



SUN BEAT DOWN RELENTLESSLY. MY TONGUE FELT LIKE A WAD OF COTTON. MY KNEES SCREAMED IN SILENT PROTEST. I WAS HOT. TIRED. ALMOST OUT OF WATER. AND LOST.

## NOT THE BEST WAY TO END A TREK INTO BAIA CALIFORNIA SUR'S SIERRA DE LA LAGUNA MOUNTAINS.

Alone on the trail and confused about the path confronting me, I had told our guide Sergio Jauregui, to "go on ahead." I planned to meet up with the group at the gate where our trek had begun four days ago. There was only one way down, Sergio assured me. He would see me in a couple of hours, cold beer in hand and with the promise of a hot shower in the offing.

Somehow, I found myself in an area of the path that did not look familiar. Should I continue on, in hopes that this was the correct route down the 6430-foot tall mountain; or should I retrace my steps to where I knew there was water and the possibility of meeting up with the burro drivers who were bringing our gear down from our campsite far above?

## I CHOSE TO "GO FOR THE WATER."

And that became my mantra as I clawed my way back up the mountain for the next half hour. I took stock of my situation: plenty of food, no signaling devices, no water purification tablets, no knife or compass. I was ill prepared to spend the night in the bush. In retrospect, I suspect I had a touch of heatstroke. My powers of reasoning were not the sharpest.

My friends and I have enjoyed the golf courses, sport fishing and beautiful beaches of the Los Cabos area for years. One of my fellow adventurers, John Valentine, 58, has been coming to this part of the world for three decades. Two others of our group, Bo Leonard, 50, and Ron Hatfield, live and work in the San José Del Cabo area. Phil Jones, 60, a retired television executive, has a home in the Villas Del Mar development at the ultra-exclusive Palmilla Resort complex. The last member of our group, David Emmott, 51, a Kansas City physician, has caught his fair share of marlin and dorado in the azure waters of the Sea of Cortez and has tamed several of the area's famed golf courses with his booming tee shots and deft touch around the greens. As for me, a 57-year old retired advertising executive, photographer and part-time travel writer, I yearned to experience a Baja far from the Cabo Corridor. This trip was

An Internet search for "eco-tourism and Baja California" resulted in several "hits" that led me to Sergio and his 11/2-year-old company, Todos Santos Eco-Adventures. I



enlisted John Valentine to make the 90minute drive from his San José vacation home to discuss the specifics of our trip with Sergio in person. John returned from his reconnoiter filled with enthusiasm. He quickly recruited Phil, Bo and Ron, while I enlisted David. We communicated our needs (comfy air mattresses; fireside seating; plenty of red wine) via email months ahead of our late January trek.

The plan was set. Our wives would stay behind, not exactly pining away in our absence; but rather ensconced in the lap of luxury that surrounds the newly-renovated "One & Only Palmilla", a five-star resort just south of San José. Here, in-season oceanfront rooms start at \$1000; a beach side margarita costs \$15 and a lime and ginger salt glow massage can set you back \$250.

Our 4-day, 3-night adventure cost each of us \$700, including tip.

"I've flown over the Sierra Laguna Mountains for over 30 years," recalled Valentine, whose father, Herb, has been coming to this part of Baja since 1965. "Dad got me hooked on the wildlife and natural beauty of this area; this trek seemed like an interesting way to see it up close and

The Sierra de la Laguna Mountains, ISSUE EIGHTEEN 2005 BAJA LIFE



located at the southern end of the 798-mile long Baja Peninsula, were once part of the Rocky Mountains. Baja was formed 30 million years ago when the Pacific Plate separated from the North American Plate and the landmass now known as Baja California began drifting northwest.

