

## BAJA

A Safe Pressure Release Valve For North America.

By Bart Allen Berry

Fear is an interesting thing. It has the capability to block rational thought. Fear of parts of Mexico, such as Juarez, is rational. I wouldn't want the job of promoting tourism there. Unfortunately, Americans and others lump all of Mexico into one big basket, and use the extremes of occurrences in one area, to develop impressions and judgments about the whole country. Understandable, but basically ignorant.

I once sat in a Buddhist monastery in Korea having tea with one of the Monks who could speak English. He had never been to America, but his impressions of religion in the United States were colored by what he had seen on TV about Evangelists Jim and Tammy Baker. I was embarrassed for my own country and made it a point to try and straighten him out about that. I know many Mexicans who are very proud of their country and about Baja and feel similarly embarrassed about world opinion caused by the cartels.

The rational analysis about Baja is clear, however. Baja is the safest state in Mexico. Many Americans are ignorant about that. On one trip to Oman (It's in the middle east), my friends would email me and say "aren't you worried about all the war fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, don't you think you'll get blown up or something?" I would answer with a simply geographic analogy- "It's like I am in the Florida Keys and the war is happening in Maine". Most people will not take the trouble to get out a map, much less use the legend to calculate distances. So it is with many Americans who live in a country so large, they barely get the chance to travel outside of their own state.

Americans have little exposure to other cultures and languages, as Europeans do for instance. With many countries so small and close together in Europe, it is natural to know several languages- and to also be exposed to the richness of one another's cultures on a daily basis. This cross cultural exposure is in evidence in places like San Diego California, where proximity facilitates the exchange of language, food, music, art and even street names which could be found anywhere in Mexico. Baja is a great nearby destination that represents a golden opportunity to experience another culture, but really offers much, much more.

Americans and others who do make the effort to come to Baja are handsomely rewarded with a warm welcoming atmosphere, people who have gone to more trouble to learn English than Americans do to learn Spanish, tourism and commerce that welcomes the US Dollar, infrastructure that mirrors American culture from Costco and Home Depot to highway and street signs in English, and of course a magnificently beautiful natural place with nearly 2000 miles of warm coastline where you can still feel free-and yes, safe. Baja is easy to get around.

In a recent travel advisory issued by the US State department, the only area in the state of Baja or Baja Sur mentioned at all is Tijuana. The advice is "Exercise extreme caution, particularly at night". Tijuana is the most visited city in the west. With more than 5 million people, the surrounding metropolitan area has become a major industrial and dominant regional center in northwestern Mexico. Currently one of the fastest growing cities in Mexico, Tijuana maintains global city status.<sup>1</sup> Big cities like Tijuana, where poor people immigrate from all over to find jobs, there will be all kinds of crime. All cities have a bad side of town, and Tijuana is no exception. Being careful at night is common sense. There are criminals and the drug trade and all manner of bad things happening in many American cities as well- New York, St Louis, Fort Worth, and yes, in your city too.

As someone who has had an office in Tijuana in years past, I know that many of the negative impressions of TJ can be countered by the culture and sophistication, the international business activities, world class manufacturing industry and more happening in Tijuana that most people never hear about. I go to great restaurants and shows at night, but I stay away from the bad side of town just like I would in New York City or Los Angeles or the city where you live. To discover the wonderful parts, you have to make the effort however-even in Tijuana.

I acknowledge Tijuana as a part of Baja, but understand that it is not generally for most, a tourism destination for much more than curious day trippers whose experience is limited to shopping or an evening of partying too hard. US cities all have places where you can do that too. If Tijuana is not your interest, you can just keep driving and in a matter minutes you will be introduced to the rest of the Baja peninsula, which is a comparative 'safe zone' as far as the US State Department is concerned.

Partly due to it's unique geography and landscape, Baja is isolated from much of the rest of Mexico. This, and the extremes of climate, mountains and desert have helped keep it more natural and undeveloped, (read: better for tourism). Rather than having every square inch labeled and administered with rules and regulations, regimented places to park and restrictive laws about whether you can step foot in a particular area, the Baja feels wide open, natural and dare I say it? More free. The multitude of recreational, cultural and lifestyle offerings here in Baja are hard to find in this concentration anywhere else on the planet.

More than just a great place to visit for a weekend or extended vacation, lower prices for real estate and waterfront property make it an ideal place to live or retire as well. Californians who have seen their net worth cut in half, the bottom drop out of their home values, and millions of job losses are wondering how they are going to make it, and to maintain a quality lifestyle. Baja offers a wonderful quality of life for perhaps less than a third of the cost.

