



Driving Baja

Our tips for making your drive to La Paz fun, safe and scenic.



Transpeninsular Highway 1 is a paved highway that runs the length of the Baja peninsula.

Driving the Baja peninsula is a fun adventure filled with stunning scenery, quirky small towns, remote beaches, and opportunities for great photos. The trip from the US/Mexico border in California or Arizona to La Paz in Baja California Sur can take two or more days, depending on your itinerary. The trip measures around 1,470 kilometers, or roughly 900 miles. (It's another 2 hours from La Paz to Los Cabos at the very end of the peninsula). In this guide, we give you tips on how to prepare for the drive, and an overview of the different segments of the journey, along with a few popular stops along the way.

Is it Safe to Drive in Baja?

The first question visitors contemplating a road trip to La Paz usually ask is whether it's safe to drive. The answer is yes, absolutely, as long as you plan ahead and prepare yourself with some local knowledge. A paved (except for a few construction zones) highway runs the entire length of the peninsula, and the biggest danger comes from cars passing on hairpin mountain turns, and the free-range cows, horses, goats and other animals that often wander into the road. As long as you take your time, drive carefully, and don't drive at night (it's hard to see those cows at night!) you will find the trip to be safe and enjoyable.

Immigration Requirements

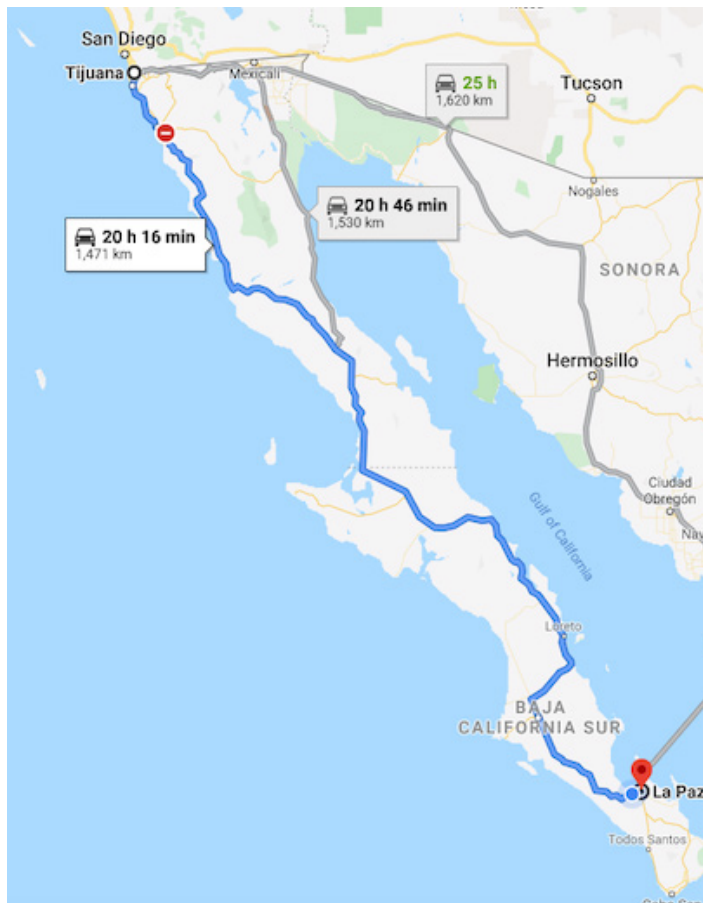
To enter Mexico, you must present a current passport that will be valid for the length of your stay in Mexico. If you do not have a temporary or permanent resident visa yet, you must also fill out the FMM Tourist Permit and have it stamped at the border. Do not forget this step! Once you leave the border, you cannot get it stamped elsewhere in Baja. You'll have to return to the border to get your FMM stamped in order to legally remain in Mexico. The forms are available online here <https://www.inm.gob.mx/fmme/publico/en/solicitud.html> or at the immigration office at the border.

