

2005 COPPER CANYON TRIP

Many have asked about the CC trip. A real trip report is up to the EC, Keith Mackey in this case. He did an outstanding job of it! I doubt that anyone else could do it nearly as well. In short it is the ultimate trip.

However I can give my thoughts on all of the maintenance and safety- related issues encountered this year, as well as some peripheral issues. Please keep in mind that these are my own observations and opinions. Other attendees might have seen it differently.

First of all, it is important to follow all of the EC's direction and instructions. He has been there several times and is an expert. He asked for a resume for the car and one for the driver. Car reliability and driver experience are very important. If anyone has a problem it affects everyone else. In years past the group has lost many hours making emergency repairs. All of the customs procedures for temporarily importing an undefined vehicle never go smoothly, but due to the groundwork laid by the EC, the delays were minimal this year.

Probably everyone went over their cars carefully and I know of two that installed the best rear axle with double idler in order to not risk a broken axle. Still we had many breakdowns. Way too many!

At least three had fuel pump issues, one had unknown fuel system problems, corrected by changing the carb with no explanation of why that would help, two cases of choke and throttle linkage being mal-adjusted, and one case of low power and low speed on the hills that remains a mystery because the operator declined a tow and no cause was ever reported. As a result of these fuel delivery troubles, I have prepared a document on that topic which is stored on the RailroadMotorcarMaintenance Yahoo group site.

All of those problems cost us time on the first day because the RR preferred that the car be fixed if possible, instead of being towed. Later they relaxed that policy, possibly due to the number of breakdowns. In the case of the slow car, it caused us no problem at all (just my opinion) because it meant that we could enjoy the scenery at a reduced pace. It did cause the railroad and therefore the EC a lot of concern however because meets with trains had to be rescheduled.

The RR insisted that we stay together, and generally we had the 19 total vehicles within a two-mile space. An additional mile or two gap was detected once and the operator was encouraged to close it up. The front end of the group slowed somewhat so the voluntarily lagging car could catch up instead of speeding. He was simply enjoying the scenery.

On several occasions a passenger train waited for us. Apparently the RR dispatcher deemed it to be the best solution at that time. Ordinarily we never want to delay their trains.

It is unlikely that most operators have gone around a 180-degree “horseshoe” curve. This trip provides a lifetime supply! There are four on the first day in open country. Then one departing Creel on the second day, followed by what is more than a 360 degree loop, but counted as only one horseshoe. Then two more horseshoe curves. On the third day we did three, two of them inside tunnels. Total of eleven!!! Each direction!!! The information came from a GPS log printed out by Will Hookway.

We did not go fast. Generally we ran at 25 mph or less so we could enjoy the scenery. Also it was due to the curves where visibility was limited. The RV Tour trains only go 15 to 20 mph as well, probably for the same reason. If we had averaged only 22 mph we would have reached Creel after only 8 ½ hours of running over the 185 miles. As it was we arrived in Creel after dark, after nearly 12 hours, despite an early start from Chihuahua City. Our average speed while moving was less than 22 mph for the entire trip.

Operators of all 18 cars had to have their blood pressure and heart rate checked by the Mexican authorities. That added at least 30 minutes to our departure. We saw no need to include the alternate operators in that program. They also required hard hats and raincoats(!) which we complied with in Chihuahua but nowhere else.

One well-maintained car broke a chain because the axle sprocket mounting bolts came loose. Fortunately a spare length of chain was available on another car, along with the tools to cut it to length. I would advise everyone to check those mounting bolts and to safety wire them afterward. I would also advise someone in the future groups carry a length of single row chain and a double row chain, with tools and an assortment of links, as spares.

The last breakdown of the trip was due to a broken alternator bracket only about 30 miles from the finish. Within a few minutes we had removed the alternator entirely, even though the railroad pilot was encouraging us to take the car in tow. That seemed to be very dangerous because there are nine busy grade crossings coming into Chihuahua City and our capability for a fast stop would be compromised.

