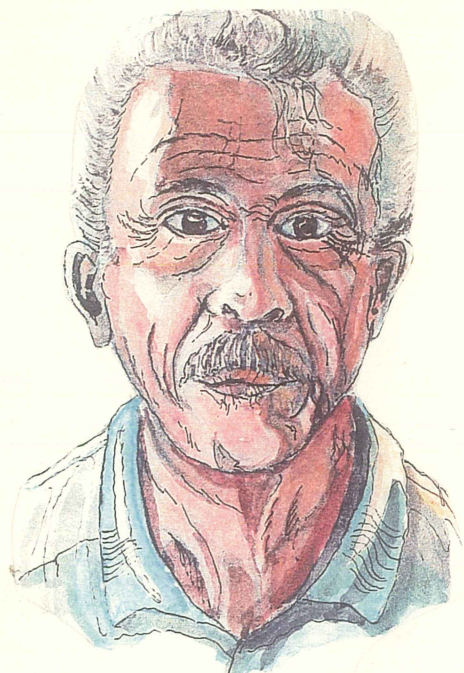


Cañon de Santa Teresa Baja California - Mexico



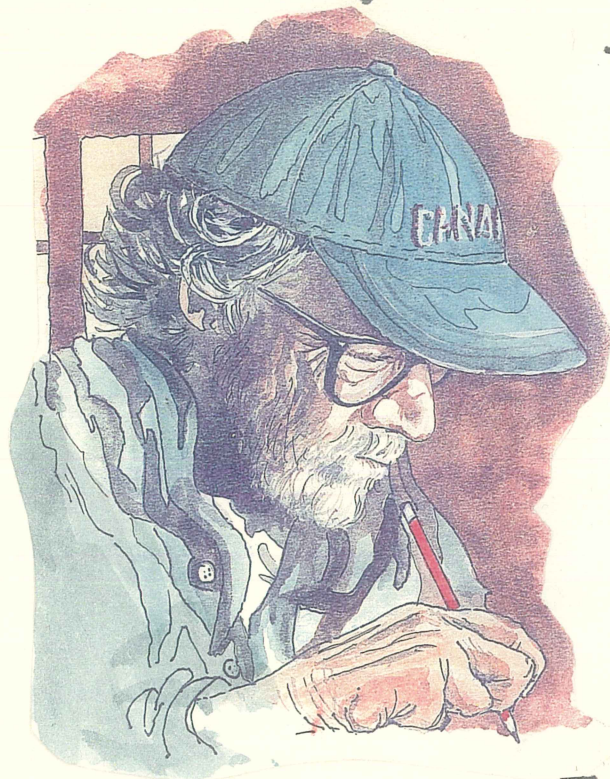
from my sketchbook / journal
by Karl Willms

¿donde estan las cabras?



to "Pilario"
and a quick recovery
y le deseamos una pronta recuperación

Forward

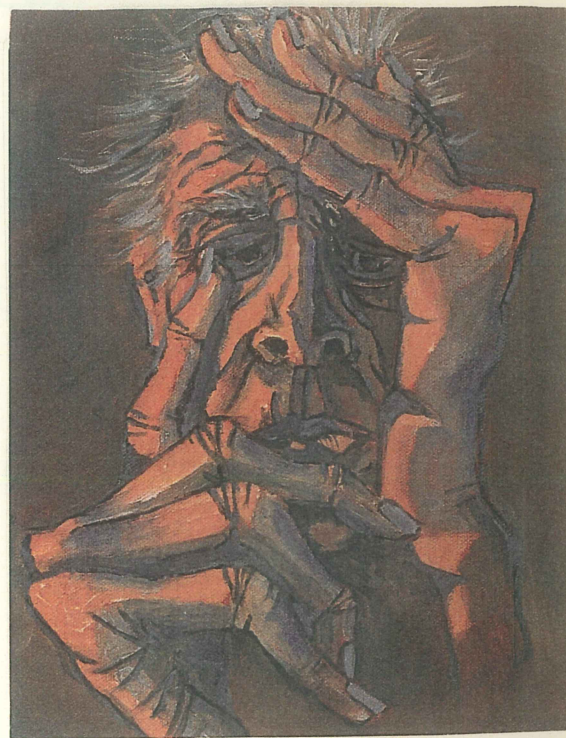


This booklet is an assemblage of sketches and text from several of my travel sketchbooks, a consequence of our annual winter migration to the Central Baja. Cañon de Santa Teresa is only one of the hidden gems of this region - many more remote and amazing habitations and cave art are concealed by canyons and crags in the San Ignacio / Mulage area.

Author

- Many thanks to our friends who made this expedition possible - especially Manuel Pilar who recently suffered serious injuries in a bicycle accident. We wish him a speedy recovery.
- any spelling or grammar errors are intentional and intended for those who take pleasure in finding mistakes.

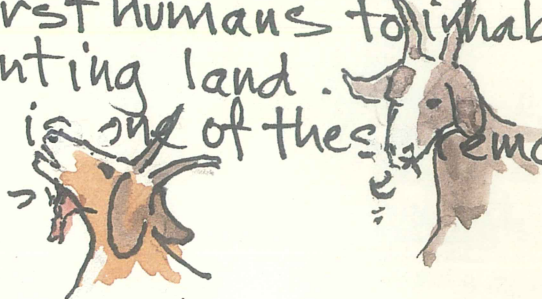
"Bad Spellers Untie"



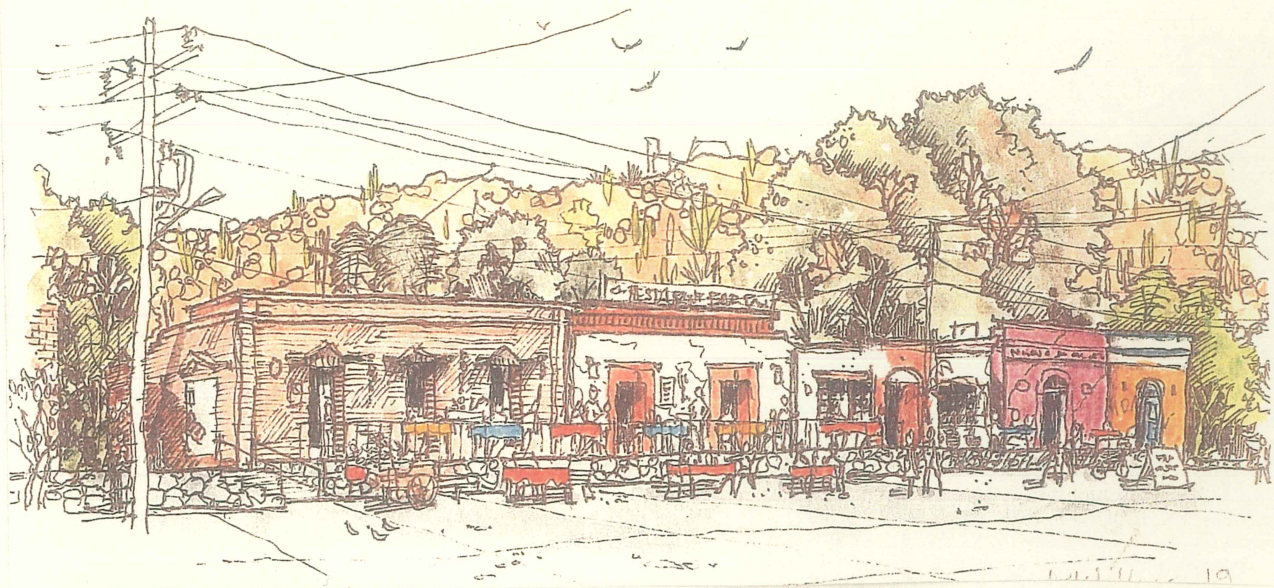


on a map, Baja California appears a freak appendage - a 2000 km. long narrow peninsula - the Sea of Cortez on the east side and the Pacific Ocean on the west. Viewed from the spine you would expect to see both bodies of water - but cartography can be deceiving. The peninsulas high sierra, deep canyons, extreme deserts and rugged coastlines hide countless habitations and warrens of ancients - the first humans to inhabit this mysterious and enchanting land.

- The Cañon de Santa Teresa is one of these remote and rarely visited gems.



4. In Feb. 2020 my wife Eileen and I booked a three day by mole expedition to the remote Cañon de Santa Teresa. Our bueno amigo Manuel Pilar of Los Petates Campo in San Ignacio, Baja Sud. arranged our adventure.



