

"Hang on, let's just put a little more pre-load on this shock."



¡Livin' La Vida Loca!



HPI'S MEXICAN ADVENTURE



Growing up I knew I wanted an off-road RC car the first time I laid eyes on one. When my dream came true, my first RC car was an off-roader. I'd imagine myself inside the Shinsei Fire Fox rolling over rough and rugged terrain. It seemed as if this desire for terra firma was in my DNA. As it turns out, I wasn't alone. Back in the mid 80's off-road RC cars saw an amazing boom; every kid on my block growing up had some sort of off-road radio controlled vehicle. Maybe the desire for dirt comes from our ancestors, since at some point all of them had to travel off-road. Recently I was invited to head down to Baja California with some of the guys at HPI to promote the launch of their new Baja 5B and Hellfire kits. Having had limited full-size off-road experience in the past I wasn't sure what to expect. Once on the trip I got instant confirmation as to just why we have this innate desire for off-road. Keep reading to see what I'm talking about.

Words & Photos by Mike Velez

Many thanks to HPI!

The Adventure

To commemorate the launch of HPI's new 5B Baja 1/5-scale buggy and the new Hellfire truck, HPI invited myself and a couple other magazine guys down to sunny Ensenada, Mexico for the off-road adventure of a lifetime. Wide Open Baja is an adventure vacation company that takes the average Joe, straps him into a full-blow Baja 1000 racer buggy, and lets him loose to experience the variety of terrain that Baja California has to offer. The trip we went on spanned the course of 4 days, with 3 full days of driving.

DAY 1 • Day one is actually day two, having arrived at the Horsepower Ranch in Ensenada the day before. But this was the first day of driving. Thankfully there's no cell phone connection, no television, no communication with the outside world. You're forced to engross yourself in the situation at hand. Strapping myself into the buggy for just the second time and heading off to tackle some terrain on the guided tour, I immediately got a sense of appreciation for the genetic code that got me wanting that first off-road RC car 25 years earlier. Erik Shauver of HPI was my co-driver for the trip. Eric's responsible for the design of HPI's new Hellfire. This guy knows his stuff. After talking to him for just a few minutes I was pretty eager to give the Hellfire a drive. After taking turns behind the wheel we came up to our first stop, lunch in the middle of the Baja peninsula. Our support crew had journeyed up ahead and prepped a pretty amazing lunch considering the situation. It was the first time for everyone in our group to compare notes on the experience to that point. It was thumbs-up and big smiles across the board. After lunch the day wrapped up with a long trek across the dunes ending up in San Felipe, a small beach town on the Sea of Cortez. Early to bed and it was time once again to hit the dunes the next morning.

Day 2 • After breakfast on the beach it was time for some free wheeling along a huge sand dune. It was also a great photo opportunity to get pictures of the 5B Baja alongside our buggies. As you can see from the photos the 5B Baja is not small by any stretch. The 2-stroke gasoline engine kept up pretty good with the 2.7 liter Porsche engine powering our buggies. On this day our guide was Bill Webber, and having just talked to him briefly at first I knew this

Did I mention thanks to Shawn and Kent at HPI?



The Terrain

The Baja peninsula features a variety of rugged terrain, everything from wide open dry lake beds to high-altitude pine forests. Driving in the different terrain and being in the vehicle gave me a sense of appreciation for chassis setup. Sometimes stiffer suspension is better. The fact that the Baja 5B and Hellfire, and most of our off-road kits, are adjustable is a good thing.

The Baja 1000

The most grueling, fearsome race of them all. Each year drivers race every form of off-road vehicle imaginable from Ensenada down to Cabo San Lucas. The trek takes them over 1000 miles of the gnarliest terrain on the planet, much of which we got the pleasure of experiencing firsthand on our 500 mile trip. The Baja 1000 attracts racers of all types and puts them to the test. Do yourself a favor and rent a DVD called *Dust To Glory*. It chronicles the race and will give you an instant appreciation to what I'm talking about.



"In the dust, it's a truck, no it's a buggy."



guy was a serious individual. Turns out Bill was a former Navy SEAL team captain and actually played a big part in designing some of the off-road vehicles the military is using over in Iraq. As you can imagine Bill ran a tight formation and gave us every opportunity to really push the buggies to their limit. Venturing to the "El Diablo" dry lake bed was pretty amazing, with the peddle pegged our buggy maxed out at 87MPH. Having found a sort of base camp I got to run both the Baja 5B and the Hellfire on the appropriately named terrain, what a blast. Both of the kits were made for just this sort of wide open area and ate up the dry lake like you wouldn't believe. The day concluded with the absolute greatest run up to the famous "Mike's Sky Ranch." The terrain was amazing and thankfully for the kidney belts, helmet, neck brace and 5-point harness I was able to enjoy the ride but definitely got enough thrill to tell my grandchildren about (when that day comes).

