

TRAVEL



photo Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers' Group

AN El Chepe train rolls into the sunset along some of the most expertly engineered track in the world.

CROSSING THE SIERRA MADRES ON EL CHEPE

Treasure train

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CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO: The Chihuahua al Pacifico train, known affectionately to locals as El Chepe, travels 657 kilometres through the Sierra Madre Mountains, home to a network of 20 canyon systems known collectively as Baranca del Cobre or the Copper Canyon.

From your comfortable seat aboard Mexico's only passenger rail service you survey grand vistas and grow to appreciate the slowly snaking genius of a train that employs 86 tunnels and 37 bridges in a 2,400-metre drop to sea level. Standouts include the nearly mile-long La Perla tunnel which makes a 180-degree turn inside a mountain, and the Chinipas Bridge whose 104-metre height inspires passengers to applaud when the train safely reaches the other side.

You will not, however, taste the best gorditas in Mexico, meet the area's original inhabitants, be among the first to ride the brand new gondola into one of the deepest sections of the canyon system, or tour the most remote museum of any distinction that you're likely to discover anywhere in the country. To do that, you're going to have to get off the train.

Sadly, few of the tens of thousands of tourists who book passage on one of North America's most scenic rail journeys make any stops before reaching the end of the line. However, several new attractions and a wonderfully accommodating pricing policy make it increasingly enticing to do so.

While first-class trains skip many stations, all economy-class trains (which are identical except that there are no carpets, no dining car, and they cost 1,000 pesos or \$82 less) make all 15 stops, and there's no additional charge for getting on and off at up to three stations along the way.

Beginning from Chihuahua City, here's where — and why — to get off the train.

■ Creel

Hidden Treasures: Staying with a Tarahumara family, world-class art, and a 30-metre waterfall.

Take a bus or a cab from Creel to Cusárare (which means "Place of the Eagles") and enjoy the 20-minute drive on a paved road past gorgeous Lake Arareko then

through forests, meadows and rock formations reminiscent of California's Sierra Nevada.

Cusárare is a village of Tarahumara or Raramuri people, and while time hasn't exactly forgotten Cusárare, they haven't spoken in a while. Hand-tilled fields and single room mud and stone homes are still the norm. Old traditions are still very much alive here but accounts of this minority group's aloof, even elusive nature have been highly exaggerated.

In Cusárare, the Raramuri will be particularly proud to point you in the direction of the Loyola Museum (15 pesos/\$1.25 U.S.) which was opened in 2004 and is now the stylish and protective home of more than 40 oil paintings of saints and other religious icons rescued from various missions in the area.

Among the Mexican masters represented is Miguel Correa, whose series of 12 paintings depicting the life of the Virgin Mary has been called, "a truly spectacular series of incomparable historical and artistic value," by one Smithsonian Institute expert.

You will also be welcomed into the home of Berta Parra, a Raramuri woman who has opened up some basic rooms for travelers and called them Cabañas Arollo Cusárare. Look for the turquoise blue house at the far end of town right on the banks of a creek (around \$20 including meals). You'll share the family's simple bathroom but also be invited into their kitchen for delicious meals.

A local bus will take you from Cusárare town to the turn off for the nearby Cascada Cusárare where a flat, scenic one hour walk delivers you to the top of the waterfall. Another five minutes down a short trail to the bottom of the falls offers even more dramatic views and a cooling mist before the walk back out.

■ Divisadero

Hidden Treasures: The best gorditas in Mexico, a challenging hike into the deepest canyon, and a jaw-dropping new gondola ride.

As soon as you disembark onto the Divisadero platform you will be met by lovely ladies selling a selection of homemade gorditas — thick fried ground corn patties that are sliced open and filled with your choice of meats, beans, vegetables and salsas (less than \$2 each). It does not matter which stand you choose: these are all by far the best gorditas in Mexico.

Eat well because the 19 km round-trip hike into the canyon from the nearby town of Areponápuchi drops 1,300 metres from the rim to

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El Chepe:
This gargantuan engineering project, which was begun in 1863 and suffered many setbacks and changes, including a total shutdown of work due to the Mexican Revolution of 1914, took nearly 100 years to complete. The line was finally finished and opened by the government in 1961. The Chp (Chihuahua al Pacifico, or El Chepe) was privatized in 1998, being taken over by the private rail franchise Ferromex.

El Chepe's modern route measures just over 650 kilometres of track between Chihuahua City and Los Mochis on the coast. The scenery, running past rivers and lakes from the coast into the deep chasms of the Copper Canyon System in the state of Chihuahua, is breathtaking.

— Guide Mexico
(www.guidemexico.info)

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Chihuahua planning gondola extension

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the Urique River below. It's steep, hot, rocky and challenging and requires good hiking boots and a good guide. Hikers are rewarded with ever-changing flora and fauna as they pass through different temperate zones and with the chance to spend the night on the sandy banks of the Urique River, of which most visitors only catch fleeting glimpses from above.

Don't want to work that hard? In August the Chihuahua state government will unveil a \$33 million gondola system and for around \$25 you will climb into a 60-person car at a station on the rim in Divisadero and descend 2.5 km to a mesa in the middle of the canyon where a bar and restaurant, mountain biking, horseback riding, and walking trails will await you.

