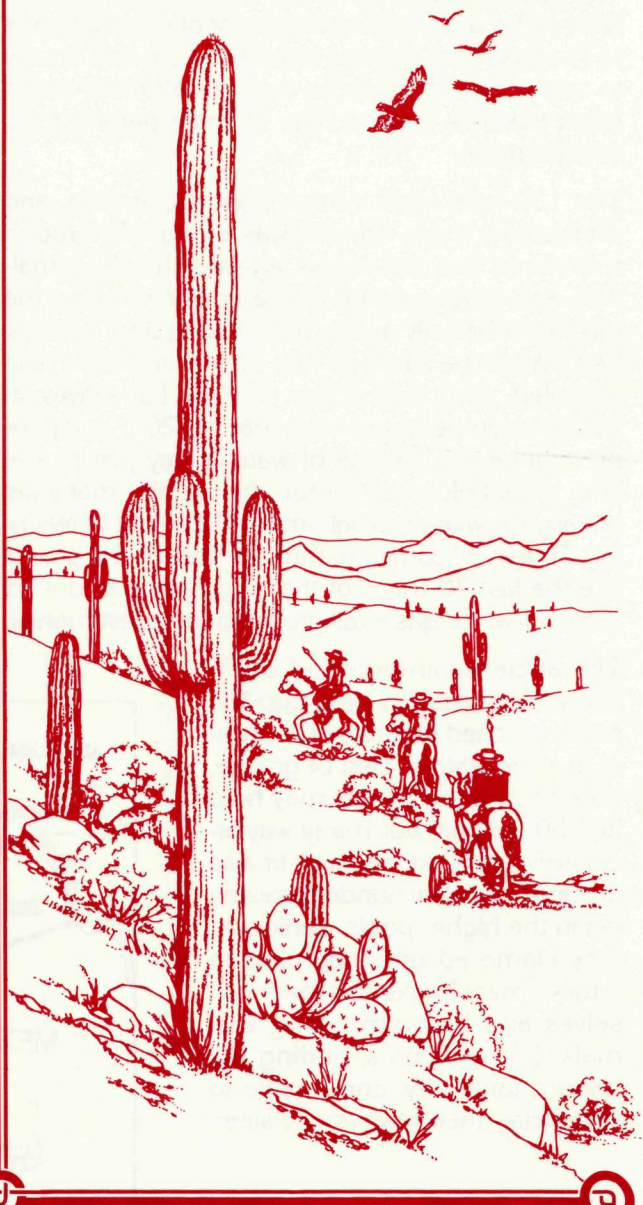


EL CAMINO DEL DIABLO

highway of the devil



An historic route linking the northern frontier of Mexico and the Spanish settlements of California, *El Camino del Diablo*—the Devil's Highway—has witnessed centuries of intrepid travelers. Yet, a journey on El Camino never has been easy.

Starting at Caborca, Sonora, Mexico, the 250-mile trip featured rest stops at Quitovac, Sonoyta, and Quitovaquito, before plunging headlong into the expanse of desolation which lent the trail its name. This stretch between flowing water on the Sonoyta River at Agua Dulce, and the rumor of stagnant water at *Tinajas Altas*, proved arduous to all, and deadly to many. The stone-cross markers of a half dozen fallen travelers testify to the ultimate penalty for a failed venture.

The 130-mile stretch from Sonoyta, Mexico, and what is now Yuma, Arizona, was a long ride through sere desert flats and across leg-wrenching lava malpais and drifting sand. In the cooler months, the trip might be only a slow plod, taking 3 to 10 days. Water might be found at Tule Tank or, if fortune really smiled, rain could deliver pools at Las Playas. In summer, temperatures here soar to 120°F and people require two gallons of water a day just to survive. Waterholes and forage dry up. Yet, many set out anyway with the single-minded thought of reaching Tinajas Altas (High Tanks). Most of the graves line the last 30 miles of that leg; by one count 65 graves near Tinajas Altas proffered mute testimonial.

The ancient campground at Tinajas Altas features nine cup-like pools perched one above the other in a precipitous cleft of granite. When full, these tinajas may hold 20,000 gallons, but many wayfarers arrived to find the lower tinajas dry and only a few hundred gallons left in the higher pools. Perilously, they clamored up steep cliffs to retrieve mere bucketfuls for themselves and their struggling animals. Some victims, finding the bottom tanks dry, and unable to feebly claw their ways up the steep

cliffs, perished within a few yards of life-sustaining water.

