# GRINGAS & GUACAMOLE

By Gail Nott

## Baja Fruit Flies

Two of the post-pubescent Federales approached the car, motioning with their guns for me to pull to the left. As I checked the rear and side mirrors, I noticed there were no other cars, either stopped or entering the checkpoint. A pile of sandbags to my right housed the usual youngster with a machine gun. When I drove along side a stone hut, two men wearing masks appeared in the doorway. I couldn't discern if what they held in their hands were guns or not.

As my adrenalin started to pump, I considered putting the gas pedal to the floor and taking my chances on being shot. I had driven over 500 miles down the Baja without incident; being robbed or perhaps killed was not on my agenda. One of the guards leaned toward me asking

that I open the trunk. My foot was still tickling the gas pedal when I queried why I had been stopped. Out of the corner of my eye I caught two masked men moving toward the car.

“Senora, we must check your car for contraband and then spray it.” Spray it seemed a hellava way to describe riddling my car with bullets. “Spray it for what,” I demanded to know.

“Fruit flies, Senora.” Suddenly the masked men began priming their five gallon spray cans, nozzles skyward in readiness. How naïve I had been to think I could drive my new red, convertible sports car down the Baja without incident.

Departing from Rosarito Beach by 8 a.m., I had been told I could reach Guerrero Negro, on the eastern coast of Mexico, for whale watching within five to six hours. No one had prepared me for the hairpin turns and sheer majesty of the Sierra Madres. With two hands gripping the steering wheel, I pushed the Spyder a little faster around each new set of curves. The three-foot guard rail seemed more like a sick joke than a safety aid as the canyon floor lay thousands of feet below on the left. There wasn’t any margin for error; sheer walls of rock rose on the right. There were no shoulders and frequent signs announcing falling rock heightened the thrill.

Multitudes of scraggly cactus and a few stretches of level road announced the entrance to the High Plains. “The “Big Guy” must have enjoyed creating this wonderland of cactus and bizarre rock formations. Behemoth orbs of rock, scoops of ice cream, some hollowed by erosion, littered the landscape. As we passed these granite sundaes, I fantasized a scene from the *High Plains Drifter*
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“Hey, Clint.”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna kill ‘em when they come past the rocks?”

Night dropped to earth like a widow's veil. After driving nine hours, the cattle standing in the road became frightening aberrations of floating glowing eyes. I kept eyeing the horizon for light, extra terrestrial and otherwise. I should have heeded the warning not to drive on the High Plains at night. Free ranging cattle, no signs of civilization, the absence of traffic and roadway lights, the feelings of isolation and anxiety were overwhelming.

Tourist season had ended in Guerrero Negro and when I spotted what appeared to be a motel, I pulled in. The owner was excited by our appearance; he would make a few pesos this evening. When I questioned if there were any whales left to be spotted in the inlet, he was empathic I would not be disappointed.

Having paid eighty pesos to ride ten kilometers across salt flats in a broken down Jeep, I felt my enthusiasm waning. The whales probably weren't too excited about my coming either. North of the border, five giant hotels, twenty restaurants and a McDonalds would have circled this inlet. We retrieved our life jackets from the only building on the beach, a small wooden shack. As I stood at the waters' edge waiting for the small wooden boats to be brought to us, our guide instructed us to take off our shoes, roll up our pant legs and wade out to them.

Hey, this would never happen at Disneyland! There must be an art to whale-watching I wasn't informed of. I saw noses, mid sections, tails and waterspouts. OK, the joke is on me. This is a multi-sectioned, mechanical mock-up they drag through the water, right? I guess the French family, who took rolls of film of whale body parts, plan to tape them together before they show their friends. After sweeping back and forth across the inlet for two hours, our guide turned the boat to shore. It was late March and the whales had begun their migration north. We were fortunate to have glimpsed the procrastinators.

Throughout Mexico, being pulled over by Federales to inspect your car for contraband is the norm. Being confronted by the "Bug Squad" as I tried to leave Guerrero Negro was a first. The masked exterminators informed me I had to pay them ten pesos. What a bargain, for ten pesos I could have the paint job on my car destroyed by insecticides. I tried to reassure them that the only fruit I had in my car was a single Georgia peach, my friend, Hank.

