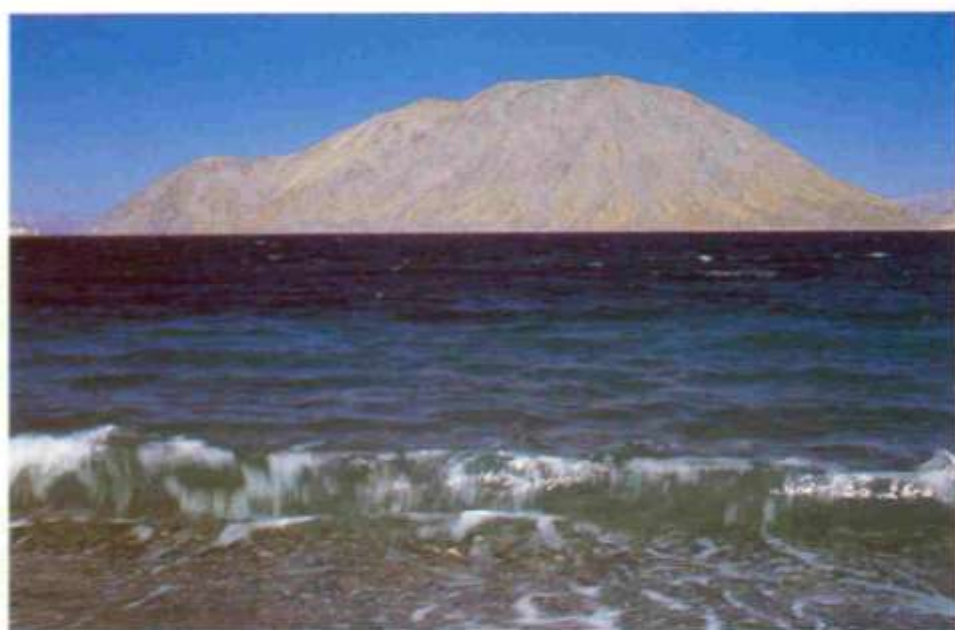


## BAJA CALIFORNIA



# The Desert Peninsula

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY JANE GIFFORD

**B**aja California, or Lower California, is the 1,000-mile-long finger of land jutting out into the Pacific Ocean below San Diego, USA. Much of Baja may once have been joined to the Mexican mainland. As the continental and oceanic plates ground against each other, peninsular California sheared northwesterly along the San Andreas Fault opening up the Sea of Cortez. It has been in geographical and historical isolation ever since.

A long chain of mountains, the Sierra San Pedro Martir in the north, and the Sierra de la Giganta in the south, runs down the length of the peninsula, seriously encumbering travel. The western flanks of the Peninsular Ranges rise gently to peaks of between 10 and 14,000 feet but fall sharply to the dark blue waters of the Sea of Cortez to the east. With an arid desert climate and scarcity of water, Baja California has acted as an effective barrier to the spread of European civilization, and harbours one of the

purest wilderness environments in Mexico. Here, in isolation, many plants have adapted to the harsh terrain and developed unique forms encountered nowhere else in the world.

