

The Baja Run

Blow-by-Blow Account of the
Toughest Run Under the Sun

63

Introduction

In one of the toughest tests ever devised to put a new product through its paces, Chevrolet's '63 trucks have shown the stuff they're made of in no uncertain terms. On June 19, following a 2,400-mile shakedown run from Detroit to Los Angeles, a convoy of six brand-new production 1963 Chevrolet trucks set out to do the "impossible." Every weight class was represented, ranging from pickups to an M80 tandem. The goal: to meet, and beat, the challenge of Mexico's barren, primitive Baja California Peninsula; to whip one of the most difficult roads in Mexico, run through more than 1,000 miles of almost trackless desolation to Cabo San Lucas at the southern tip, then clinch the performance by returning the way they had come.

For weeks on end they slugged it out on burning deserts and barren mountains, over rutted boulder-strewn trails . . . through blinding sand and dust, across sheer-banked arroyos and precipitous cliff faces on rock paths where even burros watch their steps.

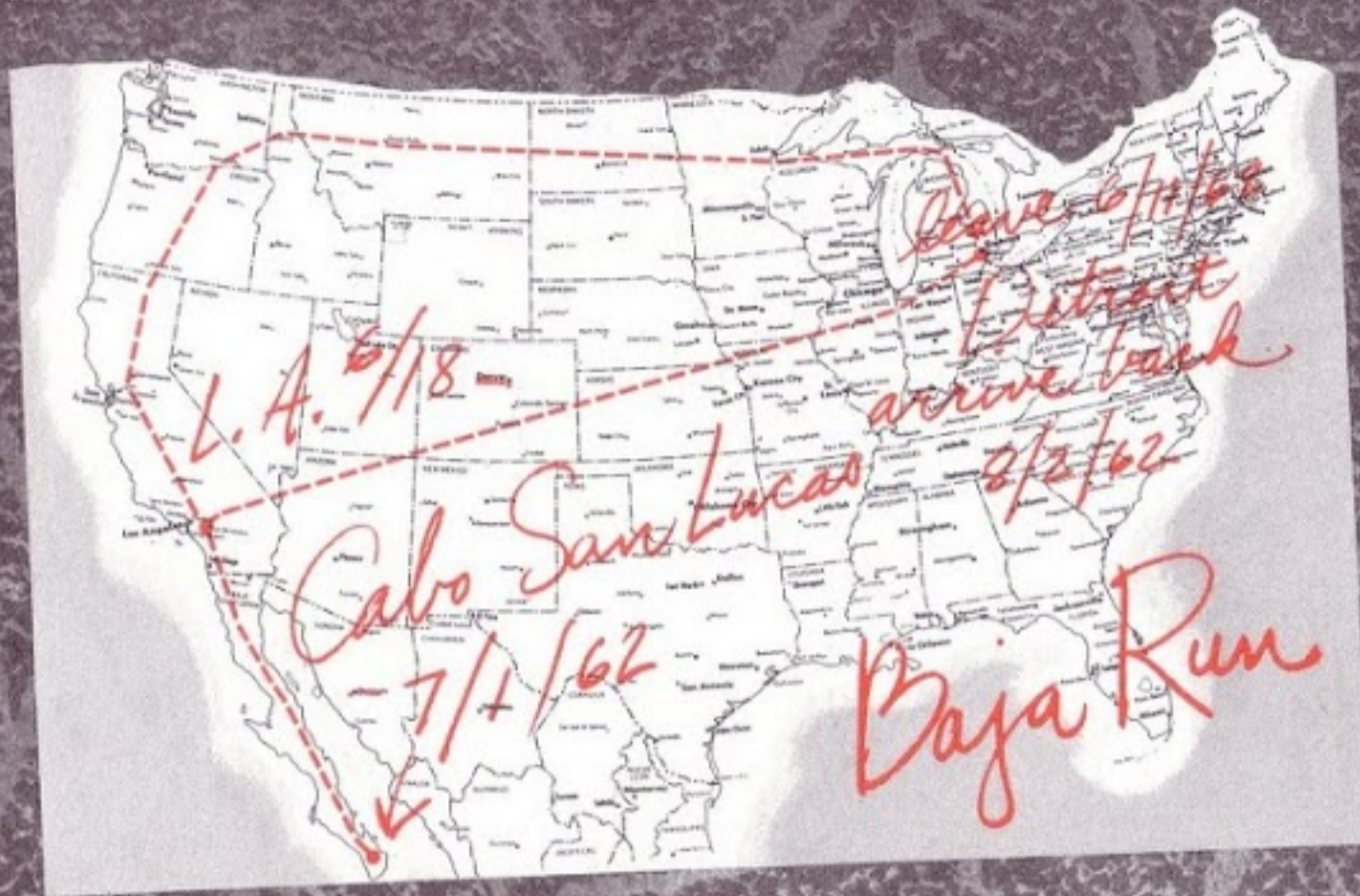
Here were trucks with completely new chassis designs, hundreds of miles from parts and service facilities and taking a beating almost sure to bring out any bugs the new designs might have. If ever big trouble was asked for, this was it! But none was experienced. Only minor maintenance was required all the way. If the Baja run couldn't beat the '63 Chevrolet trucks, what can?

