BackRoads

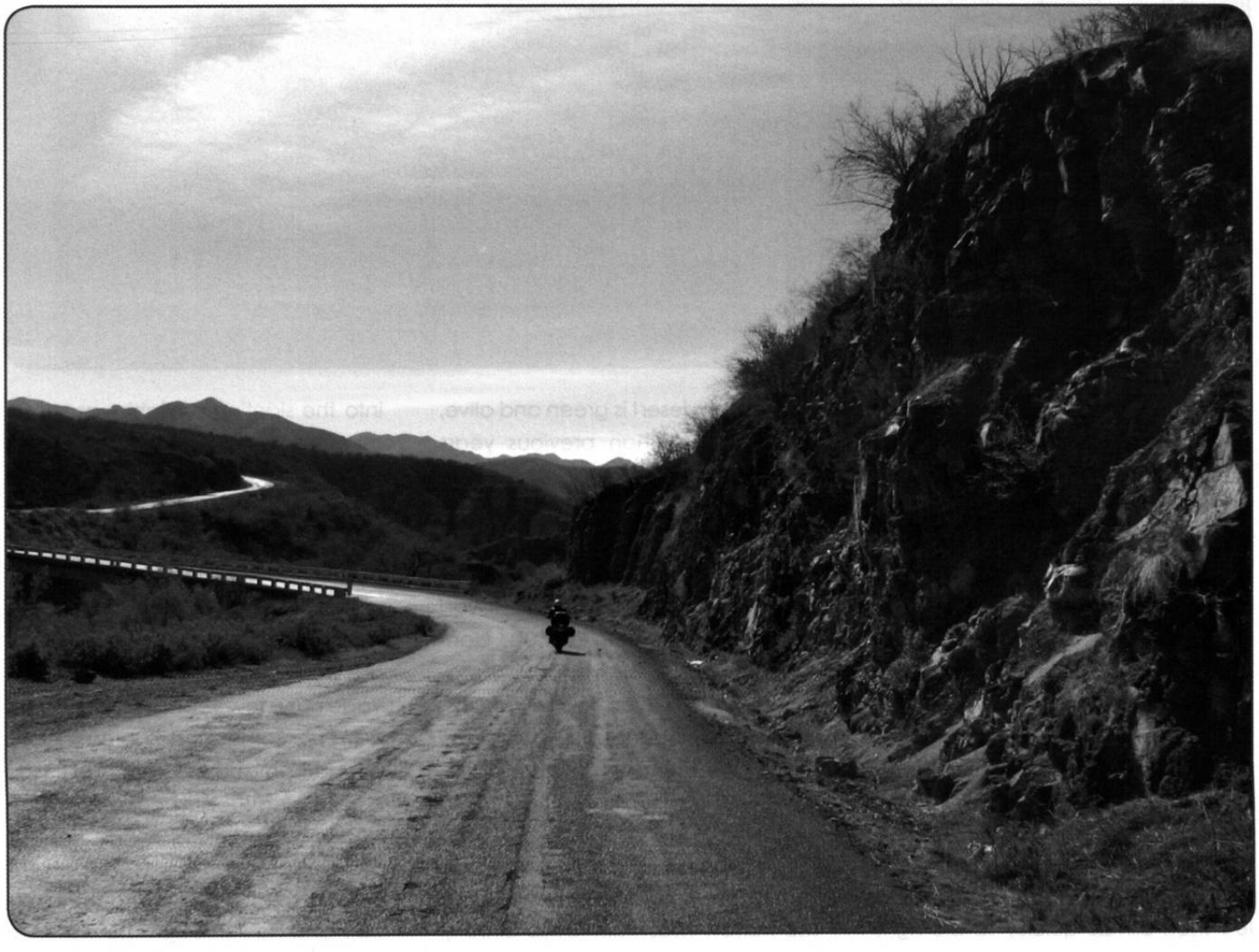
Mexico

Backroads – San Carlos, Mexico
Tom Matthews

It was raining. That was good. It meant it wasn't snowing. The road rose after we left Cananea, Sonora, riding south along the Rio Sonora River. This was familiar territory and as the sun played hide and seek I thought about other rides in Northern Mexico (see "Along the Sonora River," MOTRA, July/August 06) and the smiles started despite the rain.

