Reader's Digest Presents: Scenic Rail Journeys of the Americas

The Copper Canyon and the Coast Starlight

(Scratch track -- First draft)

Tease begins

Peter Robbins: If you like trains, you're gonna love this trip. If you like Mexico, you're gonna love this trip.

Roberto Balderama: This is a unique journey, the Copper Canyon. You have to see it. It's another world.

Pedro Palma: Train is still the only way to go across the Sierra. And it's still the best way to see the Copper Canyon.

Raquel Moreno: When the persons come here, they say, "Ohhhhh!"

SERIES OPEN -- ANIMATION

The Copper Canyon trip is a unique journey into one of North America's most mysterious and fascinating wilderness areas. It begins in the colorful border town of Nogales.

We have chosen the Sierra Madre Express, based in Tucson, Arizona, for our trip.

This comfortable, modern train operates with the permission of the Mexican Federal Government, and its spacious cars are pulled by locomotives manned with crews from the Mexican National Railroad.

As it travels through the night, the Sierra Madre Express parallels the Gulf of California, which in earlier days was called the Sea of Cortez.

Our destination is the remote *Barranca del Cobre*, or Copper Canyon, deep in the heart of the Sierra Madre Occidental range.

For Peter Robbins, who founded and operates the Sierra Madre Express, this initial leg of the journey is an essential one:

Peter Robbins: If you simply fly into Mexico on an airplane and get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to make a 6 o'clock train to go see the canyon, you're upset. You're not down to speed. On our particular trip, traveling 400 miles south takes 24 hours. And it gives everybody a chance to slow down, relax, and get ready to see Mexico.

The new morning offers us a potent mix of sights, smells, and sounds that quicken our appetites for adventure.

Now we head northeast, into the western mountains that form the spine of the Continental Divide below the U.S.- Mexico border.

From Sufragio Station, we climb steadily. The railroad's highest point, at over 8,000 feet near the town of Creel, is still below the 9,000 foot crests that many of these mountains reach.

Copper Canyon is the collective name for the mile-deep chasms that are four times greater in area and several hundred feet deeper than the Colorado River's Grand Canyon.

The tunnel ahead, *El Descanso*, is the longest tunnel on our trip. It takes the train almost two minutes to escape its 6000 feet of darkness.

This bridge over the *Rio Chinipas*, over a thousand feet long, is the highest of the 37 bridges the train must negotiate . . .

. . . and 355 feet down, the water looks very far away.

Another bridge over the Chinipas River, just ahead, looks as if it's on fire. . .

No, it's just a welder working on the bridge. . . That water so far below us wouldn't help much if it really was on fire.

Peter Robbins spent almost ten years renovating and outfitting the Sierra Madre Express.

Peter Robbins: We had mortgaged everything we owned -- the house and the car -- to get some money for the first trips . . . and as the years went by, we would add and build one car and then it would be a three-car train, and then it was a four-car train, and so little by little it's grown. . . . It's a very special little train. It will never be a great big commercial operation, and I think that's kind of the joy in how Sierra Madre Express operates.

While all of the coaches have their individual charms, perhaps the most popular car is the one-of-a-kind Divisadero car, with its combination of an open-air lounge and an observation platform.

Peter Robbins: You can smell Mexico. You can hear Mexico . . . You're actually participating in the sights, sounds, and smells of Mexico.

Ray Shattuck: You get all kinds of falcons and hawks. We saw earlier the osprey that were, ah, down on . . . perched on the cactus. Up here the most common one that we'll see is the turkey vulture, the black vulture. Yeah, they circle around, yeah. Waiting.

The cactus-studded slopes of the Sonoran desert have given way completely to a compelling landscape of Sinaloan thorn forest here.

This is mining country. In 1910, the state of Sonora exported ores worth 26 million pesos, and 60 percent of that was from copper. Some powerful Americans saw the benefits of building a rail line up into these treacherous canyons.

Industrialist Albert K. Owen began this rail line in the late 1800's, but quickly gave up.

Then Arthur E. Stilwell, the American railroad magnate, took Owen's place.

One of the contractors hired by Stilwell to help construct the line was the infamous revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa.

During the Mexican Revolution, though, Villa probably blew up more sections of the railroad than he ever completed before that war began.

