

# Mexican Caravan Adventure



## The Copper Canyon and The Baja, Part One.

It takes a good dose of literary skill to write a day-by-day account of a lengthy journey in a manner that will hold the reader's attention. I don't possess that skill, so the following will only touch on parts of our 42-day Mexican caravan adventure. It will, however, give you some insight into our fears (unfounded) and concerns (also unfounded) as we embarked on our first RV trip with a group of total strangers into a Third World country. I suspect our concerns were similar to yours if you are contemplating venturing 'South of the Border, Down Mexico Way'.

Our company of choice was Adventure Caravans operating out of Livingston, Texas. We chose them after carefully assessing several companies and offerings. Our final choice came down to two companies, both offering

a combined Copper Canyon/Baja tour. The deciding points were three-fold. Adventure Caravans had,

- a very customer friendly cancellation policy;
- a modest down payment requirement; and
- a 42 day tour offering, with plenty of time to stop and enjoy the scenery.

With the other company you were basically locked in as far as the down payment was required. In our opinion, the amount of the down payment was excessive and their tour was 14 days shorter covering a similar itinerary.... not much time to relax and enjoy the sights and sounds of Mexico.

Once having made the decision to go and sending off our down payment, we entered a period of anticipation and second-guessing. Had we bitten off more than we

could chew? What will our travelling companions be like? Will we fit in considering that we had never caravanned before and have 'done our own thing on our own schedule' for decades? Do we have a suitable rig for this trip? Is RVing in Mexico really safe or is all we have read nothing more than tourist hype?

We had already done considerable research on RVing in Mexico, but now that we were actually going, the research took on renewed meaning and intensity. We both reviewed Mike and Terri Church's book on camping in Mexico as well as numerous websites. The more we read, the more confused we became. Information overload was taking its toll. Fortunately, relief showed up in the mail in the form of a sizeable package from Adventure Caravans. We were like two kids at Christmas.

The package contained;

- A trip preparation packet for Mexico,
- Mexico travel information packet,
- Mexican vehicle insurance packet,
- A railway log covering the Copper Canyon from Chihuahua to Los Mochis, and
- A Presidio, Texas rendezvous packet.

The information provided answered all our questions and gave us a level of comfort that proved to be well-placed for the entire trip.

With Christmas and New Year's behind us and the RV loaded, at last the time looked ripe. We said goodbye to friends and family and headed off on clear, dry highway determined to get as far south as possible on the first day. It was -22°C when we left home. Nine hours later, we pulled into a four-season campground just south of Cincinnati. The cat's water dish was frozen solid. The propane heater and our electric heater quickly warmed up the camper. Our supper that night was a simple stew that only required a few minutes in the microwave.

The next day, we covered enough distance to allow us to fill the water tank and even barbecue and sit outside in delightful warm weather. The worst part of the trip was over.

We had left several days early to allow for unforeseen delays. Since there were none, we spent the extra time exploring Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande River area on our way to meeting our travel companions in Presidio, Texas. Two weeks after leaving home, we pulled into Loma Paloma RV Park on the outskirts of Presidio, right on the Texas/Mexico border. Actually, we might as well have been in Mexico already as Presidio was far more Mexican than American. Spanish was the language of choice. Even our cell phone thought it was

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across the border, as while we had a good strong signal, it would not work.

One thing that struck us was the size of the other rigs. Of the 21 units in our group, most were Class A motorhomes and diesel pushers to boot. There were a few fifth wheels, one trailer and a couple of Class C units. On closer inspection, we found two Class B units that were actually smaller than our truck camper.

Later that day, we met our fellow travellers at the introductory briefing. It was with some relief we found them to be, for the most part, as unsure of themselves and what they were getting into as we were. Most were embarking on their first caravan.

With our group due to leave in two days, there was much to do. The tailgunner inspected everyone's rig to ensure mechanical components appeared suitable for the trip. Fortunately all rigs passed. While I expected a rather cursory inspection, I was pleasantly surprised at the thoroughness of the inspection. Even the CB radio (a necessary requirement) was tested.

The next day was filled with getting to know each other, orientation sessions, rules for travelling and a trip to the Mexican border to get the necessary paperwork out of the way. Getting the paperwork sorted out certainly expedited the actual border crossing the following day.