To get your FMM stamped, as you approach the border crossing, pull over BEFORE you cross the border. There will be an INM (Mexican immigration) building where you can go inside to get your FMM stamped and pay the fee, usually 500 pesos (\$25 US) if you plan to stay in Baja longer than 7 days. Tell the agent how long you plan to be in Mexico; your FMM can be is-

sued for stays up to 180 days. It's a good idea to ask them to issue it for the full 180 days as it doesn't cost extra for longer stays. Once your FMM is stamped, return to your car and proceed to the border crossing. If you are bringing a carload or trailer full of goods with you, you may be asked to pull over to secondary inspection. You are allowed to bring your own personal belongings into Mexico without paying a fee, but be aware that anything in brand new packaging will likely be subject to import taxes.

What Can I Bring with Me?

If you have recently purchased a home and want to bring some of your household goods with you to Mexico, you are allowed to bring them, with some limitations. In general, used household items can be brought down free of charge as long as customs approves the items. Any new merchandise (especially items in the original packaging) are subject to import fees of 16% on the assessed value.



It's a 2+ day trip of 900 miles/1,500 kilometers from the border to La Paz.

Some items are regulated or prohibited. Fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, and dog food are all items that could be denied at entry. If you have a gas can, make sure it is empty when you cross. If you are bringing in any alcohol or tobacco, you have limits on how much you can bring into Mexico. As of this post, the limits on alcohol are 3 liters of liquor or beer and 6 liters of wine per adult. The limits on tobacco are 2 cartons of cigarettes or 50 cigars.

You should always check with the appropriate authority to make sure you are adhering to the current requirements. As for weapons, the best recommendation is NOT to bring any firearms or other weapons into Mexico. Firearms are illegal to possess unless you have met a long list of requirements, and even then they are heavily restricted. Even carrying a pocketknife can get you in trouble on the trip down, so it's best to stay on the safe side. If you are bringing prescription medications with you, leave them in the original containers and have a copy of the prescription handy in case they ask for it. [Check here for more information.](#)

Can I Bring My Pets?

It's perfectly legal to bring domestic pets, such as cats or dogs, into Mexico, but there are requirements you need to follow. At a minimum, you should have your pet's health records including proof of rabies and other current vaccines as well as the date of any recent anti-parasite treatments. While many people cross the border with pets and are never asked for documentation, it is best to be prepared and have your paperwork in order in case you are asked. Be aware that certain exotic pets (including birds and reptiles) may be prohibited or be subject to special import requirements. [Check here for the full requirements.](#)

Vehicle Requirements

There is a lot of conflicting information online about the rules around importing your car to Mexico. While it's true that you need to get a vehicle import permit to drive on the mainland in Mexico, you do NOT need to import your US or Canadian plated vehicle to drive in Baja. The entire Baja peninsula is designated as part of the Mexico Free Zone by the Mexican government

to make it easier for travelers to enter Mexico and improve tourism along the U.S. border. Foreign vehicles in these zones do not need a Temporary Vehicle Importation Permit (TIP). You can legally drive your US or Canadian plated vehicle throughout the entire Baja peninsula without a TIP, as long as your US or Canadian registration and driver's license are current. *You will, however, need Mexican insurance to drive throughout Baja.* It's very important to purchase this before you cross the border. It's easy and low-cost to purchase, you can find full details and insurance options here: www.bajabound.com.

Which Border Crossing Should I Use?

Following are the border crossings located on the California/Baja California border. There are other border crossings further east, but those are further from the main highways that lead down the Baja peninsula, and not used as often so are not included here.

San Ysidro (Tijuana): This is the largest of the Baja border crossings and the busiest. It offers convenience, as it is close to San Diego hotels and is open 24x7. However, if it's your first time crossing the border by car, San Ysidro's size and route into busy Tijuana can make it an intimidating experience. Crossing at a smaller station can be less stressful, especially if you are bringing household goods with you.

