# FOR THE LOVE OF HORSE-POWER!

*Baja's ideal Dude-Ranch for Petrol-Heads!*

*~story and photos by Paul Papanek~*

It was halfway through the day when I looked down at my camera and saw that it was encased in a thick protective layer of super-fine dust. I wasn't too concerned for a couple of reasons. First – my camera and lenses are tightly sealed against the elements (a selling point that was being severely tested). Second, but more importantly, I was just having way too much fun to care!

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**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | *This page: A mile off the highway, this is the entrance to the ranch. My buddy Larry eventually wrestled the wheel away from me. Just some of the scenery we experienced on our adventure. Opposite page: Inside the cantina. Todd Clement. Wide Open Adventures – Todd's old company – uses the ranch as a starting-off point for their tours of the Baja. One of Horsepower Ranch's horses grazing on a hill above the shop. The ranch with its 50-room hotel, cantina, pool, and 100 acres.*

I was behind the wheel of a highly customized Polaris RZR – one of a fleet owned by Horsepower Ranch and Horsepower Adventures in Ensenada – and I, along with my more than willing buddy Larry who was strapped tightly into the passenger seat, was out with owner Todd Clement and several other drivers to not only see the start of the SCORE Baja 500 off-road race; we were out to drive part of the course after the last of the trophy trucks ran through. We were somewhere between Ensenada and Ojos Negros, instructed to stay just far enough behind each other so as not to inhale their entire dust cloud, racing at up to 50 miles per hour on tracks through the forest and across wide open fields. And we were having the time of our lives.

How did we get here?

The story starts – as many stories about Ensenada and off-road racing do - with Todd Clement. Oh – and just maybe Al Capone. Yes – *that* Al Capone. More about that later.

Todd's passion for off-road racing began as a 9-year old, when his mom took him down to Ensenada to watch his uncle Joe race in the Baja 500. Todd was really enthralled,

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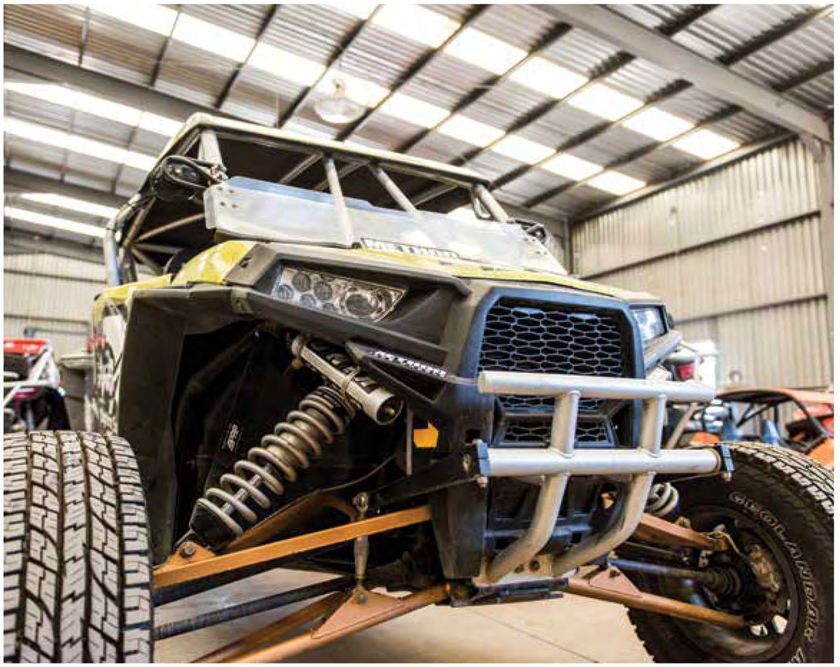

though, by racing legend Parnelli Jones who, at the time, was running his "Big Oly" Ford Bronco. Jones won that race, as it happened, crossing the finish line going backwards because of multiple mechanical problems. As Todd tells it, "He was a hero to me because he crossed the finish line in reverse! I was pretty well fixed at that point!" His passion for off-road racing had been ignited.