We hit the border as a group precisely at 7 a.m. just as the border guards changed shift, the theory being that the guards would be more interested in having their coffee rather than closely scrutinizing 21 RVs. The theory worked. We crossed at Ojinaja without a hitch. We were warned that the 'real border inspection' was still to come, approximately 45 km further down the road. This one took a little longer but, once again with everyone's papers in order, we were quickly waved on our way.

Travelling in convoy turned out to be a pleasant surprise. We had other people to talk to via the CB and the wagonmaster alerted everyone to points of interest along the way as well as turns, roadblocks, and hazards.

While all rigs had been assigned a number (we were number 19) you were not forced to travel in numerical sequence. In fact, you didn't even have to travel with the group. The only rule was that you could not arrive at the day's destination before the wagonmaster. We chose to travel with the main group and enjoy the wagonmaster's commentary and some lively discussion with our fellow travellers.

Later the first day, we came upon our first of many army checkpoints. The first one was rather intimidating. We're not accustomed to having someone point a gun at us and ask questions in a foreign language. Not to fear, it's just the Mexican National Police looking for guns and narcotics. The combination of our cat's inquisitive head sticking out the window over my shoulder and our Canadian flag on the antenna quickly brought a smile to the face of the most serious guard and a pronouncement that we were amigos. This scenario repeated itself many times throughout the trip and always ended with smiles all around. 'No problema!'

At 265 km after crossing the border, we arrived at our first Mexican campground for a two day stay, Del Fresno Parador RV Park on the outskirts of Chihuahua. This was one of only two RV parks on our itinerary where we

were told the water was safe to drink. This RV park could fit in quite nicely in any part of Canada or the United States. The pull-through sites were big and all had water, sewer, electricity and a picnic table. After settling in, we boarded a bus for supper in town and our 'Welcome to Mexico Dinner'. The following day was taken up with a bus tour of Chihuahua, a city of 650,000 people, the capitol of the state of Chihuahua and the birthplace of Anthony Quinn. Another dinner, complete with Mexican folk dancing, topped off the day.

Our visit to Chihuahua was typical of our stops in many Mexican locations — arrive at a campsite, followed by time to relax and unwind and then a tour of the local sites and dinner.

There was usually a get-together every afternoon. If the next day was to be a travel day, there would be a meeting to go over the directions and highlight any anomalies such as time changes or last minute corrections to the written directions. If the following day was not a travel day, a social hour complete with margaritas would ensue. Who am I kidding? There was a social hour every day.

One of the nice touches for all the techie types was the GPS co-ordinates of all campgrounds. We didn't have



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**Onward Ho - remembering not to exit via the driver's door.**

such a toy, but those who did sure were impressed.

Of course, the highlight of this adventure was the trip on the train through the Copper Canyon. Day 6 of the tour found us filling up with water and emptying holding tanks at the last campground where we could trust the water in preparation for boarding the train and five days of boondocking on the move. As usual, we received explicit instructions. Take all the drinking water you can carry and have an ample supply of paper plates etc. because there would be nowhere to get drinking water or to empty holding tanks until we got the rigs off the train in five days. We loaded up with our usual 40 gallons of fresh water and another five gallon container just to be on the safe side. This proved to be plenty as all dinners for the next five days were included. This certainly cut down on the water usage in the RV.

Loading the train was perhaps the most exciting event of the entire trip. We were aware the train would be comprised of 60-foot flatbed cars but we expected to share a car with another short rig. Not so. Every rig had its own car. We had enough room in front of us to hold a square dance. At the other end of the spectrum, one of the big 40-foot diesel pushers with a Windstar van in tow hung over both ends of their rail car by a couple of feet.

When we reached the loading area in La Junta, elevation 6,775 feet above sea level, we found three sets of seven flatbed rail cars side by side waiting for us to load. In typical Mexican fashion, the process was rather slow and archaic by our standards but it did



work. Each rig, in turn, had to be driven onto the first flatbed under close supervision by the train crew and the wagonmaster. Wooden ramps were placed in front of the tires and monitored as the rig was driven forward to the commands of "front wheels coming up, front wheels coming down". The ramps were then moved to accommodate the back wheels and the process repeated. The rig then proceeded down the row of flatbed cars and the entire process repeated until the first empty rail car was reached. The entire process was repeated over and over until all seven rail cars were loaded. The identical process was going on at the same time with the other two sets of rail cars.