The EC requested a list of tools and spares that everyone was bringing. Fortunately we had everything needed including several fuel pumps, a carb, spare chain(s) and chain tools. I believe Keith was carrying some Les King wheel spacers in case a car was too narrow. A recommendation for future attendees is to plan on carrying a lot of spares. Better yet, make sure your car does not need those spares.

For some unknown reason cars tend to hunt a lot on the straight track on this line. Not always, but more than normal. Maybe it is the rail profile. In any case I slowed somewhat in those areas until the hunting went away or we entered a curve. The railroad pilot set a slower pace in the areas where the hunting was worse. The car I ran had good profile on the wheels which I thought would be OK. I had not noticed some rust pits and rust areas on the wheels. Turned out they caused noise to the point that the motorcar radio was useless above 15 mph. I am now convinced that only new wheels are suitable for this trip. If the cost is not in your budget, I suggest that you should not go on this trip. Remember that you will eventually use up those wheels on domestic trips.

I had checked the gauge on the car I ran and found it to be right at 56 ½ inches. That is a tad wider than Fairmont specifies, but was OK. Some measure face to face on their wheels, but I prefer using the gauge blocks. It is more accurate and allows for some flange root wear. The drawing of the gauge block is in the Photos Section of the RailroadMotorcarMaintenance Yahoo group and in the May/June 2000 issue of the SETOFF.

The EC recommended everyone having a radio on the NARCOA frequency. A unit in your tow vehicle is indispensable on the road. The EC guided us by radio through the congested Juarez and Chihuahua cities. We traveled the 234 miles between those two cities as a group, except for those who seemingly disregarded the low speed limits in the small towns. Getting a ticket in Mexico is a serious offense. Once in Chihuahua City at rush hour we proceeded to the set-on point and set on the rails. I had a 4-watt handheld radio that was perfectly adequate for this part of the operation. Some were on CB radios, but I am not sure they got all the information.

The RR treats us as if we were a train. As a result we always pulled up to the far end of a siding to await a train because that is the normal practice. In several cases, however, we were at the far end of a quaint little town but too far away to look around. In another case, we awaited a meet that presented a great photo opportunity with the train framed by the pine trees and a Continental Divide sign in the foreground. Unfortunately the sign was 300 yards behind us! I have asked the EC if he could influence the railroad pilot next time to stop where the best photo opportunities exist.

One potential safety problem was avoided when we came upon a work party working on a high trestle with the tanks for their torch laid down between the rails. The lead car stopped to check the clearance and found that the motorcars might not clear. The tanks were moved to outside the rails. At another point a car was instructed to back out of a siding onto the main, which he did. However the switch had not been thrown and he derailed at low speed with no damage. Of course, we are always responsible for our own safety. A third situation occurred when one car bumped another during a reverse move, proving once again that reverse moves require extra vigilance.

Hotel check-in could not be simpler. The EC handed out keys and we turned them in upon departing. No waiting, no paperwork because the EC took care of all of it. Thanks Keith and Renda.

There are bottles of water in all the rooms, and additional is available. We tucked a bottle or two into our overnight bag as a backup. The safety of the local water is not an issue. As far as I know, the ice in drinks is safe as well. We took a LARGE amount of water and V-8 juice for the days on the rails knowing it would be hot and dry.

There have been questions about the weather. The answer is that we needed an ice scraper twice in Creel, and lots of sun block at other locations. Overall warm/hot 95% of the time.

Bathrooms for the ladies were a concern. I brought along a camping shower enclosure that folded up into a small space. Generally we stopped at stations with functioning bathrooms, with Temoris being an outstanding exception. Otherwise the enclosure called a FFE (Folding Facility Enclosure) was set up in a few seconds for the benefit of all the ladies. Debbie Hookway and Helen, my wife, won an award for bringing this device.

