

VIVA LA BAJA!

NORRA CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY IN THE WILDS OF BAJA, MEXICO

WORDS CHRIS COLLARD // **IMAGES** CHRIS COLLARD, SUE MEAD AND EDGARGERALDO

Westafari Chase, we have a problem. It was two minutes after midnight, and we were somewhere north of Loreto when a text from our team registered on our satellite communicator. Broken shift rod. Crawling under to shift by hand. Moving slow. 80 miles out. It was day three of a five-day off-road rally from Ensenada, near the U.S. border, and San Jose del Cabo, at the southern tip of the Baja peninsula. We had been running strong and free of mechanical issues—until now. Other cars were straggling into the day's final checkpoint, but

morning had just begun, and it looked like it was going to be a long one. Although it seemed we were alone in our dilemma, we were joined, at least in spirit, by souls of thousands of adventurers who have tested their mettle in the empty quarters of this wild and unforgiving land. There was history here: the ghosts of iconic racers such as Steve McQueen, Mickey Thompson, and James Garner seemed omnipresent, observing the scene from thick stands of cardon cactus and spinning salty yarns of the old days. This was the NORRA Mexican 1000. They had prevailed; the question was, could we?



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Three days earlier in the wee hour of the morning we were lined up in front of the Hotel Riviera, Ensenada. Around us were some of the sport's most notable cars—the Snortin' Norton '71 Nova, Rippin' Rooster '57 Bel Air, an original Stroppe Ford Bronco—and a rare few that put tire to dirt in the first Mexican 1000. It was a scene that had played out each year since 1967: a green flag, a thousand miles of arid desert, silt beds, and coastlines, and aspirations of gran-

deur. Back then it was a low-tech game, a run-what-ya-brung affair. Teams wore jeans and open-face helmets, extra fuel was stored in jerry cans, and satellite communication and GPS were decades away. There were no support crews because there were no roads. As for paper maps, they didn't exist either.

BACKSTORY

By the mid 1960s there had been several time records for the Tijuana-La Paz

run, the first set by Bud Ekins on a Honda CL72 Scrambler. The local racing scene in Southern California was on the move, gaining public and manufacturer attention, and setting the stage for an epic. Ed Pearlman, along with his crew from the newly formed National Off Road Racing Association, set his sights on Baja and a sanctioned event. It would be a tire-to-tire contest of speed, endurance, and mechanical fortitude. The first race was approximately 850 miles, as there wasn't



ABOVE:
As always, contingency row was held in Ensenada.



ABOVE:
The official pictures captured happy racers while they still looked good!



ABOVE:
The best part about NORRA is that there's a class for everything. From VWs to new trucks to whatever, all were welcome. In fact, they say that if there isn't one, they'll invent one on the spot so you can race.



BELOW:
Held outside of Ensenada, the start of the Mexican 1000 took place under perfect conditions.



RIGHT:
Seemingly twins, these two identically clad Triumph riders were ready to roll.



ABOVE:
We would not want to be the monkey, but a couple of Dirt Diggers hit the trail in their sidehack.



ABOVE:
Lyman Scherer drove this '59 Triumph TR3, one of the only cars from the '67 Mexican 1000, and ran in the Vintage Production Car Class.



ABOVE:
Robert Figlioli raced the '75 AMC J10 in the Vintage Open Truck Class. It's the truck that the Edelbrock team campaigned back in the '90s.



ABOVE:
Multi-time Baja Champion Mark Stahl was pushing hard in his classic Fillmore Ford.



BELOW:
Reigning NORRA class champion and three-time class winner Boyd Jaynes was back in his '68 Bronco looking to take the Pioneer 4x4 Class win ... again.

a defined route and no one knew the exact distance—apparently 1,000 sounded like a good number and it stuck.

Baja was a truly wild place in the '60s. Fuel was scarce, usually sourced from rancheros along the way, and teams were technically on their own after they left Tijuana. Jeeps, VW bugs and buggies, classic hot rods, and motorcycles, 68 in all, filled the four classes. When the dust settled in La Paz, Vic Wilson and Ted Mangels, who were driving a Meyers Manx, found a checkered flag, small contingent of organizers, and a few locals standing in front of the La Perla Hotel. The only way to confirm the actual time was via a telegraph to the U.S., and it was each team's responsibility to find the telegraph office and make it happen. Little did Pearlman know, but their fledgling event would set the stage for an entirely new genre of motorsports, and influence the creation of dozens of events worldwide. The race was eventually taken over by SCORE and became the Baja 1000, but in 2009, Pearlman's son Mike came up with another brilliant idea: resurrect NORRA and the nostalgia of racing vintage iron in the Baja desert.



ABOVE: Spencer Low resurrected his '88 Nissan King Cab to race in the Challenger Truck Class.



