



Mirador Cerro del Gallego affords outstanding views of Urique canyon

tour operators offer mountain bike and kayaking excursions. High-end outfits like National Geographic offer exclusive train tours with expert guides.

Let's Get Lost in the Sierra Tarahumara

Story and photos by Jane Onstott

*Jane Onstott is currently updating **The Unofficial Guide to Mexico's Coastal Resorts** with author Maribeth Mellin. A second edition of **Jane's National Geographic Traveler Mexico** is to come out in late 2005.*

Volcanic rock resists erosion, but succumbs eventually to the combined forces of wind, rain, time. Geologic time is slow; change is constant yet imperceptible. The six major crevasses that comprise the Copper Canyon – more accurately known as the Sierra Tarahumara – were carved over a period of about 60 million years. Communities there are isolated by terrain and to some degree by choice, and they also resist change.

Until now, tourism to this 25,000-square-mile region in the southwest quarter of Chihuahua State has been light – a trickle of train- and nature-lovers. For better or for worse, however, the Copper Canyon is today more accessible than ever. Chihuahua State tourism officials are systematically luring national and international travelers to this once-exotic destination. The number of visitors nearly doubled between 1998 and 2003. Adventure

The system of mountains and canyons was carved up by more than a half dozen rivers, which today continue to wind through the canyons to eventually drain into the Pacific Ocean. The largest river, Río Verde, drains Sinforosa Canyon, the narrowest of the system's major canyons and one of the least explored. It's also the second deepest (5,856 feet), second only to Urique, more than 6,000 feet. Four of the Sierra Tarahumara's six main canyons are deeper than Arizona's Grand Canyon, however it's their narrow width in relation to depth that make for fantastic scenery and super scary rides (bus, car, burro, horse, mountain bike) and hikes from the rim to the canyon floor.

Mining Moguls and Missionaries

The first Europeans to settle this magnificent but unmerciful land were mining entrepreneurs who – in order to maximize profit – immediately enslaved the local Indians. In a scenario reenacted throughout Mesoamerica, deplorable living and working conditions and introduced diseases like measles and smallpox soon decimated the

Continued on page 2

Once Upon a Time in San Cristobal, Part II

by Lynne Doyle

*Lynne Doyle is a frequent contributor to **Mexico File**. She lives in Maine and travels to Mexico frequently in search of folk art. She contributed a two-part article, *Something's Afoot in Mexico*, for the March and April 2004 issues of **Mexico File**. Her recent visit to San Cristobal, which she describes in this article, began with Part I, which appeared in the May 2004 issue. Lynne will be writing a series of articles on little-known gems of Mexico called "Las Joyas de Mexico," which will debut in the July 2004 issue.*

Another day we took a bus to the outlying village of San Juan Chamula, even higher up into the mountains, expressly to visit its colonial era church, now known as the Ceremonial Center of Chamula. It was explained to us on the way that the state of Chiapas is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural, and is unique in Mexican culture in the way its peoples have blended their pre-Hispanic beliefs with colonial Catholicism. It contains nine separate socioeconomic regions,

Continued on page 4

La Iglesia de San Juan Chamula, the non-denominational, synchronistic church in Chamula where local shamans are consulted and their recommended rituals enacted



INSIDE	Más o Menos	2
	Book Review	5
	Editor's Note	8
	About Mexico	8



Ironically, the two biggest beneficiaries of the tragedy that was 9/11 have absolutely nothing in common. Halliburton, the U.S. defense contractor recently headed by vice-president Dick Cheney has secured most of the war support and rebuilding contracts, and Mexico tourism is experiencing a significant increase in visitors looking for a safe place to sojourn. I guess I could opine a little further on this, but every time I get a little political I get some profane-laced email – so I’ll just leave it at that.

Mexico’s Tourism Ministry has admitted that they saw 9/11 as an opportunity to attract North America travelers who are going to go somewhere. They figured, rightly so, that Mexico’s proximity and neutral political position would be a natural destination for those wanting to minimize the chances of getting blown out of the sky, sarin-gassed in a subway, or suicide-bombed at a taco stand.

After two years of decreasing tourism revenues, 2003 saw an increase to \$9.5 billion in receipts, placing Mexico 10th in the world, up from 13th. More Americans are planning shorter trips, scheduling them closer to departure dates, and taking along their families.

Mexico has responded by increased advertising, building and remodeling many resort properties, and upgrading their highway system for those who like to road-trip. I can say from personal experience that the new resorts I have seen are comparable to the best in the world and the service industry has improved immensely in the past ten years. I don’t know about you, but I kind of like being given a cold margarita as I’m checking into a hotel. The last time I visited a Vegas hotel I felt lucky to be given my room key.