Day 3 • Having had the generator go out promptly at 9 PM the night before, we were well rested for the final day of this baja adventure. Having missed out of being behind the wheel on the amazing drive up to the ranch I lobbied to be behind the wheel for the first leg of the day. You know that feeling just after the officer writes up the ticket? Well, that decision to drive first would later come back to haunt me. The drive down from the ranch was amazing, and far from safe. Seems the original "Mike" lost his life driving down from the ranch while making way for someone coming up the trail. Thankfully this Mike made it down in one piece. Going through what the locals call the "Goat Trail," I happened to come across a warning marker indicating that the stream just to the right of the trail we were on had washed out some of the trail. Just on the opposite side of the trail stood a large cactus. Well, when I let off the throttle in third gear to negotiate the washout, a little bit of left and then a counter with some right at say 45MPH on loose dirt put a tiny bit of drift into the mix. Memo to self: cactus, drift, and loose dirt don't add up. Unfortunately our buggy was not equipped with the large nerf bars that donned my first Hornet buggy 21 years ago. I clipped the cactus with my left

HPI Baja 5B

Designed by HPI's Senior Designer Akira Kogawa, the 5B is an amazing buggy. It's big, 1/5-scale, and unlike other buggies you've seen before, this one's "scale" and looks a lot like a full-size off-road racer. The 5B is powered by a massive 23cc gasoline engine. Once fired up it's easy to lose yourself in the sounds and smell of the engine roaring. Even though there's really no racing class for this vehicle, it's a racer. Full-blown off-road suspension, transmission, and layout make this a buggy we can't wait to get our hands on. According to HPI the 5B will be shipping by the time you get this in your hands. So keep an eye out. We'll have a full review in the months to come.



The 5B is one of a kind and feels right at home in the Baja desert.



Mike got docked a lap and had to call for a turn marshal. Except the lap was in the four figures, and the turn marshal was a wrecker.



The Machine

When you hear "adventure vacation" or "tour" you might be thinking a ride at an amusement park, but the adventure HPI and I went on was powered by some pretty awesome vehicles. We were told that each runs about \$75K (my repair bill came out to over \$9500 for a left rear and new chassis so it doesn't sound that far off). The buggies are made from chromoly tubing, it's powered by a 2.7 liter Porsche engine bolted to a 4-speed racing transmission. The suspension's all double A-arm front and rear with 21 flippin' inches of suspension travel! The shocks are Blistein racing with external bypass. The Eibach ERS springs are pretty cool, I took one as a souvenir. They actually race these exact buggies in the Baja 1000, you can rent one for about \$50K. They'll furnish you a support crew and everything. Sounds like fun.

If you thought your RC repair bills were bad...

Let's see what Mike can do with this one.

We can say "Hellfire."



HPI Hellfire

Think buggy, think monster truck, think Hellfire. It's HPI's entry into the growing "truggy" category, although its unique in many ways. The new Hellfire was a ground up design. The goal when HPI set out to engineer the truck was to provide maximum performance in any condition. Having driven the truck it looks like HPI pulled it off. The Hellfire's fast, agile, and tough. It features tons of suspension travel, it's 1/8-scale, and powered by HPI's Nitro Star K4.6 High-Output engine. Like the 5B it comes RTR and comes with just about everything you need but fuel and batteries for the radio. The Hellfire is set to release just before the 5B so look for it soon, here in the pages of Xtreme and at the local hobby shop.



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Mike's Sky Ranch is famous as a secluded outpost for off-roaders of all sorts. The night we were there, some motorcyclists showed up at 2 AM looking for a place to stay.



Check out the business cards all around the living room at Mike's. Mickey Thompson is just one of the famous business cards that can be found.

rear tire, the result was spectacular to say the least. We (I say "we" but it was "me" behind the wheel) immediately rolled over to the right traveling at 45 MPH (my best guess, although Eric thought it was closer to 100 MPH), and the buggy rolled over twice and came to a rest 70 feet away from the cactus facing in the opposite direction. As we were going over all I remember is thinking "crap," sky, dirt, sky, dirt, oil, sky. Having made a quick assessment of the situation and making sure my passenger was alright I was glad that nothing was hurt, with the exception of the company AMEX that was to cover the \$3000 deductible for the "insurance"—that's some deductible. The ride back to the ranch in the F-350, crippled buggy in tow, was far from stellar. I was really bummed that we didn't get to go through the pine forest and that I cheated Eric of another day behind the wheel (sorry bro).

¡Hasta La Vista!

Having been able to experience the sensation of actual Baja 1000 terrain, I now understand why it is that we crave the dirt. It's in our DNA. The guys at HPI, a company with roots in on-road racing, share that same DNA that I do; that's apparent when taking a close up look at their two newest products, the Baja 5B and Hellfire. Although my first instinct wasn't to yell for a turn marshal, experiencing my crash was pretty cool; expensive, but cool. I can really appreciate the thrill of RC racing without the pain, literally. Thanks to HPI for inviting me on the trip and allowing me to share the experience with them. Thanks to Bill and James at Wide Open Baja for being great. I'm hoping HPI comes out with a F-18 Hornet next so I can go to flight school! 🚀