

DESTINATION: GUATEMALA

Chugging Through Guatemala

Rocky-rolling across banana plantations on a rugged old steamer.

Story and photos by **KARL ZIMMERMANN**

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GUATEMALA CITY — Along the banks of the broad, powerful Río Motagua, we stood and stared at the boulders that had fallen onto the narrow-gauge tracks of our railway, **Ferrovías Guatemala**. No. 205, a stalwart steam locomotive built in 1948, hissed and wheezed while the crew--along with many of the 49 passengers--surveyed the impasse.

In fact, the rocks were no big deal for Guatemalan railroaders, who routinely improvise their way through washouts, derailments and other unwelcome events, usually with only hand tools and their wits. Within minutes, crewmembers with crowbars had pried boulders loose and wrestled them clear of the tracks.

That done, engineer Jorge Díaz—76 years old and frail, but indefatigable and deeply proud of his locomotive—yanked twice on the whistle cord, sending sweet, shrill notes echoing off the hillside and prompting passengers to scramble back aboard the train.

That was my cue to clamber to the top of the locomotive's tender, where I joined Bob McLaughlin, a model railroader from Massachusetts, on a wooden bench held in place by wires.

"What a view!" Bob said with a big grin, unlimbering his camcorder. From this open-air perch we could look down into the locomotive cab and watch Jorge and his fireman as they went about their arcane rituals: the subtle and specialized manipulations of throttle, brake handle, injector (forcing water into the boiler) and other controls required to get a steam locomotive moving. We also could see past the locomotive's smokestack to the track ahead and had a 360-degree view of the riverscape, where mountains yield to jungle.

Just as we were ready to roll, passenger Barbara Coates hesitantly climbed up to our bench. "My husband will never believe I'm doing this," she said demurely as we chuffed into motion, left the rockslide behind and rambled along the Motagua at a stately 20 mph.



Crossing mountains between Guatemala City and the Caribbean coast.

We were on the second day of the weeklong Great Guatemalan Rail Adventure, a trip last February operated by Trains Unlimited Tours. Our journey would take us 197 rugged rail miles from Guatemala City, the capital, east to the Caribbean coast at Puerto Barrios, then back again. Passengers can take this trip only once a year, and only through Trains Unlimited, which has chartered trains here since 1988. A train buff, I'd been attracted by the remote and exotic route and the chance to ride behind steam.



The Spartan restaurant car.

Our first afternoon we traveled by train to El Rancho, halfway across the country. After a night in the comfortable Hotel Longarone in nearby Río Hondo, we finished the journey to the country's east coast and the town of Puerto Barrios, where a bus returned us to our Río Hondo hotel. After a day sightseeing by bus, we re-boarded the train at El Rancho for the trip back to Guatemala City, where we did more sightseeing and spent three nights at the Hotel Royal Palace.

Our steamer, built in the U.S. by the Baldwin Locomotive Co., was a "Mikado" type, meaning that it had eight driving wheels plus two-wheeled lead and trailing trucks. The 205 burns oil, not wood, to convert water into piston-pushing steam, so Bob, Barbara and I had no hail of cinders to contend with, though low-hanging branches could administer a nasty slap in the face.

Coupled behind the tender and auxiliary water tank were a baggage car, in which a rudimentary kitchen was fitted; a spartan restaurant car, where we were served lunch daily and breakfast once; a coach with upholstered but certainly not luxurious seats; and the "presidential car" Michatoya, which sported a brass-railed observation platform.



Boulders on the narrow-gauge tracks create only a temporary setback on the Ferrovías Guatemala.

Trains Unlimited categorizes some tours as "railfan," meaning that they're recommended for hard-core rail enthusiasts. Others are labeled "tourist" and are geared for the general traveler with a passing interest in trains. The Guatemalan trip fell into a hybrid category, "railfan-tourist," appealing to both groups.

The tourist side of things included a mid-trip visit to the Mayan ruins at Quiriguá, with a stop at a nearby banana plantation. Quiriguá's most notable features are nine steles covered in relief carving, the tallest (up to 32 feet) found at any Mayan site; and a collection of "zoo morphs," sculptures of animal gods often monstrous and mysterious in derivation.

Actually, almost everything about the remarkably advanced Mayan culture is mysterious--not least of all why it vanished. Quiriguá's heyday was between AD 600 and 800.

Antigua, about 10 miles southwest of the capital, doesn't seem so antique compared to that, but our visit, on the tour's last day, offered a glimpse of the 16th and 17th centuries. After the Spanish invaded in the early 1500s, a "captain general" appointed by the Spanish king ruled the region from Antigua. Handsome buildings radiate from the Plaza de Armas, making the city's cobbled streets perfect for

wandering. (Antigua remained the capital until 1776, after earthquakes prompted officials to move to Guatemala City.)

Other than Quiriguá, Antigua was the only place we visited that catered to tourists, and the shops and street vendors selling Guatemalan handicrafts set off something of a feeding frenzy among our group. There was good stuff to be had--silver jewelry, weavings, jade--at good prices.

But this tour was clearly about the train ride. Up on the tender leaving the rockslide, undeterred by occasional spatters of rain, we watched as No. 205 clanked through the little town of El Rico.

With Jorge leaning on the whistle cord, we swung around a tight curve and crossed the Río Motagua on a long bridge. From our vantage point, the journey was a scatter of chickens, a jog of pigs. Tethered horses shied helplessly away from the locomotive, and cattle were attended by white tick-eating egrets in an exemplary symbiotic relationship.

In town after town, we saw dispiriting shacks lining the railway. Some were of cinder block, others of corrugated metal; many were cobbled together from sheets of black plastic and scraps of wood. Yards were dirt, and the poverty was palpable.

