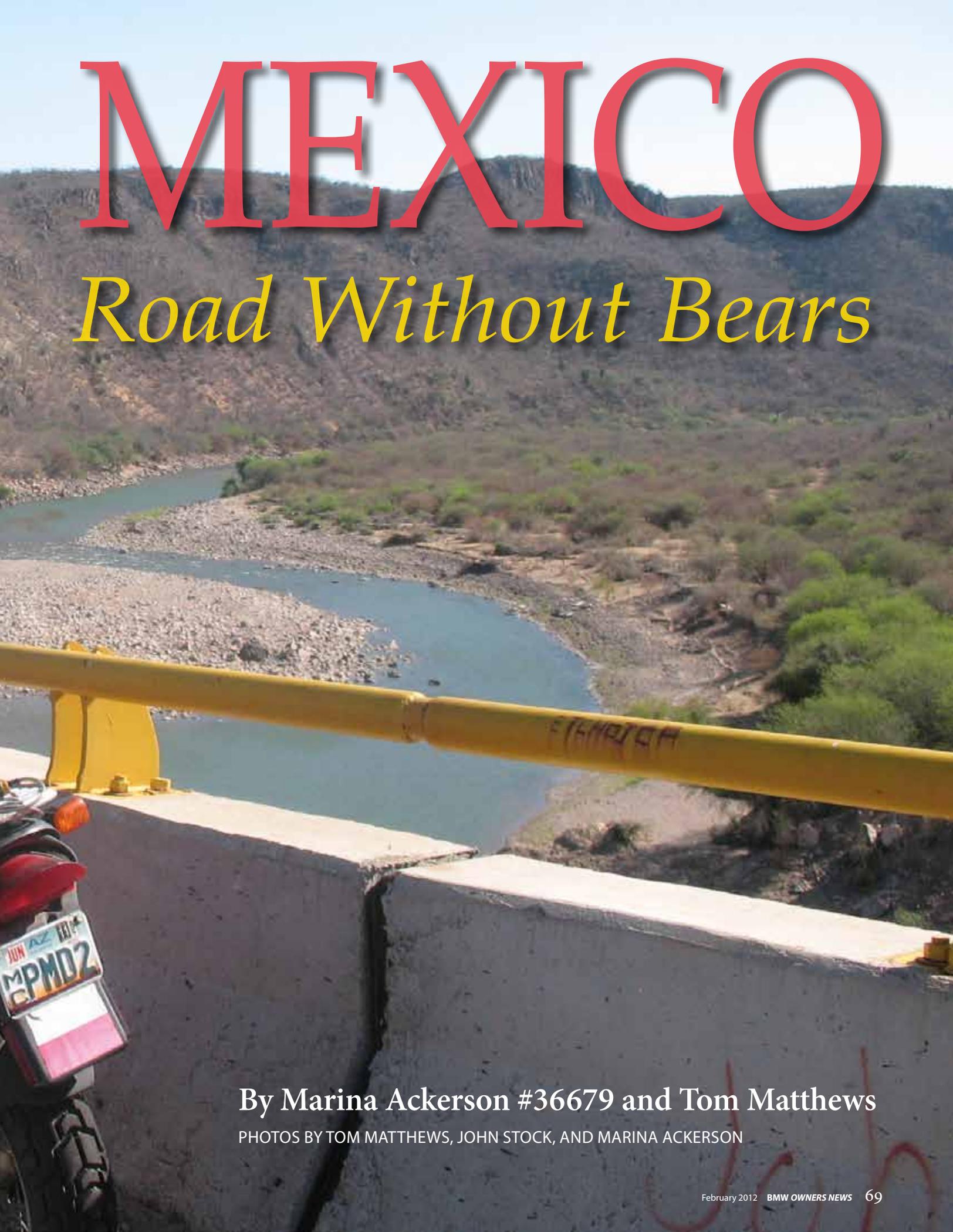


SONORA



MEXICO

Road Without Bears



By Marina Ackerson #36679 and Tom Matthews

PHOTOS BY TOM MATTHEWS, JOHN STOCK, AND MARINA ACKERSON



Camino sin Oso —

my limited Spanish told me this road sign said “road without bears.”