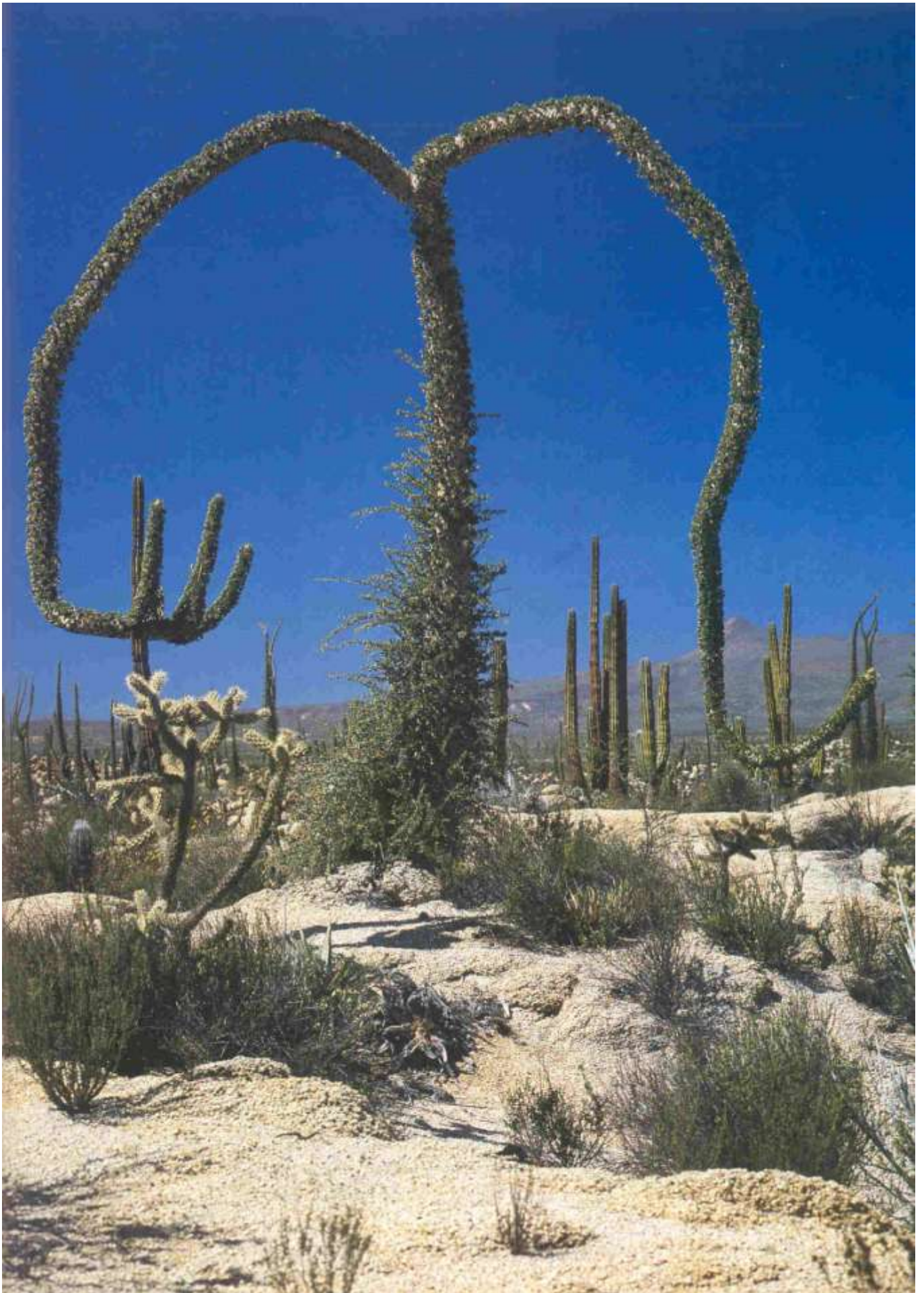
Inhabited by Indians with a far less advanced culture than their counterparts on the mainland, Baja was discovered accidentally by Europeans in 1533, when a group of mutineers landed there from a ship dispatched by Cortez to explore the Pacific. The peninsula's Indians had no written language nor organized religion. They lived in crude shelters, neither building towns nor cultivating food.

The start of the Manila galleon trade-route from Acapulco to the Philippines lured figures such as Francis Drake and Thomas Cavendish into Baja's waters to plunder the richly-

laden vessels, providing an incentive for a Jesuit colonization programme. Starved of money and supplies by the Spanish and unused to the harsh terrain and climate, large-scale colonization was never achieved. After many aborted attempts at setting up a self-supporting mission, one was finally established at Loreto at the end of the 17th Century. This was to become the mother mission for a chain extending as far north as Sonoma, north of San Francisco.

Baja California was not easily won. She paid for this brief period of civilization with the lives of most of her native population. Sailors in the south brought ashore smallpox, measles and venereal disease. By the end of the 18th Century over half of the missions were nearly extinct. By 1800 only 5,000 Indians were still living, around 10 per cent of the original population. Syphilis had taken possession of both sexes to such a degree that children conceived had little chance of survival. The Jesuits

*Part of Mexico, Baja California is an extension of the North American Desert. Separated by the Sea of Cortez, unique species, like the Boojum, have evolved.*



had discouraged settlement of land by immigrants from the mainland, so there was very little activity outside the missions.

