

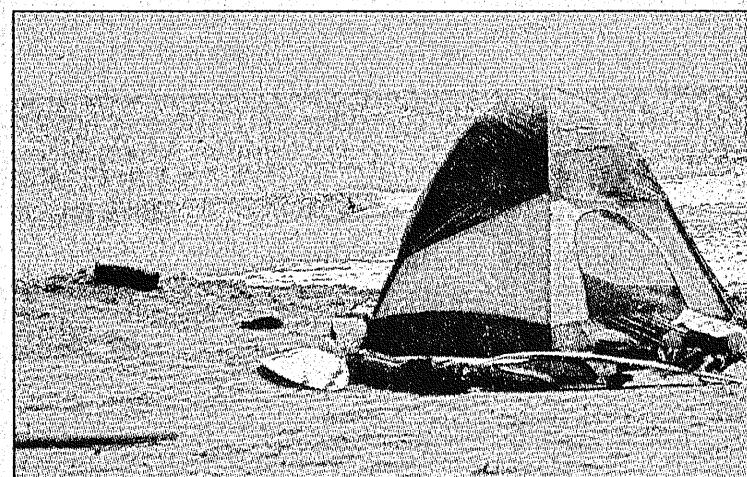
# TRAVEL



## Secret Beaches

**Walkabout:** A happy camper strolls a pristine shoreline, an ideal meeting of sky, surf and sand, on Australia's Fraser Island.

HOLLI HOLLITZER



**Wave length:** Cheap camping, no crowds.

TOM SERVAIS

### BAJA

## Scorpion Bay: Surf Haven

BY HILLARY HAUSER

**S**AN JUANICO, Mexico—It's June and we are camped near Scorpion Bay, in an enormous crescent-shaped white-sand cove lapped by glittery blue water. My day has begun as other days here, before sunrise; this morning I walked to the lighthouse to watch the big yellow ball of the sun make its fiery appearance over the Sierra de la Giganta. The fishermen here seldom lag much behind the sunrise, and suddenly the *pangas*, the fishing boats, began leaving the beach for the open ocean, silhouetted against a golden sea. A few surfers were up, too, in their camps along the cliff, drinking coffee as they watched the morning begin.

Back at our campsite, my husband Jim was up, boiling water on our camp stove. Bill, a surfer from Encinitas, bicycled out from his camp to see us, bringing Viennese coffee to share. At that moment, our dog Minke, a schipperke, caught a mouse, beating it to near-death before leaving it behind. I looked at the poor thing, then picked up a big stone, positioned it, looked away and dropped it. The mouse was killed instantly, mercifully—but the moment I walked away, a road runner raced up, pried the rodent loose from under the stone and ran away with it.

The cove, a hundred feet from our camp, has become our personal  
Please see MEXICO, L8

# Secret Beaches: Baja California

## MEXICO: Surfing at Scorpion Bay

### Continued from L1

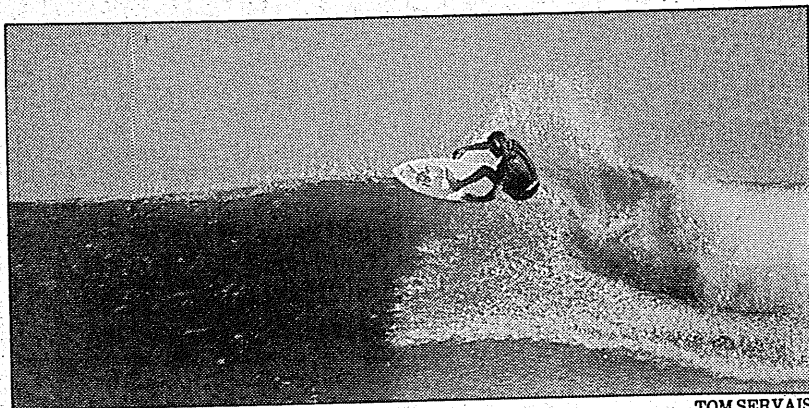
beach for the two weeks we've been here. The sound of the waves, together with the cool breeze and the knowledge that I can throw myself into the water any time I choose, softens the heat of the desert behind us. The water called me now. Leaving the mouse and the road runner, I traipsed across the sand and, out of the sight of everyone, swam naked in this pristine ocean.

Then I was ready for the day.