From Tinajas Altas the trail forked, and weary travelers and their exhausted livestock struggled toward the Gila or Colorado Rivers, which promised unlimited water, shade, and forage. Stronger parties swung west through Tinajas Altas Pass and angled north-westward through the Yuma Desert directly to Yuma Crossing. More cautious travelers took the northern route from Tinajas Altas, skirting the eastern edge of the Gila Mountains to the Gila River, and then followed it to the Colorado River confluence upstream from Yuma. One of the lesser-known and even chancier forks cut north up the Tule Valley from Las Playas and made use of water at Heart, Cabeza Prieta, or Baker Tanks before hitting the Gila River near Tacna. Historians and archaeologists are still trying to unravel and document precisely these historic and prehistoric routes. Seldom, except near waterholes or through passes, were any of these corridors actually roads. Instead, they were generally interwoven tracks and ruts made as each party wind-ed its own way from camp to camp following the lay of the land.

Thirst was not the only difficulty on El Camino. Marauders, lost routes, broken equipment, and windstorms compounded the problems of reaching Yuma, let alone California. Virtually every written account of a trip across El Camino—even contem-

porary ones—chronicles some brush with disaster. Why did anyone tempt this fate? El Camino del Diablo was a shortcut, saving at least 150 miles over going by way of Tucson and Gila Bend, following the river routes along the Santa Cruz and the Gila. This shortcut also reduced the chances of meeting hostile Apaches, as did traveling in summer instead of winter, which raiding parties preferred. To those able to brave thirst and block out the fear of peril, El Camino was the route of choice.

Also, the trail followed a geologic corridor of easily passable, though climatically inhospitable, terrain. Between El Camino and the Gila River Trail, roughly 80 miles to the north, lie rugged bands of apparently waterless mountain ranges which block direct travel. To the south of El Camino lie the Pinacate malpais lavas and beyond that, to the Gulf of California, drifting sand and tidal-flat mud. It was the Devil's Highway or nothing.

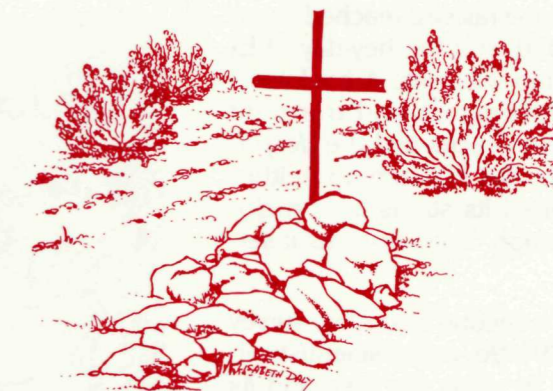
"Locally, it is known as 'El Camino Del Diablo' (the road of the devil), and few names are more appropriate." Capt. D.D. Gaillard, 1896.

"All traces of the road are sometimes erased by the high winds sweeping the unstable soil before them, but death has strewn a continuous line of bleached bones and withered carcasses of horses and cattle, as monuments to mark the way." Lt. N. Michler, 1855.

To the Indians who already lived in this land, El Camino was just another link in a vast system of trails connecting waterholes, hunting grounds, shrines, and campsites. The last people to live here were the *Pinacateños* and *Areneños*, both clans of the *Tohono O'Odham* (Papago) tribe. They ranged from the Gila River to the Gulf of California and from the Colorado River to Sonoyta, eking out a living. Life may have been difficult for them, but this was home. Their now-faint foot trails criss-cross the desert pavements.

When the first Europeans, the Spanish, came to the region, they employed Indian guides, who led them to concealed waterholes through the maze of trails. In 1540, Captain Melchior Díaz led a detachment of the Coronado Expedition through this vicinity in route to California. From 1698- 1702, Jesuit Padre

Eusebio Kino probed the region in search of souls and a route to the Pacific. Traveling horseback and afoot, this premier geographer explored and mapped both sides of the trail, and put the major waterholes on his map for later visitors. Lieutenant Juan Mateo Manje, who accompanied Kino, also left us vivid accounts of people and places along El Camino.



