

RAILFANNING MEXICO'S LARGEST RAILROAD

EXPLORING FERROMEX

MATT SELL WITH TREY HOLLAND/PHOTOS AS NOTED

MY WIFE wasn't so hot on the idea of me heading to Mexico to do some railfanning with Trey Holland, until I explained to her where we were going was not only safe, but that the hotel had a rooftop pool. Then she decided Mexico didn't sound so bad after all and she would join us.

Like any major railfan trip, there's always some preparation beforehand. The typical American mentality is that Mexico is unsafe and, at first, that is what we believed, but we quickly learned we were wrong.

Trey and I had always talked about going to Mexicali, the capital city of the Mexican state of Baja California, for a day just to get a feel for Ferromex, the largest railway operator in Mexico. But

that changed when we wised up and contacted local railfans who live in Mexico via their YouTube channels (search "FXE" followed by an ACe road number, and you'll get several results). Neither one of us is versed in Spanish so Google Translate was our friend. Happily, most Mexicans are a lot more fluent in English than Americans are in Spanish. After talking to our new friends south of the border, we focused our railfanning efforts on Ferromex operations in Torreon and Guadalajara.

Ferromex operates more than 5,970 miles of track throughout the northern two-thirds of Mexico, connecting major inland cities with four different seaports on the Pacific Ocean and another on the Gulf of Mexico. It was created in 1998

after the Mexican government privatized its previously state-run railway system — Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México, better known as NdeM. Ferromex is short for *Ferrocarril Mexicano*, which translates to "Mexican Railway."

After three months of planning and befriending locals, on March 10, 2022, we flew to Torreon, Coahuila, for five days. Torreon, with a population of 735,000, is described per the locals in Guadalajara as "a village in the mountains." Its international airport reflects that, with only 16 commercial flights daily. (There is only one flight available from Dallas-Fort Worth.)

On March 15, we flew from Torreon to Guadalajara, the capital of the state of Jalisco, for six days, flying back home

ABOVE LEFT: Looking west high atop the mountain where the famed Cristo de las Noas is located, we see a grain train coming into Torreon on March 13, 2022.

RIGHT TOP: The Zurn local is running back to the yard in Guadalajara on March 18. The 1506, one of a few SW1504s left in FNM (NdeM) paint, passes FNM signals on FNM trackage.

RIGHT BOTTOM: This Coke is for you. On March 16, we spent the morning shooting the Zurn local working industries on the south side of the yard and downtown Guadalajara. Mexican Coke is far better tasting than its American counterpart. TREY HOLLAND PHOTOS

on March 21. Guadalajara is a much bigger city of 1.3 million people. In Torreon, the largest building was our hotel, the Crown Plaza, but in Guadalajara, our hotel was dwarfed by a much taller hotel next to it. While driving around Torreon was fairly easy to get used to, Guadalajara was a whole different beast where the rule of the road is that there are no rules; it takes some getting used to. The best way I can describe it is that the



driving is aggressive kindness. They will speed around you and cut you off, then let someone onto the highway from their nonexistent on-ramps.

The reason we chose Torreon and Guadalajara is because the two cities are home to two of Ferromex's largest yards on the system. The goal was to see everything Ferromex, but more specifically, yard power and General Electric Super 7s. While in Mexico, we found out the

Super 7s had been stored a few years prior and had only been activated recently due to Ferromex being power short; it continues to be short of power with nearly 20 road units in various states of disrepair from derailments.

Safety

We took advice from locals and went where they went and stayed away from the areas they avoided. We ended up being by ourselves for only one day, the Sunday before we flew back to the States. For the rest of the trip, we had local railfans with us. At no time during our visit did we feel unsafe.

We did not stray from public areas and kept our cameras concealed and on us at all times, as you might in any urban area. (Theft can be worse than in American cities.) It should also be noted that Torreon and Guadalajara are not dangerous compared to places like Cancun and Mexico

City. Not heeding the advice of locals can drastically alter your experience negatively. We would not have pursued this adventure without the help of the locals who were more than welcoming and accommodating.