The most convincing evidence that tourist traffic is increasing is that the airlines are scheduling new routes into Mexico. It seems like every time I have flown south in the past year the plane was sold out. Thankfully, Halliburton doesn’t offer commercial flights.



Tarahumara *Continued*

native people. Once home to nearly 40 different tribal groups, northern Mexico was only sparsely populated by indigenous people by the end of the colonial era.



A typical Sierra Tarahumara church

Those hardy individuals who did survive had little use for the European missionaries who arrived in the early 1700s looking for souls to save. Patient as well as stubbornly brave, the Jesuits eventually succeeded in layering Catholic rituals onto the native worldview. But the controversial and successful religious order was the object of envy among other religious orders, and the Jesuits were abruptly expelled from the New World in 1767.

Today’s Tarahumara

The Jesuits’ forced evacuation left a void in religious leadership among the isolated mountain and canyon communities of the Sierra Madre. As a result, the Tarahumara developed a synergistic brand of Catholicism that incorporates ancient beliefs and rites. Feast days honoring patron saints are ushered in with drumming and dancing. The men get righteously drunk on the native corn beer, *tesguino*, to pay homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe during her extended December feast. Easter, the most important holiday of the Christian church, celebrates the beginning of the planting season, or the renewal of life through life-giving corn, as well as the resurrection of Christ.



Tarahumara women sell their wares

Isolated and self-reliant, the Tarahumara concern themselves little with material things. Human relations are valued more than belongings. In fact, one of the worst sins among traditional Tarahumara is hoarding. Buildings are often constructed cooperatively, with the beneficiaries providing food and drink. Their language has no swear words.

Although they gather to celebrate holy days and for community projects, the Tarahumara generally live in far-flung family units instead of towns. Even today semi-nomadic, traditional families have multiple dwellings. During the winter, when forests near the rim can be covered in snow, homes deep within the canyons are snug, and surrounding fields and orchards support crops. When summer storms bring flash floods and withering heat, families move to simple wooden houses – and to a lesser extent, to large, open-sided caves – closer to the canyons’ rims.

Called Tarahumara by the Spaniards, this native group calls itself Rarámuri, which translates loosely as “People Who Run.” And run they do, sometimes carrying heavy loads up and down the steep trails between home and pasture or between one home and another. In recent years Tarahumara men have entered and won international marathons and 100-mile endurance races without any particular training for the event. Most men now wear modern Western attire instead of the traditional white cotton breechcloths and billowy shirts, but women still wear full, gathered skirts and blouses of bright print fabric.



Fifteen years ago more men and boys wore traditional clothing

Modern Age Ushered in on the Rails

The Sierra Tarahumara became accessible to outsiders only with the completion of the *Chihuahua al Pacífico* railroad, an incredible engineering endeavor requiring 90 years and about USD\$90 million. The first tracks of the narrow-gauge railway were laid at the turn of the 20th

Continued on page 3

century during the ebullient presidency of Porfirio Díaz. Both Mexican and American companies contributed to construction over the years until their rights were purchased by the Mexican government, which finally finished the project in 1961.

Since the railroad was sold to a private company in 1998, both the tracks and the train cars have been revamped. Traversing innumerable switchbacks and hair-raising loops as well as 37 bridges and 86 tunnels, the train journey is great fun for kids as well as adults. There's a dining car with reasonably good food and a bar where smokers can puff away. Smokers also congregate between train cars, sharing the noisy, shifting platforms with photographers looking for clear access to the scenery.



The Chihuahua al Pacífico train

Riding the Rails, and Adventures Beyond the Tracks

The 14- to 17-hour, 400-mile train trip can be done in one shot, although taking this approach you'd miss out on some wonderful experiences. Along the way there are homey Western-style lodges with incredible views, and each year there are more opportunities for hiking, biking, and rock climbing. Hanging out with family or friends in front of a roaring fire is as worthwhile an endeavor as any. Easy walks and van tours lead you to wildflower-strewn meadows where Tarahumara children tend herds of goats. Women in bright cotton skirts and blouses cook over open fires in rudimentary kitchens or – mainly for the benefit of tourists – in the caves that were once their primary dwellings. Blue skies and unusual rock formations paint a brilliant background.

Naturalists will find fascinating the variety of plants and animals found in the Copper Canyon. Hummingbirds, parrots, and macaws inhabit the subtropical lowlands where palms and orchids thrive next to various kinds of cactus. Roadrunners race through mesquite forests; rattlers and white-tailed deer do their thing in the pine-oak forests. At the highest elevations, hawks and

golden eagles soar easily on updrafts and feed their young in nests atop ancient pines.

