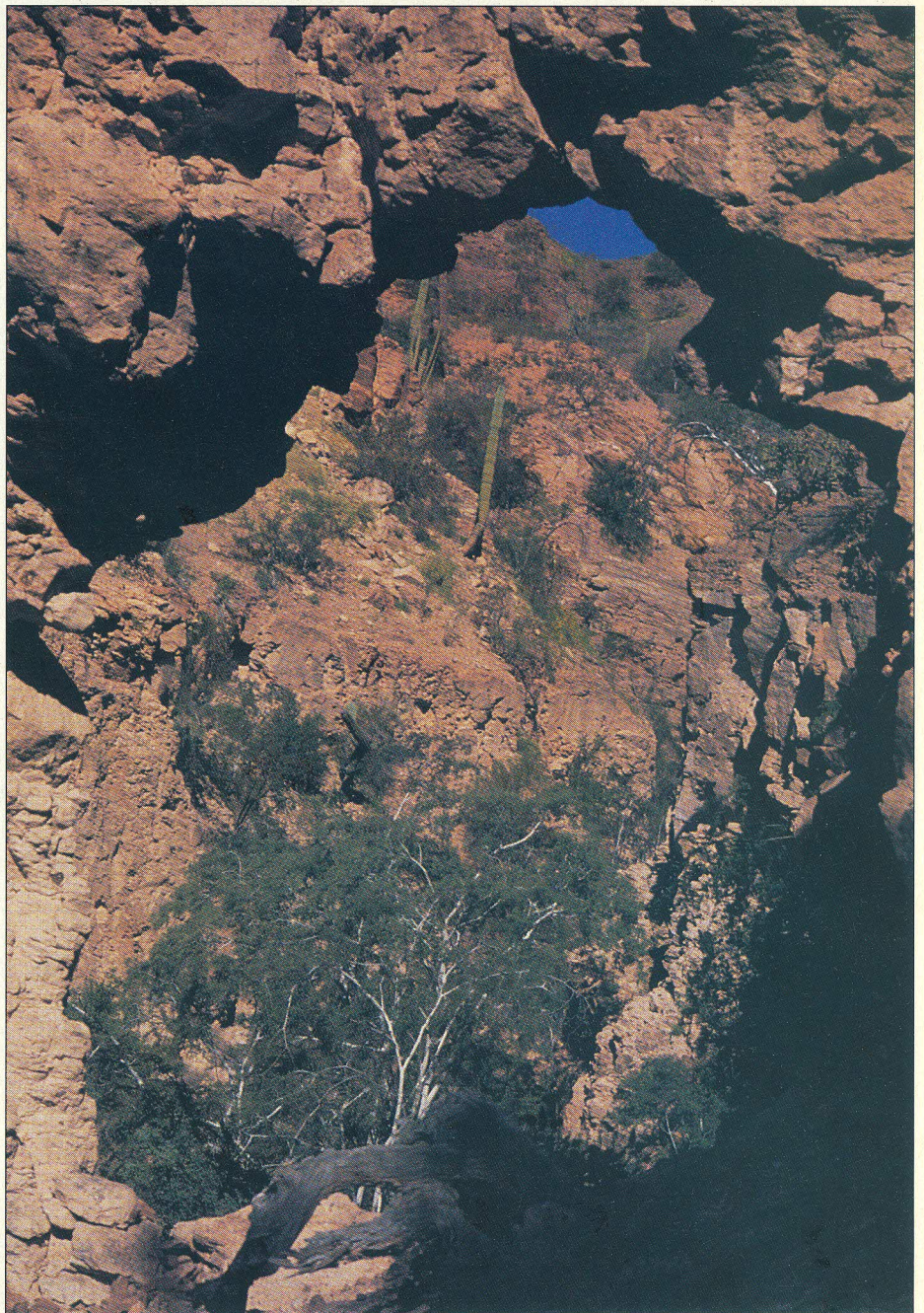
The Other Side of the Rainbow Sea EXPLORING THE EAST SIDE OF BAHIA CONCEPCION

Story and photos by Baja Bob Vinton

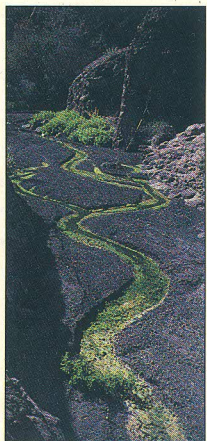
Bahía Concepción (also called Conception Bay), is a 25-mile-deep indentation in the coast of the Gulf of California south of Mulegé. It is a glittering, placid, aquamarine inland sea, dotted with islands and separated from the Sea of Cortez by the rugged, mountainous Bahía Concepción Peninsula. This magnificent anomaly of the desert and the sea was used by Sebastián Vizcaíno as a refuge during a fierce storm in 1596, and in 1668, the Spanish explorer Lucenilla reported that on the shores were white-skinned Indians who lived on fruit and shellfish.

