

Across the Border into Baja

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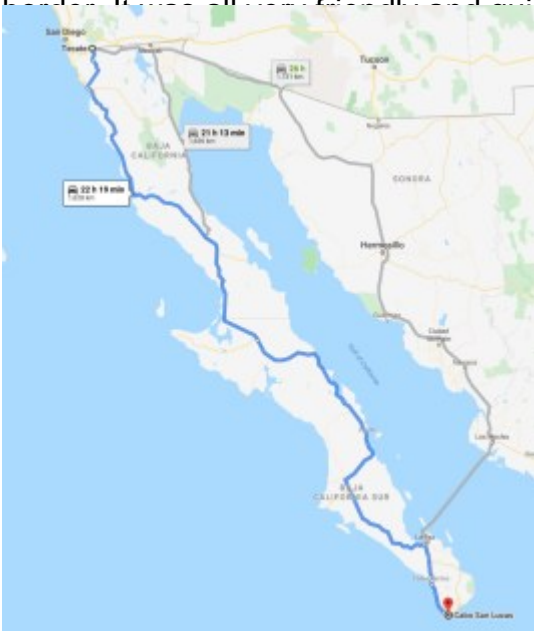


In this post we will talk about things you should know once

you are across the border into Baja. Some things do work a bit differently in Mexico and Baja tends to be unique in some ways from the mainland of Mexico given its isolation.

As with the last post, links to some helpful websites will be listed at the bottom.

We set out early in the morning to drive across the border and were happy to find that there was a very short line. There was another Class C motorhome in front of us and when the border patrol waved them through, I figured they would not let the next one (us) through. And they did stop us, but they only gave our RV and tow car cursory “inspections”. They asked about food on board and also asked about the contents of our 5-gallon jug (water), since you’re not allowed to carry fuel in containers across the border. It was all very friendly and quick (unlike our return to the US, more on that later).



Our route. From Tecate it was easiest to take Highway 3 to

Ensenada to connect with the Transpeninsular Highway (Highway 1) which we drove the rest of the way south. Since we approached from the east this short cut to Highway 1 takes you through the scenic wine country and avoids the need to drive all the way west almost to San Diego and then thru Tijuana.

For those who are coming from the east in the future, Highway 5 is “almost completed” and will be the most direct route once that happens. During our trip, Highway 5, which goes through San Felipe, had a section just south of there that was unfinished and extremely rough, recommended for 4-wheel drive vehicles only so basically a dead end.

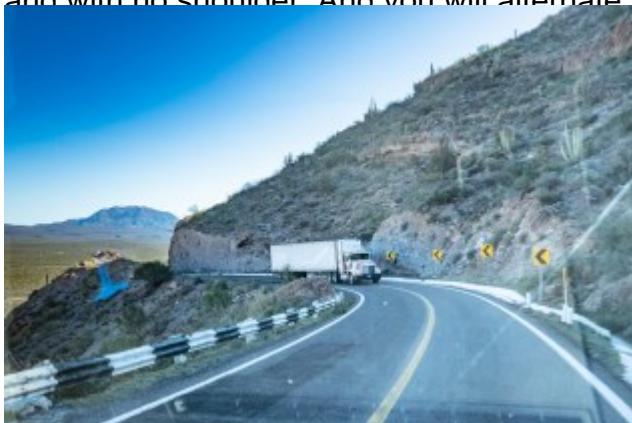
Road conditions all over Baja can change year over year, so it's important to check on those conditions prior to traveling. We're happy to have chosen the route we did because later down the road we met some truck campers who told us that the last portion of Highway 5 was super rough and they wouldn't drive it again.

But when finished it will connect with the Transpeninsular Highway just north of the turn off for Bahia n considerably.



Narrow roads/Construction. Driving some parts of the

Transpeninsular Highway can be challenging. As mentioned before, a large portion is extremely narrow and with no shoulder. And you will alternate between recently resurfaced smooth roads to terrible



Combine that with 18-wheelers driving the opposite way

that never slow down and it can be scary. The best thing to do when you see a large truck coming is to slow down and pull over to the right as far as possible. Slowing down makes it easier to get closer to the edge safely.