After a night in Bisbee, AZ, it was early morning when we loaded the gear and headed out. Our destination for the day would be Banamichi and a night with our dear fiends, Bill and Irma, owners of La Posada del Rio Sonora. Our ultimate goal – The town of San Carlos on the Sea of Cortez.

With Lynn leading on the BMW, Terry and Becky following two-up on their Triumph and me riding sweep, we devoured the twisty roads of the Rio Sonora. The road surface; well it's hard to describe in places. Originally macadam and not asphalt, the road had been patched then the patches patched. It appears that this procedure had been repeated many times. The good news is that there is a major effort to repair



the road. At least there is a major effort to announce the road repairs. Huge, colorful billboards trumpet the project, which appears is being done in small sections separated by many miles of patches on patches. Still, it's progress.

The road climbed up from the river, twisting through narrow road cuts then dropping down over white-washed bridges. All the bridges are named; my favorite is "Puente El Toro Muerto" – the "Bridge of the Dead Bull." It crosses a narrow arroyo, where the road sweeps to the left then climbs quickly to the right again. The desert is green and alive, very different than previous years when drought scoured the landscape and the land was as black as if burned by wildfire.

The sun came out but it stayed cool, temperatures in the 50's. Construction zones slowed our progress and we waved to the workers, our Spanish inadequate to engage them. We found the rhythm of the road, a Sonoran rhythm.

We wanted to be in Banamichi before the late afternoon. Riding the narrow mountain roads directly into the slanting sunlight was something we wanted to avoid. We went through the small towns of Bacoachi, Chinapa, and Arizpe. We crossed the river at five different vados or fords in the river. All but two have a solid concrete bottom. One has a clean gravel base and then there is the wash out. A flash flood took the vado out a few years ago and it's still a mess. Some muddy areas, multiple paths made by other traffic and a confusing looking current. Once again, over thinking things was the major problem. It was simple, just look for the tracks leaving the other side and ride through the water to

that spot. Through Sinoquipe and finally Banamichi came into sight. Into town and we turned down the side street and pulled up in front of the Posada.

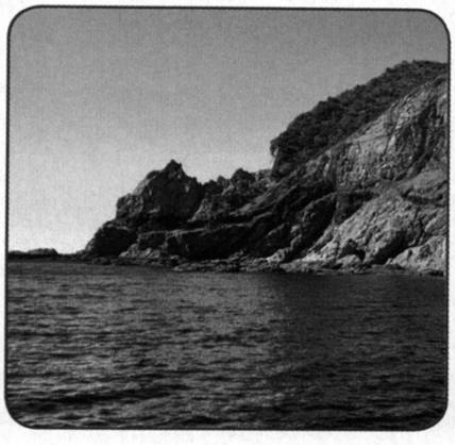
Claudia, the head housekeeper was there to meet us. Smiles and hugs and we found our rooms. A few cervezas (beers) around the fire pit, and it was time for dinner. The Posada was full that night. A group of American dove hunters and four motorcyclists. Dinner was carne asada, made with local Sonoran beef. A very good Mexican cabernet and Irma's flan for dessert. We sat late in the dining room, a wonderful space and part of the original 200-year-old building. After a little wine and good conversation before we all went to our rooms.

The morning was bright and clear and warming up quickly. This was why we had come. The warm rays of the sun drove away the thoughts of the snow that had dominated Colorado since before Halloween. Coffee, breakfast and more conversation and it was time to pack-up.

Banamichi and this part of Mexico is so safe and crime free that we left the saddle bags and duffels on the bikes overnight, just grabbing the liners to take our gear. We don't chain the bikes or even worry about locking the forks when we are here.