ABOVE: Challenger Truck Class competitor and Baja and off-road racing icon Bud Feldkamp at speed in his '85 Ford F-150.

SWEEPING UP AT THE NORRA MEXICAN 1000 Being There When the Bad Happens

WORDS AND IMAGES // JOHNRETTIE

Ever since I first photographed the Mexican 1000 in 1970 I have dreamed of the day when I could go all the way down the Baja Peninsula. A lack of funds precluded me from entering the race, though I did co-drive in the Bilstein Baja Bug in 1978 for one quarter the distance.

Although I still enjoy photographing off-road racing I decided three years ago that a change of scenery would be fun, so I volunteered to join the sweep team that traverses the course after the last car has started each stage. It's a great way of experiencing the stages firsthand and catching up with stories from the back markers who invariably never get a mention in race reports.

The purpose of the sweep team is to make sure nobody is left behind wheth-

er stuck off course or broken down. By the time we get to close stages many of the racers have already been retrieved by their support crews. However, some get stuck in situations where it's impossible to get a truck and trailer in for rescue and have to be towed out by the sweepers.

The downside of sweeping is crews often get to that day's night stop way past party time. The latest for my crew was 6:30 a.m. after towing a broken buggy for four hours in the middle of the night on the tough and stage into Loreto.

Sweeping is a great way to experience the racecourse without having to spend a fortune. You'll still need a capable off-road vehicle for winching and towing as well as a willingness to get down and dirty — oh, and tired!



ABOVE: It's not just sweep teams who help stranded racers. I learned this when I photographed the 1970 Mexican 1000 along with Jim Ober from Trackside Photo. It was the first time either of us had photographed an off-road race, and after the last car came past us we headed back home and came across this stuck racer. Ober (on the right) and I helped push him out of a ditch so he could continue on down the Baja Peninsula.



PHOTO BY DAVE CONKLIN

ABOVE: I was teamed with Dave Conklin driving his '95 Toyota Land Cruiser along with Elie Rodrigue who had to spend most of the time in the back seat as I was navigating and keeping track of messages and the whereabouts of stranded racers who might need rescuing.



RIGHT: The most dramatic rescue in the three years I've been sweeping was last year when two sweep crews helped retrieve a Nissan truck that had gone way off course onto the beach where it got stuck in the pebbles. After tying together three winch straps Mike Bradley, who was a competitor this year, was able to winch the truck out just before the incoming tide consumed it.



ABOVE: Soon after the start on the third day we got an SOS call, which meant a sweep crew and a Red Cross unit raced to the location 10 miles south of Bahia de Los Angeles. Fortunately, it was a false alarm, but we did find Walker Evans and Jason Schneider, both with blown engines, at the same location. We waited until Walker's support crew arrived and his personal helicopter took him and co-driver Betsy Anderson onto Loreto. We left Schneider and his son catching shade under their Ultra 4 racer as their support crew was nearly there. We set off as we got a message over the M-SAT radio about two broken cars further down the stage.



ABOVE: Toward the end of the race we even had to tow a couple of cars at the start line in Loreto. The competitors wanted to get a start time—even if they were unlikely to finish the days stages they would at least get a time, albeit with full penalties for missing check points.

RIGHT: Even the sweep team vehicles need service at times. If we cannot help each other out we get help from local mechanics and shops that always seem ready and able to work on any car at short notice and at extremely good rates. For example, it cost just \$19 to have the front end re-aligned on Conklin's Land Cruiser after we hit a silt bed.



ABOVE: Fortunately, there were no injuries that required immediate medical care this year. That wasn't true in 2016 when we got an urgent SOS message that required the assistance of a medical helicopter to airlift the injured driver of a buggy that had rolled down a 300-foot cliff. Since it was 40 miles along a dirt road from our location we only just arrived as the chopper took off. A medic along with Dave Cole, yes Ultra4 Dave Cole, who swept last year and competed this year, took the injured co-driver on an UTV to a Red Cross ambulance.

BELOW: The only other sweep crew who has swept the past three NORRA races along with Dave Conklin and myself are Scott and Tandi Harman in their tricked out Jeep, seen here helping load a buggy on the team's trailer. They also helped tow several competitors out of silt beds.



PHOTO BY TANDI HARMAN



ABOVE: We were alerted to a truck that had rolled off the course just south of Coco's Corner. By the time we got there their crew had already towed it out of the ditch and the sweep crew of Dave "Hawk" Sirota and Shawn Smith assisted them in loading it on their trailer.



LEFT: Well, that's your problem right there!

