State Highway 100 cuts across the Sonoran Desert from Hermosillo to one of the great Mexican dead ends: At Kino Bay, you can't go any farther...

By Susan Spano

KINO BAY, Mexico — State Highway 100 cuts across the Sonoran Desert from Hermosillo to one of the great Mexican dead ends: At Kino Bay, you can't go any farther west unless you swim the Gulf of California, formed when the San Andreas Fault split open and saltwater poured in.

That was millions of years ago, but it could have been yesterday by the day-after-creation look of Kino Bay. Here, the parched desert ends in a wide, sandy beach tended only by waves. An otherworldly seascape begins, in milky blue, and the shark's-tooth silhouette of Tiburon Island looms on the horizon.

People say the meeting of Namibian Desert sand dunes and Atlantic Ocean on the western coast of Africa must be seen, like a clash of titans. At Kino Bay, the Sonoran Desert and Gulf of California meet more harmoniously and hauntingly, as my brother John and I discovered on an autumn trip.

We flew to Phoenix, rented a Jeep Cherokee, drove south to the border at Nogales, then across the Sonoran Desert where Father Eusebio Kino — for whom the bay was named — evangelized among the native people in the late 17th century. We ate cheese puffs, listened to Bach and argued, which is how John and I communicate whenever we embark on the occasional off-road-and-map adventure I wouldn't have the nerve to do by myself.

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If you go

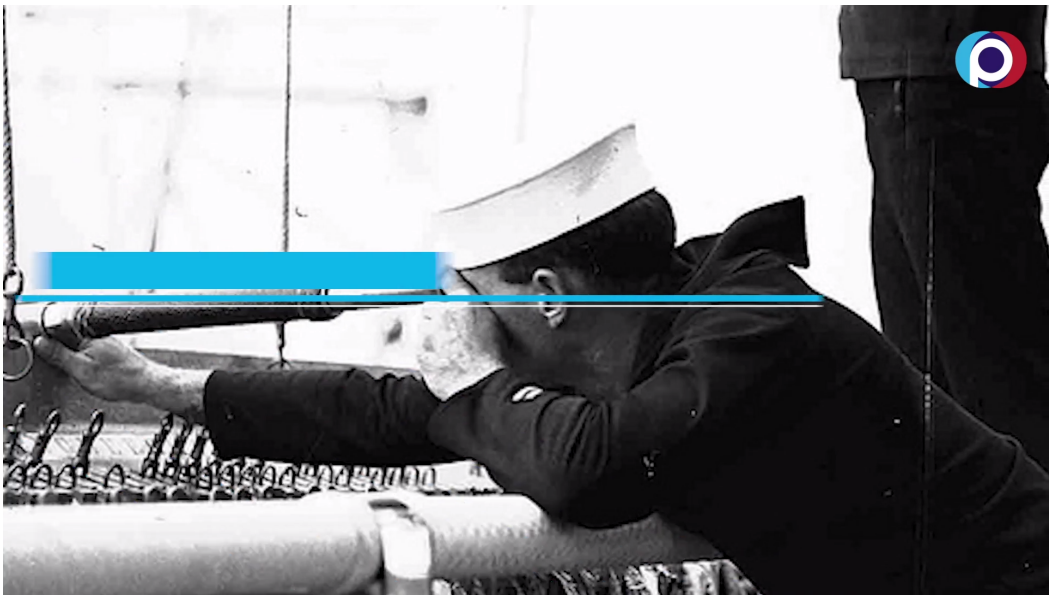
Kino Bay, Mexico

Getting there

If you're driving from the United States, Kino Bay is about 235 miles southwest of the border at Nogales, by Interstate 15 and State Highway 100. Whether you rent or take your own vehicle into Mexico, tourist permits are required, available at a checkpoint near the border; applicants must show a passport, birth certificate and picture I.D., military I.D. or voter registration card.

More information

Mexican Government Tourism Office, 800-446-3942, www.visitmexico.com



Sonora Department of Tourism, 800-4SONORA (476-6672), www.sonoraturismo.gob.mx

Ernesto Molina's Punta Chueca Guide Service can be reached at P.O. Box 163, Bahia Kino, Sonora, Mexico CP 83340; e-mail guiaeco@hotmail.com.

Kino Bay programs: Prescott College in Prescott, Ariz., 877-350-2100, www.prescott.edu/highlights/kino/visitors.html, has a Kino Bay Center, where students pursue research projects on the cultural and natural history of the area.

Other good information sources are the University of Arizona's Southwest Center in Tucson, 520-621-2484, web.arizona.edu/~swctr/, and The Boulder Outdoor Survival School, 303-444-9779, www.boss-inc.com, which offers courses dedicated to exploring the Kino Bay area, including Tiburon Island.

When we reached Hermosillo, the visibly thriving state capital of Sonora, we turned west on Highway 100, where I kept telling John to slow down because construction crews were working in the dark. The widened road, it's hoped, will spur development at Kino, prime tourist territory but hard to reach compared with Puerto Penasco to the north and Guaymas to the south.

More than just visiting Kino, we wanted to get to Tiburon, the largest of 900 islands in the Gulf of California, separated from the mainland by a channel sometimes so tempestuous that it is called El Infiernillo, or Little Hell.

Tiburon has been a nature preserve since the 1960s and is a seedbed for the rich plant and animal life of the Gulf of California, the frigate birds and brown-footed boobies, saguaro, boojum trees, bottle-nosed dolphins, piebald chuckwallas, starfish, sea cucumbers and loping jackrabbits.