The Mexican Government finally had to take over the project to ensure its completion.

The sheer rock faces of the mountains here made cutting conventional switchbacks impossible. These tunnels and loops were the solution.

The railroad was dedicated here in 1961, almost eighty years after it was begun.

This tunnel near Temoris is over three thousand feet long, and it negotiates a 180 degree turn within its span.

Seventy seconds after it enters the tunnel, our train comes out the other end, but heading in the opposite direction and still ascending.

From the Divisadero car, passengers can look back down over the three different levels of track they have just covered.

Now in the upper canyon, almost a mile above sea level, we are greeted by the smells of pines and hardwood trees. The air feels crisp on our faces.

Suddenly, it feels somehow wilder here, and more remote.

We are travelling from Temoris to Bahuichivo, which is our stopping point for a side trip to the small village of Cerocahui.

The Jesuit mission of San Francisco marks the center of the village.

This mission was founded by Padre Juan Maria de Salvatierra, who was the first European to reach the bottom of Copper Canyon.

The mission was begun in the late 17th Century, and a village quickly grew up around it. . . . However, the church's gilded dome was not completed until 1741.

Three centuries after it started, the mission here is still run by Jesuits, who also operate a boarding school for Tarahumara Indian children. A number of these children come from as far away as 150 miles to receive an education.

They are practicing today for the upcoming Cinco de Mayo parade, Mexico's 4th of July.

The Hotel Mision is owned by Roberto Baldarama. Senor Baldarama has worked hard to establish first-class hotels in the Copper Canyon area.

Roberto Balderama: Cerocahui is a unique village. A real Mexican Tarahumara village dates back to 1690 as a mission of Jesuits to convert the Tarahumara Indians . . . So that little village stays, ah, for the centuries the same way of living. So I decided to build a hotel there for adventures, ah, for tourists. They're looking for different places. The real old Mexico is in Cerocahui.

Local ranchers outfit day trips to a number of various scenic and historical sites which can't be reached any other way.

Though the ride takes over an hour, and is followed by a challenging walk to the waterfall, guides are there to help.

Today, we're headed for the gorgeous Wicochic Falls.

Arriving here, to see this, is certainly worth the effort.

Roberto Balderama: We don't have beaches. We don't have tennis or golf. This is a different kind of vacation. It's an adventure, I will say that . . . you have the beauty, the romance, and the adventure for a place, and it's part of the trip to Copper Canyon.

Right after this 695-foot bridge was finished, the rail builders had to blast a series of tunnels through these sheer rock walls . . . There was no way to go around here -- the builders simply had to dynamite their way through.

Peter Robbins: It was extremely dangerous work because in the early days when this was built a lot of the safety requirements that are now taken as commonplace were not in place. So a lot of people were killed building the tunnels. There were a lot of unexpected landslides, and cave-ins inside the tunnels. The longest tunnel is at the other end of the line near the coast, El Descanso. It's a mile long. And then there are a whole bunch of short tunnels, little short tunnels. And it was done by backbreaking hand work in the early days.

It's easy to forget those struggles now, as the train glides smoothly from one tunnel to another.

The soothing canyon air is there to greet us when we emerge from each dank cave, but it's also important to remember that the sacrifices and perseverance of those rail builders allows us our pleasant journey today.

We pass WWII troop cars that not only serve as storage containers but also house rail workers.

The end of the line for our first day is *El Divisadero*, which means "The View," and that name is well deserved.

Ray Shattuck: Welcome to Copper Canyon.

Breathtaking views of the Copper, Taraecqua, and Urique canyons await us wherever we look.

For many centuries, the Tarahumara have believed that this endlessly dramatic landscape of mile-deep chasms, towering waterfalls, and sun-shot clouds is ruled by the natural forces of good and evil.

It is tempting to read these twin spirits into the contrasting lights and darks of the handmade jewelry and baskets the Tarahumara artisans bring to the Divisadero station market.

Most of the basket makers here have hiked many miles from various depths within the canyons to sell their baskets.

They use the same native grasses that their distant ancestors used, and even construct unique baskets made from pine needles.