Packed and ready to go, we headed south towards the City of Hermosillo, capital of Sonora, population of almost 1 million. More mountain roads (better surface than the previous day) as we rode through the towns of Huepac, Aconchi and Baviocora. We left the mountains on to the flat plains at the town of Ures. Orange groves and ranches lined the road as the traffic increased.

There are two ways to get south of the city. The truck route or ride through the city center. We choose the latter at the suggestion of both Bill and Irma. The city is beautiful, wide avenues, plazas with the requisite statues and monuments, colonial architecture and bustling commercial districts. Lots of familiar names, Kentucky Fried, Coke, Pepsi, Ford, Chevy, Home Depot, Lowes and the ever-present McDonalds. We passed several Pizza Huts, our attention drawn to the delivery drivers on small Hondas with large insulated pizza carriers on the back. The ride through this fascinating city was hair-raising. Knowing Lynn was not accustomed to city riding, I was nervous for her. Terry, up high on the Tiger, appeared to be doing well. The driving style seemed to involve a driver feinting a move into your lane and absent a horn (or metal to metal contact) assuming it's ok to move over. This seemed to work well for the locals who were all on the same page. It took some getting used to for us.



With some relief, we watched the city disappear in the rearview mirrors and proceeded south on Mexico highway 15. This is the equivalent of an interstate. We rode the 4-lane, a non-descript slab of good asphalt. The road runs through a coastal plain, fairly flat with some volcanic hills. No shoulders and warning signs indicating that pulling off the road would roll your car or truck. There were a few pullouts and gas stations that seemed semi-official. There were other parking areas that seemed a bit more impromptu. Small restaurants and repair facilities

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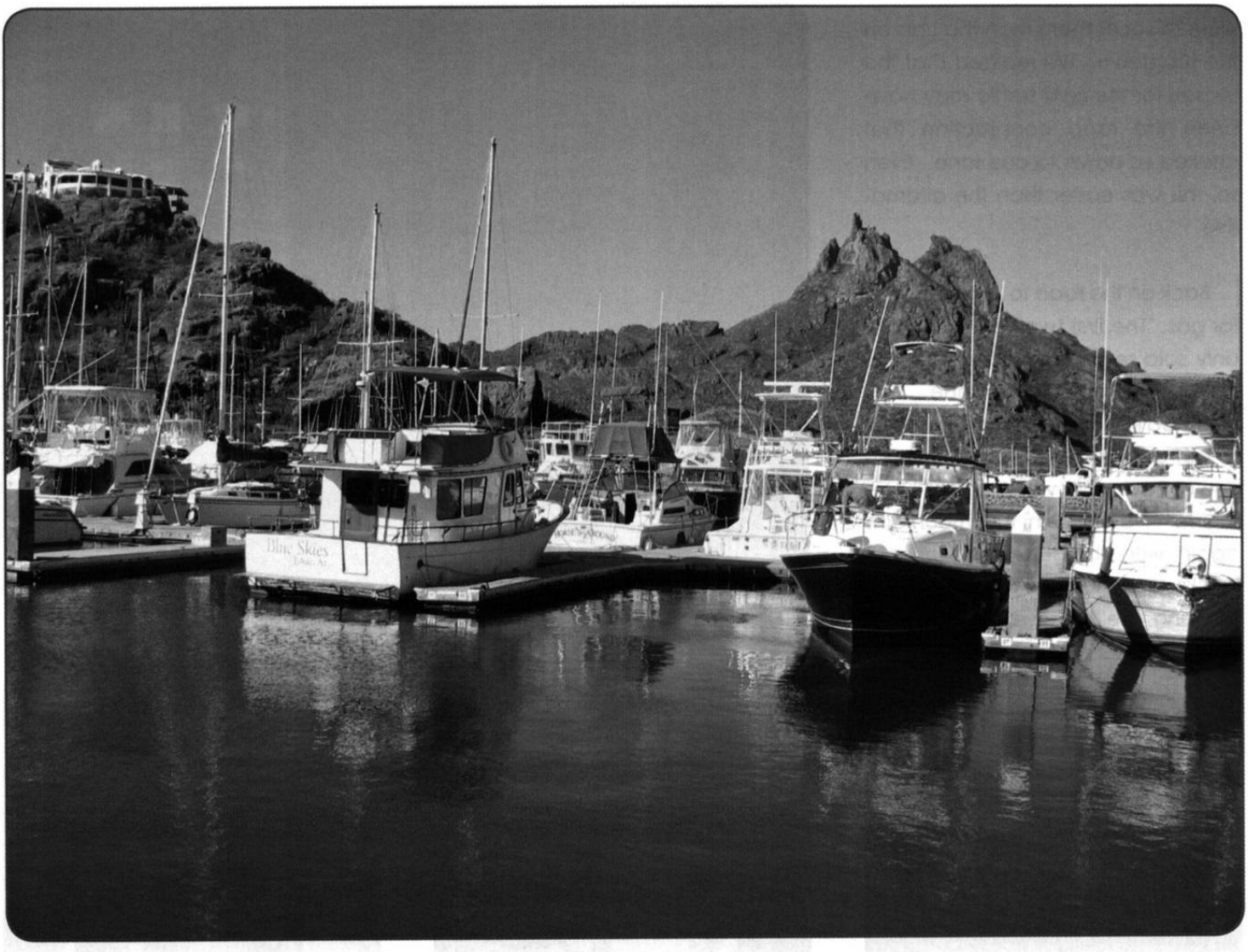