San Ignacio is a small inland town about half way down the Baja peninsula and we annually spend several weeks at the Campo. The town features a beautiful village plaza which is anchored by the San Ignacio Mission (1728). The densely treed plaza is surrounded by a number of unique shops and restaurants including our favorite bar and cantina - Rancho Grande



5.
Los Petates Campo is situated on a km. long Laguna - a fresh water oasis. This palm tree shaded sanctuary is a wonderful respite from the surrounding harsh desert. The water is fresh

Jan. 21 - Los Petates



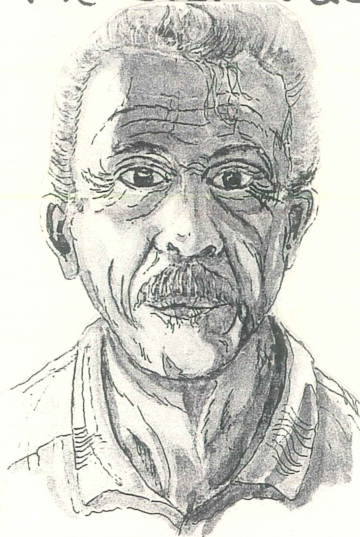
The pavement abruptly terminates at a very rough - single lane dirt trail - the last five km. into the village I walked ahead of our vehicle as walking that road is quicker than driving.

and cool, the birds are abundant and the camping sites enjoy large palm frond palapas. Our host, Manuel and his family have become close friends and we've spent many warm evenings around wine, dinners and campfires.



Our adventure begins with Manuel driving Eileen and I to San Francisco de la Sierra - a mountain enclave of about thirty families.

Leaving San Ignacio we travel about two hours west on Hwy 1 - then traveling north we ascend onto a mesa or ridge which snakes its way deep into the Sierra de San Francisco.

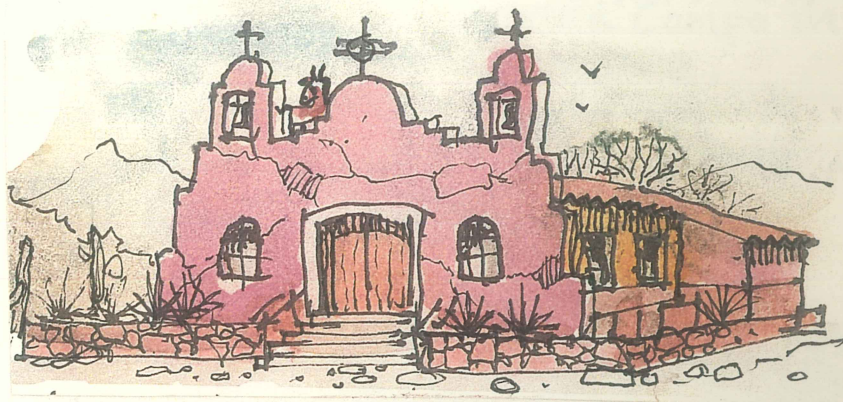


Manuel Pilar Arce
"Pilario"

Our great friend and host at Los Petates.

b.

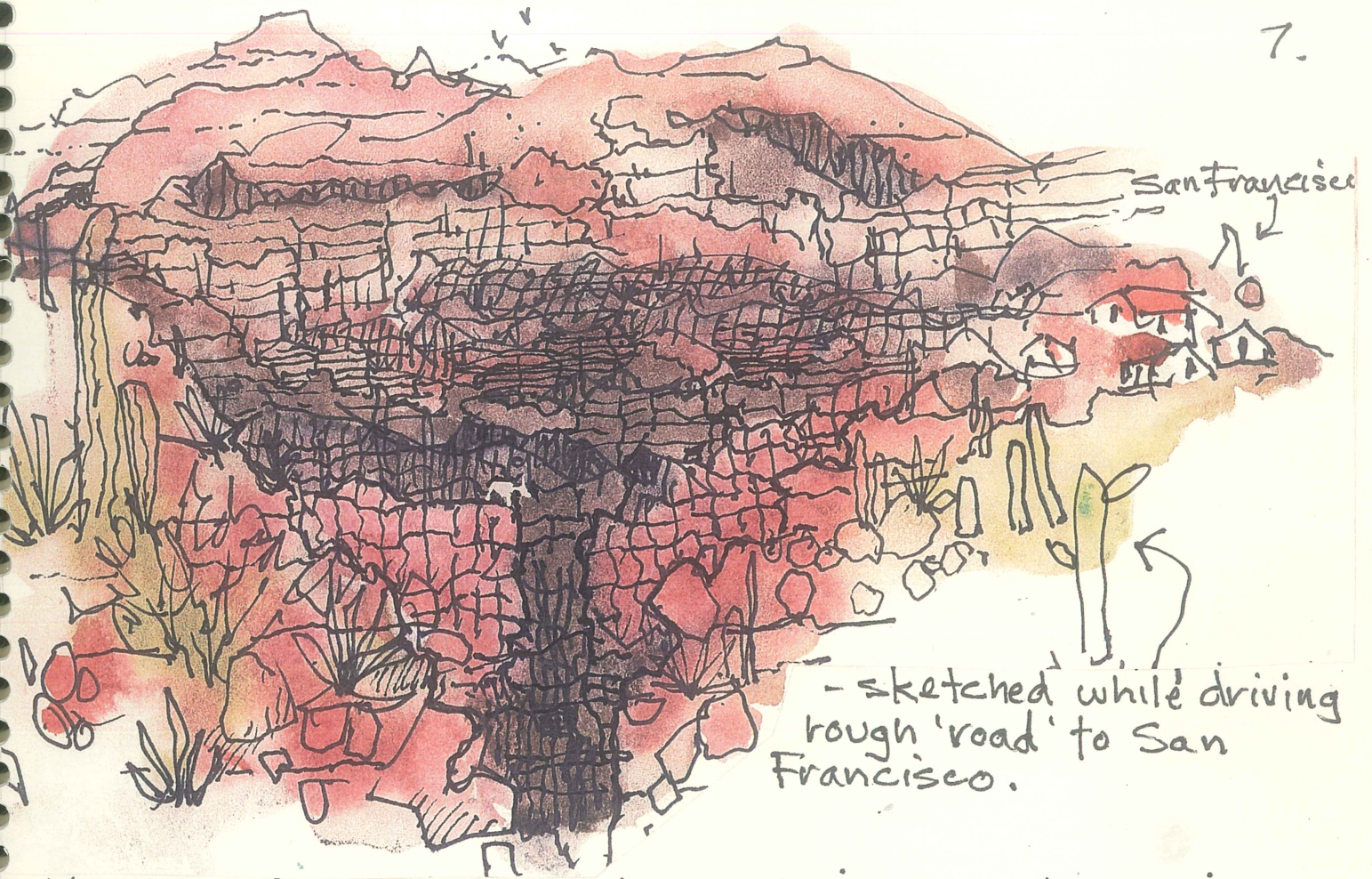
The 1500 mtr. Cerralastera with its sugarloaf shaped shoulder forms a spectacular backdrop to the hanging valley on which multi-colored casitas, stone enclosures,



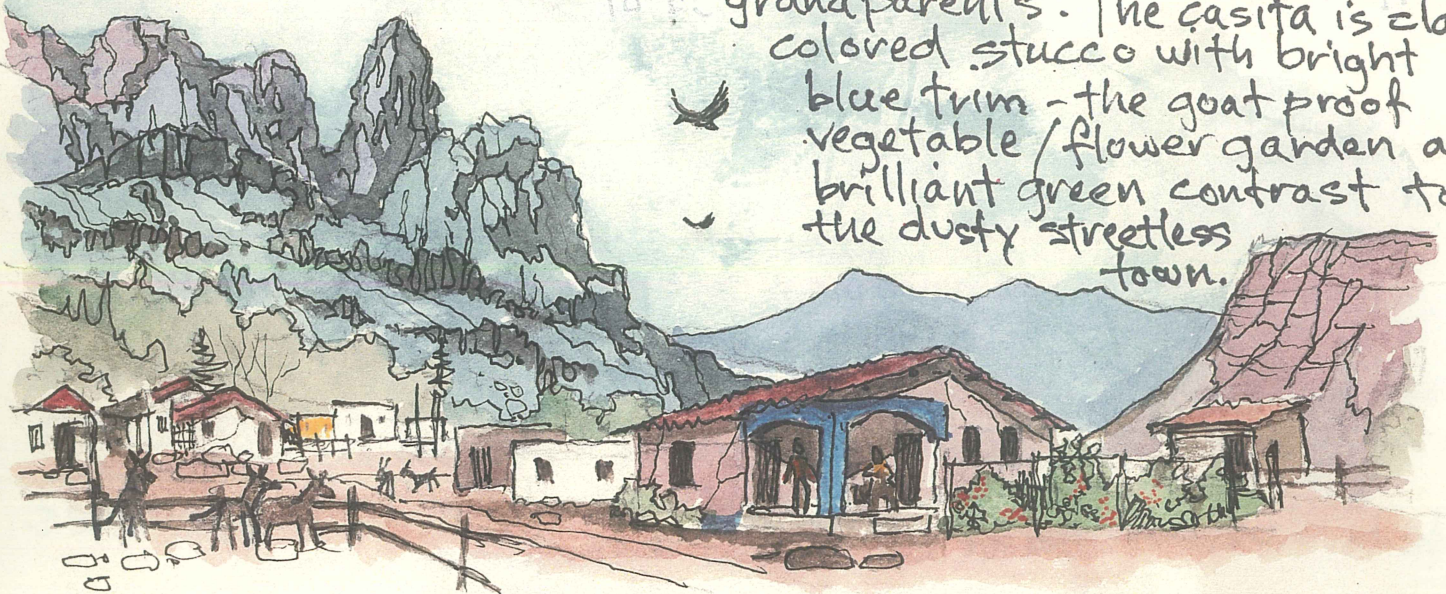
green gardens and rustic sheds are clustered and scattered. Burros and mules peer lazily over split rail fences while goats and dogs roam unheeded through the red earth and rutted common. A pink, blue and orange mission enhances this enchanting and magical mountain Puebla.