By the time he was 16, and wanting to emulate his hero Jones, Todd was looking for his own Bronco to race and found one languishing in a guy's overgrown backyard. And to close the Parnelli Jones circle, it turned out that that Bronco had been built at the same shop that built "Big Oly." After some late night wrenching, Todd was driving it to school the following week.

At 19, he finally entered his first race – the Barstow 250 – and he and his team took 4th place. That led to moving up to the mini truck class and then, with substantial sponsorship, to the pro truck class. He and his team went on to win the Baja 1000 and 500 in their class, gaining quite a bit of notoriety in the process, and making just enough money to put gas in their pre-runners.

But out of this came an idea. On a fishing trip to Alaska, it occurred to Todd that just maybe, the guys he was fishing with would have a better time spending their money driving the Baja 500 course in pre-runner vehicles. He figured that if the cars were simple enough, you wouldn't have to be a pro-level driver in order to get a real taste of legendary Baja off-road racing. That was the beginning of Wide Open Baja. With a business plan in hand, Todd designed and

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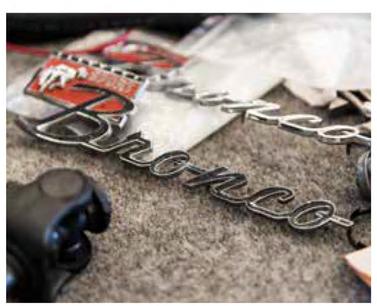
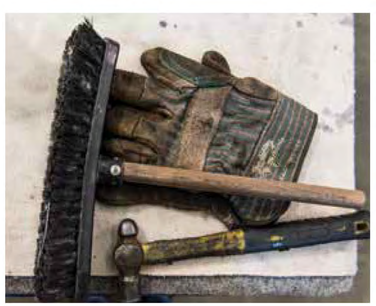
**(FAR LEFT AND BELOW)** | *Opposite page: One of the customized RZRs in their shop. The HPR logo is branded into their equipale chairs. Todd hunts classic Broncos that are good candidates for restoration. This one is next in line. This page: Horsepower Ranch is close to the vineyards of Valle de Guadalupe. Here we are taking a spin by one of them. A stack of spare RZR tires. A view across Horsepower Ranch's beautiful valley.*





**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | *This page: Three of Horsepower Adventure's RZRs lined up in front of the cantina, ready to go! Applying the chrome Bronco logo will be the final step. A few tools in the fabrication shop. Opposite page: If you see this, you're on the right dirt road heading to the entrance of the ranch. The Horsepower Adventure logos are displayed on all of their Polaris RZRs. One Horsepower Adventure's RZRs blasting down a dirt track.*

built a fleet of 46 race cars – a little stronger and more comfortable than anything on the market. It turned out that his cars were so durable and reliable that militaries from around the world began buying them. And - they were added as an official class in the Score races, too.

The adventure tours Todd began hosting for corporate groups from around the world were an instant success. His emphasis was always on safety first, and he would take considerable time to teach every participant how to drive and how to communicate from car to car. Some of the adventures would last as long as eight days and cover up to 1400 miles – Ensenada to Cabo and back - with tented camps and meals being prepared ahead of their arrivals along the way. Todd was having the time of life – as were his clients.

Several years later, he got a call from a guy who owned an historic 80-year old ranch a few miles outside of Ensenada. On its 100 acres were a cantina, huge swimming pool, and a small hotel. The guy wanted to sell, and thought that it would be a perfect place for Todd to base Wide Open Baja – which had become a pretty big operation by then. Todd says that when he showed up to see it, "…it had beautiful bones but was really decrepit. Roofs were falling in, there was no greenery, and it was in a general state of disrepair. And it was perfect." It also came complete with ranch manager Rodrigo, who was born on the property.

