

# BREAKING BONES IN BAJA



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**THE LAST TIME I TRIED SERIOUS OFF-**roading I busted three ribs and a foot. I'd negotiated a rock-strewn canyon and emerged above the rim of Searles Valley when I suddenly choked up in sand. My moron mind had made me look down. Never look down! I augered the front wheel deep, until the big 1200 GSA corkscrewed and flipped. My Forma Adventure boot folded, twisting and snapping my ankle. I hit the ground hard. Gasping, I rolled on my back and stared at the sky as I lay dazed amid a bed of not-so-cuddly teddy bear cactus.

A remote mountain in California's Mojave Desert is not a good place to break bones. Next time I'll slow down. Stay focused on the horizon. Swap the Michelin Pilots for more appropriate tires. Or maybe I just needed more practice. Perhaps on a long ride down Mexico's Baja California peninsula, I mused, as I hobbled around on my crutches.

Baja California. It fired my imagination like a heat-haze hovering between hallucination and reality on the distant desert horizon. When my buddy JD Smith called, inviting me to join him for a two-week adventure to Cabo, I hopped excitedly like a Mexican kangaroo rat in estrus. I envisioned Baja's savage beauty unfurling as if in an IMAX movie as we cruised down Highway 1, with occasional feral forays away from the hardtop.

"We're gonna do a lot of off-roading," JD added, ominously. "You'll need to change your tires. Get some Metzeler Karoos. They're good on the GSAs in the soft stuff." Uh-oh! JD is a motorcycle riding instructor. He's explored Baja eight times. In 2015 he even crossed the fabled Darien Gap on a bike. Now JD wanted to scout a new Baja route for his tour company, RTW Moto Tours. I realized I was on a steep learning curve as JD and the brutal desert promised to hone me into a badass adventure rider.

September 26 started out well as we

roared south down I-10 from Palm Springs for Calexico and the Mexican border. I'd never crossed the frontier and was amazed that no official stopped us or asked for our papers. Just a slow ride through the metal-studded border chicane and we emerged into rough-edged Mexicali.

We cruised west along Federal Highway 20 and rocketed up the long, sweeping grade—sinuous as a culebra—that spiraled from sea level to deposit us at a 1,200-meter elevation atop the ridgeline of the Sierra de Juárez. JD cut a helluva pace, leaving no chance to soak in the views. My toes scraped



asphalt unnervingly as I leaned my GSA into the bends arcing through what poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti called "a fantastic mountain landscape of nothing but stone."

I savored the wonderfully temperate weather as we lunched in La Rumarosa, far above the oven-hot desert floor. We were now up amid juniper and Jeffrey pine at the northern gateway to Parque Nacional Constitución de 1857. I'd done a little research. The area was described as "a formidable barrier between the eastern and western parts of the peninsula" and the "roughest part of Baja's rugged terrain." A mountain domain of bighorn sheep, mule deer, and cougar.

The remote park—a place of stark, lonely grandeur—is accessed by "a challenging unpaved road" (Lonely Planet) and rough trails. We adjusted our ESA pre-loads and hit the track on the pegs. The sandy trail

rolled and pitched through a grandly chaotic landscape studded with fantastical granite boulders. The boulder gardens were interspersed between alpine meadows cut through by sand-filled washes and deep rock-strewn arroyos. Soon we were hammering over washboard and through deeper pools of glistening granitic sand. A couple of times I felt the front wheel lose traction and slide. Then the Metzeler dug in and momentum kept the Beemer on course.

"We'll be in sand much of the way, perhaps ten inches deep in places. We'll paddle through. Keep your eyes up!" JD had admonished. He was setting a pretty fast pace. But I kept to his tail. I felt confident, comfortable, steering and balancing the bike with my hips and shifts on the pegs as the cobwebs since my last off-road adventure receded. Then, ninety minutes into the ride, I went down. Hard. Fast. And totally unexpected.