- The local population seems quite self-sufficient and I was surprised to see a significant proportion of young people. We noted lush vegetable gardens secured with high fences, but their main livelihood appears to be raising goats and making cheese. They're also well known for their leatherwork, especially their beautiful Zapatos.
- There is an elementary school for the youth but high school students must travel to a larger centre - high school education is mandatory and most teens are in boarding situations during the school semesters
- There's very little english spoken in these remote villages but with my meagre spanish and sign language, I can usually communicate the essentials



We arrive to a seemingly deserted village and we locate our guide by randomly driving around casitas, garden enclosures, barking yellow dogs, squawking chickens - eventually encountering an old vaquero who points in the direction of a small cluster of buildings. Our guide's name is Jose Jesus Arce and he lives with his very pretty esposa, Rosia and two small girls and their lovely grandparents. The casita is clay colored stucco with bright blue trim - the goat proof vegetable/flower garden a brilliant green contrast to the dusty streetless town.

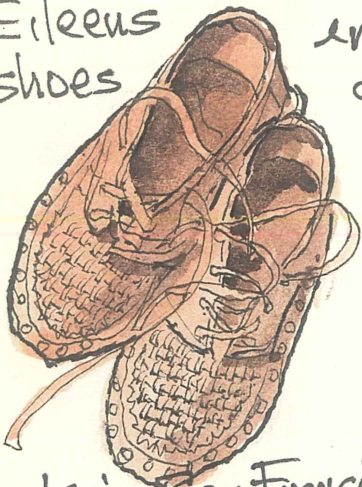


3. Jose certainly looks the part of a Mexican Vaquero - western shirt, faded jeans, black stetson and locally handcrafted gaiters and boots. The soft cowhide ankle height botas are crafted in San Francisco with soles salvaged from old tires. He adds a pair of chaps, necessary for riding off the trail when the burros stray - which they often will.



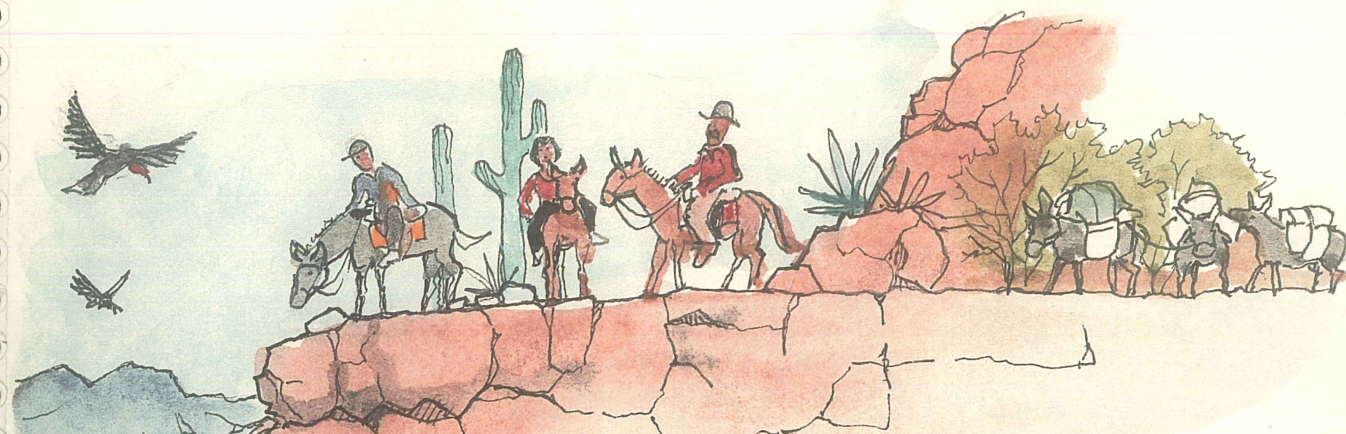
Jose lashes our gear onto three sleepy burros and with no loss in translation and a heave and a ho boosts us onto our handsomely saddled mules. With a "burro ho" he sends the burros down the trail - then with a "mula ha" a wave and adios to Rosia, we're bouncing along the cactus and mesquite shrouded sendero. I immediately lose my ball cap to a mesquite which Jose deftly retrieves. About 30 minutes of riding takes us past a miniature pink mission and a very dilapidated cemetery. A vulture

Eileens shoes



made in San Francisco

scavenged carcass of a burro(?) lies at the entrance to this eerie place - a little further down the trail we reach the tiny enclave of Guadalupe. A couple of old vaqueros wave to us from the shade of a palapa and with a "hola" and a "feliz viaje" we continue down the dusty trail. We ride through a surprisingly green landscape - a "green desert" flourishing with many varieties of cacti, shirt grabbing thorny bushes and of course mesquite.



We're observed by several herds of curious goats and as we ascend a small rise - there it is - the yawning chasm of Santa Teresa Cañon.

After about an hour's ride we're already hurting so Jose helps us dismount. We take advantage of this photo-op, and as we stare down into this incredible void we hear in the distance a faint tinkling of bells, then barely visible far down the winding trail another pack train is slowly working its way up the steep grade. We assume the narrow pathway only allows for one mule width and our assumption proves correct. Two vaqueros, four clients with their rides finally reach the canyon rim as Jose pushes our burros down into the canyon followed by Eileen, myself and Jose as sweep.

The next three hours are an endurance challenge for the novice rider. The route in some places is more like a chute of loose stones than a trail and in some locations transitions to steep solid smooth rock. The real difficult obstacles are the vertical steps of about half a metre - we lean back as far as we can at the same time focusing on staying on our mules. You soon forget that your butt hurts and your legs are shakey. The mid-afternoon sun adds much 'heat' to the sufferance - "Why are we doing this!"

10 A mula negotiates a switchback by suspending his head over the edge of the canyon and then turns with his feet as the trail reverses - somewhat disconcerting if your eyes are open. I'm told several clients have turned back at the canyon rim as it certainly is a recipe for anxiety. Knowing that the mules have travelled the route countless times, the apparent danger and very real pain - like chile on an enchilada - (if you pardon my analogy) enhances the flavor of the adventure



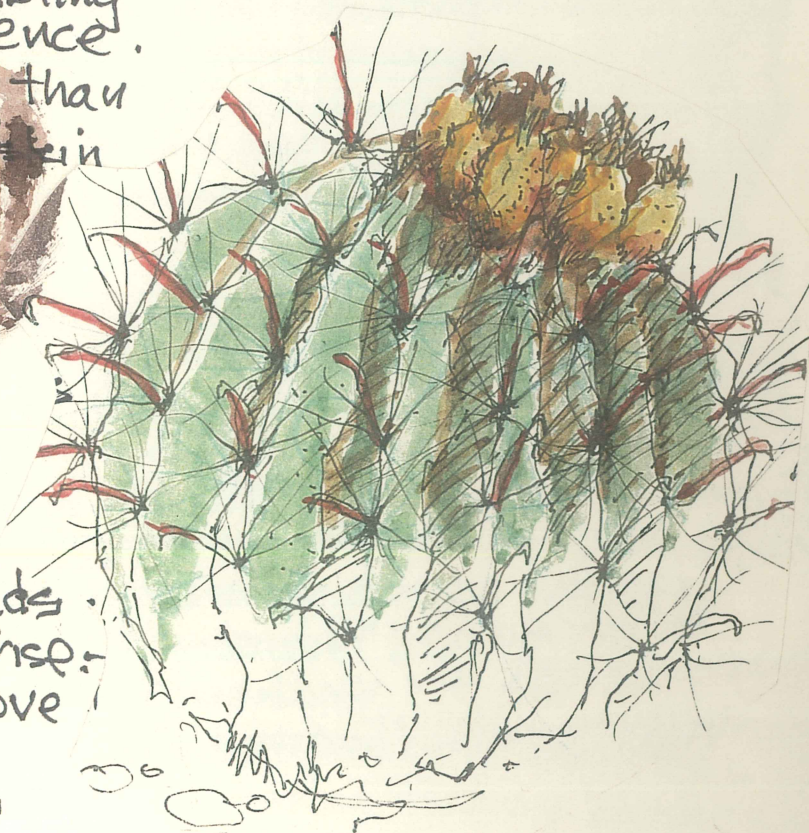
Oh - and the view as we descend is stupendous and overwhelming - with vultures and hawks flying far below we feel like we're being drawn down into the scenery.