The apocryphal story that Al Capone once owned it and used it as a secluded

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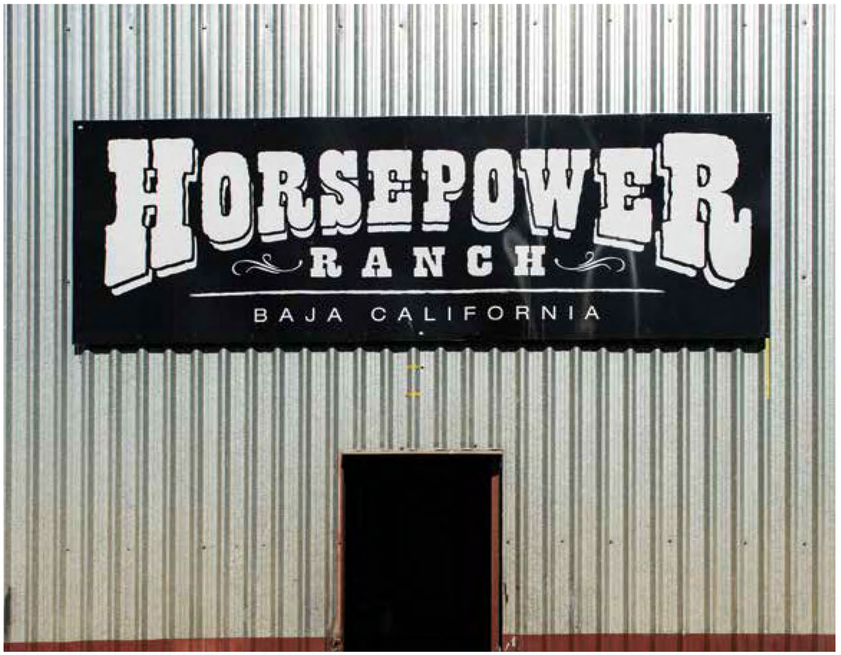


getaway from his Riveria Casino in downtown Ensenada provided great intrigue and promised fun dinner and beer-fueled conversation for years to come.

Right away, Todd saw it as a potential utopia for people who race the Baja. He immediately named it Horsepower Ranch and, within a few months, they were hosting guests. Paul Newman, on his first visit, called it a "dude ranch for petrol heads." He was right on the money. The ranch quickly became the epicenter of pre-race parties and events for the Baja 500 and 1000 races, as well as the Legends Rally. And off-road motorcycle tour companies used it as a jumping-off venue for trips down the Baja, as well. Movie stars and famous racers flocked there to hang out with Baja off-road racing crowd including Sandra Bullock, Jesse James, Patrick Dempsey, Mario Andretti, Walker Evans, Ivan Stewart, and many others.

And some amazing things happened. Todd tells a story about engineers from Ford coming down to the ranch for a pre-race event and how they examined his adventure tour cars with a fine tooth comb. A year later, they came back to the ranch to unveil the Ford Raptor – heavily inspired by the design of Todd's cars. That really solidified their place on the racing map!

Around that time, Todd and his partners built the shop – all 10,500 square feet of it, including a complete fabrication building – so he would have a place to store and work on his fleet, and to build more of them.