Our climb into the Sierra Lagunas traversed three distinct bio-systems: scrub/Sonoran desert, dry forests and pineoak forests. The highest of these, the Sierra de la Laguna pine-oak forest, starting at about 2,200 feet, is the wettest area of Baja, receiving as much as 40 inches of rainfall annually. By contrast, the dry forest receives less than 11 inches annually. The plentiful rainfall in the pine-oak forest contains an amazing diversity of lush plant life as well as an interesting assortment of animal and bird inhabitants. It has been estimated that as many as 10% of the region's mammal, reptile and plant species are endemic to the area.

A journey into the Sierra Lagunas takes you into a vast, unspoiled wilderness. The area has been called an "island in the sky" because of the topography, which isolates it from surrounding ecosystems. The initial ascent is long and arduous. There are a number of Class 3 climbs in the Sierra Lagunas, including the 6,468-foot al

Picacho, our ultimate destination. A Class 3 climb does not require specialized equipment and/or training, but may involve rock scrambling and traversing steep drop-offs.

In 1994, the Mexican government declared the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains a Biosphere Reserve. This designation prevents commercialization of the area and provides guidelines for hiking and camping.

Sergio and his wife Bryan hosted a gettogether dinner and briefing at Los Adobes Restaurant in downtown Todos Santos, where we began our adventure.

EDUCATED AS AN ENGINEER AND HAVING DONE POST GRADUATE WORK in molecular biology at NYU, the 36-year-old Sergio is a modern-day Renaissance man. He is conversant in five languages, including Chinese. He can speak with alacrity about classic movies and current events. He even spent time as a party clown in his native Mexico City, an avocation that the impish guide resorts to every now and then to lighten the mood of sometimes emotionally charged situations. Sergio is also a certified Wilderness First Aid First Responder.

(Opposite Page, Left) The way up the 6430-foot tall mountain was marked intermittently by trail signs. The pathway itself varied from smooth packed dirt to loose scree. (Opposite Page, Right) John Valentine surveys the campsite, a two-day growth of salt and pepper beard attesting to his "el rev de la Montana" status. (Left) Bo Leonard began each day with vigorous stretching exercises, a nod towards his aching back and sore leg muscles. (Below) While hawks ride thermals far below, Bo finds a peaceful spot atop al Picacho for one of his frequent trailside naps.

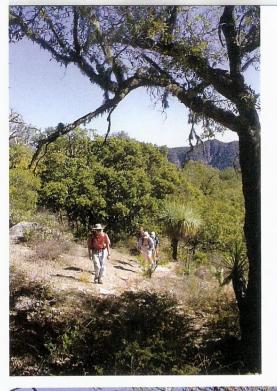


Todos Santos Eco-Adventures is very much a family affair. Sergio's father, Sergio Sr., 67, accompanied us on the trip; while his mother, Isabel, kept Sergio's storefront open in downtown Todos Santos.

It was at this briefing that we got the first indication that our trip was not going to be a cakewalk. Sergio talked about the rigors of the climb. He cautioned us to bring plenty of drinking water, have good, well-broken in hiking boots and to eat a hearty breakfast prior to departure at 8 a.m. The crowd grew silent in anticipation of the next day's strenuous activities. Phil Jones, who had never camped out in his life, indicated some reticence about spending three full nights on the mountain. Phil is a typical type "A" personality. He lives life at 100 MPH, and all along we questioned his commitment to a 4day adventure in the great outdoors. We hoped he would stay the course: John had purchased an assortment of rubber snakes and jumping plastic spiders to make Phil's stay on the mountain memorable.

Breakfast the next morning at the Todos Santos Café was a jocular affair. Most everyone was in high spirits, buoyed by plentiful amounts of steaming hot coffee, plates overflowing with pancakes, French toast, scrambled eggs and buttery toast. We

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## WE ASSUMED THAT BECAUSE THE TREK UP THE SIERRA DE LA LAGUNA WAS UNHERALDED, THAT IT WOULD BE EASY. HOW WRONG WE WERE.

exuded a kind of false bravado typical of male egos who were about to face the unknown.

