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## Copper Canyon, Mexico Our Journey Though an Awesome Natural Excavation

By Maralyn D. Hill & Norman E. Hill, 'The Tandem Travelers'

Train journeys are high on our priority list. Visiting the Copper Canyon in Mexico was a top spot on our "someday" destination list. Last fall, an opportunity arose with the International Food Wine and Travel Writers Association (IFWTWA). Finally, we would experience this phenomenon first hand.

Flying from Phoenix was relatively easy, by connecting in Hermosillo, Mexico and transferring to Los Mochis. Any concern about its small airport was unfounded, as it was modern, clean and efficient. Our Aero Mexico jet came through for both segments without any difficulty. The airline's staff was pleasant to work with and efficient.

In Los Mochis, our trip started at the lowest altitude. We had no idea it was such an industrialized city. We headed for the Hotel Santa Anita, part of the Balderrama group of hotels. All of our rooms were comfortable and provided a good nights sleep.

After breakfast, Mr. Balderrama gave us a brief history lesson about Los Mochis. It was founded in 1903 by an American, Benjamin Johnson, in order to deal with sugar cane harvests. We discovered that Los Mochis was a "breadbasket" for the area. The city was located in the state of Sinaloa, which was heavily agricultural, growing large quantities of corn, tomatoes, beets and sugar.

When the Balderrasmas realized they were hosting so many journalists who also wrote about food, they sent their corporate chef, Victor Samaniego, with us for a few nights.

Before we left Los Mochis, we went on board the Balderrama charter boat in Topolobampo Bay. This combination port and marine sanctuary was filled with clams, crabs, oysters, scallops, shrimp and much more. Dolphins accompanied us and surrounded our boat, playing with delight.

As we slowed near a fishing boat, the fishermen, in exchange for coca-cola, filled the chef's pan with fresh shrimp for our lunch. We enjoyed delicious plates of scallop and shrimp ceviche, coconut shrimp and, sautéed shrimp. We had never experienced such fresh ceviche, and the squeeze of lime made it perfect. The rocking boat, circling birds, and delicious fresh seafood served to remind us of an earlier 1997 trip with Brenda aboard a Turkish gullet.

On the way to El Fuerte, we went to a Mayo Indian dance exhibition. Their displays showed how original religious rites were often reconciled with Catholic ceremonies by Jesuits and other monks, easing their conversion Christianity. We stopped at a roadside stand and sampled some homemade cookies.



### Big Blend Radio Interview



**Maralyn Hill discusses Copper Canyon, Mexico**

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[The Tandem Travelers](#) are a traveling writing team made up of Maralyn D. Hill and Brenda C. Hill - co-authors of 'Cooking Secrets - The Why and How' and 'Our Love Affairs with Food &

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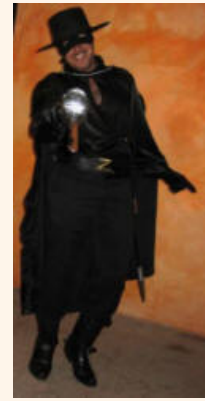
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We drove fifty miles to El Fuerte, birthplace of "El Zorro," founded by the Spanish in 1564. After we checked into the Balderrama Hotel Posada del Hildalgo, there was a river tour in the afternoon that offered viewing of petroglyphs. Before a nice dinner, we were charmed by a Zorro who sang tales of his adventures.

With eager anticipated the next mornings start of our train ride. The Copper Canyon Railroad, otherwise known as the Ferromex "Chepe" Railroad, started from the west coast town of Los Mochis and continued carrying our group eastward through agricultural plains. The train climbed upward into the Sierra Madre Mountains before reaching the Copper Canyon. Along the way, it crossed 37 bridges and went through 86 tunnels. Eventually, the train descended from the mountains into the ranching country of the state of Chihuahua. It then reached the city of Chihuahua, capital of the state, completing a journey of 408 miles, or 16 hours straight through.

Two trains handle this Ferromex route. One goes East, from Los Mochis to Chihuahua, while the other travels in the opposite direction between the cities. Privately owned since 1995, as all Mexican railroads now are, the line is profitable.



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Completion of the Copper Canyon line in 1961 took over 70 years. This time frame was due primarily to the daunting terrain of the Sierra Madre Mountains and the Copper Canyon. Originally, the objective of the line was to carry produce and other goods from Texas and the USA's Midwest into Mexico, thus avoiding a completely western route to San Francisco. At this point, though, a Pacific port for Mexico had not yet been completed.

Therefore, temporarily, the new railroad carried only passengers. It was the first east/west line that allowed both tourists and locals to travel in these directions when there were no readily accessible roads. Today, the Copper Canyon Railway is the only line that still carries passengers along with freight.

Eventually, the port of Topolobampo became a suitable port for shipping. This allowed the primary switch to produce, so that the Railway's dual function has continued since.