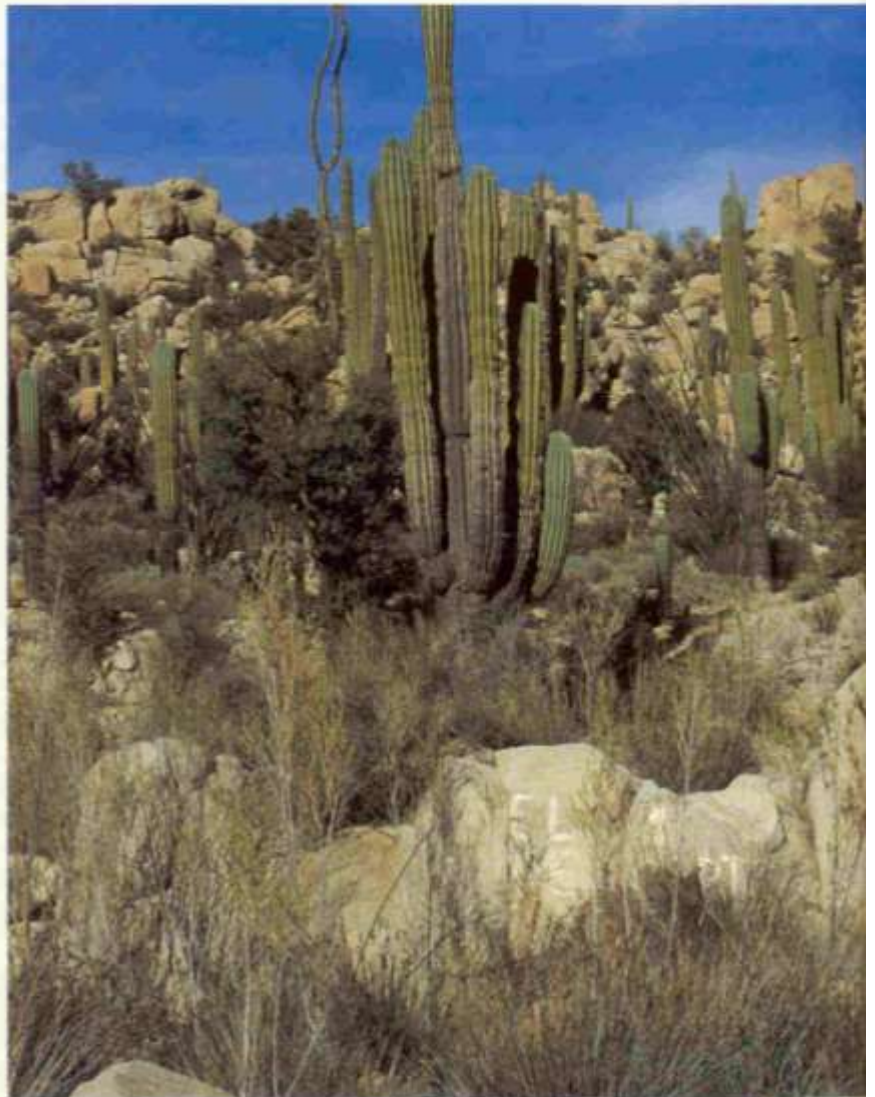
Upon victory in the Mexican-American War, the Americans included Baja California in the lands to be ceded by Mexico. The final decision to take only Alta California and New Mexico had far-reaching effects for the peninsula. The Mexican Government saw Baja as an opportunity to raise funds for mainland projects. Vast tracts of land were leased to unscrupulous American agencies and individuals who lured gullible compatriots to the peninsula with fraudulent promises of "pure black humus soil and grass higher than the shoulders of a horse".

No such land exists in Baja California. In 1885 copper-mining concessions at Santa Rosalia were leased to a French syndicate which ran the mine, under appalling conditions, until 1954. Old steam engines are a silent reminder of foreign exploitation of Baja's assets.