Each of us brought varying degrees of physical ability to the trek. Phil Jones and David Emmott regularly work out with personal trainers in Kansas City. John Valentine and Bo were inveterate walkers. Ron was a long-time runner. I had recently climbed to the top of Africa's Mt. Kilimanjaro.

We assumed that because the trek up the Sierra de la Lagunas was unheralded, it would be easy. How wrong we were.

After a half-hour's drive down a dusty dirt road, we clambered out of Sergio's new 8-passenger Ford Explorer, shouldered our daypacks, and started hiking. Sergio had explained that our trek would start at 1,500 feet above sea level, and continue for 12-13 miles with a vertical ascent of 4,500 feet.

Phil and Ron took off immediately. They set a torrid pace; and in fact none of us saw them until we reached our campground 5 1/2 hours later. "The sooner we get up, the sooner we can come back down," were Phil's parting words.

The rest of us closely followed Sergio up the mountain. Bryan stayed behind to organize our luggage and the foodstuffs, which would be loaded on burros for the trip up the mountain. Sergio's father had climbed the mountain the day before and had established our base camp in the second valley at the crest of the range.

The going was easy at first. Scrub brush and giant Chardon cactus lined the trail. Now and then, we would flush some doves or other native birds. We kept up a brisk pace, with Sergio and David leading the way, followed by Bo and John, and with me bringing up the rear.



AFTER ABOUT TWO HOURS, THE GOING GOT PROGRESSIVELY TOUGHER.

Up and up we went, traversing steep paths that at times were at 35-40 degrees from the horizontal. Our quadriceps burned with each step. Our calves strained. Our chests heaved from exertion. At one point, David's heart rate hit 160 beats per minute, more than twice his normal resting rate. We were quickly approaching exhaustion.

Sensing our fatigue, Sergio called a halt to our ascent and we rested and had a light lunch. He cautioned us against sitting down, lest our bodies began to shut down. We ate standing up, relaxing against the

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granite boulders that littered our path upwards. I reflected on my limited climbing experience. And I told the group that this climb was every bit as tough as the first day of my recent Mt. Kilimanjaro climb, where the gain in elevation was similar and the climbing conditions equally strenuous.

I've known John Valentine for over 30 years—in all that time, I have never seen him sweat. Now, rivulets of water cascaded down his whiskered face, leaving salt streaked lines on his hollow cheeks. His normally pressed Ralph Lauren hiking shorts were caked with dust. This was a side to John I had never seen. You learn the most interesting things about people when you face a tough physical challenged together.

Both John and Bo have had back operations; both were in obvious discomfort. But they soldiered on with remarkable grit.

We had been climbing for three hours; and we had at least another three hours to go. The path ahead became increasingly steep and more challenging. Again, Sergio cautioned us to climb slowly and drink plenty of water. Despite the altitude gain, we did not seem to feel the effects of the nearly-mile high elevation. Our breathing was labored, to be sure, but no one was gasping for breath.

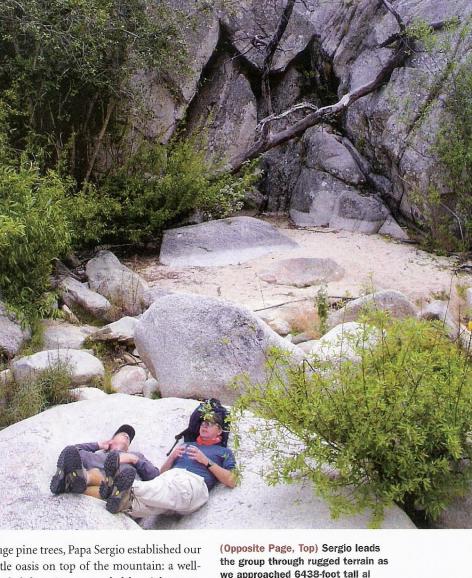
Soon, we were through the worst of it a vertical gain of 300 meters over two miles of tortuous boulders and narrow sluices. We crested the last of the ridges and descended into a small valley where the vegetation was lush and the temperature was decidedly cooler. Oak trees with Spanish moss hanging from their branches melded with beautiful red madrono trees and giant yuccas to form a green canopy that sheltered us from the sun's rays. The path was covered with acorns that crunched under our feet. The forest smelled sweet, pure, inviting. We crossed a little creek at 5,500 feet and followed it to our campground. Here, nestled beneath