I was riding on hard-pack with my forefinger covering the brake when my front wheel wavered in an unanticipated patch of sand. I can't explain what happened. I guess I instinctively—and stupidly—touched the brake. In a millisecond the front wheel dug in and slammed sideways as the rear end spun the tail around and flung the bike on its side. I sensed my left leg being twisted beneath the BMW as it fell. Had it gone under the pannier? I felt no pain, but was acutely conscious of surreal déjà vu, as if replaying a familiar film in slow motion. As the dust settled and my mind came into focus, I lay on my back in the soft sand, knowing that my vacation had ended.

I levered off my helmet and crab-crawled on my back to shut off the ignition. There was no point in trying to stand. I could feel my lower leg loosely detached inside the Sidi Crossfire boot. I raised my head and noted the oddly articulated position of my foot. I wiggled my toes. That seemed a good omen. I couldn't sense the warm, sticky presence of blood. Then I tried raising my knee and through the sudden gnawing ache felt the motion of bone against bone.

floating free in a gelatinous mass. An ugly thought crystallized: This is bad! Still, I felt strangely sanguine as I lay in passive torpor, waiting for JD to acknowledge my absence and return.

I tried to roll the film forward. Thank God I'd just bought insurance in case I got hurt in the boondocks, but where was I going to get medical treatment? Good medical treatment! How were we going to get me out of here? We'd passed not a soul. We were miles from the nearest cell tower. Riding pillion with JD was unthinkable.

Twenty minutes passed. Finally I heard the thrum of JD's water-cooled GSA. As JD leaned over me, a Nissan pickup emerged around the bend. ¡Que maravilla! Two Mexicans emerged, brows furrowed in abject concern. We contemplated bundling me onto the back seat. The Mexicans wisely demurred—better to let professional medical staff secure my leg before moving me. They agreed to ride back along the 40 miles of rough track to La Rumarosa to summon an ambulance.

JD helped me get comfortable with my back against the roadside sand ridge. He placed a jar of Ibuprofen by my side. Then he rode off to seek a cellphone hotspot. I

downed four 200mg Ibuprofens, noted the time, then lay in patient silence for almost two hours. I recalled Ted Simon, regaling his tale in *Dreaming of Jupiter*, chomping aspirin against impending pain after breaking his leg while motorcycling in Kenya in 2001. Like him, "I wasn't feeling too proud of my riding skills."

It struck me as amusing that the Cruz Roja ambulance arrived with sirens wailing. I watched laconically as paramedic Leonel Gasca Hinojosa cut away my BMW GS pants. His compañero, Isaias López Granados, signaled to brace myself. I clawed the ground against the agonizing pain as Leonel gripped tight my mushy limb and Isaias wrestled the Sidi boot until the pulpy leg and foot plopped free. They straightened the foot then wrapped it in cardboard, which they folded into a triangle and banded tight as a makeshift brace.

"Where shall we take you?" Leonel asked, as the duo hoisted the gurney into the ambulance.

I reasoned that being medevaced to the USA was my best option. I'd had the foresight to buy insurance in case I got hurt in the boondocks. I wondered if my insurance cover this medevac and how long it would

take to make those arrangements? My priority was to get my leg stabilized.

"The best private hospital around?" I replied.

Thankfully, after a two-hour ride I was wheeled into Hospital Almatel in Mexicali. Good call! By chance, Almatel specializes in orthopedics and is popular with U.S. citizens for medical tourism. Within the hour I was being laid out on a radiology scanner.

"It's a terrible fracture," said orthopedic surgeon Dr. Humberto Carlos Torres. "Almost a rompacabeza," he added, likening it to a jigsaw puzzle. My tibia had been torqued into five dagger-shaped pieces, each fissured with seismic faultlines. My fibula had sliced cleanly in two. Looking at the razor-edge breaks, I felt glad I'd been wearing new Sidi Crossfire 2 boots. Their rigid polyurethane protector plates had surely prevented the bones displacing laterally and tearing through arteries and flesh as my foot and lower leg were violently wrenched.

