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THIS IS THE FUTURE OF OFF-ROAD RACING IN BAJA

# Why Navigation

Baja California is the pretty girl next door. She's mysterious, growing in popularity and way friendlier to us than we deserve. Plenty of people fall for her allure, coming across the fence in hordes to hug her curves against the tread of their tires, to ogle at her exotic features and listen to her whisper soft, warm nothings across their faces while watching the sun set into the Pacific. Mexico is wild, and if you want to join her family, to blend in and become more local than tourist, you'll need to prove yourself... it'll be worth it!





by Kyra Sacdalan |  
photos by Justin W. Coffey

# Rallies Matter

Those who've really figured it out, how to toe the line with finesse, are those veterans of the chase—racers of motorsport in such infamous events as the *Baja 1000* ([Score-International.com/baja-1000](http://Score-International.com/baja-1000)), *Mexican 1000* ([Norra.com/Mexican1000.php](http://Norra.com/Mexican1000.php)) and now the *BAJA RALLY* ([BajaRallyMoto.com](http://BajaRallyMoto.com)). They are the men and women who really get to know the nooks and crannies of this most southern state. To fully witness Baja, you must traverse the backroads, and there's no better way to travel down the spider web of "less traveled" tracks than with an off-road vehicle. But what sets the *BAJA RALLY* apart from the rest, aside from its youth (2017 will be its fifth year), is the ecologically positive nature of *Rally Raids*. Which is exactly why Scotty Bloom, founder of the *BAJA RALLY*, and his politically and socially conscious team—a mix of international and local rally veterans—have chosen to hold this sort of competition rather than its enduro-style compatriots.

To know the true benefit of a navigation rally, you first need to understand an enduro. In the case of the *SCORE International* series (*Baja 1000*, *Baja 500*, and *San Felipe 250*) and *NORRA's Mexican 1000*, vehicles ranging from four wheels to two, and mighty to mini, participate in the high-speed, straight-shot race from the start line to the finish. The event is held on a closed course, typically outlined by flags along a

predetermined span of kilometers across Baja's north, central and/or south regions. Competitors are permitted to "pre-run" the circuit up to weeks in advance to familiarize themselves with the route—a safety measure that's an integral part of the challenge. It also helps pad an advantage because an enduro is a balls-out, foot-to-the-floor battle between trucks, side-by-sides, quads or motorcycles, which can run well past sunset.

We met three-time *Baja 1000* champion Robby Bell one year in Catavina as he studied the course a week before the race. He told us about riding his *Kawasaki KX450F* race bike through a remote desert somewhere in Baja cloaked in a thick black sky with no light—no moon, no stars—save for his headlight to guide him while gunning for yet another overall win. Hours into the ride, his body brutally beaten at that point, with eyes fixed in the tunnel of light, his mind started to wander. Hallucinations of snipers crawling out from under the bushes began to taunt him. He said it took the rest of his energy to stay focused on the finish, to keep from succumbing to the illusions and bring his team to victory.

2017 *BAJA RALLY* Champion, Steve Hengeveld, grabbing some throttle and showing us exactly how he's kept a firm grip on the title for the last few years.



*Big Guys Garage* rider, Carlos Yfarraguerri, wonders what lies ahead.

Gerardo Nino blazed a trail along the highway... almost too fast for us to keep up in the van and have Justin take a photo!



It wasn't only the folks from *Big Guys Garage* who found themselves buried axle deep in that day's challenges.



Trent Burgiss finished a strong second behind Hengeveld, who was only one big mistake away from losing the title to his strongest adversary.



