

# You're Never Alone in

by Scott Bloom

**B**ill Nichols is seated in the dining room of *Alfonsina's*, in Gonzaga Bay, after a long day of making new single-track trails in Baja, California. Having dinner with him are Kacey Smith and her parents, Bill and Linda. The iconic Nichols is known amongst moto riders in Baja for his signature routes in central Baja, including the flagship piece which bears his name. Smith (a.k.a. "The Lizard Lady") has spent 25 years in Gonzaga, her second home, and is famous for her *BAJA GPS Guidebook* series. They're all a very pleasant bunch, and nice enough to share their table with anyone willing to exchange their moto adventures of the day. You start to shrug when one of them wonders why you would ride off road from Tijuana to La Paz alone, "And, you're going solo *because?*"

"Freedom," is your one-word answer.

While it may seem unconventional to pre-run the *BAJA 1000* course without a buddy or any support, you explain that it's not really as dangerous as it may seem. Kind of like an optical illusion to trick your friends at home. Bill and Kacey know that almost any other time of the year, being alone in the middle of any remote Baja route raises the morbidity rate among soloists. But the week before the *BAJA 1000* is an exception; if you stay on the course and run into serious trouble, at least someone should be coming down the same route within a few hours. Even if whether they can

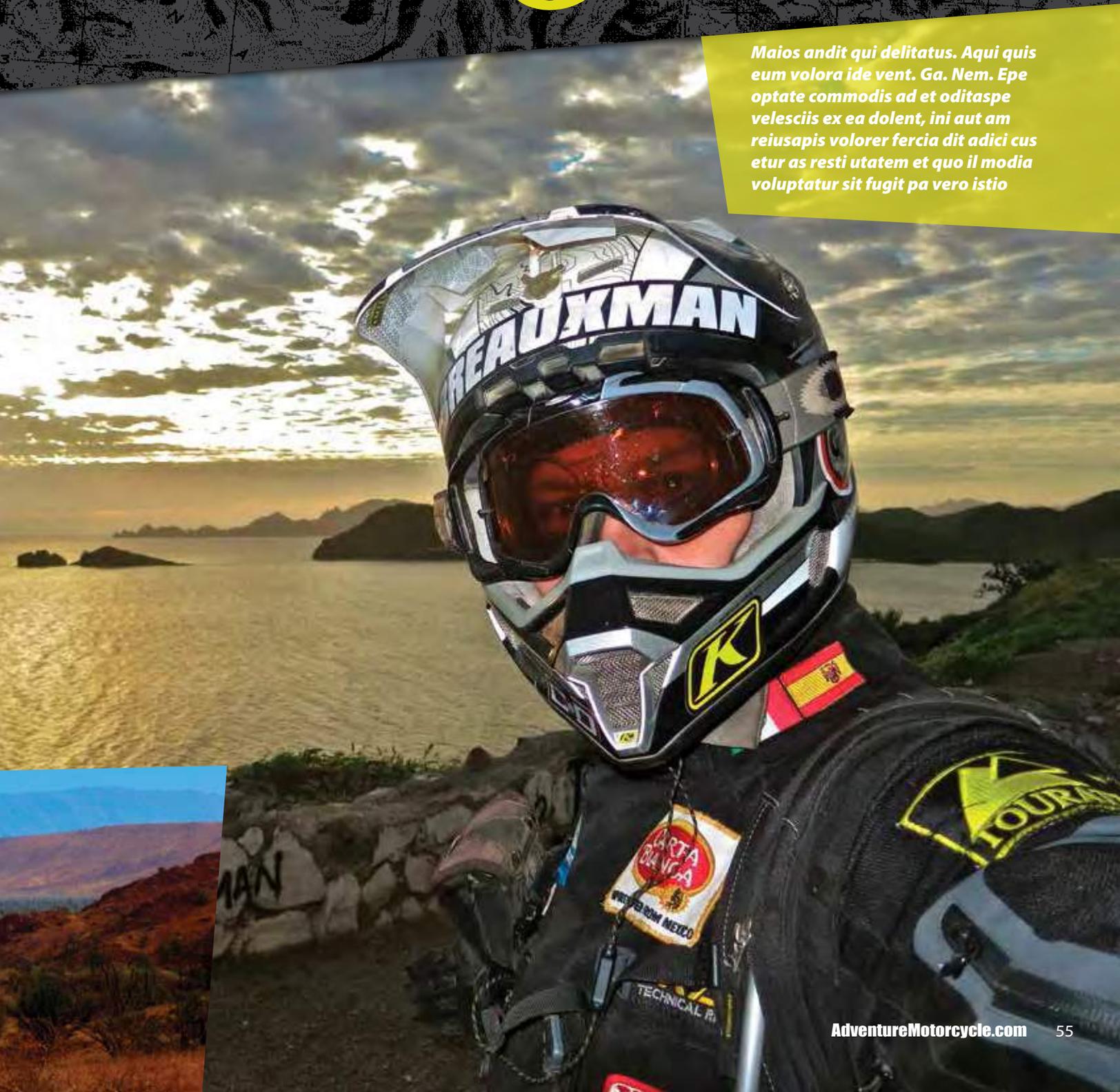
do anything to help you is another question.

