

The Road Less Traveled: Copper Canyon by Car

By Heather & Chris Stockard, SV Legacy October 2005

We definitely took the road less traveled to Copper Canyon! Because we have our two dogs, Kira and Minnow, we figured that public transportation wouldn't work and decided to drive to Copper Canyon. Since the train ride through the canyon seemed to be out of the question, we opted to drive to Creel and spend three days there exploring the Copper Canyon region. I'm not sure that I'd recommend this approach to the faint of heart. If you decide to follow in our footsteps, take a sound vehicle, be prepared to camp if necessary, and ensure that your supplies include water, toilet paper, soap, towels, and food to munch along the way if a restaurant doesn't appear. You also need a good map, though as you'll see from our narrative, a good map doesn't always help! We have the cream of the Mexican road atlas crop – Guia Roji, Por las Carreteras de Mexico. This is available from www.gonetomorrow.com and other sources.

We buttoned up the boat for a week away and left San Carlos in the morning. We headed south of Guaymas a couple of hours to Ciudad Obregon. With our good book of Mexican highway maps we felt we would be able to find the secondary road we needed to take us into the mountains. Well, we missed it by five or six miles the first time but eventually figured it out. It might have had something to do with the fact that the highway number was different, and the signs used a different name for the major town along the route from that shown on the map. The map atlas showed the road as Sonora 12 headed to Rosario. The actual road signs showed the route as Sonora 117 to Tesopaco. We had chosen this route because it looked much shorter and more interesting than the alternative – MX 15 north to Hermosillo, then MX 16 across.



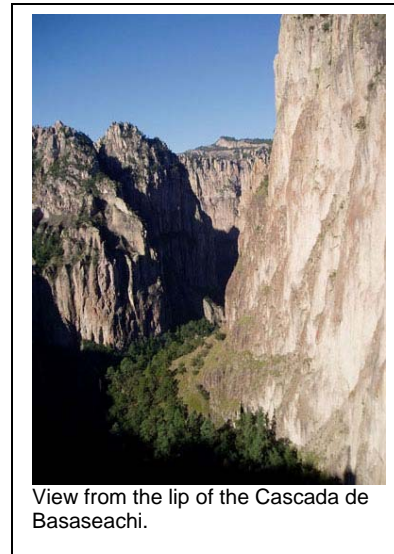
There are so few paved roads heading off into the hills that we were able to backtrack and find the only likely looking one just south of the toll booths. We followed this likely looking road even though the route numbers didn't match but soon found that the small settlements and intersections appeared where the map showed they should. With our confidence restored that we were on the right road we headed east across the coastal plain. The foothills grew until they were substantial mountains. The VERY twisty steep roads

crept through the hills until we finally joined the "main route" (MX 16) from Hermosillo. We expected that this would mean a larger faster road. Wrong. This "highway" twists and turns along hillsides and ridgelines, up 6% grades and down again. Heavy trucks and

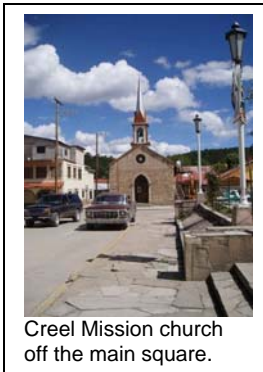
local traffic too. Our speed made good was about 35mph. I think it's a toss-up which route is better – through Hermosillo or Sonora 117.

We passed though Yecora (one of the few spots with a Pemex station), tanked up and then headed on. We didn't have a real goal in mind but wanted to get stopped for the night before dark. By this point, I was really questioning our decision to drive to Creel! We stopped finally at a small family motel/cabanas just outside of Basaseachi. It was starting to rain and night was approaching. Very basic but quite clean (250 pesos). They didn't allow dogs in the cabins, so the dogs had to stay in the car overnight. We had a simple meal (no choice on offer) of meat and potatoes and beans with delicious corn tortillas (100 pesos for two including agua minerale).