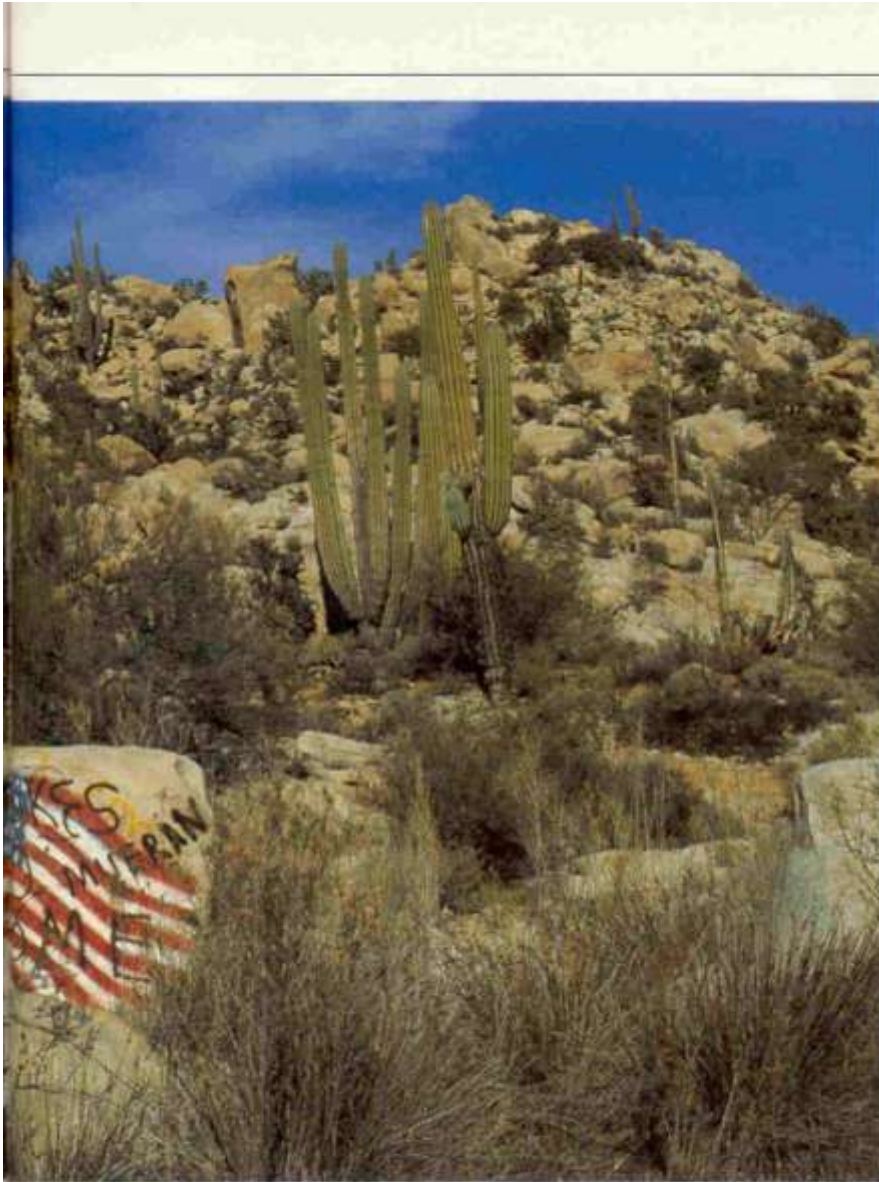
In 1933 the Mexican Government recovered the lands which had been under foreign control for years and, for the first time in many centuries, the people of Baja California were able to colonize and develop their own land. It wasn't until 1952 that the northern part of Baja California was officially acknowledged as Mexico's 29th state. Baja Sur entered the union as late as 1974. Although the advent of prohibition in the States in the '20s had brought relative prosperity to the north of Baja, and trading-routes, pearl-farming and mining had given rise to development in the south, the central region, some 500 miles of desert wilderness, remained untouched.

In December 1973, after many decades of promises, the Mexican Government finally completed the Transpeninsular Highway started in La Paz in 1920 - Mexican Federal Highway I and ID. It became possible to travel through the desert ranges and boulder-fields of Central Baja and to visit its Pacific and Gulf coasts without having to set aside weeks to travel in an uncomfortable convoy down the rough dirt-tracks which until then had served the region.