Otay Mesa: This border crossing is just east of San Ysidro, yet still conveniently located less than a mile from the San Diego hotels on the US side. We have found this border station to be easier to navigate and quieter, especially early in the morning. If you are bringing any household goods or other items you need to declare, be aware that the inspector does not arrive before 8:00 a.m., so arriving any earlier than that at the border won't get you on your way any faster. (See below for what to determine what to declare.)

Tecate: A little further to the east is Tecate, a small town that offers an easier crossing than San Ysidro. One drawback for travelers is its location: Tecate is not close to any major cities or hotels on the US side, so you'll have to plan accordingly. The closest town is

Baja Driving Tips

Drive carefully. In Baja, cows, horses, goats and other animals roam freely. It's not uncommon to come around a curve and see a heard of goats or a cow standing in the middle of the road. Also, MX-1 is the main transportation route from Baja to the US and Canada, so you'll often encounter large 18-wheel trucks and other assorted vehicles driving this route. The road is often a single lane in each direction, with no shoulder, even on the steepest mountain curves. Large trucks can take up much of the road coming around those curves, so take your time, drive slowly and be prepared to stop at any time.

Watch for topes (speed bumps). You'll encounter topes, or speed bumps, throughout Baja, especially when approaching and leaving most towns. Many are unmarked, so remember to slow down and look out for them as you are entering and leaving even the smallest of villages.

Don't drive at night. This advice has little to do with crime and more to do with visibility. In Baja there is little or no ambient light after dark. There may be large potholes in the road, and animals are known to lay down on the highway at night to keep warm. If you're traveling after dark, you won't see them until it's too late. Plan your trip well and make sure you can get to your destination at or before sunset.

Stop signs. Generally speaking, at a four-way stop, the first person to arrive at the intersection has the right of way (always yield to pedestrians). However, drivers here don't tend to follow the right-side tie-breaker rule, so be careful if you arrive at the same time as another vehicle (and don't be surprised if they assume the right of way). Regardless of how the locals drive, it's a good idea to come to a full stop at stop signs, and cede the right of way if there is any doubt.

El Cajon, or you can stay a bit closer in Jacumba Hot Springs. Avoid the busier times, such as Friday nights, as there is only a single lane and traffic can quickly back up then.

Calexico/Mexicali: if you are coming from Arizona or further east, the Mexicali border station may offer the fastest crossing into Baja California. You can stay in Calexico on the US side of the border and cross the border first thing in the morning. From here, you can take Highway 5 south, or drive west to MX-1, so check your route to see how far you can get from Calexico to make sure you're at your destination before dark.

Which Route Should I Take?

For the purposes of this guide, we will assume you are driving Baja for the first time, possibly bringing a carload or towing a trailer full of your belongings. The route you take south from the border depends on where you cross, and how much time you want to take to arrive at your destination in La Paz. If you want to complete the trip as soon as possible, you can get

from the border to La Paz in two days. However, be aware that in the winter you will need to get started early to avoid driving in the dark at the end of the day to reach your destination. This route requires only one overnight stop, but because each day is fairly long, it's a good idea to have two people who can share the driving.

If you want to take a bit longer, relax and enjoy the drive, you can absolutely do that. For example, you can plan on spending a day or more in the Valle de Guadalupe, Baja's famous wine region, home to over 100 wineries, many of which have won global awards for their wines. [You can read more about it here.](#) Or you may want to stop and camp on the fabulous beaches at Bahia Concepcion. It's up to you and we encourage you to do your research and plan your stops in advance. There are large stretches of highway in Baja with no services, so it's good to be prepared.

Baja Road Trip Options

Highway 5 South from Mexicali to Highway 1

Day 1: Cross at Mexicali, Take Highway 5 South to

Highway 1 in Chapala, then continue on to Guerrero Negro (10+ hours).

Hotels: Stay in Guerrero Negro at Hotel Terra Sal or Halfway Inn.

Day 2+: Guerrero Negro to Santa Rosalia, Mulege, Loreto, La Paz (10+ hours)

Stopping in San Felipe

If you are crossing the border later in the day, you can stop at San Felipe for the night.

