

Surviving the Baja 1000

Skirts, girdles, and catheters



From the April, 2003 issue of Motor Trend

"You're about to experience a most incredible adventure. You must expect at all times to encounter oncoming traffic. You must be alert that there are many cows, calves, bulls, horses, and goats roaming freely on and around the course. All competitors are reminded that off-road racing is an inherently dangerous activity that can result in serious injury or even death. Due to weather, animals, and people, [we] do not guarantee that all [course] markings will still be up on race day. Be advised that spectators on or near the racecourse may engage in malicious activities by building ramps, digging ditches, and/or placing objects onto the course. Once the race starts, it's outta my hands--you're on your own, or, in other words, the lunatics will, indeed, be running the asylum. Good luck and have fun!"

That's how Sal Fish, CEO/president of the race's sanctioning body, SCORE International, put it during the driver briefing the night before the 2002 Tecate SCORE Baja 1000 race. Thought: "What the hell have I gotten myself--and Baja-experienced co-driver/ photog David Newhardt--into?"



The opportunity to participate in this form of desert mayhem came courtesy of Yokohama Geolander and Wide Open Adventures, aka, Wide Open Baja. A few years back, WOB certified a herd of two-person, [Porsche](#)-powered race buggies to compete in their own class in the Baja 1000. This year they coyly asked if we'd like a little fun in the sun and drive one leg--a little over 200 miles--in "The Baja," as it's been called for the past 35 years. Well, why not? They promised an unforgettable weekend. No kidding.



What is The Baja? Technically, it's a thousand-mile (mostly) off-road race through Mexico, from one end of the Baja Peninsula to the other. This year, the race began in Ensenada and ended 1017.31 miles away in La Paz. The day before the race day is called "contingency" day, when each race vehicle must be brought through official tech inspection by the driver and co-driver

scheduled to start the race--that's us. The reality of the day is something altogether different.

What actually ensues can be loosely described as a Mexican block party with gratuitous Tecate girls dancing on bandstands, tented vendors selling everything from deep-fried churros to rebuilt transmissions and mistranslated Baja 1000 T-shirts. After speaking to a Baja veteran, it turned out we lacked a few essential race supplies, and the vendors had exactly what our last-minute shopping list required: Mechanix Wear gloves that double as driving gloves, earplugs to cut down on the six-hour engine drone, and a "slip-on" catheter to afford bleeding-off a certain bodily fluid at full race speed.

As luck would have it, the same vendor's trailer had all three of the items on our list. "I'll be taking these earplugs, those red gloves, size medium, and one of those catheters, please."

"What size do you need?"

"Aren't all earplugs the same size?"

"No, the catheter. What size?"

"You got anything bigger than a large?"

"Nope, all we have left are these mediums."

"Uh, I guess I'll have to make do with one of those."

Page said, "I'll take three, please."



Each race buggy was equipped with a driver-to-co-driver and buggy-to-base radio plus a filtered fresh-air supply pumped into both helmets. Combined with a Lowrance GPS system, these few components proved to be lifesavers--quite



literally. Newhardt and I sat five-point-belted into BC7 in front of the Riviera Convention Center. In a lineup according to the event's fastest-to-slowest starting order, Baja Challenge cars staged about midfield.

"Newhardt, you got your girdle [kidney belt] on?"

"Yeppers." "Helmet skirt, earplugs, and catheter on?"

"Check, check, and double check." "GPS on and route book?"

"Up and ready." Let's race!

Sooner than I had expected, my bladder sent an unambiguous message: Now or never. With four cars in front of us at 30-second intervals and exiting the vehicle not being an option, I had exactly two minutes to answer the call. The instant I'd committed and was, ahem, midstream in the moment, a man broke away from the crowd. "Hey!" he yelled over the raspy air-cooled motor. "You're leaking fluid!" All I could yell back was, "Yes. Yes, I am."

After we got a sincere handshake and "Good Luck!" from Sal Fish at the starting line, the timer announced, "Five, four, three, two, one, GO!" BC7 was underway. Plan A was to never lose sight of the car that had left a mere 30 seconds before us. Piloting BC6 was five-time Baja champion Ryan Thomas. If I could just lock onto him and follow his line, I'd keep us in the race and probably learn a few things along the way, right? Wrong. I never saw BC6 again.



Plan B was to rely on our prerunning notes for the first 20 miles of the race, which we had carefully highlighted. We came drifting around a blind left corner (in a beautiful slide, I might add) to find a mass of spectators crowded around a modestly sized water crossing. Hard on the brakes, I managed to scrub off what I thought was enough speed to cross with a minimal splash, yet maintain some forward momentum. When the wave of chocolate-milk-like ooze came bounding through the front of the car (where a windshield would normally reside) and flooded our laps, I knew we were in over two feet of trouble.