It doesn't cost extra to make stopovers along the train route, but you should book them in advance and reiterate your itinerary when purchasing the train ticket. I recommend skipping Los Mochis and boarding the train in El Fuerte. Spend the night before there, and stop for one or more nights in Cerocahui (Bahuichivo Station), El Divisadero, and Creel. More adventurous souls can design trips to some of the lesser known canyons (see the Reading List, on page 7, for suggestions about exploring these) with local guides. If you want the exercise but not the legwork involved in individual trip planning, check out the adventure outfitters. At least a dozen U.S. operators now lead Copper Canyon expeditions centered around mountain biking, birding, hiking, and rafting.

Among the best-known adventure travel outfitters with Copper Canyon itineraries are Outpost Wilderness Adventure, Umarike Expeditions, Mountain Travel Sobek, and Nichols Expeditions. National Geographic offers a high-end tour with expert naturalists aboard the American Orient Express; the Sierra Madre Express is another deluxe train tour. Copper Canyon Adventures, The California Native Canyon Travel, and Lindblad offer bus and van tours. Rosen Rides leads motorcycle expeditions to the area. The Mexican tour operators Felgueres, Rojo y Casavantes, and Turismo al Mar have been leading trips to the Copper Canyon for many years.

Ready to Roll

Although a *Chihuahua al Pacífico* rail adventure can be undertaken in either direction between Chihuahua City and Los Mochis, traveling west to east promises the most spectacular canyon scenery during daylight hours. The landscape changes substantially during the 400-mile journey. Rich alluvial plains near the coast have fields of alfalfa, sugar cane, rice, and cotton going full tilt. These give way to foothills covered in twisted scrub oak and aromatic mesquite, and soon riders are glimpsing the first of the magnificent canyons. The most spectacular scenery is seen between Témoris and Creel stations. The railway gains nearly 3,500 feet in elevation in just 85 miles, so it's no surprise that this stretch boasts the most astonishing engineering feats as well.

Just beyond Creel is Ojitos, the highest point of the train ride at 8,071 feet. After that the train begins a steady descent to the prairies and cultivated fields around Chihuahua City, the state's capital. The Creel to Chihuahua leg can just as easily be accomplished by bus as by

train, as the scenery is mostly the same, and buses run more frequently.

A busy commercial city, Los Mochis, the train's western terminus, is often sweltering and not terribly attractive. Most tourists come exclusively to board the train, which decamps with a great belch at 6 AM. If you have time to kill in Los Mochis, sightseeing options include a bay tour out of Topolobampo to see birds and dolphins; birdwatching and sea lion tours to Isla del Farallón; offshore fishing near Isla del Farallón; and countryside tours to plantations and small towns near Ahome.

About 50 miles east of Los Mochis and 600 feet above sea level, El Fuerte is more intimate and historic and has more things to do. Also, by spending the night in El Fuerte you can sleep later the next morning, as the train makes its first stop there at 7:40 AM. Founded by the young Spanish explorer Francisco de Ibarra in the mid-16th century, El Fuerte served as a trading post for several centuries and is now dedicated mainly to agriculture and tourism. Some of the town's most impressive homes have been turned into hotels.

Things to do in and around this picturesque colonial town include visiting petroglyphs outside town and soaking in hot springs around Choix, about 30 miles to the northeast. Float or kayak on the Río Fuerte to see native and migratory birds, fish for black bass on El Fuerte Lake, or take a guided or unguided bike tour of El Fuerte. Copper Canyon Adventures (tel. 698/893-0915, www.coppercanyonadventures.com) leads local tours as well as excursions into the canyons.



Preparing the inflatable boat for a El Fuerte River float

Cerocahui and Urique Canyon

The next train station with tourist accommodations nearby is Bahuichivo. A handful of hotels in and around the small town of Cerocahui send drivers to pick up guests. Otherwise you can board a dilapidated bus for a long, bumpy ride to Urique, at the canyon's base.

Continued on page 6

each with its own capital city. The region around San Cristobal is known as the Highlands because of its 7,000-foot altitude. The villages all have their own particular Indian cultures, each of which distinguishes itself from the others by three things – its language, its clothes, and its patron saint.

