



ABOVE: A Baja California Railroad road job stops infamously heavy Tijuana traffic near the city center in order to make a shove into Z-Gas. Power for the day is a pair of rebuilt GP35s from LTEX, one in BJRR's attractive new scheme.

UPPER RIGHT: After working the two large gas companies in Valle Redondo, the BJRR road job heads back toward Tijuana with a pair of ex-AT&SF GP38s.

JUST 30 MINUTES SOUTH of San Diego lies the sprawling city of Tijuana in the Mexican state of Baja California. While not necessarily known as a rail-roading mecca, Tijuana is actually home to one of North America's most colorful and friendly railroads. The Baja California Railroad (BJRR) has been bringing modern rail service to the industries in the most northwestern corner of Mexico since taking over the Tijuana & Tecate rail line in 2012. BJRR is building new infrastructure, adding customers, and are even working on reactivating the famed Desert Line that runs back across the U.S. border from its eastern end, across Carrizo Gorge Trestle, and on to a connection with the Union Pacific in Plaster City, Calif.

Today's Baja California Railroad runs on right-of-way originally laid out as part of sugar mogul John D. Spreckels' San Diego & Arizona Railway. Spreckels, who had retired in San Diego, saw an opportunity to build a competitor to the town's only rail connection, the Santa Fe, by forging south to Tijuana and then east back to a connection with the Southern Pacific.

Construction began in San Diego in 1907. In 1909, under an agreement with the Mexican government, the SD&A formed the Tijuana & Tecate Company, which constructed the 44-mile Mexican segment and held a 99-year lease. The entire line, to the El Centro connection with the Southern Pacific, was completed in 1919. The rugged territory the line

traversed resulted in it being dubbed the "Impossible Railroad."

In 1933, descendants of the Spreckels family sold the railroad to the Southern Pacific, which reorganized it as the San Diego & Arizona Eastern. The line was owned and operated by SP until 1979 when it was purchased by San Diego Metropolitan Transit System for use as part of the new San Diego Trolley light rail system then under construction. By this point, the Mexican portion had been turned over to the nationalized railway Ferrocarril Sonora Baja California, which took control in 1970.

Kyle Railways operated the SD&AE until 1984 when two trestle fires on the Desert Line severed its connection at Plaster City. RailTex launched San



TRAINS IN TIJUANA

THE BAJA CALIFORNIA RAILROAD

CHARLES FREERICKS/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Current Operations

Diego & Imperial Valley to take over and began regular operation in San Ysidro in 1986. The Carrizo Gorge Railway was subcontracted by SD&IV in 2000 to complete repairs to the Desert Line, and resumed train service in 2004.

Following embargo of the Carrizo Gorge Railway in 2008, the short-lived Pacific Imperial Railway was organized with the goals of rebuilding the railroad and resuming international freight service. What resulted was several months of confusion and disagreements with owner San Diego MTS. In 2012, the Mexican portion of the old SD&AE became today's Baja California Railroad, resulting in a successful rebirth and an exciting expansion of service that continues to this day.

A day on the BJRR begins at 7:00 a.m. Monday-Friday in the Tijuana Station, which is located in the Libertad Colony neighborhood at Avenue Ferrocarril and the U.S. border, and which now includes a modern office building that pays homage to railroad architecture and houses much of the company's operating team of approximately 35 employees. The station also includes the original Tijuana & Tecate depot, which is being transformed into a museum.

There are three crews who work staggered schedules. Most days require only two to be called. The first crew builds the interchange train in the yard. Once the train is ready and the border authorities give the okay, the gates are opened

and the train shoves north into the San Diego & Imperial Valley yard in San Ysidro, Calif. SD&IV is now a Genesee & Wyoming subsidiary that operates freight service on the northern end of the original SD&AE between San Diego and San Ysidro. It acts as a bridge, allowing Baja California a connection to BNSF Railway.

Once in the SD&IV yard, the BJRR crew has both a drop and pickup to make. An hour or two later, with permission of the border control, they pull back through the gates into the Tijuana yard. Then they begin the often large job of building the Redondo Valley Turn, which

generally includes adding a second locomotive.

