

DAILY LIFE

In the San Francisco Mountains

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The El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve has been a natural protected area in Mexico since 1988. Located in the central part of the Baja California Peninsula, it covers 2 547 790 hectares below the 28th parallel in the municipality of Mulegé in Baja California Sur. It includes islands, coastal areas, lagoons, plains, and mountainous regions. Specific parts of the reserve have been singled out for special recognition: in 1993, the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) declared the rock paintings in the San Francisco Mountains and the Vizcaíno Whale Natural Sanctuary World Heritage Sites. In 2005, the islands and protected areas in the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortés, were included on the list, too. All three cases recognized their vast biological, archaeological, and historical wealth.

The sheer size of El Vizcaíno Reserve makes it possible to enter into contact with a wide diversity of ecosystems, landscapes, inhabitants, and settlements. This article

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Photos by Rafael Pareja.



The way to San Francisco de la Sierra is covered with canyons and plains.



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will only look at the region of the San Francisco Mountains as a central point for visiting the rock paintings. However, it is not the only area that boasts this cultural heritage: in the Guadalupe Mountains in Baja California Sur, and in the San Juan and San Borja Mountains in Baja California, many other rocky crags and caves also have rock paintings.

The San Francisco Mountain rock paintings are located in a polygon covering the 206 800 hectares declared a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO. This area boasts a masterpiece of human creative genius and bears exceptional witness to a cultural tradition or civilization that has now disappeared. Archaeological research indicates that the human groups that created them inhabited the region about 3 000 years ago. The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) reports the existence of more than 700 archaeological sites that have given up finds of isolated artifacts, workshops, camp sites, pits, cremation sites, funeral caves, rocky crags, petroglyphs, and pictographs; of these, almost 300 sites have paintings and stone reliefs.

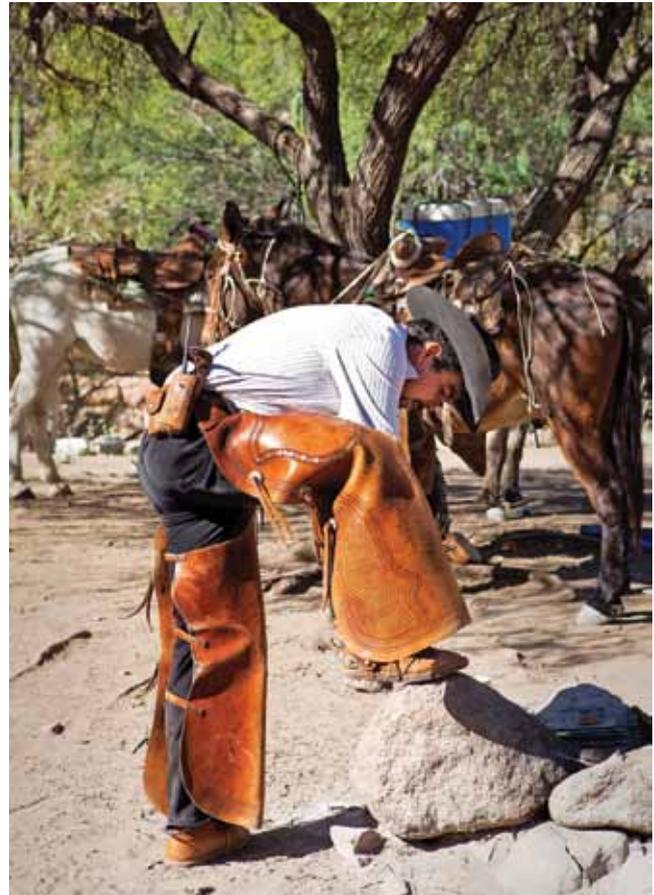
The starting point for reaching the Santa Teresa, San Pablo, San Gregorio, and El Parral Canyons is either Santa Marta or San Francisco de la Sierra. The INAH has commissioned personnel in these two towns to organize and coordinate visits to the rock paintings, which can only be made with a guide. The two places are connected to the

state's main highway, Trans-peninsular Highway 1; in the case of Santa Marta, by a dirt road, and from San Francisco, by a 37-kilometer highway, paved only three-quarters of the way. The dirt road is winding and narrow and crosses heights and gullies. For now, the inhabitants keep it passable, but without any pay. Little rocks painted white show the way, contrasting with the light yellowish and reddish earth tones around them. The markers seem to go on forever, along the land, passing houses and other spaces, because in San Francisco de la Sierra and the other small settlements, there are no fences or other kinds of barriers.

