



The men and women who enter the **Baja 500** know before they start their engines not to expect smooth roads, packed grandstands or handy pit lanes, just the challenges of the beautiful but unforgiving **Baja California** desert.

PHOTO: BOYD JAYNES / TRANSTOCK / CORBIS; FILO; ISTOCK (DIRT TEXTURE)



# Sand in the Cracks

One of the harshest tests for man - and machine - is the **Baja 500**. Every year, the hundreds of drivers the race attracts push themselves and their vehicles over roughly 800 non-stop kilometres across the Baja California desert. It's madness. The story begins around midnight.  
*By* JUDY SMITH



# "Which way? Which way?"

shouts the driver, Luivan Voelker, as he wipes his face shield and peers into the foggy night. Through the darkness he sees shadowy figures silhouetted against roaring bonfires. Where's the road he should be on? Why can't he find any of the direction markers that will tell him where to turn? He can't use the GPS as it quit working after the water crossing, so he has to rely on the signs - but there aren't any.

He is trying to find his way to the finish line of the SCORE Baja 500, an annual event that has drawn as many as 438 entrants to the Mexican city of Ensenada in Baja California Norte, the top half of the beautiful and mostly empty Baja peninsula. The number in the title refers to 500 miles (804 kilometres), but the course is sometimes shorter.

From Ensenada, where the race starts, our frazzled driver has driven his race car for about 640 kilometres, through brush-covered hills, searingly hot desert, chilly mountains, streams and seemingly endless silt. Then he hit the Pacific coast where fog made it hard to see. Now, within a few kilometres of the finish line he has discovered that the brightly coloured arrows that have been helping him find his way are no longer marking the route. They've been taken as souvenirs by race fans, the ones standing around those bonfires. The driver will just have to wing it, and trust the spectators to point out the right road.

## Adventure? Guaranteed

"You've got to be a little adventurous. You've gotta be able to enjoy rolling the dice a little bit - playing with the unknown a little," says Rod Hall, the only racer who's managed to compete in every Baja 1000 (the big brother of the 500) since the first

one in 1967. He's also raced in most of the Baja 500s and has built up a record number of victories. Since 1970, he has compiled 18 wins in various classes in the Baja 500 - and he has another 18 victories on record in the Baja 1000. The most recent was June this year, when he and his partner, Mike Winkel, took the win in the Stock Mini class in their H3 Hummer. "Baja opens up your eyes so much," says Hall, "and once you get out in the open, you have the complete feeling of freedom."

To prepare, drivers usually spend three or four days in the wilds of Baja, reconnoitering or "pre-running" the racecourse. They drive their off-road vehicles (trucks, bikes, quads, pre-runner buggies) around the racecourse at an easy



While the organisation of the Baja races has improved since 1973 the going certainly still gets rough. The 2008 edition of the Baja 500 took the racers on a 709-km tour of the northern part of the peninsula. The drivers had to pass four pitstops.



MAP ILLUSTRATION: EMILY COOPER; PHOTO: TRACKSIDE



## BUGS TO BIGS

Cars racing the Baja 500 range from the Stock Volkswagen Class introduced in 1974 to the Trophy Truck Class which started in 1994. The humble Bugs use standard Beetle parts, and allow entry level (read cash-strapped) racers to compete at relatively sedate speeds. The unlimited Trophy Trucks are built on tube frames, with massive engines, huge amounts of wheel travel and top speeds of over 220 kilometres per hour.



PHOTO: TRACKSIDE / TRANSTOCK / ALAMY / GETTY IMAGES





The **class winners of the 1974** edition of the Baja 500 on parade (top left). Overall victor Bobby Ferro sits in his VW-powered Sandmaster Funco buggy (bottom). **Judy Smith**, the author of this article, stands beside her broken-down vehicle during the 1981 edition of the race (top right).

PHOTOS (FROM TOP LEFT): © 2007 TRACKSIDE PHOTO; JUDY SMITH; TRACKSIDE; TRACKSIDE

pace, trying to memorise it, and give their navigators a chance to see it before the going gets gritty. But even though the racers carry GPS units to help them navigate, they have limitations. For one thing, they can quit working if they get wet. Besides that, GPS devices can't tell the driver if a broken vehicle is parked on the course. They can't spot a wandering cow either.

Which is why - until they are taken for souvenirs - the entire length of the course will have been marked with arrows, reflective stickers, brightly coloured ribbons, danger warnings and mile markers. It's hard to get lost, but there are plenty of other things that can happen. "You challenge the desert, the vehicle and your common sense all at the same time," smiles Hall, "and you're in a competition too - you have to have the desire to win."

#### Forty Years of Madness

The first Baja event, the Baja 1000, was staged on October 31, 1967 by the National Off Road Racing Associ-

ation (NORRA), a US-based organisation. Starting in Tijuana, just across the border from San Diego in the US state of California, it finished in La Paz, near the tip of the Baja California peninsula, a distance of some 1,500 kilometres. The race generated a huge amount of interest, and the racers came back with a lifetime of stories to tell.

