

Travel

Topolobampo and the Copper Canyon

By STANLEY JENNINGS

The shortest distance between the American midwest and the Pacific coast is probably by way of San Francisco ... right?

Wrong. Through Los Angeles ... right?

Wrong. Try Topolobampo. Topolobampo? Where and what is Topolobampo?

Well, it's a little fishing village on the Mexican west coast near the southern end of the Gulf of California. And we'll get back to that. But ... question number two ... What's the biggest canyon in North America, possibly in the whole world?

That's easy ... the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. The one in Arizona.

Wrong again!

Aw ... c'mon! The biggest canyon is called Copper Canyon and it's about 200 miles from Topolobampo. It's so spectacular it could swallow four Grand Canyons. The interesting connection between these two little-known geographic quotients is a railway. The Chihuahua-Pacific it's called. The story of that railroad alone is an unbelievable romp into the fantastic.

The railroad was started in the 19th century, as part of the rail boom to link the industrialized east with the opening of the Pacific coast. The job wasn't completed until 1961! It was an incredible task. Eighty-six tunnels had to be carved into the Sierra Madre Mountains and 39 bridges were

needed to span the raging rivers of the gorges. The road had to climb to 8,000 feet before it could begin its slide to the sea.

Now, the Chihuahua-Pacific is beginning to pay off in tourism and commerce in a roadless wilderness.

For the mildly adventurous the Chihuahua-Pacific is a ride to remember. There are places, on switchbacks, where the 14-car vistadome liner does that classic chasing-its-tail act. It's possible to have three levels of track in view at one time, two of them on the opposite side of the canyon you're descending.

While the rails come to the U.S. border at Presidio, Texas, (famous for warmest U.S. temperatures) passenger service begins at Chihuahua city, 140 miles down the line. There are good highways to Chihuahua from both Presidio and El Paso. And of course there is air service to the city of a half-million people which also gave its name to the little breed of Chihuahua dog.

Almost daily, year-round, the vistadome train leaves Chihuahua about 8 a.m. and completes the trip to the coast region before midnight. At the same morning hour a sister train is leaving the Pacific side for the reverse journey.

Actually the western terminus is at the town of Los Mochis, 10 miles inland. Los Mochis is in a rich salad and sugarcane producing valley. The trip is a great diversion for anyone commencing a leisurely tour of Mexico.

The Pacific terminus offers air and sea con-

nections with La Paz, Guaymas, Mazatlan and most of the famous west coast resort areas.

Don't hold me to it ... in the face of rapidly changing fuel costs ... but at the beginning of the year Chihuahua-Pacific fares averaged only two cents a mile. Several guided tours are available.

At Presidio I was able to arrange a round trip with accommodations on a moment's notice. Normally, train reservations are not necessary but accommodation at one of the hotels in the big canyon region should be booked in advance.

An air-conditioned bus whisked us to Chihuahua. The city has a fair choice of hostels, but the vintage 150-room Hotel Victoria oozes colonial charm. Hard to beat at \$14 per day double (U.S.). American food is good there; Mexican food excellent (not overly spicy). Chihuahua is not a tourist trap. The hotel gave us 21 pesos to the dollar, equal or better than bank rate.

Our reserved seats had abundant leg-room and they swivelled a full 360 degrees for viewing scenery on all sides. There was lots to see. Rolling ranchland gave way to irrigated orchards walled by hundreds of miles of stone fences.

The train climbed into increasingly rugged terrain where a ponderosa pine forest clung to leaning crags. Mountain peaks reached to 11,000 feet.

Suddenly the world dropped away. We were at Divisadero Barrancas (Canyon of the Great Divide). This breathtaking abyss is frequently called Copper Canyon.

In the canyon labyrinths live the Tarahumara Indians, surely the most primitive people north of the Amazon. Some of them will be at the canyon overlook to sell you wood carvings.

Five hostels are located nearby and in the canyon. Usually accommodation is American plan with three ample meals and a room with fireplace costing an average \$36 per day per couple. Accommodations are rustic, much stone and log in evidence and

some have no electricity. There is some excellent trailriding and trout fishing in the depths.

Unreal as the canyon vista appears, it's barely a sneak-preview of the awesome scenery ahead. The downhill run is a kaleidoscope of roaring rivers, towering pinnacles, valleys you'd have to be born in to get there. A shutter-bug must be fast to capture blossoming trees and plumes of waterfall, since every few minutes the train dives into a stygian tunnel and in a moment

the scene will be of a different shangrila.

Trail's end, Los Mochis (pop. 40,000), boasts tall palm trees and several good hotels. Rooms with bath average \$20 double. There's a well worthwhile all-day guided tour of the area taking in the harbor at Topolobampo and a lunch stop at one of the excellent seafood restaurants. Topo offers some of the world's best deep-sea sport fishing.

Any scenery you've missed because of the darkness, you'll see on the return train ride.

