

DESTINATION:

PUNTA SAN CARLOS, MEXICO

The land of magic dirt



MEXICO'S BARREN BAJA CALIFORNIA PENINSULA has long been a magnet for surfers seeking empty waves and solitude, but only recently has it begun to attract mountain bikers in search of new riding opportunities. While most of the peninsula's singletrack potential remains largely untapped, one remote outpost—Punta San Carlos—is making a name for itself with a rapidly expanding network of sublime mountain bike trails.

Punta San Carlos, an eight-hour drive south of San Diego, California, has for decades been known as one of the world's finest windsurfing and kiteboarding destinations. The confluence of its high mesas and the Pacific Ocean creates a unique microclimate that generates wind. With such a dynamic environment for water sports, the implications these conditions had for the coastal soil—a magical mix of decomposed granite

and degenerated sandstone—was long overlooked by visitors.

That was until California native Kevin Trejo and a few of his windsurfing buddies began exploring the inland canyons on their hardtails during waveless periods. Following narrow cow paths that wound gently into meandering arroyos, they quickly learned that it only took a few rides to turn these animal trails into bona fide singletrack—and some fast and flowy singletrack at that.

"After riding the cow trails, we found out how good of riders the cows actually are, and how easy these tracks turn into singletrack after just a few rides," said Trejo, who has operated a surf camp called SoloSports here since 1987. "It was like, Holy Cow! What was meant to be a secondary diversion became an obsession and turned into an adrenaline rush that was equal to the other reasons we went to Punta San Carlos."

Trejo and crew completed their first trail, a rhythmic descent named Dad's, in 1996, and have been building ever since. But in recent years, as visitors began talking about the trails as much as the wind and waves, Trejo stepped up his trail-building efforts. Today, Punta San Carlos boasts more than 60 miles of singletrack, and Trejo's circle of friends is starting to build at a furious pace.



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These trails, along with abundant natural features that lend themselves to stunts, have captured the fascination of pro riders and filmmakers. Following exploratory trips by Josh Bender, Randy Spangler and Chris Van Dine, word of the area's potential spread quickly, and late last year Anthill Films showed up to film a segment for their upcoming movie, *Follow Me*.

The filmmakers and their crew of pro riders were ecstatic over the location. Geoff Gulevich, Matt Hunter and Cam McCaul—no strangers to mind-mending terrain—all raved about the trails and the

BARK AT THE MOON

Randy Spangler sends it high above the single-track shrine
Photo: Ian Hylands

away by Baja that he ended up vacationing there with his family after the shoot. "Tires roll fast, but there is a soft surface layer that needs to be carved. It's crazy—cornering is like setting a rail. It feels like surfing or skiing, just float and carve."

THE FOOTHILLS

The trails begin right behind Trejo's oceanfront

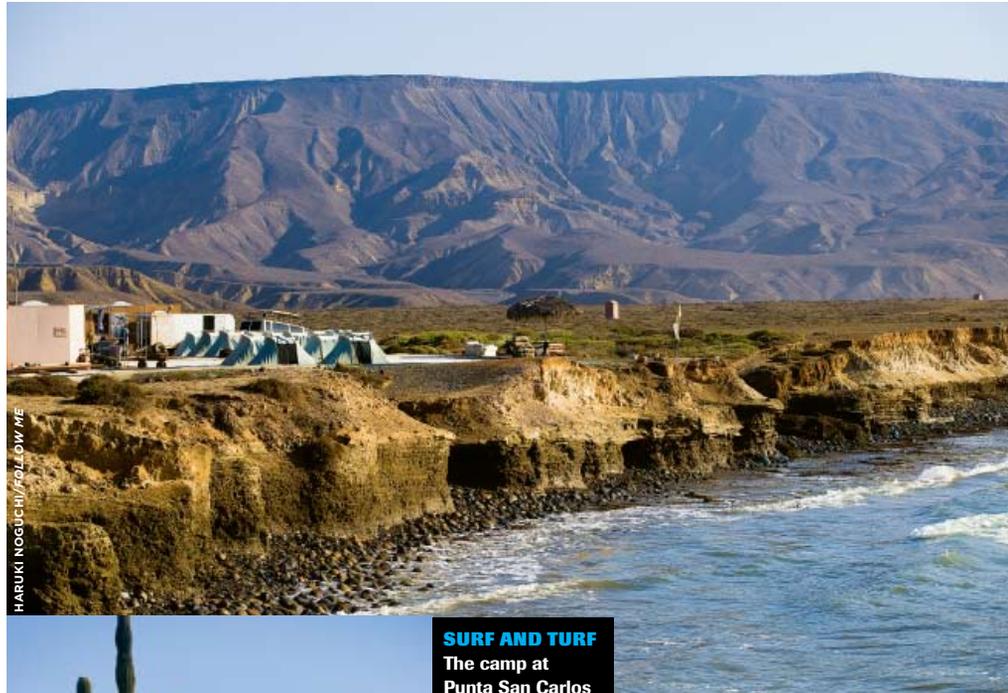
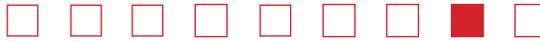
unique texture of the dirt.

"There's something going on with that dirt," said Hunter, who was so blown

camp and wander gently into the foothills, following the natural contour of gullies that slice their way from the inland mesas to the sea. They climb up and over ridges—each series of switchbacks leading to a swooping, high-speed descent down a sand-filled funnel on the backside.

