LIMA, Peru – On a dusty hillside in the Chosica section east of Lima, we stood on the platform of a two-story wooden station befitting the classic station in Thurmond, W.Va., and celebrated a railroad more than 4,000 miles away and that has been gone 18 years: Conrail.

The occasion was the dedication of a former Conrail C39-8, No. 1030, still resplendent in Conrail blue and named in appreciation of James A. Hagen, the Conrail Chairman (1989 to 1996) who agreed to lend his and his company’s expertise in the early 1990s effort to privatize South America’s freight railroads. FCCA Chairman Juan Olaechea and Pittsburgh, Pa.-based Railroad Development Corp. Chairman Henry Posner III (himself a CR alumni) presided. Our Trains tour group, on its first full day in the country, FCCA workers in hard hats at this shop town, and the seemingly obligatory dog at every station in this country stood with rapt attention. When it was done and the locomotive dedication was completed, a server passed around pisco sour drinks (the local favorite), which we downed with the joy of a group of travelers embarking on an epic journey.

On this first day, we stumbled into the back door of Lima’s only train station, the Desemparados Station, which is today a major library. We didn’t realize that the FCCA had arranged to greet us at the front door and tour us through this spectacular Beaux Arts 1893 depot that sadly goes unused for its original purpose in this nation dominated by the car and bus.

The only passenger trains run six to eight times a year as special all-day excursions into the Andes.

Our 4-car train consisted of a kitchen car, two Romanian-built coaches from 1982, and a heavily modified bar-observation car that reminds me of the Lookout Mountain, Southern Railway’s famous open-air tail car on its 1960s and 1970s steam excursions. Naturally, our group flocked to the observation for the best views of the unfolding urban landscape. With more than 10 million people, Lima is a major urban center in South America, and for miles we rolled by hovels, businesses, food stands, and other necessities of life. We gawked at the major damage that floods caused here last spring, washing away the railroad for 16 days and costing more than $4 million to rebuild. We passed the reason this railroad still exists, a freight train, hauling zinc...
medallions. Mineral traffic along with cement and fuel are major commodities on the FCCA.

We climbed from sea level to an altitude of 2,800 feet at Chosica and eventually even higher at San Bartolome. We listened to the chugging sound of our General Electric locomotive as it made its way ever upward, only stopping for the occasional car or truck parked too close to the tracks. Fortunately for us, the FCCA has grade crossing flagmen on motorbikes to guard the many crossings.

At Chosica, after our celebratory drink, we adjourned to visit the locomotive and car shops, where among the many prizes was a former Norfolk Southern C39-8, No. 8554 in a disheveled state. The unit was being converted for use on this, one of the kings of mountain railroads. FCCA will chop the cab and radiators for tunnel clearances and lightens the engine and shortens the fuel tank for bridge loadings. A standard SD40 and a EMD G12 export unit, which one of our party describes as an SD39L in export clothes, were also on hand.

We concluded our day at San Bartolome, where we inspected the deadline that included more former NS C39s and a handsome but out of service 2-8-0 with a Belpaire firebox. This is also where all FCCA trains change direction as the station is at the point of a single switchback. Owning to that, before we left, No. 1031 climbed onto the short turntable.

Members of our group pushed the Armstrong turntable around so the engine is pointed in the right direction for tomorrow’s journey. Ahead of us are the Andes, more switchbacks, bridges, tunnels, and grades in excess of 4.2 percent. I fully expect it to look and feel like nothing I’ve ever experienced in my 50 years of being in love with trains. I’m thinking Saluda, Moffat, Wasatch grades all rolled into one and multiplied by 10.

Railroading at 15,000 feet and other true tales from South America: Trains’ Peru tour, Day 2

Henry Posner warned me before we left. Climbing the Andes on Peru’s FCCA railroad would tax one adjective more than any other to the point of becoming a cliché before the day was out: Amazing. That word, however, does not do justice to this king of mountain railroads that challenges railroaders with an unrelenting barrage: 4.2 percent grades, dozens of tunnels, sharp curves, and one of the highest altitudes of any railroad in the world at 15,000 feet.

Our three-car special zipped up the mountain at a brisk pace, meeting opposing freight traffic, stopping for photos, and stirring both sheep and llama herds.

If you are not comfortable with heights, this is one railroad that is not for you. It runs along steep cliffs on shelves high above the rest the typography. Bridges are perched at dizzying elevations. But if you are good with this, the scenery is spectacular and the show truly beyond belief.

A last parting thought on this railroad. My favorite moment came when we arrived at the summit at Galera, some 15,000 feet above sea level, late in the afternoon. On the way up, some of us were receiving oxygen to minimize the effects of altitude. Others sipped coco tea or coco candies, which the crew told us would help mitigate our experience. Despite the impact the lack of oxygen had on us, we all got off the train, snapped pictures, marveled at the summit tunnel which took minutes to clear after we’d roared through in a smoky blaze. We snapped photos of a mineral train departing the summit loadout. It was mountain railroading at its fiercest and boldest. And yes, Henry, you were right.

