

Encountering Chihuahua's Canyons

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It was getting dark. The man fixed his harsh gaze on me and in a rough voice, said bluntly, "You're not bothering anybody, friend. You're travelers, you need help and we're giving it to you. We know what it's like to be away from your family with nobody to even give you a cup of coffee. So stop saying you're a bother. And don't offer us money. If you want to pay us, do the same thing for someone else." And all together, the residents of the little hamlet got moving to make us something to eat and even emptied an entire house so we could sleep in it. I had originally only gone up to the house to ask permission to put up our tents.

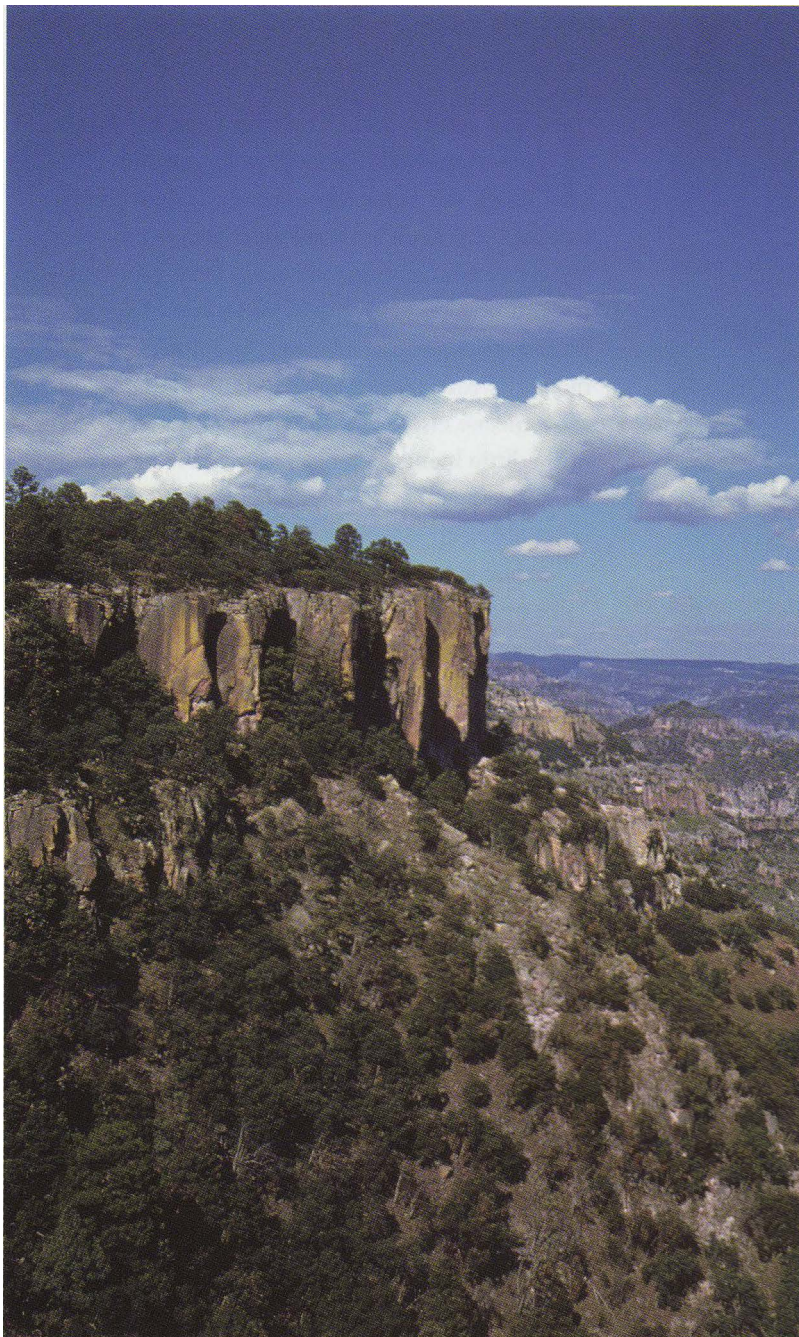
Further along, a day's walk away, was the Sinfrosa Canyon. Deep, broad and, above all, unknown.