Also of special note, everyone from the military to private security has weapons plainly visible. The National Guard rides around Guadalajara on the power on some of the local trains. The Guard also has a command post in the middle of the wye at Las Juntas Junction. They are present to prevent local thieves from breaking into the trains and to provide protection to the crews. Happily, they do not see railfans as a threat. Also, the local police always ride around with their lights activated. You need to pull over only when they turn on the siren.

Operations

Again, this is where guides come in handy. Outside of local trains and some scheduled movements, there is no set pattern; one day will be busy while the next is dead. In Torreon, there are three to four yard jobs per shift, depending on traffic and the day. Generally, there is one job working each end of the yard and a hump job in the middle. North of

town, in Gomez Palacio, Durango, the M Line splits from the A Line and eventually heads toward Piedras Negras/Eagle Pass. The A Line's connection is Juarez/El Paso to the north and continues to Irapuato in the south. Torreon also hosts a short line, one of three in Mexico — Ferrocarril Coahuila & Durango — which has several former BNSF Railway EMD SD40-2s and a few GE U23Bs.



RIGHT: On March 13, two yard jobs work together at the east end of the yard in Torreon. One of the jobs has a pair of former FNM Super7s in FNM paint. **MATT SELL PHOTO**

BELOW: A freight on the Tepec line heads toward Guadalajara at Ninguno, west of the city on March 17. **TREY HOLLAND PHOTO**



ABOVE: On March 12, we started at the east end of the yard as power from an inbound freight cuts off and crosses over before heading back to the patio. In the background, a pair of Super 7s works the yard. **MATT SELL PHOTO**



Torreon is Ferromex's largest yard. It has an eight-track arrival/departure yard, a low-profile hump, and a 16-track classification bowl. The yard is also equipped with a major locomotive and car repair shop. Torreon Yard is the key focal point for Ferromex traffic between

its northern lines and the southern points along its main trunk line, the A Line. Also of note, all trains will cut their power and head immediately to the diesel pit. This includes relaying trains that get a new crew. The yard is flat and most trains are not tied down in this process.

In Guadalajara, there are four yard jobs, known as "patio services," that are daily. These include the Zurn Industrial Turn (daily except Sunday), Castillo Turno, Las Juntas, and La Vidiera. The Castillo has been known to run twice a day. There are also the Colima and Irapuato locals that are long-distance locals and also run daily. From the north, you have the very scenic T Line. On the south side, you have the I Line that takes the connection at Las Juntas Junction and heads toward Irapuato, and eventually Mexico City to the east and Manzanillo to the west. The Irapuato line is the only main line that is signaled on the entire Ferromex system; everything else is dark territory including the main trunk route, the A Line.

With main line freights, intermodals, and ore, Las Juntas is the busiest spot on the Ferromex system. Of note, Las Juntas is the most interesting to navigate with no traffic rules and extreme congestion. It is also one of the poorest areas of Guadalajara, and crime is high. We did not spend much time there.

The most interesting local in the area is the Zurn Industrial Turn. It leaves the yard on the new main (circa 1972), goes south toward Las Juntas Junction, and reverses onto the original main. From there, it goes through a chemical facility and a very busy unprotected crossing as it threads its way toward the Zurn area.

Despite all this, the train is only a few blocks from the yard at all times. It also traverses two street-running sections, one of which runs for several blocks and is nearly a half-mile long. Power for the local is a pair of GP38-2s on one end and an SW1504 on the other. Recently, a B23-7 in "Coke light" paint has been filling in for the SW1504.

The other three locals go toward their namesake areas to work before returning. All rate Super 7s and SD40-2s for power. Power changes frequently on these locals, depending on tonnage for the day's train. All but the La Vidiera go

east out of the yard. The Zurn Industrial leaves the earliest with the others leaving late morning to noon.

One of the only passenger trains that continues to run on a regular basis is the *Jose Cuervo Express* out of Guadalajara to Tequila and back on select Saturdays and occasional Sundays. Power is typically the Ferromex executive power in navy blue, black, and gray paint. When the executive power is not in town, assorted yard power from the patio powers

BELOW: The Guadalajara wreck train prepares to get in position to assist in rereailing a derailed Ferromex GEVO north of Gomez Palacio, Durango.