Plan C developed somewhere around race-mile 60. We regained the use of our radio after it had dried out in the Mexican heat--more than we could say for our driving suits or route book. From here on out, we'd rely solely on GPS routing which WOB had preprogrammed into each BC car. Accurate to about the width of a car, all we needed to do was to stay on the squiggly black line, while avoiding the skull-and-crossbones icons. Aptly indicating what I discovered were only the most life-threatening of hazards, these nasty icons peppered our screens at various intervals, from several times in a mile to once every 10 miles. Dave would announce, "Hazard! Quarter mile ahead after ninety-degree left. Eight-hundred-feet, four-hundred feet...", and so on until I slowed to a crawl only to discover a 10-foot boulder, a five-foot-deep river wash, or "vado," a sheer cliff, or all three in succession. Like I said: GPS = lifesaving device.

More surprises presented themselves after we'd been racing for a couple hours. First was the appearance of the tops of our two front tires. It turned out I hadn't even been working the suspension hard enough to use all two feet of travel. And

whaddaya know? The buggy actually got easier to drive and more pleasant the faster and harder I threw it at ditches, rocks, and jumps.

As I was demonstrating my newfound confidence to Newhardt--who replied with a "No [kidding], Sherlock"--our buggy was thumped really, really hard from behind. A faster guy had been behind us for some time, and we hadn't heard his distant horn beeping. Bam, bam, BAM! After the third such encounter with race traffic, I decided we wouldn't be passed again.

Plan D: Pedal down and dust plume flying, we picked up the pace. We began passing other racers. In all, we probably made five passes and enjoyed the hell out of each one. Love Plan D. I'd be lying if I didn't say that I was having the time of my life at this point in the race. I was using all the suspension, all the engine, and all my skill simultaneously, without thinking. Call it what you like: driving nirvana, Baja zen. Driving the Baja felt like an endless string of unconsummated car wrecks--only hours of seat time, muscle memory, ample suspension, and a proficient co-driver kept me from wadding up the buggy at every turn.



We soon discovered that our supposed route through the city of San Felipe (race-mile 181) was actually through the city dump of San Felipe. Apparently, the race organizers had driven an earthmover through the dump in two directions, pushing all manner of discarded home appliances to the sides of a 30-foot-wide swath of semi-clean dirt. Either side of the path was hedged by a 10-foot-high pile of debris and a curious number of spectators. Newhardt yelled, "Look out for that cardboard box!" I pitched the car into a slide to avoid the object. That was no box--it was a television set! Then we saw a Frigidaire, a Toro, a Sunbeam, and other assorted name-brand junk. It was as if we were driving through the San Felipe Home Depot at 60 mph.

Finally, a straight, flat stretch with no hazards indicated on the unfailing GPS screens. This was the picture of Baja I had in my head before we'd started. As fast as BC7 would run in top gear, we floated over the landscape at an indicated 72 mph for what seemed like 10 minutes. Dave finally called out, "Ninety-degree left in a quarter mile," and, true to form, there was a great big metal fence in our path.

The last dozen miles before the driver swap at Puertecitos were possibly the most punishing. The smooth, silty dirt was replaced with melon-size white rocks and shale dispersed over undulating terrain. Paul Page's threats echoed in my ears. Even at a reduced speed, we nearly drove right past the Wide Open Baja pit zone: Ten crew members waiting in the middle of nowhere with spare tires, a welder, 50-gallon barrels of race fuel, and bottled water. We pulled in, hopped out, and the crew went to work. They found a loose alternator mount and an oil filter

dangling from its supply and return lines. The bracket was removed and welded on the spot and the oil filter fixed in place with a few industrial zip ties.

Newhardt and I debriefed the next duo just as the sun was setting, "The GPS is great, but it lags behind by about a hundred feet. The brakes are good, but they've been spongy all day and need at least two to three pumps before they work. The suspension and Yokohama tires are miraculous. We only touched the skidplates once or twice and we haven't lost a pound of air in six hours. Good luck and have fun!" BC7 left in a cloud of dust. It turned out we'd passed two of our teammates who'd broken down along the way. This means we made up two positions in six hours.



There were 234 starters, competing in 24 professional and five sportsman classes for cars, trucks, motorcycles, and ATVs. Just 151, or 64 percent, finished before the 40-hour time limit elapsed. The winning truck made the trek in 16 hours, 19 minutes, and 3 seconds. Their record-setting average speed was 62.34 mph, or just 0.11 mph slower than the overall winner who made the trip on a motorcycle.



Our team from Wide Open Baja entered seven identical buggies this year, and they all finished. The fastest WOB covered the Baja Peninsula in 23:31:20, or just over 43 mph. Our BC7 lost the two places we made up and finished last-in-class with a 32:17:18 overall time. According to WOB, this is the first time in the 35-year history of the Baja that a manufacturer of a four-wheeler posted a 100-percent

finishing record with multiple vehicles.

Running even just a portion of the Baja 1000 was at once the most life-threatening and life-affirming experience I've ever had--and I can't wait to do it again. Perhaps with fewer TV sets in the road this time. And I'll bring my own catheter.

Read more:

http://www.motortrend.com/features/112_0304_baja/printer_friendly.html#ixzz0zYvgSgph