

bikes, buggies, boojums and baja

BY JAMES T. CROW

MOTORCYCLISTS ORDINARILY DISAGREE with everyone concerning the relative merits of their kind of vehicle compared to any other. Therefore it came as no surprise to me to learn that motorcycle and dune buggy advocates were disagreeing about which kind of machine would be quicker over primitive roads such as those running the length of Mexico's Baja California peninsula between Tijuana and La Paz.

In the past, motorcycles have gone almost unchallenged for making the best speed under difficult conditions. In 1962 a pair of riders on Honda scramblers made the Tijuana-La Paz trip in 39 hr, 15 min. Last fall another pair riding 650-cc Triumphs took 13 min off that record and left it at 39:02. But almost no one else, so far as the record shows, had even made a serious attempt at a quick run. Recently, though, a group of dune buggy enthusiasts familiar with some of the primitive roads wondered if a buggy couldn't do it more quickly.

Ready to do something about the bike record was Bruce Meyers, designer-builder of the Meyers Manx, a Volkswagen-based buggy with a minimal fiberglass body and a combination of characteristics that seemed to have promise for making a suitably high average speed for the long, tough trip. Bruce was to be the driver of the record attempt car.

Accompanying him was Ted Mangels, an old friend and fellow Baja (rhymes with ha-ha, not rajah) enthusiast. Ted, an engineer by trade, would be navigator and relief driver.

Their vehicle would be Old Red, Meyers Manx serial number 00001, the very first Manx built. Though taller and more square rigged than the latest Manx models, Red is probably the toughest buggy ever built and has survived more than 20,000 of the hardest kind of miles, in Bruce's demanding hands. Equipped with a stock 50-horsepower VW 1500 transporter engine, Red was reluctant to exceed 50 mph in top gear (thanks to the stock VW final drive and the big 8.85/9.15-15 Gates Commando XT mud and snow tires on the rear), so Bruce and Ted liked to call it the world's slowest racing car.

Their plan was to consider the southbound trip a feasibility study (Ted's phrase) and then, if the results confirmed their projections, assault the motorcycle record on the return. This bit of finesse, they reasoned, would give them a worthwhile advantage over the motorcyclists who had been experienced rough-country riders but didn't know Baja and had to depend on little more than route notes, riding skill and brute stamina to see them through.

Only half joking, it has been said that La Paz and Tijuana are 950 miles apart and sometimes connected by road. The traveler may expect to encounter almost every possible kind of poor road and though the trip is made regularly by all kinds of cars and trucks, it is generally extremely slow. The average 4-wheel-drive car or truck is said to take 9 days for the journey. Volkswagen buses reportedly bounce through in 6 to 8 days and 5 days in a buggy or Jeep is considered to be really good time.

Accompanying the record attempt car and crew on the southward leg of the journey were two other buggies. One belonged to Neal Allen, an aircraft accident investigator whose background includes driving an MG TC in the second-ever Watkins Glen road race back in 1949. John Bond was originally scheduled to go with Neal but buggy folk are notoriously loose hangers and by the time the expedition finally got underway, the window in John's schedule had closed. I had ear-

lier expressed interest in the journey and was invited to go along when John couldn't.

Neal's buggy, a later-model Manx, had a slightly stronger VW engine than Old Red, with 1600 barrels on a 1300 case. It was the handsomest buggy of the lot, resplendent with its self-color fiberglass body in gold flake, fully chromed engine and front wheels, and Speedwell bucket seats.

In the third car were Sanford and Jane Havens. Friends of the Manx folk who originally planned to spend a week around Ensenada, San and Jane had dinner with us at El Rey Sol in Ensenada on Saturday night, the eve of our departure into the barely charted country to the south. We encouraged them and by the time we finished Neal's bottle of El Presidente brandy in the courtyard of our hotel they could no longer resist the temptation to join us in the adventure. As it turned out, they had cause to regret it later.

The Havens' buggy was a home-built, not a Manx. Based on VW parts, San's car had a wooden hull, reflecting the builder's association with the boat building trade. It had a stock 40-hp VW 1200 engine and in one way was more comfortably fitted out for the trip than the others as it had a fiberglass top with side curtains at the back.

From Ensenada, we were four days on the road. Our corrected mileage (allowing for the larger front tires) from Tijuana to La Paz was 987 miles, about 30 miles farther than the route followed by the motorcyclists. The route we took will not be described in detail as it was devised by Bruce and Ted (with the help of friends) to save time and they don't want to make the motorcyclists' way any easier than necessary. It might also be a disservice to anyone planning to make the trip as it would be easy to get seriously lost if a wrong turn were taken.

The road wasn't as bad as I had expected, even though I don't know how it could have been much worse. There were rocks, ruts and holes. There was loose sand, rock-studded dirt and the deepest powdery dust I've ever seen. There was also an occasional smooth, fast stretch where it was possible to drive flat out. These were rare, however, and it was cause for celebration any time 4th gear could be used. "Hey, look! Fourth! First time today!"

We camped three nights between Ensenada and La Paz. The luggage capacity of a dune buggy limits the luxuries that can be transported but the necessities we carried in Neal's buggy included sleeping bags, a 7½-ft Thermos pop tent and canned food that could have lasted us a week if it had been necessary. We also carried extra gasoline, oil, water, brake fluid, a roll-up tool kit and a supply of small spares such as spark plugs, points, fuel pump, fan belt, etc., but nothing like gearbox or engine parts. Our camp sites ranged from sensational to miserable and at the last place we occupied the tent for the only time as it looked like scorpion country to Neal's sensitive eye.

The weather was mostly overcast with a brisk cool wind from the west. This made us wear more layers of clothing than most Baja travelers as the peninsula is better known for being warm than cool. The weather did not affect our traveling time, though, as higher temperatures might have.

The scenery in Baja California is worth the trip. As far south as El Rosario, about 220 miles from Tijuana, the road stays close to the coast and is generally agricultural. The route then turns inland and enters the Sebastián Vizcaino Desert and from this point there are sights for the eye that can be seen nowhere else in the world.