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Bikers in the Copper Canyon get million-dollar views, like this one from the road to Batopilas. (Photos by Kevin Davis)

## Biking that other grand canyon

*A wind-in-the-hair adventure through Mexico's Copper Canyon*

**By Kevin Davis**

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COPPER CANYON, Mexico -- There's not much traffic on the road to Batopilas, and it's easy to see why. It is one rough road.

This crudely carved highway through the Copper Canyon region of Mexico is littered with rocks, pitted with holes and caked with dust. It winds through the mountains around dizzying curves, up and down steep switchbacks and through narrow passageways. Homemade crosses and memorials mark spots where hapless souls plunged off cliffs in cars or buses.

While it's not the most car-friendly road, it's perfect for mountain biking.

I'm barreling down it on a 24-gear, front suspension bike toward the bottom of the canyon and have the road all to myself. For the last 10 minutes, I've been flying straight downhill on a bone-jarring ride over rocks and ruts and around hairpin turns along this stunning route through the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range of northwest Mexico.

About 4,000 feet below, the Rio Batopilas rushes south, swirling around giant boulders that tumbled into the riverbed. To my left and right are stratified canyon walls and mountain peaks rising some 7,000 feet. The wind whips over my face as I rattle down the hill, picking up more speed.



A friend had advised me to gently squeeze and release the brakes to keep from going out of control. And never hit the front brake too hard or the bike will stop cold and send me flying over the handlebars. Riding safely down these steep grades takes complete concentration. You don't want to be looking off to the side or trying to scratch an itch.

But there's no need to race down to the canyon floor. While speed is part of the thrill of mountain biking, so is stopping and looking around. So I stop the bike and take a look to remind myself why I am here. This place is gorgeous.

The air is cool, and the sun is just beginning to creep over the mountaintops. About a mile or

so behind me are another 12 bikers, a group from the United States who came to this remote part of Mexico to try something different -- seeing the Copper Canyon on two wheels.

The Copper Canyon, or Barranca del Cobre, is often compared to the Grand Canyon, though they are far from equals. The Copper Canyon is four times larger and much more diverse, and it's not choked with tour buses, RVs and families in minivans. It consists of a series of gorges that stretch some 900 miles long and more than a mile wide and deep in places.

The Copper Canyon was once among the great travel secrets of North America, but even though it's been getting more notice in the past few years, it's still largely unknown. When I mentioned to friends and colleagues I was going there, most hadn't heard of it.

The area remains largely untouched. Most visitors view it from the comfort of a train along the famous Chihuahua al Pacifico rail line, which cuts through the canyon from Chihuahua to Los Mochis. Others have ventured into the canyons on hikes or guided bus tours from various towns around the rim.

The good news for those considering going by bike is that hardly anyone ever uses the road from Creel to Batopilas. On a typical day, you might see five or six vehicles. It takes a sturdy car or truck with industrial strength suspension, in good mechanical condition and a nery driver to negotiate the turns and climb the grueling hills.

It's not much easier on a mountain bike. The uphill climbs can be murderous and the downhill rides a terror. But it's an exhilarating ride that tests your stamina and guts.



Adventure travelers and hardcore mountain



Bikers take a break on the road to Batopilas in Mexico's Copper Canyon.

bikers have been coming to the Copper Canyon for years, but an Arizona adventure

tour operator has opened it up for intermediate and aspiring mountain bikers by creating custom-made guided tours.

"Hardly anyone used to come around here on bikes," says John Saliba, a former marketing executive who decided to give up corporate life to pursue his dream of running mountain bike tours. "This is a lot more fun."

Saliba runs regular tours from the United States, making the trip about 12 times a year. His WorldTrek Expeditions, based in Tucson, offers full tours including bikes, accommodation and food. "This is really the best way to see the canyon," Saliba says. "Because you're right in it."

The trip begins in El Paso, Texas, where Saliba collects his customers in a van to take them down to the canyon for a week of riding. I've joined a group for my first mountain biking expedition. My biking experience is limited to riding around Chicago where the challenge is dodging cars, potholes, joggers and in-line skaters. I prepared for the trip by pedaling on a stationary bike for a few weeks. Saliba says that anyone in good physical condition and, ideally, with intermediate mountain biking experience can make the journey.