Baja Run Timetable

- Phase I - Detroit to L.A. -- June 11-18
- Phase II - L.A. to Cabo San Lucas -- June 19-July 5
- Phase III - Cabo San Lucas to L.A. -- July 7-21
- Phase IV - L.A. to Detroit -- July 22-Aug. 2

Phase I - Detroit to L.A.

1. Each vehicle undergoes final check and lubrication at General Motors Proving Ground garage.
Proving ground guard watches big tandem dump truck, last of the caravan, as it pulls through the gate.
2. Glistening trucks will lose their shine, but none of their go, before they return.
Two days later, caravan passes through toll gate on Oklahoma's Will Rogers Turnpike. Trucks all running smoothly as they make their way toward California.
3. Mountain country of Southwest signals the approaching end of Phase I of the trip. All trucks are running well and ready to tackle the rugged Baja Road.



Phase II - L.A. to Cabo San Lucas

The Baja Run Begins in Earnest

Fitted out like an expedition to Darkest Africa, trucks and crew assembled early in the morning of June 19 for final briefing and assignments. All necessary gear was loaded on the trucks -- the food, water, parts, tools, tents, cots, sleeping bags and miscellaneous camping equipment needed to carry a party of 24 drivers, engineers, photographers and observers through the weeks ahead in the wilderness. Each truck, the six 1963 models and the three support vehicles for personnel, was loaded to capacity and slated to work its way through the entire trip.

June 19 -- Rolled out of Long Beach at 8 a.m. for San Diego and points south -- made the border by 11:30 a.m. and tackled Customs after a break for lunch -- took till mid-afternoon to clear all the equipment the convoy carried. Gassed up all vehicles and filled the tanker in Tijuana, then headed south on good blacktop road down the coast. Nice weather, easy going, rolling into Ensenada about 5:30 p.m. for the first night's stop -- 67 miles south of the border and 207 miles logged for the day.