THE FUNNEST RACE ON THE PLANET

This year, which marked NORRA's 50th anniversary, was expanded to five days and encompassed 1,300 miles of Baja's best. As is tradition, if you want to race, whether it be in a Ural sidecar, Porsche 911, '57 Bel Air, or Triumph "desert sled" Scrambler, they will find (or create) a class for you. All are welcome.

Although it is known as the "Funnest

race on the planet," it is still a race and competition within classes is fierce. However, unlike other events, nerfing is strictly prohibited (vintage parts are hard to replace), teams tip cold ones together in the nightly bivouac, and the atmosphere is one of camaraderie. Drivers will stop to help another out of a ditch, and organizers support this by deducting *good-Samaritan* time from their overall score.

While today's 1000 incorporates GPS trackers and route books, and nearly all teams have chase crews, there were a who that gravitated toward old-school Baja tradition. An example is Ned and Kat Bacon, who piloted their '60 Willys with no support, buying fuel at Pemex stations, and relying on their own moxie when things went sideways. To top it off, after 1,300 miles of racing they turned

PALAPA BOY MOTORSPORTS 1983 NISSAN AT NORRA

WORDS AND IMAGES // SHAUNOCHSNER

Dana Dague of Palapa Boy Motorsports had been tirelessly working day and night for months to prep an '83 Nissan truck that would be entered into the 2017 edition of the NORRA Rally.

We launched from Orange County a couple of days before the Rally headed south of the border. The truck looks amazing. Painted Blue and Red, an original paint scheme of the early days. The team is well prepared. Pit plan in place and race ready. Driving and co-driving duties are split among Dana Dague, son Chase Dague, Dana's brother Brian Dague, friends Reid Rutherford, Reid's employee Travis and Steve Rudd along with son Danny Rudd. Also driving is Baja legend John Kennedy with his daughter Julie. Day one race day is mostly flawless.

The pit stops are executed well. The team encountered issues

on day three when the welds on the shock mounts break on the truck. A field fix gets the truck to Loreto. What is amazing about Baja is the friendships you can quickly make. We asked around about a good mechanic who can weld and were directed to a shop just outside Loreto. This shop has everything. It's huge! The owner is known for working on race vehicles for some of the biggest teams in Baja. He got to work welding on the Nissan and before we know it after a decent cash payment to our new mechanic friend we were back in the race on day four.

The goal of every race team is to finish in San Jose Del Cabo. After several long days and months of prep work on the truck that goal was obtained by Dana and the team when they arrived in San Jose Del Cabo at the finish line and celebrated their hard work. The team was able to pull off a Third Place finish for the 2017 NORRA Mexican 1000.



ABOVE:

It took a good deal of work to get the Nissan ready for the challenge of covering 1,000 miles of desert.



ABOVE:

The truck looked great at the start and spirits were high.



ABOVE:

Looking good!

ABOVE:

After some practice, the pit stops were smooth.



ABOVE:

At the finish line!

VIVA LA BAJA!



ABOVE:
Everyman racers, Roger and Brad Lovell in their Bronco.



ABOVE:
Nobody embodies the Baja mystique like the Class 11's, as Sean Danley shows in his '68 VW Legends Bug Class Beetle.



LEFT:
The GoWesty Westafari VW Vanagon had a few troubles, but what other race vehicle can you camp in if you break?

RIGHT:
Sal Fish, who led SCORE for 40 years, raced with several teams this year but finished with Jim Riley in the Rippin' Rooster '57 Bel Air.



around and drove it home. One of our favorites was the "Baja Triumph," a '59 TR3 driven by Lyman Scherer. This pint-sized sports car entered the 1967 event as a Class 1 and was left for scrap in an arroyo when it broke a crankshaft. Decades later it was discovered Alan Brickey, restored, and given a new lease on life. And lest we forget to mention "Macadu," Mark McMillin's championship buggy. This Porsche-powered '79 Chenoweth landed three overall Baja 1000 wins in the '80s and continues to dominate the limelight.

So you might ask, "who won?" Well, *everyone* did. If they rolled under the green flag in Ensenada they became forged in the annals of racing history. Most of those who suffered game-ending mechanical failures loaded their rigs on a trailer and followed the race south, joining the party each night at the bivouacs. The Mexican 1000 is about the experience: the campfire yarns to be spun about bottomless silt beds, endless sandy beaches, and midnight snafus in a forest of cacti.

As for our Westafari hooligans and the GoWesty Vanagon (yes, there is even a class for RVs), we didn't get to the bivouac that morning until 5 a.m. After fixing the shifter and wiping the grit from our eyes, we were back at the starting line in time to start the next leg. We were three car lengths behind last place, but set on beating the competition regardless of cost to liberty or life ... and we did! I should mention, of course, we were the *only* vehicle in the class. *Viva la Baja!* **DS**



LEFT:
The awards ceremony took place on the beach.