Protecting environment

Development — especially commercial fishing and the harvesting of ironwood trees for charcoal — has taken a toll on the region's astonishing biodiversity, which is partly why a Mexican marine base was established on Tiburon, why environmentalists guard it so jealously and why scientists line up to do research on and around the island.

The human history of Tiburon is equally compelling. It is the ancestral homeland of the Seri Indians, one of Mexico's most distinctive indigenous peoples. The semi-nomadic Seris remained hunter-gatherers into the 20th century and fiercely resisted Spanish and Mexican efforts to subdue them.

Loathed by ranchers, who shot them on sight, and rumored to be cannibals (an accusation denied by the Seris), their population plummeted to fewer than 100 by about 1850, when they were forcibly moved to a ghetto in Hermosillo and their young were placed with foster families.

But like some Old Testament tribe, the Seris found their children and escaped to Tiburon, the setting of their myths and their source of wisdom about the natural world.

Later, when the island was turned into a preserve, the government built for the Seri the villages of Punta Chueca and El Desemboque.

In 1975, Mexico gave Tiburon back to them, along with exclusive fishing rights in the Infiernillo channel.

Finding history

I tried to line up a Seri guide to take us to Tiburon, but everyone told me just to drive the rough, unpaved road north of Kino to Punta Chueca or El Desemboque.

After we reached the bay, we spent the night at Posada Las Aves, a neat little motel court a few blocks from the beach, then went to the Seri Museum on the northern side of Kino, where I had arranged to meet Ruben Garcia, the director.

The museum's explanations, mostly in Spanish, tell the harrowing history of the Seris. Vintage photos show Seri men in traditional pelican-feather skirts and Seri women sporting delicate patterns painted across their cheeks and noses. There are tightly woven baskets and ironwood carvings, for which the Seris have become famous; models of their ocotillo cactus-framed dwellings; and shallow reed canoes in which Seri fishermen masterfully navigated El Infiernillo.

Garcia had brought along an English-speaking friend, Filiberto Vargas, who offered to take us to Punta Chueca, about 20 miles north of Kino, to meet a Seri guide.

We set out on the gravel road that leads to the village through forests of saguaro cactus. The countryside appears fearsome to the untrained eye. But those who know where to look for flowers, hummingbirds and waterholes see it as a "place wildly alive," as ethnobiologist Gary Paul Nabhan wrote in "The Desert Smells Like Rain," a book about another group of Sonoran Desert dwellers, the Tohono O'odham people of Southern Arizona.

The Seris learned how to harvest this singular cornucopia, although the population never numbered much more than several thousand. It is estimated that there are now 650 Seris who subsist mainly by making crafts, fishing and selling licenses to hunt bighorn sheep, introduced on Tiburon Island in the 1970s. Each license sells for more than $100,000, a windfall that has brought striking changes, as anyone approaching Punta Chueca can see.

Satellite dishes bloom in trash-filled yards, and shiny, new trucks sit beside windowless concrete-block houses that lack electricity and running water. The village has a basketball court, bunker-like church and ramshackle marina but no shops, restaurants or tourist attractions.

Hiking the island

Filiberto easily found the home of Ernesto Molina, an experienced Seri guide. Molina, a quiet man who speaks some English, agreed to take us to Tiburon in his boat the next day. He wanted $150 for a half-day visit, with a hike, or $500 to take us around the island, camping on the beach overnight. John leaned toward the longer trip, but I was feeling cautious, so we chose the shorter itinerary.

The sun was shining the next morning, and there was no wind, boding well for our expedition to Tiburon. Around 8 a.m., we were back in Punta Chueca, following Ernesto and his wife to the waterfront. With a few spare, elegant movements, he launched his 26-foot panga, a wooden boat with an old motor.

Contrary to its reputation, El Infiernillo was glassy smooth that day. Flocks of birds shot into the sky as we neared Tiburon, its stark mass coalescing into details: a mucky beach and sand shelf stepping up to the desert floor, where someone had built a few ocotillo huts; the long, broad skirt of the island with its pattern of low desert scrub rising to the mountainous backbone of 30-mile-long Tiburon. When Ernesto finished anchoring the panga, we put on our hiking boots and set out west toward one of the few waterholes on the island.

It was easy going at first, as creosote and elephant trees yielded to a forest of twisted ironwood. There was no path, but Ernesto knew the way, leading us through blue-flowered desert mallow, around prickly cholla cactus and across rocky dry washes. He spotted a mule deer, and I almost stepped on a tarantula. A jackrabbit leapt out of the brush, each hop seemingly as long as a kangaroo's.

We rarely spoke. Ernesto seemed to want it that way, although he told us he had lived on the island as a boy.

The route got rougher and steeper, and the walk became a desert bushwhack. I was hot and tired by the time we reached the waterhole, brackish and shrunken, sunk in a pile of boulders at the head of a narrow canyon. Somehow Ernesto found exactly the same route back to the boat. We saw dolphins as we recrossed the channel and, back in the village, John bought a beautiful, taut basket made by Ernesto's wife.

As we drove out of the village, we took one long last look at Tiburon Island. Now we could say we'd seen it, although getting to a place you've long wanted to see can be dangerous because the reality rarely matches the dream. Tiburon was, I think, as untrammeled and beautiful as we'd hoped, but sad, too. With new development probably coming to Kino Bay, the island and the way of life it symbolizes seem ever more tenuous.

Susan Spano