What many who have a second home in Baja, or who have settled here permanently understand is that it is easy to travel back and forth and basically have a footprint in both the US and Mexico at the same time. Many people are working part time in the US to

make money and spending it in Mexico, where it goes a lot further. With more than 300,000 border crossings a day at Tijuana/San Diego, many are travelling between both countries every day, much like the Europeans do. There is an obvious economic benefit for both countries to have this area of commerce and interchange. Plus, it is interesting.

To be able to sample 45 wineries roughly an hour and a half from the border, or visit a remote surf spot or hot springs, to ride your motorcycle or ATV through hundreds of miles of mountain roads, to listen to a classical guitar maestro play amazing music for you just three feet away and so much more that Baja offers- will add richness to your life, if you are brave enough to seek it out. Ignorance is largely caused by a lack of experience.

Experiencing Baja is one of the 'softest' international travel experiences you can have. In most cases, someone will speak English, and be quite patient and understanding with you, no matter what your level (or lack thereof) of Spanish is. Much different from places like China or France for that matter. Without the hassle and expense of international air travel, you can drive right across the border in the comfort of your own car. Dollars are accepted most everywhere. Many radio stations broadcast American music and do many of their commercials in English. Baja is simple to navigate with a very well maintained artery running from end to end. Well known tourism spots, hotels and resorts are abundant, as well as RV and more primitive camping if that is your thing- often times right on the beach.

Lower prices than the US on most things in Baja range from government regulated gas prices and ridiculously cheap car mechanic work, to fresh seafood. Many ex-patriate communities have popped up throughout the Baja in places like Todos Santos, Punta Banda, Los Barriles and San Felipe where it is hard to find a Mexican resident. Most of these gringo dominated communities combine activities and retirement with culture, a cheap cost of living and beautiful scenery and natural environment. Oh yes, and then there's the mediterranean climate.

Most who visit Baja fall in love with a lower stress level and all that there is to experience here, but it is this author's prediction that this will not stay a secret for much longer. With global economic crisis married to continual population increases and the aging baby boomer demographic- people will seek out somewhere they can live within their economic means, with a quality of life, dignity and peace. Many who have left the big mortgage behind to settle in Baja count it as one of the best decisions of their lives. As more and more learn about the safety and comfort and economic security that Baja offers, then Baja should see a much larger migration of gringos.

The best part is, it is possible to start with a small footprint in Baja and 'test it', perhaps with a simple weekend place. Many who start this way begin questioning why they wouldn't spend more and more time in the south. Everytime they go back to the States they feel their stress levels increasing again. In this day and age, with the support of internet technology, international banking and ease of mobility between the US and Baja,

you actually can live in both places. Many smart folks have been doing this for years, taking advantage of the best of both countries.

If you are reading this could you be one of those who are afraid to step outside of the comfort of your familiar existence? Do you take dramatic stories about Mexico as gospel and apply an uninformed and generalized point of view to the entire country? Have you been here? Are you willing to stretch a little to get to know the beautiful experiences and culture that await you and the warm welcome from your neighbors to the south?

America is lucky to have such a great neighbor in Mexico. Imagine instead that Uganda, or Serbia or even Columbia shared the entire US southern border. Those who look down their noses at Mexico and label it a 'third world nation' out of their own ignorance should know that Mexico is projected to be one of the top four economies in the world by 2050. When the dollar begins to fall further with all of the US Federal and State-wide debt, having a Peso account in Mexico might suddenly look like a good idea. If and when things get even worse in the world, more and more will find their refuge in Baja.

Take the advice from someone who is here, feet on the ground in Baja, living it. Baja is one of the safest, easiest and most beautiful places you can live. The pressures and psychologically crushing responsibilities to manage and maintain in the North will be significantly reduced in Baja. Why do you think people come here on vacation? Many feel that they are reclaiming their time, their freedom and their lives when they come to Baja, and they certainly wouldn't stay if they didn't feel safe.

Baja is an easy international experience to sample, with so much to offer. Similar levels of wilderness and nature, culture and adventure, lifestyle and fun cost so much more elsewhere and are so much further away.

Baja's warm welcome is waiting for you and it's close.

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<sup>1</sup>Sociologist Saskia Sasse, in reference to her 1991 work, "*The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*"