

## Baja's Tajo Canyon

*Story and Photos by  
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**I**magine a magnificent Yosemite-like desert canyon lined with stately palms and a 1,500-foot granite monolith, the Great White Throne, at the head of the canyon, reminiscent of Yosemite's Half Dome, within 100 miles of San Diego.

This is Canyon Tajo, about 15 miles in length and a mere 25 miles below the U.S.-Mexican border. If it existed in the United States, it would surely be a national park.

Randall Henderson, one of the premiere Southwest desert explorers in the 1940s, with a passion for palm canyons, called Tajo the "Grand Daddy" of palm canyons. In 1947 he counted 4,500 mature fan palm trees and estimated an equal number to exist in the many tributary canyons.

The Spanish word "tajo" means "gash" or "chopping block," which accu-

rately describes both the great chasm of Canyon Tajo and the Great White Throne. The Throne is a massive granitic buttress that dominates the upper end of the canyon, with its top rising to nearly 5,000 feet above sea level.

### GEOLOGY

Canyon Tajo is the largest and most spectacular cut in the eastern escarpment of the Sierra Juarez, which is the southern extension of the Peninsular Mountain Ranges of San Diego County. The Sierra Juarez represents a tilted fault block of rock with a gradual slope to the west and an abrupt 5,000 foot drop to the desert floor below. Slashing back into this eastern edge of the sierra is mighty Canyon Tajo. It looks like someone cut a large piece from the birthday cake, the result of 100 millions years of erosion.

The two major rock types are metamorphic and plutonic. Metamorphic rocks are the pre-existing sedimentary rocks which have undergone change by intense heat or pressure under the earth. They are frequently stratified with bands of black, green, red, brown or tan and are very evident along a stream course. Plutonic rocks intruded into the metamorphic mass and cooled slowly, resulting in a coarse grain with crystals. They are of a light color, granite being the most common in Tajo.

### PALMS

Palms provide a luxuriant tropical backdrop to the beauty of Tajo. They consist of the California fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*) and the Mexican blue fan palm (*Erythea armata*). The blue palm is distinguished from the *Washingtonia*



variety by its ashy green fronds that have almost a blue-green tint. It is endemic to the northern half of Baja California and does not cross into the United States.

The palm fruit hangs among the leaves like large clusters of grapes from long arching branches. The palms were a major source of food and building materials for the Yuman people of Northern Baja.

The upper reaches of the canyon are dominated by cascading waterfalls, emerald blue-green pools and lush fern grottoes surrounded by blue fan palms. The lower canyon is sprinkled with groves of California fan palms, which have their feet near the perennial stream that leaps over huge granite boulders and darts under others before it disappears into the desert sands. Lovely pools and waterslides make Tajo a water wonderland in the usually arid drylands.

### HIKING IN TAJO

A two- to three-day backpack is the minimum visit for those who want to commune with Tajo in all its splendor.

The hiking season lasts from November to April and one should be prepared for possible cold, windy and rainy periods. Hiking in Tajo is recommended only for the seasoned wilderness traveler.

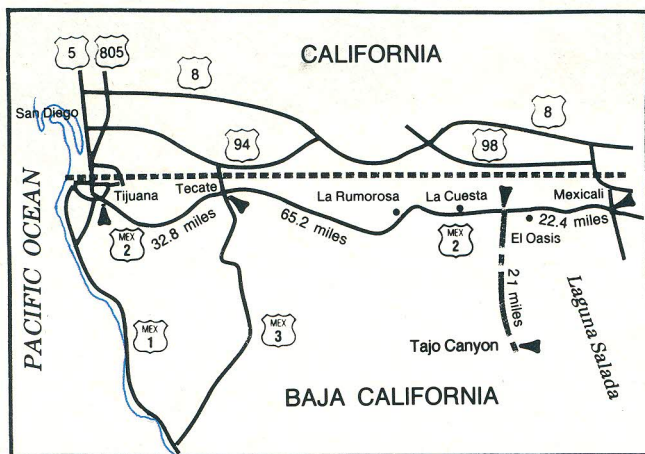
With a four-wheel drive vehicle, you can drive one to two miles up some sandy tracks along the south side of the opening of Tajo Canyon. After leaving the vehicle, head west toward the narrow mouth. You'll cross several kilometers of desert pavement and a maze of dry stream beds with magnificent stands of mesquite, palo verde, ocotillo, jumping cholla and barrel cactus. Within two to three hours, depending on your pace, the canyon will narrow. At this point palms and crystal-clear running water will appear. (You are at your own risk if you drink the untreated water.) If it is springtime, brittle bush will be ablaze in yellow. From here, boulder hopping with rubber-knees and -legs is customary unless you can find the old Indian trail on the north-side benches above the stream. Dazzling white dikes stripe much of the brown, black and red metamorphic rock and pleasant palm

shaded campsites occur within one to two miles of the first water. There are many-sided canyons - great for exploring - with blue fan palms wedged into unbelievable crevices 2,000-3,000 feet above the water-course.

The canyon splits into a north and south fork at an elevation of 2,400 feet, approximately eight miles from the north-south graded road. The south fork seems to have permanent water and one must traverse many polished house-sized granite boulders and difficult waterfalls to proceed. The views of the Throne from this intersection are fabulous, especially when it is framed with palms or if one has the opportunity to view it in the morning light with a moonset over this mammoth monolith.

Canyon Tajo with its colorful domes and rocky battlements, its fantastic botanical variation and its enticing pools with reflections of palms and ferns, is a mecca for hardy botanists, photographers and hikers.

## HOW TO GET TO TAJO CANYON



Turn south from Mexico Highway 2 at the "Canon de Guadalupe" sign just west of Laguna Salada and proceed 15 miles south to "Rancho La Ponderosa", a small goat ranch. Six miles past the ranch you will cross the extensive wide flat mouth of Tajo Canyon and spectacular views of the Great White Throne can be seen. 21 miles from the pavement (Mexico Hwy. 2) along the south side of the mouth of Tajo Canyon you will see tracks leading to the west. Take this trail and proceed up the wash a mile or two, depending on the type of vehicle you are driving. For further instructions see the "Hiking in Tajo" section of this article.