Local tradition in Chamula holds that their patron saint, John the Baptist himself, chose the site for the village's Tzotzil ceremonial center. Their language is Tzotzil and their dress is distinguished by the heavy black wool wraparound skirts worn by the women. (Spanish is their second language and while it is taught to the children who go to school, Tzotzil is the language spoken in Chamulan homes.) The economic basis of the town is agricultural, with the growing of fruits and



A pair of Chamulan village elders in traditional dress. These men are two of a group of civil servant-like officials responsible for monitoring local disputes and upholding village regulations. They can also sometimes be shamans.

vegetables, and it has a traditional Mayan social structure based on the mythological concepts of sun, moon, corn and the forces of nature, combined with Catholic religious influence. This clash of ancient Mayan religion and Catholicism is referred to in social studies of the area as synchrotism (according to Sergio Castro). The Mayans of the region were enslaved, but their religion was not forgotten – rather it was blended with the teachings of the Catholic clergy, and what has resulted is an interesting amalgam of both. The people of Chamula acknowledge only one of the seven sacraments, that of Baptism, and have rejected the other six. Once a year, on June 14th, a priest arrives at the ceremonial center to perform all baptisms of children born during the past year. There is no holy marriage, only civil; there are no priests and no holy mass is observed. Chamulans worship some traditional Catholic saints, but their manifestations often include characteristics of ancient Mayan gods and goddesses. Sheep are considered sacred and are never used as food, only for their wool.



A private altar found in the home of a Zinacantan vendor who sold us some weavings. I found it noteworthy that the Virgin of Guadalupe is honored even here in these remote mountains. The seashells on the front of the altar represent the weaver's mother's love of the sea

In this village, sheep are tended only by women and children, and when a sheep dies, it is buried with special ceremony.

The single church serving hundreds of Indians from the surrounding mountains is completely non-denominational. There are no pews, and no altar or stations of the cross, but there is a large statue of Saint John decorated with red and yellow ribbons. The Virgin Mary has a place in the observances of these people, but as a saint, not as the Mother of God, as the Indians consider the concept of a virgin birth ridiculous. She is honored during the week before Easter, called Santa Semana, where festivals of varying kinds are held, although none having anything to do with Easter, as throughout the rest of Mexico. The Catholic trinity is represented by Saints Peter, John and Sebastian, and while representations of a Christian cross are found throughout the village, they do not represent the Trinity, but rather North, South, East and West, and are used for protection against evil spirits.



The pair of Chamulan crosses, representing North, South, East and West, that guard Iglesia de San Juan Chamula against evil spirits. They are draped in pine boughs, believed to aid in warding off these spirits

Villagers pray three times a day, as three is considered a sacred number because of the representational Trinity. The pine tree is considered sacred and aids in protection, so crosses are often found erected in pairs or threes and adorned with pine boughs.

The colonial-era décor on the walls of the church remains, but the church is completely open. Petitioners come

to consult the village shamans only, and all ceremony takes place in small groups on the floor, each headed by its own shaman who leads the group in chanting. Shamans can be male or female, are considered to be physicians as well as priests, and are consulted about all matters of health and spirit. The principle is achieving balance of body and spirit – sins and illness can break balance, and it is the job of the shaman, upon consultation with the petitioner, to determine what changes are necessary to regain balance. Instead of masses, healing rituals using candles, eggs, chickens and – interestingly – coca cola are observed, and many can be conducted simultaneously within the huge structure. Depending on the problem as determined by the shaman, candles of specific size and color are



The candlelit interior of Iglesia de San Juan Chamula. Each group is petitioning its shaman; the varied size and color of the candles represent different problems and solutions

placed in precise positions and burned. In some extreme cases, a chicken can be sacrificed and its blood used to aid in achieving balance. Originally, a dark liquid derived from black corn was used to make a beverage used as a kind of holy water, but the corn was a hybrid and difficult to grow, so Coca Cola, which is also black and contains sugar, can be substituted when appropriately blessed. It is further valuable as it is believed that burping expels illness. Healings take place on every day of the year. Visitors are permitted inside to observe, but no photographs, with or without flash, are permitted (although a postcard of the interior of the church is available).



A shaman and his petitioners conducting a healing ritual in La Iglesia de San Juan Chamula

Clinics provide vaccinations for children and information regarding birth control, AIDS prevention and cancer are dispensed to women, although healers forbid any practice of birth control. According to the Mexican reformation of the 1970's, which included a plan to eradicate illiteracy throughout the country, the government provides free primary, secondary and college educations to all qualified students. At age 6, all children are required to be sent to school, where they are taught to read



A Chamulan baby at the village market wrapped in some of her mother's weavings to protect her from the rain



Two little Zinacantan girls posing for us for pesos



Four Chamulan teenage girls – I found myself wishing they would sell the wonderful colored rebozos they wear instead of the black and white ones they seem to think the tourists prefer



A traditional Zinacantan wedding dress decorated with the white feathers that symbolize freedom

and write Spanish and their native language, as well as some math and science. The Mexican constitution requires this, but in these Indian villages, parents decide whether to send their children. In these societies, the age of seven is considered adult for males, and the time when they begin to farm alongside their fathers, and ten is considered adult for girls, who then learn to cook and weave.