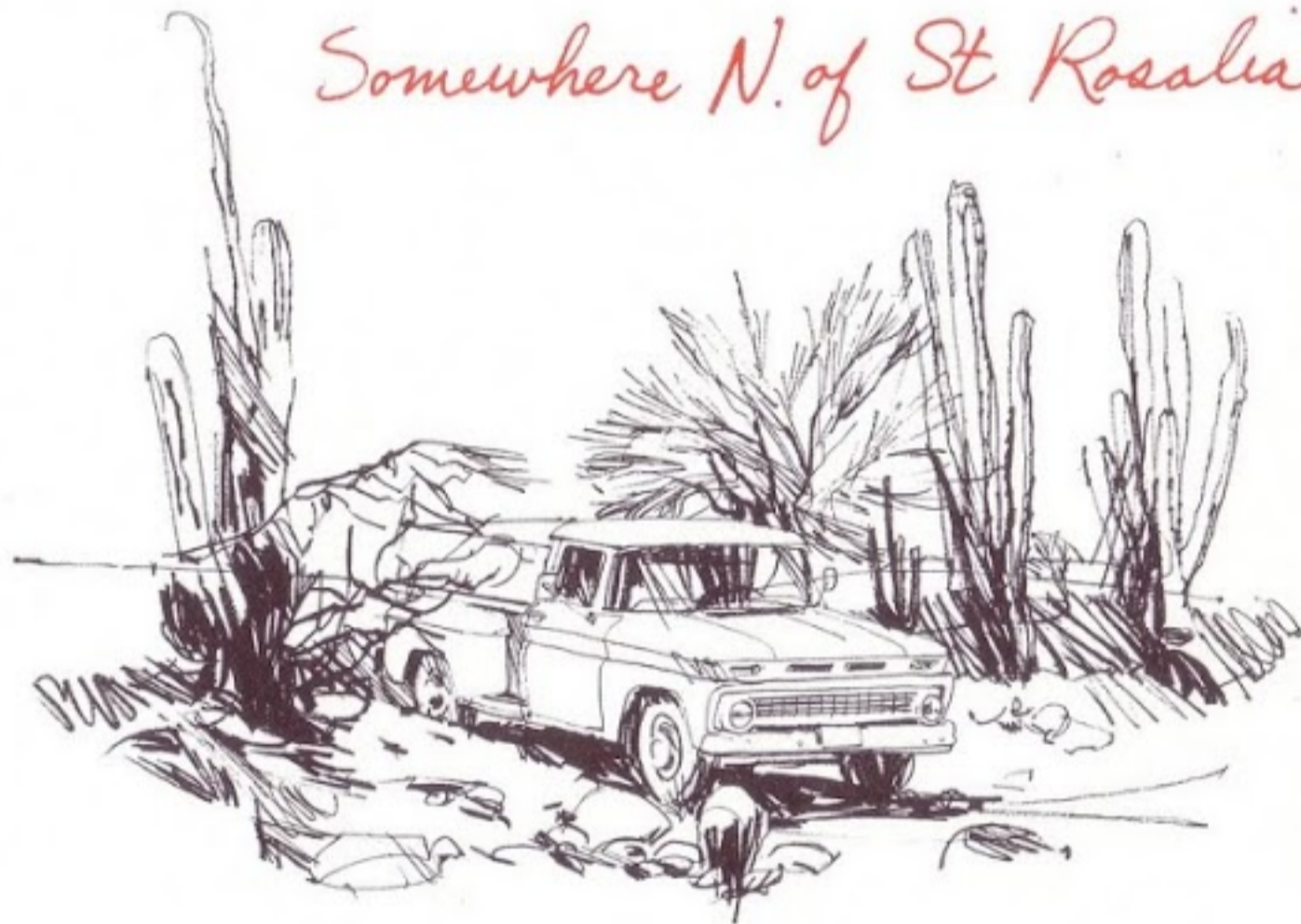
June 20 -- Spent the morning in Ensenada getting pictures and installing two-way radios in the trucks, set to Mexican frequency. Headed south after lunch -- on good blacktop which lasted only 73 miles. From there on it was a rocky, rutted trail that knocked average speeds down to between 10 and 20 mph, and made it tough for the big trucks to keep up with the lighter units. Achieved destination (Sky Ranch, a fishing camp) at about dark, just in time as the ruts made the road almost impossible with only headlights to light the way through. Convoy ran perfectly all day, logging 122½ miles from Ensenada.



S. of
Ensenada

June 21 -- Up with the sun and back to the grind by 7 a.m. The steady pounding that would know no letup for a week begins to become routine. Terrain flat at first, and the road badly rutted -- then into rolling hills with boulders adding to the hazards of the road. Passed through tiny El Rosario in late a.m., then swung inland for a taste of Baja's dust, often thick enough to prevent seeing the truck ahead. Cooling systems were hard pressed here. Soon started a long, tough upgrade pull, climbing 2,000 feet in the course of the afternoon. Kept on until 7 p.m. arrival at Rancho Arenoso, a barren adobe outpost far out on a dusty plain. Set up the first of many overnight camps -- only 63 miles for the day through up to 112-degree F. heat.

