In American culture afterlife homage for the departed is usually reserved for places of worship and the cemetery. The latter—often tucked away behind fences, walls, and tall shrubs—are visited by the sad, the grieving, and the solemn. However, as I traveled along Baja’s principal southerly route the numerous roadside crosses, shrines, and monuments fascinated me. I found Baja’s last shrine when I reached the peninsula’s most southern tip, where the mountains tumble with majestic splendor into the sea.

Mexico Highway 1, also called the Carretera Transpeninsular, or the Baja Transpeninsular Highway, stretches for approximately 1,050 miles from Tijuana to the tip of Baja California at Cabo San Lucas. This roadway is narrow compared to highways in the United States and road shoulders are nonexistent along many stretches. Above all, the region’s travel books recommend in bold type, do not drive at night. The road is unlit and animals congregating on the road after sunset pose an ever-present danger.
I have often heard that livestock can be found on Mexican highways after nightfall. Later, I learned that after sunset many animals seek asphalt roads because the pavement radiates the desert heat that has been absorbed during the day. Animals are on the road during the night to stay warm!
Along the roadway I saw several dead animals that had been killed by vehicles. These collisions often occur at a high rate of speed and end tragically for both the animal and driver. Without the benefit of a road shoulder, vehicles often careen off the highway, frequently with terrible results.

At this accident site a horse apparently was standing in the middle of the highway before it was struck. You can see the skid marks detailing the point of impact and the vehicle’s route of travel. Fortunately, there was a road shoulder.
Roadside memorials are called “descansos,” which means “resting place” in Spanish. Some believe that the practice of erecting these memorials (also referred to as “crucitas” or “memorias”) may have its origins in Mexico. The dictionary defines “descanso” as a roadside marker or memorial to a victim of an automobile accident. But not all descansos are along highways; the practice also memorializes the place where the soul left the body.
This descanso was erected with rocks from the surrounding area. Some researchers believe this practice comes from a Spanish tradition of placing stones where pallbearers rested between the church and the cemetery. Later the stones became crosses. An interesting aspect of descansos along Baja’s peninsular route is that remnants of the accident’s wreckage are sometimes left alongside (or included in) the descanso. Notice the car hood to the right of the stone memorial. More wreckage was strewn about the area, which seemed to be a very old site.
This descanso was created using the remnants of the “Green Angel” truck in which the driver met his untimely, violent end. Green Angels patrol Mexican highways to help motorists needing mechanical assistance, towing, adjustment or changing of tires, travel information, first aid, and other assistance. Sometimes, even these roadwise angels of mercy are reminded that no dispensation is offered to the inattentive or careless traveler.
Although there are many straight and level stretches along the Baja route, the roadway also follows the dictates of the mountainous terrain. Consequently, there are many 90 degree and severe S-turns on Mexico Highway 1. At almost every one of these treacherous areas is a descanso.
This descanso rests at the bottom of a downhill, 90 degree curve. Notice the rock barrier erected to prevent vehicles from hurtling off the road. The brown object behind the crosses is a car door, most likely from the vehicle involved in the fatality.
Beyond this S-turn are two descansos. The photograph on the right depicts a simple wooden cross and a pile of stones to mark one spot. Note the side view mirror (no doubt a remnant of the wreck) that has been left on the stones.
Remnants of wreckage of a fatal accident are located behind shrine and strewn around the area—testimony to the sudden and violent departure of the soul from the body. In the right-hand photo, note the wreath lying atop the wreckage.
Driving defensively is required in Mexico, according to the country’s AAA tour book. “Always be alert to road conditions and other motorists. Bus, truck, and other drivers who are familiar with local routes will drive faster and negotiate maneuvers more boldly than tourists.” Driving in Mexico requires patience and intuition, and foreign drivers often find that the Mexican driving culture is far more complicated than in their own home country. Local drivers tend to weave in and out of lanes as they please, often without the use of turn signals; they also frequently ignore red lights or drive the wrong way on one-way streets. And so on. This photo shows a van passing a truck on a curve with a small cliff to the left as both vehicles head downhill on a mountainous road approaching a 90-degree blind turn.
A fascinating thing about these Mexican roadside shrines is that they resemble gravesites. In American culture a gravesite identifies the final resting place of physical remains. But, as previously mentioned, a descanso in a spiritual context is intended to memorialize the place where the soul left the body. The souls of Oscar, Rogelio, Gabriel, and Israel departed here on 25 May 1994. May they rest in peace.
Descansos can sometimes be found on clear, level, and roadworthy sections of the highway without any hint of the circumstances. Thomas Mann said, "A man's dying is more the survivor's affair than his own." So families and friends place a cross on the site, build a shrine, light candles, lay wreaths, and pray for departed souls—perhaps feeling a little better knowing that the mournful place has been blessed.
And so at the final resting place the mourners mark the spot and bless the soil with holy water. They are comforted knowing that the lingering soul is on *camposanto* (holy ground) and that their departed will be remembered.

