

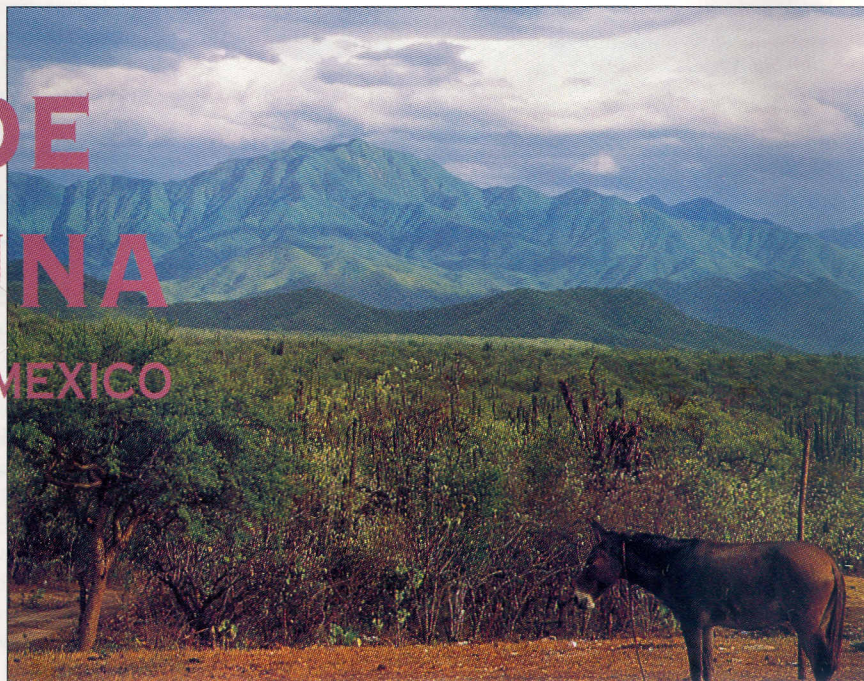
# SIERRA DE LA LAGUNA

BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR, MEXICO

BY CHRIS HUMPHREY

Every winter hordes of pale-skinned gringos flock to the beaches of southern Baja California, seeking the sun and surf of Cabo San Lucas. In their haste to hit

the beach, most don't even register the jagged chunk of mountains they drove around or flew over to get to Cabo: the Sierra de La Laguna, which forms the spine of the southernmost section of the Baja peninsula.



Cerro Salispuedes, southern Sierra de La Laguna. Chris Humphrey

If a tourist does notice the 7,000-foot emerald-green granite peaks looming in the Baja haze, the thought of putting down that bottle of Pacifico, driving through the miles of desert plains, and actually hiking up into them is simply out of the question. That's okay, let 'em stay on the beach. For the rest of us, those afflicted with that slightly masochistic desire to walk up whatever mountains are in sight, it just makes trekking through this lush, rugged range all the more magical: thousands of tourists just a few miles away, most of whom will never see this jungly paradise.

And a paradise it is, an "island in the sky" home to plants and animals not found in the arid deserts that make up most of the Baja Peninsula: piñon pine, palms, oak, yucca, cactus, and even aspen living side by side; rare birds, tree frogs, mountain lions and coyotes roaming undisturbed by man. How some of these species got to the Sierra in the first place was something of a mystery, since many could not have migrated across the desert, but scientists have recently theorized that the range was once part of the Mexican mainland. Over geological time the Sierra split off and was an island in the Pacific before finally joining with what is now the Baja Peninsula, isolating the region for millennia and leading to the fascinating endemisms now

found in the Sierra. This rich ecosystem is also nourished with the heaviest rainfall anywhere in Baja—30 inches average annually, almost double that of the surrounding plains.

The rugged slopes and dense undergrowth of the range have also served as a barrier to its development and exploitation. Condos might be going up daily in Cabo San Lucas, but the only people living near the Sierra are a few scattered rancho families who head up into the hills to graze cattle, cut wood, or guide a gringo to La Laguna, a meadow in the center of the range. Apart from a couple of trails and a few old mines still occasionally prospected, the Sierra has been blissfully left alone by humanity.