Somewhere N. of St Rosalia



June 22 -- Up at 5 a.m., broke camp and off again into the hot, dry desolation of the central Baja wilderness. Road rough as ever, average speed limited to about 10 mph -- rolling through flat open desert at first with cactus the only sign of life, then into more rugged rising country with huge rock formations, more boulders, more dust -- vehicles all running perfectly with the big trucks keeping up amazingly well. Arrived Dry Lake destination about 7 p.m., 90 rugged miles since morning, and met liaison aircraft -- set up camp and turned in early.

June 23 -- Up at dawn at Dry Lake camp -- spent most of the morning on aerial photography with the convoy running on the sun-scorched flats. Temperature rose to 122 degrees by noon when the convoy hit the trail south again. More blinding dust, rocks and ruts and sand. Brief rest stop at Punta Prieta village, then back at it, following the tortuous road as it swung back toward the Pacific Coast and the day's destination, Miller's Landing. Guide guessed wrong at one of many forks in the road, convoy went five miles on wrong fork. Finally got back to the main road -- too late to go on. Camped among the cactus after a grueling 75-mile day.

June 24 -- Up at dawn and off for another day of jolts on the Baja road. Soon reached the shore of Sebastian Vizcaino Bay, and shortly swung inland again. Hot weather, flat country, much cactus and dust -- buzzed by the liaison plane with extra supplies required, to be landed at a ranch not far from the next day's route. By late afternoon reached the town of El Arco, on the "state" line between Baja, California and South Baja territories (a few houses, cantina, and army barracks, more adobe and dust, surrounded by desert) -- pressed on another ten miles for a total of 102 for the day, stopping at 7 p.m. to pitch camp.

June 25 -- Another 5 a.m. awakening and under way in short order -- one Carryall left the route for Rancho Marguerita where the supplies had been landed, rejoining the convoy without incident at 10 a.m. -- a brief break, then on again through dusty desert over brutally rough road. Ran into some heavy sand that bogged down the Fleetside, had to winch it out. Into rolling hills in the afternoon with the road getting rockier, arriving in the town of San Ignacio 4.30 p.m. Decided to push on toward the mountains looming to eastward, scheduled for crossing on the next day's run -- kept going until 7:30 and pitched camp in the shadow of the Tres Virgenes Volcanoes. Camped on lava-type ground which bogged down most of the trucks at one time or another -- another rugged 75-mile day completed.

June 26 -- Slept in till 6 a.m., then tackled the climb over the mountains to the Gulf of California -- a precipitous ascent to 5,000-ft. elevation, then into a long, tortuous series of switchbacks down the gulf coast side of the range -- hit the beach by 2 p.m. and into Santa Rosalia by 3 -- biggest town since Tijuana, hot and dusty with copper mining machinery lining the harbor, but also with a hotel . . . rooms and showers after eight days in the desert! Welcomed by local officials and entertained at an evening fiesta in the Plaza -- drivers got caught up on truck maintenance and crew morale took a big turn for the better -- 30 near-perpendicular miles logged for the day.



June 27 -- Reveille at 6 a.m. and, after a leisurely breakfast and loading-up, southbound from Santa Rosalia by 8:30. Delayed at the outskirts of town while the van detoured a water pipe over the road, too low for the high van body -- weather hot and humid, and the road rough and dusty, but occasional palm trees and other greenery provided a welcome change from the endless desolation of the previous days. Near Mulege, the van bogged down in sand, had to be winched out by the tandem, and a flat on one of the Carryalls had to be changed. Rolled into Mulege in early afternoon, parked trucks on air strip and checked into the Club Aero Mulege for a two-day stay . . . a welcome taste of stateside living for the first time south of the border. Only 42 miles logged from Santa Rosalia this day.

