

Riding the rails through Latin America

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

One of life's most thrilling moments comes at the first lurch as the engine, be it steam, diesel or electric, strains to get the long procession of railway cars under way. Whether it's an Amtrak line taking the commuter to work or the tourist train that will spend days winding through a remote mountain track, the excitement of an honest-to-gosh train ride can't be beat.

While passenger railroading has fallen on hard times in much of the United States, south of our border numerous trains wind their way between towns providing not only a tourist excursion, but for many, basic transportation to town or between far-flung cities.

I will never forget the first lurch of the old Jungle Train that meandered its way from San Jose, Costa Rica over the mountains and down

through the banana plantations to the Atlantic coast town of Limon in the early 90's. I felt like a kid again, taking my first trip on the Pennsylvania Railroad's Red Arrow from my home in Detroit to visit my Grandparents in Canton, Ohio. But this was Costa Rica and I was on my first genuine train ride since we had lived in Panama in the mid-seventies and I had been a frequent rider on the old Panama Railroad.

From the Jungle Train's windows the traveler could see the endless acres of bushes with bunches of slowly-ripening bananas all wrapped in their distinctive blue plastic bags to protect from bugs and damage. In some places, one could almost reach out of the window and grab a banana for lunch. Unfortunately, the severe earthquake of 1991 broke the line and stopped rail trips to Limon and to Costa Rica's Pacific coast city of Puntarenas.

A railroad journey full of beauty and adventure that is still running, and well worth the effort, is the excursion from Cusco, Peru up to the foot of the famous ruins of Machu Picchu. The early morning train winds its way up switchbacks out of town then up over the mountains, passing by snow-covered volcanic peaks, then down to the final stop at Aguas Calientes where tourists take a bus up to the famous ruins.



While travelers can take a limited-access tourist car for a higher price, those of lesser means or who want a flavor of the “real” Peru can hop aboard the less-opulent common cars, mixing with local traffic including women on their way to market, kids riding to visit grandma, and chickens that will constitute someone’s supper.

Large open windows allow for unobstructed views of the flowing mountain rivers and jagged peaks along the route. Also visible are many Inca ruins, their distinctive stonewalls rising up from open clearings and along terraced hillsides.

The half-day trip arrives in plenty of time for several hours of trekking among the ruins and a late evening return trip to Cusco. Or, the traveler can stay in nearby hotels, returning by rail on the late train the next day.



A thousand or more miles to the south, a sign of dubious authenticity proclaims that the railroad station at Puerto Montt, Chile is “the southern most station in the world.” Never mind that an excursion train runs out of Ushuaia, Argentina 800 miles further south, or that a narrow-gauge railway, the famous Patagonian Express, runs from El Maiten to Esquel also in southern Argentina.

Nevertheless, the Chilean railway system, which has been significantly upgraded in recent years, offers a pleasant journey from Santiago to Puerto Montt. Of special beauty are the last fifty miles or so as the train winds along the side of Lake Languihue offering gorgeous views of the magnificent Osorno volcano. Travelers may want to disembark to visit the unique German communities of Frutillar and Puerto Varas.

Frutillar is small and totally tied to the lake as it clings to the shore. Of particular interest is the Colonial German museum that helps the visitor to explore why many of this area’s residents are blond, speak German, attend a German-language school and are served by a missionary priest assigned here from Germany.

Puerto Varas is the jumping off point for the spectacular across-the-lakes journey to the vacation town of Bariloche in Argentina. Several trains a day pass through the town that offers a spectacular promenade along the lakefront.

One always has regrets after a vacation—mine after a recent trip to Brazil was that I didn't buy the operating model of the Curitiba-Paranaguá train to add to my layout back home. Running from Curitiba, which has been called one of the world's foremost examples of urban planning, the train crosses rolling countryside and then emerges from a tunnel into a spectacular landscape of mountains and gorges. Clinging to the side of steep cliffs, it winds around outcroppings of rock, darts through a number of tunnels, rattles across precarious trestles and eventually drops along a riverbed as it runs toward the sea. From the windows of the sparse passenger cars, travelers can view beautiful cascading waterfalls and snap loads of photos as the engine pulls the train around sharp curves and across bridges.