Hotels: San Felipe Beach Hotel; Kiki's; or The Sanddollar.

From San Felipe continue on Highway 5 to Highway 1 until you reach Santa Rosalia, then follow the directions from Santa Rosalia on to La Paz.



Drive carefully and don't drive at night, you never know when you may encounter livestock on the road just around the next bend.

Highway 1 South from San Ysidro, Otay Mesa or Tecate (2.5 – 3 days)

Day 1: Tijuana to El Rosario (5+ hours).

Hotels: In El Rosario, stay at Baja Cactus Hotel or Mision Santa Maria.

Day 2: El Rosario to Santa Rosalia (8+ hours)

Hotels: In Santa Rosalia, stay at Hotel El Morro or Hotel Las Casitas.

Day 3: Santa Rosalia to Mulege, Loreto, La Paz (7.5 hours)

Military Checkpoints

Along the way, you will pass through a number of military checkpoints, which are there to make sure nothing illegal is being transported. Don't be intimidated, the service men and women operating the checkpoints are typically very friendly and polite. They will usually either just wave you through, or ask a couple of questions about where you are coming from and where you are going, and the length of your intended stay in Baja. Most don't speak English, so it helps to have a few Spanish phrases downloaded and saved in your Google Translate app on your phone. If they do ask to search your vehicle, it's not a big deal. Step out of your car, bring your wallet or purse with you, and watch while they search to make sure nothing goes missing. It happens sometimes, but not often. Offering up cold bottles of water or Cokes is a friendly gesture, as the guards are often standing for hours in the hot sun.

Highway 5

If you are crossing at Mexicali, or if you're crossing further east and just want to avoid the Ensenada traffic, you have the option to drive south on Highway 5, which goes through San Felipe and eventually connects with MX-1 further south. The road is paved and recent reports from drivers who have traveled this route say it's in excellent shape. This route will provide an easier and faster option for getting to Baja California Sur, you can make the drive to Guerrero Negro in one day, and be in La Paz by the afternoon of the second day. If your goal is to get to La Paz as soon as possible, this may be your best option. From Guerrero Negro, follow the directions in the next section from there on to La Paz.

Traffic lights. These also work similarly as they do up north, but with a notable exception. Following the green light is a flashing green light, which in Baja is treated the same as a yellow light. The flashing green then turns to yellow and very quickly to red. Green means go, but if you see a flashing green, slow down as you would for a yellow light. If the light turns yellow, don't run it, definitely prepare to stop.

Roadside assistance. If you do break down or get a flat tire, you will soon experience some of that Baja magic you'll hear people talk about. Even in the most remote locations, a passing motorist or local will often suddenly appear out of nowhere to help you in an emergency. Don't be suspicious, the locals here are genuinely friendly and eager to help. If it happens, offer a tip (which may be refused). If no help is in sight, and you have cell reception, you can call the Green Angels. Similar to AAA in the US, these are fix-it crews in green and white trucks, paid by the Mexican office of tourism, that patrol the highway and will help you fix or tow your vehicle for free. The 24-hour toll-free number to call for the Green Angels is 01-800-987-8224, or from a Mexican cell phone you can just dial 078.

Keep your gas tank full. There will be long stretches with no gas stations, so plan well and fill up any time you get below a half tank. Don't rely on maps that indicate gas stations in remote areas, they may be closed or no longer exist.

Watch for left turns. You may occasionally come upon a vehicle driving slowly in the left lane. In most cases, the vehicle needs to turn left soon and is preparing to do so. Turn signals are somewhat optional, so be aware that the vehicle may slow or even stop. Remember, in Baja a vehicle ahead of you on a 2 lane highway with its left turn signal on is likely signaling you that the road ahead is clear and it is safe to pass. The drivers here are mostly friendly that way!



It's well worth taking the time to explore the Valle de Guadalupe wine region near Ensenada.