June 28 & 29 -- Photographers busy in the scenic Mulege area, while the drivers took a breather, getting ready for some really rough days ahead.



June 30 -- Up at 6:30 and ready for the worst of it -- southbound from Mulege shortly after 8, into rocky, dusty country and mountains bordering beautiful Concepcion Bay. The road became perilously narrow, climbing on tortuous switchbacks carved out of sheer cliff faces -- roadside crosses marked many places where trucks, and drivers, had gone over the edge. Road followed bay beach for a short distance and two hours were lost winching the tandem out of the surf, where it had become bogged down. Barely avoided being caught by rising tide. Back into rugged mountainous country after lunch, with even narrower trails and some of the tightest spots yet, including a close call with the van as a rear wheel went over a cliff and spun wildly above 90 feet of thin air before achieving traction. Tough going in 100-degree-plus weather, with only 31 miles completed by 4:00 and only 60 by dusk at 7:30 -- pressed on after dark to Loreto, 40 more miles away, through more heat, dust and extreme road perils. Rolled in at 10:30, exhausted, with 100 miles logged since leaving Mulege.

July 1 -- Sunday morning in Loreto, up at 6 and away by 8:30. Local inhabitants out in numbers bound for church as the convoy pulled out. Soon back to perilous mountain driving through the most spectacular scenery yet. Reached mission of San Javier by 1:30 and stopped for lunch, only 22 miles completed of the 200 scheduled for the day. Ran through numerous boulder fields and dry, rocky river beds, and at one point forded a river about 100 feet across. Reached the main road to La Paz

at 6:45, almost dusk with over 150 miles to go -- about 30 miles of gravel washboard, then blacktop full of chuckholes, but the convoy was able to roll at reasonable speeds for the first time in almost two weeks, getting up to 45 mph in the better spots. Finally rolled into La Paz at 2:30 a.m. after 18 hours on the move -- dinner and a well-earned rest at the hotel, with a three-day break to look forward to.

July 2, 3, & 4 -- No rest for the '63 Chevy trucks -- much movie footage shot in and around La Paz, with only the run down to the Cape left to complete Phase II.

July 5 -- Up at 6, breakfast and loading up, and southbound from LaPaz about 8 -- made good time on washboard dirt road -- mostly desert with much cactus, occasional ranchos with gaunt cattle and more dust. Convoy slowed as country became hillier and road narrower with many hairpin turns -- passed town of Todos Santos on the Pacific Coast in late a.m., pressed on south along the coast, and then inland across the tip of the peninsula to Cabo San Lucas, arriving at about 3 p.m. 135 miles south of La Paz and nearly 1,100 miles south of the U.S. border. The run that "couldn't be done" had been completed, and the '63 Chevy trucks that did it were in topnotch shape, ready to do it all over again!



Phase III - Cabo San Lucas to L.A.

Homeward Bound the Hard Way

July 7 through 21 -- The weeks of brutal pounding behind them made it very clear what lay ahead. After two days of routine maintenance and servicing, the convoy set out northward on July 9, heading back to the USA on the Baja road. The trucks rolled well, again taking all the abuse this slam-bang route can dish out. They made the trip back without incident (except for one close call where the tanker was winched back from the edge of a cliff with nothing to spare) and without performance failures. The reliability they proved going down the Baja was doubly proved coming back!

1. Huge boulder fields and rock-filled river beds make the going almost impossible throughout much of the southern Baja Peninsula. This demands the most of truck suspensions and running gear.
2. Steep cliffs, cavernous canyons and tortuous hair-pin turns present some of the most hazardous mountain driving anywhere. Many trucks have been lost in this country, and it's easy to see why.
3. Choking, blinding dust blankets everything, often blotting out sight of the truck ahead. Dust is something you can't avoid on the Baja Peninsula. Machinery has to be built right to keep going in an atmosphere like this.
4. The jolting and jarring goes on and on as the road winds through mile after mile of nothing but sand and cactus . . . and cactus and sand.

