

“Tecate, Mexico – Just south of the border, but a world away”

At the end of March in 2017, I decided to make a short trip to Tecate, Mexico where I booked a room at the “Santuario Diegueno Resort”. The property had a lot of excellent reviews online, so I was looking forward to the overnight stay. On the way to Tecate, I planned to stop in the small town of Alpine and visit the local brewery there. I had booked a room for the night at the “Ayres Hotel” – a very nice hotel just off Interstate 8. After checking in, I walked to the “Alpine Brewing Company”, which according to the map was just 3 blocks from the hotel. But after walking twice that distance on Main Street, I was no closer to the brewery. Finally, I stopped at a small flower shop to ask directions. As it turned out, the brewery was on the street just below Main Street, next to the CVS pharmacy. Once I knew to look for CVS, it was easy to find the brewery, where I had a delicious BBQ pulled pork sandwich, topped with melted cheddar cheese and fresh salsa – simply fantastic! To accompany it, I went with the bartender’s recommendation of a cold pint of their “Hoppy Birthday IPA”. Later, I went inside the brewery to taste their new “HFS IPA”, which was phenomenal! The name of the beer was created by the brewmaster upon his first taste of it, whereupon he declared “Holy F**king Sh*t”! That evening, as I returned to the hotel, I stopped at the local liquor store to pick up a six-pack of “Brew Free or Die Pale Ale” from a craft brewery in New Hampshire. When I went to check out, the cashier was making jokes with a customer, trying his best to imitate “Joey” of the “Sopranos”! I ended the evening in my hotel room watching Anderson Cooper on CNN.

The next morning, I got gas at the Shell station, cash at the Wells Fargo ATM, and a sausage McMuffin at McDonald’s before leaving Alpine for points south. The route took me through Japatul Valley in the Cleveland National Forest – a rugged, mountainous landscape, very green from the recent winter rains.



Soon, I came to “Portero Regional Park” within sight of the massive border wall with Mexico. The park preserved huge old Live Oak trees, some of which were more than 100 years old. However, as I hiked along the nature trail, I saw several of the ancient trees had died from 5 years of drought and had been cut down. Along the nature trail were many very interesting exhibits and displays about the history of the local native people known as the “Kumeyaay”.



Leaving the park, I stopped at the “Lake Barrett Junction General Store” for a cup of coffee. (the Lake Barrett Road was closed by a gate and a “Private Access” sign, but my map didn’t show the road being closed)



From Lake Barrett Junction, it was just a few miles south to Tecate, California, a tiny village with a couple of small shops and the Mexican Immigration and Customs border crossing. As I drove across the border, Mexican border agents did not stop me, perhaps because of my California license plates. (on a side note, before the trip I had purchased a special auto insurance policy for Mexico, since virtually all US insurance companies “exclude” coverage in Mexico – luckily I didn’t have to use it!) After crossing the border and entering the small town of Tecate, my first impression was that of a typical third world country – generally poor and in “run-down” condition, so typical of Mexican “border towns”. Although the appearance of the town was rather dingy, I felt no fear or danger as I drove through the town, and surprisingly, the traffic moved very well and was quite “behaved” compared to California. As I searched for a sign to the resort, I happened to find it more by accident than design!

The town of Tecate is part of the huge Tijuana metropolitan area, even though it’s over 50 miles from the center of Tijuana. In modern times, the town is best known as the home of Tecate Beer, one of the most popular in Mexico. But the town was founded much earlier in 1892 in a lovely fertile valley surrounded by several mountains and hills of northern Baja California. It’s also situated in the heart of a region inhabited for hundreds of years by the native Kumeyaay people. The area surrounding Tecate supports a thriving farming community where crops include olives, grapes, and barley. The town is on Mexico Federal Highway 2 that connects Tijuana in the west with Mexicali and points east, all the way to Ciudad Juarez. Late in the 19th century, a railroad was built from San Diego to Yuma, Arizona in order to connect with the mainline of the Southern Pacific railroad. The route went through a large portion of northern Mexico, including Tecate. It was known as the “San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railroad” and transported both freight and passengers until the mid-1950’s, at which time it became unprofitable. Then in the late 1970’s, a section of the route from Campo, California to Tecate was donated to the “Pacific Southwest Railway Museum” in Campo. For several years the museum operated a tourist train from Campo to Tecate, popularly known as the “Tecate Express” until 2007 when one of the many tunnels along the route collapsed. There were several proposals to open the tunnel, but as of today it remains closed – unfortunately! Tecate still retains its traditional Mexican architecture and culture, all within walking distance of the resort.

The resort is a large hotel and conference center situated on top of a small hill next to the police station. (security was certainly no problem) Entering the spacious lobby, I discovered a spectacular 5 star property! There was beautiful white marble everywhere and gorgeous local Mexican artwork throughout the hotel, which had just 26 rooms, all beautiful large suites with huge bathrooms that included a spacious spa/tub, all constructed from Italian marble! From the terrace of my suite, I had a wonderful view of the mountains and desert to the east. I spent some time in the warm afternoon sun just sitting on my terrace with a couple of cold beers from the mini-bar and enjoying the view. At one

point, I noticed there was something painted on the border wall in large white letters – it read “I LOVE YOU ALL”! Meanwhile, the weather was sunny and comfortably cool as I watched lots of colorful birds just a few feet away.