Our plan was not to stay on the train for the entire 16 hours. As many do, we stopped along the way to stay overnight, explore, and discover a little about the people. The canyons filled us with awe as they opened in front of our eyes. By the time we left the train in Bahuichivo, continuing eight miles by bus to Cerocahui, we had crossed many miles of the breath taking canyon. When we arrived at the rustic Mision Hotel, founded by Roberto Balderrama Gomez in 1961, our elevation was now 4100 feet. Our rooms were like miniature haciendas. Thank goodness each had a wood stove and a good stack of wood, as we needed them at night.



Cerocahui was founded by the Jesuits, 300 years earlier. Its hotel was developed to promote the Copper Canyon Railroad. Much to our surprise, it was also surrounded by Vino de Cerocahui Vineyard, which had produced its first vintage in 1991. This area was an ideal location for wine, due to cool days and chilly nights. Mr. Gomez and his son, represented an example of realizing the canyon's value and promoting it. The Winemaker Marino Mendez described his production of four varietals, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot, and semillon, spread among approximately 5,000 vines.

Late afternoon, part of our group chose to learn more about area wine, some hiked to a 70 foot waterfall. Still others, including Maralyn, Frederica Dunn, Kurt and Michelle Winner, departed for a 3-1/2 hour trail ride to see the same waterfall along a tributary of Rio Septentrion.

During the rides first 45 minutes, the group did not realize they would have to ride down hundreds of feet of rocks and stones, cross a river, and then ascend to the waterfall. They thought the ride back would be a short cut, but the return route was exactly the same. Michelle, an accomplished rider said, "This was the most challenging ride of my life." Frederica had ridden quite a bit, but nothing like this. Kurt and Maralyn, on second and third trail rides ever, said their others had been flat compared to this. Adrenalin was pumping, while each incline and decent were beautiful and scary at the same time. Juan, our guide and his dog Pepe, were exceptional and the horses, Pepino, Lucero, Conejo and Lirio the best ever—thank goodness. As the sun set, we returned to the hotel just past dusk. Our group entered, excited about completing the ride, but telling tales about their levels of fear. Norm was patiently waiting with others, but with an obvious expression of relief.

Early the next morning, we again boarded the train for our ride to Divisadero. The terrain grew more awesome, as we looked outward at deepening chasms. Finally reaching the luxurious Balderrama Hotel Mirador, we saw the climax of our trip. This hotel was situated right at the tip of the Copper Canyon itself, at an elevation of about 8,000 plus feet. Our rooms and verandas, as well as a spacious dining room with porch, were so close to the edge as to provide a breathtaking view of the Canyon's incredible expanse.

For those with any fear of heights, looking right over the rail was not just down, but straight down. It's difficult to say which was a more incredible feat of engineering—the building of the railway itself, which transports visitors to the Canyon, or the Hotel Mirador and its associated rims, so close as to seem like a literal continuation into the Canyon depths.

Divisadero was home to numerous lovely hotels. It was raining, but we wanted to see views from other hotels. Hotel Mansion Tarahumara was like a white castle with red tile roofs, and its stone walls and turrets seemed like a journey into another time. It featured a great room (that really was a great room) for dining. Right next to the dining area was an equally charming, but very intimate, bar. Its hospitality and tequila warmed us from the rain.

Hotel Divisadero Barrancas offered service, spectacular views, plus more tequila. Due to time constraints, we did not visit some other fine hotels. We eagerly escaped back to the Hotel Mirador, took a shower and enjoyed Margaritas, while looking out over the canyon.

The next morning we watched the sunrise from out hotel verandas, as it gradually rose above the canyon. Later, at breakfast in the dining room, we could enjoy our food and still partake of all the canyon's wonders.

We took a walk along the rim and shopped among local Tarahumaras, who were selling their handicrafts. In the afternoon, we boarded the train for Creel. But before we left this area, we wanted to record some details on the canyon itself.



Let's face it—the Copper Canyon (Barranca del Cobre) is not listed as one of the seven (or whatever number) wonders of the world—but it should be. It's at least four times the size of the world-famous Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, and, at many points, is about 1000 feet deeper than Arizona's famed site. The Copper Canyon is actually composed of six canyons. The Grand Canyon was formed by the rushing power of the Colorado River, which gradually dug out its formations. Copper Canyon, on the other hand, was formed by some prehistoric series of volcanic eruptions.

At the very depth of Copper Canyon, vegetation and plants are of a tropical variety. Bananas, limes, mangos and the like grow there. At the upper extremities of the great formation, where freezing temperatures and even snowfalls are normal and expected, delicious apples are grown.

Over the years, considerable gold and silver have been mined throughout the Canyon, but no copper at all.

For hardy souls (make that "soles" also), it was possible to use several trails to hike the entire distance down to the Copper Canyon base. At one lookout







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