The railroad presently covers a little over 44 miles of track, serving some 26 unique customers. The largest commodities are LPG, lumber, grain, and land.

Sometime between noon and 2:00 p.m., the Turn is ready. With the announcement of a loud horn, the train heads out toward Garcia, running through the Urban Zone, crossing the Tijuana River on a modern bridge, and then following Boulevard Federico Benitez Lopez through dozens of Tijuana neighborhoods. If there is work along the line (at Z-Gas), this is the job that handles it.

At Garcia, a brand-new transloading and logistics center opened in 2015 and already services seven customers. The Turn always has work to do here. The facility includes both refrigerated and frozen storage, as well as a 24-hour guard. South of the station, the tracks turn east, passing over the Tijuana River two more times near the Abelardo L. Rodriguez Dam in La Presa. It then passes the Matanuco, heading through a huge lumber facility where some old Carrizo Gorge Railway equipment is still stored.

At Rancho Tres Piedras, the railroad passes through a ramshackle

LEFT: A truncated road job that had work only in Garcia this day performs an air test in the railroad's pride and joy, its new Estación Garcia transloading facility.

BELOW: A road train gets ready to leave Estación Tijuana, which has been recently rebuilt and expanded to allow for increased freight service.



Baja California Railroad

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2018 White River Productions

BJRR - Baja California Railroad
MTS - Metropolitan Transit System
PIR - Pacific Imperial Railroad
SDAE - San Diego & Arizona Eastern
SDIV - San Diego & Imperial Valley



ABOVE: The iconic and beautiful Tijuana & Tecate station in Tecate acts as a portal to the Tecate Brewery behind it. Tecate receives cars once to twice a week.



LEFT: The railroad's lone speeder traverses the Redondo Loops, acting as a pilot for the passenger excursion from which this photo was taken from.

neighborhood of makeshift housing (much of it built using old garage doors as outer walls). Crews must be careful through here, as pirated electric wires have previously fallen onto the track. Just a little bit farther east sit BJRR's two largest customers, Star Gas and

Z-Gas, positioned across from each other in the Redondo Valley.

Most days the train returns to Tijuana after working in the Valley; on Thursdays, however, the road job becomes a Tecate Turn, and continues east up the grade into the engineering marvel double



loop known as the Redondo Loops. The train then continues through La Puerta and into the quant town of Tecate where the same-named brewery is serviced (and has a Mercedes Benz rail tractor as a plant switcher). The total run from Tijuana to Tecate takes approximately 3½ hours.

Tecate is not going to be the end of the line for much longer, however. BJRR just acquired the Desert Line section of the original SD&A from Pacific Imperial. Rehabilitation is planned to start sometime very soon, and likely prior to publication of this article. The intent is to begin running trains through Campo, Carizzo Gorge, Jacumba, Dos Cabezas, and Coyote Wells, with a Union Pacific connection in Plaster City by the end of

2018. Not only will the line add a second U.S. Class I interchange, but there are also potential U.S. customers along the line, turning the railroad into a true multinational transportation company.

The rehabilitated line will also give the Pacific Southwest Railway Museum in Campo a connection to the national rail network. The BJRR and the PSMR have a close relationship.

At the time of this writing there are five locomotives, including two former Santa Fe GP38s in blue-and-yellow and three rebuilt GP35s — a GP39-3 lettered for LTEX and two GP38-3s painted in the Baja California's beautiful blue-and-green scheme (which was designed by the railroad's terrific in-house marketing department). The plan is to eventually



paint all the locomotives in this scheme. The new scheme is not just for shippers. It is helping to make the local communities aware of their hometown railroad. BJRR has launched a campaign to help improve safety conditions for the communities along the line, making

sure that they are good neighbors. The future is quite bright for the BJRR as more and more international companies are looking at Tijuana to expand their manufacturing and customer bases.

Railfanning

Railfanning the BJRR can be both challenging and rewarding if you're willing to put in the effort. Some advice to always give yourself twice as much time to get to a location as you need. Tijuana traffic is notoriously slow, and the road conditions can be quite poor (especially as you hit the more rural areas). If you're going to chase a Tecate train, a four-wheel drive is necessary to follow it up into the Redondo Loops.