On the way back from Chamula, we stopped in the village of Zinacantan further down the mountain. This village also speaks the Tzotzil language, but otherwise, there are significant differences. The patron saint here is St. Lawrence, the economy is based on the growing of flowers for export, and the adult costumes are made of cotton instead of wool. (The climate is amazingly much warmer for such a short distance away.) There are no shamans here – the social origin is Aztec and Catholicism is practiced here, although there is still only civil marriage. Shamans in this village work in people's homes and not in the church. Because of the economic base of flowers and the presence of huge flower-growing cooperatives, the clothes of the people of this village all have flowers on them, and almost all of the weaving incorporates some sort of floral design. Of particular interest is the bridal costume of this village – it is decorated with actual feathers as well as floral designs and the symbolism represents freedom – I thought an interesting concept for Indian women.

I found these villages fascinating. We all have heard of areas in Mexico where pre-Hispanic beliefs have been incorporated into Catholicism (or vice-versa), but this was my first time seeing this in action. We were fortunate to meet on the bus a woman on her way to Chamula to work in the clinic who explained all of this to us – I'm not sure how much I would have understood without her. She further explained that the issue of language is crucial and part of the reason the Indian societies of Chiapas have been able to maintain their individual traditions. It is prohibited for Chiapanecans who speak different languages to marry. I immediately asked if this precept wasn't ever violated and was met with a blank stare and the reply that "No, it is not necessary." Hard to believe, but in my view, the people of at least these two villages have sincerely managed to keep their traditions alive and are not just trotting the clothes and weavings out for the tourists. As we traveled throughout Chiapas, we saw many Chamulans in the tropical zones selling their weavings still wearing their heavy wool skirts. Of course, we also saw many Chiapanecan young people who have totally rejected their traditions wearing contemporary clothes and working at jobs in tourism far away from their villages.

Continued on page 6

BOOK REVIEW



Bus Across Mexico,
by Robert Berryhill.
Bengi Publishing, 2001,
230 pages, \$19.95.
ISBN: 0970097956.

Reviewed by Gordon Jett

Bus Me, Baby!

In 2001 Mike and Terry Church published a book that would revolutionize RV camping in Mexico. It was accurate, thorough, and made you want to grab a toothbrush and hit the road.

Now a guy named Robert Berryhill has done the same thing for bus travelers! Who knew that Mexico has the largest and most efficient bus system in the *world*? I've lived in Mexico for ten years and didn't know that.

It seems that there are over 800 bus lines in Mexico and that their schedules are controlled by a single master computer. I would have guessed that they could change schedules on a whim, but that isn't so. Berryhill does a masterful job in collating tons of information that makes it easy to pick your destination anywhere in Mexico. And the key is that you can count on the schedules he prints. Pick your destination and Berryhill tells you the location of the bus terminal, the times of departure, the travel time, the cost, and the amenities at the terminal and on the bus. He even tells you how to pronounce your destination and provides a bus traveler's Spanish vocabulary.

When you think of a Mexican bus you probably envision a recycled school bus, belching smoke and filled with screaming kids, goats and chickens. They do exist, but only way, way into the country. Inter-city "Executive Class" busses these days are built by Mercedes-Benz. They often have just three rows of seats across. The seats recline almost to horizontal, and they have hostesses and provide snacks and clean restrooms! Air-conditioned, of course, and many provide "in flight" movies. All for a fraction of the cost of flying!

Bus Across Mexico by Robert Berryhill is available from Amazon.com, and if you're a Mexicophile like me, it could be the best twenty bucks you've ever spent. I'm thinking of trading in my old motor home for a bus ticket to Cancun!





A weaver in Zinacantan using a backstrap loom also wears an example of the traditional flowered serape she is making

At one point, we met a young girl of nineteen called Anita who spoke to us of her efforts to educate herself while simultaneously remaining true to her Chamulan traditions. Wearing her tribal clothes, she comes into San Cristobal every day to sell her family's weavings in the zocalo in the morning and attend school in the afternoon. Unable to be spared from her family's work as a child, she is now attempting the equivalent of a GED with the hope of someday becoming a teacher. She also explained a program sponsored by the Mexican government to remote areas called tele-secondaria, which involves going to a specific site and attending classes broadcast on television. She does not as yet study English, but we were able to communicate in Spanish as she explained her situation to me. She has battled with her father to avoid marriage but is fortunately supported by her mother. To earn extra money, she visits the hotels of San Cristobal with a pad and pencil and takes orders for special woven monogrammed pens for tourists. She has everyone write the names



The charming and beautiful Anita, who posed for me despite her tribe's superstitions regarding photography

they want and delivers the pens the following morning. From our hotel, she had nearly fifty orders and somehow managed to finish them all overnight. Plus she is gorgeous.