We were in southern Chihuahua and wanted to cross all the canyons in the Tarahumara Mountains in a single trip. I had had my first encounter with one, like most of us, in the Copper Canyon, next to the railing at El Divisadero. The first thing that attracted me was the canyon itself, that deep gash in the earth where we discover that the paths down are filled with loose rocks and it takes hours to descend to the river. That was, in the end, the goal.

Down at the bottom, nothing could be seen but the river and the mountains towering above. After a starry night or a full moon, in the morning, the air laden with smell of greenery and your ears filled with the incessant song of cicadas, you discovered that the river was really only half the journey and you still had to climb up again.

When we returned to the railway line, our lips dry from thirst, I knew I would come back because, long after being satiated but still hungry for scenery —and that took days—, I asked myself what could be beyond there, behind the hills that rose on the other side of the canyon, the ones we had not scaled or descended. Well, that is what we were doing now: journeying through an enormous mountain range that had swallowed us from the very first days with its rain and its sun, with its cold and its wind. And here we found canyons, still far from the Copper Canyon. Soon we would

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know that they were an important part of the mountains and that the culture itself was ruled by them.

The Sinforosa Canyon was only the first that we would encounter on our journey, and even though I already “had experience” in the canyons—that can take the breath away from anyone who looks at them—nothing had prepared me for the impact of that first human lesson in the mountains, a lesson I have never forgotten: think and live as a traveler.

Two months later we would arrive at Ciudad Madera, our objective. We had crossed the main canyons, those gashes in the earth that had frightened two seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries and continue to impress anyone who sees them. After walking hundreds of kilometers through the mountains and at the bottom of the canyons, we still asked ourselves why a canyon draws you so. What was a canyon, really?

Every time we stood on the edge, with our gaze fixed and lost in its depths, we felt we were above the world. That is perhaps their greatest attribute: making you feel that you are atop a high mountain, seeing the infinite spaces above and the real depths below. And the best of all is that there was no need to make any physical effort. All you had to do was to come on a train or some other means of transportation, free up your gaze and let yourself be carried away by the sensations unleashed inside you.

But that does not mean that the canyons are less valuable than the peaks. The canyons of Chihuahua are not exactly places to just sit and contemplate, even though we all do it. They are actually more terrifying because they challenge you: “Come and meet me.” You cannot stop feeling it, although few accept it. But anyone who goes down to the bottom or climbs the mountains to get rid of the uneasiness, finds that their voice has become increasingly stronger. Why?

Perhaps it is because in some places you can find prospectors making a living by collecting tiny amounts of gold from personal mines with rudimentary mills that they make themselves. They have overcome all obstacles by dint of pure tenac-

ity and effort. It is the legend of gold or silver that is constantly with them because they are the ones that experience and personify it. A gram of gold is sufficient to loose all the stories of treasures buried during the revolution: their hope.

In Batopilas, one of the three canyons (together with the Copper and Sinforosa Canyons) that feed the Fuerte River, there is a very rich mine with its own railway, originally transported piece by piece on pack mules. Today, that mine is only ruins that continue to attract everyone who goes there and where, some say, ghosts and specters live that you can talk to if you get along with them.

Or, it may be that the meeting with the Rarámuri totally changes the meaning of your life, when you see them walking along the slopes at great speed, but as though they were not moving at all. I have followed them and marveled at their elegant gait.

Years have passed and I still remember the face of the man from the hamlet and how tired I was when I went to his house, but also the sparkle in his eye when he said, "You're not bothering anybody," using the formal form of address, because, there, everyone uses the formal form of address, even to children.

The value of the canyons is not in the gold that was and is still extracted from them, nor in the minerals we carried for days or weeks to take home and not even —or at least not completely— in their scenery full of depths and open spaces limitless to the eye.

What makes them different from a peak is the true discovery: one finds oneself among ways of thinking, of being, of living and of acting that are completely different. Encountering people. Like that midwife who waited for two days for the pregnant woman to need her services. Or when a Rarámuri (as the Tarahumara indigenous call themselves) stands in the middle of his hamlet at the bottom of a canyon, solemn, with an earthen bowl full of *tesguino*, and pours a little on the four points of the compass to offer it to the Earth and then offers you a drink of it and you don't know what to do except drink a little while he smiles. The fiesta has begun.