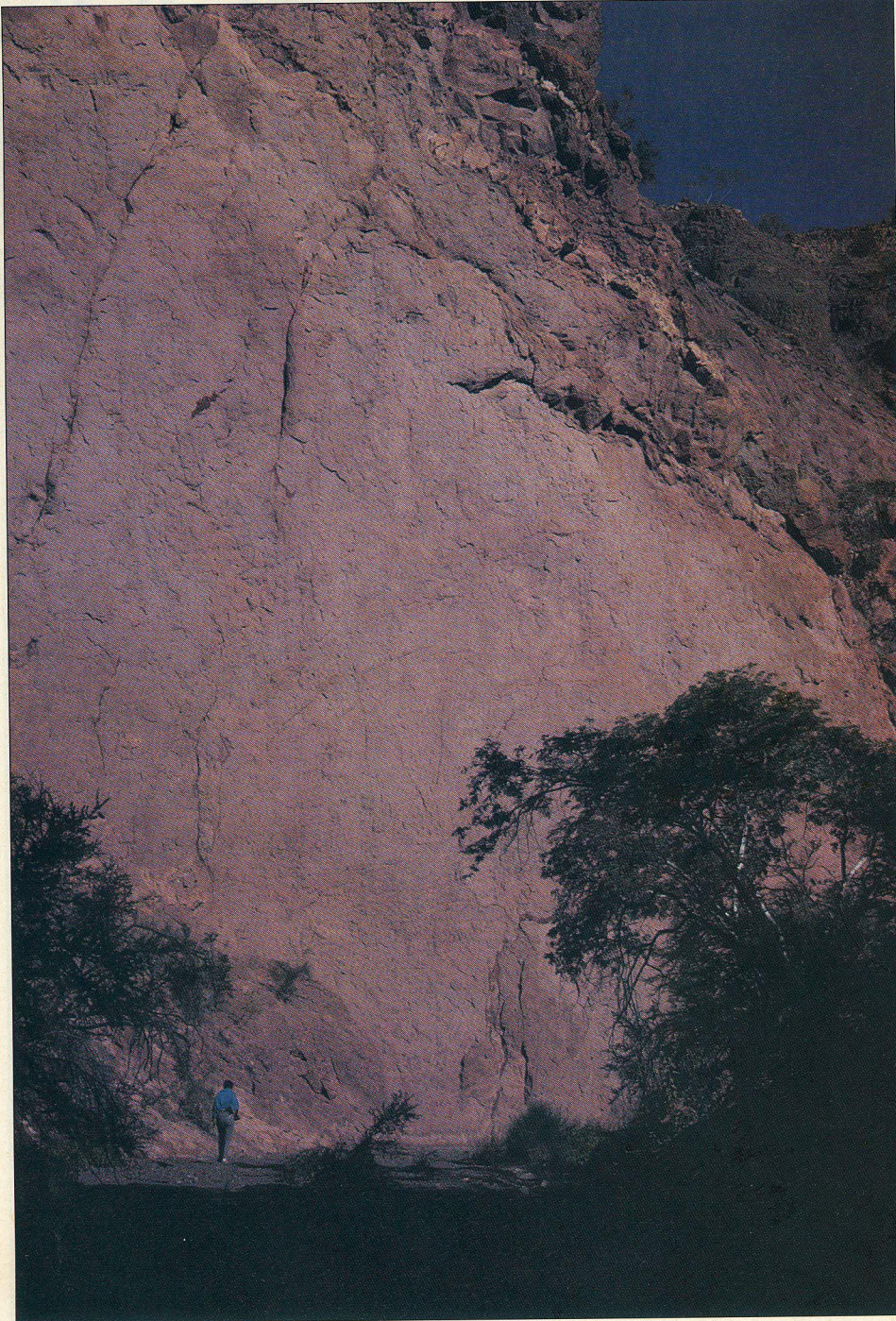
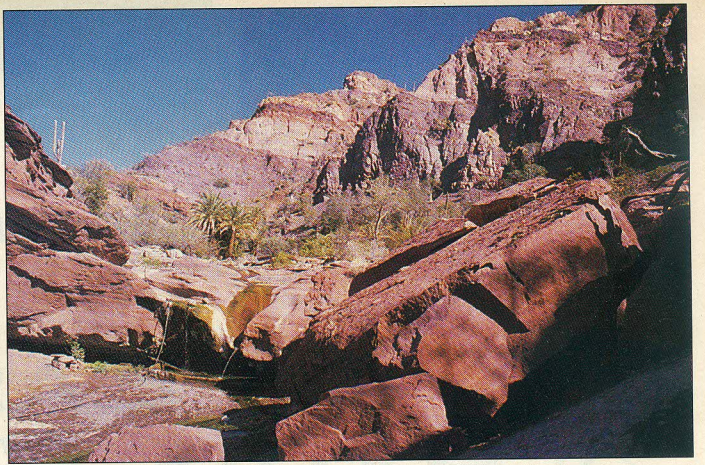
After many trips along the western shore of the inlet, some of my companions and I wondered: "What is on the other side of Bahía Concepción?" In early February of 1991, after unusually heavy rains in November and December, we decided to explore the peninsula.