along the road, with semis parked in the median and on the side of the road.

I could smell the salt air long before I could see it. We exited the four-lane and headed west to San Carlos. Billboards in English told us we were on the right track, advertising hotels, restaurants and real estate agents. Finally, the Sea of Cortez was in view. Beautiful views of the sea and the volcanic hills on the coast met us as we wheeled into town.

After checking into the hotel and meeting several American expatriate retirees and a surprising number of Canadians, we walked across the street to Charlie's Rock to sit at a counter looking down at the beach and out to sea. Gulls hung almost stationary in the wind currents just feet away from us as patrons threw them chips. Cervezas and some shrimp and life was good. That was followed by a walk on the beach in the afternoon sun. This is how winter should be.

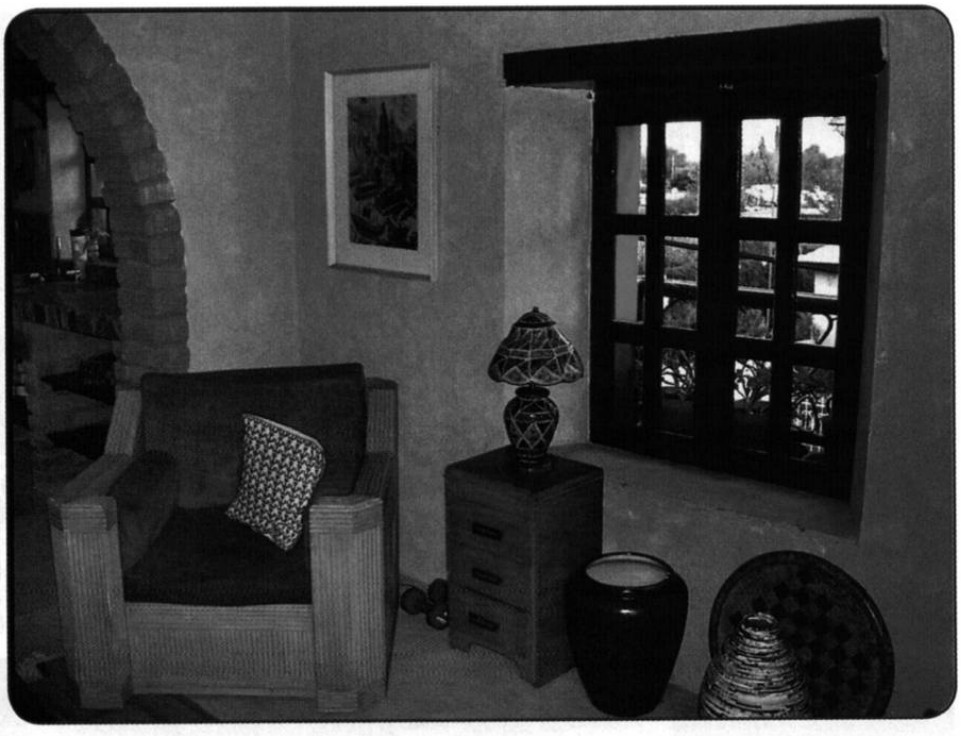
Coupons for free margaritas enticed us to dinner at the hotel where we were serenaded for Valentines Day by two different guitar players playing for tips. A good day.