Later in the afternoon, I decided to explore Tecate and headed for the “Tecate Brewery” downtown, but I found it was closed for renovations. So instead, I drove a short distance to the “Museo Comunitario de Tecate” (Tecate Community Museum) where I found some gorgeous outdoor local artwork and very interesting historical exhibits about the Kumeyaay native people. Upon leaving the museum, I tried in vain to find the old railroad station along the line that once connected San Diego with Yuma.



Unfortunately, I encountered a lot of construction and no place to park, but I could see the old railroad tracks were still in place, though they had been abandoned a decade earlier. So, I drove back to the resort and proceeded to the hotel bar where I had a very interesting conversation with the bartender. Seems that he had worked at the Tecate brewery for 12 years before moving to the US, where he married an American woman, had two teenage daughters, and lived near San Diego for many years. He returned to Mexico recently and took up the bartending job in the hotel. He told me that his daughters visit him two or three times a month, since it's much easier for them to visit him than him to visit them. As I sat at the bar, in conversation with the bartender, the hotel manager came in and recommended that I try a beer from the new local craft brewery named "Finisima", which means "The Top One" – it was superb! When I decided to have dinner in the hotel restaurant "Asao" (meaning "to eat" in the Kumeyaay language), the bartender reserved a table for me.



The service in the restaurant was very professional and the recommendation of two wines from the Ensenada vineyards in northern Baja California was perfect, a light, crisp Chardonnay and a full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon – both were delightful! My dinner began with an unusual “grilled iceberg lettuce salad”, served with fresh bell peppers, bacon, feta cheese, and honey vinaigrette dressing! For the main dish I chose Carne Asada and roasted red peppers – absolutely fantastic, but too much to eat, so I had to box up half of it for later. And to finish dinner, my server insisted I should try the house specialty for dessert – “Flan de Camote”, a soft cream cake made with “tres leches” and lemon zest! It was served with a cup of espresso that came with the “correct” size European spoon. (so many times, a cup of espresso in American restaurants is served with a “regular” size spoon, which is too large to fit the small espresso cup!) During dinner I watched a table of 8 middle-aged ladies seated nearby. All of them were very well dressed and looking beautiful, although all were a bit on the heavy side. They were having a great time, especially so as they were being flattered by their handsome young server! I spotted an unusual device on which to hang their purses at the end of their table – it was really quite a simple design, but it was very practical. The restaurant was not only elegant, but the food was also fantastic! After dinner, I went back to my suite and ordered a couple of cold “Finisima” beers from room service – delivered by the same server as for dinner. As I looked out from my terrace, I could see a very long line of cars waiting to cross the border into California. Sometimes it stretched for many blocks and moved at an incredibly slow pace! (Earlier in the evening, the bartender had told me that although the local drivers would sometimes let a car “cut in the long line”, they would call the police and report the car. As a result, the car would be forced out of the line by the police very near the border crossing and “escorted” back to the end of the line! Crime does not pay.) Before retiring for the night, I watched an episode of National Geographic on TV.

The next morning, as I looked out at the incredibly long line of cars waiting to cross the border, I debated about driving to the border crossing in Mexicali instead, 35 miles to the east. Even after breakfast, the line was still exceptionally long. But just 10 minutes later, it had all but disappeared from view. So, I decided not to drive to Mexicali, rather to cross the border in Tecate. As I joined the shorter line of cars, it was still a long 20 minutes of waiting. Meanwhile, lots of “hawkers” were busy selling snacks, bottled water, t-shirts, jewelry, artwork, and a myriad of other items to drivers waiting in line. Every few minutes, I advanced, perhaps one or two car lengths! Among the hawkers were a number of disabled people seeking handouts. I felt like it was better to give them a few dollars rather than to buy any of the cheap trinkets being sold. When I finally reached the US Customs and Immigration post, there was no hassle crossing back into the US – in fact, the Border Patrol agent waved me through without stopping to check my passport! From there, I took a leisurely scenic route home through the San Diego mountains by way of the “Sunshine Highway” over the summit of Mt Laguna to Julian, Borrego Springs, San Felipe, and Warner Springs. Unfortunately, when I got to Borrego Springs the wildflowers had already “peaked” a couple of weeks before. Yet, the town was crowded with tourists, even to the point where the State Park Visitor Center parking lot was full and closed. So, I decided to beat a hasty retreat

out of town and drive up the S22 highway over the Laguna Mountains to continue my journey home. (the mountains were still cloaked in a carpet of beautiful deep green grass) As I approached the tiny village of San Felipe, I stopped at the one and only roadside bar where there was a group of bikers enjoying the lovely outdoor weather, while the owner of the bar grilled hamburgers. I sat down at the bar outside and ordered an ice cold can of Budweiser (no craft beers here!) It was fun to watch the bikers and listen to their conversations. It was obvious they were having a fun time on their way back to San Diego. After leaving the “San Felipe Bar”, I stopped at the “Warner Springs Ranch Bar & Grill” for a cold pint of “Goose Island IPA” – a craft brew from Chicago!

When I returned home that evening, Tina, my dear friend from Germany, had prepared a delicious, simple dinner of spaghetti, fresh tomatoes, and parmesan cheese. After dinner, Leslie and I celebrated her visit over a couple bottles of wine as we all sat on the patio in the warm evening.

PHOTO GALLERY



