

# Kino: Questing Spirit

By Bunny Fontana

The Jesuit priest Eusebio Francisco Kino – a northern Italy native -- was not the first European to venture into the parched lands of the northwestern Sonoran, yet the significance and impact of his work has carried through the centuries.

Father Kino – missionary, explorer, cartographer, geographer, cattleman, writer, architect, builder, and agriculturalist – first sailed into the Sea of Cortez in 1683. He began his missionary labors among the northern Piman Indians, the O’odham, in 1687 along the Rio San Miguel in Sonora, about 70 miles southeast of today’s Nogales, Arizona. One of the few who came to believe that Baja California was not an island, he was anxious to discover an overland route to sites where Jesuits had begun an earlier missionary enterprise. During his search, Kino encountered the native Hia Ced O’odham, the “Sand Papagos,” on treks into the waterless expanses of the Sonoran desert never before seen by non-Indians. Not even the ill-fated Spaniard Melchior Diaz, on his fruitless and fatal quest to make contact with Spanish supply ships at the head of the Sea of Cortez, had ever faced more than a fraction of this wilderness.

Kino and his small Spanish military escort traveled throughout much of northwestern Sonora, including the Camino del Diablo, “Devil’s Highway,” and the Pinacate Mountains, nine times between 1694 and 1706.

Kino’s journeys were never barren. In 1698, he founded a mission at the oasis settlement of Sonoyta; he built its first church in 1701. He drew detailed maps and provided journal accounts of routes and conditions. He especially took notes of sources of water. Typical are his descriptions of this land’s two greatest oases, Quitobaquito and Sonoyta:

"In the afternoon [of October 7, 1698] we left for the good place [Quitobaquito] which we named San Serguio and another four leagues along the *arroyo* [Sonoyta River] which goes to the sea. It has water which runs in many places, *carrizales* [canes], *tulares* bulrushes and ducks and

birds from the marshes, and excellent pasturage for the cattle. From San Marcelo [Sonoyta] there are irrigation canals and flat, level lands for planting, although this year they had not sowed these except for many squashes."

Kino devoted a lifetime to his zeal, curiosity, and determination to prove that the Sea of Cortez, or the "Mar de las Californias" as he wrote it on his maps, ended in a land bridge to Upper and Lower California. His last visit to Sonoyta and Pinacates was in 1706, when he was 61 years old. Five years later, in 1711, his remains would lie beneath the floor of a chapel in Santa Maria Magdalena, another of the many Sonoran missions he founded.

He ultimately succeeded in his goals: Kino proved conclusively that Baja California was a peninsula, in spite of the fact that the opposite belief continued officially into the early 18<sup>th</sup> century; his journeys of discovery also helped open land routes to Upper California, one through the most formidable desert in North America. His steps would eventually be followed by such Franciscan missionaries as Francisco Garcés and by such empire builders as Juan Bautista de Anza, the man whose overland colonizing expedition to Alta California in 1776 led to the Spanish settlement of San Francisco. The route trod by Kino over the Camino del Diablo became an 1849 pathway for Mexicans to the gold fields of California.

For good reason a 3,197-foot mountain in Organ Pipe Cactus Monument bears the name, "Kino Peak." It is a lasting reminder of his enduring legacy – that of his questing spirit -- in this serene but awesome land.