In recognition of the unspoiled purity of the range the Mexican government declared the Sierra de La Laguna a "Reserva de la Biosfera" in June 1994. What actual protection this will give the Sierra is a good question—the Mexican government tends to be big on declarations and weak on enforcement—but it is definitely a step in the right direction.

## Getting Into the Sierra

Geography has been kind to would-be hikers: although the mountains are extremely rugged, a series of deep east-west canyons

cut across the range's flanks, nearly meeting in the middle and giving relatively easy access to the center of the Sierra. The crown of the range, and its namesake, is La Laguna, a large meadow lying between the highest peaks; it reportedly was a lake until the end of the last century, when Cañon San Dionisio eroded sufficiently to drain it. La Laguna makes an excellent campsite and base to explore the high country, and because of this it is the principal destination of hikers in the Sierra.

There are two main routes to get to La Laguna, one beginning from the west side at Todos Santos and the other from the east leaving from near Santiago. As the range "faces" west, the Todos Santos route is steeper and more direct, and because it gets by far the most traffic of any trail in the mountains it is also easy to follow, making this a good choice for those wanting to hike without a guide.

## The West Side: La Burrera

A maze of sand roads lies between Todos Santos and the mountains, which makes finding the trailhead on this side a small challenge. Leave Todos Santos on the highway heading south to Cabo, and, after passing the Punta Lobos turnoff (a signpost on the right), look for a cattle guard on the left a few hundred yards further. Turn onto



this dirt road—it's 11 miles from here to the gate at La Burrera ranch, where the hike starts. Follow the road two miles to the first junction and take a right up the hill past an old tower. Go left at the next junction, 3.5 miles from the highway—here the road gets very sandy. Continue straight from here seven miles further to a gate and parking area. Along the way is a turn-off on the left posted Rancho San Martin, where guide David Saisa lives.

Start walking up the dirt road past the gate for about 20 minutes to La Burrera, a deserted ranch. Follow the road left across the arroyo and continue for another 20 minutes, keeping an eye out for a trail on the left. Don't be fooled by cattle paths—you'll know the right one when you see it. There is a small clearing just before it on the right, with some litter; then the road goes up a small rise and the trail turns off to the left. After about 30 yards this trail turns up a ridge, and you'll continue directly up the side of the Sierra for the next five hours to a plateau. There is no fear of losing the trail; in fact much of it is a veritable trench because of horses and mules. After reaching the plateau, you'll hike another 40 minutes to reach La Laguna meadow.



### *Exploring At La Laguna*

After hiking all that way you won't want to miss the spectacular views from El Picacho de La Laguna and Cerro La Aguja. From the ranch shacks at the northwest end of the meadow, follow the trail back into the woods toward La Burrera for ten minutes to a small clearing where a trail forks off past a very dilapidated shack and campsite. Follow this trail for 1.5 hours to El Picacho, the higher of the two peaks, but don't miss the short scramble down the saddle and up Cerro La Aguja, a jagged granite tooth jutting out high above the desert plains.

For better views to the east over the center of the range, the peak with the radio towers—clearly visible from La Laguna—can be hiked up in an hour or so from the meadow. Follow the La Burrera trail past the Picacho turnoff until reaching the first crest affording views out to the west. Stop and look to your right: there will be a faint trail heading north up the ridge to the towers.



Following the Arroyo San Dionisio 1.5 hours east of La Laguna brings you to a beautiful waterfall, a perfect spot to relax and swim.

### *The Southern Route: Cañon San Bernardo*

The Sierra can also be crossed along Cañon San Bernardo, south of Cañon San Dionisio, in two to three days. This trail basically follows the canyon directly from Boca de la Sierra on the east side, across the watershed and down to Rancho Santo Domingo (14 miles total). It's best to go west to east; the trailhead can be reached by dirt roads from Todos Santos. Same directions as for La Burrera, but turn right at mile 3.5 instead of left, then continue straight until seeing a sign at a junction pointing to Rancho Santo Domingo, where guides can be found.