Speaking of awards, Karen and Mark Werner provided a whole bunch and the program to go with them after we arrived back in Chihuahua City. How they accomplished it remains a mystery, but it was certainly one of the greatest highlights of the entire trip. Their assistance to Keith and Renda Mackey was appreciated by all. The presence of Karen and Mark added immeasurably to the whole trip experience.

The road trip portion was eventful for some. Will Hookway with two cars on his trailer was sideswiped only two miles from home as he departed. Emergency repairs to the trailer took more than a half-day and additional repairs were needed in El Paso. Fortunately we had left with extra time to spare. Another attendee couple had serious fuel system problems with their truck, which had to be left at a dealer in El Paso. Another attendee had space on his two-car trailer for their motorcar so all was well. On the return from Chihuahua City to El Paso the EC suffered a blowout and a trailer suffered a flat tire that was destroyed by the time it was changed. Carrying two spares is a good idea. Bringing a two-car trailer with only one car on it is another good idea, because it allows a solution to someone else's road trip problem. Allowing an extra day slack in traveling to El Paso is a good idea, considering your investment in this trip.

The US road trip motels were surprisingly cheap. One place with a \$36 price on the sign out front put us up for \$34! AAA, AARP, and other cards work wonders. I do not think we spent more than \$49 anywhere. Good motels, not fleabags.

Planning to arrive a day early is an excellent idea, since there seem to be many things that need to be done once you arrive. Do not bother with trying to get a visa at El Paso. It is a waste of time, as some of us found. I planned to exchange \$400 for Mexican currency, but ran them out of the bills worth \$50USD or less. Result was I left US money as tips for rooms and for some bar bills. We spent all the Mexican money. Others spent more on souvenirs. Exchanging money before leaving can save you time in El Paso.

Mexican gas was comparable to US prices. We bought nearly \$130 worth of gas in Mexico. From the motel to Chihuahua is 244 miles. Add 20 miles of driving in the city. Then 244 miles back to the US. There is fuel available on the road between El Paso and Chihuahua, as well as in Chihuahua. A well running MT19 and a Woodings/Honda together averaged more than 35 mpg. I calculated an average of 45 mpg, but do not really believe the number. Maybe 40 mpg can be counted on.

The food served at the hotels was not what we know as Mexican food. Instead it was heavy on chicken and vegetables. In some cases, soup as well. Frankly the cuisine was not memorable, but maybe that is just me. I do not recall seeing a tortilla anywhere. Breakfast included a few things I did not recognize, but the typical American choices of eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes, pancakes, waffles, orange juice, and the like were available. Lunch was provided each day that it was necessary, and consisted of chicken in some form, a drink, and snacks. There was fresh fruit as well, which I gave to our security persons.

Bugs? Never saw, heard, or noticed any of any kind. None flying and none crawling. Saw no other land-based wildlife at all, but there were a lot of dogs that came running out as we passed through some villages. I noticed that a few of them had a very close resemblance to a coyote in body shape and running gait, and may have actually been coyotes. Of course, pigs and chickens seemed to run loose in the villages. Despite fences, there were a lot of cows roaming free, and the astute motorcar driver must assume that a cow is crossing the track right around the next blind corner. A number of rotting carcasses along the track indicated that the trains frequently hit cows.

The nighttime security was outstanding. Two RR employees in full uniform including ties insured that everything in the motorcars was safe. I gave them water each morning and part of our lunches. Others did the same. It is possible that some cash was transferred as well. Goodwill for future trips was on everyone's mind.

Bring several cards for your digital camera. I took 300 pictures on two cameras and another attendee took more than 1800! He had to download to his laptop ever night.

Additional information on the 2003 trip is available on a page in Les King's website:

<http://www.leskingmotorcars.com/mexico/mexico.html>

Pictures from the 2005 trip are in a gallery at: <http://www.railspeeders.com>

Enjoy!

-- Dick Ray