In 2010, with Wide Open Baja and the

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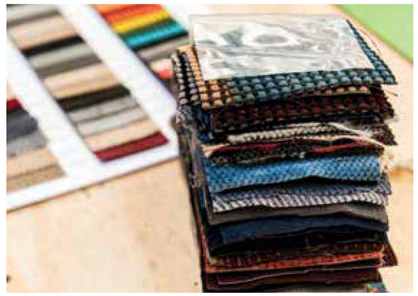
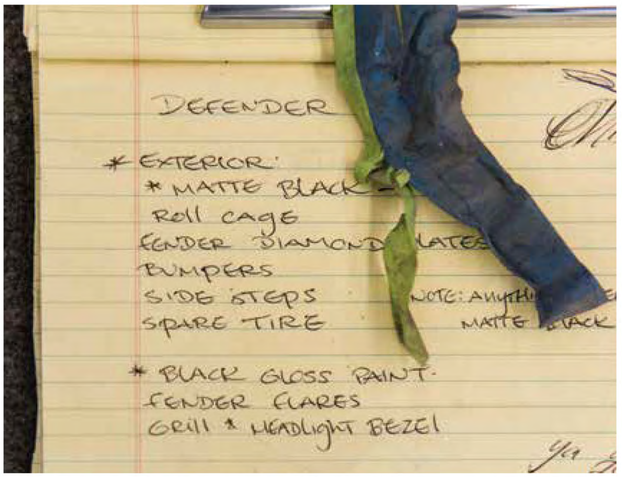
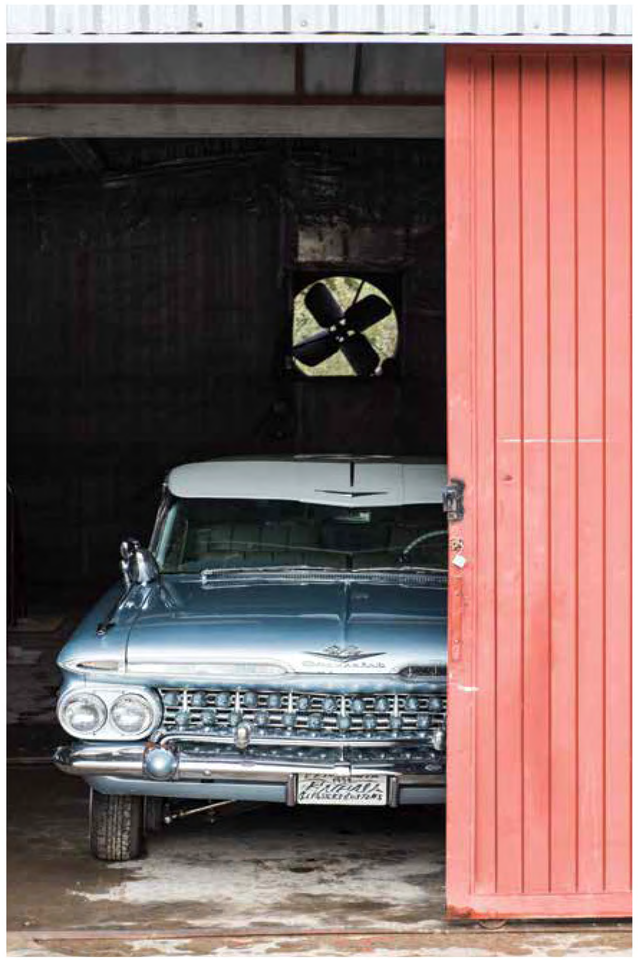
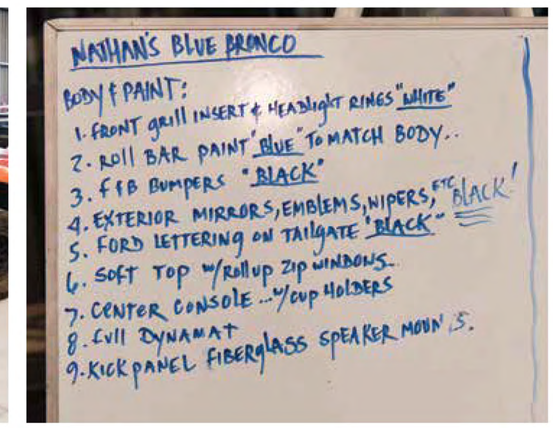
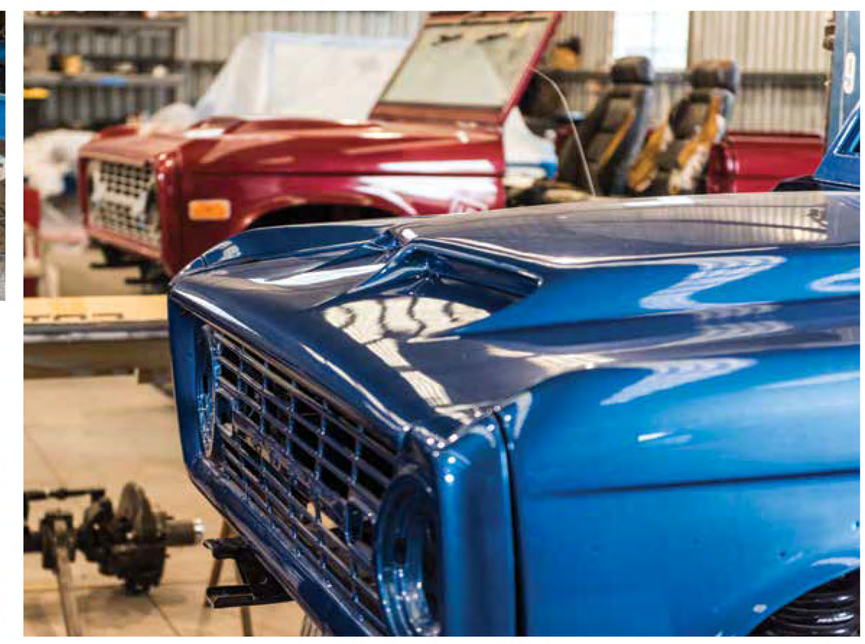
**(FAR LEFT AND BELOW)** | *Opposite page: Serious work goes on inside this building. A stack of fabric samples for a restoration. The punch list for a Defender being modified in the shop. Flaco's low-rider hiding in the body shop. One of the shop's own classic pickups. This page: One of the crew working on a part in the fabrication shop. Smoothing out the dents in the hood of the pickup truck. A classic pickup truck that's been completely stripped for a ground-up restoration, almost ready for the paint shop.*