Since there was usually not a lot of traffic, sometimes we even came to a stop. That makes it easier for truck drivers to calculate how not to hit you, especially since they have no intention of slowing down.

A special caution for Class A Rvs. We drove Island Time, our Winnebago View, a class C Sprinter. These are nicknamed a "Skinny Winnie" because it's only 90" wide, much slimmer than many Class Cs to drive a Class A on these roads.



We met one unfortunate big rig owner whose driver's side

mirror was completely sheared off and had shattered the driver's side window in the process. If you can, change the alignment of your side mirror to bring the arm in as close as possible to the side of your rig, even at the cost of some visibility (traffic is very light, it is an acceptable risk). We also had one slight mishap but not nearly as bad, a truck (barely) scraped our driver's side mirror. It cracked a turn signal cover and sounded like a bomb went off.

Some Class A owners drive down with a tour group or create their own "caravan" with friends. They carry walkie talkies and the front person warns the others when a truck is coming, then they all move to the right and slow down. I guess the fact that there are multiple rigs may cause the truckers to be more cautious.

Passing. We opted to drive pretty slowly and take it easy so didn't have much need to pass. But, sometimes there may be a really slow vehicle on the road in an area where it's not very safe to pass. At those times, you may notice that the slow vehicle will turn on their left turn signal (when there is no left turn anywhere). That is their way of letting you know that it's safe to pass.



distances are shown in kilometers. Fortunately it's easy to equals .62 miles.

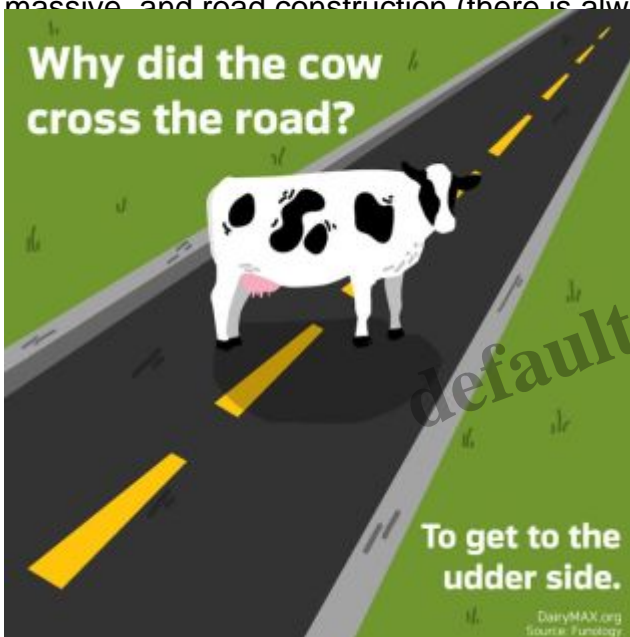
Topes Topes are speed bumps and in Mexico there are a

large variety of these. There are small bumps, medium bumps, large humps, enormous humps, indentations that are like inverted bumps etc. The topes do a much better job of speed control than speed limits and they are absolutely everywhere.

Sometimes there are signs warning you of upcoming topes and/or signs alongside the topes. Other times there is no signage. Watch for them when you enter an area where speed limit is reduced. And where there is one, there are usually others.

Pedestrians use the topes, usually the larger ones, to cross the street and they always have the right of way. Always be on the lookout and slow down when you suspect there will be some topes and watch for pedestrians walking onto to them from the side.

Driving at night. Don't drive at night. There are several good reasons for this: poor or no lighting on the road, animals (mostly cows), road hazards including the infamous topes, potholes, which can be massive, and road construction (there is always some construction in Baja), lots of 18-wheeler traffic parts of roads, thieves. I've read that some locals drive at night as a hazard to be aware of at night.