At the southern end of Bahía Concepción, about 45 miles past Mulegé, we left Highway 1 at kilometer 76. Vehicles making this trip should have high clearance and low gears. While four-wheel drive is not absolutely necessary, it is advisable; don't plan to make the trip in your motor home. After a rain the



Unique rock formations (above) abound in the finger canyons along the eastern shore of Bahía Concepción. Emerald green algae (left) thrives in the El Salto canyon stream bed.





Clockwise from top: Rancho Aguaje; waterfall at El Salto canyon entrance; sheer volcanic conglomerate walls of El Salto canyon.

roads become muddy and impassable.

Hugging the southern shore of the bay past a semi-abandoned, government-run trailer park, the road passes through a fabulous gigantic cardón forest, or cardonal, where turkey vultures roost to dry their wings in the morning sun. This is a good camping area. The 30-mile drive to the tip of the peninsula would make a very long day trip, and there are many places to enjoy along the way. Plan to spend a few days on the journey and you will be amply rewarded.

The dirt road follows the eastern shore of Bahía Concepción across coastal plains with barren salt flats and pebble beaches, which are great for shell collecting. Fish camps are strewn along the shoreline with their enormous piles of scallop shells.

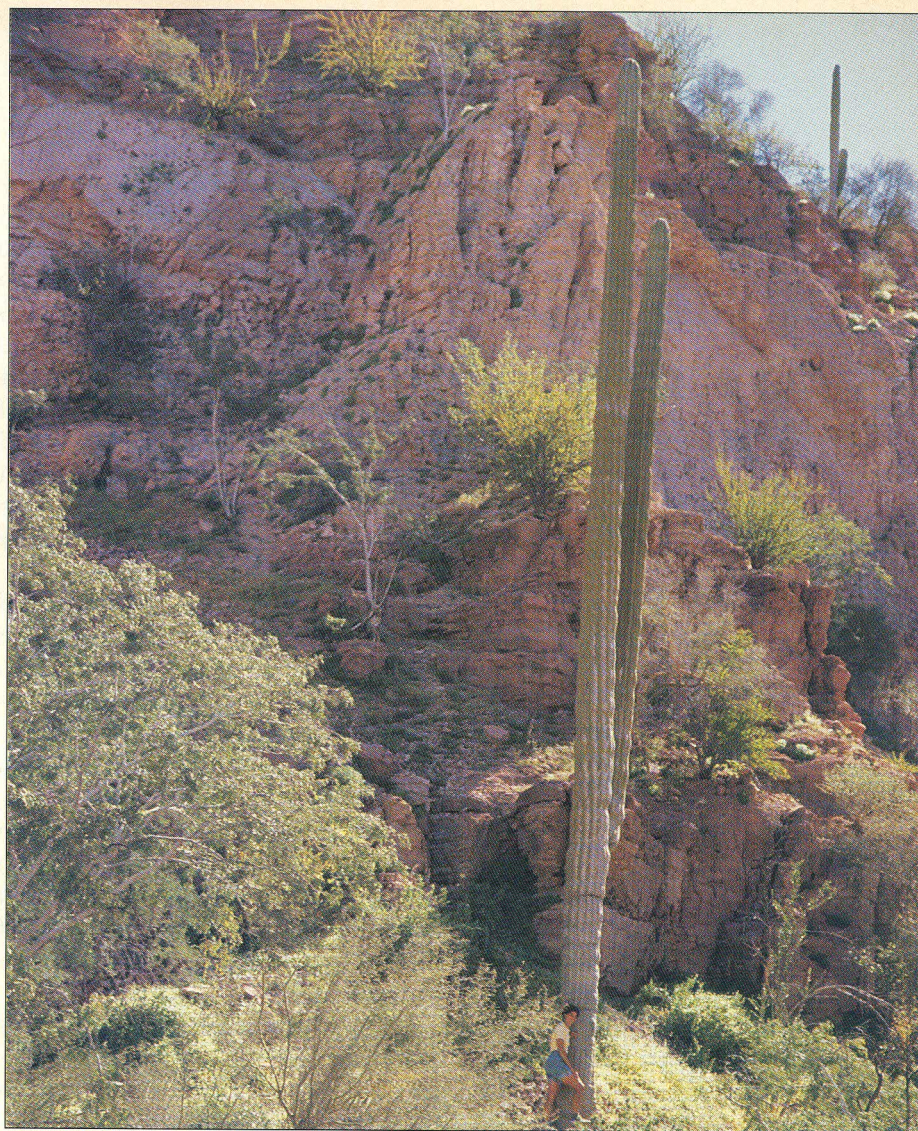
Approximately 15 miles from where we left Highway 1, a side road leads east to Rancho Aguaje, where 70-year-old Patricia Renteria (Baja Patty), one of the colorful power-women of Baja, lived for 10 years. She died in May of this year, but memories of her braided silver hair, turquoise jewelry, artsy-craftsy palm-thatched casita and hospitality survive her, along with her black cat, Durango, and her "Baja Bum" license plate. Rancho Aguaje has one of the few permanent fresh-water springs on the peninsula, and the palms nestled along its narrow gorge are reflected in it. An idyllic spot.