The city that is eating itself, flamingos, and other true tales from South America: Trains’ Peru tour, Day 3

Posted by Jim Wrinn on Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017

Sometimes beauty and grit are next door neighbors. Thursday’s chartered FCCA train from LaOroya to Cerro de Pasco showed us that. We saw great natural beauty. And we saw scars that industry can leave on the land.

On the third day of our special tour of Peru, we took FCCA’s branch to this mining community, nicknamed the city that is consuming itself because of the continuing mining activity that causes portions of the city to be relocated on a regular basis. We climbed from around 11,000 feet to about 14,000 feet.

The branch is interesting. It starts at a junction city where an industrial railroad once ran. Danish self-powered diesel cars purchased for an uncompleted passenger operation are parked on a siding, slowing rusting away.

From there, we traveled to what must be the most interesting photo runby ever performed. It took place at a wetlands, where flamingos take up residence. We stopped for a photo runby that, yes, included flamingos. And yes, I was as surprised as you are that they did not fly away when the train came.

The yard is full of freight cars on arch bar trucks, some of them with roller bearings. Not far out of the city, we travel through the one and only switchback on this line, a moderate leap compared to what we saw on the FCCA’s main line the day before. Outside of there, we stopped for a photo runby, where a friendly couple and their dog greeted us at their house by the tracks.

Our next stop was Shelby, where a rusting 30-inch gauge diesel of, we believe, eastern European manufacture, had been abandoned next to the FCCA freight station.
We completed the climb, pulling into the yard at Cerro de Pasco, where the local was making up its train.

Mining activity was all around us, and we marveled at what we saw. The deep pit in the city of the city, a crater like one on the moon. The tall mounds of mine tailings as high as a roller coaster. Murky sedimentation ponds designed to hold back pollution.

Beautiful birds and deep mines. Preservation and consumption. Beauty and grit. They do exist side by side, and we saw it first hand thanks to this opportunity to explore the world by rail.

HUANCAYO, Peru – This day won’t be as exciting or amazing, Henry Posner told me as we boarded the C30-7 for Friday’s trip from LaOroya to Hauycayo, Peru. We were riding on a FCCA railroad branch that sees about one train a week. I’m sorry, Henry, but I have to disagree. Yes, it’s not crossing the Andes at 15,000 feet or traveling to the city that is eating itself. But this is truly a scenic beauty once we left the smelter town of LaOroya. We followed a river gorge that reminded me of Union Pacific’s Cascade, Idaho branch, and the UP main line at Echo Canyon. In order to select the best photo spots, Henry and I rode far forward – as far forward as possible, on the front of No. 1001.

The view, as you can imagine, was immense and intense. We stopped for photos several times along the way, each one a breathtaking masterpiece of railroading and nature. We passed farmers in their fields, pigs, sheep, goats, and cows grazing alongside the tracks. And at one point, we even herded a group of llamas using the locomotive horn and bell, hand claps, and Henry’s trusty whistle.

I’m happy to report that no llamas were injured in Friday’s excursion, although I was worried about one especially slow one. But it finally cleared the right of way.

The branch was supposed to be unoccupied other than our train, but at Pachacayo we found a genuine surprise in the siding: a Brazilian-built double-ended locomotive built under license from EMD. The shape was unique, but the sound was that of a good old fashioned American SD40. Our hosts even backed up our train for a better view of this rare beast.

But that is not all. When we arrived at Huancayo, in the station complex was a small narrow gauge 2-6-0 that looked to be of American descent, on display in an avocado green paint scheme. It made the steam lovers among us (myself included) very happy.
It’s been stripped of parts and empty liquor bottles rested on backhead oil can platform, attesting to the engine’s long service as a display piece.

There was one more surprise at Huancayo, whose compact and fenced depot complex is surrounded by urban development and big box stores. We noticed a bagged cement transload that was straight out of another era. Here, workers struggled with bags of cement in containers, hand loading them onto pallets resting on a truck.

Posner says cement is the only traffic on the line, but it is good business the railroad enjoys.

Today’s post is a short one as we have a super early call time tomorrow for our flights to Lima and then to Arequipa, where we will join the Belmond Andean Explorer train, a new luxury service that I am eager to sample. Have a great evening and be sure to check out posts from the explorer train over the weekend. Good night Trains Nation!

CUSCO, Peru -- The engine revs up and with a lurch the aircraft begins racing forward down the runway at 11,000 feet above sea level. My heart races a little knowing that an A319 only has so much linear footage at this altitude to become airborne or spatter itself on the side of the Andes. Instead of fretting about high altitude departures, though, my thoughts instead turn to Peru, its railroads, and their people who have welcomed the Trains tour group and me for the last 11 days. What a ruggedly beautiful country, and what spectacular railroading.

Sadly what takes place here is mostly out of sight due to its location far from U.S. and European eyes, save for a few intrepid travelers and photographers who come in search of amazing scenery; indefatigable North American Alcos, GE's, and odd-ball EMDs; and sheer railroading audacity. I came not really having expectations that needed to be met.