In the morning we got directions to the waterfall park and were discouraged from taking the short route on to Creel as being a "muy mal carile". We stopped at the Parque Cascada de Basaseachi and walked the 1 km to the top of the falls where one is treated to a spectacular view of the canyons but only a limited view straight down of the waterfall. A better view from the bottom is available for a 5-6 hour hike down and back up. There are several small motels, restaurants, and camping areas on the side road that heads down to the Cascada de Basaseachi park.



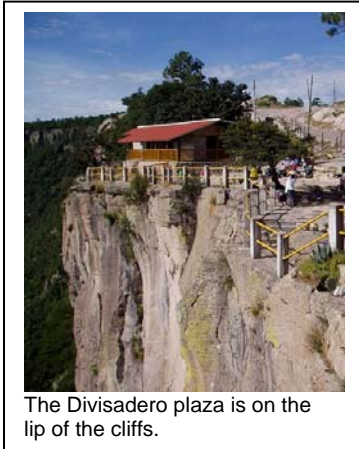
We then headed back to MX 16 and on east through the mountains, though from this point on it was a bit straighter and shallower. We were surprised to reach an overlook that looked east over the wide valleys around Chihuahua. The road flattened and straightened and we zoomed along to the intersection with the paved road to Creel. A (relatively) quick and pleasant road led to the pleasant tourist town of Creel. Creel is the home of the Turahumara people (the canyon runners who ran deer to exhaustion as a hunting method) and a major stop on the canyon railroad. We enjoyed a nice lunch and a bit of browsing made all the nicer by the pleasant, cool, mountain weather. This is the only time in Mexico we have walked a city and been comfortable, temperature-wise.



Creel is definitely a tourist town with buses bringing Mexican tourists and school groups in and the train bringing gringos in as well. There are many restaurants and lodgings ranging from basic to upscale Best Western. We found that in general the State of Chihuahua is more prosperous than the areas around the Sea of Cortez. The towns and homes are better and better cared for, and the cities seem more organized and well run.

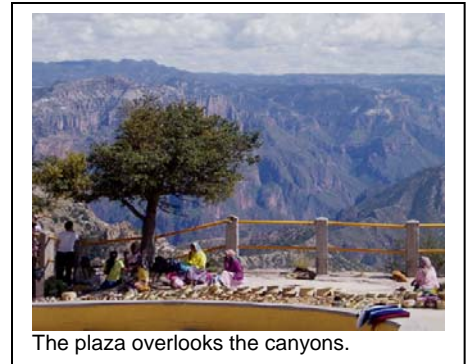
We checked out a downtown camp/RV park (Villa Mexicana) in the industrial area at the south edge of town with good facilities but zero atmosphere. Instead we headed out of town to a native run park (Lake Arareko) where you can camp in primitive conditions for 15 pesos per person. Camping is allowed

anywhere...just pick a spot. There are some fireplaces, some pit toilets, and a couple of shelters, but no tables or specific spaces. You just drive around in the woods until you have bounced off enough trees and rocks and found a spot. We were alone here and it is very quiet and restful. Some Tarahumaras live in the area (perhaps in the caves around the lake) and we saw them wandering through the landholding. Some kids and women would stop by with the usual trinkets for sale.



The Divisadero plaza is on the lip of the cliffs.

The next day we drove to the end of the paved road at San Rafael, with stops at Divisadero and Areponapuchi (also known as Arepo). At the two stops, we were able to get wonderful views of the canyon and, if we had been so inclined, arrange sightseeing trips down into the canyon. We had a cup of coffee at the Hotel Posada Mirador and enjoyed the spectacular views from their balcony. Then we returned to Divisadero for an excellent lunch at the Hotel



The plaza overlooks the canyons.

Divisadero Barrancas. There are lots of vendors at the Divisadero train stop selling baskets, sculptures, woven shawls, and other goods.