To make the loading more interesting, all the rigs had to be positioned as close to the left side of the rail cars

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as possible. This was to allow room on the right side to exit the rigs and move about on the rail cars. Once on the respective rail cars and positioned properly, the train crew tied down each rig, nailed what looked like vintage 1900 wheel-chocks in front of each wheel and installed handrails. We were told to stay out of the way as the train crew knew what they were doing ... not entirely true.

While we did stay out of the way, later inspection showed that they had tied down the front of our truck and the back of the camper, not a good situation. I had visions of the camper being torn from the truck as we rounded some corner. Not to worry! I pointed this out to one of the train crew and the rear tie-downs were relocated to the truck.

One of our travelling companions was not so lucky. He didn't bother inspecting his rig and later found the front tie-down points selected by the train crew were only flimsy supports for some of his rig's body detail. Both supports were damaged and would eventually have to be replaced. Hey, it's your rig and your money. Keep an eye on things.

Three hours later, we were all on our respective flatbeds, our moving boondocking sites for the next five days. We were the second last in the procession putting us at the rear of the train, just in front of the tailgunner's rig, perfectly situated for some great pictures of our train and engines going round corners and over trestles. Onward Ho - remembering not to exit via the driver's door.

Our first night's stop was on the rail siding at Creel, elevation 8,000 feet with a tour of Tarahumara Indian living conditions and a dinner out, complete with entertainment. Life doesn't get any better than this.


The next morning was quite a shock to many of our travel companions. Most of the pictures in the travel brochures show people sitting out on their flatbed cars enjoying the warm sun and sipping margaritas. The brochure did indicate that it could be cool in the mountains and that a jacket might be appropriate. This understated fact was brought home with force as we arose to temperatures of  $-6^{\circ}\text{C}$  and snow on the ground. What do you expect at 8,000 feet in the mountains in early February? Since we had left home in the dead of winter, we at least had sufficient warm clothes to handle the temperature, not so for some of our southern travel companions. As the day went on, it did warm up but most of our sightseeing while the train was in motion was from inside the warm cab of the truck.

The following days on the train were most enjoyable. We travelled approximately four hours per day at a maximum speed of 20 km/h leaving the afternoons for sightseeing and touring. The temperature remained on the cool side until we hit lower altitudes on the last day. Every day the scenery was breathtaking and the natives friendly as we passed by or explored the villages. One of the most memorable scenes to me was that of barefoot kids walking to school along side the tracks through patches of snow oblivious to the cold. As far as heating and lighting in the RV while on the train was concerned, we had no problems. Our propane heater kept us warm and our solar panel kept the battery fully charged.

We unloaded the train at Los Mochis. Here, those rigs that only had to drive onto one or two flatbed rail cars when loading found that the way off was to drive over the empty cars in front of them. The end result was that everyone had to navigate seven flatbed cars to complete the loading/unloading process. We all made it with no mishaps. While the train portion was over too soon, we all looked forward to actually camping in warm weather on the Sea of Cortez.

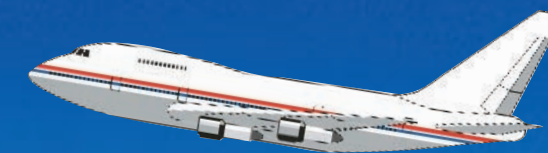
Back on the road again, we followed directions to Gustavo and camped at Mr. Moro's on the shore at Las Glorias, a trip of only 108 km. What a beautiful setting, but it is quite crowded.

This was our first real taste of camping in Mexico. While the beach was fantastic, our campsites were so small that some of the rigs had to choose between putting out their slides or awnings. If nothing else, it forced us to become a tight-knit community.

The disappointing camping situation was soon forgotten over a great meal in Mr. Moro's restaurant and our now daily margarita party. This was topped off with one of the most beautiful sunsets we have ever seen. Two days here to unwind and then it would be off to Mazatlan for a full five days of fun on the beach before taking the boat over to The Baja, but that will have to wait for the conclusion of our Mexican adventure in the next issue. 

*Doug & Lyn Scott have been RVing/camping for over 40 years. They began with a walled tent in the late 60's then progressed to a 19 foot travel trailer in the 70's. Following that, they spent many years with their two children exploring the far reaches of North America using backpacking equipment. Now that the children have left home, the Scotts continue to explore using their truck camper as their home away from home.*

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