"It needs surgery, but don't worry. We can fix it," said Dr. Torres, reassuringly. He proposed inserting an intramedullary tibial nail down the shaft of the bones to pin the rompacabeza together. "You'll be walking



again in a month," he added jovially. I liked his confidence.

Then I was informed that Almater wouldn't accept my insurance with UK-based International Medical Group. I'd purchased IMG's Patriot Multi-Trip travel package (good for 365 days travel and medical coverage up to \$1 million) specifically because it insured for injuries incurred while motorcycling. For good measure, I'd also purchased their Adventure Sports Rider.

I figured I was staring at a major hospital bill. Fortunately, the quotes Almater gave me (\$6,400) were insanely cheap by comparison with the USA. My credit cards could pick up the short term. Nonetheless, I was still mulling a medevac to Eisenhower Desert Orthopedic Center, near my home in Palm Springs.

JD had been working the phone with IMG. Next morning IMG declined to medevac me to the USA. Their rep told JD, correctly it appears, that my policy included medevac to the "nearest qualified medical facility" only (that would be Almater) and "the cost of returning to the home country" (that would be post-treatment). I had declined—foolishly in retrospect—to purchase IMG's "Evacuation Plus Rider," providing international medevac for non life-threatening situations. The devil is in the details: My policy medevac coverage pertained to life-threatening situations only.

However, IMG agreed to reimburse all costs incurred in Mexico. Decision made. Next day I was wheeled into the theater and succumbed to the anesthetic full of confidence.

When I awoke, I couldn't feel my leg at all thanks to morphine. It was bandaged up to my groin. Dr. Torres promised I'd be home in two days, during which I could not have received better treatment at Hospital Almater. Kindness and professional attention enveloped me.

What of the bike, still ensconced amid the pines in the mountains? Since U.S. auto insurance is invalid in Mexico, I'd insured the bike with Mexico auto insurance specialist Sanborn. Apparently, I hadn't done my due diligence here either! How had I missed their clearly-publicized disclaimer: "Off-roading is NOT covered." Fortunately, JD proved a trusted friend. I handed him my cash. He hired a taxi and rode out to retrieve the bike. What the hell would I have done without him? The next day, JD

rode my bike home to Palm Springs, accompanied by an Almater concierge shuttle to bring him back to Mexicali. The following day I was released on crutches and driven across the border and home via hospital shuttle, closing a chapter on my wayward Baja adventure.

Unfortunately, IMG was anything but cooperative in response to my claim for reimbursement as I wrestled with a faceless and seemingly robotic bureaucracy. In a letter dated December 13, 2016, for example, IMG requested a copy of all pages of my passport, plus flight ticket receipts, etc. I replied by letter stating that I traveled by land and that no visa/stamp was issued at Calmexico/Mexicali. I provided photographs showing that I was motorcycling when the accident happened. Nonetheless, I provided details of my passport and U.S. insurance coverage (which, of course, does not provide for treatment outside the USA), as requested.

In a statement dated January 24, 2017, IMG denied my claim because I had not provided: a) copies of all my passport pages; b) flight tickets or travel itinerary; c) other insurance's explanation of benefits. Once again I replied, this time with all copies of my passport pages, etc., including further proof of the journey by land (including photographs) and reiterating that my U.S. insurance provided no benefits for treatment in Mexico. IMG sent me another letter stating that it was denying my claim.

Furious at such snake oil treatment, I contacted my friend and consumer travel advocate Christopher Elliott ([www.elliott.org](http://www.elliott.org)) to enlist his support. I copied IMG and started posting my story to social media. That did the trick. After eight months, IMG



paid up. Case resolved! I'd learned some salient lessons about proper trip planning, including the absolute necessity of applicable insurance and doubling down on the fine print.

What a pity I didn't get to experience Baja's kaleidoscopic desert landscapes, nor even set eyes on the Maxfield Parrish hues of the Sea of Cortés. My plans for ten days of big-bike enduro riding had crashed within hours, leaving tormented memories hovering, like chimerical Baja California itself, in that hazy dreamworld between reality and hallucination. ☹