San Francisco de la Sierra is the most populated place in the area with a little over 50 inhabitants, distributed in 12 dwellings; many of the surround hamlets, spread-out and isolated, have no more than 10 inhabitants each. It is also common to come upon abandoned dwellings because the owners have died or emigrated, leaving the buildings to deteriorate, with only their foundations and the corrals left to testify to the past. The dwellings are built with the materials at hand: wood, earth, or reed walls; cardboard sheets or local palm leaves for roofs; earth or cement floors; and no electricity, drainage, or running water. These services are replaced by solar panels for lighting and latrines. But the most critical of all is the water.

In San Francisco de la Sierra, before the Spanish International Cooperation Agency built a guesthouse managed by the community and installed a pumping system and distribution network, water was collected from streams and transported on beasts of burden; in the driest seasons a trip to the springs could take several hours. Along the waterways, it is common to find dams that are used to water the animals and to supply the houses with water for cleaning. These small settlements have no land telephone lines and cellular phones do not work. The inhabitants communicate with each other using portable radios, and everyone can hear and participate in the conversations, so they know all the ups and downs of everyone's daily life. Access to medical care is limited; these people are affiliated to the Health Ministry's Popular Insurance service, but no personnel is assigned to the Rural Health Center. The doctor comes through only once a week to provide care for all the towns in the region. Meanwhile, local inhabitants maintain their knowledge of the use of medicinal plants and, if there is no emergency, they deal with illness or injury according to tradition; but they also underestimate problems that then become acute or chronic.

In most of the area, educational services are scanty. Pre-school and primary grades are taught by community instructors or by a single Public Education Ministry teacher in single-room schoolhouses with all the grades together. A few years ago, it was not possible to go to middle school or further without emigrating, until the San Francisco de la Sierra Middle School was opened. However, there is nowhere to go for high school or university, thus forcing young people to leave their homes if they have the resources to live in a city. This means that the average schooling among the mountain



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dwellers comes to only four years, and that the work force is employed autonomously above all in agriculture.

The distance from urban areas that can provide a diversity of goods means that people do without consuming them even if they are necessary. They also have to pay higher prices than in the rest of the country. This means they survive in a subsistence economy where local networks for exchanging goods among families are important. These networks facilitate mutual support in emergencies and are strengthened by invitations and attending religious saints' day celebrations in the local communities and participation in festivities, which are almost the only leisure activities available.

The San Francisco Mountains are located between the sea and the desert. Local inhabitants, everyone from the semi-nomad Cochimí people who lived there until the eighteenth century to the Spanish missionaries (first the Jesuits and later the Franciscans and Dominicans, and the descendants of Buenaventura Arce, the founder of San Francisco de la Sierra in the mid-nineteenth century), have had to deal with the elements. These include rocky soil with little organic content, made up of volcanic, granite, and sedimentary rock; a severe, dry climate featuring extreme heat and cold; slight precipitation and high evaporation that prevent the aquifers from replenishing; and remote, difficult-to-access land where canyons and steep peaks crisscross plateaus and hilly areas. The surprising diversity of flora and fauna contrasts with this, as does the presence of endemic species that create a specific, important ecosystem, both beautiful and of great scientific interest. Crossing the plateaus and climbing down the canyons, visitors can appreciate the transition and how dry-climate-loving xerophile plants can co-exist with sub-tropical species. The contrasts can be seen from a distance: the tops of palm trees jut out of the ravines, following the flowing water along narrow paths, while along the slopes, the cacti and spiny bushes cling to the rocks and to life in hope of the annual rains that allow them to store up enough water for the dry season.

