

## **Mexico: Copper Canyon and Total Eclipse of Sun April 1-9, 2024 Betchart**

Monday, April 1 – Leaving Home to Chihuahua

Up at 2:30 (awful) to get to the airport by 5:00 (and just barely make it). Cheery check in attendant at the desk when we get there. For breakfast at the airport, get a bagel for Jan and a cookie for Randy (Randy had a breakfast at home before he left). Get on the plane without a problem. Flight to DFW was bumpy. Have to take the SkyTrain from terminal C to B. Get a sandwich for lunch. The flight to Chihuahua was fine: cloudy when we took off; sparsely cloudy when we land. Eat our sandwich early in the flight. Get through passport control and get our first stamps on our new passports. Lose the lottery and have to have our bags inspected at customs. We were supposed to take a taxi to the hotel, but we were met by Betchart people in the lobby. They take us to lunch at a local restaurant. They then take us into the center of town to look at the outside of the cathedral. We then walk through the center of town, past some outside wall paintings and sculptures. Next is into the Palacio del Gobierno with its walls covered with Mexican history murals painted by Aarón Piña Mora. Then to the Sheraton at the edge of town to check in. Problem: Jan's suitcase is not in the van. Finally get it. Get a drink at the bar (Mexican wine) and order a light dinner there (Randy's fifth meal of the day). We are joined by some people of another color group and enjoy the conversation. Finally go up to our room. Jan cannot find her green bra and phone charger cord. We look for them for over an hour but finally conclude that, when she changed clothes this morning, she had left the bra at home. We can charge the phones with one cord alternating usage. Finally go to bed after being up for twenty-one hours. Note in passing: We find the cord the next morning.

Tuesday, April 2 – To Creel

Up at 5:30 for bags out at 7:00. So-so breakfast at the Sheraton. In fact, the whole Sheraton experience was so-so. The lights in the hall didn't turn on. The lamps were falling apart. Nice appearance but that was only a facade. After breakfast, we see that our bags are taken away, but a porter knocks on our door and asks if we have any bags. Jan panics and we have to go down and make sure our bags are by the bus. They are.

Long drive to Creel. Leave at 7:30 and get there about 3:00 with a bad pizza lunch along the way. La Sierra seems to be the pizza chain here. They are everywhere.

Change to a school bus and head out to a Native American village. Stop at a "cave house," a house built into an opening in the side of a cliff. Then go into the village area and to their church. Very stark inside. Skipping the "frog rock" (which we see briefly on the way out), we go to the mushroom rocks. Take pictures and look at the village's crafts. Then back to Creel to the main square and their museum. There are no lights on in the museum when we get there but they came on afterwards. Interesting historical overview of the area.

Back to the hotel and have a welcome drink. Check in and head off to our room. No heat in the room. Call front desk. Go to orientation and dinner. Come back. Still no heat in room. Go to front desk again. This time, someone walks down with us and shows us how to turn it on. Get things ready for tomorrow and hit the hay.

The drive up was interesting. Chihuahua was down in the Chihuahua desert and was very dry and dusty. Creel is in the Sierra Madres (on the other side of the Continental Divide) and in dense pine,

juniper, and live oak forests. We experienced the gradual change as we came up. Before the trip began, we checked the temperatures in Chihuahua, Mazatlán, and Durango. It was much colder up here than we expected.

#### April 3 – Drive to Copper Canyon

Drive to Copper Canyon Adventure Park and take gondola into canyon. Randy has bowl problems at the end of the ride. He takes a dump in the bathroom but then realizes that there is no water there for the flush. Oops! Walk around the top of a butte at the end of the gondola ride and take pictures. Then head back to the top. Walk around top looking over the canyon and watching zip-liners take their ride down. Then head back to the bus. It takes forever for the shuttle bus to pick half of us up. We then have to wait at the bus for the shuttle to pick up the other half. Only a short drive to the hotel but have to transfer to another shuttle bus to take us the last short distance. We have to wait to check into the rooms. Watch humming birds at feeder. The experts say that they see five different species there. We couldn't distinguish or remember what they were. Finally get into our rooms. They have a beautiful view overlooking Copper Canyon. Find out how to turn the heat on in the room and it warms up nicely. Go up to the upper dining room for two uninformative lectures followed by dinner. While waiting for dinner, we have a basket weaving demonstration. We buy a pine needle basket for \$100 pesos or \$6 dollars. Then ride back to the main hotel and bed. During the day, we embarked on eight bus rides.

#### April 4 – Urique Canyon and Hotel Mison Cerachui

After breakfast and a humming bird watching session, start out on a bird hike. Stop after a bit and go back to the room. Take a long bus ride to our hotel for the evening in Cerachui and have lunch in the garden. Take another long shaky bus ride to a lookout point over the Urique canyon. Two hours out, two hours back, and ½ hour at the lookout point. Come back, shower, and head for wine tasting. The garden at this hotel is filled with grape vines and the hotel has a winery attached to it. Get a tour of the winery and the vineyards on the premise. After the tour, have wine tasting of five of their wines. Then a buffet dinner and to bed. Have a fire lit in the room (the only heat for the room) and, when we get there, it is very hot! Try cooling it down by opening windows, but we are not very successful. There is a celebration of some type in the town square right up the street from the hotel and music keeps blaring until around 4:00 in the morning. Bad bed for Randy (he keeps feeling like he is falling out). No one got a good night's sleep.