Little has changed in central Baja California since the completion of the highway. Most of the traffic on the 500-mile stretch of road between San Quintin and Mulege is still just passing through. To the north and south the



*In the past, the hostile desert terrain of the Baja peninsula was not conducive to human habitation. However, the completion of the Transpeninsular Highway in 1973 made the desert an easy target for holiday-makers from north of the border. Anti-American graffiti defaces the stars and stripes which have been painted on roadside rocks in the Catavina boulder-field. Right: Elaborately decorated cars take precedence over housing. Left: The succulent, water-storing leaves of the Century Plant hold reserves which eventually push up an enormous flower stalk, sometimes 14 feet high. After a bloom of yellow flowers, the leaves turn red and the plant dies. The Indians use it for medicine, tequila, mescal and soap.*



coastline is gradually filling up with holiday developments, many of them run by North Americans. Luxury hotels catering to game fishermen are prevalent in the south where La Paz is the commercial centre.

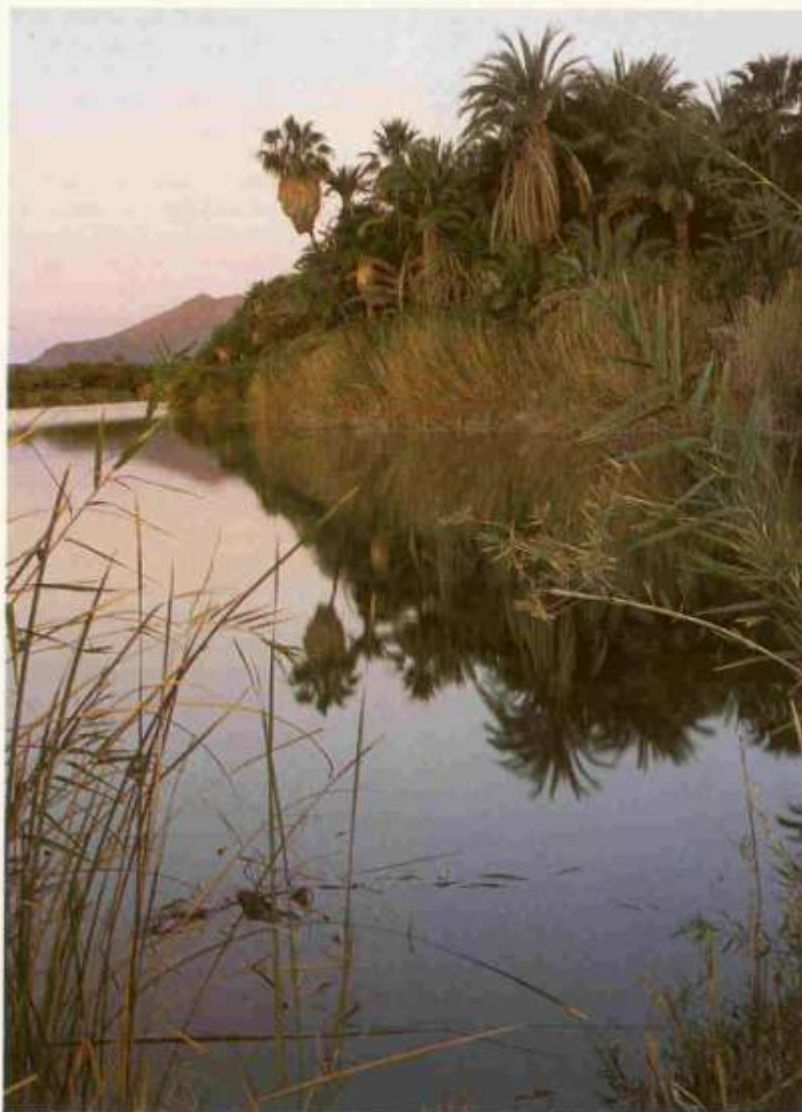
A water-treaty with the United States in 1945 and the building of the Morelos Dam on the Rio Colorado have led to large-scale irrigation of the northern valleys, where strawberries, tomatoes, vineyards and ranching are all lucrative businesses. The face of Baja California is changing.

There are three distinct regions of vegetation in Baja: the California Region in the north, consisting of coniferous forest and densely growing shrubs; the Sonoran Desert Region which covers roughly two-thirds of the peninsula and contains Baja's most extraordinary plants; and the Cape Region in the south which can be described as arid forest.

