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 Chihuahua al Pacífico, 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 canyons of the Copper Canyon System in the state of Chihuahua, is breathtaking.

— Guide Mexico (www.guicomexico.info)

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

Karen Catchpole
Contributing Writer

CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO: The Chihuahua al Pacífico 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 Peña tunnel which makes a 180-degree turn inside a mountain, and the Chimapas 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 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.

Cred
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”) for 19 km round-trip hike into the canyon from the nearby town of Aparicio. Gorditas 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 Aparicio (around $20 including meals). You’ll share the family’s simple bathroom but also be invited into their kitchen for delicious meals.

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.

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

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TRAVEL

Chihuahua planning gondola extension

From page 29

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 by a dirt road which descends 1,200 metres down to the town of Urique on the canyon floor, reached only by a dirt road which descends 1,200 metres and is free, as long as the government employee assigned to operate it is around.

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 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.sanfilipepereal.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/coppercanyons/lodginginfo.htm#sierra).

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Hotel Jade (doubles $22, www.jadetownhotel.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).


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.