Continuing along the main eastern shore track, two miles past the turnoff to Rancho Aguaje, a road on

the right leads off to abandoned Rancho El Salto. It ends at the entrance to a beautiful canyon with sheer 200-foot walls of pink volcanic conglomerate and a 6-foot stair-step waterfall fed by another permanent spring. This is a great place for a shower.

On our trip, the plants were luxuriant as a result of the recent rains, and "belly" flowers carpeted the canyon floors and walls. We saw sunflowers, sand verbena and brilliant orange pega pega flowers. Fig trees, with their sprawling octopus-like arms, clung to the steep canyon walls. Graceful, white-trunked palo blanco trees with lacy leaves stood out dramatically against the dark rock. These finger canyons are perfect for day hikes as the early morning sun bathes the pink, orange and red rocks in delicate light.


An hour's drive along the narrow dirt road past Rancho El Salto brings you to a critical junction at 30 miles off the pavement. The left fork leads two more miles to Punta Hornitos. The right fork continues to wind for 10 miles through the highly mineralized mountains of the Concepción Peninsula, following an arroyo — tinted tan, mustard and rose — to the Sea of Cortez. The road ends at Gavilanes, where thousands of square feet of old mining ruins remain. Flat concrete pads make excellent camping sites with views of untrodden beaches curving between rocky headlands. A U.S.-financed manganese mine was in operation during World War II and employed nearly 7,000 people until 1948. It is a rock-hounder's paradise, with deposits of pyrolusite, vanadinite, limonite, aragonite and manganiferous travertine.