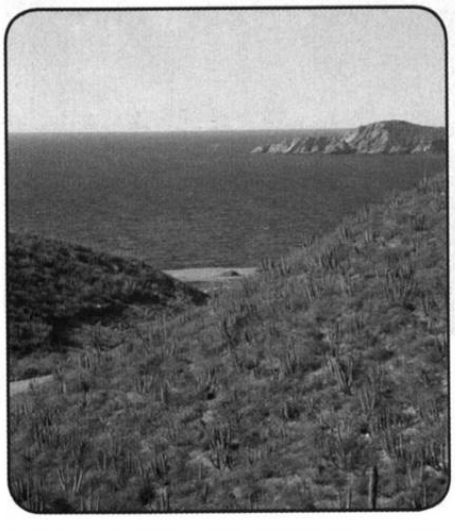
We woke up early and had breakfast before exploring the town. We spent some time at the marina enjoying the sights and sounds and the warmth of the morning sun. Too soon, we were on the road again, heading north the way we came.

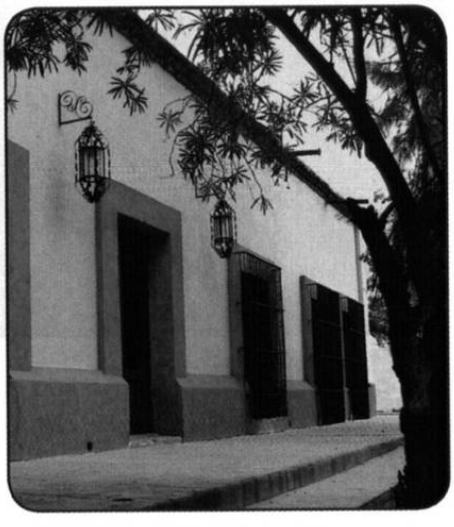
At Hermosillo, we chose to take the truck by-pass route and avoid the city center. This proved to be much less interesting and less hair-raising. The route is on surface streets and through neighborhoods. Trucks made the bulk of the traffic but there

were fewer of them than the cars on the trip down. We realized that the reason for the light traffic may have been the road construction that choked us down to one lane. Even so, this was easier than the alternative.

Back on the road to Ures and time for gas. The first two Pemex stations only sold regular and the Triumphs needed a bit more octane. We splashed in a few liters of the "verde" to get us down the road to the station at Baviacora with the "red" premium. We were in the mountains again with the sun warm on our backs and the river below. Before too long, the bikes were once again







parked outside the Posada. We relaxed by the fire to enjoy Cervezas and conversation before dinner.

As we left the Rio Sonora and turned east at Cananea, I felt the smile start to diminish. Across the Border and back into Bisbee, my smile wasn't quite gone but I imagined it was a little more wistful.

After a quick lunch the bikes were loaded in the trailer for the ride home. Snow graced the mountaintops in southern Arizona and 4 new inches of the stuff greeted us as we pulled into the driveway.

I closed my eyes, forgot the snow and thought about the ride. The smile crept back.

We go again in October – can't wait.

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