We finally arrive at base camp intact but unable to dismount without a leg boost from Jose -

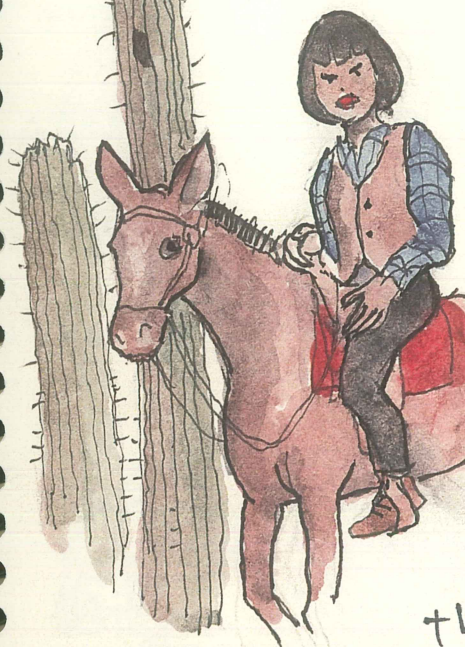
a humbling experience.

Eileen fared much better than I - maybe it was the sheepskin pad on her saddle.

While Jose relieved the animals of their burdens we set up camp. The campsite is a flat sandy area with a large palapa and to our amazement, gravity-fed flush toilets. A makeshift fence surrounds the area and another surprise: a randomly treed orange grove with pomegranate bushes interspaced among palms, mesquite and cactus.



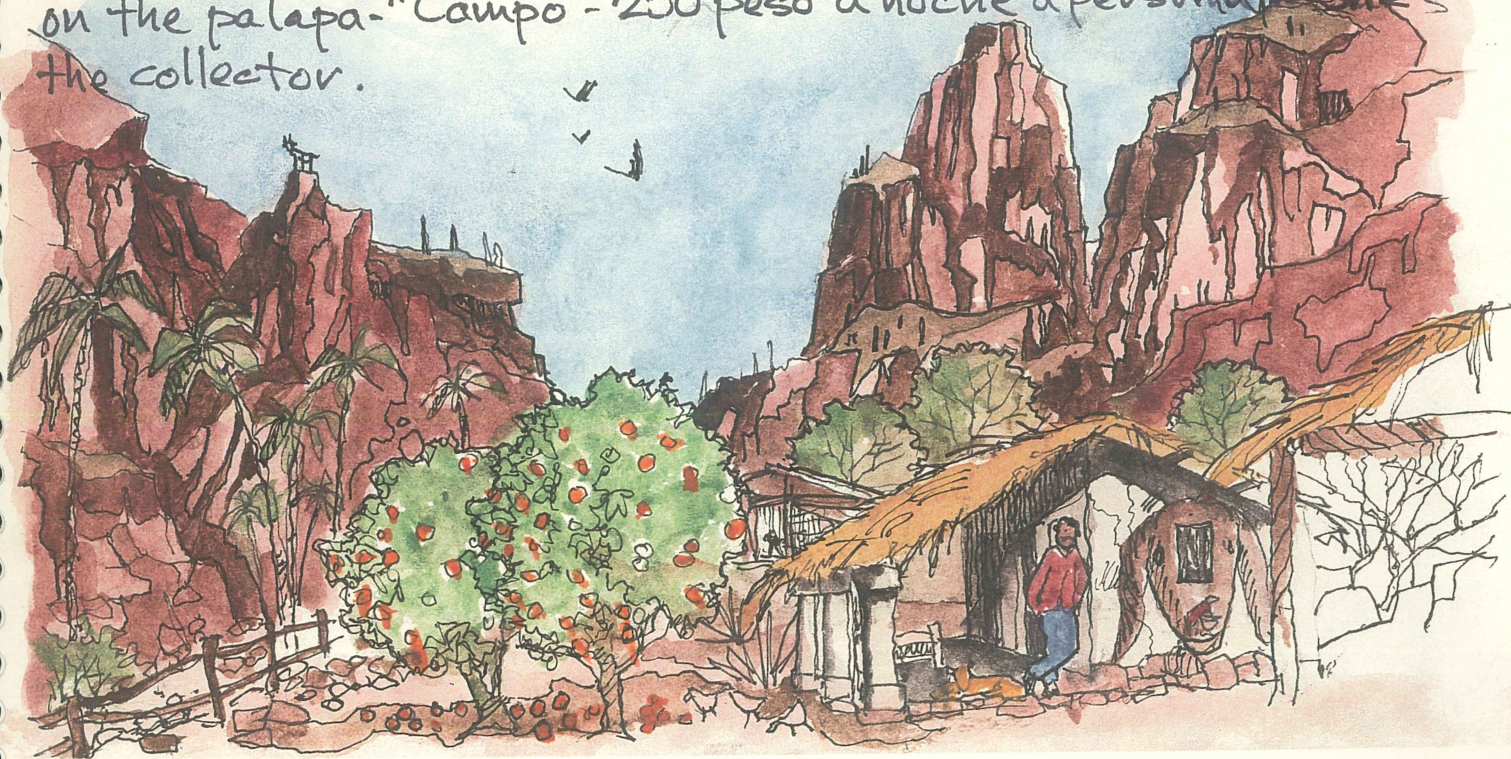
the intrepid
Eileen



It's mid afternoon of our first day, 11. the sun is hot and after we've organized our camp I try for a quick siesta. Some bones and an adrenaline spike do not contribute to sleeping so we cook our dinner of fried spam with tortillas and canned something or other for dessert.

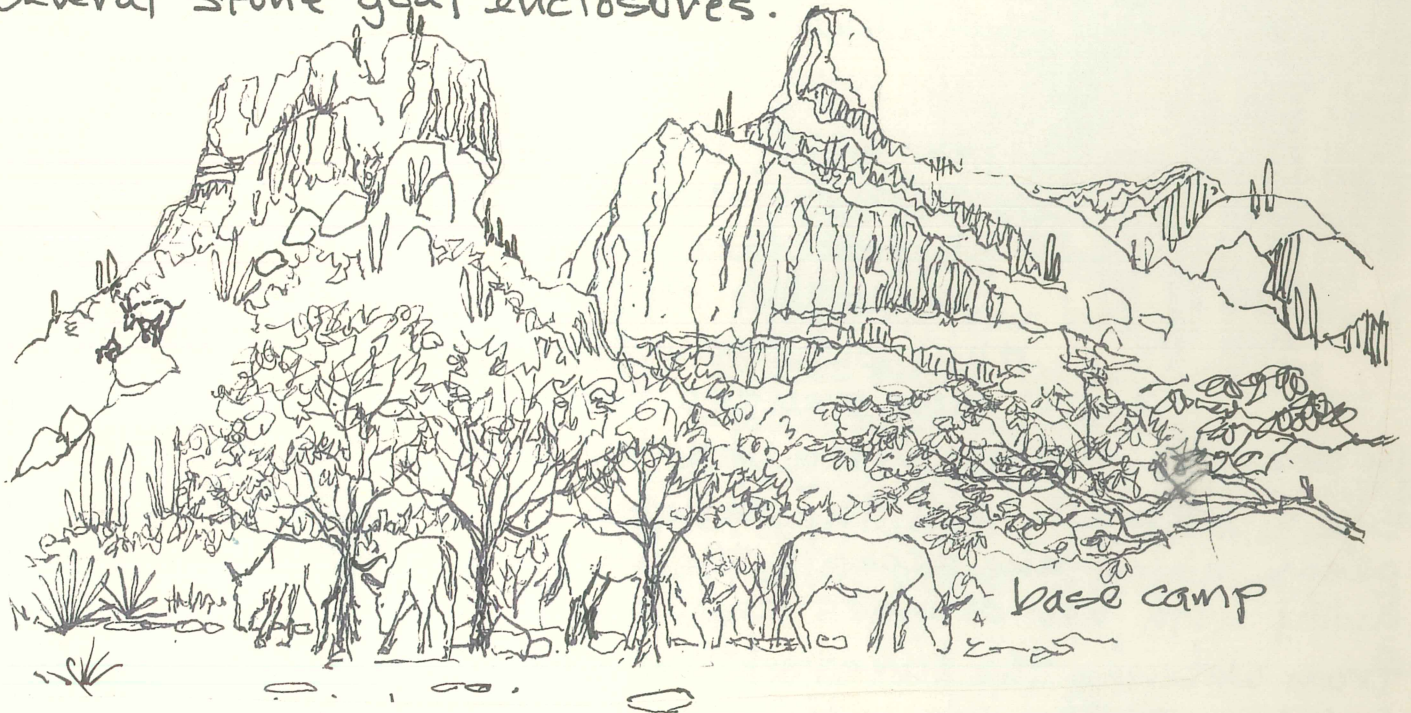
As we're finishing our humble meal - to our amazement an old lady walks into our camp followed by two grey burros. She's obviously of advanced age, her not brown face a maze of wrinkles, her eyes like shiny black beads, she's very thin but appears very fit. She's carrying

4 or 5 ripe oranges in her hands. She's mumbling in Spanish and gesturing with her hands and we assume she's trying to sell the oranges. Eileen hands her some pesos which she accepts then with a confused look walks away with her oranges and her burros. When Jose returns from watering the livestock, in my broken Spanish I explain to him our experience. He points to a small, primitive sign on the palapa - "Campo - 250 peso a noche a persona" she's the collector.