#### April 5 – Copper Canyon Train Ride

Up with alarm. Because the fire went out, the room is cool, but not bad. Bags out and to breakfast in plenty of time. As we go to breakfast, our birders have found a sharp-shinned hawk up in the tree eating the remains of a bird he/she had caught. Take short van ride to the train station. Boarding is organized but seating is in disarray (we are not given our tickets and therefore do not know our seat numbers). Finally get it figured out.

First half of the train ride is through the canyon and is beautiful. This is supposed to be the "Grand Canyon of Mexico." It is not that. The walls are not steep and everything is wooded. Hill are out of volcanic tuff and is mostly white or gray. Not nearly as colorful as the Grand Canyon. Since tuff is a very soft rock, there are not as many cliff as in the Grand Canyon.

There is very little water in the river below. In the tunnel with the 180° turn, we don't even feel the train turning. Before entering the tunnel, we see the three levels of train track in that canyon. At the end, we take a bridge over the river. We are in the observation car as we go through the canyon. We are then called to lunch. Randy has quite a good hamburger and Jan has salmon. After lunch, we

get a bill for our sodas and quite a large tip (service for the meal). Did not seem right, but we paid it anyway.

After lunch, we are in the Sonora dessert. The landscape has really changed to being similar to Chihuahua but with more trees. From the El Fuentes train station, take a bus to our hotel and get our rooms. We are in the Zorro room (there is a statue of Zorro near the check-in). I guess El Fuentes has some connection to Zorro? There are hummingbirds by the feeders at check-in. After getting our room, we go back for pictures at the feeders.

Short walking tour around the central square and on to a lecture on the Mars Rover and dinner. Then back to the room and bed.

#### April 6 – Bus drive to Mazatlán

Leave El Fuentes and drive and drive. First, it is desert and, then, go through agricultural regions, but both are boring nonetheless. Get a bag lunch, which is surprisingly large and good, and then drive to botanical gardens (in Culiacán, the murder capital of Mexico). Get about ½ hour to walk through. Nice waterlilies section. Walk through the desert section and then back on the bus for the 2 ½ hour ride to Mazatlán. Get there just after dark. Hotel is on the ocean (especially at high tide). Check in and get our bags. Decide to skip a shower and go to the bar for a drink. A couple other tour people join us. Head for dinner buffet. Dining room is very loud. Dinner is not very good and service is awful (drinks are slow; food is not restocked). Too many people. Head for room and bed.

#### April 7 – Drive to Durango

Bus ride to Durango is supposed to be a three-hour bus ride but it is actually an hour more. Last part, going into the Sierra Madre Mountains is dramatic, much like Copper Canyon. Road has many twists, turns and tunnels. Randy feels sick most of the way. Get to Durango, and check in. Jan rescues her roller bag that the other Johnson picked up (bag is identical, just different nametags). Randy's bags are delivered to room. Randy goes back and finds Jan's big suitcase. Take a city walk past the archbishop's palace and through the city's history museum (actually, the old mine owner's house that was converted to the museum). Back to the hotel for a lecture on eclipses. They come every 18+ years. Durango was chosen because it had the least average cloud cover along the eclipse path and was near the longest duration. Interesting. Question: how did the Babylonians have enough records to predict eclipses? One plate meal for dinner. Then to bed.

#### April 8 – Eclipse Day

First contact: 10:00 am

Total at 12:10 pm

Duration approximately 4 minutes

Breakfast at the hotel. Bus to hill south of hotel. Betchart has arranged exclusive use of a gondola up to the top of the viewing hill and an exclusive area for us to observe it. People have all sorts of optics. We just use our cell phones and eclipse glasses, which they provided. Clouds on the horizon, but no clouds overhead. Spectacular. When total, with our binoculars, see lines streaming out of the sun and red flares from the bottom and right corner of the sun. Take some pictures with our cell phone which are not very good (cannot control the exposure). Back on the bus to the hotel for lunch. Free time after lunch. We pack a little and then walk around the block in Durango. Too windy to go much further. Go into Sagrado Corazón de Jesús (Sacred Heart of Jesus) Church. Interesting stained glass windows picturing the Stations of the Cross. Then back to hotel to clean up. Take showers and dress of dinner (only second time on this trip that we have time to do this). Eat and back to room to pack and go to bed early.

April 9 – Going home.

Up early for an 8:30 departure to airport. Make it in plenty of time. Unlock bags for inspection (no X-ray machines I would guess). Plane is an hour late because of storms in Dallas. Go through passport control in Dallas with only facial recognition again. Plane from Dallas to Cincinnati is an hour late also. Get home around midnight and go to bed. No more passport stamps. Just the one from entering Mexico.