Highway 1

If you are crossing the border from the San Diego area in California through either the San Ysidro or Tijuana crossings, Transpeninsular Highway 1 (MX-1) is the route you will use to get here. MX-1 is a paved highway that runs the entire length of the Baja peninsula from Tijuana to Los Cabos. The highway is in good shape and relatively easy to drive, with a few caveats (see our Baja Driving Tips below). Regardless of how long you take to make the drive, we recommend starting your day by crossing the border early in the morning, when traffic south is at its lightest.

Tijuana to El Rosario

This segment is only 349 kilometers, or about a 5-6 hour drive, so it's an early Day One stop. But, because of the spacing of the towns, it is a good stopping point if you are taking the three-day route. Otherwise, you'll be continuing on to Guerrero Negro, another 5½ hour drive south. As you approach Ensenada, you will be treated to views of the Pacific Ocean. Expect the occasional traffic and construction delays along the way, Ensenada is the largest city in Baja with over a half million residents. If you need coffee, this is the place to stop, as you won't find another coffee shop along this route for the rest of the day.

South of Ensenada, we like to stop for lunch at a roadside café named [Restaurante Acambaro](#) just north of Santo Tomas. If you're pulling a trailer or a boat, there is space to pull off on the right side of the highway. The restaurant is across the highway, and there are bathrooms here if you just need a rest stop. After that, proceed south to San Quintin. From Ensenada to San Quintin can seem like one long stretch of heavy stop and go traffic. Go slow, stop at the stop signs, watch for topes (speed bumps) along the way, they are typically placed as you are entering and exiting a town.

If you're planning a three-day trip, one option is to stay your first night at the Mision Santa Maria beachfront hotel by Rancho los Pinos (www.misionsantamariahoteles.com), or you can continue for another hour to the Baja Cactus Hotel in El Rosario (<http://www.bajacactus.com/>). Both offer nice, clean rooms, secure parking, free wifi, and are pet friendly. Mision Santa Maria hotel has an on-site restaurant, and Baja Cactus has a restaurant right next door called Mama Espinosas, a famous stop on the Baja 1000 tour – its walls are packed with memorabilia. Both hotels have a Pemex gas station close by where you can fuel up for the next leg of your journey.

El Rosario to Guerrero Negro

If you're doing the trip in 2 days, your likely destination the first night is Guerrero Negro, on the Pacific side. It's another 360 kilometers, or about a 5½ hour drive from El Rosario, so start early if you're planning to drive from Tijuana to Guerrero Negro all in one day. Be sure to fill your gas tank before departing El Rosario, there are no gas stations on the next portion of the drive through the mountains until you approach Guerrero Negro.

From El Rosario to Guerrero Negro, the highway winds up through the Sierra de la Giganta mountains until you reach the otherworldly boulder fields of Catavina. The scenery here is dramatic – with giant boulder piles that look like they were created by aliens playing with Tonka trucks. You'll also see some funny looking cactus plants called boojum trees you would swear came straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. If you or your furry

ones need a rest stop, you can pull off at Hotel Mission Catavina, the only hotel in Catavina. It has a large parking lot for oversized vehicles, and plenty of room to walk a dog.

You'll want to drive slowly on this stretch of road, especially going around tight curves in the mountains. You'll encounter large semis coming from the opposite direction, swinging around curves out into the middle of the highway, and there is often no shoulder and very little space to move over. Slow down to let them pass.

Just north of Guerrero Negro you'll finally see a gas station, with a roadside diner next door that serves tasty burritos in the mornings and early afternoon. Once you've fueled up, you will continue on towards Guerrero Negro and cross the state border from Baja California into Baja California Sur. There is a small agricultural station here where they may stop and ask you if you are carrying any food or plants, and collect an environmental fee.

