

**Copper Canyon by Rail
by Roland Kelley**



Our power for the trip a GP 28-2

In the April issue I told you a little about the "Chihuahua al Pacifico". It is the regularly scheduled passenger train thru Copper Canyon. In this issue I would like to give you some information about the "Sierra Madre Express" which I took thru the Canyon. It is owned by a company in Tucson, Arizona. The train consists of four cars. A dome diner, two former crew sleepers and an observation car. The train was contracted By Tauck World Discovery out of Norwalk,CT. To say that travel is down is an overstatement. Our tour guide stated that prior to 2000 they were running 22 trips thru Copper Canyon a year. Now they are doing only 12. The onboard crew was very helpful and the food on the train was Great. The best thing about the train was the open areas that you could look out and take pictures. The weather was sunny every day and it was in the 80's. Couldn't ask for anything better.



**"Divisadero" Sleeper with open end.
Built as dormitory car for the Union Pacific in 1949 by ACF.**

The train trip started in Nogales, Mexico where we boarded the train. Most of the track was welded rail and very smooth. It was a single track most of the way with passing tracks. At one point in the night we were backed into a fenced in area, and the train was checked for drugs and unauthorized personal. They did not wake us, but did check out the train with dogs. After this they did a crew change and we were on our way again. The



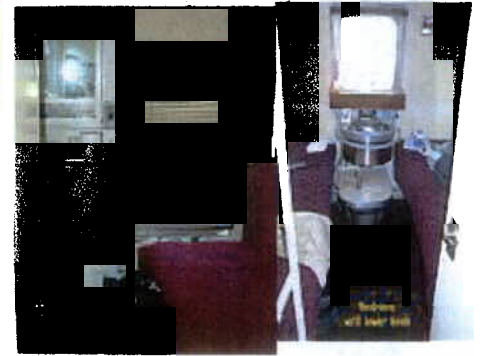
same check was done on our return trip heading back to Nogales.

As a private train we were at the lowest priority on the rails. It did not seem to slow us down that much as we only had to wait in the hole a few times. The longest being about 20 minutes.



"Tucson" dome diner. Built in 1955 for Union Pacific by ACF. After Union Pacific it was purchased by Autotrain.

An interesting thing to me was the selection of cars in our train. The two main sleepers were Converted crew cars. This put a baggage compartment at one end. One was opened up like an old open end observation with a bar added for drinks. The other ran with the baggage doors open and was the only smoking area on the train. The thing about these sleepers is that as crew cars they would sleep 6 per bedroom. They now have been converted to two lower beds. Great for us old folks, no ladders to climb, but the toilet was open between the beds. Most people did not use them for that reason. Glad I was traveling alone as I would have had to go to one of the public restrooms in the other cars, as most did. Each car had a single bedroom which I was told was for the conductor. The Observation car "Arizona" was the only car that had been a revenue car and had the toilet in a closet. To compare this to the American Orient Express all of its cars for passengers were revenue sleepers, so all the bedroom have a closet for the toilet.



On the left is my single bedroom, the right shows the bedroom with two lower beds.

Going up thru the canyon the tracks were in great condition, with mainly welded rail and concrete ties. They were not the type I have seen around here. It was concrete under the rails but an iron rod held the concrete in the middle. They had many greasers along the track and they worked well as you never heard the wheels Squeal as we took many sharp curves. It made for a very quite ride. The speed most of the time was Only about 30 MPH because of the grades some at 2.5% and the many curves, 86 tunnels and 37 bridges.



"Arizona" sleeper and lounge car. Built in 1946 for the Northern Pacific and ran on the "North Coast Limited" on the Chicago to Seattle run from 1946 to 1956.

There are no roads over the canyon for you to drive so if you want to just pass thru and go out The other side you need to take the train. If you are traveling be motor home or fifth wheel there is A train that takes you and your vehicle thru the canyon. We passed it on our trip, it had about 30 to 40 flats, each with a motor home or fifth wheel. It stops at the town of Divisadero, at the rim of the canyon, for a day. We were told the price is \$5,500 for your motor home or fifth wheel vehicle to be transported across the canyon.