After a seven-hour van ride from El Paso, the group stops for a stay in Creel, elevation 7,640 feet. Creel is one of the gateway towns to the canyon and serves as a base for tourists and backpackers wanting to hike or ride into the mountains. It's also a stop for the Chihuahua al Pacifico train, which continues southwest. Eventually, we'll go southeast and descend toward our destination -- Batopilas, an old

silver mining town of about 800 along the Rio Batopilas at 1,650 feet.

South of Creel, the road is no longer paved. This is a deterrent to many travelers, especially recreational vehicles that can't take the strain or make the turns. In fact, people pay to anchor their RVs on flatbed rail cars to be pulled through the canyon. They eat and sleep in their own RV while the train does all the work. It's an odd site to see hundreds of RVs parked on the train outside Creel.

For those who don't have their own bikes, Saliba provides high-end Voodoo mountain bikes with front suspension and "granny gears" for those tough uphill climbs. And there are many. Even though the trip moves in a downward direction, there are some hills that even the best bikers have to walk.

Our first day of riding is spent exploring the countryside around Creel before descending into the canyon. Saliba follows the riders a mile or so behind in the support van, which is loaded with fresh water, food, bike repair equipment and a rack on the roof in case someone decides to pack it in. He stays far enough away that bikers feel a sense of isolation. It is quiet out here, and the place is our own.

For lunch, Saliba lays out a first-rate spread, including turkey, ham, seafood salad, potato salad, various breads, fresh fruit, granola bars, trail mix, chips and soda. He shops at a Sam's Club in Tucson before each trip. This is food he cannot get in Mexico.

It's amazing how much you can eat after a few hours of strenuous biking, having built up a pure and well-earned hunger. During our week's trip, before or after lunch, we usually go for a swim along the route. Saliba knows where the great swimming holes are, including a spot along the river where there are hot springs.

The long downhill thrill ride comes on the second day of the trip, a descent of more than 4,000 feet from just outside Creel to the town of La Bufa, population: 7. (It was once the site of a copper mine.)

The road is insane. It's full of huge rocks and deep holes, gravel patches and piles of dust. Around one curve, I see a four-wheel drive truck with two seats bolted onto the roof where two tourists wearing floppy sun hats sit strapped in for an outdoor joy ride. They sway and bounce as clouds of dust fly into their faces.

I continue down to La Bufa, feeling every bump, every little rock in the road. The more I ride, the more comfortable I get with the downhill rides and sharp turns. Stopping to take a rest, I hear a pounding sound in the distance. It is Tarahumara Indians, who beat their drums as they walk the mountains where they live. It's an announcement of their presence, a distinct beat that identifies each individual. They wear puffy, pleated shirts, shorts and sandals made from old tire treads.

That night, Saliba has arranged for us to stay at the home of Don Bush, an American who decided to get away from it all and built a home on the edge of a cliff in La Bufa. His place is made of wood and mud brick and is decorated with masks, animal sculptures, cattle skulls, wind chimes and all sorts of knickknacks hanging from walls and trees.



Hurling through a creek

"I moved here to get away from people, and now there are people coming around all the time," Bush says, kicking back on his porch with a cold Tecate beer. "People who used to come down here asked if they could stay with me, so I figured I

at the bottom of Copper Canyon can provide some welcome relief from the heat. might as well build some rooms and charge them for it."

Bush greets his visitors with a giant bowl of guacamole, salsa and chips for a happy hour on his wooden porch overlooking a valley. For dinner, he cooks up a meal of linguine with ground turkey, tomatoes, peppers and cactus, and we eat by kerosene light. Bush provides cots for those who want to sleep outside under the stars, and most of us do, watching a brilliant sky with shooting stars.

From Bush's place, the ride down to Batopilas takes about five hours, and while it's downhill, there are plenty of climbs to get around the mountains. It's a relief to roll into town. Batopilas is a great place to hang out. It's a quiet town built along the riverbanks with cobblestone streets and Mission-style buildings.