Near the station is the Posada Barrancas El Mirador Hotel, also owned by Roberto Balderama. It's a thoroughly modern hotel, with 37 comfortable rooms.

Raquel Moreno: When the persons come here, they say,"Ohhhhh!," because we are right on the rim of the canyon and you can see the canyon everywhere you just stay in the hotel . . . from the rooms, from the living, from the dining room . . . Every room has a balcony to the canyon. . . the hotel was built with mostly Tarahumara Indians who lives around the canyons up those mountains. (TURNS & POINTS) . . . We didn't use any machines. Everything was handmade. And you see all the ornaments and the ah, the tile, the, ah, walls is adobe. Everything is natural. We use everything from Mexico, from the area.

In the morning, we wake up to glorious sunshine and the roomy dining room of El Mirador.

There is time for breakfast . . .

... and for the views we might have missed the evening before.

The train won't leave until late morning, so there's even time for peering carefully down into the canyon from the rim, or flying right down into it.

Rafael Novo: Everybody ready? Welcome to the Canyon.

(**Cut in over Novo**) Rafael Novo is our pilot today.

A morning helicopter flight takes off from the hillside adjacent to El Mirador.

Rafael Novo: As we pass through the pillars, because it's windy today, the helicopter may move a little bit, so nothing to be concerned. It's just a little air.

As the giant metal bird follows the turkey vultures down into the barrancas, the magnificent splendor of this canyon country is revealed to us.

But if we want to get a closer look at life in the Barrancas, we have to get back on the train and go north, to the town of Creel, which is a rugged logging town with about 6000 inhabitants.

On the way, we cross the Continental Divide at 8,071 feet, the highest point on our rail journey.

Roberto Balderama: That's why they come here to the canyons, to relax and take it easy and enjoy the time . . . That's part of the beautiful thing of this trip. You are not rushing. You are resting. You are reading. You are talking. You are making good conversation. Enjoying life.

Peter Robbins: We have a mix of several cultures in Creel. We have of course the Mexican culture in Creel. We have the Tarahumaras, who live on the outskirts of Creel. For instance, these little fields are all Tarahumara right out here. Then we have a small Anglo community. And then we have some of the Mennonite influence, because down the rails toward Chihuahua is a Mennonite community. So occasionally in Creel you'll hear German spoken, which is kind of unique.

Creel is the perfect destination for travellers who want to explore the depths of the *Barranca del Cobre*.

Pedro Palma: Creel is a fairly new town that started from the arrival of the railroad . . .

(**Cut in over Palma**) Pedro Palma, a local guide, was raised with Tarahumara Indians.

. . . that at the beginning was really just in a small Mestiso settlement. When I say Mestiso, I say mixed blood, that's Indian and Spanish blood in this culture. Train is still the only way to go across the Sierra. And it's still the best way to see the Copper Canyon, or the Barrancas del Cobre.

Creel's permanent residents are predominantly *Mestiso*, but the Tarahumara come into town to sell what they have made and to buy supplies.

The oldest retail establishment in town is the *Artesanias Mision* store, which sells Tarahumara baskets, pottery, woven goods, jewelry, and carvings.

Alejandrina Lopez operates the Mission Artisan store.

Alejandrina Lopez: I came first as a tourist about 20 something years ago. At that time I decided I may come and help, you know? I didn't know how, but then I said, "I, I am an accountant, from Mexico City," but then I said, "Some day I will go to help for one year." And I came in '81 and not only stayed one year, stayed 15 years now.

Alejandrina's store offers the Tarahumara an important outlet for marketing their crafts, and some of the proceeds help to defray the operating expenses of a 60-bed hospital that has been here as long as the railway has.

The hospital, which provides free care for the Tarahumara and anyone else who needs its services, was the vision and achievement of Jesuit missionary, Father Luis Verplancken.

Father Verplancken: I found when I saw so many children dying that I decided I would stop the building of the church and open the hospital first. It was more important.

Protected by their historically isolated homeland, the Tarahumara continue as one of the most populous native peoples in North America. Currently, they number almost 50,000.

In the sixteenth century, the Tarahumara Indians settled in the Copper Canyon area to avoid being enslaved by the Conquistadores. Later, many of them also strongly resisted conversion by the Jesuits.