12.

The woman's name is Margarita and she lives with her nephew (or grandson) Jaun at the south end of the canyon about half a kilometer through the orange grove and along the river bed. On my subsequent trip in 2022 I visited her casa on the 100 yr old Rancho Santa Teresa - the rancho compound consisting of a small casita, several outbuildings, a roofed barn / pen and several stone goat enclosures.



They make goat cheese at the rancho - their goats inhabit the hostile crags and cliffs in the surrounding canyons. It's still a mystery to me how they locate their scattered herds and then milk them - Jaun the herdsman tries to explain this to me and I just nod as if I understand. Maybe Jaun has that sixth sense (and of course past experience) he must intuit where each group of goats usually are and where they should be at milking time. Most animals have internal clocks or senses but we as Homo sapiens ~~have~~ within a few generations (and possibly as we've become self aware and brain cluttered) have lost that intuitive sense.

Enough digression!



13.

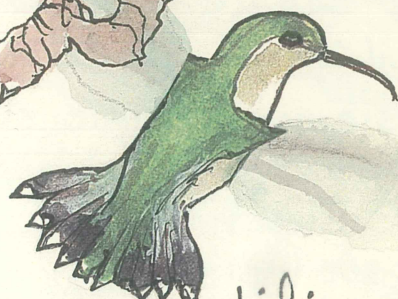
Jaun - a man in his 30's seems very content living isolated at the bottom of the canyon. His occasional rides up that primitive trail to market his cheese and oranges may be his only contact with civilization. Margarita apparently only leaves the rancho when she needs to see her doctor. Jaun transports a few supplies for desperate tourists - we were desperate for a beer - I bought his last two Tecate's for 400 p.ea. (\$2)

It seems that people like Jaun and Margarita or the inhabitants of small, isolated villages like San Francisco de la Sierra consciously avoid being trapped in "progressive" society and choose to live simple, uncomplicated lives. Rumor has it that three of Margarita's brothers live in a cave - somewhere in the Sierra San Francisco. They raise goats for their own sustenance and live off the land. They occasionally emerge in some remote village to trade for basic essentials (and the latest N.Y. Times?).

Eileen and I hiked down the canyon after dinner and almost everywhere along the trail we find shards and knappings - leavings of the ancients. I found several flakes of obsidian, the source of which would have been volcano sites at Tres Virgenes many kms to the south-east.

There are birds everywhere - cardinals, orioles, gila woodpeckers, hummingbirds, flycatchers - a birders paradise!

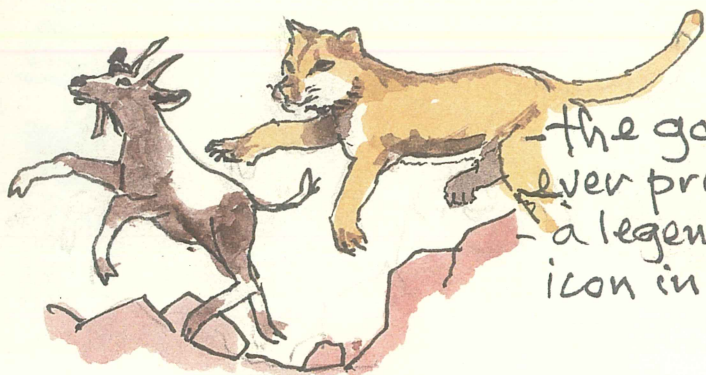




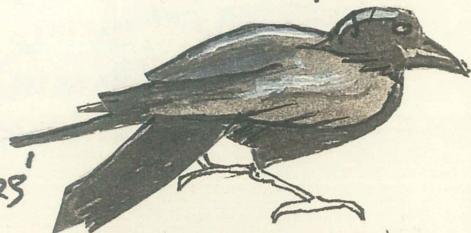
- the silence of the canyon amplifies the sounds and songs of the birds - this and our solitude in the vast amphitheater heightens our awareness - almost to a state of sensory overload.



- The nights are alive with sounds including the yapping of Coyotes, croaking of frogs, and the buzz of Crickets. The most feared predator in the canyon is the Puma and a real factor in respect to domestic goat mortality.



- the garrulous and ever present raven - a legendary, mystical icon in ancient peoples' history



-the most populous glider in the 15.
canyon is the Turkey Vulture.

This opportunistic scavenger
can be seen by the
dozens - floating in
circles - patiently
waiting their
turn at
leftovers

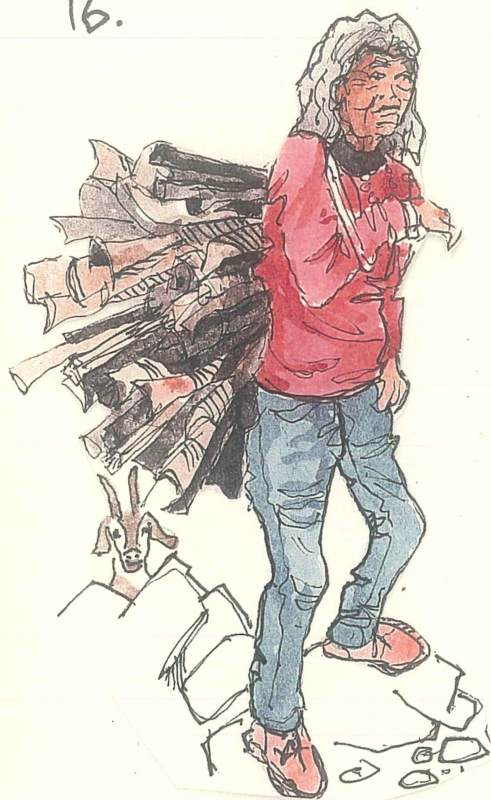


The canyon's updrafts and wind currents are
a wonderful environment for the raptors - the
hawks, owls and eagles - Mexico's national
bird is the Golden Eagle.

One afternoon we spotted a pair of Crested
Caracara. In Mexico this raptor is
called "Real Eagle" (if I understood
the translation correctly). This bird
is really a falcon but ask any
citizen of Baja - they will
claim the Caracara as their
national bird.



16.

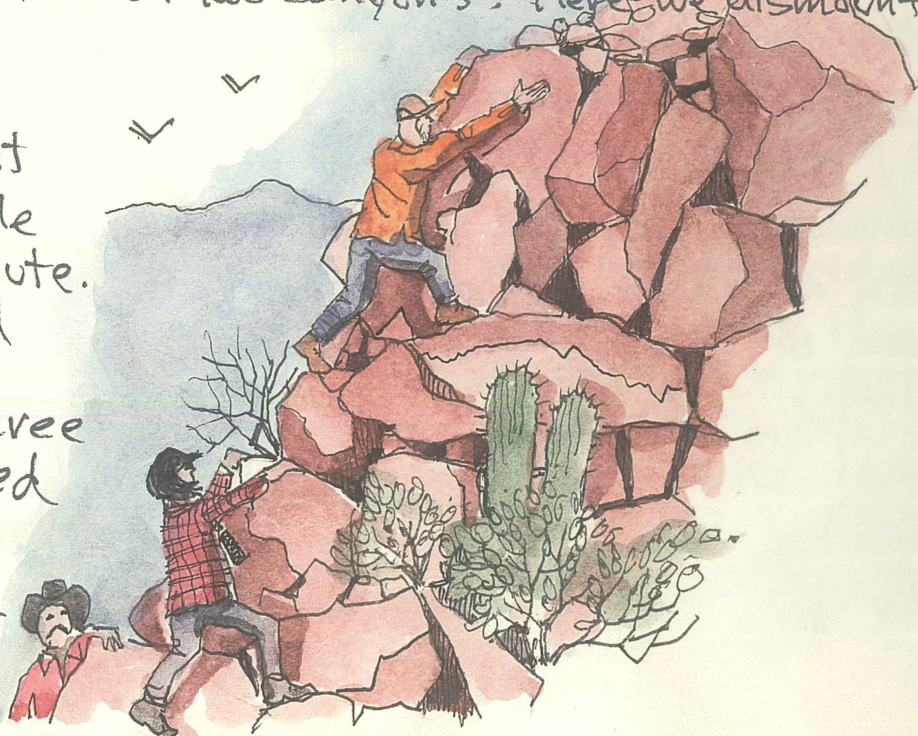


The path down river that Eileen and I followed that first evening is shrouded in vegetation. As we walked down the trail and around a bend we once again encountered Margarita. On her back in a sling she was carrying a huge load of firewood. The oranges and the burro's were no longer with her and we engaged in a long conversation with her - either of us understanding anything.

