

**TRAINS Magazine tells the story of FVG's resurrection and operations**  
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## In Guatemala, a railway phoenix rises

*Steam excursion winds its way through the jungle*

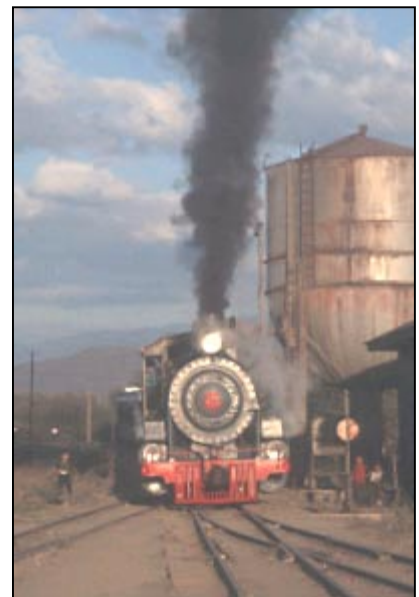
Story and photos by **Karl Zimmermann**

Speed, I've found, is more relative than absolute. Fifteen miles per hour behind a steam locomotive over marginal 3-foot-gauge track, rocking and rolling through the jungle with night coming on, feels plenty fast.

This experiment in apparent velocity I carried out in February 2000 on a weeklong Trains Unlimited tour of Guatemala. I was near the end of a second full day of travel behind No. 205, an outside-frame Mikado (think Denver & Rio Grande Western) built by Baldwin in 1948. Seated on the open platform of business car Michatoya, we were closing in on Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean, 197.4 miles distant from Guatemala City, where our journey had begun.

One hundred and ninety-seven miles, however, doesn't really tell the story. Far more pertinent is the elevation differential: from 4910 feet at Guatemala City to essentially sea level at the port. The western, mountainous section of this route is very much an up-and-down railroad, scattered with spectacular trestles and featuring ruling grades of 3 percent or better in both directions.

It was, in fact, a remarkable trip all around. We were traveling on **Ferrovías Guatemala**—an operation roughly two months old, run by a United States-based concessionaire that had taken over a nationalized railway shut down for years—since 1996. It's a story interweaving the histories of **Railroad Development Corporation (RDC)**, the concessionaire; Trains Unlimited Tours, which for a few years operated the only trains on the line; the International Railways of Central America (IRCA); and the United Fruit Company, the giant corporation lurking behind that rail enterprise.



**Mikado No. 205 catches the early morning rays of the sun as it prepares to leave El Rancho.** *Karl Zimmermann*

## **PART 2: Raising the railway from the dead**

The country's first railroad was the Guatemala Central, completed in 1884 from Puerto San Jose on the Pacific to Guatemala City, but the line I rode, from Guatemala City to the Caribbean coast, wasn't finished until 1908. By then Minor Keith, a founder of United Fruit, had begun acquiring railroads in Guatemala and El Salvador with the dream of a Central American railroad linking the continents. In 1912, these lines became the International Railways of Central America, handmaiden of United Fruit (though bananas typically represented less than 10 percent of common carrier IRCA's revenues).

The opening of the Atlantic Highway from Guatemala City to Puerto Barrios in 1959 was the final devastating blow to the railway, already tottering by then. The year before, as the result of a 1954 anti-trust suit, United Fruit had agreed to divest itself of its substantial ownership interest in IRCA. The railroad's last profitable year had been 1957. For the next decade the Guatemalan government propped up the line with loans; in 1968, with the railroad in default, the government foreclosed and began running the Guatemalan segment of IRCA as Ferrocarriles de Guatemala, or "FEGUA."

This continued until 1996, when FEGUA threw in the towel and shut down all operations. By then, the track had deteriorated to impassability. (Trains Unlimited actually funded Band-Aid track work to enable its annual specials to operate over part of the line in 1997 and 1998.)

Meanwhile, the moribund railway was privatized to be operated as Ferrovías Guatemala by RDC. In December 1999 the Guatemala City-Puerto Barrios line was reopened for freight service.

## **PART 3: Leaving Guatemala City**

On February 19, 2000, a Trains Unlimited special once again stood at the Guatemala City station (or what was left of it, since a suspicious fire had burned out the head house in 1996), waiting to depart for El Rancho and Puerto Barrios.