The Chihuahua government plans to extend the gondola system all the way down to the Urique River in the bottom of the canyon by 2011, creating the third longest gondola system in the world at around five kilometres from rim to river.

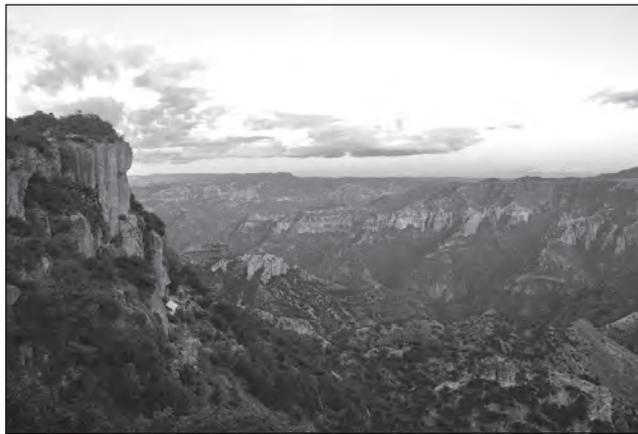
■ Bahuichivo

Hidden Treasures: A heart-thumping drive, shockingly fresh shrimp, and a free zip-line.

Gallego Viewpoint above Cerocahui, about 48 km from the station, has just been renovated with new viewing areas, new guardrails and new bathrooms. Even before these improvements it was one of the best spots to look into and across Urique Canyon, the deepest in the Copper Canyon network.

From Gallego Viewpoint take a deep breath and continue down to the town of Urique on the canyon floor, reached only after navigating the twists, turns, narrow sections, blind corners, speeding on-coming traffic, sheer drop-offs, and conspicuous absence of guardrails via a dirt road which descends 1,200 metres in just 24 km.

Once in Urique head straight for Restaurante Plaza on the main street for an enormous stone goblet full of aguachile, a delicious cross between gazpacho and spicy shrimp cocktail made with fresh shrimp driven in daily from the fishing village of Los Mochis on the coast (\$5.50).



THE sunset momentarily turns the Copper Canyon pink near Areponápuchi.

A short but exhilarating zip line was recently installed just outside Cerocahui. This spans a small side canyon and is free, as long as the government employee assigned to operate it is around.

■ El Fuerte

Hidden Treasures: Bird-watching, bass fishing and petroglyphs.

El Chepe continues on to Los Mochis but ending (or beginning) your journey 80 km from there in El Fuerte lets you enjoy the substantial charms of one of the latest towns to receive Pueblo Magico status from the Mexican government in recognition of its cultural, historical, and architectural qualities.

A guided trip down the lazy Rio Fuerte provides sightings of some of the area's more than 60 species of birds including ospreys, the bare-throated tiger heron, the russet-crowned motmot, and the great black hawk. Break up the float with a short jungle walk to view the ancient Nahuatl petroglyphs which are believed to have been shaken from their original lofty perch atop Cerro de la Mascara (Mask Hill) during an earthquake. The inscribed rocks



photo Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers' Goup

A Raramuri girl cooks tortillas for breakfast at Cabañas Arolo in a traditional home in Cusárare.

now lay scattered far down the slopes in protected areas that are easily reached just inland from the river.

El Fuerte has also become a destination for bass fishermen eager to match wits with the area's largemouth and black bass. There's even an annual international fishing competition held here.

If you go:

For full details of El Chepe tickets and timetables see www.chepe.com.mx/ing_html/index.html

Start (or end) your journey with a night or two at the Hotel San Filipe Real in Chihuahua (doubles from \$75, www.sanfelipeelreal.com/). This charmer is the city's only boutique hotel and it's located just a five minute cab ride from the train station.

If you don't want the basics of a Raramuri home stay in the town of Cusárare, book a night at the nearby Sierra Madre Lodge at the start of the trail to Cascada Cusárare. Run by Raramuri staff, this long, low stretch of rooms with a communal porch has tiled bathrooms, chairs and benches crafted out of gnarled and polished tree limbs and trunks plus wood-burning stoves and fireplaces. What the lodge doesn't have is electricity (from \$100 per person per night including meals, 1-800-648-8488, www.coppercanyonlodges.com/coppercanyon/lodginginfo.htm#sierra).

Hotel Jade (doubles \$22, www.jadetourshotel.webatu.com/eng.html), right on the square in Cerocahui, is spotlessly clean and more than comfortably appointed. Owner Alberto Lopez speaks great English and will be on the platform ready to pick you up at the Bahuichivo train station about 48 km from Cerocahui. Alberto can also guide and drive you from Cerocahui down to the town of Urique and back (\$30 per person).

The eclectically decorated rooms and suites in a 350-year-old former hacienda make Hotel Torres del Fuerte the most chic and most historic digs in El Fuerte (699-893-1974, www.hotelesstorres.com/ing/index.php for rates). Contact Chico for guided fishing, bird watching, and petroglyph trips (698-893-9120 or 698-106-3146).

For tours call Dave Hensleigh, guide and owner of Authentic Copper Canyon (www.authenticcoppercanyon.com). Dave runs a regular roster of set tours (including his new Blue Corn Express culinary itineraries with chefs from the U.S. and local cooks). Dave also uses his hands-on experience and contacts in the Copper Canyon (he's there an average of 16 weeks a year) to build custom tours.