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The canyons' invitation attracts many. Few accept it. With that journey throughout the mountains, we realized one thing: after going through one canyon after another, after the hundreds of people we had met and after becoming "mountain people" little by little in our way of living and even of speaking, the truth was that we did not know them. So, our return became imminent. Over and over.

We have traveled thousands of kilometers on foot through them, following the course of the river to see if it was navigable or not, or finding something that, even though we expected it, still surprised us. Years ago, we were again on the edge of the Sinforosa Canyon. Someone had mentioned to us something about the Tubar, an extinct indigenous group that Carl Lumholtz mentions in his book

El México desconocido (Unknown Mexico). So there we were, in the middle of a Tarahumara area. In the morning we went to the edge in search of a way down to the river. A 20-year old man came up to us.

"*Kuira-bá*," was our greeting. And in less than an hour, we had a delightful chat in which he told us how the "terrible Cocoyom (the Tubar)" had been giants who ate the "people" (the Rarámuri) and that the latter had agreed to offer them a *tesgüino* fiesta to get them drunk in a cave. Once asleep from the *tesgüino*, they set fire to many *chiltepín* (a kind of chili pepper) plants to suffocate them to death. They all died, but, our new friend told us, their houses still remained at the bottom of the canyon.

Guided by him, we reached some buildings in the middle of the canyon that we never would

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have seen if we had been alone. I remember having stopped for a moment to see how far we had to climb down. "Impossible," I thought. And, as though he had heard me, the Rarámuri climbed down with no trouble at all. We, the visitors, could well have thought something impossible, but they, the canyon inhabitants, do not know the word.

Contact with the mountains and the canyons is always pleasant. Setting up camp next to the river and listening to hundreds of frogs or the quieting hum of the river, or the cicadas interrupted by some animal that has come to drink during the

night. All the senses, not only the sense of sight, are rewarded.

This is the true discovery. The true value of the canyons and the mountains: the people, who would not be what they are without these forests or depths, without their wild animals coming occasionally into view, without that heat in their depths or the snow in winter. That is what the canyons are: an entire world that must be explored to enrich our own lives. Walking and talking allows us to learn very easily how important it is to preserve what we have as a legacy for our children. **MM**

The Chihuahua-Pacific Railroad



The Chihuahua-Pacific Railroad, stretching from Ojinaga, Chihuahua, to Topolobampo, Sinaloa, crosses deserts, valleys and imposing mountain ranges to reach the sea and is as astonishing as the scenery it shows us.

The idea of building this railroad came into being about 1861, as an economic enterprise that would join the U.S. Midwest to the recently discovered Oguira Bay (today Topolobampo) in Sinaloa. However, 100 years would go by before the finished railroad, today considered a prime example of engineering, could be inaugurated after joining some stretches of track and finishing others. For all those years, builders had to not only deal with the financial difficulties that a job of this magnitude implies, the change in concessionaires and a revolution, but, above all, the inhospitable terrain that had to be conquered by technical and human efforts.

The 250-kilometer length of track that goes through the heart of the Sierra Madre Occidental, to join Creel, Chihuahua, to the state of Sinaloa, was the most imposing and last built. Joining the city of Chihuahua to Los Mochis, Sinaloa, in a stretch of line that takes 15 hours to traverse,

took 86 tunnels (17.2 kilometers of track) and 37 bridges spanning a total of 3.6 kilometers.

This is the portion of the railway line that most surprises travelers who ride it through the Copper Canyons to see the world that took in the survivors of the Tarahumara culture. The track rises toward Creel and reaches its highest point (2,400 meters) a little beyond it. Then, going through tunnels and over bridges, it descends among imposing canyons, skirting precipices—four of which are higher than Colorado's Grand Canyon—bringing viewers a natural beauty that otherwise could only be seen by its silent inhabitants and the occasional impetuous explorer.

Today, the Chihuahua-Pacific Railway, better known as "Chepe" after its initials in Spanish, is the only commercially operated railroad in Mexico. It offers first and second class service, with all the conveniences, and has daily runs through the Copper Canyon with stops at several intermediate stations where visitors can find accommodations. This allows them to stay over and hike down to the bottom of a canyon, or just observe the breathtaking scenery from the look-out points.