



---

# SUN, SAND, SOAP

---

*A surfing couple sets up shop in the Baja desert, making a living producing a different kind of foamy water*

*-by Joan Tucker & Paul Papanek | photos by Paul Papanek-*

Years of traveling in southern Baja have taken us on many wonderful, totally unexpected adventures in our '88 VW van: To a dirt polo field in the middle of the desert, a soon-to-be golf course built on top of sand dunes overlooking the Pacific, the Sierra La Laguna Mountains to visit a potter - well, you get the picture.

*Continued on page 104*

**(LEFT AND BELOW)** | Who would think that a dusty, hardscrabble landscape would yield a much-sought-after, eco-friendly luxury soap?





**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | Surfing couple, Michele and Mario, have established a remarkable soap-making company on an old rancho in the midst of the rugged desert country of southern Baja, where roaming cattle seem to outnumber humans. Preferring a simple setup, Michele and Mario produce hand-made soap with naturally-occurring, environmentally-friendly materials.

While he (the van is named Hans...) is faultlessly reliable, he does not have a quiet interior on a dirt road. Put another way, it's hard to carry on a conversation with the person sitting next to you while bucking down anything but a paved road. So - this we knew when we started out from La Paz one sunny morning heading south to a place called Las Vinoramas (which, when we were getting directions, we thought was a huge wine store...). We just weren't fully prepared for what we were about to experience when we turned off of the beautifully paved - and very quiet - Mexico Hwy 1 just south of the San José airport and aimed Hans east toward the coastline. We had heard about a couple who, years ago, moved off the grid and began to produce wonderful, all natural hand-made

soaps on their very remote rancho. We were off to find them.

Twenty very long, deafening, screw-loosening, endless miles of the worst washboard dirt road we've ever been on, accompanied only by cows - alive and not alive - vultures, dust and the occasional pickup truck heading in the opposite direction, brought us - finally - to an amazing oasis at the tip of the Baja Peninsula: the Desert Soaps company. This totally unexpected destination gave us one of the most inspirational and exciting days we've had in a very long time.

As we pulled our dust-choked van into their rancho, Michele and Mario were outside waiting for us. Michele's tie-dyed dress and long, flowing hair - and the big

hug that she gave both of us - was the first clue that we were about to spend the day with a very unique couple. While eating a delicious lunch that they had prepared for us, they told us their story.

Michele - a beautiful surfer girl from the San Fernando Valley - meets a handsome Australian artist/surfer dude - Mario - while surfing in Australia. A few years later, Michele is surfing in Bali, where she happens to run into Mario again. They nod, they chat, they go their separate ways. A few more years pass, and Mario finds himself surfing in El Salvador. And yes - he sees Michele across the uncrowded waves and they finally realize that life is offering them a grand adventure together. Well - maybe the story isn't quite that simple, but it's true - and it

eventually brings us to soap. More on that in a moment.

Now a couple, Michele and Mario decided to follow their surfer dream to Mexico. Mario had always loved it there and had spent some time in Baja. The next few years found them surfing up and down the Baja coast, camping or staying with friends - just following the waves. They finally decided, in the mid-90's, that it was time to settle down in Baja. Most surfers would have headed straight for the great surf breaks on the Pacific side at Todos Santos. But in their search for the perfect place in which to settle, Michele and Mario unexpectedly

*Continued on page 106*



stumbled upon an amazing piece of property overlooking the water at Las Vinoramas (which, as it turns out, is not a huge wine store after all) that really felt like it could be home - a beautiful, secluded cattle rancho, built in the 1930's and abandoned for the past 20 years. They bought it, moved in, and began a total restoration, bringing it back

to life (minus the cattle), restoring its sweet water well, re-thatching the roofs, rebuilding the rooms with native woods and materials, and installing the solar panels that would supply all of their power.

It soon dawned on them that, while surfing is great, they had better think of a way to make a living. A chance conversation with her sister turned out to be the beginning of Desert Soaps. Her sister mentioned that creosote (chaparral) - a bush that grows in huge supply throughout most of the Baja peninsula, is a natural preservative for oils. That got Michele thinking about the implications of that little tidbit, so she started doing a lot of research. And - that led her to soap. It seemed like a natural

idea - using what their land was giving them to support themselves. Perfect. So - armed with a few soap making books and a never-ending supply of natural ingredients, they got to work. Throughout the next year, they experimented - learning which plants to use and how to use them, figuring out the recipes, adjusting the ingredients, and testing the results on themselves and their friends.

As it all got more serious, they finally had to turn half of the house interior into a soap-making factory with some Rube Goldberg-like equipment designed by Michele's father. Who knew that rain gutters from Home Depot would make perfect soap molds? Apparently, Michele's father did. Finally, in 1996, Desert Soaps was born.

The beautiful desert hills surrounding their rancho supply them with most of the flowers, plant extracts, bark, leaves and other nutrients used in their soaps. Everything is hand-harvested in small batches on the hikes through the hills that Michele and Mario take with their dogs. A few other natural ingredients come from other parts of the Baja Peninsula. In addition they have trained - and employ - local women from the nearby ranchos to help make the small batches of handmade, rustic looking soaps. All of the soaps and lotions are produced using only coconut, palm, and olive oils - and no animal products. The colorings are all natural as well - spices, iron oxides, and ultramarines. The restored original sweet water well supplies

the water used in all of their products. The packaging - designed by Mario - is made with recycled and renewable materials, printed by a shop whose profits go to a local orphanage. To complete this circle, their electricity comes from 100% sustainable solar energy, making the entire process very ecologically and ethically sound.

The result is a successful line of natural soaps and lotions that have made their way into some of the best resorts, spas, and boutiques in Baja and the mainland. As the demand for their all natural, organic products grows, Michele and Mario feel that it's important to stay small - not only to maintain the quality of their soaps, and to preserve the plants that give them their

ingredients, but to be able to continue living the wonderful life that they have created for themselves - a world that is totally unique, welcoming, and self sustaining.

Before we knew it, the sun was beginning to set. We were reluctant to leave, but we wanted to get back to the highway before dark. Michele and Mario, who had not stopped smiling all day, gave us a big hug as we climbed into Hans to begin the dusty, bumpy trip back to civilization. And as we drove away, and saw them standing amidst such incredible beauty, it occurred to us that they are living not only the surfer's dream, but all of our dreams - of following the heart and making the dream come true.

El Fin!

**(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT)** | *Desert Soaps proves that even the most seemingly inhospitable terrain can yield a luxury product in a sustainable, eco-friendly manner, especially with a hand-made production process.*