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As for cows and apparently also horses, they sometimes

lay down in the middle of the road because it's warmer there. One of our neighbors at one of the beaches we stayed in told us of a couple that told them to pay no heed to the warning about driving at night, bragging that they drove at night all the time. A few days later our neighbors came upon the cow that that same couple had hit on an earlier night. Yikes.

Hector and I did drive at night a few times, mainly going back from dinner in town to a campground just outside of town but we did so on well-traveled roads that we had first driven in daytime, for short periods of time. Cuidado por favor.



toll and Federal roads in Mexico called los Angeles Verdes (the Green Angels). In Baja, we know that they patrol Highway 1 south of Ensenada. They are bilingual and carry some tools and parts to provide limited mechanical assistance and first aid. They can also help arrange towing if needed.

The Green Angels are paid by the government through the Mexican Tourism Ministry and their services are free or included in your toll on toll roads. If you are on a toll road always keep your toll parts and tipping them for their services is recommended.



If you pull over to the side of the road and lift the hood and

they are driving through they will stop for you. You can also call them, and there are various phone numbers listed on the internet and also on roadside signs but there are large areas with no cell service, so that may not be an option.



Previously a nationalized resource, gasoline and diesel

sales have been deregulated as of 2018. Most gas stations we saw were owned by Pemex, the state-owned petroleum company, but new ones are starting to pop up.

All gas stations are full serve and they will wash your windows, check your tire pressure etc if asked. Be sure to tip your attendant. We give them a five peso coin if they do nothing other than put gas in the car, but if they wash the windshield and perform additional services.

(on) and is more expensive than in the U.S.



At Pemex, regular unleaded gas is “Magna” and the color of those gas nozzles is green or “verde” (which in the U.S. is used for diesel). Premium unleaded or high-octane gas is “Premium” and the gas nozzles are red or “rojo”. Folks refer to the gas by the color. Fill with green (llene con verde) or fill with red (llene con rojo) por favor.

Diesel At Pemex stations is designated by black nozzles or “negro”. DO NOT use the green for diesel, it is unleaded gas and will kill your engine. Ultra-low Sulfur Diesel (ULSD) is available in the state of Baja California but may or may not be available in the state of Baja California Sur. Pemex has been saying that they are converting to all ULSD for years but that has not proven to be fact. I’m on a lot of Mexico Facebook groups and there is always lively discussion on this from the various regions. If your (ours didn’t) we recommend you do further research if you’re headed to



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Dirty Gas and Diesel is a common issue. Apparently further south on

the peninsula they bring fuel by barge from mainland Mexico. This additional step apparently releases particulates and water into the fuel which then go into your tank. Our sprinter registered a check engine light that ultimately turned out to be a dirty fuel filter, which we had to drive to Cabo San Lucas to replace.

After the fuel filter saga we used a “Baja Filter”. A funnel with a particulate filter and water separator sold in some marine supply stores to filter the diesel when we filled. A bit of a pain, but no further problems.

Gas Station Scams. Gas station attendants, who make very little money, have been known to run some scams. While we never had a problem in our two months in Baja or the three months we’ve lived in Mexico we have heard of others that have.



The most common scam is to not return the pump to zero after the previous customer, so the total sale amount will include their amount. We recommend that the driver always exit their vehicle before they start pumping. What we found interesting is that now the attendant will usually point to the fact that the pump is at zero, they know about the scam and that foreigners are more aware of it. It's still good to be observant.

The second one I've read about is that they will shortchange you and if questioned, tell you that you gave them a different bill than you gave. So, a good rule of thumb is to say out loud how much you're handing them as you count out the money. And check your change.

The last one is that the attendant will say the credit card machine didn't work and run your card a second time. This does not seem to be as common.

Again, we had very nice courteous gas station attendants and no issues.

Police

There are a few facts about police in Mexico that are important to be aware of before you cross the border. We had absolutely zero issues with police in our 62 days in Baja.

