

beyond

the

horizon





↔ On a three-day trek through the Sierra de la Laguna mountains,

Esme Benjamin discovers a rugged side to the East Cape—and herself.

photography by NURIA LAGARDE

The final push to the
summit of El Picacho.



THE RATTLESNAKE IS SO still and perfectly camouflaged that we almost don't see it.

Lurking on the edge of the trail, obscured in the shade of underbrush, it coils around itself, tongue flickering in the air. Judging by its distended middle, it's currently in rest-and-digest mode—and, fortunately for us, too lethargic to care about sharing the trail with a few interloping hikers. Still, two more careless steps, and our adventure might have been over before it properly began.

"Aren't they supposed to rattle their tails as a warning?" I ask, my voice slightly shaking. "Isn't that their whole thing?"

We are only 30 minutes into a three-day trek exploring Baja California's southernmost mountain range, the Sierra de la Laguna. Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the 277,835-acre protected area is a sanctuary, providing fresh water to nearly 70 percent of Baja California Sur's population, along with dozens of endemic and threatened species—including our slithering new acquaintance. Already, I can tell I'm in for an adventure.

Our goal is to summit Sierra de la Laguna's highest peak, El Picacho, which stands at 6,507 feet above sea level and rewards hikers with views stretching from the Pacific Ocean all the way to the Sea of Cortez. Reaching the peak will be a true backcountry adventure, one that most visitors to the region never experience.

