

Baja California Cave Paintings

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Prolific cave paintings extend the entire length of the Baja peninsula. Technically they are not in caves, but in rock shelters seldom extending more than ten meters.

My interest in Baja cave art began two years ago when I was looking for lava tubes on Vulcan de las Tres Virgenes. One hundred kilometers to south of the volcano is one of the peninsula's best preserved sites. I was fortunate to visit it.



San Borjita, Photo by Ruplinger

The site is known as San Borjita. It is quite impressive with numerous paintings on the ceiling. Many of the figures represent men with arrows piercing their sides. The indigenous peoples at this site are said not to have inhabited the shelters, but just to have met there. Elegant little green plants with red flowers carpet the shelter's floor. The canyon has towering red cliffs and lots of plush palo blanco trees. It is located on the Rancho Baltizar owned by Señor Gorosave.

The term used in Mexico for rock art is “Pinturas Rupestres”, which interprets to “pictures rustic”. Locals usually refer to them as “pinturas” or “monos”, which has the literal translation of “dolls”. Archeologists refer to the science as “ethno historic studies of shamanism”. At some sites the paintings illustrate a shaman or medicine man holding a wooden plaque symbolizing his power. This is somewhat similar to the spear-staff with feathers so often held by American Plains Indian chiefs.

Another notable cave art site, which I visited on a subsequent Baja trip is in Canon de Santa Teresa, situated in San Francisco de la Sierra. It is somewhat like a miniature grand canyon. I rented mules and with the help of a local farmer, Carlos Arce, made a three-day visit to the canyon floor. The canyon walls house numerous shelters with well preserved paintings. Most of the paintings displayed similar themes.



Canon de Santa Teresa, photo by Peter Ruplinger

The most common illustrations are of men painted in maroon, or black, or divided vertically half black and half maroon. They almost always have their arms raised upward, as if to the square. Often they are pierced with numerous arrows. Some have a much smaller humanoid figure resting on each shoulder. Theories as to what they mean or why they were painted are completely speculative.

It is my own speculative observation that in our space age, NASA's messenger satellite, propelled beyond our solar system, contains a plaque with the image of a man whose arm is also raised to the square.

Ethno historic studies of Spanish documents indicate that the sites were first visited by Jesuits between 1683 and 1720. Spaniards reported the paintings as having been "excellently preserved". The Cochimie residing in the area when the Jesuits arrived said the artwork was made by a previous race of "giants". Archeologist discounted the "giant" reports until they excavated bone remains of people in excess of two meters in stature.

Dating of the paintings is speculative. Some "authorities" place dates as far back as ten thousand years. More conservative dating estimates the work to have been made from five hundred to two thousand years ago. One author reports a drawing of a man on a horse and concludes that at least some drawings were created in post Columbian times. Another author reports that there are no known illustrations of horses or dogs. Obsidian oxidation dating of tool chips shows that the sites were inhabited as far back as six thousand years. Carbon 14 dating is said to place inhabitants as ancient as ten thousand years. Obviously the paintings were not necessarily created that long ago.

Other common art themes include antelope, usually inclined upwards at about a twenty degree angle, as if running or climbing. A few figures are clearly women, as noted by breasts. There is one painting of what appears to be a whale or perhaps a sea lion. There are occasionally eagle like birds and sea turtles. On the ceiling of one shelter in Canon de Santa Teresa is a unique pattern of geometric shapes colored in black and maroon. It is common for paintings to be superimposed on each other.

The artisans traveled to the coast. There are numerous remains of clam shells. One archeologist reports a drawing of a feathered serpent and concludes that they had some contact with peoples of the mainland.

A shelter in Canon de Santa Teresa has several metates on the floor which may have been used to prepare paint. Archeologists speculate that the paint was made from urine and pulverized rock. How the artist painted cave areas in excess of ten meters above the floor may never be known.

The terrain in central Baja is arid. Locals say that it only rains once or twice a year and sometimes never. There is, however a dew which blows in from the ocean each night. I woke one morning to find my sleeping bag covered with a light film of condensate and a humming bird delicately sucking it up. This dew provides life to the numerous varieties of cactus and shrubs, which grow in the area. The little rain which does fall, makes its way through rock crevasses to the 1,100 meter canyon floor where it collects into a small stream.



Canyon floor - photo by Peter Ruplinger

It is understandable why there are so many rock shelters in the canyon. The area is an oasis in the middle of a hostile, arid wilderness. Personally, I found it to be one of the most beautiful spots I have visited. The small stream is lined with lush vegetation and groves of palm trees. Brightly colored tree frogs sing cheery melodies from sun-down to noon. Quail coo and scatter through the brush. A refreshing cool breeze blows continually. The breeze adds to the peaceful atmosphere with a heavenly sound as it rustles through the palm trees. Red and black cliffs tower on all sides. I regretted leaving and hope to return.

Bibliography:

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Note: Cavers interested in visiting Baja are welcome to contact the author.