Scorpion Bay is a spectacular front yard for the dusty little town of San Juanico, a prosperous fishing community about two-thirds of the way down the Baja Peninsula from the California border, on the Pacific side. The bay is officially called the Bahía de San Juanico, in fact; "Scorpion Bay" is the name American surfers have given it.

By either name, it is something special. All too many secluded, potentially idyllic beaches in Baja have been trashed and polluted, but this bay is gloriously pristine. These waters are wonderful for swimming (although swimmers are advised to do the "stingray shuffle" to avoid stepping on the occasional ray), but it is spectacular for surfing. It is a surfer's dream.

Jim and I started coming here four years ago, usually timing our trips to catch the best surf, in the summer or fall, as late as November. This time we had come with our good friends Bruce and Karen Raph, who now joined us for breakfast. Afterward, the four of us walked a mile down the road to the bay, passing the camps of other surfers who had set up temporary homes in trucks, vans and tents



TOM SERVAIS

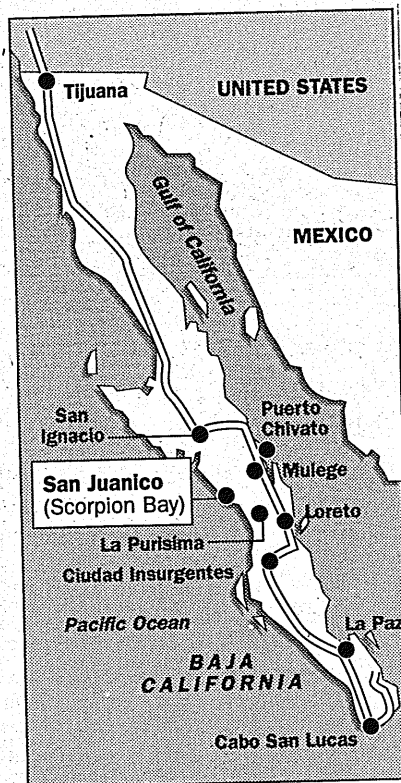
### Free fall: Surfer atop wave at Scorpion Bay.

along the cliffs.

There are five surf breaks, or points, in this area. The first one is off a little island in the bay itself. The rest are actual points of land just north, along the shoreline. Most of the surfers camp close together on the second and third points and around to the head of the bay, but Bruce, Karen, Jim and I had settled two or three hundred yards from each other on the fourth point. We liked the privacy, which made it worth suffering the strong winds that come up in this spot every afternoon.

Above us, on the fifth point, a couple of German tourists, Tillman and Sylvia, had established themselves as hermits. They had walked down to our camp for a visit the night before, and over Tecate beers we'd learned that they aren't surfers at all, just visitors following their noses and a Baja road map. We were astonished to hear this. The roads to San Juanico are hellish to negotiate, and usually the only people willing to go to the trouble to get here are