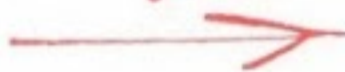
a
river bed
-no water
but plenty
of rocks!



easy does it
-on the
switchbacks



we're eating
dust again



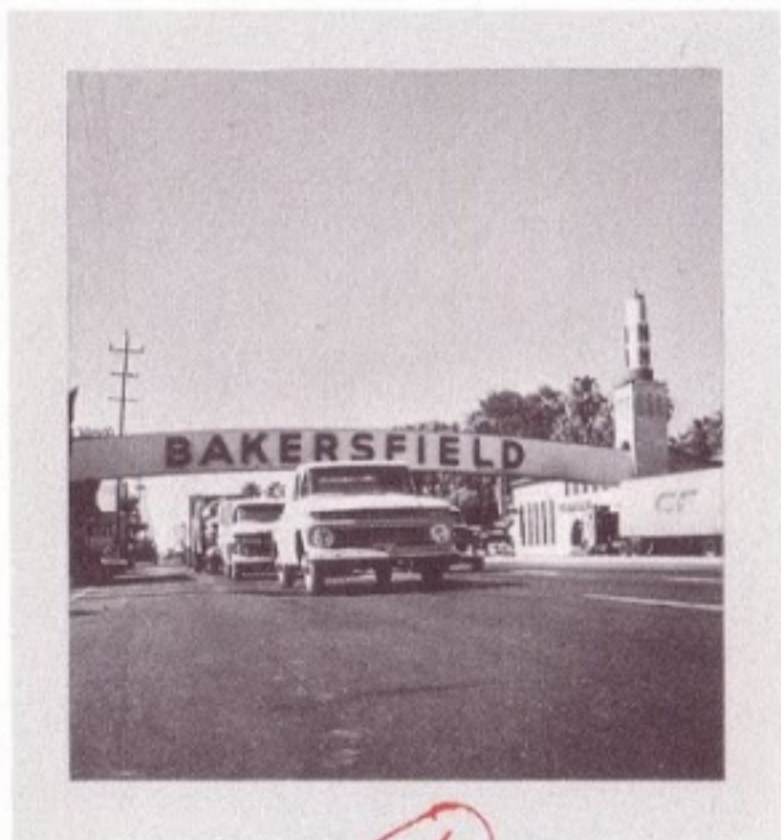
another
week of
this and
will be
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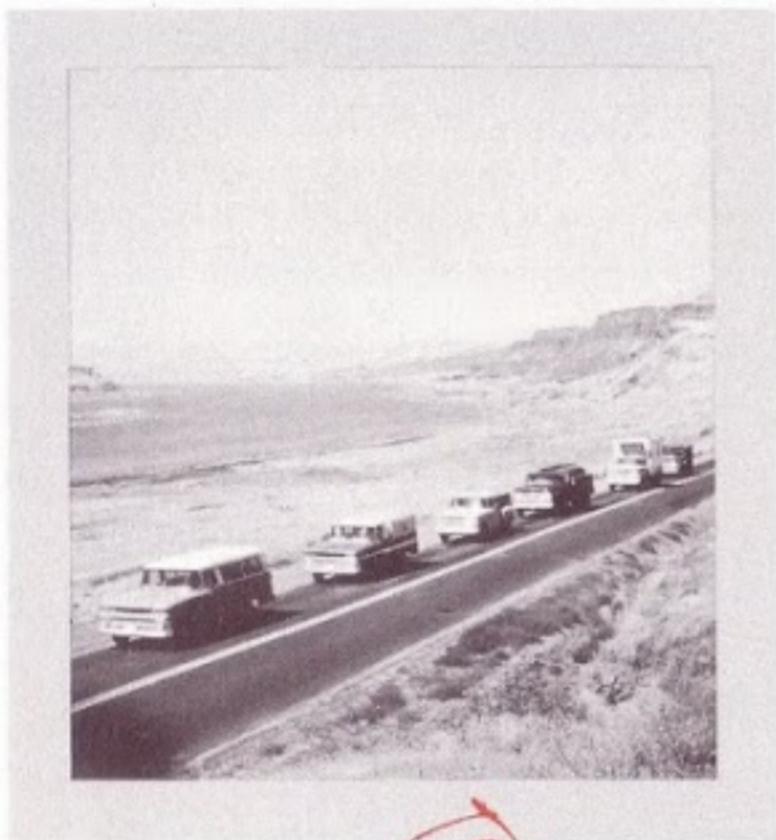
Phase IV - L.A. to Detroit