Spanish clergy and military used El Camino as a route to the missions and stations in California. El Camino was generally shorter, cheaper, and safer than sailing around the tip of Baja, California. Notable among these land expeditions are those of Fray Francisco Garcés (1771, 1779-1781), Juan Bautista De Anza (1774-1776), and Pedro Fages (1781-1782). Too, we must remember that although Spanish sailors discovered the ports of San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, it remained for overland travelers to colonize them. A number of the first permanent settlers at these Spanish posts came by way of El Camino.

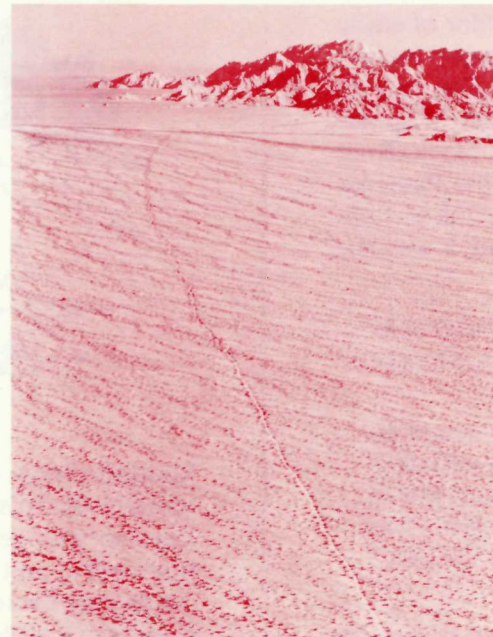
Then, because of the 1781 Yuma Indian uprising at the Colorado River Crossing, the trail fell into disuse. Although Captain Pedro Fages soon reopened the route, El Camino del Diablo languished until 1849, when the cry of "Gold!" at Sutter's Mill in California lured thousands of argonauts from Mexico. On the heels of these miners came the American and Mexican boundary surveyors, mapping and cataloguing the land bought in the 1853 Gadsden Pur-



chase. Little in their reports would entice settlers. A second wave of miners flowed through in the 1860's when placer gold was discovered along the Colorado River. The highway's grim name may date from this period when, as one traveler wrote, "frequent graves and bleaching skulls of animals are painful reminders of unfortunate travelers who died from thirst on the road."

The trail's popularity waned when the railroad reached Yuma in 1870, and the hey-day of El Camino was over. A backwash of prospectors and transient cowboys recrossed the *despoblado*, but El Camino neither regained its status as a major migration route, nor was it settled.

After a second boundary survey in 1891-96, noted scientists arrived to study the area and its storehouse of wonders. W.J. McGee, William T. Hornaday, Karl Lumholtz, and Forrest Shreve, head the list of botanists, ethnologists, geographers, zoologists, and archaeologists seeking to unravel the mysteries of this corner of the Sonoran Desert. But by then, El Camino del Diablo had become just another lightly-traveled county road.



El Camino del Diablo stretching westward across the *despoblado*.
Peter Kresan photograph

Camino between Las Playas and Tinajas Altas remains virtually as it was and always has been. The Indians, the Spanish, or the 49ers, would have no trouble recognizing the terrain from the most prominent guidepost of Cabeza Prieta Peak, down to the life-saving pasture of galleta grass at the Pinta Sands.

The territory between Sonoyta and Yuma remains one of America's and Mexico's last frontiers. A trip along El Camino del Diablo is a step back into the pages of history as far as the eye can read.

Notes to the modern traveler:

A permit is required to visit the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge manager (1611 North Second, Ajo, Arizona 85321; (602) 387-6483) handles these permits and can provide travel information and regulations.

A trip along El Camino remains a self-contained wilderness venture. All gasoline, water, and supplies must be carried. There are no facilities along the way.

Four-wheel drive vehicles are required. At times, the road is impassable.

All vehicles must remain within fifty (50) feet of the roadway. No off-roading in any type of vehicle is permitted.

No collecting of any kind is permitted.

The 1990 Arizona Wilderness Act added most (803,418) of Cabeza Prieta NWR to the Nation's wilderness system. Please help us maintain the wilderness character by practicing "Leave No Trace" ethic.

Text by Bill Broyles

SUGGESTED READING LIST:

James M. Barney, *El Camino del Diablo Arizona Highways*, March, 1943.

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Karl Lumholtz, *New Trails in Mexico* (reprinted Glorieta: Rio Grande Press, 1971).

W.J. McGee, *The Old Yuma Trail National Geographic* (March-April, 1901).



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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 1306
500 Gold Avenue
Albuquerque, NM 87103



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