Worrying about bears along with cows on the tight, twisting, steep descent road was a new challenge to add to my Mexico riding experiences. After all, this was not British Columbia. Standard bromide to those new to riding in Mexico from my dear friend John Stock who, along with his lovely wife Maralan, has hosted many Chain Gang tours to Mexico is “Mexico will make you a better rider.” Nobody has argued that point to date. So went our third day of incredible riding in the Sierra Madres of northern Sonora, Mexico.

To begin, we checked into the famous Gadsden Hotel in Douglas, Arizona, then rode to the border, parked and walked across to Agua Prieta, Mexico, to obtain our visas and motorcycle vehicle permits. Back at the hotel, we met for dinner, a review of Mexican terminology and obstacles we would encounter and lifted our glasses in a toast to our upcoming adventure. *Disfrutar cada momento*—live in the moment.

Now I’m no slouch when it comes to riding a motorcycle, but I take a back seat to my friends Maralan and John. When they

asked if I (2009 F650GS twin) and my riding partner John (Suzuki V-Strom) wanted to go to Sonora for a few days, I jumped at the opportunity.

Next morning, crossing into Agua Prieta, we met friend Tom Matthews on his ’06 Triumph Tiger behind the permit office. He had ridden up that morning from Banamachi, Mexico. He and wife Lynn (rides an F650GS) own the Hotel Los Arcos de Sonora where we would spend our last night in Mexico before returning to the US. He also takes motorcycle tour groups to the Baja and Sonora (Turkey Creek Tours). Could I be in better company? The old money exchange office was closed, so Maralan asked where we could exchange money. “Turn right at the next corner” was the reply. So we turned right and cars were coming at us. We were going the wrong way on a one-way street. We pulled over to the curb and started laughing. Mexico will make better riders out of us!

Nacozari de Garcia, 75 miles south, was our first stop for fuel, a stretch and to meet old friend Rololfo Mercado, the newspaper publisher. After a short tour of the copper mining museum on the plaza and spirited a cappella versions of Mexican pop songs by students who were out of school for lunch,

we wound our way out of town as the road climbed and fell and continued down the river valley of farms and ranches to Moctezuma for our own lunch. At the little roadside restaurant we found the tacos de carne asada just as good as ever and the Mexican cokes just like the old days. Have I mentioned that speed limits are either non-existent or are ignored?

Heading south on the state road, we rode the plain beneath the dormant volcano Cerro Blanco. The landscape is flat, ringed by mountains and littered with volcanic rock the size of watermelons. Good roads, more sweepers and some tighter curves along the Sierra Los Azules (mountains of the blues) to the Yaqui river bridge for a major photo stop. A short ride to Sahuaripa (Sa-wa-ri-pa), a good looking, mid-size ranching town, gas and Cerveza for the evening’s thirst. Next, Arivechi with an exquisite main plaza, a small but stunning church and a kiosk in the plaza with a stained glass roof depicting local scenes. Twelve km down the road, we turned off the highway to Bamori, where we would spend two nights.

Bamori (elev. 1770 ft.) is a very small town on the Rio Sahuaripa, a small tributary to the Yaqui. We stayed at the Hotel

Bamori, which bills itself as “Capital of the world” and has the official document showing the official trademark they received for the title. We were all captivated by a 5-year old girl, very self-possessed, who talked up a storm and sat on our motorcycles.

The citizens of Bamori were out on the plaza just visiting and enjoying the cool evening. Everyone was friendly and greeted us warmly, some in English. The nearly full moon lit the white front of the church with an almost translucent glow.



Nacazori boys singing a cappella.

Arivechi



Riding through herd of cows out of Bamori.