For travelers in any region like this, safety is an obvious concern. But after decades of military dictatorship and civil war, the country has become more stable politically and socially. I never felt endangered or even hassled by locals, nor did I hear of other passengers encountering trouble. Adding to our sense of security were two or three machete-carrying crewmembers. Their main function was to hack away at obstructing foliage at photo locations, but they also seemed ready to protect passengers, should the need arise (and it never did).

We were traveling in the dry season, November through April, and before long we were running through banana plantations amid the high-arching spray of irrigators. Bunches of green bananas were tight under leaves.

Bananas played an important part in the history of the once-proud, now-rickety railroad we were riding. Opened in 1908 as the Guatemala Northern, it was supported from the beginning by U.S.-based United Fruit Co. The line became part of the International Railways of Central America in 1912, and it prospered as long as United Fruit prospered.

Later history, however, is not as pretty. In 1950 diesel locomotives were delivered to modernize operations, but they sat idle until 1954 because the unions, fearing job loss, refused to operate them. In 1958 United Fruit agreed to divest itself of the railroad in anti-trust proceedings. In 1959 the Atlantic Highway opened between Guatemala City and Puerto Barrios, leading to devastating competition from trucks and buses.



Once rolling, the train gets a warm send-off in town after town, including Gualán.



Michatoya, the "presidential car," with a viewing platform in back.

In 1968 the railroad was nationalized, becoming the Ferrocarriles de Guatemala, or FEGUA. By then it was literally and figuratively falling apart.

In 1996 FEGUA threw in the towel, shutting down entirely. For the next two years, the only trains moving in Guatemala were the annual steam charters by Trains Unlimited, which paid thousands of dollars to keep the line passable. By February 1999, thanks to the ravages of Hurricane Mitch, it was beyond such piecemeal help, and there was no trip.

But by then a small miracle was afoot. Pittsburgh-based **Railroad Development Corp.** had signed on as concessionaire to repair and reopen the line as Ferrovías Guatemala. An RDC specialty is rail management in developing countries, and the company thought the Guatemala route could sustain a modest freight operation. In December 1999, freights began running between Guatemala City and Puerto Barrios. The phoenix had risen, and Trains Unlimited charters could roll again.

All this helped to explain why we always were greeted with interest--either as royalty or strange visitors from another planet, I was never sure which. Over much of the line, we were the first passenger train, let alone steam train, to pass in years, and hardly a single bystander ignored us. Workers in the fields stood as if at attention and watched. Small girls held tinier ones in their arms and stared.

With our steam engine chugging along at little more than a walking pace, I easily made eye contact with individuals at trackside, which inevitably led to warm smiles and energetic waves.

All along the line, our passage apparently preempted whatever else was going on. At Gualán, a town on the Motagua River where we stopped to fill the locomotive's water tank, our visit was nothing short of a festival. A truck-size boom box on wheels blared music. Hundreds of locals crowded the station platform and lined the tracks.

When we rolled out of town, whistle hollering and exhaust quickening, I waved grandly from Michatoya's observation platform, feeling pretty important.

If the eastern end of the rail route is characterized by lowland jungle, the west end from Guatemala City to El Rancho, 65 miles away, is a picturesque jumble of mountains, valleys and rivers. For the railroad, that means tight curves, stiff grades and leggy trestles.

Each day featured a number of stops in scenic locations for "photo runbys." Photographers stepped off; the train backed up, then came charging forward under an impressive canopy of smoke.

"Magic!" fellow passenger Pamela Russell said. "These runbys are full of anticipation as you see the smoke around the bend--like a dragon coming."

In addition to first-timers like Pamela, there were people like Dwight Long from Nevada, who had 20 various train trips under his belt, and John Mueller from New York, who had 17--about 30 weeks of

travel, all told. John had brought daughter Christine Milazzo, son-in-law Joe and grandsons John and Nick, 5 and 3 years old. Most of the passengers were Americans, joined by other train buffs from Japan, Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands. All were having a ball.

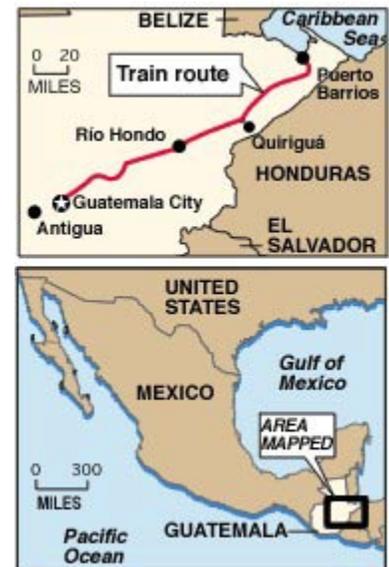
On the last afternoon, rolling back to Guatemala City, Christine and John were riding the locomotive tender when the train, smoke spewing, chugged through a tunnel. "I gave up cigarettes six years ago, but those few minutes made up for it," Christine said later.

My favorite moments had come earlier in the trip, on the last leg of the eastbound run to Puerto Barrios. Dusk was closing in, and most passengers had opted to take the tour bus back to the hotel rather than ride the train for the final 36 miles. The dozen who stuck it out were glad we did.

Most of us squeezed onto Michatoya's covered, open platform, sheltered from a light rain. The old car rocked and rolled like a ship at sea. Running alongside the Río Motagua, now majestically wide, the track crossed broad fields blanketed with fireflies. At every village, crowds had gathered, waving from pools of light as the blue-gray world faded to black.

Eventually we sat in the pitch dark, drinking it all in: the fresh smell of wet jungle, the sounds of steam locomotive, and the jostle of wheel on rail. "The crew must think we're crazy," a passenger said. "Well, I guess we are."

But none of us really believed it.



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