A nifty little train it was. Behind Mikado No. 205 was an auxiliary water car, a boxcar, a mail-baggage ("cerreo/equipaje"), a restaurant car (converted from a coach for charter service), a coach, and business car #1, Michatoya, generally called the "presidential car." (Indeed, it has been used by Guatemalan presidents -- including the current one, Alvaro Arzu, on the occasion of the railroad's 1999 reopening.) The well-worn car has a writing desk with hooded lamp; above it hangs a stained map of "Lineas de los Ferrocarriles Internacionales de Centro America," a thermometer, a barometer. There's a wrought-iron ceiling fan, clerestory of green glass, a bunch of club chairs, two berths in the center, a galley, and -- most important -- an open observation platform.



**At the throttle of No. 205 was 76-year-old Jorge Diaz, shown here at right with his fireman.**

*Karl Zimmerman*

Major domo of the operation was Fernando Pombal, director of Latin American tours for Trains Unlimited. At the throttle was 76-year-old Jorge Diaz. There was no mistaking that our trip was an event, since Fernando was besieged by radio and print media until Jorge scattered the crowd with four warning blasts of 205's whistle.

Then our train backed out, past an extensive shop complex that seemed a ghost town. Poking their noses from the roundhouse were yellow-striped blue diesels that carried a stylized Zephyr-like FEGUA logo, oddly sleek for this now rag-tag railroad (but one that in its heyday had been a substantial and impressive operation). We rambled through the back streets of Guatemala City to a constant concert of American-style whistling from an American-style locomotive. Our route was packed with people watching and waving.

#### **Part 4: The Bridge of Cows**

At La Viaducto de las Vacas -- the Bridge of the Cows -- right on the edge of town, we stopped for the first of many photo runbys. Then trackside scenes spun out: a dozen women clustered around a spring doing wash, schoolchildren swarming to trackside, guards with guns (Sometimes it was clear what they were guarding, sometimes not.), endless warrens of cinderblock and corrugated shacks, and later even bleaker ones of sticks and black plastic. Chickens, turkeys, and dogs were everywhere. Derelict shells of stations -- concrete or wood -- spoke of a busier time.

After lunch in the diner -- creamy cucumber salad, smoked ribs, beans and rice, washed down with beer ("Gallo Cerveza--Famosa desde 1896") -- I climbed up on the tender to better enjoy the passing view. Before long a man walking the tracks with his two small boys and a rifle flagged us down with his red hat, to warn us of a train ahead, as best I could tell.

Less than a mile further on, at El Carrizo, we came careening around the corner to find diesel No. 916 (Babcock & Wilcox, General Electrica Espanola, Licencia General Electric Company USA, 1971) on a trestle dead ahead. (The 916 apparently was potential help for the 205 if needed.) We stopped in plenty of time -- no great trick at 15-20 m.p.h. -- as the diesel scooted off the trestle.

From my perch on the tender I could watch the men at work in the cab. Machinista (engineer) Diaz has come out of retirement annually for the Trains Unlimited special. Edgar Marroquin, the fireman, a full-time Ferrovías employee, is nicknamed "Chucho" -- which sounds like choo-choo, though a chucho is a kind of dog, which is the derivation of the name. His father, who also worked for the railroad, carried the same moniker.



**The steam excursion through Guatemala included a number of photo run-by opportunities, including this one at the El Chato bridge. *Karl Zimmerman***

Occasionally Chucho would cross the cab and grab the whistle cord; his touch was particularly attenuated and mournful. At times he'd help Jorge horse the Johnson bar into the extreme reverse or forward quadrant. Jorge made a good run, and we arrived at El Rancho well ahead of time.

## **Part 5: Moseying pigs and stealing rails**

After a hotel overnight at El Rancho, we were back at the wood-frame station the next morning. With early sun washing the scene, pigs moseyed across the tracks, and the crowd of curious bystanders grew. The Mikado took water, then showed off for passengers and locals alike in a photo runby. Because of our early departure from hotel, breakfast was on the train: scrambled eggs, black bean puree, sausage, cheese, orange drink, Nescafe.



**The early morning sun gleams off the rails as No. 205 builds up steam for the second day of the trip.** *Karl Zimmerman*

At the Rio Tambor, we stopped for another runby. “This was all washed out,” Fernando said, gesturing at a long fill. “Nothing was left but the bridge. Unfortunately, all the work here had to be done by hand.” RDC had contracted with Fernando to rebuild substantial portions of the railroad. Working from October 1998 to July 1999, 150 to 200 laborers used the existing rail and replaced about a thousand ties per day — five ties under every 33-foot length of rail (a new tie under every joint, plus three others).