Back in camp Javn (the grandson) had joined Jose but we were too tired to try and navigate a conversation so we tented down. We endured an uncomfortable night as we had neglected to bring mattresses

and woke up still stiff and sore. We ate a minimal breakfast - then back on our molas for a ride down the canyon. We rode about one and a half hours through spectacular scenery - mostly riding in the very rough boulder strewn riverbed. Boulders the size of houses towered over us with no identifiable trail visible through the rocks and logs. The mules knew the route and eventually we arrived at the intersection of two canyons. Here we dismounted and followed

Jose up a steep path to an almost vertical unstable looking rock chute. We climbed and scrambled on boulders and scree until we reached a semi-terrace along which we hiked for about one half hour.



The sky was clear and the wind calm - my energy was low but we arrived at a massive overhang.

blackened ceilings evidenced the campfires of the ancient peoples. What a setting and what a view.

The river far below, the canyon walls, the distant plateau - a mysterious and enchanting place - and to imagine that people actually lived here!

We walked another 20 m. along the same strata - and there it was! A huge cavern that spans approximately 100 m. along the cliff face - the smooth sandstone walls covered in ochre, charcoal and chalk paintings.

Predominant are people side by side with arms raised as if herding the animals into an ambush - deer and bighorn sheep are depicted life size or larger, some with spears through them. Vultures or ravens float above

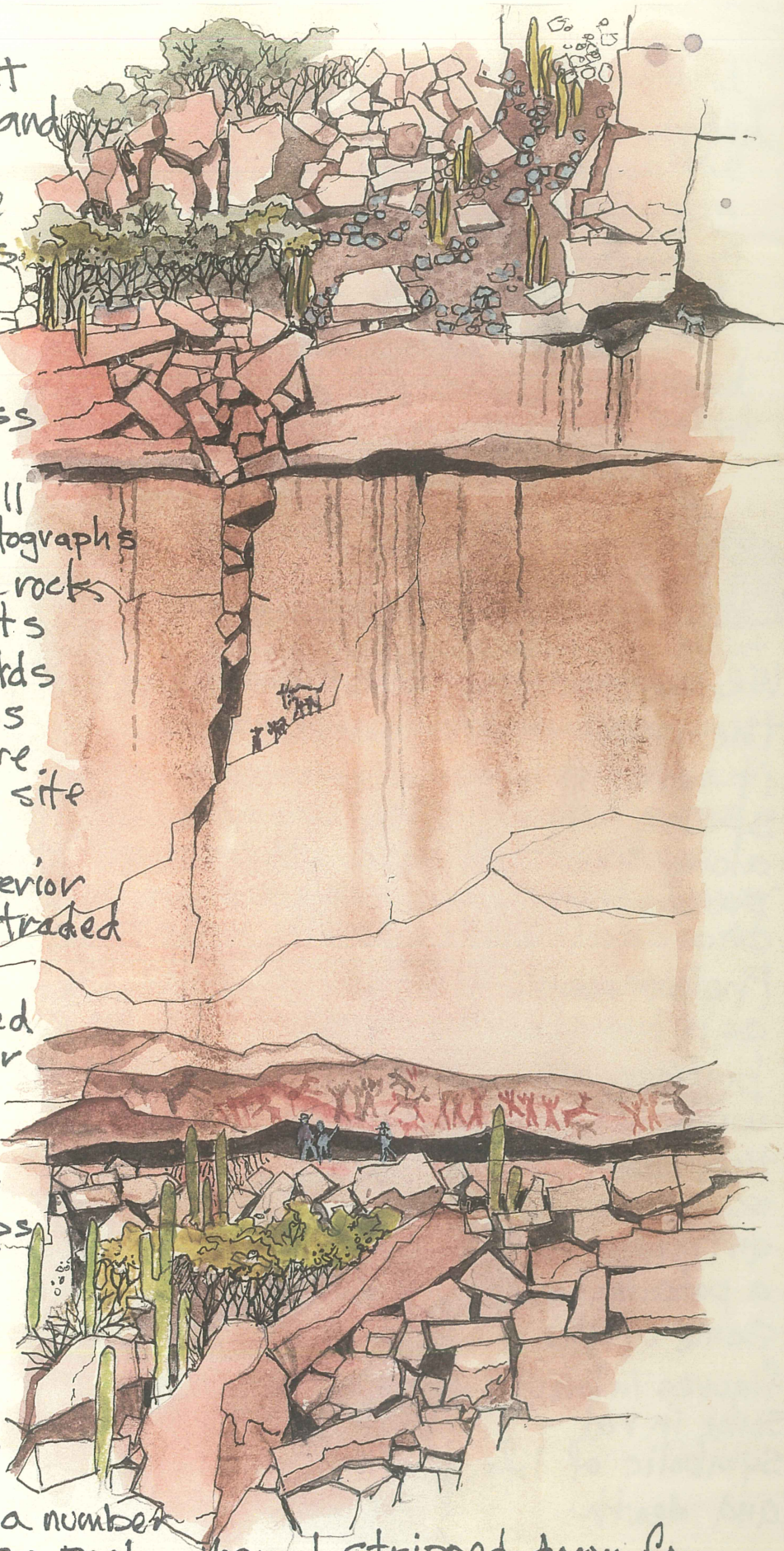
this chaotic scene as if anticipating a potential meal. Some of the figures in black, some in red - symbolic of life and death.



18.

We accessed the next cave by backtracking and scrambling down that formidable chute where an obscure trail leads us to an even larger and more spectacular site. The cave spans more than 200m across the canyon face with paintings along its full length. Many of the pictographs are painted high on the rock walls where the ancients would have built scaffolds to reach these precarious heights. The graphics are similar to the previous site but a breaching whale suggests that these interior peoples travelled and traded with coastal tribes.

From here we descended back down to the river bed where we relieved our parched throats at a cold, fresh water spring. The water seeps out of a crack in the canyon wall and Jose fashioned a spout out of some reeds so we could refill our water bottles. The river exposes from under the boulders in a number of clear, emerald green pools where I stripped down for a very cold, refreshing swim.





It was mid afternoon and we had time to visit one more site - a cave on the opposite side of the canyon. We rode our mules a short distance up the canyon wall - then hiked along a cliff to another amazing cavern and once again the cave art was mind blowing. These paintings are over 10,000 years old - a concept in time that is truly hard to comprehend.

A one and a half hour ride back to camp and we're done, wasted, cooked - a quick dinner of whatever and into the tent. The sun disappears early in the deep canyon and it reflects golden off the sheer rock walls - but we've passed out in our sleeping bags.

In the morning we wake up to the cooing of doves.

A leisurely breakfast of bacon and eggs is embraced enthusiastically by José who of course contributes tortillas.

We break camp - José sends the burros up the trail - we mount our mules and head for the canyon rim.

The ride up the trail is much more comfortable - we lean forward - the saddle horn within easy grasp and we can actually relax a little - something we should have learned on our ride down. We reach the rim in one and a half hours - much quicker than our descent.

Desert Bighorn



20.

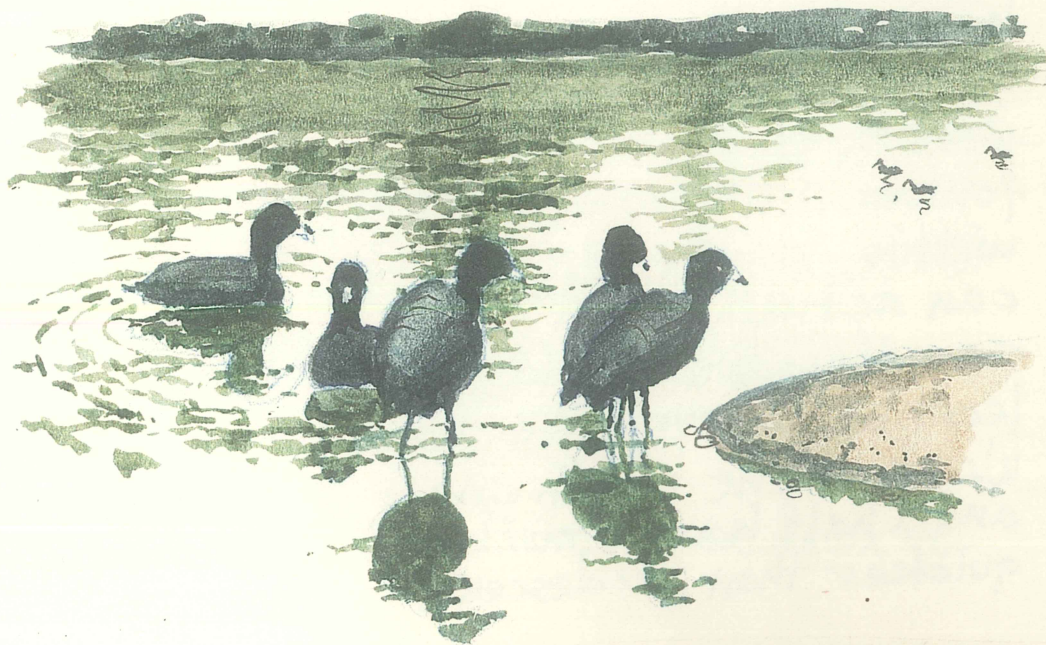


We're back in San Francisco de la Sierra early afternoon - we're tired, dusty and saddle sore but extremely happy to have experienced and survived an amazing adventure. As we unpacked our gear Eileen offered Jose our cooking utensils which he enthusiastically accepted. She then gave him practically everything but the kitchen sink. Her down jacket had been tugged and snagged by cacti and mesquite and was moulting feathers - this she also gave to him.