Given the gradual nature of these trails, climbing is easy, yet the grades are just steep enough to make each blistering descent worth the effort. While Dad's is a favorite access point, trails such as Zeta Gulch, Stan's, Dammit Jim's and Sierra's all wend their way gracefully





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SURF AND TURF
The camp at Punta San Carlos (above); Buchar and Spangler slalom the cacti
Photo: Ian Hylands

through the foothills and make for exhilarating climbs as well as descents. Or, riders can simply climb straight up the pebble-strewn stretch of Lower Maggie's until it forks, heading either up toward the towering mesas or into the feature-filled playground of the Badlands, a barren dreamscape of wind-worn berms and hips that became the focal point of the *Follow Me* film shoot.

THE BADLANDS

The Badlands certainly live up to their name. Sandwiched in a floodplain that runs from the

mesas into the foothills, they constitute a succession of mini-canyons filled with natural ravines that run into big bowls placed with countless natural hits. Van Dine spent days building gap jumps and then soaring above the eroded channels, barely finishing one before starting the next. And when the Anthill entourage arrived, everyone—riders and photographers alike—got their hands in the dirt, each becoming a sculptor of earthen stunts.

"I loved ripping through that desert looking for weird natural features to ride," said McCaul. "Some of the best jumps I've ever ridden were shaped by erosion and wind, and Punta San Carlos is that epic little pocket of desert that Mother Nature decided would be her sandbox."

Along the fringes of the Badlands, in the rolling hills that extend upward to the mesas, lie some of Punta San Carlos' greatest treasures: Intricate mazes of steep, turn-filled chutes that at first appear daunting, but actually allow the average rider to draw sweeping arcs along the sides of each wall, like a skier carving gigantic Super-G turns. Hidden here is one of the area's finest trails, Snake Run, which features a precipitous drop into a series of bowled-out corners into the floodplain below. With each turn, it's easy to build speed, enabling riders to get higher up each wall as they effortlessly dirt-surf their way to the fast-and-swoopy Rattlesnake connector trail. >

SPLATTER



“Those trails are so flowy and fun, it doesn’t even feel like you’re exercising,” said Canadian pro downhiller Claire Buchar after a recent trip to Baja. “The Badlands are like a little freeride park, and it feels like you’re in a Star Wars movie ripping through there. And the area has potential for so much more.”

THE MESA

But to fully experience the magnitude of the area—and to set oneself up for a half-hour descent to the ocean—climbing the Lion’s Den trail to the base of the mesa is a must. This rocky sliver of singletrack rises sharply up the main hill into a series of switchbacks through thick cactus patches to reach the Lion’s Den, a grotto which, at 806 feet above sea level, marks the established trail network’s highest point. From this lofty perch, riders can look out upon countless ribbons of singletrack unfolding through the arroyos, stretching all the way to the beaches and the beginner-friendly surf break right next to the camp.

On a recent trip to Punta San Carlos, Kevin Trejo led me to the top of Lion’s Den. As we caught our breath, he excitedly pointed out all the lines below and explained his vision for the future. Punta San Carlos could become the Moab of Mexico, he said, and the Badlands and surrounding hills could one day host Red Bull Rampage or a similar event.

“When I sit up here and look out over this, it’s a big kick for me to think about how many people are going to love this massive playground,” Trejo said. “It gives me goose-bumps every time I think about it. It really is what keeps me going.” —BRICE MINNIGH





STONE FREE
Spangler and Buchar study the local geology; it's Baja Fog time at the ocean-front bar (right)
Photo: Ian Hylands

the inside line

• **BEST TIME TO GO:** Baja's temperate climate makes riding a year-round possibility, though the inland canyons can get scorching hot on summer afternoons. Trejo's camp—a two-hour drive from the nearest town—is open from March to December, and plans to keep it open year-round are in the works.

• **LODGING:** For those with transportation and plenty of supplies, it's possible to camp for \$5 a day. Individual visitors are welcome to stay at the SoloSports camp for \$200 per day, which includes meals, unlimited drinks at the bar, tent camping and use of surfboards and stand-up paddleboards. Riders can rent bikes from Trejo's fleet of Santa Cruz Hecklers, Nomads and Ibis Mojors for \$50 a day.

• **THE PACKAGE:** The easiest way to experience Punta San Carlos is through one of SoloSports' all-inclusive packages, which start and end in San Diego. For those opting for the eight-hour drive, the cost of an eight-day stay is \$1,600 (\$1,900 for unlimited use of a rental bike). Or, for the two-hour flight from San Diego to Punta San Carlos aboard a six-seater



PHOTO: IAN HYLANDS

Cessna, the cost for eight days is \$2,200 (\$2,500 with bike rental).

• **THE EATS:** The food is definitely one of the highlights of a trip to Punta San Carlos. Breakfasts range from pancakes to huevos rancheros and are prepared by the local staff, while lavish seafood dinners that include freshly caught lobster, crab, abalone, squid and yellowtail are always on the menu.

• **THE DRINKS:** SoloSports' ocean-front bar is stocked with wine, beer and plenty of tequila. The all-inclusive package includes unlimited drinks, and everyone is encouraged to try the camp specialty, the Baja Fog, which is prepared by pouring a shot of premium tequila into the neck of an ice-cold Corona and topping it off with a freshly cut slice of lime. —*B.M.*