



The Sierra Giganta Loop

In Search of the Rainbow Canyons North of La Paz

Story and Photos by Bob Vinton

As we crested a series of low hills, the multi-colored sandstone bands of the Sierra de la Giganta uplands north of La Paz were unveiled to us in the early morning sun. The cliffs were bathed in shades of green, pink, red, brown and tan — like a layered wedding cake.

It was just one of many stunning views we enjoyed on an off-road tour to this remote and seldom-explored area, which can now be reached by vehicles with high clearance and low gears.

Over the past few years, roads leading to the fish camps, orchards and ranches of the region have been graded, enabling off-roaders to complete a roughly 150-mile loop. The trip heads north from La Paz along the Sea of Cortez to a small fishing and salt-production village called San Evaristo, and then southwest over the mountains and back to the transpeninsular highway.

Descriptions of this sandstone wonderland of steep cliffs, mesas, worn volcanic peaks and deep arroyos had tantalized me for years. Five years ago I set out in a truck to explore the rainbow-colored canyons of a sandstone bluff in the area called Cabeza Mechudo. But after a day my partner and I were beaten back by severe washboard dirt roads.

Amidst rumors that the loop to San Evaristo was possible, our seven-day journey began in January. This trip requires travelers to be completely self-contained; so we gathered provisions in La Paz before pointing my 1978 Chevy 4X4 truck northbound on the transpeninsular highway.

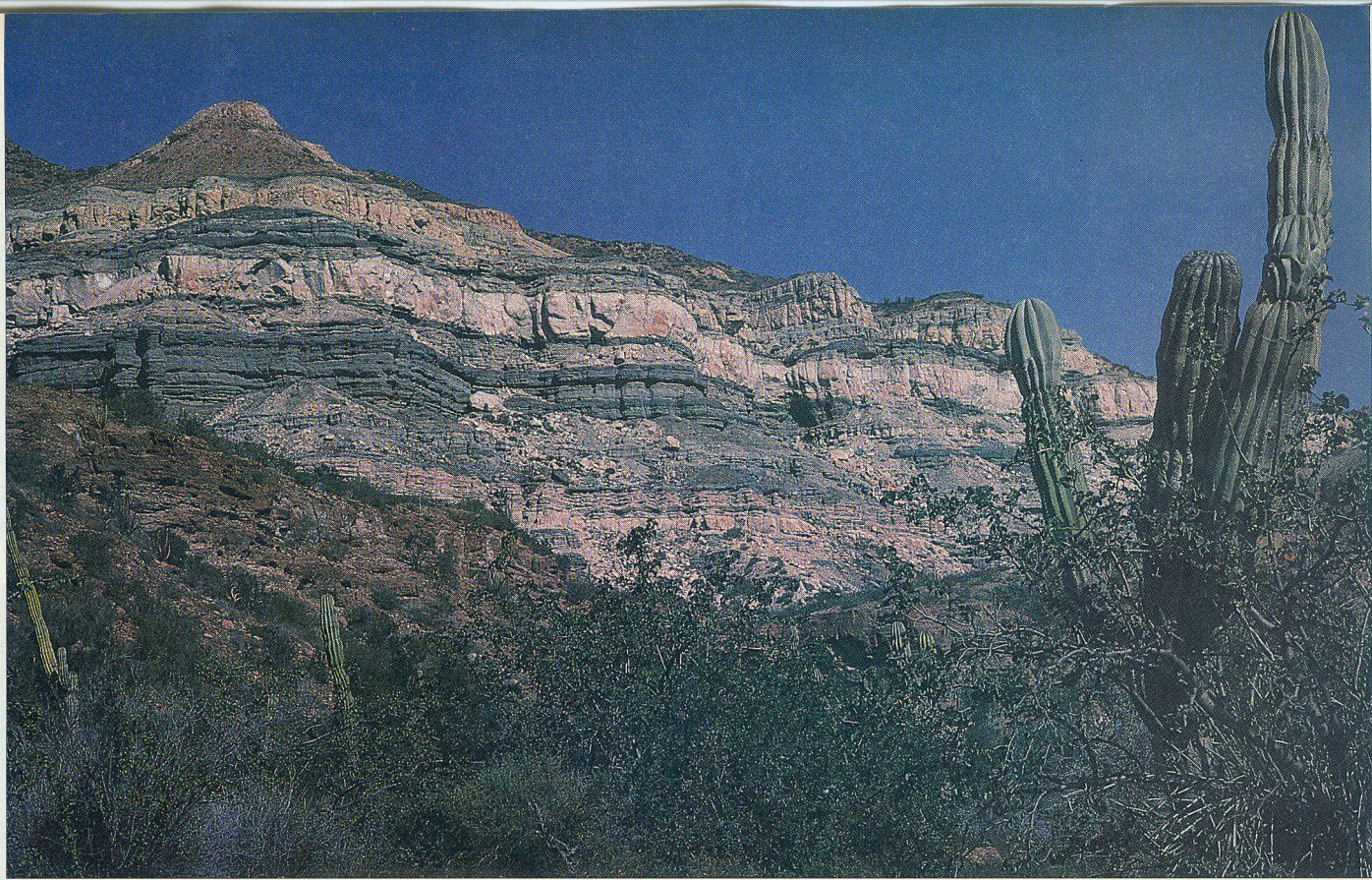
Signs clearly mark the way to the turnoff from Mexico 1 onto a paved road to San Juan de la Costa, a phosphate-mining town situated about 35 miles north of La Paz. At mile 20 there are multiple side roads that lead to good, rocky beach campsites set against orangish-red cliffs.