For the truly adventurous, a hike can be made up the arroyo past Santo Domingo to the top of the watershed; you can then cut north, staying high on the ridges, up to La Laguna. Then you can head back down either to La Burrera or San Dionisio. This would be a four- or five-day hike, and a guide from Santo Domingo is advised as they take the route on occasion and know where to find water on the ridgetops.

### *The East Side: Cañon San Dionisio*

For those interested in venturing further off the beaten path, consider exploring the eastern route to La Laguna via Cañon San Dionisio. Using this route enables hikers to cross the entire Sierra,

an excellent three- to four-day hike (15 miles total) with a day at La Laguna, and also gives a taste of the more remote reaches of the range. The best way up this side is along a trail that begins at the Rancho San Dionisio, located just inside the mouth of the canyon, 14.5 miles on a dirt road from Santiago (ask directions in town).

The trail follows the Arroyo San Dionisio briefly, then turns south along a side arroyo and heads up a ridge, continuing up to La Laguna. Finding this trail is no simple task, and its upper sections are vague and easily confused with a myriad of cattle trails that criss-cross the hills on this side. Unless you're interested in bushwhacking through nettles and thick undergrowth, taking a guide is a good idea, at least to where the trail begins up the ridge. With a guide this route is a solid day's hike; without one, plan on sleeping out once before reaching La Laguna—backtracking and wrong turns are inevitable.

### *When To Go*

The main rainy season ends in November, so early- and mid-winter is an excellent time to visit the Sierra: the flora is incredibly lush and drinking water is plentiful. With a little preparation, hiking in the wet season is no problem, as the rains predictably hit every afternoon for a few hours; the shacks at La Laguna can provide shelter if you didn't bring a tent. It freezes regularly at La Laguna at night, so pack accordingly.

### *Resources*

The best general guide book covering southern Baja is the *Baja Handbook* by Joe Cummings (Chico, CA: Moon Publications, 1994), which has a fair amount of information on the Sierra. Walt Peterson's *Baja Adventure Book* (Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 1987) has slightly more information on the Sierra as well as a decent map of the region. For topo maps, call either Map Link (805) 965-4402, or the Map Center (619) 291-3830. Topos covering the range are: F12B23, F12B24, F12B33, and F12B34.

The Centro de Investigaciones Biológicas (CIB), a research center in La Paz,



The trail from La Burrera. Chris Humphrey

has conducted extensive studies on plants, animals, geography, and hydrology in the mountains in their successful efforts to convince the government to establish the Reserva. *La Sierra de La Laguna de Baja California Sur* (La Paz: Centro de Investigaciones Biológicas, 1988) edited by Laura Arriaga and Alfredo Ortega of CIB, is an excellent overview of different aspects of the range, although it is in Spanish. It can be purchased at the CIB offices.

### *Assorted Details*

**Water** is found year-around at La Laguna, but elsewhere it is unreliable, especially in the high country.

**Guides** can be found at any of the ranchos near the Sierra, such as Rancho San Martín and Rancho Santo Domingo (near Todos Santos) and Rancho San Dionisio (near Santiago). Rates average about \$30 U.S. per day, more with burros.

The most dramatic **views** are from El Picacho de La Laguna (6,507 feet) and its companion peak Cerro La Aguja (6,432 feet).

There are only two known **aspen** in the Sierra; both are located on the trail from La Burrera, just before reaching La Laguna.

**After the hike** go to Pilar's in Todos Santos and gobble several of her fabulous deep-fried fish tacos, and wash them down with an ice-cold Ballena (liter bottle) of Pacifico. Then proceed directly to nearby Playa San Pedro, sling your hammock, and let the waves work the kinks out of those aching muscles.