Please see MEXICO, L9



VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times

## Secret Beaches: Baja California

### MEXICO

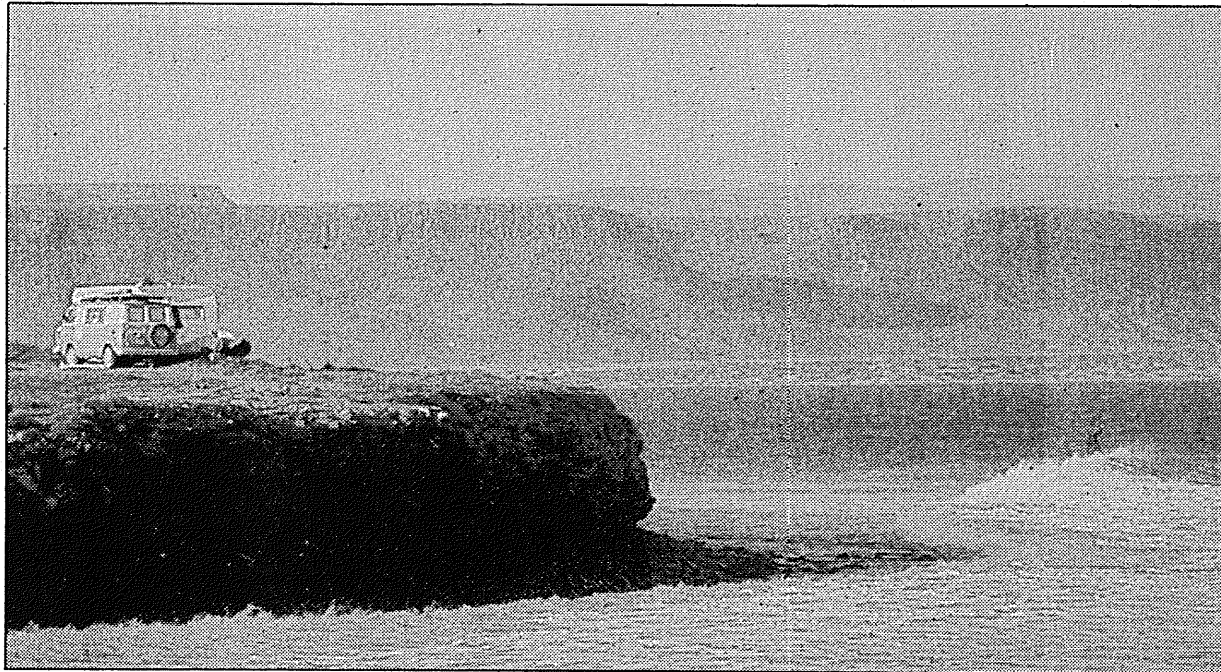
Continued from L8

surfers in search of the waves for which Scorpion Bay is known.

Surfers love Scorpion Bay because a southern swell wraps around Punta Pequeña and peels off into Scorpion Bay in perfect right-breaking waves—so uniform they look as if they've been generated by a machine. The five points stretch for about a mile and a half along this part of the coast. It is said that on a good swell, a surfer can ride the full distance, from the fifth point all the way down into the bay. (We've yet to see this.)

The reputation of Scorpion Bay is growing rapidly in the American surfing community, but thus far tourism, surf-driven or otherwise, has had very little impact here. Over the years, various schemes for developing hotels and condominiums have been proposed, but existing roads to the area are tortuous and rough, and no major construction has yet taken place. A few Americans, mainly surfers, have bought lots in San Juanico (five years ago these went for about \$2,000—today they're about \$15,000) and are building unobtrusive homes.

But other than that, the only new visitor-directed enterprise has been a very low-key one: Promotura Punta Pequeña, a small company owned by Southern California surfers Jamie Atkins, Tom Smith



HILLARY HAUSER

**Point break:** One of five camping and surfing spots at Bahía de San Juanico.

and Dan Clenney, has recently set up campsites equipped with showers and restrooms on the cliffs above the bay, as well as a cantina selling tacos, cold beer and such. The facilities, built of local brick, wood and thatch by local workers, harmonize tastefully with the surrounding landscape. The company, which owns a significant amount of coastal property around Scorpion Bay (and has a small number of private home sites for sale) has also installed large, storm-proof trash receptacles along the beach-

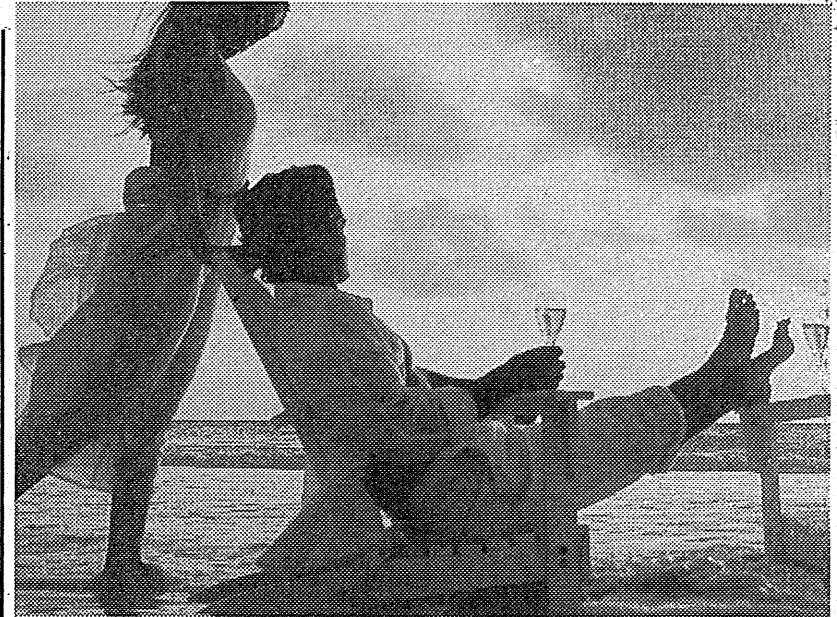
es to discourage littering.