A popular hotel here with travelers is Terra Sal (<http://www.hotelterrasal.com/>). It's just off the highway, has a large, secure parking lot for larger vehicles (including trailers), and an on-site restaurant that is open for dinner and breakfast. The Halfway Inn is another popular choice just north of town and right off the highway. There are also hotels further in the town of Guerrero Negro that are closer to the ocean if you are planning a longer stay here. Guerrero Negro is one of the premier spots for gray whale watching in winter.

Guerrero Negro to Santa Rosalia

If you are taking 3 days to complete the trip, your destination on the second night from El Rosario is likely Santa Rosalia, just 220 kilometers or 3 hours south of Guerrero Negro. We recommend staying at [Hotel El Morro](#). The hotel has nice, clean rooms, large balconies with stunning views of the Sea of Cortez and is pet friendly (a pet deposit is required). There is also a restaurant on site and secure

parking. It's located right on MX-1, just after you get through town, so you'll be well positioned to leave early and hit the highway the next morning. Hotel Las Casitas is another similar option on Highway 1 overlooking the ocean.

As you approach Santa Rosalia, you will cross the mountains and drive through the desert until you see the iconic Tres Virgenes, a series of three volcanic mountains rising up out of the desert. From there, you will climb up through another set of mountains and descend back down through switchbacks until you see the Sea of Cortez open up before you. You will be used to this advice by now: drive carefully! The mountain curves are tight and the drop-offs are steep with no guardrails. Just keep your eyes on the road and drive slowly until you arrive at the bottom in Santa Rosalia. Congratulations, you've crossed the entire peninsula and are now ready to make the trek south to La Paz!

Santa Rosalia to Loreto

If you are doing the 3-day trip, this day is the best because it is one of the most scenic, and also the shortest day. The first stop south of Santa Rosalia is Mulege, a small town located at the mouth of the Río de Santa Rosalía. Here the elevation drops and suddenly you'll



The boulder fields and boojum trees in Catavina.



Santispac beach at Bahia Concepcion is a great place to cool off with a swim or camp for the night.

find yourself in a tropical oasis surrounded by palm trees. Mulege is a charming town, one of Baja Sur's [pueblo magicos](#), and worth stopping in for an early lunch. We recommend [this roadside spot](#) for excellent fish and shrimp tacos, where you can park nearby, eat outside and keep an eye on your car.

Just south of Mulege is the northern entrance to Bahia Concepcion, a stunning, miles-long bay with some of the most beautiful beaches and scenery in all of Baja. Keep an eye out for the dedicated pull-off vista spots where you can park safely to enjoy the view and take pictures. Further south along the bay, you'll find Playa Santispac and Playa Requeson, some of the most picturesque of the many beaches along the drive. If you're traveling in warmer weather, you may well find yourself pulling off at one of these white sand beaches just to jump in the crystal turquoise water. Trust us, it's nearly irresistible.

Once you've left Bahia Concepcion, you'll head south to Loreto, another of Baja Sur's *pueblo magicos*. If you didn't stop to eat in Mulege, you'll find plenty of restaurants in town here just off the highway. For an inexpensive stop on the Malecon with great food and a view of the water, try [Restaurante Bar Los Mandiles](#). As you drive through Loreto, you'll be surrounded by the Sierra de la Giganta mountain range on one side and gorgeous ocean views on the other. Fun fact: this part of the Sea of Cortez is home to blue whales, the largest mammal on the planet.

Loreto to La Paz

From Loreto, you will head back toward the middle of the peninsula one more time, and south through Insurgentes and Constitución, two towns close to the ports of Adolfo Lopez Mateos and San Carlos on the Pacific side, where you can go gray whale watching in winter. From here, you'll zig southeast again towards the Sea of Cortez, up across a mesa at the top of another mountain range, and finally down the last hill into La Paz. As you approach the city, you will be rewarded with a view of the Bay of La Paz stretching out below. You'll go through one final agricultural checkpoint, and from there you will arrive in El Centenario, a quiet community about 20 minutes outside of downtown La Paz.

Breathe a big sigh of relief, you made it! You are now a Baja road warrior, and will soon be sitting with a margarita and telling tales about your Baja road trip.



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