huge pine trees, Papa Sergio established our little oasis on top of the mountain: a well-tended fire pit surrounded by eight camp chairs and a small kitchen area. Our brandnew mountain tents were pitched nearby. The sky was blue; the air was clean. And there was cold orange juice and fruit awaiting our arrival.

Phil and Ron had arrived about an hour before the rest of the group and already had made plans to return to Todos Santos the next day.

"This was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life," said Jones. "Camping out is just not my thing. You guys are welcome to it. I'm going back down in the morning."

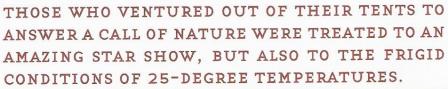
That night, Sergio cooked a tasty dish of curried chicken with rice and peppers and we shared the first of many bottles of a Baja-produced Nebbiolo red wine that we had purchased at the Cabo San Lucas Costco for under \$9 a bottle.



the group through rugged terrain as we approached 6438-foot tall al Picacho. The day of our ascent was picture perfect: temperatures in the low 80's. Zero humidity. A cloudless sky above. (Opposite Page, Below) Pedro leads a string of burros down the mountain. Each of us had personal gear weighing around 50 pounds. With foodstuffs and camping equipment, the per-person allowance for gear averaged 200 lbs. (Above) David Emmott and Bo relax at the waterfall. Both hikers exhibited an innate ability to fall asleep at the drop of a sombrero.

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We retired to our tents early that night, around 9:30 pm. The temperature had dropped from a high of approximately 65 degrees at dinnertime to around 50 degrees when we crawled into our sleeping bags.

The night was interminably long. We were in unfamiliar surroundings. The clanking of the bells Pedro had tied around the necks of the burros tinkled in the distance. Coyotes cackled at the tree line. Alternately, Phil's and my snoring established a low grumbling that sounded like two baby volcanoes in the throes of erupting. The temperature plummeted. Those who ventured out of their tents to answer a call of nature were treated to an amazing star show, but also to the frigid conditions of 25-degree temperatures.

We rolled out of our beds at 7:30 am. even before the sun began to paint the valley with its welcome warmth. Our water bottles, which we had neglected to place

inside our tents, were frozen solid. Bo coaxed the previous evening's fire back into life, and Papa Sergio put the coffee pot on. We began to stretch, creak and groan. All things considered, we agreed that we felt pretty good after yesterday's climb.

After a breakfast of juice, sweet rolls, and yogurt, Phil and Ron headed back down the mountain. Sergio would call Bryan to pick them up in about five hours. That left John, Bo, David and me to continue the trek.

Sergio promised some spectacular scenery over the next two days. He said it best, "The first day was a killer. You all did good. Now comes the fun part...the icing on the cake."

And what a cake it was!