The people of San Juanico seem to enjoy the presence of American visitors, and the little town is a friendly place to visit. Its dirt streets and simple houses (some with satellite dishes) are neatly kept, and a church high on a hill overlooks everything. There are shops, including a grocery store, a liquor store and a hardware store, and an artesian well provides the town's water.

Those looking for party time in San Juanico are not likely to find it,

unless they happen into town during a fiesta—but there are usually one or two restaurants, depending on who feels like turning his or her living room into a restaurant at any given time. We used to love the *huevos rancheros* at Gloria's, for instance, but on our last couple of trips she has not been serving. At another makeshift restaurant, Jim, Bruce, Karen and I enjoyed a delicious lunch of *manta machaca*, a dish of scrambled eggs, onions and dried stingray, which we ate with

Please see MEXICO, L16



### Enjoy The Maui Surf Without Getting Soaked.



Inclusive Packages From

**\$207\***

Per Person, Per Night

At the Stouffer Wailea Beach Resort, the tropical sunshine, the fresh ocean trade winds, and the caress of the waves will relax you. And our special Sunbrella<sup>SM</sup> package rates will make you comfortable too.

Our gracious country club atmosphere is combined with unpretentious island hospitality and real "Aloha" spirit. At this tropical beachfront paradise, you'll find a pool surrounded by peaceful waterfalls and streams, three championship 18-hole golf courses, and 14 tennis courts. Plus several delicious dining options to choose from and our twice-weekly traditional Hawaiian luau.

As the only Hawaiian resort to receive the AAA Five-Diamond Award for 13 consecutive years, the Stouffer Wailea Beach Resort offers the perfect island vacation. At a rate that won't throw cold water on your dreams.

For reservations or more information, call your travel agent, or 1-800-874-0027.

\*Packages subject to limited availability. Rate is for three-night inclusive package, per person, based on double occupancy. Other restrictions may apply.



# Secret Beaches: Baja California

## MEXICO

Continued from L9  
beans and tortillas.

San Juanico's principal industry is fishing, and Mexican fishermen take their business seriously, each belonging to a *cooperativo* that regulates and polices the taking of seafood—especially abalone and lobster. Tourists are not allowed to remove these particular delicacies from the waters of Baja, and no matter how deserted you think a beach is, the chances are good that the *cooperativo* is watching you. Fishermen will gladly sell abalone and lobster to visitors, though. In the old days, so the stories go, locals would trade lobsters for Oreo cookies or American cigarettes. We've paid \$9 a pound for abalone.

**B**ut crabs and various kinds of fish are fair game for outsiders, and San Juanicanos can be generous in this regard. We got to know

one fisherman, Susanno, who took Jim out on one of his fishing trips. (Gloria, who operated the restaurant we liked, is his wife.) Another time, two other fisherman, Alvino and Ishmael, came out one afternoon with "fish for Jaime," for which they refused payment. Agapito, an inspector from the *cooperativo*, came to see us one afternoon, too—to see if we'd been poaching, I suspect—and then stayed to play with us a riotous game of Scrabble, in Spanish.

The beaches north of San Juanico, accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicles, are like scenes from another world. Jim, Bruce, Karen and I took two trips in Bruce's truck to the *estero*, a vast estuary five miles up the coast. To get there, we had to drive up a beach so wild and deserted it was like traversing a primitive, mystical wilderness. We passed vultures feasting on the carcasses of bat rays and sea lions; just offshore, dolphins chased schools of fish at such high speeds that the ocean

around them exploded with their frantic bursts of energy. Ospreys gathered on the cliffs, while frigate birds scissored the air. On one trip, we fished, with Karen catching a corvina in the shore break within minutes and Bruce landing a halibut soon afterward. Meanwhile, I took a swim in the most crystal-clear sea I've ever experienced. Later, we all waded into the estuary and snagged a feast's worth of big crabs with monofilament lines.

After a day spent like this, stepping in and out of the ocean, surfing, fishing, then feasting at night on a bouillabaisse of crabs and fish we've caught ourselves, it's difficult not to feel very much at peace. Sitting by a fire, looking at the stars over Baja, discussing astronomy, the Earth and the universe, the simple life prevails. At Scorpion Bay, our entertainment comes from the sea, the stars and ourselves.

---

*Hauser is a free-lance writer based in Summerland.*