Overall, a visit to the highlands of Chiapas is unlike anywhere else I have been in Mexico. The scenery alone makes it unique, but the

Continued on page 8

Cerocahui is a diminutive mission town where holy days are celebrated at the pink limestone church built by the Jesuits in 1680. From Cerocahui, local outfitters can arrange expeditions on foot or horseback to see a variety of attractions, including Yepáravo waterfall, the old Sangre de Cristo gold mine, and Indian burial caves. They also can arrange trips to Urique, at the bottom of the eponymous canyon. You can spot it – glinting in the sun next to the lazily curving Urique River – from the incredible lookout point Mirador Cerro del Gallego.

Into the Canyon

At 1,640 feet above sea level – and about 6,000 feet below the canyon's rim – Urique was established as a mining town along the upper portion of the system's deepest canyon. The inhabitants of this area were the first of the canyon groups to be conquered by the Spanish. A peaceful riverside settlement with a few historic buildings and a laconic air, Urique has only been connected to Cerocahui, by dirt-and-gravel road, since the mid-1970s.

There's plenty to occupy the adventurous traveler who reaches Urique on foot or horseback, or by bus or truck. Visit the Santa María de Monserrat Church, especially lively around September 8, feast day of its patron saint. Hike to hidden El Fuerte Canyon, rarely visited by tourists, or to ruins or villages closer to town. Swim in the river, hike lateral canyons, or arrange ahead of time to go rock climbing or mountain biking. In the wet season you can go rafting along the Urique and Fuerte rivers. Urique has several simple lodgings where you can get – you guessed it – simple meals.

Cerocahui itself has several charming lodges. Right across from the mission church, the Hotel Misión (tel. 668/818-7046, ext. 432, www.mexicoscoppercanyon.com) is part of the Balderrama chain – the Fred Harveys of the Copper Canyon. Outside town on the road to the train station, Paraiso del Oso (tel. 800/884-3107 in the U.S., www.mexicohorse.com) is owned by American Doug Rhodes and his wife Ana, who is from the area. Doug



Rustic comfort outside Cerocahui at Paraiso del Oso lodge

is a good contact for horse rides throughout the area. Meals are included at both lodgings.

The Great Divide

The train's 15-minute stop at El Divisadero isn't long enough. There's hardly time to admire the magnificent canyon views, let alone to take photos or buy handcrafts from the Tarahumara who set up on straw mats their reasonably priced wares. The most common items for sale are burnished clay pots, carved wooden bowls and trinkets, and pine needle baskets. Divisadero offers miles of panoramic views and opportunities to walk, hike, and ride horses into the Urique, Oteros, and Copper Canyons. Hike to Lago Pilares, a pretty lake nestled in pinewoods, or to the lookout point for Piedra Volada: an enormous rock that seems to hang in the air.



Classic canyon view from El Divisadero

Named for the Continental Divide that it straddles, El Divisadero has three charming lodges with excellent views. Three miles to the west, at Areponapuchi, are two other comfortable lodgings. "El Uno" Ecolodge is Tarahumara-owned. There are no restaurants in the area; each hotel serves guests in its wood-timbered dining room. El Divisadero is now accessible by road from Creel, 30 miles to the west, and from Cerocahui, 42 miles south.

Creel: Canyon Gateway

Creel was founded in 1907 during construction of the railroad. During the early days of tourism, in the 1970s and 80s, burros and horses were as common as pickups on the town's few dusty streets. Today there is a higher ratio of four-wheeled to four-legged transport, but the streets are still dusty in

Continued on page 7



A diminutive donkey waits for its owner

Tarahumara *Continued*

the dry season and muddy when it rains or snows.

Although the town itself is not terribly scenic, it has the best infrastructure for canyon excursions both major and minor, as well as tour operators and local guides. Several shops sell authentic Tarahumara violins, baskets, woodcarvings, and other items. Creel is a good base for treks into Copper, Oteros, Candameña, Batopilas, and Tararecua Canyons. It's a long day trip to Basaeachic National Park, where you can see Mexico's first and second highest waterfalls. There are basic lodgings there for those who don't want to hurry back the same day.