Mordida is such a wonderful Mexican tradition. When I asked if they would consider *not* spraying the car for twenty pesos, they both smiled and nodded yes. I quickly handed them the money and pulled away from the checkpoint.

Crossing the Baja from West to East, to reach Santa Rosalie, was a continuation of mountains and high plains. Tiny coved beaches of white sand and clear blue water, nestled below jagged cliffs, were a welcome addition. Santa Rosalie, once an active copper mining town, sported an oddity - wooden houses. The Rothschild's dynasty shipped the ore to California and Mexican lumber made the return voyage. While the shipyard is a graveyard of rusting cranes and warehouses, the mountain is dotted with wooden houses sporting crimped tin roofing.

Winding up the mountain on smoothly paved streets, we discovered the St. Francis Hotel, built in 1886 to house engineers and visiting businessmen. Constructed totally of wood, the lattice railings, shuttered windows and porch rockers welcomed us to another century.

Excited, Hank and I accepted a room on the second floor for a better view of the bay and village. We waited calmly for assistance to move our luggage upstairs. The Senora queried if there was a problem. With an engaging smile she advised us she was the manager, cook, waiter and bartender, but clearly, she did not do luggage.

On the first landing, I shifted my grasp on the two suitcases and leaned against the railing for a brief rest. Gently, quietly, the railing began to move outward. I dropped the suitcases and threw myself toward the wall. The railing remained hanging over the sidewalk. Our room was papered in padded fabric, the random width wooden floor rolled up and down. The windows were nailed shut and the controls for the air conditioner were wall decorations; there wasn't one. The soothing sounds of the creaking porch rockers transported us as we watched the sunset. One forgot the lack of 21st century amenities. We were enveloped in the 1900s.

Hank and I had left Rosarito Beach four days ago and we were anxious to reach La Paz to catch the ferry. A pile of rocks on the edge of the road wasn't unusual; the Federale that appeared from behind it was. Once again we were motioned to pull over and told they wanted to search the car. My Hanes Her Way were to be tossed this way and that one more time. More men had put their hands on my underwear these last few days then in all my years of dating! It wasn't a conscious thought, I simply said No; they could not search the car.

The young soldier stared at me, stepped back and conferred with his buddy. He motioned for two other soldiers to come forward. I was just too tired to imagine the worst. Politely they asked if I would transport two of the soldiers to their home in the next village. It was likely the topic of

conversation for quite awhile in this remote mountain village. We roared through the streets toward the plaza with the two young Federales wedged in the tiny back seat, radio blaring salsa and a loco gringa driving.

After two days of haggling with the Mexican bureaucracy about permits for the car, we finally scheduled the ferry trip from La Paz to Mazatlan. Once the car was safely stowed in the bowels of the boat, we wandered around the shipyard unclear as to when and where to board. Intuitively I suggested we follow the endless stream of Mexican suitcases.

As in Santa Rosalie, we were once again transported to the 19th century; perhaps Liverpool or Dublin, hundreds of immigrants boarding a ship to America. Crowing roosters tied in cardboard boxes, bags and baskets of bedding and clothing, tiny children crying in the arms of their mothers. Tears and hugs from family members as the line moved slowly toward the gangplank.

I kept wondering where this mass of humanity disappeared to as we were shown to our "Especial" stateroom on the top deck of the ship. Having seen *Titanic* too many times, I envisioned the elegance of chandeliers, silver and polished wood. A worn-out sofa bed completed the living room, the bedroom consisted of two *futons*. The bathroom, however, sported a roomy shower, a vanity for m'lady and toilet paper! The ferry had an outdoor bar on the upper level, complete with deafening *bandas* music.

As we watched the sun go down, more and more people joined the festivities. This became the Mexico I know; the families jammed together in the lower decks joining the fiesta. Babies and bottles of tequila were passed around, young lovers crept off to the shadows and the gnarled hands of not-so young lovers joined.

Driving the Baja was an experience of a lifetime, memories I shall always have. Here is a suggestion for you: Once a year, go someplace you've never been before.