We returned to Creel and explored another area of the Tarahumara landholdings, including the 400-year-old mission church at San Ignacio and the Tarahumara village where the people still live in caves, rough cabins, or stone dwellings and tend their crops and livestock. In the late afternoon, we returned to our favorite spot in the Lake Arareko camping area and settled in for the evening. Since this was Friday night there were a couple of other campers and a catered party by the lake that broke up by 10pm.



Mission church at San Ignacio.

On our second full day, we set out to explore the highly recommended museum, Casa de las Artesanias del Estado de Chihuahua y Museo. You shouldn't miss this small museum, which has excellent exhibits on Tarahumara culture and art. Next door is the mission shop, with good crafts for sale. The mission shop and the stores in Creel had excellent prices on handicrafts and we quickly finished our early Christmas

shopping.

Our original plan had been to find a tour operator who was willing to take us and our dogs on a sightseeing trip down into the canyon. I'm confident that we could have arranged that in Creel, but were unable to generate sufficient motivation! After the September heat in San Carlos, we were enjoying the cool temperatures of the canyon rim too much to be overly interested in heading down into the warmer reaches of the area.



Tarahumara women in traditional clothing.

Instead, after lunch we decided to head on our way out of Creel. Our original plan had been to return to Hermosillo, then up to Tucson for some shopping. That would have meant retracing our route through the twisty mountain roads. Instead we opted for the better roads headed east. We stopped for the night at a nice RV park (100 pesos) in Cuauhtemoc. This is a very interesting area filled with Mennonites who moved to Mexico in the 1920s. These wide valleys are at about 5000 foot elevation and are filled with apple orchards and other agricultural efforts. The winters are cold and we were surprised to find wood stoves and heaters in most buildings. Quite a change from the heat around the Sea.



Statue of Mennonite farmer in Cuauhtemoc.

The next day we pressed on through Chihuahua and up to El Paso, TX. The roads around the city of Chihuahua and north were excellent – essentially U.S. standard. There were malls, car dealers (including BMW), and chain restaurants like Denny’s and Applebees. (Not that that is necessarily a good thing.) The highway tolls were higher than in Sonora but we were happy to pay for the good driving and excellent clean and modern facilities.

Since it was Sunday afternoon, we had a long wait to cross into the U.S. at El Paso, but we reached our hotel and settled in by 5. The next day we had an easy drive across I-10 to Tucson, where we spent several days running errands before returning to San Carlos.

Our conclusions: Clearly, the trip down from El Paso and Chihuahua is the more heavily traveled tourist route to Copper Canyon. We ran into “wagon masters” for one of the RV tour companies. They load their RVs onto flatbed cars and take 5 days to make a leisurely trip through the canyon to Los Mochis. This would be one option for folks with pets, if you have an RV and money isn’t an object! Also, we heard that there is someone at the Los Mochis RV parks that watches pets for owners taking the passenger train. It may be possible to take pets on the second class train through the canyon.

If you decide to follow our route, plan to take your time on the winding roads west of Basaseachi. We recommend that you plan to stop for the night at Yecora to avoid an overly long day. Then either stop for the night at Cascada de Basaseachi, if you want to spend time hiking, or press on to Creel.

Although we didn’t get the whole experience of the train trip through the canyon, we felt we got a good flavor for the canyon area. Some of the best views along the train route are at Divisadero and Arepo, which we visited by car. A trip down to the canyon bottom by Jeep would have been interesting. That side trip probably would have given us an experience equal to the train trip.

Services in the small towns along the route are pretty basic. There are Pemex stations in the bigger settlements, but we didn’t drive by very many of them without filling up.

Once you are on the road to Creel services are much more available. ATMs were available in Creel, but not in the smaller towns. Although the mountain roads were twisty and steep, they were in good condition. There were several army checkpoints along the route. To take a car past Yecora you do need an all Mexico car permit rather than the Sonora Only permit.

To see more pictures of our trip, check out our website at: www.legacysailing.com. The pictures of Copper Canyon are in Photo Gallery 33.

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