

WIDE OPEN BAJA

WE RUN 40 PERCENT OF A BAJA 1000 EQUIVALENT, SOUTH FROM ENSENADA

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Wide Open Baja offers incredible off-road experiences for adrenaline junkies. Drive a \$100,000 purpose-built race buggy on the same treacherous dirt and rock trails that comprise the famed Baja 1000 course, and enjoy restful evenings after each day's thrills.

The company offers off-road adventures that kick off in Ensenada or Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Trips range from half-day outings to a four-day, all-inclusive, immersive adventure. For those looking to truly push the envelope, they can even help you run the actual Baja 1000 race.

We headed for the Ensenada route, which kicks off with your arrival in San Diego, California. We were greeted at the airport by our lead driver and instructor, Darrin, who shuttled us across the border into Tijuana and points south.

We kicked off our three-day trip through Northern Baja with a fantastic oceanside lunch of chile rellenos and margaritas at Gary's La Fonda, as we

made our way south from Tijuana to Ensenada.

We spent our first night at the famed Horsepower Ranch, a frequent hangout for Baja racers, packed with memorabilia and offering a restful oasis before our first day on the punishing desert trails.

As morning broke, we took some time to familiarize ourselves with our custom-built Baja challenge car and safety protocols before putting on our helmets and strapping into our five-point racing harnesses.

Each of Wide Open Baja's custom-built buggies is equipped with a GPS for tracking its position and a radio system which keep you in communication with other drivers in your group. Radio communication is critical for relaying hazards and driving instructions to the cars behind you.

Heading out into the desert, we got our first taste of Baja's rugged terrain. Fortunately, each car is equipped with ginormous all-terrain tires

and a suspension system with an incredible 18 inches of wheel travel.

Each excursion is accompanied by a Baja race crew, including a lead car driven by a professional trail guide and a truck carrying spare equipment, fuel and even a spare buggy that you'll meet up with at checkpoints throughout the ride. Our co-driver was Charlie, Wide Open Baja's tech expert, who knows the trails like the back of his hand.

Despite what you might think, riding across the dusty and rocky desert trails at speeds up to 90 mph is surprisingly comfortable in Wide Open Baja's cars, thanks to the huge shock absorbers, padded, suspended racing seats, and full-face helmets with fresh air ventilation.

Normally, when you see huge rocks in the middle of a path, you avoid them. Not so with these off-roaders, which crawl over boulders like it's nothing.

As you delve deeper into the desert, you realize just how isolated you are from civilization. There are no distractions, so you can focus 100 percent of your mental energy on negotiating the challenging trails.

After a full day driving nearly 200 miles of rugged trails, we found our way to our next stop—Mike's Sky Rancho—a hideaway about 5,000 feet up in the mountains. It's a rustic, quiet and peaceful getaway that's served as a stop for Baja racers for 50 years.

There we were greeted by a friendly German Shepherd dog named Rocky—who likes to play fetch with rocks, naturally. Be sure to give him some belly rubs if you see him.

As we finished each day of intense driving, we were greeted with a cold beer (or three) and some of the most peaceful and relaxing settings to restore our energy for the next day's drive.

We woke for another day on the trails, and the climbs got steeper, the rocks got more slippery, and basically every hill and corner was completely blind. It's thrilling and nerve-racking, but immensely satisfying as you move through the white-knuckle terrain.

It was a nailbiting morning, driving some of the most dangerous and precarious trails we'd encounter, but the payoff was huge—amazing, unspoiled vistas of the Pacific Ocean.

We took some time to contemplate at the top of a bluff overlooking the ocean, then headed back towards downtown Ensenada for our last night and a well-deserved rest.

We spent our last night at the beautiful and relaxing Estero Beach Hotel, a luxurious beachside resort where we enjoyed a much needed soak in the hot tub, and took in one last Pacific sunset before heading back to the States.

As we bid farewell to our trusty four-wheeled steed, a proud sense of accomplishment washed over us. We had just driven nearly 400 miles of the vaunted Baja 1000 course, in the exact same kind of vehicle that professional off-road racers ride in.

Along the way, our focus and nerves were tested, with every hill, curve, and terrain providing a new and surprising challenge. And while there's certainly some danger here, we always felt safe thanks to Wide Open Baja's amazing and professional crew, and the incredible car they built. ■