“Repairs had to be done by train, since in many areas it was impossible to bring equipment in. To me it was a challenge,” Fernando said. “Once we caught vandalism in progress. We could hear the hiss of cutting torches, as thieves cut the rails so they could haul them off.” Since one was an armed lookout, Fernando and his party quietly slipped away without challenging them.

“Most of the damage was done by Hurricane Mitch, in October and November 1998,” Fernando said. This was a serious curve ball for RDC, which had been in the process of rehabilitating the line.

## **Part 6: Regal welcome and falling rocks**

At Gualan, where we crossed the Motagua on a triple through truss bridge that had been corkscrewed by the floodwaters of Mitch, our coming was a festival. Huge crowds had gathered, particularly around the station. A truck-sized boom box blared Latin music. As we left town, the group on the back platform of the Michatoya waved, feeling regal.

Then, before long, we were stopped by a rockslide, which the speeder acting as pilot had slipped obviously by, not recognizing that it would impinge upon the Mike's greater girth. Fortunately, Jorge's veteran eye spotted the problem in time, and the crew used crowbars and brute force to clear the way.

At El Rico, we crossed back over the Motagua on rail/road combo bridge -- paved with rails. From the tender, where I once again perched, the journey was a scatter of chickens, a jog of pigs, tethered horses shying with fear in their eyes, cattle attended by cattle egrets. Past Quirigua, we ran through banana plantations, with high-arching spray of irrigators. Bunches of green bananas clung tight up under the spreading leaves. Here the United Fruit heritage was palpable.

At Bananera, once United Fruit headquarters and the south end of the company's diverging line from Quirigua, we met a Guatemala City-bound freight: five flats of coiled steel (the railroad's primary commodity) and two cabooses, behind GE No. 902. We entered town by shoehorning through market stalls (roofed and sided in black plastic that could be folded back to clear the tracks), with produce and people literally but a foot or two away.

### **Part 7: Mixed consist on return trip**

Only 12 passengers choose to complete the journey to Puerto Barrios by train, with the balance returning to the hotel by bus. Just roommate Rich Thom and I decided to remain overnight in Barrios and go to El Rancho the following day aboard the (supposedly) deadheading special while the rest of the group toured the Mayan ruins at Quirigua. We spent the morning in Barrios watching No. 700 (a 400-horsepower GE switcher built in 1956) turn our train one car at a time on the turntable, while workers replaced a broken brake-hanger bolt on one of the water-car's trucks. At about ten in the morning, No. 1000 (a Bombardier unit, named Zacapa) arrived from Guatemala City with one container, some ten empty flats, and a caboose.

At 1:10 p.m. we finally left town as part of a freight behind No. 1008: six flat cars of coiled steel, the charter train including No. 205, and — coupled in our faces as we sat on Michatoya's open platform — a yellow caboose. At about 11 p.m. we lurched to a stop: the last axle on the diesel and the first on the first flat had derailed. At 2 a.m. we were on the track and under way again. At 4:30 a.m. we were back at the hotel.



**After leaving Gualan, the train had to make an unplanned stop to clear away a rockslide.**  
*Karl Zimmerman*



**Mikado No. 205 sits on the turntable at the beginning and end point of the Trains Unlimited Tours excursion in Guatemala City.**  
*Karl Zimmerman*



The next day, the first of two that we would take to wend our leisurely way back to Guatemala City, with plenty of runbys, Henry Posner, RDC's Chairman, rode with us, traveling with his daughter Ida. He was gracious in answering questions from passengers.

"This was considered to be an impossible suicide mission," he said. "As a project, it falls somewhere between a U. S. shortline and an Internet start-up."

Leaving El Rancho, No. 205 tackled the railroad's steepest grade, 3.3 percent, and our progress slowed to a walk. We stopped, then started again. At first the reciprocating pull was painfully pronounced, but eventually Jorge had us rolling freely. (The problem has that the oil was too cold, from recent refueling.) At Santa Rita, a dramatic locale with a long trestle and horseshoe curve, Posner and the rest of us unloaded for a runby.

"There's plenty of room for everyone. It's a big country," Posner said, then gracefully acceded when asked to move and join the photo line. The assembled photographers speculated about whether the wind might blow the smoke in our faces and spoil the view.

"We'll just have to wait and see," Posner said with a smile. "Sometimes you can't live a totally risk-free life."

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