Backpackers and campers use the train as basic transportation to reach some remote mountain trails. Others enjoy the day's excursion, taking time to eat lunch at one of the stops, then returning to Curitiba by bus, which is faster.

Curitiba itself is a fascinating city where an integrated bus system, linked by distinctive tubular bus stops, allowing residents and visitors to travel anywhere in the city quickly and efficiently. Definitely worth the visit is the city's famous botanical garden, dominated by a unique domed glass greenhouse. The garden is within walking distance of a bus line and right along side the Curitiba-Paranaguá train route.

There is no doubt that Latin America's (if not the world's) most thrilling train excursion is the railroad that runs south of Quito, Ecuador to the mountain town of Riobamba and on to the coast. What makes this journey unique is the opportunity to climb on top of the train's freight cars and ride the route with unobstructed views of Ecuador's Avenue of the Volcanoes.

Leaving the splendid colonial center of Quito, the train moves through the city's blue-collar and industrial southern sector. On a clear day the trip offers magnificent panoramas of the snow-capped Cayambe, Antisana, Los Ilinizas, Cotopaxi, Tungurahua and Chimborazo volcanoes. Along the way one can see the patchwork farms that layer the sides of other mountains, quaint towns and open markets where fresh meat hangs waiting to be sold.

While Metropolitan Touring operates a more comfortable and more expensive tour car, most intrepid travelers don't miss the chance to ride up top where it can be cold and a bit sooty from the engine smoke, but is well worth the effort. Conductors make their way along the top of the boxcars collecting tickets while vendors jump from car to car selling pork rinds and other local goodies.

Some of the more adventurous get off at Cotopaxi park to explore the wilds surrounding this almost-perfect cone-shaped volcano, see the wild horses that run on the plain at the foot of the mountain or even scale the peak of its ice covered cone.

Others spend the night in Latacunga where they can visit a distinctive Indian market or sample the local delicious pork-based dish Chugchucara.

Perhaps the most famous part of the Ecuador railway experience is the trip from the mountains down to the country's port city of Guayaquil. The railroad winds its way through the mountains, down over the precarious "Devils Nose," and eventually to the steamy lowlands along the Guayas River.

Unfortunately, earthquakes, landslides and recurring economic crises make the completion of this portion of the trip a hit and miss event, so it is best to check ahead of time. Metropolitan Touring provides connections for those who want to make this trip, though the independent traveler can use local buses or the unique Autoferro (bus on rails) and do it on their own.

With many other railroads operating throughout Latin America, including Mexico, these are just a few of the operating lines. I have many more rails to ride before I have finished seeing the continents to our south.

IF YOU GO

Ecuador: Tickets may be purchased at Quito's historic but run-down train station along Maldonado Avenue south of the city's center. The passenger train does not run every day, so it is best to check ahead about the schedule. Metropolitan Touring provides comfortable excursions. They may be reached at info@ecuadorable.com, or via their U.S. agent at Adventure Associates, 13150 Coit Road, Suite 110, Dallas, Texas 75240, Phone: (972) 907 – 0414, 1-800-527-2500, Fax: (972) 783 – 1286.

Chile: Some reports say that the Chilean Railroad is operating only between Santiago and Temuco while others indicate that it continues to operate south to the lake district and Puerto Montt. In any case, the trip is overnight from Santiago and tickets may be purchased at the city's main train station at 3322 O'Higgins. (There are a few old engines and passenger cars parked at this station that are worth seeing).

Peru: As with Ecuador, the ticket from Cusco to Aguas Calientes and Machu Picchu may either be purchased at the train station in Cusco or from one of the many travel agencies there or in Lima. This train is often full, so it's wise to buy your tickets a day ahead of time.

Brazil: The Curitiba-Paranaguá railroad station is in the back of Curitiba's main bus station. Tickets may be purchased the day before the journey. Be sure to sit on the left-hand side of the train when leaving Curitiba. (If you are in to model railroading, don't forget to pick up the engine and passenger cars that are available in one of the station's gift shops).

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