THE PLAN WAS TO TAKE A 2 1/2 HOUR HIKE TO THE HIGHEST POINT

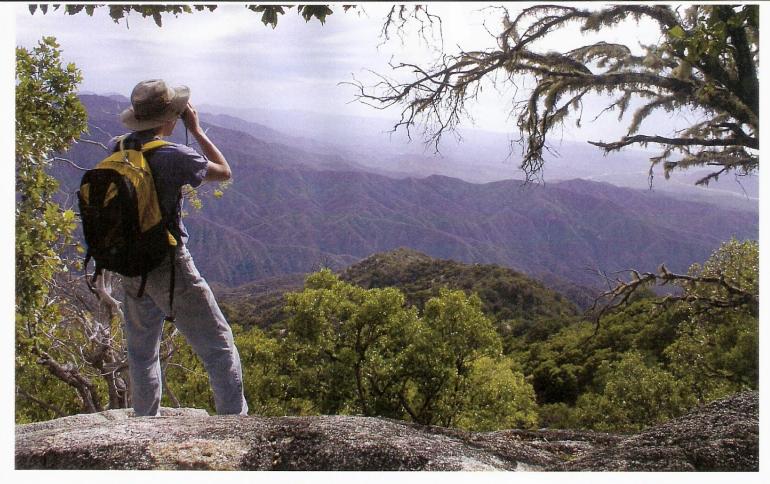


in the immediate range of mountains in which we were camped: 6,438-foot tall al Picacho. We broke camp at 9:00 am and headed northwest into the foothills. We climbed easily for several hours, pausing to enjoy the expansive vistas the mountain-side presented. Here, giant yucca trees reached for the sky, with long beards of dried leaves hanging almost to the ground. The sunlight was intense; the morning colors muted; the air, clear and clean.

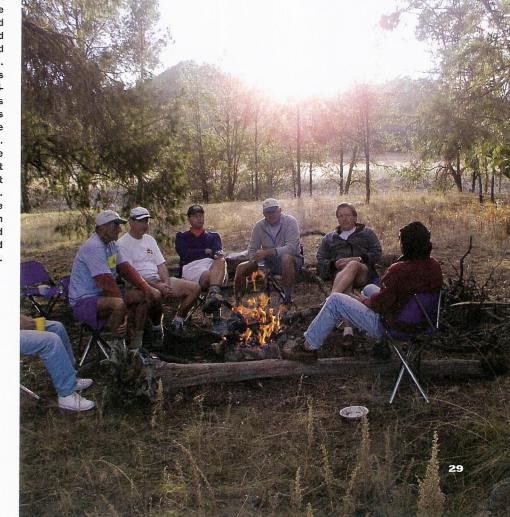
Sergio explained that very few tourists come into the mountains. He estimated that fewer than 200 Americans make the trip annually. A trip up to al Picacho is an annual occasion, however, for more than 500 middle school and high school students. "They come up here like a rite of passage," Sergio explains. They camp. They climb. Some come back year after year. It is the thing to do." And thankfully, there is very little litter along the trail.

We had been climbing steadily for about two hours, when we paused to take some photographs at a scenic overlook we dubbed "El Pico del Maguey" (Century Plant Peak). Here, the entire Pacific basin unfolded below us. Sergio promised us an

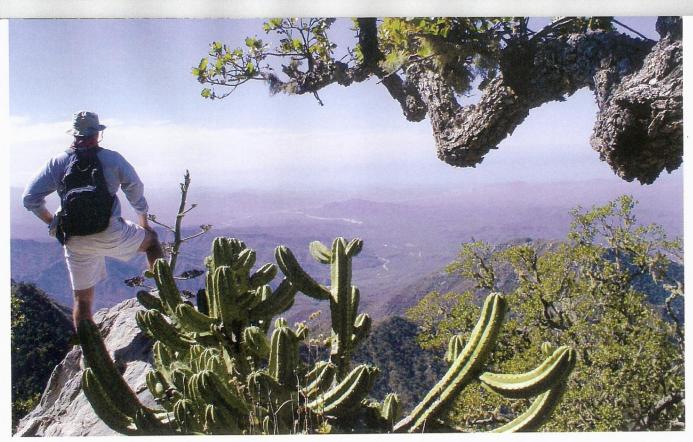
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(Opposite Page, Left) We camped in a wide meadow at the top of the mountain range. Here, we had plentiful water for both bathing and cooking (we bathed downstream and drew water for cooking upstream!). (Opposite Page, Right) Sergio pauses enroute to our campground. The 35vear-old entrepreneur entertained us with stories about his country's past as well as tidbits about the ecology of the region. (Above) Here, Sergio surveys the range far below as he looks west towards the Pacific at 4500 feet during our ascent. (Right) Discussion around the campfire our first night centered on the difficulty of the day's ascent and on Phil and Ron's intention to head back the next morning.