We were especially lucky this January: Baja Sur had recently received ten consecutive aguaceros, or tropical storms. This normally arid tropical thorn forest had erupted into a dense jungle of cacti, shrubs, elephant trees and numerous other species. Flowers — including apricot mallow, San Miguel, sunflower and nightshade — carpeted much of the landscape.

At 25 miles north of the highway we encountered a major junction: the left fork continues into the settlement of San Juan de la Costa and the phosphate mine. The right fork leaves the pavement and hugs the edge of the Sea of Cortez on its way to San Evaristo.

San Juan de la Costa consists of about 100 whitewashed houses perched on a bench at the mine entrance. The 24-million-year-old ore deposit is ten percent phosphorus, but, after leaching and refining, it is enriched to 30 percent and shipped by freighter to the Mexican main-





Below left, a view of the Sea of Cortez from our campsite at Ensenada Verde with cactus gardens and flowers in full bloom. Above, the rugged rainbow-striped sandstone bluffs near Cabeza Mechudo.

land for use in fertilizer production. This mine provides roughly 40 percent of Mexico's phosphate needs.

Near the mine, we saw mannequin-like turkey vultures roosting atop pleated cordon cacti, drying their jet black wings under a rising sun.

There is no dependable source for fuel or provisions here and the unpaved road north of Punta Coyote should be attempted only by vehicles with high clearance and low gears. It could be very dangerous, if not impossible, for motor homes or vehicles with trailers to proceed.

After passing through a checkpoint manned by a friendly mine worker, the road to San Evaristo winds its way through the open-pit mining operation and leaves civilization behind.

From here we crested a series of low hills and then, for the next 27 miles to Punta and Rancho Coyote, the road is flat and parallels the coast with a few side roads to the beach. Near Rancho Coyote are numerous canyons — driveable only with a 4x4 — that plunge down the eastern escarpment of the sierra. Thorny scrub and white-trunked palo blanco trees were ablaze with color here.

The short, colorful arroyos near Rancho Coyote are great for day hikes and possess many eroded and strangely shaped rock formations.

Beyond Punta Coyote, the massive and steep headlands of Cabeza Mechudo loom and the 3,672-foot-high Cerro Mechudo, located four miles inland, dominates the skyline. The road then de-