Highballing Home in a Breeze!

With the brutal Baja road behind them, the crew relaxes as they get ready for the homeward cross-country run. Every truck has been checked over and found fit and ready to roll. The pounding Baja country has taken none of the snap out of the new Chevrolet trucks despite the grueling miles of the toughest run under the sun. Although the crew is weary, they're proud of the extraordinary performance of their Chevrolet trucks and are eager to head for home.



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1 Caravan leaves on July 23 and passes through Bakersfield, California, on its way north. Trucks running well as they head for mountainous country.

2 Near Crater Lake, National Park, Oregon. Altitude is well over 6,000 feet at this point.

3 More mountains in the northern finger of Idaho test the staying power of Chevy engines.

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Five days after leaving Los Angeles, the caravan passes through Glacier National Park.

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Big trucks of the caravan pull into a Wisconsin weigh station after traveling 3,000 miles since leaving L.A.

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Caravan crosses the Mackinac Bridge joining Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas. Only 300 more miles to reach home and finish a long, hard test of 1963 Chevrolet trucks.



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Back in Detroit! -

Operation Scorch is History

The grueling run from Detroit to the tip of the Baja Peninsula and back brought out the best in new Chevy engines, chassis and suspensions. It was a run that put new Chevrolet truck engineering advancements to the test in a way that has never before been equaled. Every part of every truck withstood the challenge and displayed performing ability that means dollar-saving efficiency on any hauling job. You may never run a Chevrolet truck through scorching desert heat, over barren rock-strewn paths or across a mountain range, but you know that they can do it and still come back for more! It was conclusively demonstrated on the Baja road -- the toughest run under the sun!

THE NEW TOUGHER-THAN-EVER TRUCK BUILD THAT BEAT THE BAJA, GOING AND COMING!

The Baja was a truck test unlike any before it . . . a slam-bang 2,000-mile trip that put every part on its best behavior. Of special significance was the outstanding performance of the new-for-'63 components, some of which are shown here. They stood up to the Baja's worst without a hint of failure -- demonstrated the kind of quality in trucks that means lowest cost hauling.

1. New High Torque 230 Six -- standard power for light-duty and Series 50 models. Features overhead-valve design, precision-cast cylinder head and block, and rugged 7-main-bearing crankshaft.

2. New High Torque 292 Six -- standard in Series 60, optional at extra cost in Series 10-50. Special heavy-duty features such as Stellite-faced exhaust valves with automatic rotators and aluminized inlet valves give extra durability.

3. New Ladder-Type Frames -- backbone of rugged new truck chassis. Deep channel-section side rails are joined by heavy alligator-jaw crossmembers. On heavy-duty models, rear crossmember is drop-center type to simplify fifth-wheel installations.

4. New Coil-Spring Independent Front Suspension -- for all light-duty models. Keeps all the advantages of Chevrolet's renowned ultra-smooth ride, and gives improved wheel alignment and better steering through new design of control arms.

5. New 2-Stage Coil Rear Springs -- for 1/2-ton and 3/4-ton models. New spring design gives improved ride when empty, and better load support with less sway at maximum GVW.

6. New Solid Front Axles with Variable-Rate Springs -- Solid axle gives extra ruggedness and new leaf springs provide outstanding ride, both when empty and with a full load of cargo.

New trim Design -- narrower fenders and running boards for conventional medium- and heavy-duty models reduce width by 7 inches to increase maneuverability in tight places.