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even better view from the top of al Picacho.

He pointed to the peak just over the next ridge: an imposing 200-foot tall promontory jutting high above the dense forest. To enjoy the vistas from al Picacho, we would have to do some serious rock climbing; pulling ourselves up hand over hand in a nearly vertical ascent. We helped each other climb up and over the huge boulders that formed the base of the peak and in short order we stood at the summit with its uninterrupted view of both the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean. Sergio estimated that our visibility was nearly 60 miles in each direction.

We stopped for a filling lunch of "pan rellenos," rolls filled with spicy chicken or pork. It was a luncheon to remember: the dark forest below; the placid waters of two beautiful bodies of water to our east and west; a sheer drop-off of 700 feet directly below us. Enchanted, we watched five hawks ride the thermals far below us. Bo took a nap. We all signed a log book that the students had left for others to record their adventurers.

Sergio's entry was the most poetic. He talked about the challenges of the trail; how not everyone would be successful in climbing to this special place; but that climbing, like life, rewards those who persevere.

To enjoy the vistas from al Picacho, we would have to do some serious rock climbing; pulling ourselves up hand over hand in a nearly vertical ascent.

The going down was easier than the going up...and we were back at camp around 3:00 pm.

"Today was a great day," echoed David.
"The best part of this trip isn't about climbing any particular mountain or doing anything dangerous, it's getting to know Sergio and Papa better...and working together with you guys to accomplish something really special."

Dinner that night was a boisterous affair. Bo kept the fire glowing while David and I puffed contentedly on some smooth Cuban cigars. The rigors of our climb that day increased exponentially as did the amount of tequila we consumed.

We all slept better that night. The temperature hovered in the mid-50's; so sleeping was comfortable. The mournful bleating of a baby cow searching for its mother augmented the sounds of the previous night. We wondered if the coyotes would have a midnight snack; but Sergio assured us that coyotes did not hunt in large packs, and for that reason the baby calf was safe and sound.

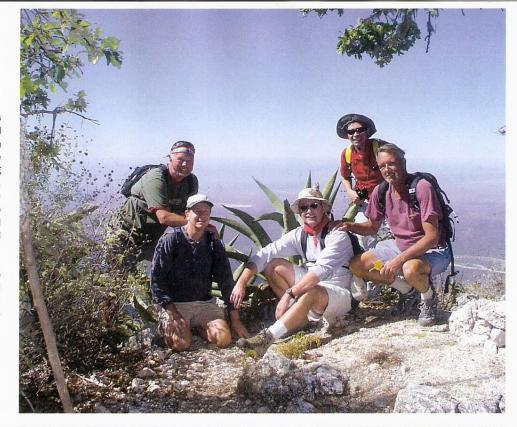
MORNING SAW ANOTHER GLO-RIOUS SUNRISE. David and I cooked scrambled eggs with cheese and carne machaca, a bland-tasting dried beef product that proved to be a staple of breakfasts in the Sierra Lagunas. We wrapped the eggs in toasted flour tortillas, added ample amounts of picante salsa, and had a breakfast feast fit for the mountain men we were fast becoming!

Today Sergio and his father would take us on a very different exploration: down the river bed for about two hours of brisk hiking and rock scrambling to the site of a waterfall whose cool waters fed a deep pool of crystal-clear water.