Bridge to Bamori



Bacanora taken from above.

The Road To Yecora – 75 Miles Of Heaven

It's hard to bottom out suspension, clean off the mud guard and break the mounting latch on Jesse bags on a '98 F650 Funduro, but John Stock managed to do all three on this trip. He and Maralan simply fly through the curves, Maralan on her lowered '97 F650 Funduro "Lil Red." I don't even try to keep up.

This is "the ride." The first half is pavement, some pavement or no pavement and a herd of cows being driven across the road to ease through. In and out of the river bottom and then up into the hills and back for about 40 miles, it was a mere warm up for the next leg. After a brief stop at the military checkpoint (teenagers with spiffy uniforms and automatic weapons), we climbed through incredibly tight twisties to 6500 ft



John A, John S, Maralan and Marina

in a pine forest with 8,000 ft peaks visible. We were on sweet 16 – yeah! The dragon has nothing on this road. We dropped down into a bowl-shaped valley with Yecora (elev. 5100 ft) laid out before us. Gas, a ride through town and lunch at friend Octavio's restaurant. To celebrate the reunion, Octavio brought out his home brewed Bacanora, 100 percent agave with a smoky flavor. We all shared a glass. Then, oh darn, we had to ride Sweet 16 back to Bamori. Steve Johnson says you have to ride a road three times—once out, once back,

and once for photos. John remarked that it was among the finest days of riding he has ever experienced.

At breakfast on Sunday, we discussed route options. Tom's neighbor, Raymundo, who makes some of the best cheese in Banámichi, suggested taking Sahuaripa to Mazatan. Raymundo described it as a good road for motorcycles. We decided to give it a try. Wow, as good as it gets. We crossed the first of four mountain ranges through more tight twisties and steep descents on the way to the town of Bacanora, which

gives its name to the drink. We came around a sharp right hand curve and the town was visible below. It looked like a movie set built to look like a small town in Mexico. We wound down a few switchbacks and toured the town. Back on the road, we climbed again three more mountain ranges cut by deep and steep canyons. We were treated to small glimpses of the Plutarco Elias Calles reservoir as we wound around on a shelf road nailed to the side of the cliff. We dropped down to just over 900 ft to the tiny village of La Estrella at the southern tip of the reservoir and crossed over a very tall, very narrow single lane bridge. It was about 40 miles of exquisite riding, and we rode the mountains without the worry of bears on the road. Yes, there were at least ten signs that said *CAMINO SIN OSO*, *PRECAUCION EXTREMA*. Finally, the moment of enlightenment, a closer look at one of the signs showed that the sign actually read *CAMINO SINUOSO* or sinuous (curvy) road. Some *payaso* (clown) had painted out the letter "U" on every sign. They were thorough, to say the least.

The mountains behind us for a while, we



Another great curve.

Below: Church in Arivechi
Right: Dome of Gazebo in Arivechi



had a very straight 30 miles to Mazatan. When we reached the Pemex station we all had a good laugh about the bears. A quick lunch in Mazatan and we headed for Ures. This was a little dicey, as the route was not at all clear. Go up behind the Pemex and turn left at the Tortilleria, then take a left on the road to Pueblo de Alamos. A little head scratching and we were on our way through a classic Sonoran desert landscape. Organ pipe and prickly pear cactus lined the road, along with ocotillo in bloom. Mountains ringed the horizon. When we reached the pueblo, the pavement disappeared. The roads in the town were soft sand. We walled around until Tom flagged down three teenage girls in a pickup to ask for directions. They led us back to the pavement and we