**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | *This page: After the new motor and dash have been installed in the red Bronco, the guys start working on all of the hook-ups. One of two blue Broncos currently in the shop. The crew installing a dash in the red Bronco. Note the custom air conditioner vents installed across the bottom! Opposite page: Flaco's low rider which he drives every day to and from his house on the ranch. One of the Horsepower Adventures support trucks that goes out on every trip. The next steps on a blue Bronco just out of the paint shop. One of the crew prepping one of the pickup's fenders for paint. Two of the Broncos in the shop undergoing ground-up restorations.*

hotel in full swing, they stopped building cars for the adventure tour business. Todd says "…we didn't want to saturate Baja with our race cars. Every time we went down the peninsula, we wanted the locals to be happy we were coming through and throw rose petals instead of rocks."

Feeling like they had taken the adventure tour business as far as he could, Todd sold Wide Open Baja in 2007, and with all the space in that huge shop now available began doing restorations and resto-mods. He put together the core of a great crew – a couple of incredibly talented paint and body guys from East LA – Pete and Flaco – an upholsterer from Guadalajara, and a few local craftsmen and mechanics. Friends from southern California would come in and lend a hand. It started out slowly, finding trucks and cars here and there, and taking in the occasional outside job. But then they started to focus. They realized they that they liked pickups, Bronco, Camaros, Land Rover Defenders, and early Porsches and Mustangs, so Todd began combing the want ads and following leads to find good candidates for restoration or modification. Now, about 50 percent of the projects in house are cars that they find themselves, and the other 50 percent are cars that people bring in.

Todd is always on the hunt. On any given day, he might be found driving his big Ram pickup towing his flatbed trailer behind

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with, perhaps, the carcass of a rusty early '70's Bronco strapped to it. In a few short weeks, a gleaming Bronco would roll out of the shop and you'd be hard-pressed to know it was the same one that went in.