The approach to the falls was straightforward, but still challenging. At times we were presented with one of several routes up, over or around the large granite boulders that threatened to impede our progress at each turning. Sergio or the more adventurous Bo would lead the way and help the rest of us with the crossings. We were fortunate that most of the granite

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(Opposite Page) David Emmott looks west from a spit of land we dubbed "Century Plant Peak." The Pacific Ocean glistens in the background. (Right) The hikers at 6000 feet. From Left: Craig Ligibel, Bo Leonard, David Emmott, Sergio Jauregui, John Valentine, (Below) David surveys the waterfall after our hike on Day 3. Earlier, the author had bowed to peer pressure and had taken a frigid birthday-dip in the 45-degree water. Mucho frio! Expletives deleted! (Following Page) David pauses enroute to al Picacho. A veteran runner and physician, David kept a close watch on his vital signs in the thin mountain air. He maintained a heart rate of 140-160 bpm while doing strenuous climbing...about twice his normal resting rate!



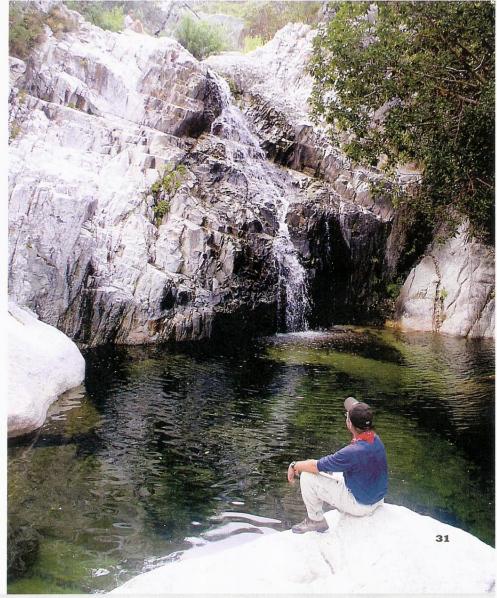
was dry; in places where the stream rushed over the rocks, footing was treacherous. A slip would not be fatal. But could result in a twisted or broken ankle...and long and painful slough back to camp.

The 50-foot waterfall was all we had anticipated: a pristine piece of paradise where we were the only inhabitants. David and Sergio immediately made their ways to the bottom of the falls: Sergio via a frontal assault down the nearly vertical face of the falls; David, with a more conservative route via the side of the stream. Bo had staked out a suitable spot for his noontime nap. Papa Sergio watched his son climb down the face of the falls like a diminutive Spiderman, but opted to stay on top of the falls for the duration. John and I gingerly made our way to the bottom following David's route.

As it turns out, the day of our visit to the waterfall was also my 57th birthday and I decided to celebrate with a swim in the 45-degree water. Brrrr.

We basked in the pale sunlight at the top of the falls and consumed another hearty lunch of pan rellenos, oranges and Snickers bars. On the way back to camp, the heavens opened up and sent torrents of water sluicing down the now-slippery rocks that lined the streambed. John, Bo and I found cover in some caves while Sergio, Papa and David braved the elements and headed back to camp.

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From my vantage point in a slight depression pressed against the riverbank, all I could see—and hear—was water. The rain came down in sheets. Big, fat droplets fell on my head and shoulders from cracks in the overhang. The swollen stream pulsed at my feet. The granite boulders lining the stream glistened in the afternoon twilight. I stayed in my cave for about half an hour.

I arrived in camp just as a dense fog began to blanket the valley. Rain still sputtered from the sky, and we immediately set up an impromptu laundry around the fire to dry our soggy clothes and footwear. My boots had taken a dousing; and I was most concerned that I would not be able to wear them down the mountain the next morning. Soon, the acrid smell of wood smoke permeated every article of clothing we owned. Its odor stayed with us for the duration of the trip.

The fog grew thicker, and at 4:00 pm, the darkness around the fire was almost complete. Just then, we were joined by four Park Rangers who had just returned from a week off the mountains. The Rangers tend to the trails and stand ready to help hikers in need of medical assistance. We shared some wine with them, and they recounted stories of rescues they had made and severe weather they had experienced in their time on the mountain. According to the Rangers, April is the best month to climb into the Sierra Lagunas. There have been reports of up to 2 inches of snow during the month of March.