The promoters had no hesitation in planning another race the next November, and by 1969, interest had grown to such a degree that NORRA decided to make it a twice-yearly event, except that the springtime race, the Baja 500, would be shorter, with both the start and finish in Ensenada. In all other respects it's the same type of race as the Baja 1000, but support crews (that can range from none - just the co-driver - to eight extra trucks equipped with spare parts and tools) have an easier time as the distance is shorter.

Promoted by organiser SCORE International since 1974, these two are the landmark events but other races have been established, such as the

### Bugs, Bikes and Dirt Through the Years

#### 1967

First Baja 1000, promoted by the National Off Road Racing Association, began in Tijuana and ended in La Paz. Won by Vic Wilson and Ted Mangels in a two-wheel drive VW buggy.



#### 1969

NORRA launches Baja 500, won by Bud Elkins and Guy Jones in the Baja Boot.

#### 1970

Rod Hall wins the Baja 500 in a four-wheel drive vehicle. He continues to race and now has 18 Baja 500 victories. He currently races in a Hummer.

#### 1972

Larry Roeseler wins his first Baja 500, on a motorcycle. He has a total of 16 wins in motorcycle, truck and unlimited classes.



#### 1974

SCORE begins long-term sponsorship. Bobby Ferro wins in a VW-powered Sandmaster Funco single-seat buggy. Course marked for first time.



#### 1976

New categories added, including Class 11 for Stock VW Sedans. Class for motorcycle racers over the age of 30 added.



PHOTO: COBBIS

## TORTOISE AND HARE

Baja racers need a high degree of self-assurance, a well-developed sense of humour, patience to an extreme degree and a high threshold for personal discomfort. Baja legend Rod Hall says deciding which of the 18 car and truck classes to race in is the first challenge. The next most tricky part is finding race support, technical help and funding. But the hardest choice is always: "What's fast enough?"

"You can't let someone else determine how fast you're going to run your race," says Hall. In this year's Baja 500 race, many competitors passed him early in the day, but then had problems and needed to stop and make extensive repairs. "At the end I won because I didn't have to stop and work on my car."





San Felipe 250, which starts from the Gulf of California coast of Baja, to cater for the terminally addicted.

From the start, the races were an exhilarating mix of speed and adventure. Much of the adventure centred on finding the quickest way to the finish line. The early courses were not marked, except for the occasional pile of rocks or cactus-speared beer can put there to remind racers that a turn or a hazard was just ahead. Adding to the adventure was also the possibility that the vehicles might break down, or hit something very hard, or fall into a hole. But the entries still came piling in year after year.

“We love the challenge of coaxing a 40-year-old car hundreds of miles across the Mexico deserts,” says long-time VW racer Jim Graham, who like many drivers takes part to boost a deserving charity - in his case World Diabetes Day. “And the fans are always tremendously supportive.”

Again and Again

Still, trying to pinpoint the reason racers come back so regularly is difficult. Hall says that at the end of a race all the drivers are tired, and usually feel they have “had enough.” Never again, they say. But then, after resting for a while, they start thinking about next year’s adventure; they just know it will be different next time, he says. The car’s condition, the weather and the other competitors: each has an impact on the race, and will make things different and hopefully easier next time. That’s what draws him, and countless others back again and again.

However, to be successful as a Baja racer you have to be aware of consequences. “If I make a mistake



- if, say, I go too fast and the car breaks - it’ll be my responsibility to fix it and get going again,” says Hall. Which means that despite technology having lightened the impact of problems, racing in Baja continues to be a mix of adventure and speed.

GPS units combined with course markings make it hard to get lost. Satellite and radio communications systems allow nearly instant tracking of every vehicle and permit racers to call for spare parts or assistance. But the desert is still a harsh place. “When you leave the line your whole spectrum changes. You find you are quickly disintegrating your whole vehicle,” says Hall.

And technology can’t take away the magic of Baja racing. Watching the sunrise on the second day of racing is a memorable moment, and there’s nothing quite like the glow of moonlight on the empty desert as a terminally fatigued driver makes his way to the finish line. Even if he doesn’t exactly know the way. ■

Baja legend **Rod Hall** has raced in every Baja 1000 and most Baja 500s. The 38 years between these pictures being taken in 1970 and this year have been kind to Hall, who holds a record **18 Baja 500 class victories**. While Hall’s latest victory came this year in a **Hummer** (above), drivers take on the desert in a variety of vehicles, including modified pick-up trucks (opposite page top) and buggies (opposite page bottom).

PHOTO: © TRANSTOCK INC. / ALAMY



PHOTOS: © TRANSTOCK INC. / ALAMY



**1978** Mexicans score first wins: Mike Leon and Javier Tiznado in Baja Bug class; Jesus Luna and Aurelio Alvarez in VW sedan class.



**1994** First year for Trophy Truck class - trucks built on tube frames with big motors and huge amounts of wheel travel. Often produces overall winner.



**1990** Class 50 added for drivers over 50 years of age. Won by Al Guzman.

**2006** A record 438 starters line up for Baja 500, with 222 finishing the race. Senior citizens get their own Class 60.

**2008** Mark Lindsay in a Polaris RZR becomes first driver to finish Baja 500 in the UTV Class for small side-by-side vehicles.