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# BAJA (not-so) FRESH

THE HAZARDS OF DRIVING  
REALLY FAST OFF-ROAD IN AN  
OFF-ROAD TRUCK DESIGNED  
TO GO REALLY FAST

By Josh Dean



Todd Clement, a burly, goateed American, has a beer gut, a blonde wife, a big red pickup, and a sweet ranchero in the rolling desert outside Ensenada, Mexico, called Horsepower Ranch.

Clement bows down to dust and desert, and he bought this land to spread the gospel. On it he built a bar, a restaurant, 20 guest rooms, a swimming pool, a plush, palm-tree-shrouded lawn with a volleyball net, and a state-of-the-art auto shop that employs 15 local mechanics who get plenty of work.

That's because the stars of the show at Horsepower Ranch are 20 turbocharged, Porsche-powered desert-racing buggies—high-octane-laced Kool-Aid for adrenaline junkies with money to burn. Like most healthy males, I like to drive fast but rarely have the opportunity. I live in Manhattan, land of traffic and taxis. And, as a magazine writer, I am merely a host carrier for what little disposable income I have, ferrying it from ATM to bartender in a drunken relay that never ends.



» From top: Buggin' out; the author in this season's hot color, yellow; approaching sandstorm; Baja motorcade; a breakfast of champions...where's the brew?

But thanks to the good people of BF Goodrich, a massive tire company built on a foundation of cash, I have been invited—along with nine other journalists—to visit Horsepower Ranch and drive Clement's cars, which just so happen to be outfitted with BFG's Baja 1000-winning off-road tires.

So that's how I got here, to this wooden table covered in margaritas that arrive in fours, facing a lectern where Clement has begun his orientation and safety briefing.

Sipping a beer, Clement assures us not to worry, that these Baja 1000 racers were built to take a licking and that—here he knocked wood—there had never been so much as a broken bone at Horsepower Ranch, nor on any of the countless tours he's run on the thousands of miles of road and trail that cut through Baja. "That does not mean," he said, turning stern, "that it is okay to wreck my equipment. These are expensive, high-tech vehicles you are about to get into, and I want you to respect them."

He paused.

"BF Goodrich bought you all insurance. Did they happen to mention the deductible?"

We all look at each other, sip our margaritas, murmur, and decide that, no, this is the first we've heard about a deductible.

"It's \$2500. Keep that figure in mind. You're on the hook for it."

**The next morning**, as the fast-rising sun burns off my tequila haze, we throw down some coffee and grab helmets, neck guards, and something called a kidney belt, then look around for a partner and a car. Charlie, not just the only other New Yorker but also the only other Ranch attendee who didn't work for some sort of off-road magazine, looks at me. I look at him. We shrug. How hard can this be?

On a basic level, driving a turbocharged dune buggy is like driving a car: You got your clutch, your brakes, your steering wheel, your stick shift...But the similarities end there. There are no doors, no windshield, and no air conditioning. Getting into the car requires a climb through the window, Duke brothers style, and an awkward repositioning of the bucket racing seat. Then you belt up the five-point harness, put on your neck guard and helmet, attach



## Wide Open Baja Facts

### COURSES OFFERED

- 4-day Ensenada tour (\$3595)
- 7-day Baja Peninsula tour (\$6595)

### WHEN TO GO

- Year-round (except November when the cars are running in the Baja 1000)

### GETTING THERE

- Hop on a flight to San Diego...they'll pick you up

### TASTY VICTUALS

- On the ranch, it's beer, beer, beer. Carne asada, guacamole, margaritas, hot salsa, and did we mention cold beer?

### MORE INFO

- [wideopenbaja.com](http://wideopenbaja.com)

the pumped-in air hose and communication cable, and attach the safety net to the side window so that when you roll over you won't put your arm out and get it crushed. Once your cord is attached, and a radio channel is selected, you can communicate with all cars in your group by pushing a button on the dash. You can also talk to your co-driver without pushing anything.

"Ever driven one of these?" I ask Charlie, my radio voice taking on the timbre of Darth Vader.

"Nope," he says.

"Me, either."

The radio crackles and our group leader, a chippy Ned Flanders sound-alike named Tom, pipes in. He assigns numbers to the cars and asks us to stay in order. We are Car Two. One by one the cars check in and he asks us to start up the motors.

"Okay," I tell my co-pilot, "wish me luck."

I push the start button—there is no key on a Baja buggy—and the engine sputters a second, then rumbles to life. Wearing a thick helmet filled with blowing air and riding in a race car with no windows or windshield, you hear nothing of the

outside world. Until the radio breaks in and all goes silent except for Tom's chatter.

"Let's move 'em out. Take your time going up the hill from the ranch. Get a feel for the clutch, slide around a little and see how much play you've got in the wheel. And have fun."

I ease out the clutch and push on the gas. Easy enough.

**Clement opened** Horsepower Ranch in 2003, seven years after he founded the company Wide Open Baja, a well-known outfit offering four-to-seven-day off-road tours through Baja, Mexico, much of it the actual race course of the Baja 1000, which Clement himself has run several times (most recently in the top-level Trophy Truck division). Now that he's got the ranch and so many good mechanics, Clement offers an even more unique adventure: for \$70,000, he'll give you a car and a support team and enter you in the race.

Charlie and I aren't quite there yet. While I pick up the sliding and skidding of desert driving pretty quickly—maybe too quickly, in that I am almost immediately coursing with inappropriate

confidence—Charlie's first stint at the wheel isn't so auspicious. Within 10 minutes he has blown not one but two tires, and also flooded the engine. But we—and by "we" I mean BFG—have paid good money for this trip, and Clement's excellent team of guides will not have us idly sweating under a cactus while the Mexicans work their magic on the engine. No, we are put into a backup car and tossed right back into the mix.