In the mountains, the first stands of Baja California's most bizarre endemic plant appear. Named after the elusive beast encountered by the unfortunate baker in Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, the Boojum is unique in appearance. It generally grows to a height of about 30 feet, although heights of more than 60 feet have been known. The average mature girth, at the base, is five feet. The main trunk is greyish, tapering towards the top and giving rise to its Spanish name, Cirio or candle. After sufficient rain, the Boojum sprouts a dense mass of small disc-like leaves on ridiculously short twigs which cover its trunk.

These bright green leaves only remain for a short time before they turn golden yellow and die. The top of the trunk may branch but there is no apparent pattern for this. Some Boojums are crowned with eight or more short branches, reaching stiffly skywards. Others produce a couple of longer branches which bend down towards the ground. Given enough rain, a cluster of yellow flowers appears at the top of the column or at the end of its branches.

Not far south from the first stand of Boojums, the largest of Baja's endemic species makes an appearance. Thought to be the world's biggest cactus, the Cardon or Giant Cactus resembles the Saguaro, immortalized in countless Westerns. The Cardon has more and much larger branches than the Saguaro, which emanate from a sturdy trunk. The branches have between ten and 20 vertical ribs which are covered



*Date Palms originally attracted missionaries to the oases where they established towns such as San Ignacio.*

silvery-grey with black mottling. Its overall appearance is elephantine. The bark itself is thin and papery, and peels away to reveal layers of gold and green bark beneath.

The inner layers of bark are reddish and cork-like. It is occasionally covered with slender *Acacia*-like leaves which quickly yellow and die. Within the space of a few days, the desert landscape is transformed from a lush green forest to a fading golden canopy, strewn with the fibrous skeletons of dead *Cardons* and the honeycombed remains of *Boojums*.

Baja California still contains extraordinary reaches of unspoiled wilderness. Two National Parks have been set up in northern Baja, where there is great pressure on the land from the growing holiday industry. Another has been established at Scammon's Lagoon on the Pacific coast near Guerrero Negro. This is one of the major breeding-grounds for the California Grey Whale. Some of the largest salt-flats in the world are found along this stretch of coast, as well as oil and natural gas deposits. A French company recently wanted to install oil-drilling platforms just off-shore. Conservationists were greatly concerned that this would hamper the Grey Whales' breeding habits and endanger the species. A meeting of the local government voted down the company's proposals.

The Mexican Government is understandably keen to encourage tourism. Signs along the highway remind drivers that the road is intended to foster economic development and not high-speed driving. But sadly the highway is beginning to show the more sordid signs of Western tourism. Boulders lining the road on the Catavina Plain are now daubed with inane slogans, and two ribbons of broken glass from countless beer bottles follow the contours of the highway.

Pressure for development in the wild reaches of Baja California will inevitably increase. The challenge to make Baja's rich natural heritage an economic asset without destroying it in the process will have to be met. Hopefully, more Natural Parks will be set up and visitors to Baja will go there for the warm climate, game-fishing, and to appreciate one of the purest wilderness environments in the world. ■

with little furry balls in the flowering season. These open into white funnel-shaped flowers about three inches wide. The accordion structure of the *Cardon's* fleshy branches allows the plant to expand as it takes in water during the infrequent rains, and to contract during times of drought. The ability of the *Cardon* to store great quantities of water enables it to flower each year even in the absence of rain. The *Cardon*, which grows very slowly and lives up to 200 years, is the most widespread of Baja's larger plants. Extensive stands known as 'cardonals' can be seen from the mountains south of El Rosario down to the tip of the peninsula. Although not a threatened species, grazing domestic animals have an impact on young plants by removing much of the plant-cover which provides vital protection from the rigours of the climate.

Roughly half-way between El Rosario and the road to Bahia de los Angeles, the mountains give way to an extraordinary granite boulder-field. Thousands of huge white boulders, some 200 feet high, lie strewn over a flat plain. Large crystals of quartz, feldspar and mica glisten in the face of the rock. The granite is slowly decomposing as a result of the combined action of rain, wind, sun and bacteria. Many of the boulders are hollow inside, balancing on pedestal feet. This is perhaps the most scenic region of central Baja, with an exceptional range of desert plant-life.

Elephant Trees are widely distributed through the Catavina boulder-field, some growing directly out of the boulders. This is a short, squat subtree with an unusually stout trunk and thick, sharply tapering, wide-spreading branches. Its outside bark is