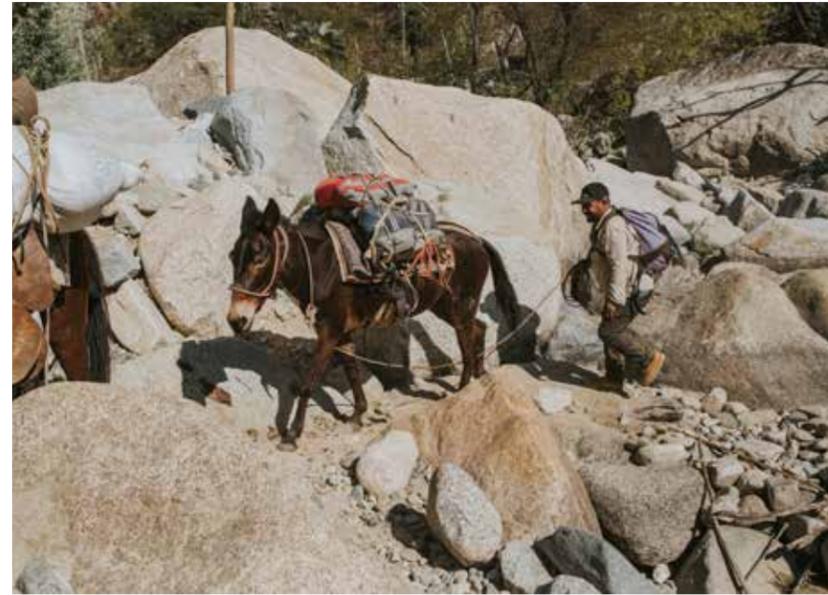
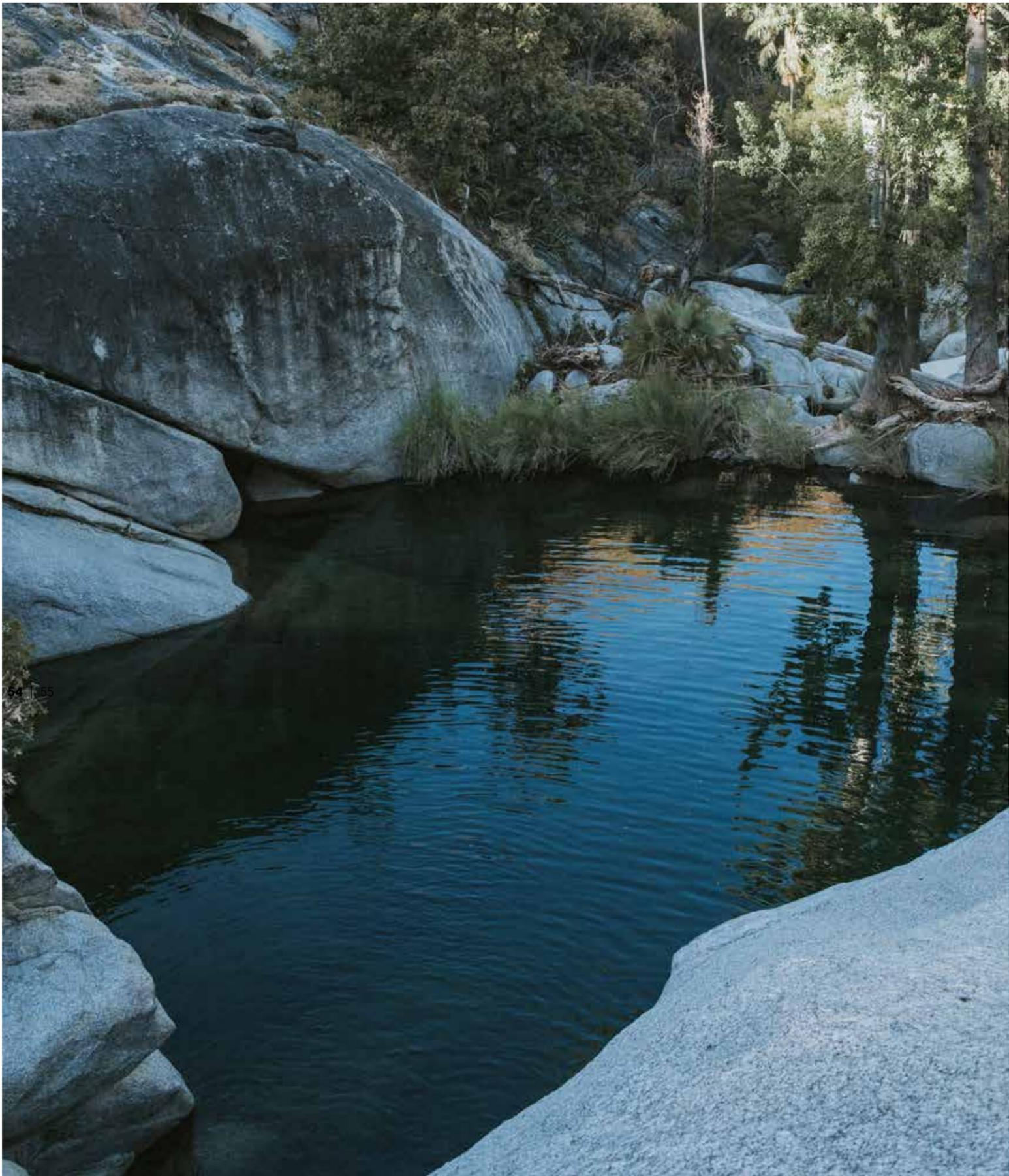
"It's going to challenge us mentally and physically," says Marco Peña, director of Costa Palmas' Aventura excursions department. Peña has hiked this route on 10 separate occasions and to hear him tell it, the awe of the experience never dulls. "It's a fantastic way to find yourself. The first time I went up the mountain I thought, 'Why isn't everyone doing this?'"

We cross the valley's dry shrubland, weaving between spiny columns of cacti and dormant fruit trees awaiting the chance to blossom with spring's first rains. Though it is technically the cool season, which runs from November through April, this part of the trail is hot and arid. In our backpacks, we carry three liters of water each, along with warm clothing, which feels somewhat preposterous in the present heat but will be essential come sundown, when temperatures can drop as low as 30 degrees Fahrenheit.

Our camping gear has been loaded onto three mules, which are currently being led by Chayo Rosas, a local park ranger, to our first campsite: a shady, palm tree-lined ravine known as Poza de Pepe. There, Peña tells me, we will find pools fed by a river so clean and clear you

Above: The mountain trails of the Sierra de la Laguna, once used for transporting livestock. *Opposite:* At the top of El Picacho, with views stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Sea of Cortez.





can drink from it as well as swim in it. This is the image I hold in my mind as we make our ascent into the mountains.