Five miles from Creel within a small valley, San Ignacio de Arareko is an enclave of Tarahumara homes attached to a sweet mission church. Walks, hikes, and bike rides in the surrounding area can be arranged in Creel. A common tour includes visits to Bisabirachi, which in the Tarahumara language means "Place of Erect Penises": a reference to its monolithic rock formations. (Tourism folk call it the Valley of Monks; go figure.) Also included on most tours are Valle de Hongos (Valley of Mushrooms), Valle de Ranas (Valley of Frogs), and other areas where huge rocks have weathered to resemble different shapes. A brief stop is usually made at Lake Arareko, where visitors are accosted by shy but persistent Tarahumara women and children selling souvenirs. The lake is worth spending more time than most tours allow, and it's possible to rent rowboats for fishing or to bike the perimeter.

Another popular outing from Creel is Cusárare, with its appealing mission church and religious art museum. Cusárare Falls is

a bit disappointing in the dry season but quite pretty the rest of the year; it's about a two-mile hike through a pine-oak forest. About 15 minutes outside Creel, Cusárare has a wonderful lodge called the Copper Canyon Sierra Lodge (800/776-3942 in the U.S., www.sierratrail.com). There's no electricity, so neither phones nor TV will distract you from reconnecting with the alpine surroundings. Yummy meals are served in the dining room, where a giant fire often roars on the hearth.

Other excursions are bit farther afield. The Recohuata Hot Springs have been channeled into four cement swimming pools among pine, poplar, and oak trees. Go for the day or camp out under the starry sky. Rukiraso Waterfall, at the head of Tararecua Canyon, is accessible by mountain bike or high-clearance vehicle.

Creel has no fancy hotels, and the only chain is an uninspiring Best Western. Margarita's (tel. 635/456-0045) and Margarita's Plaza Mexicana (tel. 635/456-0245) are both inexpensive hotels with genuinely friendly staff and low-key, pleasant accommodations. My favorite restaurant in Creel is Tungar, the no-frills "Hangover Hospital," which serves delicious pozole and stingray tostadas. It's directly across from the train station.



Valley of the Mushrooms, outside Creel

Named for a former Chihuahua governor, Creel is also the jumping off point for trips to Batopilas: 75 miles and five hair-raising hours away at the base of Batopilas Canyon. Precious metals were discovered there in the late-17th century and, amazingly, this was the second place in the country, after Mexico City, to get electricity. Buildings constructed during the Porfiriato have a grandiose air that is quite incongruous with the modest, isolated Batopilas of today. One of these was the home of Alexander Shepherd, a

mining entrepreneur largely responsible for Batopilas' successes. The aqueduct built to supply the town and the mines is still in use today. In addition to these sites, don't neglect to visit Satevó Cathedral, four miles away. Walking downriver from Batopilas, it's quite a shock to come across this attractive, multi-domed church beyond a bend in the river. Documents referring to the church's original construction have been lost, and no one seems to know why the church was built here, far from any indigenous population.

Avid hikers can trek to villages above Batopilas, or go on overnight backpacking trips following el Camino Real, the "Royal Road" over which mule trains once carried tons of silver to Chihuahua City. A rugged hike of two to four days gets you to the town of Urique. It's worth mentioning that almost all hiking within the canyons should be done with a local guide who can skirt the well-guarded marijuana fields that are planted here and there throughout the Sierra Tarahumara.

Batopilas has only modest accommodations, but then how many visitors come expecting turndown service with a Godiva chocolate on an eiderdown pillow? After a death-defying ride into the vertiginous canyon and all the walking, fresh air, and simple, healthful meals, you'll sleep like a baby in even the most rustic accommodation. And that's what a trip to the Copper Canyon is all about.



Reading List

The following books are found in libraries, used bookstores, and on internet book sites like Barnes & Noble (bn.com) and Amazon.com.

History of the Copper Canyon and the Tarahumara Indians, Carl Lumbholtz, Grant Shepherd, Rick Fisher. Sunracer Publications, Tucson, AZ, 2001.

Mexico's Copper Canyon Country: A Hiking and Backpacking Guide, M. John Fayhee. Johnson Books, Boulder, CO, 1994.

Mexico's Copper Canyon Trail Adventure, Richard D. Fisher, Sunracer Publications, 2003.

Tarahumara: Where Night Is the Day of the Moon (Second Edition), Bernard L. Fontana. University of Arizona Press, 1997.