When I asked Todd what the difference was between a custom shop in the US and one in Ensenada, he told me that, first and foremost, it's the passion of the people he has working for him. Many of them live on the ranch or close by (every day after closing, you can see Flaco driving his beautiful low-rider up the dirt track to his house on the hill above the ranch. It's quite an incongruous sight!), and everyone loves coming to work. They make sure that work is fun, and as Todd tells it, "…we work and sing and have a great time and if there's a mistake, we just do it over again. There's never a time when someone says, "that thing has to leave right now. It's not done! We don't have anymore time!" We always have time here!" Pete, the paint and body master from East LA, wandered by at that point and added "And no other custom shop I know of in the States has a swimming pool, volleyball court, a 50-room hotel and a cantina!" As you can tell, morale is incredibly high here!

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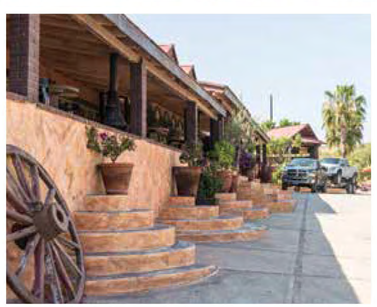
**(FAR LEFT AND BELOW)** | *Opposite page: The guys working on the red Bronco. Pete, the body and paint guru, stands in front of a recently completed Bronco. The shop has their own full-time upholsterer, and this is where the magic happens. A Bronco motor waiting for its rebuild. While Horsepower Ranch works on just about anything, they specialize in classic Bronco restorations and resto-mods. This one has recently come out of the paint shop and is awaiting the next steps. Opposite page: Pete, the body and paint guru, is about to apply white lettering to the Ford logo. Todd, always on the hunt for old Broncos, buys one that he found in a warehouse. A new RZR waiting to be customized for Horsepower Adventures.*



**(ABOVE)** | *Just outside the cantina, a large grassy area hosts parties, volley ball games, and bonfires. The cantina, outside and inside. Todd is incredibly proud of his collection of collector-item sombreros. These are just a few.*

And it shows. When I was there last, the team – expanded to handle the number of vehicles in the shop – was busy installing a dash on a candy-apple red Bronco, and at the same time, working on a custom interior for Defender and massaging dents out of a classic pickup truck that had been stripped down to bare metal in preparation for going into their own paint booth. The place was humming – literally – with Banda music playing on a boom box and many of the guys singing along. Everyone laughs together, and the work gets done – flawlessly. Their attention to detail is unmatched. Todd, with his encyclopedic knowledge of mechanics and off-road racing – coupled with his sense of humor and love of what he's doing – is the glue that keeps it all together.

A couple of years ago, Todd got restless and decided to jump back into the adventure tour business, calling it Horsepower