Railroad photography in Mexico is legal. The BJRR, however, crosses an international border and the rules there are a lot more murky. I would not shoot

into the U.S. from Mexico when the gate is open, and it's important to listen to the guards and the railroad employees if they comment on your location.

Most of the neighborhoods that the railroad runs through on its western end are quite busy and I find them to be safe (and even welcoming — the locals are amused at the guy taking train pictures). As you head east, it's best to be more cautious, especially around La Presa, Rancho Tres Piedras, and the road into the Redondo Loops, where I would recommend being low-key. Also, Mexican roads are not always well-marked, and I, myself, have gone the wrong way down a one-way street, so be cautious in your driving. When out of the car, just the same as railfanning anywhere in the U.S., trust your fear, and if a situation seems unsafe, leave.

Some preferred spots of mine to catch the train are shooting north from the



OPPOSITE TOP: A road job that just left Estación Tijuana ten minutes earlier heads over a grade crossing with part of the city's skyline behind it.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: The international border on the Desert Line is marked only by this hand-painted sign on the side of the tunnel wall. Freight trains should begin passing this marker again soon.

ABOVE: The road job heads out of the central area of Tijuana with a pair of AT&SF GP38s.

LEFT: Heading over the Tijuana River as seen from the Gonzales Dam, the train moves toward Matanuco. This is one of the best shots on the line, but involves waiting on a narrow curb and shooting through a fence.

grade crossing at Belisario Dominguez, the somewhat obstructed but neat bridge over the Tijuana River in the Urban Zone, and from the back of the Calimax parking lot at Boulevard Agua Caliente and Avenue Tapachula (although recent construction may be ruining this view). There are some great shots going south-east of there along Boulevard Federico



RIGHT: A BJR train heads through the huge lumber yard in Matanuco. There are a pair of retired Geeps stored in the lumber yard. Getting in to shoot them, however, depends on whether there is a friendly or unfriendly guard on duty that day.

BELOW: Another day and another run over the Tijuana River, taken from the Gonzales Dam. This is probably my favorite place to shoot on the line, but it can be dicey.



TOP: A road job arrives at Z-Gas and begins the work of cutting its train in order to switch out the plant.

ABOVE: The historic Southern Pacific depot sits adjacent to the railroad's yard and shop complex in Tijuana.

Benitez Lopez, including the Z-Gas facility, but you really need to get way ahead of the train for these, since parking is difficult and you generally have to park a block inland and hoof it back.

The very narrow (way too narrow) curb on the Rodriguez Dam offers some amazing views, but parking here is far, so you have to hike back. I've never been bothered, but sometimes there is a guard and there is a nearby police station, so I wouldn't be that surprised



ABOVE: The BJRR train passes through one of the tunnels that make up the area around Gonzales Dam. Note the new platform and fencing, which comes into use when the tourist train stops here for views of the dam.

RIGHT: On the southern end of the yard in Tijuana, the morning transfer job heads out light to collect the previous day's road pulls.



Loops is fascinating and well worth the extra days.

The BJRR has truly revitalized railroading in the "other California," and is well worth a visit. It's probably the easiest — and friendliest — place to photograph if you're inclined to go south of the border.

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if a rail photographer was questioned or stopped. East of La Pressa, you're mostly shooting into the sun. A Redondo Valley Turn can often come back in light, but the engines run long hood forward.

If you're chasing a Tecate Turn, the loops allow for light angles in all directions, but I'm not personally certain how accessible all of the track is (or how far it's smart to get away from your car).

About once every other month, a local operator utilizes some Chicago double-decker commuter cars and a BJRR crew and locomotives to run the *Tren Turístico Tijuana-Tecate* train from Garcia to Tecate. If you're making only one visit to Tijuana, I'd try to include a tourist train ride, too, if you can. The run through La Pressa and over the Redondo

TOP: The striking paint scheme on rebuilt GP35 3906 is to be eventually applied to all five locomotives. As of this writing, there are two units wearing this scheme.

ABOVE: In the valley mist, the BJRR works Valle Redondo between the two large tank car customers located here.