THE MEXICO FILE

Published ten times a year by Simmonds Publications
5580 La Jolla Blvd., #306 ■ La Jolla, CA 92037
Voice mail: 800-563-9345 ■ Phone/Fax: (858) 456-4419

E-mail: dave@mexicofile.com ■ Website: www.mexicofile.com

Subscription rate is \$39.00 per year in the U.S., \$49.00 per year outside the U.S.
PDF version available, see subscription box for details

Promotional rates are sometimes available. ©2004 Simmonds Publications

The Mexico File's contents are intended for the independent traveler. The information given is believed to be reliable, but cannot be guaranteed for accuracy due to constant changes that occur in a country this size. ■ Unsolicited stories, photos and letters are welcomed and encouraged. Postage should be included for any items to be returned. ■ This publication may not be reproduced in any form without written permission from the editor and the author of the article.

Editor: David Simmonds

Publisher: Robert Simmonds, Ph.D.

Contributing Editors: Cheryl Weller, Felice Simmonds ■ Design/Layout: Paul Hartsuyker www.hartworks.net

About Mexico

Butterfly Refuge Under Attack

The Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve is a 10,000 year old forest stretching from the outskirts of Mexico City to the mountains of Michoacan, where millions of North America butterflies migrate to annually. Tens of thousands of tourists visit this forest set aside by presidential decree 18 years ago. But when the migration season ends, mobs of loggers descend, cutting down an estimated 70 mature trees per day, taking the law into their own hands and threatening violence to anyone who complains. President Fox sent the army into the forest in May, but this war continues. As elsewhere in the world, the indigenous people view the forest as theirs, and logging is what they do to feed their families. The government and environmental groups disagree.

New Health Guide for Travelers

A doctor from Tempe, Arizona, has published a book that any Mexico traveler should consider buying. *Mexico Health and Safety Travel Guide* by Dr. Robert Page contains a regional directory of 180 qualified physicians, extensive symptom and disease overviews, and an index covering medicines, symptoms and medical translations. The book also lists 200 facilities in 40 of the most popular cities, including the size and staffing of each hospital and the names of English-speaking doctors. See www.medtogo.com for purchase information.

Oaxaca Festival in July

From July 17 to 26, the city of Oaxaca will host the Guelagueta, an annual folkloric festival that dates back centuries and attracting thousands of visitors from throughout the world. Groups representing the various states of Oaxaca travel to the capital city to showcase their cultural heritage with regional song and dance.



San Cristobal *Continued*



A series of hand-made dolls found at the market in Chamula. Most outstanding of the textile work from this village are the striking colors – distinctive carryovers from the region's Guatemalan heritage

cultural diversity and the history of the area is its own special treasure. For me, the art in the area is limited pretty much to textiles, but what textiles! Anyone with an interest in fabric and weaving should definitely not miss highland Chiapas. The people are generally warm, helpful and exceptionally attractive. Indian cultures are strong here, with less Spanish and mestizo influence, and this alone provides a valuable insight into Mexico's character not as readily accessible in other places. I haven't yet put my finger exactly on how some of the differences found here might be influenced by the distinct, cooler climate, but when I consider the culture of the southwest of my own country in contrast to New England, I know there is something disparate at work here somewhere.

One last thought – there is a restaurant in downtown San Cristobal called El Fogon de Jovel where they serve a marvelous cream of pumpkin soup and a drink called a Tzotzil Angel made of a liquor called pox (pronounced "posh") and eggnog – unequivocally not to be missed.



A Zinacantan woman making tortillas on the floor of her home. Served warm and wrapped around locally made goat's cheese, along with a thimble-full of pox while you are shopping, these tortillas are an extremely refreshing treat



EDITOR'S NOTE

Lynne Doyle, a longtime Mexicophile, educator, and expert on Mexico's folk art, will start a series of articles beginning with the July 2004 issue of *Mexico File* called "Las Joyas de Mexico." Lynne has an expert's eye for detail and observation and an intense interest in Mexican culture. "Las Joyas" will explore little-known gems of Mexican life – places of interest to the traveler that are little known, some intriguing people she has met during her travels, and information about the folk crafts of Mexico. We hope her contributions will enhance your *Mexico File* experience.



Subscribe to The Mexico File.

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____

Cost:

Printed version —

\$39.00 per year (10 issues)

\$65.00 for two years (20 issues)

(Add \$10.00 to price if outside the U.S.)

PDF version —

\$18.00 per year (10 issues)

\$34.00 for two years (20 issues)

Send check or money order to:

Simmonds Publications

5580 La Jolla Blvd, Suite #306

La Jolla, CA 92037

Phone 1-800-5MEXFILE