In a valley south of Ensenada, thousands of race fans wake at scraggly campsites to the sight of rising dust and feel of trembling earth. It’s a roaring off-road armada of 300 bikes, buggies, quads and trucks.

The first motorcyclist flashes past in an explosion of dirt. A chase helicopter swoops overhead. The hordes spring from their campfires. Despite speeds of up to 100 miles per hour, bystanders jam the roadside, leaving bikers and drivers millimeters for error.

“Have you ever been startled or scared, really scared?” asks Dave Ashley, a truck racer who’s been competing here since the ’80s. “Imagine that happening for a full four, five hours.”

And it’s not only drivers who feel the buzz. A thrill-seeking teenager dashes out of the crowd and across the course like a bull-dodger at Pamplona, winning an ovation. Then a civilian cycle takes the dare, lurching across the track. Then a car.

This is no traffic cop’s nightmare; it all materialized last June, at the running of the 2004 Tecate Score Baja 500. There was more of the same in November, when another 280 kidney-thumping devotees lined up for the Baja 1,000, aka the Tecate Score Baja 1000, aka the Baja Mil, aka the granddaddy of desert racing.

For 37 years, these races have endured despite deaths and injuries, despite prize money that’s pocket change next to NASCAR’s winnings, and despite perpetually dodgy local politics.

“A 24-hour plane crash”

Along the way, the races have grown into a sort of a brand name for manly challenge. Steve McQueen, George Plimpton, James Garner, Ted Nugent — all have skidded here. It was Parnelli Jones, Baja repeater and Indianapolis champion, who called the Baja Mil “a 24-hour plane crash.”

But as Baja’s population grows and environmentalist sensibilities edge south across the border, the future of these races looks about as clear as the dust-choked route.

“These races have little to no environmental oversight, and the maximum speeds they encourage result in maximum damage to the landscape and wildlife just so gringo motorheads can rip it up,” said Daniel Patterson, a biologist at the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

“Some of our kids are so perplexed as to how their parents can support this sort of thing,” said Oscar Ramos, the Tijuana attorney who serves as race promoter Sal Fish’s right-hand man in Mexico. “They want to put tougher conditions on us.”

Still, the roster of starters for last year’s Baja 500 was the longest in 15 years. And within its first hour, the race had slipped into the usual chaos.

At mile 50, 28-year-old Ricardo Flores of Tijuana and a dozen buddies pulled their truck up to a creek and built a little dam. They were among perhaps 100,000 spectators, and their dam converted a little trickle into a 3-foot-deep water hazard.

With Metallica blasting on the stereo and many empties scattered on the dirt, they waited for new arrivals. Every time a racer hit the water, a great wave of mud leaped toward the crowd. Flores and company bellowed their approval.

It’s not the money

Dave Ashley once ran Baja wired up to a machine that measures lateral and vertical G-forces. The results showed G-loads that shifted from positive 9 — nine times the usual pull of gravity — to a heart-in-throat negative 5.

“And sometimes those reversals happen in less than a second,” he said. “It’s enough to where it knocks the air out of you sometimes.”

Then there’s the cost. The richest teams, the ones fueled by personal fortunes and big-time sponsors, bring scores of crew members and hire helicopters to trail overhead in case of trouble. Some will spend $1 million on a vehicle. Many will spend $100,000 on one race. And even the teams with the thinnest wallets have to pay $500 or so to fill a truck’s 65-gallon tank.

Yet even when you add up purse money and contingency prizes that manufacturers give the winners who used their products, the winner winds up with less than $20,000.

One of the things that keeps racing in Baja an adventure is its ragged flavor. After all these years, it’s still an amateur affair. More than 95 percent of the drivers are weekend warriors — builders, small businessmen, teachers, Nevada casino executives, salesmen, mechanics.

Last year’s route was 428 miles, an obstacle course of silt-swamped, boulder-marred, dust-cloaked tracks, the way marked by stakes and ribbons semi-visible through the clouds of brown. The...
and he never failed. The drivers don't know Espinoza from Dale Earnhardt Jr., but they have to trust him.

Other bystanders, meanwhile, have entirely different strategies to inject themselves into the race. Every year, in the dark pre-race hours, scores of them sneak out to make their own amendments to the course. Mostly, they like to dig trenches and arrange rocks and planks to cause unexpected jumps. Sometimes, they even use heavy equipment. Nothing pleases the crowd more than an airborne vehicle.

"Off-road racing in Mexico is viewed as a blood sport. People like to see accidents and guys rolling over," said Enrique Hambleton, a veteran driver and Mexican citizen from La Paz and La Jolla. "Experienced drivers know that whenever you see a clump of people out in the middle of nowhere, watching you, you'd better go slow."

Nobody keeps a comprehensive list of those killed and injured in the course of the Baja 500 and 1000, but for any newcomer, a sampling of casualties should be sobering enough:

November 1989: Ten-year-old spectator Lorenzo Lopez is killed when a Baja 1000 competitor's vehicle hits him near San Quintin.