And every time you think the train has come to the end of a box canyon, you realize that construction engineers (most of them British, we believe; note the neatly groomed, well defined right of ways in most locations) figured out some way to escape to higher ground, whether by zig zags, as they prefer to call switchbacks, a tunnel or two or several, a high bridge, or any number of solutions that would tire those who layout railroads.

It is as if David Moffat's Denver & Salt Lake up and over the Rockies was transported 4,000 miles to the south, where fortunately the nearby equator prevents a snow disaster here like the one that plagued the Moffat Road west of Denver.

After a lifetime studying the business, I know mountain railroading from Crawford Notch, N.H., to Donner Pass in California, and most places in between. But I was still unprepared for the likes of this place with tracks placed as high as 15,000 feet. It must be illegal or at least immoral to build a railroad into the mountains without switchbacks or loops.
As most railroaders know getting up the grade is a one kind of feat. Getting down the grade is even more important. On railroads like this it is a lifesaving technique that is shared among fearless railroaders who have four tools at their disposal:

Air brakes, straight air (basically an extension of the independent brake running through the train; notice the twin brake pipes and air hose connections between cars), dynamics, and as a last resort, hand brakes. On the FCCA, life is indeed like a mountain railroad. Grades of up to 4.7 percent dictate what goes up and what goes down.

This has been and is a land of intense mineral exploitation (copper, gold, silver, to name a few), and where there are minerals, there are railroads. That has always been a fact, it remains one, and will likely always be. Minerals are big bulky stuff that is idea for railroads. Some of what once was slumbers in anticipation of changing world market conditions (the giant, quietly simmering smelter we traveled through last week in LaOroya would make a fine model, but then again, so would the entire FCCA out of Lima to the east), and some continues in operation, such as the line to Cerro de Pasco, whose nickname, “the city that is consuming itself,” as the open pit mine grows and expands, is no joke. The zinc ingots we saw heading to port at Lima once again prove that minerals are the bedrock traffic here.

This is a land of railroading contrasts. While the gritty standard gauge FCCA hauls freight up and down the Andes east of Lima, PeruRail, IncaRail, and the new and genteel Belmond Andean Explorer between Arequipa, Puno, and Cusco, tote tourists bound for the ruins at Machu Picchu a few hundred miles to the south. We marveled at PeruRail’s meter-gauge money machine, hauling tourists to the Incan mountain citadel. It may be one of the most profitable passenger lines in the world with high volumes of high revenue tourists filling every seat.

We also wondered at some of what we saw without answer:

- The trans-Lake Titicaca carferry parked at Puno for an undetermined amount of time since it last moved freight cars between Peru and Bolivia.

And yes, my friends, those are dual gauge tracks on the deck. Nobody seems to know when it was last used or what its prospects for renewed service might be.
• PeruRail’s Alcos, which are rumored to be up for replacement with newer power.

Yes, that was a 1966 graduate of Schenectady, No. 600, on the Belmond train we took. If confirmed, expect a rush of visitors before the last 251 engine is stilled.

The longevity of the Armstrong turntable at San Bartolome, which sees daily use as trains reverse directions at this switchback.

And at the same location, steam locomotive No. 209, which has been out of service about a decade. There are those who would repair and run the engine once again, but there are also those who see it as a difficult and expensive toy. But in the end you have to ask yourself, wouldn’t it look good on this mountain railroad?

Near the end of our meal, I asked him if I were to come back in 10 years, what might I see. His reply was swift, the kind that comes from a thinking man who contemplates the future with frequency: Switchbacks, gone, replaced by spiral tunnels. Commuter trains on the tracks in Lima. Flood controls in place. And newer engines and more freight traffic, of course. I hope it happens. I hope that railroading in the Andes continues to evolve. Whether by zig zags or spiral tunnels, I hope it keeps climbing ever higher than before.

And lastly, dogs. Raildogs to be precise. They seem to be everywhere in this country, and with as many homes as face the tracks, it is not surprising to see them. They seem to populate every yard and railroad station, some welcomed and beloved, and some tolerated. How good it must be to be a dog in Peru, whose primary duty seems to be chasing trains out of their territory and then returning for praise and food.

Those are questions I shall ponder further along with the memories and pixels we collected. But right now the A319 has leaped into the air and we are soaring to the northwest over the Andes. Lima and a change of planes await. In a few hours, I will be back in the U.S., where I belong. I am glad for having had the chance to see this country and its railroads. And I hope someday that I shall return. What will I find then? On the first night of our visit here, I dined with FCCA Chairman Juan Olaechea.
If this Trains tour in conjunction with Special Interest Tours sounds like something you’d enjoy, please consider joining us on a future expedition. We’ll be visiting great scenic railroads and museums of Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland next June. And we’ll be visiting Switzerland next September. More tours are in the works. Please visit www.specialinteresttours.com for more information and to register.

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