There's no question why hundreds, even thousands, of fans come from all over the globe to stand track-side, sometimes in a dried-up riverbed, cheering 'til it hurts, chewing on a mixture of dirt, sewage and petrol sprayed by determined number-plated vehicles and their pilots blazing past. It's an exhilarating event that's as much for the spectator as it is for the racer. But with that sort of dedication and intensity comes destruction, and as any good battle ends, it leaves scars. Yes, economically, enduros can be a benefit to a variety of establishments—selling out hotels months in advance, filling cafes and restaurants with big appetites and a thirst for Mexican beverages. But at what expense? Throughout these enduros, much of the ride is closed to the public, meaning traffic is impeded. And such terrain is often selected from publicly harnessed expanses, which can have an adverse effect on the locals well after the checkered flag has waved the conclusion. Byways for local commuters are rerouted. And parades prevent any flow of movement from weary travelers just hoping to meet their destination. As much of the routes are reused, the land is given little time to recuperate. Then once the war is won for the year, trash litters



Top Ten finisher George Dennison hardly knew how he'd fare at this moment as he fought for a good starting position during the Prologue Stage.

the battlefield before the next war is waged. The warriors, factory-supported racers, and a few passionate no-names are back to wreak havoc on Baja in the name of honor, prestige and champagne-soaked glory.

The *BAJA RALLY*, a navigation-based *Rally Raid* styled after the infamous *Dakar Rally*, is a competitor's sport, a grueling several-day ride mostly aboard motorcycles and side-by-sides with only their teams to cheer them on. Too long, too time-consuming and too remote for regular patrons to give their sideline support, this is an event that leaves little impression on anyone, or anything, except for the racers who, considering the rising number of entrants each year, have become enchanted. It can seem discouraging to hold a competition that doesn't invite an audience, but that's entirely the point. Let people see it from afar, broadcast and streamed, or better yet, from behind their own set of handlebars. No fans, no trash, less liability and danger to everyone involved. Less to have to control means more ability to control. And when you're truly enamored with a

world, it becomes your duty to preserve its integrity while you thoroughly appreciate its bountiful attributes.

This is the case with the many organizers, volunteers, venues and competitors of *Rally Raids* who give their time, money and energy to experience Baja responsibly. Each year, the organization petitions and applies for the endless stream of permits needed to hold a legal event within Baja's borders. They work directly with the Mexican government to assure that their race is welcomed by their hosts. Most of the ever-changing track was carved into private land for which each mile was given permission by the owner. And as light-footed as the *BAJA RALLY* intends to be, the event, like the enduros, still boosts the local economy prior to, during, and post each event:

- **Prior:** A lot of money and months of planning, consulting, and scouting must be spent in Baja to prepare for each new competition.



- **During:** They bring hundreds of riders, crew, officials, enthusiasts and patrons to hotels, restaurants, wineries and otherwise empty establishments during the “slow season” in Baja California.
- **Post:** All a person needs to be mesmerized by Baja is an introduction. And the *BAJA RALLY* facilitates an intimate meeting for American and international visitors alike, who often return on their own, if not to the recurring editions of the *BAJA RALLY*.

If that’s not enough encouragement, the organization has opened a rally school to educate and stimulate motorcyclists who are new to *Rally Raid* or in need of further training.

A *Rally Raid*, for those unfamiliar, is an off-road, navigation-based event where operating the race vehicle along rugged, sundry and intentionally unmarked terrain, is just a meager

part of the challenge. Tight-lipped operators wait as long as humanly possible to hand over a scroll of paper they call a “road book,” which is written in French (per *FIM* regulations), gibberish and primitive hieroglyphics. Racers hover over their scrolls for hours color-coding them with highlighters in hopes they can understand just enough in the split seconds during the high-speed competition when they can afford to move their gaze from the road to the road book. As they try to navigate their way out of a desolate landscape, “way points” are collected.

Battles for position often ensue toward the start of the course, while locals and wildlife can pose unintentional roadblocks. But for the most part, riders are utterly alone with their motorbikes. UTVs host a driver and passenger, but that doesn’t make them any less solitary. If they manage not to wander aimlessly along the invisible path from some single overlooked instruction, adding unwelcome minutes to their time card, and they ride as fast as their heart and gut permit—without engine failure, accident or misfortune—they still might not have a chance because, well... that’s only half the battle. **ADV**



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It takes a village (more like the entire Mexican state of Baja) to nurture a well-rounded event like the *BAJA RALLY*.



The competitors at the 2017 *BAJA RALLY* blasted their way through the slippery desert washes with no sign of giving up. Nathan Rafferty, seen here, was no different.