

La Bocana de Santo Tomas

Hiking Baja's Quiet Coast

*Coastal Trail,
Bahía Soledad*



Story and photos by Jerry Schad

Out of the mist-drenched air we climbed, straight into the warm, clear breath of the desert. My companions and I, Los Caminantes de Las Nubes ("the Cloud Walkers"), had punched through the gray marine layer and now stood in the pure white light of the morning sun. All around us cottony clouds swirled against the coastal peaks like mock surf; it was as if the ocean level had suddenly risen 2000 feet, drowning out all traces of civilization. Far to the east and southeast, we could see the mock mainland — the Sierra Juarez and Sierra San Pedro Martir mountain ranges.

Opposite the rising sun, a startling vision materialized. Concentric rings of blue and red light that surrounded the shadows of our heads were projected on the fog bank just below us. It was the rare "specter of the Brocken," or "glory," an optical effect akin to that of a rainbow.

Onward we climbed through open fields of lupine and poppy, and dense stands of manzanita and cha-

mise, to our destination-- the summit of Cerro Soledad ("Solitude Hill"). At 1065 meters (3500 feet), Soledad is the highest bump along Baja's entire Pacific shore. Finding no record of previous ascent, we built a small cairn and left a record of our visit.

Cerro Soledad presides over one of Baja's most spectacular coastlines, a region centered around La Bocana de Santo Tomas, the mouth of the Rio Santo Tomas. Although only 20 bee-line miles south of Ensenada, the area attracts few visitors compared to the more easily accessible Punta Banda/La Bufadora coastal area a few miles north. Some people are deterred by the bone-shaking 17 miles of rocky road through Canon Santo Tomas; others are put off by the lack of easy communication with the outside world (there are no telephones here, for example). These qualities, however, are exactly what appeal to dyed-in-the wool Baja adventurers.

Our reconnaissance of the area began with an exploration of the jut-

ting headland known as Punta Santo Tomas, north of La Bocana. A sleepy village, El Puerto Santo Tomas, overlooks a small fleet of fishing boats anchored in a storm-protected cove just south of the point. From there, we walked an old road leading northwest over a gap and down to a coastal terrace overlooking the rocky coastline. We paused to watch a seal cavorting in the swells just beyond a cobble beach, and then ambled out to the end of a west-pointing peninsula, Punta Rif, for a better look at a massive arch carved in a sea stack. Through the hazy air we could just make out the diminutive Roca La Soledad--said to be the best diving site along a hundred-mile stretch of coast between Punta Banda and Isla San Martin — about two miles offshore.

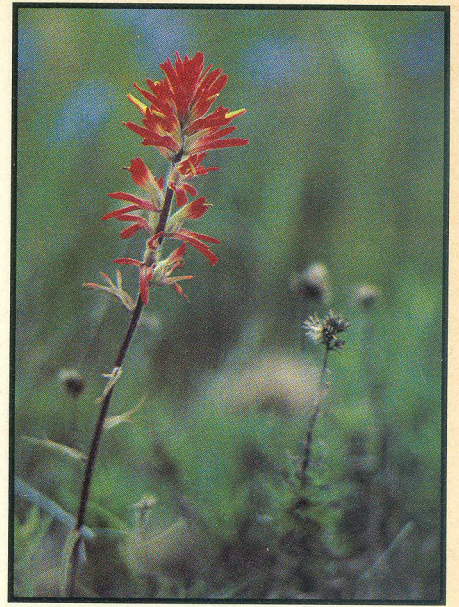
Circling east, our road became a narrow trail, perched at times on the very edge of a hundred-foot sea bluff. Soon we were in the midst of a veritable garden of familiar and exotic

plants. Intermingling with various sages, lemonade berry, and Laurel sumac were succulent live-forevers, menacing clumps of Shaw's agaves, and benign-looking velvet cactus. We were surprised to see several kinds of plants familiar to us from explorations of Southern California's low desert: barrel cactus, fishhook cactus, jojoba and chuparosa. The trail petered out at a wave-washed point riddled with tidepools, each a separate world teeming with silvery barnacles, huge green anemones, purple urchins, crimson starfish, sea snails and crabs.

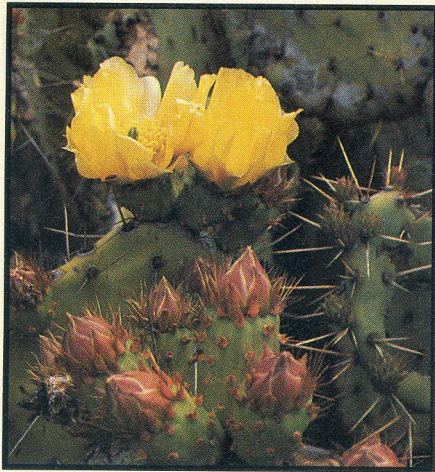
Sadly, our brief weekend visit in the springtime did not allow time for

exploring more of the coastline or participating in water-oriented sports. Suffice it to say, however, that we'll be back some time to enjoy the warmer waters of summer and early fall. Fishing, diving, sailing, sailboarding, kayaking, surfing and swimming are all a part of the La Bocana experience.

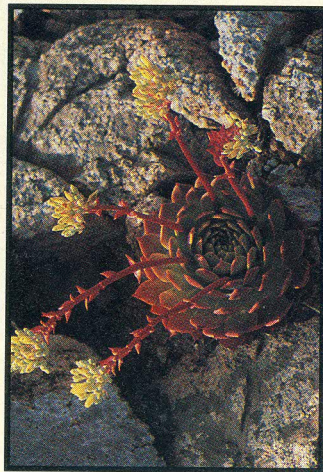
Climbing the coastal hill and gazing out to sea is especially rewarding during spells of super-clear weather, which occur frequently from late fall to late winter. But even the usual spring and summer condition of low night and morning overcast can be taken advantage of if you rise at dawn, as we did, and climb above the clouds.



Above, *Indian Paintbrush.*



Far left, *Prickly Pear Cactus.*



Middle left, *Live-Forever.*



Near left, *Blue-Eyed Grass.*

Below, *Near Cerro Soledad Summit*