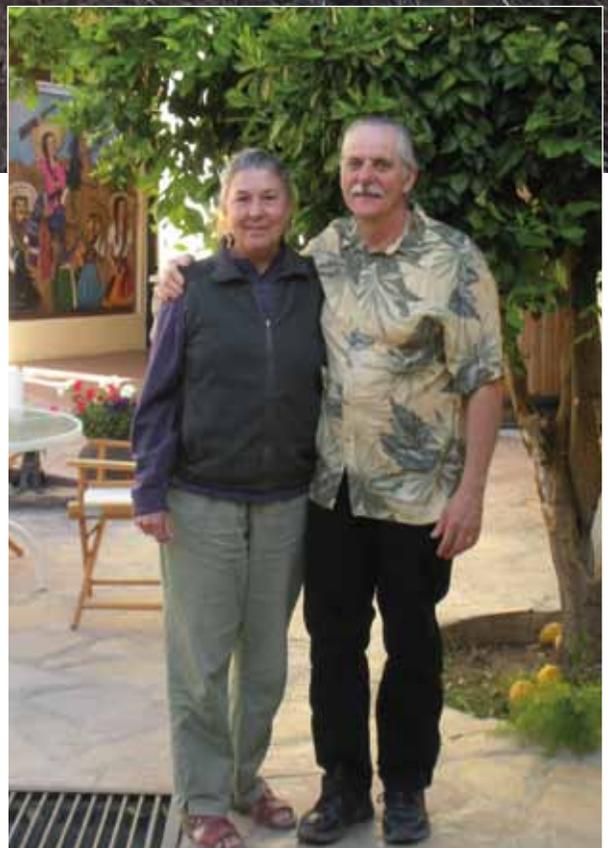
Landscape in Sierra Madres.

headed through the desert to Ures.

Ures was once the capital of Sonora; we stopped to admire the restored governor's mansion and enjoyed the shade of the trees in the plaza for a few minutes and took in the colonial architecture. We topped off just outside town and headed north up the Sonora River. Another short round of mountain riding with the Rio Sonora far below and we reached Mozacahui, which at times has a military checkpoint. Not this day, so off again through small towns and lots of *topes* or speed bumps. We stopped in the town of Baviacora for a look at the new and old churches side by side. The new church was closed, but since the entire side of the old adobe church is wide open, we were able to get a look at the restoration that was begun and discontinued some time ago.

A short 25 miles later, we pulled up in front of the Hotel Los Arcos de Sonora in Banámichi. Tom's wife Lynn had cold cervezas Negra Modelo waiting for us.

We parked the bikes in the secure parking area behind the hotel and enjoyed the patio. Tom and Lynn own Turkey Creek Motorcycle Tours and had been running motorcycle tours down the Rio Sonora when they fell in love with Banámichi and decided to leave Colorado and build a hotel that would complement their tours. They still run tours in Colorado and Arizona, but now



Tom and Lynn Matthews in courtyard of Hotel Los Arcos.



Landscape in Sierra Madres.

live full time in Mexico and tour the Baja and Sonora. The hotel is in part a restored, original adobe and in part new construction. It opened in September of '09. It is classical Sonoran Colonial style. The patio is large, full of plants and flowers and has a pond and waterfall. We sat in the patio and sipped Bacanora and talked about the ride and how magical Mexico was.

Tom fixed us a full breakfast and we headed north, following the Rio Sonora to Cananea to turn in permits and then east to Naco to cross back into the US at Bisbee.

The 150 miles from Banamachi to the border crossing at Naco traversed mountains with sweeping curves and up and down through *vados* (water crossings) along the Rio Sonora. I slowed down to look at the spectacular mountain vistas. We were lucky there hadn't been much rain, so

the crossings were relatively easy even if the water was cold; it was kind of fun having the water spray up over the windshield. As is often the case, the wind started as we got close to the border, with tumbleweed blowing across the road. We exchanged our pesos for dollars, turned in our visas and crossed the border.

The entire time in Mexico—three plus days and almost 700 miles—was without incident. I was with people who know Mexico, know the roads and know where not to go. Now I know why Tom tells people the only thing you might have to fear about visiting this part of Mexico is that you won't ever want to leave.

Any questions? Please contact Tom for more information about creating the ride of your life in Mexico! Fall is a great time to go. ☺

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