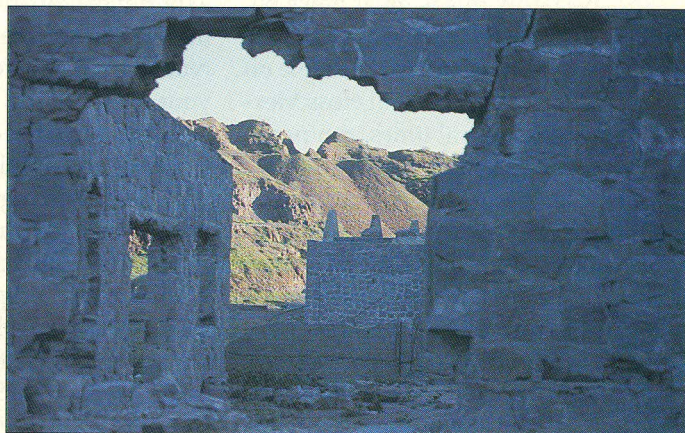
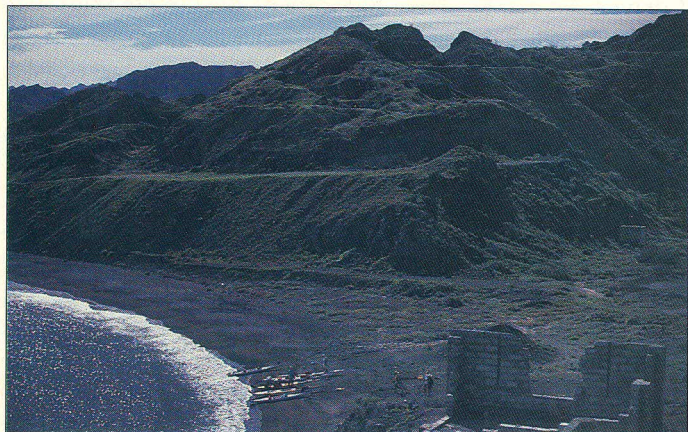


(Above) Magnificent cardón cactus abound in these canyons. (Bottom left) Beautiful coves and beaches north and south of the mine at Gavilanes are great for day hiking. (Bottom right) Manganese mine ruins make for great exploring.

The Gulf Coast north and south of the mine is excellent for extensive day hikes to discover its hidden coves and abundant tide pools. Watching the brown pelicans dive-bomb on a bait fish boil is a favorite pastime. Appearing awkward, yet efficient, they fold their wings back and plunge

clumsily from great heights into the sea.

If you're already packing to come discover this hidden heart of Baja, you won't be disappointed. You will find sinuous, narrow red rock canyons with fabulous flora, and discover beaches that few people visit. 



EXPLORING THE EAST SIDE OF BAHIA CONCEPCION

(for the eastern side of Concepcion Bay)

To begin your off-road trip, leave Highway 1 at kilometer 76/Los Piños and head east along the southern shore of the bay. A four-wheel drive vehicle is recommended, although a high-clearance pickup or buggy driven slowly and carefully can make it. After rain this road becomes muddy and impassible. At mileage 14.5 you reach the turnoff to Rancho Aguaje. Continuing north 2 miles along the main road you reach the turnoff to Rancho El Salto. Continuing north along the main road for 13.7 miles you reach a junction. The left fork leads to Punta Hornitos (2 miles), the right fork leads to Gavilanes (1.6 miles). The road ends at Gavilanes, located 32 miles from pavement (Highway 1) on the northeast shoreline (Gulf of California) of the peninsula.

SERVICES:

This area has no services. Food, water, camping gear, and extra gasoline must be taken with you. Numerous primitive campsites can be found along the eastern shore of the bay as well as in the numerous canyons found at the base of the peninsula's mountains.

Roads following dry arroyos (washes) leave the main north/south dirt road and head east to the canyons, providing excellent campsites. Gavilanes also provides good primitive campsites.



KICKIN' BACK ON BAHIA CONCEPCION

(for the western shore of Concepcion Bay)

The bay begins 625 miles south of Tijuana, 7 miles south of Mulegé. Highway 1 parallels the western shore providing easy access to these inviting blue-green waters, scenic volcanic islands, white sand beaches and campsites.

SERVICES:

Mulegé has extensive services, including several trailer parks and hotels, a gasoline station, numerous restaurants, banks, telephones, auto and mechanical stores, supermarkets, fishing and diving gear shops and guides.

Concepcion Bay has numerous campsites, mostly semi-developed with only limited facilities, along with several restaurants. The following is a list of the main campsites, from north to south along the western shore.

1. Playas Punta Arena
2. Playas Santispac
3. Posada Concepción
4. Los Cocos
5. Playa Burro
6. El Coyote
7. Playa El Coyote
8. Playa Requeson