Sensing a return of the rain showers, Sergio busied himself preparing our last dinner on the mountain: pasta with cream sauce.

I continued my birthday celebration with several inches of tequila and another fine Cuban cigar. According to Papa Sergio, this was "el tiempo esta tequilero" (a good day to drink tequila). I couldn't have agreed more.

Bo stoked the fire in anticipation of a long, cold and wet night ahead. He was not disappointed. Just as we finished dinner, the heavens opened up. We just made it to the safety of our tents when torrents of icy water inundated the campground. We holed up in our tents for about and hour. Then, around 8 pm., the rain slackened and



we peeked out of our tents to view an eerie landscape shrouded in fog and mist. Bo's fire was barely alive, and we crawled out of our soggy sleeping bags.

We made one last attempt to dry our clothes. My boots were a lost cause. We enjoyed the warmth of the fire until a second onslaught of rain chased us inside our tents around 10:30 pm.

Rain fell with increasing intensity throughout the night. The wind shrieked. The sides of our tents flapped furiously. We spent an anxious night. Several times, John felt that the 30 MPH winds would blow over his tent. David packed his bags at around 3:00 AM in anticipation of having to evacuate the meadow because of rising water.

The next morning dawned clear and cold. There was two inches of rainwater in my washbasin, but the ground was firm and the creek didn't appear to have risen at all. The rainwater had just been absorbed into the sandy soil. Sergio assured us that the path down would be firm and navigable.

David made breakfast burritos with scrambled eggs and beans for all of us, and for the caballeros who had just arrived with the pack animals to pick up our tents and luggage. We broke camp in good order and buoyed by full bellies and bright sunlight, began our 4-5 hour trek down the mountain.

The going was easier than we anticipated. But because I was forced to wear tennis shoes rather than my soggy boots, my toes soon began to scream in agony with each downward step.

I hung back from the group, taking baby steps to minimize the pain. It was going to be a long day. But everyone else was making good progress down what seemed to be an interminably long descent. Then, there was my debacle of getting lost on a one-way trail. I guess getting a year older certainly didn't make me a year wiser.

Finally, I heard the distinctive shouts of the burro drivers as they led the heavily laden animals down the rocky trail.

"Tienes agua?" I mumbled to Pedro, the lead driver.

"Si, mi amigo," was the welcome reply. Never has water tasted so good.

As it turns out, I had not strayed from the main trail at all; I had just become disoriented from the heat and was becoming dehydrated. Sergio had been following my progress with binoculars from his vantage point far below, and was fully prepared to affect a "rescue" if the situation had warranted.

It was an anti-climactic ending to a physically and mentally challenging, but highly rewarding trek into a beautiful part of Baja California that few people ever see.

All was forgotten as we toasted our accomplishments in the open-air dining room of Sergio and Bryan's home overlooking the Pacific several hours later. The hot, dusty trail was a distant memory as Bryan refilled our Champaign flutes with domestic bubbly. We congratulated each other on a job well done, thanked Sergio and Papa Sergio for bringing us back safe and sound. We hugged Bryan and Isabel for good measure.

Even more than the adventure, we had been privileged to get to know a very special Mexican family and to see a piece of their country through their eyes.

All told, we hiked over 35 miles, more than half of that at altitudes above 5,000 feet. We climbed higher, farther and under tougher conditions that any of us had anticipated. And we all came back down the mountain with a greater sense of appreciation for the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains...and for one another.

Craig Ligibel is a free lance writer living in Kansas City. Craig cut his journalistic teeth covering the Belfast riots for the Chicago Tribune in 1968 and the social upheaval of El Salvador in 1971. In the following years, his articles have appeared in Los Angeles Times Travel Magazine, Sailing Magazine, Latitudes and Attudes and Northwest Airlines World Traveler.