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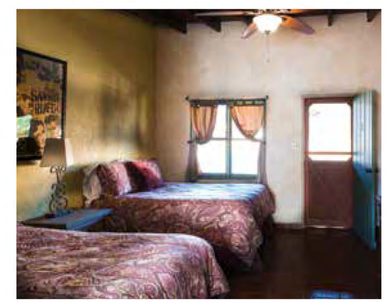
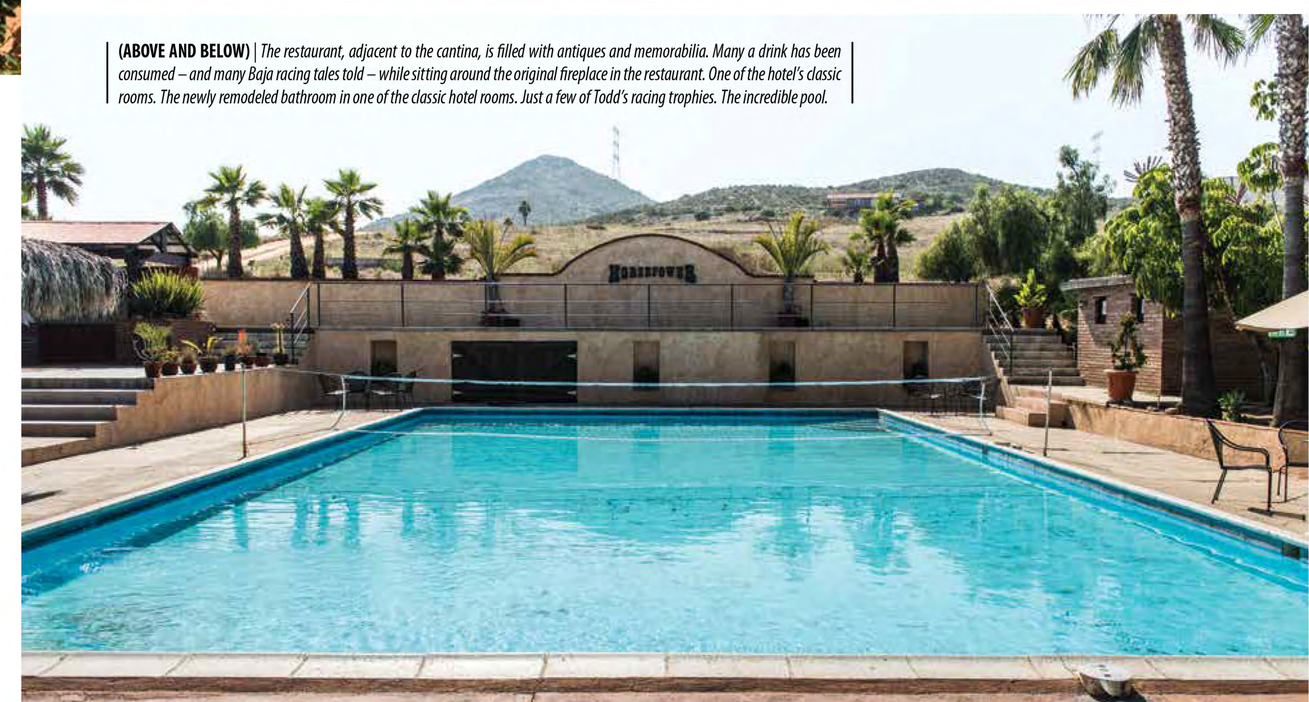


**(ABOVE AND BELOW)** | *The restaurant, adjacent to the cantina, is filled with antiques and memorabilia. Many a drink has been consumed – and many Baja racing tales told – while sitting around the original fireplace in the restaurant. One of the hotel's classic rooms. The newly remodeled bathroom in one of the classic hotel rooms. Just a few of Todd's racing trophies. The incredible pool.*



Adventures. This time, he customized a small fleet of Polaris RZRs – adding a center seat in the back, tweaking the suspension, installing GPS and communication gear, and making them go faster. Way faster. Which brings us back to my camera being covered in a layer of dust.

There were a few guests staying at the ranch who had booked a one-day adventure tour (which anyone can do, by the way), and Larry and I got to tag along. It just so happened that it was the day of the Baja 500 so we were doubly excited. And we were not disappointed!

Exhausted and dusty as we pulled back into the ranch just before sunset, we made our way directly to the cantina to have a shot of tequila to toast the day. Sitting at the bar with Todd as he told us crazy stories about the ranch and the races, we were like a couple of goofy guys from LA having come down to Ensenada to hang out with Baja pro racers. Todd made us feel good about that. And it was great.

***For more information, explore online:***
***www.hprbaja.com***
***www.horsepoweradventures.com*** *El Fin!*

**(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE)** | *Opposite page: Todd and the crew. Signs on the 1-mile dirt road point you towards the entrance to the ranch. This page: A brief stop for a chat with other guests while out on our adventure. Running through the countryside near Ojos Negros – not too far from the ranch. The cantina - complete with a rock 'n mariachi band - plays host to pre-race parties.*