Over the next two days we do hundreds of miles of high-speed desert racing, through washes, up mountains, and across empty beaches doing upwards of 100 mph while praying that the sea gulls covering the beach get out of the way. They do, but not before scaring the crap out of me by waiting until the last possible moment to lift off, their tail feathers sometimes grazing the car's front. Did I mention that we have no windshield?

**The last day dawns like,** well, just like every other day. You can say one thing for the weather in Baja: It's consistent. Consistently freakin' hot. Driving a desert racer with no windshield is like attaching a hair dryer to a pith helmet and entering



"Let's move 'em out. Take your time going up the hill...slide around a little and see how much play you've got in the wheel. And have fun."



» From top: True grit; horsepower corral; "Hey, Todd, pull my finger"; really deep shit; Baja staffer demonstrates soccer-style out-of-car pissing technique.

a marathon in a plastic sweat suit. If it weren't for the air hose pumping warm air into your helmet there's a good chance your head would actually roast in there, making it hard for Clement to collect his money later. Not that I'm noticing, as I take over from Charlie on a breathtaking plain that stretches to the horizon in one direction while falling over the edge of a mesa on the other. Our lead car sets a quick pace and I'm a little late getting buckled up—there are so many steps that I never really get the hang of this—so there's a larger-than-normal gap between us and the car in front. Apparently, the next guy is having similar problems, because by the time we're rolling a radio check reveals that he's a good three minutes behind me. I'm feeling like Bobby Unser out here, whizzing around turns and careening down the trail, knocking over cacti and generally scaring the shit out of Charlie.

At one point I overcorrect a turn and we spin out into the scrub brush, pieces of bush flying into our laps.

"Um, sorry about that," I say over the intercom. "I'll chill out."

And I do—for about five minutes. But soon enough I'm lost in the moment, driving way too fast for the conditions and my skill level and who cares, man—this is fun! I can sense Charlie gripping his oh-shit handle as I whip around a turn and feel the car sliding toward a berm. I yank the steering wheel like the rookie I am, overcorrecting the slide and sending the car straight toward the edge of a gulley.

"Oh, shit!" I yell.

"Oh, shit!" Charlie answers.

The car's rear right-side tire is trying to hold the dirt as we slip over the hill, but I'm losing to gravity and the nose begins to turn toward disaster. Bushes and branches are all over, and all sorts of horrible sounds ensue followed by a colossal impact and then nothing. When the dust clears—and I use that phrase for the first time literally—we are on the car's nose at the bottom of the gully, the ass end still on the hill.

"You okay?" I ask.

"I think so. You?"

"Remarkably, yes." And I click on the radio.

"Lead car, we have a problem. We're off the course."

"Well, get back on," our guide replies, annoyed.

"I don't think you understand," Charlie says.

"We're REALLY off course."

There is chatter on the radio as the car behind us says they'll keep a lookout but after a few minutes they meet up with the others and we hear the driver say, "We just drove that road really slowly and didn't see them. It's like they vanished."

And once we're out of the car, it's clear why. This gulley is more like a canyon; we plunged at least 30 feet directly onto the car's nose.

"Man," I say to Charlie, who is half-pissed at me but also sort of slap-happy and joyous to be alive. "I am a firm believer in helmets and harnesses. I mean, look at that shit!"

"Yes," Charlie adds, not smiling. "We should be dead."

Then he starts taking pictures.

**BFG, God bless** its corporate soul, picks up the tab for my little accident. I had broken the front suspension, trashed the oil pan, and ruined some tires, but these cars are built to take punishment and it's nothing the Mexican mechanics can't fix—once they figure out how to get it out of the gulley. When we roll back into the ranch in our third car in four days, one of the mechanics who'd descended into the canyon to survey my carnage comes over with a huge smile.

"You got it out of the canyon?" I ask him.

"Si. We fixing it now."

At the going-away fiesta, after some obligatory PR about sidewalls and tread patterns, awards are given out. Some kid from an off-road mag wins fastest lap, a girl from a tire magazine in Akron wins most improved and, well, there's not much surprise over who wins the "Week To Forget" award.

I'll give you one guess. Okay, two.

Hint: They'd both be right. *mph*

## Dune Buggy Breakdown UNDER THE HOOD OF THE BAJA RACERS

THE HEART OF THE HOSSSES that fill Horsepower Ranch's stable is a **Porsche Type IV engine** (from the 914) bought largely from scrap and reassembled at Orange, California's Fat Performance race shop. There, the mad scientists pop on **bigger valves and custom cranks** and enlarge the cylinders' bores, resulting in an engine that puts out **150 hp** at a very low compression ratio to accommodate the increased shittiness of Mexico's Pemex fuel. On-site in Ensenada, **four-wheel disc brakes** are added, along with **Bilstein shocks and Eibach springs** that allow for up to 17 real inches of wheel travel all around. And it's all topped off with a buggy body custom-built by Snugtop from hand-laid fiberglass. Change is constantly afoot: This year's cars were upgraded to **fuel injection and 2 mm of engine stroke** were added. The stable, says Tom Morris, who runs Wide Open Baja's operations, is "ever-expanding." On the drawing board is a whole other animal.

"We are looking at something that could run Paris-Dakar," Morris says. "Probably a three-seat buggyish thing, but that's all I can say right now." If you're bored with Baja, look for the new rides sometime in '07.