Soon, the terrain becomes more challenging. The scenery is surprisingly lush compared to the valley floor, with oaks and aspens that gleam green against the parched mountainside. But the soil on the trail remains bone dry. Dust dunes make uphill sections laborious and downhill sections treacherous. Spraining an ankle now would be a disaster, I think to myself, eyeing the turkey vultures circling overhead. It's comforting to know that Peña is carrying a satellite phone, a first-aid kit, and a GPS tracker with an emergency button monitored by his team at Costa Palmas.

Plus, Peña reminds me, we are in expert hands with Rosas. His family has lived here for more than 100 years, raising and managing cattle on their ranch, El Refugio, and taking care of the reserve in various government-appointed roles. The trail we are hiking was created for the transportation of livestock before Rosas's father, a legendary ranger named Don Catarino Rosas, began taking tourists on adventure trips to the Sierra de la Laguna shortly after it became an official biosphere reserve 30 years ago. The Rosas family has a deep understanding of these mountains, their trails, and the flora and fauna that exist here.

Four hours and many miles later, tired and covered in dust, I'm relieved to hear the sound of a rushing river. We've made it to the cold, clear pools of Poza de Pepe. While Peña and Rosas set up our tents, I peel off my sweaty clothes and go for a dip. The icy water is an instant tonic, soothing my sore feet and replenishing my energy.

As I towel off and pull on some warm layers, the smell of dinner wafts into my tent. I follow my nose to find Chef Alex Cocío, from the Costa Palmas Beach & Yacht Club, preparing sautéed vegetables, chicken, and refried beans over the campfire. After devouring as much food as my stomach will comfortably fit, I retire to my tent and, limbs heavy and mind calm, drift off to the comforting chorus of nocturnal frogs.

Opposite: The cool, clear pools at the Poza de Pepe campsite, where weary hikers can cool off with a swim. *Above:* Chayo Rosas, a local park ranger, transporting camping essentials on his three mules.



Above: A delicious meal cooked over the campfire by Chef Alex Cocío.
Opposite: Views of the sunset from the summit of El Picacho.

The following morning, we hit the trail early. It's barely 8:30 a.m., but the sun is already scorching as we tackle the steep climb out of the ravine. Despite the heat and the lactic acid burning in our legs, there is something innately satisfying about this kind of physical feat.

"We humans like to set challenges for ourselves, and this is a constant reminder that small steps can lead to big achievements," Peña says, somehow echoing my inner thoughts. "And no matter if you live in a mansion or a little house, coming to hike and camp out here connects to your primal instincts."

He's right. In the Sierra de la Laguna, everything is stripped back to simple needs and goals: Put one foot in front of the other. Stay hydrated. Don't stray from the trail. Staying present is refreshingly easy with no distractions, no obligations, and no cell phone signal.

Later that afternoon, after a nap and pasta salad lunch at our campsite, it's time for the final push to the summit of El Picacho and the famous views I've been promised. We pull on our backpacks and hike through the valley, startling a wild boar and her piglet, who disappear into the vegetation with a squeal. I'm tired and eager to reach the peak, but the trail seems never-ending, and thick tree cover makes it difficult

to gauge our progress. Just as I'm starting to feel frustrated, we finally arrive at the top.

I hold my hiking poles aloft, basking in the warm glow of success. Golden light illuminates the mist-swathed mountains below. In the distance, the Pacific Ocean melts into a moody, overcast horizon. The awe of this moment makes all the effort worthwhile.

As the sun sets, we make our way back down the mountain, headlamps and moonlight illuminating our way. When we arrive back at camp, Cocío is waiting with sizzling fajitas and bowls of warm, nourishing soup. We gratefully tuck in, while Rosas—who made his first hike into these mountains at just 6 years old, with only his 8-year-old brother for company—shares tales of the trails, including a few of lost hikers and harrowing rescue missions. It's a reminder that this place is wild, beautiful, and certainly not to be taken lightly.

The following morning, Peña and I bid Rosas, Cocío, and the mules a fond farewell, and begin to retrace our steps back through the mountains. It's a long and arduous day, but spirits are high, and when we finally arrive back at El Refugio, I'm overcome with a mix of joy, exhaustion, and triumph. Gulping down an ice-cold Coca-Cola, I think back to our rattling surprise encounter at the very beginning of our long journey. At the time, I had wondered if perhaps it was a bad omen, but now I see it differently: In some cultures, a snake crossing your path is said to represent personal transformation. After the last three days, I believe it. **END**