Back in San Ignacio I immediately dove into the laguna - a perfect dirt and dust remover. Then a nap in my soft camper bed and finished the day with a hamburguesa and cerveza (or two) at Rancho Grande.



Goats at the
Laguna



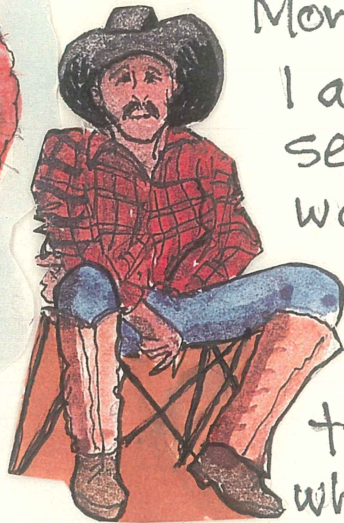
Epilogue

In Feb 2022 our intrepid Vaquero Jose with my bueno amigo Alejandro Morillo re-visited the canyon. I assumed that I'd be better seasoned and that the ride would be easier on my old bones. I wasn't and it wasn't!

When we once again ascended to the canyon rim I wondered whether I had another Santa Teresa expedition in my 75 yr. old body. I think I do - possibly with my grandchildren.

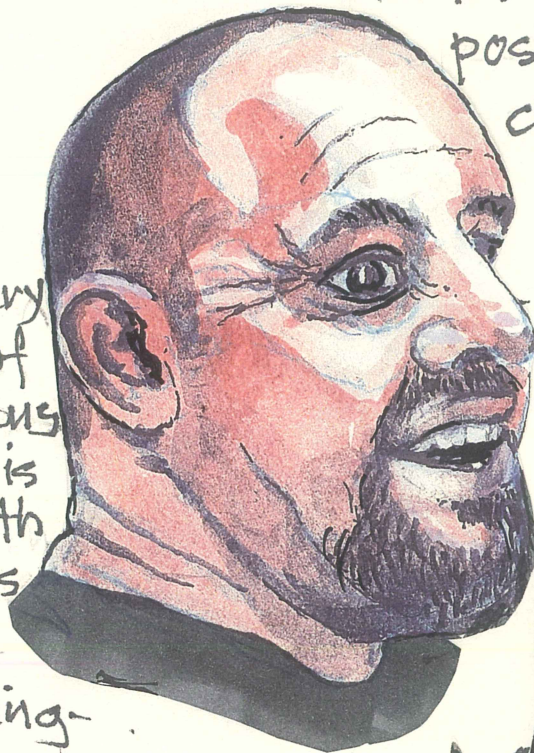


the bonita Rosia



Jose Jesus Arce

- the physical challenges, the incredible scenery
- the mysteries of ancient habitations and sharing this experience with others, chronicles the adventure into the amazing and mysterious



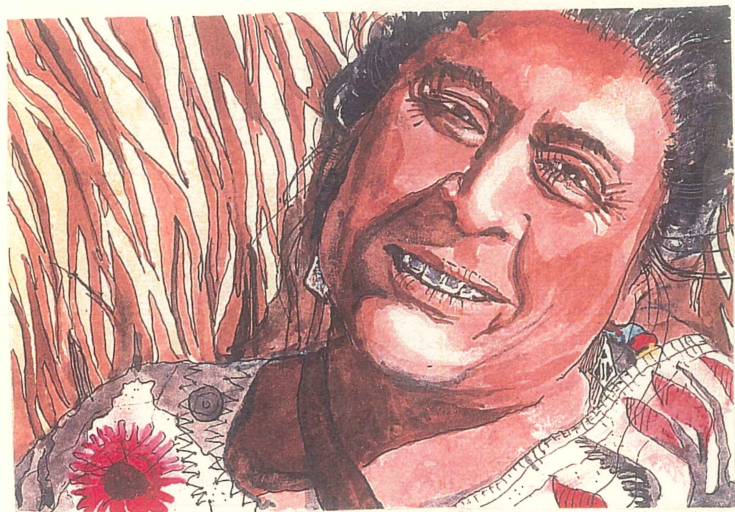
"Cano"