Small towns. We'd read that we should be extra cautious after crossing the border into Tecate. It's a small town with narrow streets and being the first one that we drove into felt a bit confusing. Be careful and come to a dead stop at stop signs. The small-town police are watching U.S. plated vehicles closely y small infraction. Not unlike small towns in the U.S. nor



lights flashing. If you see a police car behind you with their lights on, fear not. If they want to stop you, they will briefly use their siren and you will know it. Otherwise, it's another day in Mexico. Hector likes to say they like their blinky lights.

Bribes. There are lots of stories of people being stopped by police with false charges (or questionable ones) and asked to pay a fee to "take care" of the ticket in advance, or given not so subtle hints to that known in Mexico as a "mordida" (bite). Many people agree that it's best not to s that will only encourage the behavior.



Be respectful and under no circumstances discuss the matter of a bribe. Many

times if you tell them you're willing to pay the fine at the station (not to the officer), the officers will let the charge go, especially if it was questionable to begin with and what they really wanted was a mordida.

Fortunately, we didn't get to test this in Baja. We did, however, have our first instance of this in Cancun when we drove there recently. Hector got pulled over for speeding (he actually was a little but with traffic). The officer explained that it was Saturday and the "station was closed" but we told him we would return on Monday to pay our fine.

He took our license and registration and walked back to his motorcycle, but came back after a bit and said he would "help us out", he seemed to linger a bit, but after a polite pause (where we might have perhaps offered some appreciation but didn't) he let us off with a "warning".



Police Guns and Military. You will occasionally see trucks driving around with groups of police or

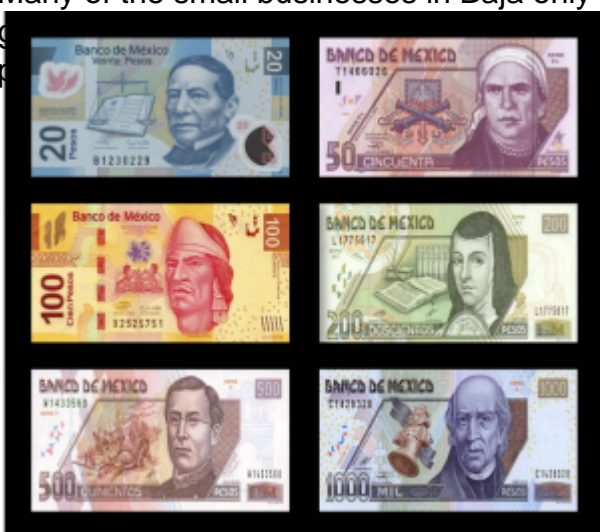
soldiers standing in the bed of the truck all with bulletproof vests and carrying rifles or even mounted machine guns. This does not generally mean something has happened it is just the way police show their presence sometimes.

Checkpoints There are occasional random checkpoints (some permanent, some temporary) where military or police will stop you and ask you some questions. Again, nothing to worry about, as this is just a form of security. They will usually ask you where you came from, where you're headed to, how long you'll be staying etc. and perhaps make other conversation (they did with us, since we speak Spanish). It's just their way of giving you a closer look.



Pesos

Many of the small businesses in Baja only accept cash, and though some accept dollars, they will give you a less favorable rate. You will usually pay more for the convenience of dollars. Always have pesos all the time to get the most for your money.



This last year the exchange rate has fluctuated from 18.5

to 20 pesos to the dollar and we've seen exchange rates posted at stores anywhere from 16 to 18 pesos to the dollar. There is an app called "Dollar to Peso" that we found useful to check the most current exchange rate and for quick calculations.

It's also important to keep a certain amount of smaller bills as some businesses will not have change. And to also have some coins on hand (mainly 5 and 10 peso) for tips. Not only is it customary to give tips to servers at restaurants, but a modest tip to gas station attendants (all gas stations are full serve) and baggers at grocery stores is appropriate.

We got our first pesos at Ensenada by withdrawing from a bank ATM. ATMs generally use the best exchange rate, but you should always double check. Use ATMs in banks if you are able to and avoid random ATMs in the middle of nowhere. Skimming is not uncommon.