The mountain inhabitants, known as “ranchers,” also surprise you with their ability to adapt and their love of the land and the work they do. Amidst these difficult conditions, agriculture is limited; cultivable land in terms of fertility and humidity can be found at the bottom of the ravines in small areas spread out from each other. This makes it necessary to settle there to be able to take care of the crops. These oases bring forth a variety of fruit like citrus fruit, apples, peaches, pomegranates, figs, mangoes, dates,

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The little hamlets are made up of rudimentary buildings.



A cemetery nestled in the mountains.



Local rancher.

and some grains and legumes. The crops are transported on beasts of burden, uphill, for several hours. Local residents also gather seasonal wild fruit from some of the region's flowering species, particularly the cacti, to supplement their diet and to use in health care. In the past, they used the agave plants to make alcoholic beverages. The families remember that for their ancestors, this was the main sustenance in hard times, although transporting it to sell in larger towns would take several days, putting themselves at risk for hold-ups. However, making alcoholic beverages was banned and became a clandestine operation until it disappeared altogether.

Today, activities center on traditional animal husbandry. Raising and milking goats is predominant; they also have cattle, but to a lesser extent; and barnyard animals are common, including horses, mules, and donkeys. The donkeys are needed for transport along the steep mountainsides. In the daytime, the animals graze, and at night they are shut up in corrals made of stones and branches next to the dwellings. At dawn, they are milked, and cheese is made using the milk. As they take the animals out to pasture, they collect the wood they need to burn in their homes. In the afternoon, they herd the animals back to the corrals. Animal husbandry demands that the ranchers have a diversity of knowledge and skills like lassoing, breaking the animals, riding, milking, vaccinating, genetically improving, inseminating, and birthing, among others.

As a result, the local economy depends on selling and buying animals: horses, mules, and burros for transport; male goats for their meat; female goats for their milk to make fresh and semi-dry cheeses. Other economic activities include preserving fruit, preparing the dried meat known as "*machaca*," embroidering textiles, and leather working. It is important to mention that leather working is indispensable because demand is high for *tehuas*, the rough shoes needed for the local terrain, leggings or chaps, saddlebags, saddles, and a wide variety of items used on ranches. Daily activities are marked by the arrival of tourists and the services offered so they can see the rock paintings. In the San Francisco Mountains, the ranchers are organized, rotating their participation as guides. But they only do it once a year each because tourism is low and concentrated between the months of October and May. The rest of the time, the heat is intense and it is risky traveling to the canyons.

Usually, a trip through one of the canyons takes three days and costs less than US\$250, including the pay for the guide, the animals that transport the visitors and carry the food, and the camping gear. As a result, mountain families have low incomes and

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their living conditions include many deprivations. However, they make an important, free contribution as custodians of the region's patrimony, and have followed the recommendations of the government agencies and national and international civil society organizations to optimally manage the natural resources inside the protected area. All of that should be repaid with better basic services.

The distance from central Mexico means that domestic tourism is low; most people come from Baja California itself and other countries. Gradually, however, the region is becoming better known through other windows that explain realities, form images, and create curiosity and the desire to travel to this corner of Mexico. This is the case of the 1998 Carlos Bolado film *Bajo California. El límite del tiempo* (Lower California: The Limit of Time). Local ranchers agree that several tourists told them that they had decided to make the trip after seeing the movie. They also identify closely with what Cody McClintock has to say in *Corazón vaquero* (Cowboy Heart) (2008), and César Talamantes's *Los otros californios* (The Other Californians), which portray daily and traditional life in the region.

Cordiality, generosity, and a joyful personality are virtues among the mountain dwellers. They are always ready to show visitors the natural beauties of their land, and little by little, they increase their activities, trying to be environmentally friendly. For example, the La Bajada Plain educational path, laid out on what was the road that led to the Gulf of California to gather sea salt and seafood, is now a place for children, accompanied by adults, to give lessons on ecology, making conservationism a life option. With their ears and eyes always open, they show the animals that plow the heavens and others, along the ground, that furtively welcome us. **MM**

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Local guides lead a caravan to the murals.