Cañon de Santa Teresa

- our great friends Alejandro and Diana

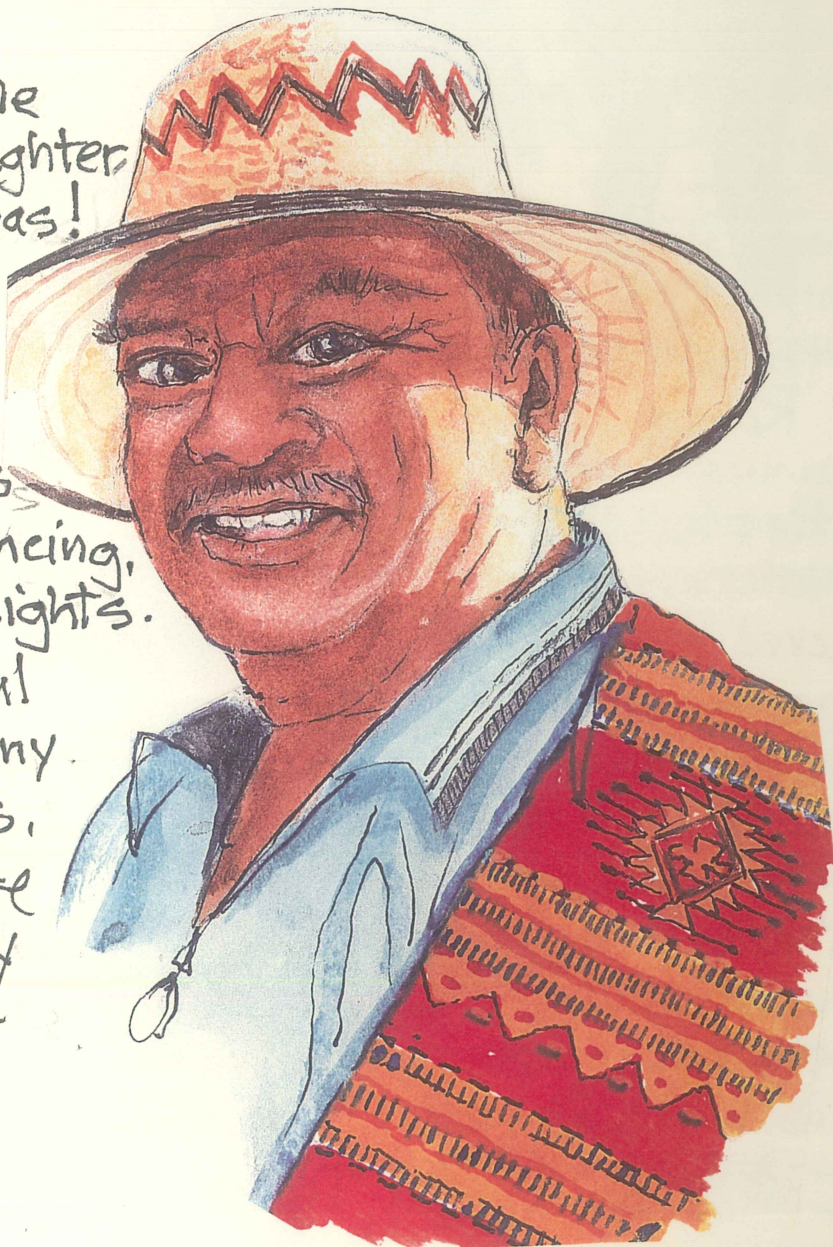


Baja Friends



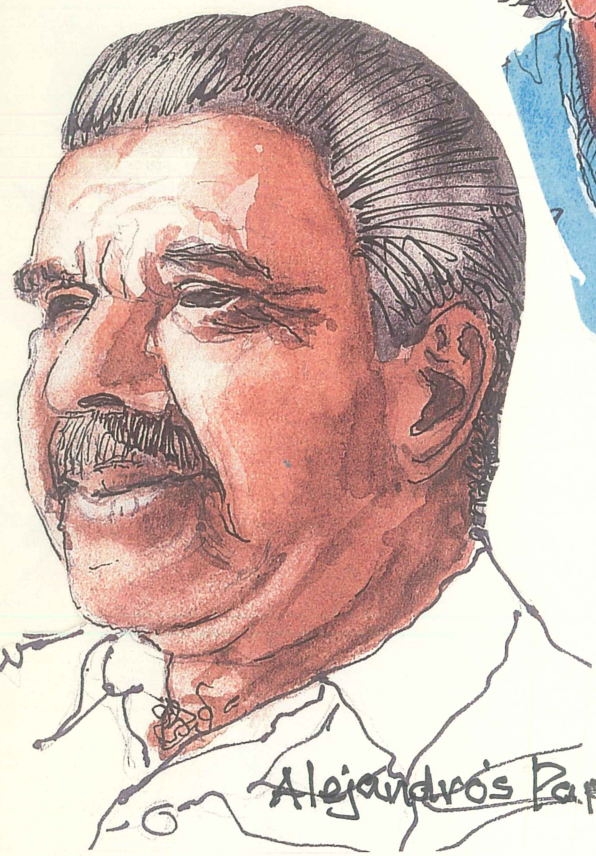
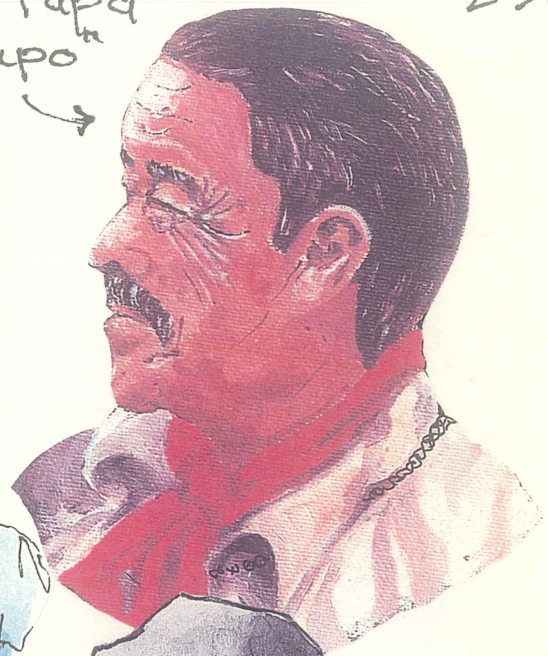
Isabel and Miguel Garcia
 - weavers from Mitla,
 Oaxaca
 - We met them on the
 beach at Santispac
 and in Oct. 2022 we
 visited them in Mitla.

- the occasion was the wedding of their daughter and what a party it was! Our time there also co-insided with the dias de muertos celebrations - muchos mezcal y comer, dancing, mariachi and late nights.
- Oaxaca is a beautiful part of Mexico - many pre-columbian ruins, great food, temperate weather and friendly hospitable Zapotec people.



Dianas Papa
"Chapo"

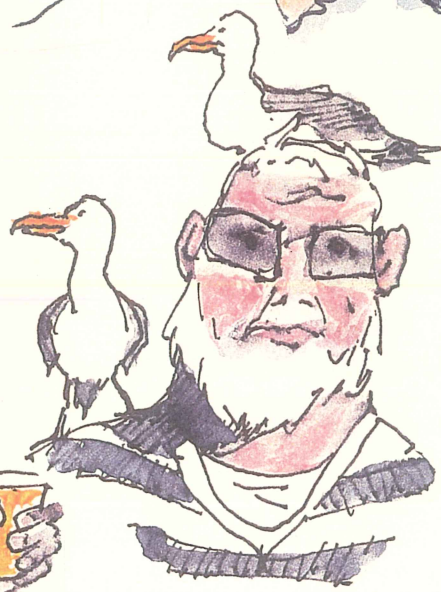
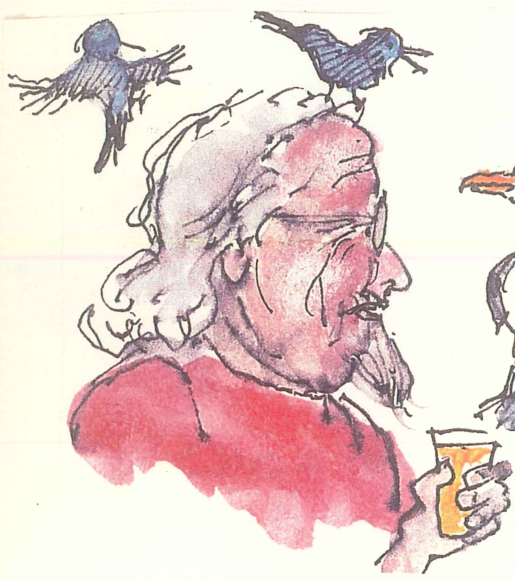
Ceaser - one of
the many La Bocana
cousins



Alejandro's Papa



- a La Bocana
fisherman.



Reed and Ken
- snowbird gringos

Luli the fish seller -
 - most mornings at
 Santispac beach Luli
 arrives with last
 night catch - camerones,
 halibut, snapper etc.



Jesus Higuera - Mulage
 - get my massage at her
 healing centre - she
 attacks every muscle
 and knot and finishes
 with a meditation - 45
 minutes of WOW that
 feels good!





Jaun - our what can I do for you
today guy.



Chi Cho - water supplier
and socializer



- guapo Carlos at
Anrias Bar-Cantina
Santispac beach

26.



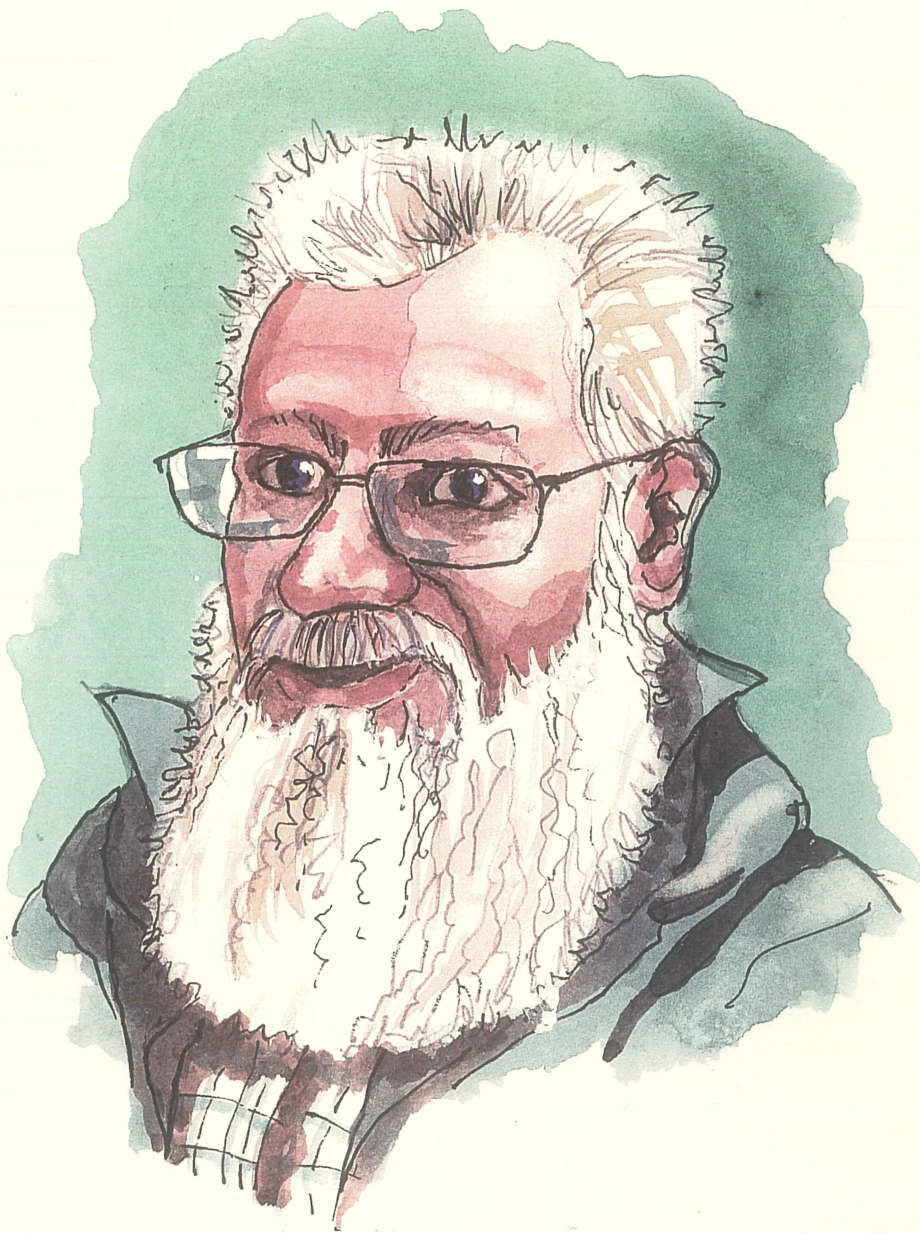
Los Petates friends



The Blacks at Santispac beach



Palape builders Santispac



Ken Blunden - my website designer
and Domain navigator - very patient
with techless and feckless client
- and still friends.