There are several day trips that afford opportunities to see Tarahumara settlements close to the town.

While most Tarahumara live in timber houses, some still live traditionally in cave homes and supplement their incomes by allowing tourists to tour these unique houses.

Pedro Palma has arranged a visit for us:

Pedro Palma: We are at the nearest inhabited cave home near Creel. And this is a very traditional cave. It's about third generation already living here. There's a great story of the man who used to live here and passed away last December -- Sebastian. That's how we referred to his cave as well, Sebastian's cave. He used to be the mailman between here and Wachochi, which is 115 kilometers from here. And there wasn't a road then. It used to take him about ten days to get there. Also to the bottom of the canyon, which is Batopilas, 140 kilometers from here. . . . So you're welcome to visit Sebastian's cave.

Sebastian's daughter, Maria, lives with her family in traditional Tarahumara fashion, raising animals, weaving belts on inkle looms, and raising corn, which is not only a staple of their lives but of their religious practices as well.

The Tarahumara religion, a hybrid of Christianity adapted to their own native beliefs, pits *mi pani biteame*, the "one who lives above," against *rire biteame*, the "one who lives below."

Many Tarahumara live in the higher, cooler rock caves during the summer, and then move down to the sub-tropical climate of the canyon floor during the winter months.

Here, as everywhere, symbols of modern life appear, and mix with the traditional native dress.

No matter how they live, though, all Tarahumara know themselves as *raramuri*, or foot runners. Long before horses were brought into the Sierra Madre Occidental by missionaries, the native nomads here travelled through the vast canyons in the easiest and most efficient way -- they ran.

Before this century, the *raramuri* were even reported to hunt deer by running after them for an entire day -- running for 24 hours without stopping -- until the deer dropped.

Repeatedly, the Tarahumara have earned the reputation of the greatest longdistance runners in the world.

Pedro Palma: Okay, running is not only a sport. It also means practicing the social life among the community, because they live scattered all over the High Sierras and deep in the canyons. And by practicing the race, kicking the wooden ball, that brings the community together and gives them the opportunity to practice, as I say, their social life.

Another surprise hidden deep in a remote section of the *Barranca del Cobre* is this 17th Century Spanish cathedral, usually referred to as "The Lost Mission of Satevo."

Its design and purpose link us to similar missions that were built by Franciscan missionaries all along the coast of California about a hundred years later.

Our final stop on this trip awaits us just beyond the 1,637 foot bridge over the *Rio Fuerte*.

The small, colonial town of El Fuerte was named for the 18th Century fort that was built to protect the Spanish colonists.

Cinco de Mayo, the 5th of May independence celebration, has started in El Fuerte.

This town was a central trading destination for gold and silver miners. Missionaries and soldiers also outfitted their explorations to Northwest Mexico and California from right here.

Today, however, this bustling tourist town is a perfect spot to experience Mexico's traditional folk arts . . .

- ... to sample the native cuisine ...
- . . . and to enjoy the exotic natural attractions.

Now comes our chance to sit back and reflect on all we have seen in the remarkable Copper Canyon.

The sun slides toward the Pacific and the Sierra Madre Express heads back north, up through Sonora, toward California, which Teddy Roosevelt called "west of the West," and toward our next exciting rail journey on the Coast Starlight.

The Coast Starlight's full tease should appear here.

In the hours before dawn, the train prep and commissary crews in Los Angeles work to outfit Amtrak West's most luxurious passenger train for its two-day journey north to Seattle.

Everything we might need on our journey north is prepared and loaded before we board the train.

This new rail adventure on the Coast Starlight will follow much the same path that the early Franciscan missionaries traveled.

Our journey on the Coast Starlight will take us 1300 miles, from Los Angeles to Seattle, and it will pass through several of America's premier cities along the way.

As we emerge from a tunnel in the Santa Susanna pass, we leave the 455 square mile sprawl of metropolitan Los Angeles behind us.

We roll through the Simi Valley and head for the coastal town of Ventura. From there, we'll hug the shoreline up to our first stop at San Luis Obispo.

Although it's Christmas time, the fields here in Southern California have turned bright emerald. Southern California's "false spring" has arrived. The rains of November have given way to December's perfect weather.