The HID headlamp lights the way, straight down the fast-graded road alongside the crack of dawn. It's cold outside, but you're just getting warmed up and settled in on Day Two. You'll be in the saddle for ~~ten~~ more hours today, all of them off-road except about a 23-mile stretch of pavement into Baja de Los Angeles, for a short "break" before a scheduled fuel and water stop. Staying on schedule has merit on this trip. In just a few days, the world-famous *BAJA 1000* will pass through and with it, the speed, adrenaline and other psychological effects of horsepower and high fructose corn syrup. But for now you have the *BAJA 1000* race course all to yourself. There are no rules. Instead, common laws of sensibility, not riding fast enough to hurt yourself, and remembering that you're riding directly into a potential head-on with local traffic. When the coast is clear, though, you can really let your mind wander, and after a while you realize that's *the reason* you're here in the first place.

Next stop, *Coco's Corner*, the remote junction outpost made famous by the documentary film *Dust to Glory*, and the thousands of visitors who have passed by and signed Coco's visitor logs. It's light outside. There, you stop only briefly to unzip sleeves, change goggles, and make friends with some racers camped out there for "pre-running." Five minutes later you're off and up to speed, ultra-comfortable and keeping momentum on your side. A warm breakfast awaits nearly 100 miles ahead.

# Bajaja

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some of the southern towns, *steekers* are not optional, and the tenacious kids will shake you down. Inevitably, the further south you ride, the demand for your *steekers* rises as fast as your supply dwindles.

Baja's very unique landscape offers some idiosyncrasies found in many of the world's most sought-out adventure destinations. Because of the long, narrow shape of this peninsula, the third longest on earth, the landscape is constantly changing, and savvy riders must always be ready to adapt to changing weather. The terrain varies and switches back and forth from decomposing granite, pine forests, sand washes, mountains, valleys, canyons, beaches, silt, shale, volcano, and salt flats. Because you are conscious of your surroundings, you are now somewhat of a geologist, botanist and meteorologist—all wrapped into your riding persona.

You wake up in Loreto, and it seems like your best Christmas morning ever. The reason for your elation: The brilliant ingenuity and tenacity of the Emmanuel Palacios, the young and resourceful mechanic in Loreto who so effectively pounded a \$3 wheel bearing into your damaged rear hub. It all happened yesterday, 15 miles north of Loreto, where you almost seemed "alone" in the jungle-like terrain there. But, you pulled it together and rode out—in second gear the entire way.

Something important is learned just before your first Baja mission is accomplished: Off-road is the national sport and pastime of Baja (trumping both *fútbol* and baseball), primarily because it's an unavoidable way of life for anyone living outside of her major cities. Accordingly, when it comes to anything mechanical or to do with tire repair, the resourceful people of Baja are exceptional improvisers. Not only do they make do on limited resources, but



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**"Need a pull quote here.  
Maybe this long?"**



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they can also fix most anything that rolls or floats. In the case of your rear wheel, Palaos and his tenacious brand of “Mexineering,” save your trip—and prevent your hitchhiking all the way to La Paz with a busted-up bike.

No. Instead you motor out of Loreto, on your final day, toward La Paz... and it looks as if it's going to be the best day ever. As a concession, you let your ego go and realize it is best to stay on the highway for the morning before rejoining the *BAJA 1000* route further south. This is usually the longest and sometimes the roughest part of any “peninsula run,” and your detour bypasses 50 miles of bumpy sand whoops for as far as your eye can see. You've been there and done that, though, so you decide to capitalize on your last day... and maybe make a new friend or two.

Speaking of covering miles, you glance down to notice you're about to ride the thousandth mile of your journey. *Hey look!*—there's a roadside *tienda* (shop) up ahead. You park and take off enough gear to settle in for an hour or two. The woman who runs it is Olivia, along with her great dog, Alex. She makes burritos and serves coffee. The entire time you're listening to her story you play with the dog and take photos. Olivia tells her story, along with the sad twists and turns it's taken. She sobs as she recounts, but you help by reminding her that we all make life what it is... and will be. And, as you motor off toward the Pacific coast, you reflect on the nice lady and the memorable breakfast, wondering if she'll ever be “Alone in Baja.”

The highway is long and straight, and your mind wanders introspectively... perhaps to ponder failed relationships, the weakness in your golf swing, or that new business plan you've intended to write. Your heart races with the speed, and your mind bounces back and forth, sometimes thanking you for missing the 50 miles of sand whoops just to the west. You're almost in La Paz—you've been here before, solo, but not alone.

Now it's time to cut back to the coast and rejoin the *BAJA 1000* course for the final miles. At Punta Conejo you find ideal riding conditions along with sunshine and cool breezes. You've ridden this section several times before, but it always ends up being somehow longer. Baja is so easy to look at on the map—but, it's always longer than you remember. That's what makes it so mysterious... even though you wonder what will be different this time.

These last 20 miles are not easy—and the final five are just plain tough. You know you're getting close, though, when you begin to taste the “sweetest aroma” in the world—the burning of plastic and trash. You're near the municipal landfill outside of La Paz, and will soon be receiving your trophies: two ceviche tostadas from the Bizmark, on the waterfront malecon. Your final miles are toughest because you know it's coming to an end, and you won't have the excuse of blaming your schedule, or the bike race for your absence. No. The escape is over... for now. **ADV**

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