The town has only one public bar, which is nothing more than a backyard with folding metal tables and chairs set up near the edge of the river where you can get bottles of cold beer. There's a big old tree in the middle with bullet holes in it. The electricity in Batopilas is unpredictable, which explains why so many people carry around flashlights or kerosene lanterns at night. Four or five times a night, the lights fade and then cut out completely.

Since not everyone on the trip is a hard-core biker, Saliba offers the option of staying on the main road or going off-road onto single-track paths that are mostly used by villagers and cattle.

Having gained some bravado from a few days of biking, I opt for the hard ride. The next morning it's just me and Blair Windley, one of the guides and native New Zealander



who perfected his mountain biking skills riding with Saliba. We go off-road along a narrow single-track path to a remote village called Cerro Colorado. The track takes us through thick cactus patches, along the rocky edges of cliffs and over several river crossings where we blast through the water. At several points, we must carry our bikes because the riverbed is too rocky and full of boulders. Goats and cows wander over and around the path, but don't pay much attention. We find a great swimming spot and take a cool dip.



Guide John Saliba (center) of WorldTrek Expeditions checks out clients' bikes during the Copper Canyon ride.

The best part is lunch. We stop at a woman's house and sit in her dining room as she prepares us spicy ground beef and potatoes, rice, cucumber, shredded carrots and fresh, warm tortillas. For dessert, she cuts up a fresh papaya. The meal cost us about five bucks each.

We get back on the path and head back to Batopilas, energized with bellies full of food and the prospect of sitting by the river with a few cold beers. The sky is brilliant blue, the mountains soar above us and it feels like we have the whole place to ourselves.

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## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

WorldTrek Expeditions, based in Tucson, Ariz., offers regularly scheduled mountain biking trips to the Copper Canyon from **September through May** when the weather is dry and reasonably cool. Summer in the canyon can be unbearably hot, with temperatures well into the 100s. During the trip I took, it never got much hotter than probably 80 during the day. WorldTrek's guided week-long tour costs **\$1,199 per**

**person** and includes meals, lodging and ground transportation from El Paso, Texas, where the trip begins and ends. For those without bikes, **rentals are \$100** extra, and singles requiring a private room will pay another \$145. Riders must get to and from El Paso on their own, which is about \$400-\$450 round trip by air from Chicago. Because of the elevation changes (temperatures rise the deeper you get into the canyon), it's wise to bring clothes for warm and cool weather.

## **SLEEPING AND EATING**

Riders on WorldTrek tours stay at **small, basic hotels** in Batopilas and in Creel, and at the unusual mountainside home of Don Bush in La Bufa where there's the option of sleeping on cots under the stars. All accommodations have private bathrooms. Meals are prepared at restaurants, hotels and at the homes of native Mexicans who cook up **excellent dishes**. Breakfasts often include eggs, potatoes and tortillas. Lunch is usually sandwiches, fruit and granola bars. Dinners are among the highlights of the trip with first-rate Mexican meals such as a mouth-watering chicken mole or spicy shredded beef and potatoes. Fresh bottled water is provided throughout the trip. Bring spending money for snacks, drinks and souvenirs.

## **PREPARING FOR THE RIDE**

Mountain bike riding can be difficult for the uninitiated, and WorldTrek recommends you have at least intermediate experience. But, if you're in reasonable shape and have done a little biking before, you can make it. For those who get too tired on the tour, a support van is always nearby. Also be sure to bring padded bike shorts and helmet. Camelbacks, which are backpacks that store water in a rubber bladder with a tube that winds around to rest near your mouth, are great for keeping well hydrated while riding. Hard-core riders have the option of getting up before dawn and pedaling back uphill toward Creel on the last

day, but most choose to ride in the van. It's nearly 40 grueling miles.

### INFORMATION

For more information, contact WorldTrek Expeditions at 800-795-1142, or visit their Web site at <http://www.worldtrekexpeditions.com/>.

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