As we enjoy a delicious lunch, we can watch the vast Pacific endlessly roll against the shore rocks and reflect the azure sky.

We pass close to the dazzling beaches at Montecito and Summerland.

Since this area is semi-desert, sunshine is a constant here. Without the ocean breezes, the sunlight would be intolerable.

But the combination of ocean mist and soft, filtered sunlight have given Southern California a climate that is consistent and incomparable.

The first part of the trip brings us to the charming town of San Luis Obispo.

About halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, it's a great place to begin exploring this region's mountains, lakes, beaches, sand dunes, and quaint, central California towns.

Its mission, San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, was the fifth mission founded in California by Padre Junipero Serra.

One of the main tourist attractions near San Luis Obispo is San Simeon .

Begun in 1919 and finished almost thirty years later, William Randolph Hearst's famous estate once included 270,000 acres. The castle, known as the Enchanted Hill, was designed in the Mediterranean Revival style.

(Cut in over Allen) James Allen is the Public Affairs Officer at the Hearst Castle.

James Allen: Hearst Castle is one of the last of the great estates that were constructed during a period in American history called the Gilded Age . . .

He began in 1919 at the age of 56 to build something a little more comfortable . . .

Mr. Hearst loved Christmas . . . I'm sure it must have been just an astonishing experience. I can see them tearing open the gifts with great gusto.

Hearst's mansion, which he referred to as his ranch, has 130 rooms and still contains his extensive art collection.

Neoclassical statuary mixes with Art Nouveau sculpture . . .

Gothic furniture is displayed near medieval and Renaissance paintings . . .

Greek pottery, 16th Century tapestries, rare books, and countless other treasures were shipped back to California from all over the world.

Here in the Refectory, a Flemish tapestry depicting the prophet Daniel watches over an exquisitely set table that boasts 18th Century Mexican silver candlesticks.

Mr. Hearst did, however, appreciate some of the more ordinary things in life as well. The table is furnished exactly the way it would have been when he was in residence.

William Randolph Hearst died sometime before 10 a.m. on August 14, 1951 at the age of 88.

One year after he died, the hilltop of the estate, about 125 acres, was given to the State of California by the Hearst Corporation. On June 2, 1958, the Enchanted Hill was opened to the public.

Back on the train, we begin to climb up the Cuesta Grade, the highest point the Coast Starlight traverses in the verdant Santa Lucia Mountain Range.

This series of tunnels and some loops carry our train the 1340 feet to the top of the Cuesta Pass.

The Southbound Coast Starlight, Train Number 11, greets us as she rolls by.

Across from us we can see Highway 101, the major north-south road that basically follows *El Camino Real*, the King's Highway, from the days of Spanish dominion in California.

The next tourist attraction we pass is the small town of San Miguel.

The Mission San Miguel Arcangel was the sixteenth mission in what is referred to as "Father Serra's Rosary," or the chain of twenty-one missions that stretch from San Diego to Sonoma.

What is most remarkable about this mission is that the interior decorations of the church here are in practically the same condition in whioch the padres left them in 1841.

Dan Krieger is a Professor of History at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.

Dan Krieger: We're at Mission San Miguel Arcangel. It was founded in 1797 by Father Lasuen, the father presidente of the California missions . . . It's a spectacular place.

Dan Krieger: We're inside the . . . mission mania.

Furniture, interior furnishings, pottery, and even early Hollywood movies adopted the mission style near the turn of the century.

After we leave San Miguel, we drop down out of the Santa Lucia range into the lush Salinas Valley. This is country made famous by John Steinbeck, the Nobel Prize winning author of such books as *East of Eden* and *Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck calls this valley "a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, where the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay."

As night comes on, we roll into Northern California and through the rushing darkness into the San Francisco Bay Area.

(Note about San Francisco here.)

The dawn of a new day finds us taking a different and delightful side trip -- a daylong excursion on the Napa Valley Wine Train. Since December of 1989, this train has been not only showing people the wine country between Napa city and St. Helena, but treating them royally along the way.

Vincent DeDomenico, an entrepreneur who invented Rice-a-Roni, is the managing partner of the wine train:

Vincent DeDomenico: I like good food and good wine, and the idea is you want to combine the two, because they really fit together . . .