Many Mexicans get paid on the 15th and end of each month. If you are withdrawing money on those days, you may find that the ATMs have run out of money. And yes, this did happen to us, fortunately we don't wait until we're out of money to withdraw more.

Shopping and Restaurants

Value Added Tax. Unlike in the U.S., all pricing in Mexico already includes the sales tax, it is called the Value Added Tax or IVA (Impuesto al Valor Agregado). So, for example, in stores the price shown is the total price you will pay. When you look at pricing on a menu, those are the exact amounts that you will be charged on your bill.



Tipping. The

"standard" tip in Mexico is 10%. We usually tip between 10% at food trucks and 15% at casual less. It's illegal in Mexico to include tip on the bill, but it can happen. gated to pay the tip.



expressed in grams and volume in liters. Produce usually shows pricing for one kilogram, which is equal to 2.2 pounds. If ordering meat from a butcher or anything where you need to communicate a weight, it's good to know that one pound equals about 480 grams.

Groceries. Since we arrived in Mexico with very few food items, we stocked up on food and liquor once we reached the first big city, Ensenada. They have a Costco and big supermarkets there and you can shop "American style".

Once you head further south, you may find that some places just have small grocery stores but you may also find specialty markets such as "fruterias" for fresh fruits and vegetables and "panaderias" for breads etc. I highly recommend the fruterias! Once you get used to this you may even prefer to shop



Washing Fruits

and Vegetables. I always play it very safe with fruit and vegetables that don't have to be peeled nor cooked. I purchased a vegetable disinfectant, Bac-Dyn was the brand, that is sold in most grocery stores. There are others and they are usually found in the produce section. There are also other more natural methods to disinfect like soaking in vinegar that I haven't tried. And some people just rinse their vegetables and have no issues. I, however, have a sensitive stomach so I don't take chances.

Milk and Eggs. Unlike in the U.S. eggs are not usually refrigerated. The pasteurization process in Mexico is different and they are safe to eat without refrigeration. You can refrigerate them if you like, but once you do that they must continue to be refrigerated. I personally was happy that eggs didn't have to take up space in the refrigerator.

Milk is also pasteurized using a different process and is sold in airtight cartons that only need to be refrigerated once opened. Again, it was nice to buy a large amount of milk and not worry about refrigeration or spoilage.

You may also find refrigerated eggs and/or milk, and if you prefer those just keep them refrigerated.

Time Zones

This is fun. The Baja California Peninsula is in two different time zones. The state of Baja California is in the Pacific Time Zone and Baja California Sur is in the Mountain Time Zone.



savings time occurs at a different time in both states, which caught us off guard for a bit after we crossed the border between states.

The state of Baja California observes daylight savings time on the same timeline as the U.S., along with municipalities in nine other border states.

The state of Baja California Sur, however, observes Mexican daylight savings timeframes and “spring forward” to daylight savings about three to four weeks later than the U.S., and “fall back” about a week earlier than the U.S.. This will only matter if you’re traveling between March and April or late October to early November.

Get all that? From a little while there we honestly weren't sure what time it was.



Just a brief note about the weather. We were surprised to

find that it was a bit colder than expected in much of the peninsula. Of course, we started out in February so perhaps that shouldn't have been surprising. Anyway, we ran our heater on many nights but speaking for myself I am a wimp when it comes to cold, others may be more tolerant.

We still recommend that you take light jackets and layers. It wasn't until we were in La Paz, which is



So there you have

it, our list of things to be aware of in Baja. Don't let any of this scare you off. Baja is fantastic. Its remoteness requires a bit of extra effort but you will be rewarded.

Here is a list of some useful resources with their links:

- [Green Angels](#) – information on how to reach them
- [Mexico Road Signs](#)
- [Mexico Time Zones](#)
- [Weatherspark](#) – link to both states for average temperatures in various cities
- [Spanish Names of Stores and Shops](#) – also includes some shopping vocabulary
- [Metric Conversion Charts](#)

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Category

1. RV fulltimers

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