BOTTOM: A loaded grain train heads east at Nazareno de Abajo, Durango, with an AC44 doing the honors. This is 10 miles south of Torreon. TREY HOLLAND PHOTOS



ABOVE: A freight heads south through Picardias on the morning of March 13. TREY HOLLAND PHOTO

LEFT: "Come over here and sit out of the sun." The Torreon crane and Guadalajara crane attempt to lift a GEVO back onto the main as the crew from the work train invites us to sit in the shade of a derailed grain hopper. They were unsuccessful at rereailing the GEVO and ran out of the time they were permitted to foul the main. MATT SELL PHOTO

the train. The train has nine matching coaches in light black and gold. The cost to ride is 2,000 pesos (roughly \$100). It is an all-day event that tours the town, the distillery, and local tourist areas via buses from the station. It is well worth your time.

Motive Power

Ferromex has a rather small selection of motive power, but what is on the roster is in multiple paint schemes and multiple



ABOVE: At the east end of Torreon on March 15, a yard job from the patio is preparing to work the east end as two freights go about their duties. TREY HOLLAND PHOTO

RIGHT: The Zurn local is running on street C12 after having finished work at an industry in the Zurn area of Guadalajara. MATT SELL PHOTO

variations within those schemes. Ferromex does not have PTC and thus none of its power can lead trains on most lines in the U.S. Several SW1504s and at least 10 Super 7s retain their FNM blue paint. The Super 7s were a part of GE's rebuilding of older U38Cs and C30-7s in the mid-1990s and are the only six-axle versions built other than demonstrator units, making these GEs unique to Ferromex. KCS de Mexico had a fleet of former FNM Super 7s as well, painted in KCSM/Kansas City Southern "Retro Belle" colors, but these were sold to Larry's Truck & Electric several years ago.

Railfanning

Imagine, if you will, a railroad world in pre-9/11 security days in the U.S. That is the Mexican railroad railfan scene when it comes to "security" and trespassing. It is common to see hobos riding trains; railroad workers don't bother them and



generally turn the other way. We were told we had to have permission to photograph from a public walkway at Torreon, but by the next day that was cleared up; the private security guards in the yard were wrong. Other than that, we were not bothered by the railroad or its security officers.

The biggest difference is that it is highly advisable to keep your radio scanner well hidden. If the police see you with

one, they will assume you are with the cartel; that hassle is something of which neither of us wanted.

Cost

Mexican currency is the peso and as of this writing is currently 20 pesos to one U.S. dollar. A visit to Mexico was cheaper than visiting almost anywhere in the States. The top-end motels are under \$100 a night and good meals average \$15



per person. Fuel, however, is a little more than the current average in the states. The biggest cost is the airfare, which is currently several hundred dollars.

Traveling Post-Pandemic

Mexico has zero special requirements for traveling to the country when it comes to vaccines and even testing. Masking is required in public areas, but generally is not enforced. Coming back to the States, however, you must test negative within 72 hours before your flight.

Fun and Friendly

Mexico is a wonderfully beautiful country and we just scratched the surface when it comes to scenery. The railfans ("ferroaficionados") are some of the best fans we've had the pleasure to meet and were more than welcoming. Every Ferromex employee we encountered was enthusiastic when meeting a few Americans and were a joy to talk with. We both look forward to returning. Perhaps you'll consider Mexico for your next railfan vacation destination. 🇲🇽



LEFT TOP: The Las Juntas local with a Super 7 leading an SD40-2 is just outside of the yard in Guadalajara and is approaching Las Juntas Junction on March 14. TREY HOLLAND PHOTO

LEFT: The Torreon patio is viewed from the middle walkway in Torreon with FXE's newest paint scheme and a visiting American motor present. MATT SELL PHOTO

BELOW: A 3800-series Super 7 leads the Irapuato local toward Guadalajara on the east side of town with four standard cab units for power late in the day on March 17. Armed National Guard members provide protection for certain trains to deter theft. This was one such train, as two guards were riding the last motor. TREY HOLLAND PHOTO