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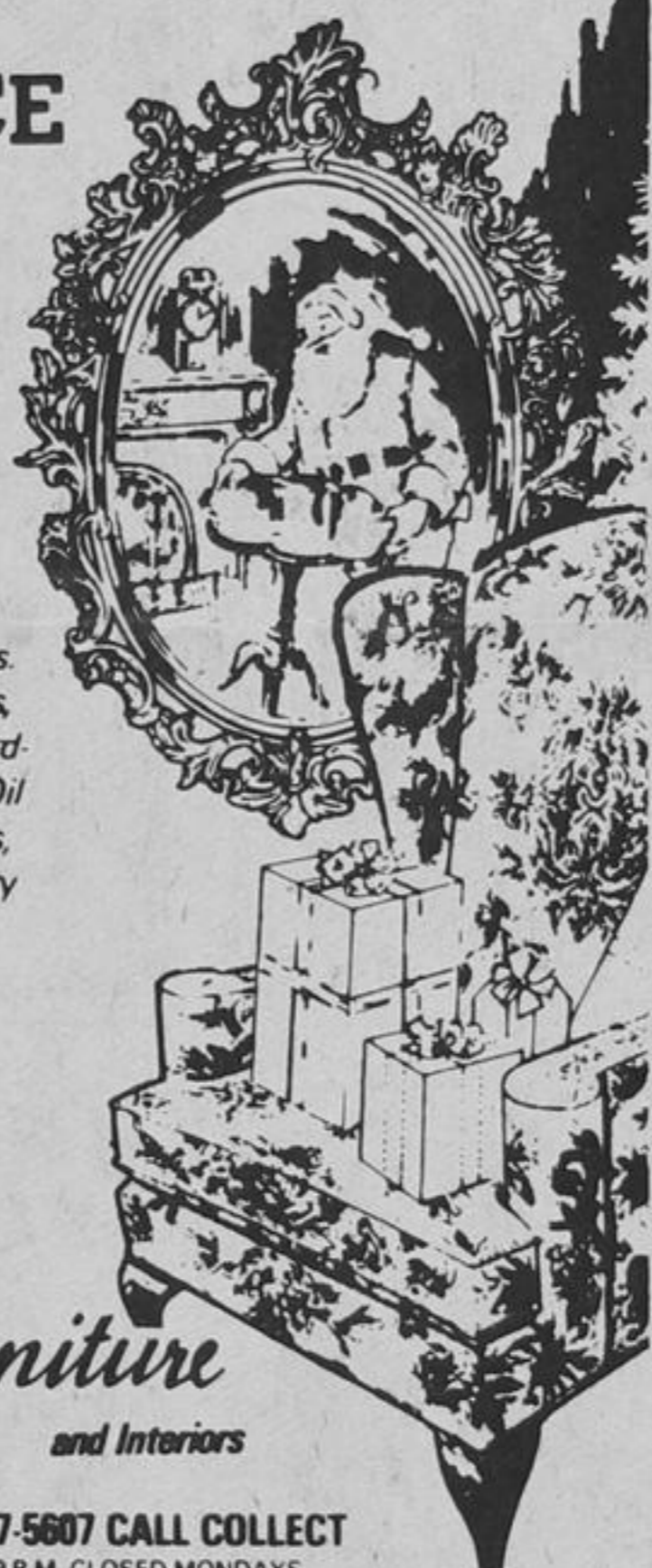
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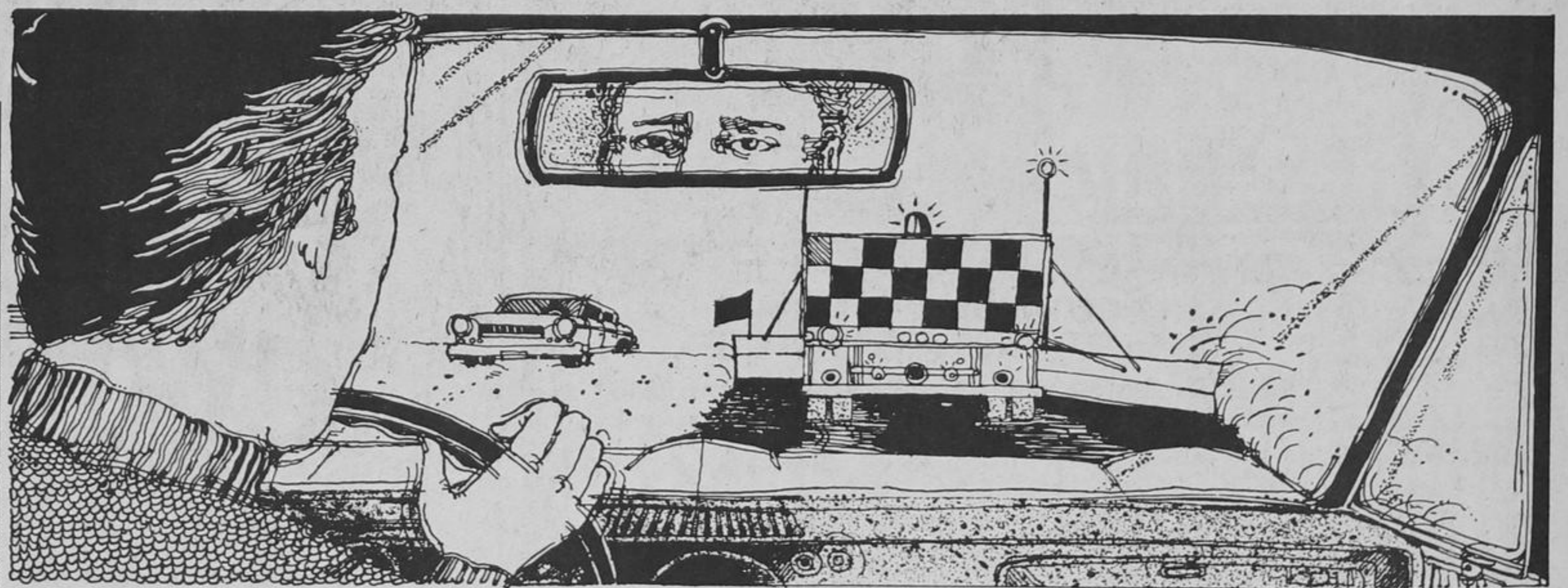
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