June 1995: Motorcyclist Danny Hamel, 23 years old and already a five-time Baja champion, has covered about 10 miles of the Baja 500 when an off-duty policeman steers a vehicle onto the course, hits him head-on and kills him immediately.

June 1999: Two miles beyond the starting line, driver Jason Baldwin, 29, loses control of his truck at a crowded highway crossing and flies into the spectator area, killing one Mexican onlooker and injuring nine others.

"One fatality is way too many," said race promoter Fish, whose company, SCORE International, retains a medical director and emergency response crew. But in any venture as outlandish as this, Fish adds, "there are just certain things that are gonna happen. It is a very, very dangerous adventure."

The floor show

Sam Navar, 34, was ready for his moment. When another trophy truck careened into the Ricardo Flores Water Hazard and stalled in the deep water, Espinoza and company leaped from the sidelines to work their magic. When the ignition turned over, the crowd roared and the driver charged up the hill.

And now it was Navar's turn. In his workaday life, he's a Jaguar mechanic in San Diego. But here, where he has family and a long history of race-day adventures, he was part of the show. He leaped behind the truck and grabbed the rear bumper.

As the tires churned and the vehicle lurched up the muddy hill, there was Navar in back, invisible to the driver, bouncing through the mud on his barrel chest like a stunt water-skier on choppy water.

Eventually — after 20 feet or so, the skin on his arms and chest abrading, the blood trickling — he had to let go. Navar stood, apparently feeling no pain, and saluted the crowd. They went ape.

Road to ruin?

Even in fatality-free years, opponents of these races call them dinosaurs from an era of motorized manifest destiny, land-bashing fests that rearrange a delicate desert. Even if the route isn't truly off-road — the organizers stick to crumbling ranch roads and dirt paths, most of them blazed decades before — the engines rattle every plant and animal in a usually silent territory. The breeze scatters tons of spectator litter across a broader territory than any cleanup crew is likely to reach.

"You could not do this in the U.S. So why do we have to do it here?" asks Horacio de la Cueva, a biologist who came to Ensenada 13 years ago from Mexico City. "I don't think these races are helping the landscape or helping people earn their livelihoods — not in an enduring, meaningful way."

But plenty of people disagree, pointing to the dollars left behind in Baja's restaurants, bars, gas stations, grocery stores and hotels. Some argue that a few days of dirt traffic on ranch roads is an environmental hiccup compared with the overfishing and runaway development afoot.
throughout the peninsula.

To assemble this course, Fish said, he arranged to pay access fees to 16 agricultural communities, half a dozen privately held ranches and two Indian communities, about $21,000 in all, arranged through the Ensenada mayor's office. Fish's budget for the Baja Mil: a little more than $200,000.

On a job-poor peninsula, that gets noticed. Even skeptics like De la Cueva concede that if you asked 100 Baja residents for an opinion, an overwhelming majority would support the races — including, of course, the Mexican nationals on the race's roster of starters.

Still, Enrique Villegas, who heads Baja California's Ecology Directorate, wants "more time prior to races to evaluate environmental conditions. We would also like to establish an off-road race environmental fund, maybe by issuing off-road vehicle permits, so that we can finance more environmental monitoring, studies and race surveillance."

As part of its obligations, SCORE International sends sweep vehicles out after the race to troll the route for litter and course markers.

"We pick up more than we bring in," Fish said. If somebody wants to tighten regulations, he adds, "why not start with the buses and the taxicabs, or the people who throw their six-packs and their Pampers out the window?"

The finish line

The racers hurtled on. Driver Lou Franco crashed, suffered what he believed was a concussion, rested a bit, then roared back out onto the course. Down south, along the beach section, Dan Myers collided head-on, at low speed, with a local's Ford Explorer — a love tap by Baja standards. Myers rejoined the race.

Now the race was nearly nine hours old, the crowds thickening along the last miles and distressed metal strewn across the peninsula. Of 300 starters, fewer than 200 would finish within the allotted 17 hours.

As a holler went up and a chase helicopter swooped, a silver and blue cyclist roared like an overgrown action figure down the wash that runs through Ensenada. He made a turn, zoomed beneath a low bridge, eased into the baseball stadium and cozed up to the big Tecate balloons. It was Baja veteran Steve Hengeveld. He and his partner, Johnny Campbell, had averaged 51.05 miles per hour, and their bike was the first to finish.

The first trophy truckster across was Alan Pflueger, a 37-year-old car dealer from Honolulu. Pflueger's share of the purse was $3,780. His team's gas cost more than that.

"I love Mexico!" he exulted. "This is the best place to race."

Sam Navar, bleeding and beaming back at the water hazard, would never disagree. Neither would Ricardo Flores, the noted reservoir builder, or Juan Espinoza, truck driver and filter pirate.

Though none of them stood on a podium this day, they didn't have to. They already owned this race.