Tibetan Buddhist saying: “When you are born, you cry, and the world rejoices. When you die, you rejoice, and the world cries.”
Along with the tradition of erecting crosses is that of building roadside shrines. The shrines, which resemble small chapels (or, as shown here, a hollowed out sandstone boulder), provide a place to pull over to rest and pray for the protection of travelers. The shrines are often dedicated to a particular saint, and include an altar filled with lit candles, flowers, and religious folk art.
This shrine, carved from a sandstone boulder is dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe.
The vehicle involved in this fatality was a gray, 4x4 truck, indicated by the fender leaning against the descanso railing. More wreckage was strewn behind the shrine.
There has been a fatality at almost every curve along the sierra (mountainside) route. For the most part there were appropriate roadway markers along the Baja route, but I never saw a Mexican highway officer during my travels. The lack of police presence results in the rules of the road, speed, and safety precautions being self-regulated—and largely ignored. Considering human nature, my sense is that the situation would be no different in the United States. Were it not for law enforcement, we would all be traveling like madmen.

Remnants of the wreckage related to this descanso can be seen to the left of the shrine.
Elizabeth Felix. Born: 30 May 64. Fallen: 22 June 02. Descance En Paz – Rest In Peace
The 90-degree turns effect lanes of traffic in either direction. There were descansos on both sides of this curve, almost opposite each other. Note the skid marks. The gully behind this cross is littered with vehicle wreckage.
Warning sign for an upcoming 90-degree turn. See the wrecked guardrail. The remnants of several truck wrecks litter the slope. A lady in a red shirt at the left of the photo is laying a wreath alongside a descanso. There were three on this hillside.
Leaning against the cross in this memorial is a car door from the fatal crash. Other remnants were strewn about the site.
This descanso was located on a straight and level part of the highway that ran through a small village. To slow traffic, speed bumps (known as “Topes”) are placed on the highway at a town’s entrance and exit. It is always wise to slow down in these areas; Topes are not always marked and can severely damage a vehicle traveling at excessive speeds. Descansos are also erected for other types of fatalities, including those of pedestrians.
This descanso memorializes the final resting place of a truck driver. A computer search for Pena Trucking yielded a listing under getadrivingjob.com. Al Pena Trucking, Baja California Norte, Mexico. Who, I wondered, replaced this driver?
The inscription reads, “In memory from your brothers, sisters, and cousins.” The literal translation of the word “recuerdo” is “souvenir.” However, in the context of a descanso it would be more appropriate to translate it as “in memory.”
A path from the highway led to this natural monument, which depicts the Virgin of Guadalupe. Below the painting was an altar of natural stone on which many candles were lit in homage or as an offering to travelers.
While standing along one of Baja's lonely stretches I thought about the unexpected, violent, and sudden deaths that had happened along this route. A quote from Proust came to mind: “We say that the hour of death cannot be forecast, but when we say this we imagine that hour as placed in an obscure and distant future. It never occurs to us that it has any connection with the day already begun or that death could arrive this same afternoon, this afternoon which is so certain and which has every hour filled in advance.”
This is Baja California’s southernmost monument, located at the high point of the Baja spine as it tumbles spectacularly into the water where the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez meet. I climbed to this spot in 1989 while anchored in the small harbor of Cabo San Lucas after sailing here from Newport Beach, California.
The southernmost tip of Baja California. The Arches is one of the most dramatically beautiful meeting places of land, sea, and sky. This view is from the Sea of converge.
View from the Pacific Ocean. The town of Cabo San Lucas and its harbor comes into view after sailing around the Arch, where the Sea of Cortez converges.
Another view from the western side, where the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez converge and Baja California ends. Locally, this area is known as “Divorce Beach.”
Harvest moon over Cabo. I found Baja’s southernmost descanso while climbing through a cliff pass to where Baja California, the Pacific Ocean, and the Sea of Cortez converge.
Baja California’s southernmost descanso located on the Pacific Ocean side of a cliff trail leading to a final meeting of land and sea.
The descanso was adjacent to a trail that was treacherous and threatened climbers with the potential of falling rocks and boulders. Patricia Ruiz. Born 1 Jan 1980, Died 1 Dec 2002.
Arriving safely at Land’s End. Are Mexican highways dangerous? In the United States there are approximately 50,000 traffic fatalities a year. And in most cases, both in the U.S.A. and Mexico, the primary factor involved is human error, which includes driving too fast for road conditions, inattention, alcohol, and so forth. So before drawing any conclusions about Mexico, consider first the universal law of karma: action and reaction, cause and effect, sowing and reaping.

“In the course of natural righteousness, man, by his thoughts and actions, becomes the arbiter of his destiny.” --Paramahansa Yogananda