(**Cut in over Brent**) Wine buyer for the Napa Valley Wine Train is Brent Trojan:

Brent Trojan: There's a wine with a price for everybody on board . . .

The distinguished chef on this rolling feast for the palate is Patrick Finney:

Patrick Finney: We're capable of serving about 135 gourmet meals in about 35 minutes . . .

Our main course consists of . . . bon appetit.

With our appetites satisfied, we climb back on board the Coast Starlight for an evening of travel that takes us up through Sacramento, where in 1863 the Central Pacific began its portion of the rail line that would link the West with the East six years later.

Our destination for tonight is the charming railroad town of Dunsmuir.

(**Cut in over Reva**) Reva Coon has lived here for more than seventy years.

Reva Coon: The town was set to the ryythm of the railroad . . . I came to this lovely little town, not knowing a thing about it . . . and so I came to Dunsmuir.

It was May 10, 1869, when the golden spike was driven at Promontory Point, Utah. Trains from the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific Railroads touched cowcatchers, linking the nation and helping to create new towns like Dunsmuir.

A lifelong fascination with trains brought inventor Bruce Petty to Dunsmuir.

Bruce Petty: I was a child and I saw this cab forward steam locomotive, like the one behind me . . . One of the motivations for coming was Dunsmuir was a railroad town . . .

For the people of Dunsmuir, Christmas and railroads are forever linked.

Bruce Petty: Every year I'm involved in Candles in the Canyon . . .

With the sounds of the season still ringing in our ears, we bid good-bye to California and head toward Oregon.

We pass through Klamath Falls and begin our climb into the breathtaking Cascade Mountains. The palm trees and sun-kissed beaches of Southern California suddenly seem very far away.

Oregon has always lured travellers. In the 1840s, before railroads reached here, many set out from Independence, Missouri, where the Oregon Trail began. They struggled for 2000 miles to reach this land of wild forests, rocky coasts, volcanic mountains, raging rivers, and fertile valleys.

Viewed from the comfort of the Coast Starlight, the snow-covered mountains and passes are serene and enchanting.

The train is the perfect place to relax, to read, and to reflect.

The summits of the Cascades soar to over 9000 feet. Unless you're an experienced mountain climber, this is easily the best way to see them.

As we head down out of the mountains, the snow shifts over to the rain that here in the Pacific Northwest seems almost constant.

To many pioneers heading west, the fertile soil and moderate climate of the Willamette River valley made it an ideal place to settle.

Our train, howver, is headed on to Portland.

Charles Roebuck: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, it's wine-tasting time again . . . something they'll never forget.

Charles Roebuck is the Coast Starlight's Chief of Onboard Services today.

The swollen Willamette River is churning as we approach Portland.

Just past the falls and the dam is the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center.

Portland is the state's largest city, with half of Oregon's almost 3 million people living here.

This city was developed during the 1840s, because of the Columbia River, which connects it directly to the Pacific Ocean. John Couch, a New England sea captain exploring for salmon fisheries, helped to transform Portland into a major port.

The city is a gateway to the Pacific Northwest.

Portland's downtown is a mixture of commerce and nature. Its flowers, parks, fountains, and public squares remind residents and tourists alike of the city's close connection with the natural world surrounding it.

Mt. Hood, at over 11,000 feet the state's highest point, towers above us as we continue on toward Washington State and our final destination -- Seattle.

The end of our journey on the Coast Starlight brings us to the Pacific Northwest's largest and busiest metropolitan center.

Hilda and Barry Anderson are travel writers who live in Seattle and ride the Coast Starlight as often as they can. (add establishing shot of these folks here)

Barry Anderson: . . . and then of course at Christmas time, at this time of the year, the city just lights up . . .

Located on Puget Sound, Seattle is a major port city.

In the harbor, its light ships are becoming an important tradition at Christmas time, and the celebration there gives us a chance to meet some of the city's friendly residents.

It's a new morning in the busy and unique Pike Street market area. This may be the best fish market you'll find anywhere.

Though these two rail excursions have come to an end, our memorable trips on the Copper Canyon and the Coast Starlight have only ended in fact -- they will live on in our memories and in our imaginations for a long time to come.