

NEW STEAM

FOR OLD ENGINES

A U.S. company hopes to revive a steam-powered train in Guatemala, preserving an important part of the country's history and attracting tourism

It makes an awful lot of noise, but no one in El Rancho seemed to mind the steam whistle being blown almost continually as the old engine was fired up. In fact, a small group of residents had left their homes in the tiny town to watch the goings-on from the shade of the run-down old station. And a number of children were running among the rails under the mid-morning sun.

Decades ago, steam trains came through here daily, so this was a special day—both for the old, for whom the site brought back fond memories, and the young, who'd never seen a steam engine before.

Perfecto Santos Turco, whose father used to work for the railway, remembers the old days. Observing the morning's activities, he says the faded wooden station used to be a hub of activity.

"Before, it was a real brouhaha when the train came in. It was always crowded here



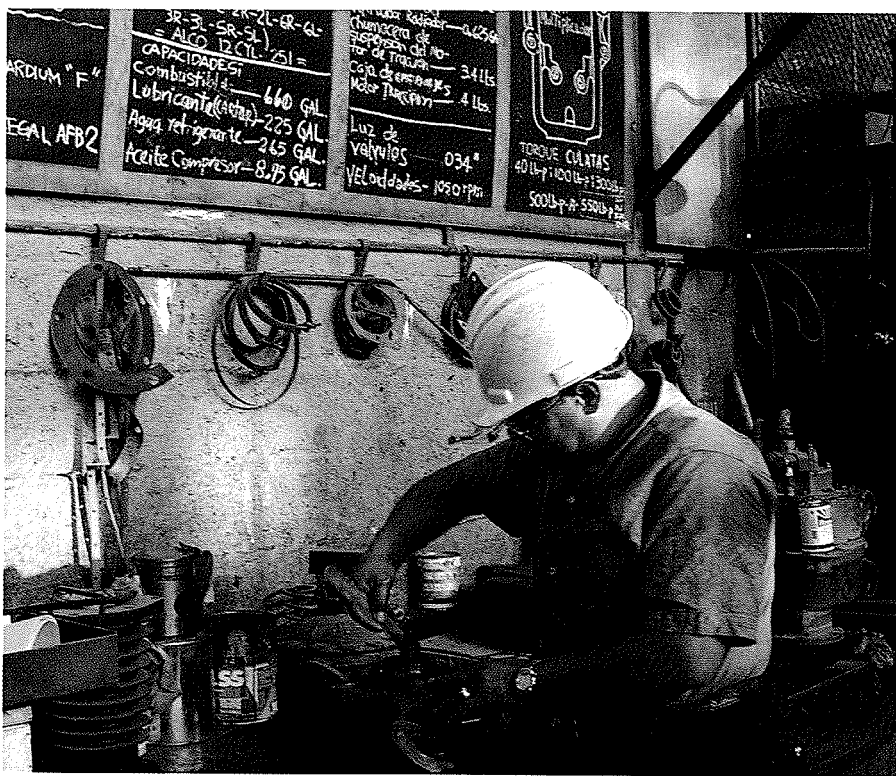
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with people waiting to watch the train go by. And there were all sorts of booths set up, for example, selling coffee and food and other stuff," he says nostalgically.

Trains—be they steam or diesel—were once an important means of transportation in Central America, but they have all but been abandoned in most of the isthmus as new highways have taken over. In Guatemala, however, not only was a line reopened in 1999, but the U.S. firm now running it wants to see the old steam

The pride of the Guatemala railroad, Steam Engine 204, opposite, is newly rebuilt and one of only two steam engines still operating on the line. Colombian technician Federico Reynales, left center, brought in especially to fine-tune 204 for this trip, pauses to make a point with Hans Gehlert, head of the Friends of the Railroad (in yellow hat), and, Tony Sloan, New Jersey steam train enthusiast

by Celeste Mackenzie



engines and wagons regularly welcoming passengers. Such railways exist in only a handful of countries around the world.

Henry Posner III, president of the Pittsburgh company that has run the railway since 1997, says Guatemala boasts the most extensive and intact narrow-gauge railway in the Americas. He calls the three-foot gauge system a "living museum" that has survived precisely because of neglect suffered following nationalization.

"We have the original steam locomotives, original line, and original workshops. The reason that this survived was basically the lack of investment in the railway as a result of its being nationalized and neglected since the 1970s. The fact that it was not modernized means that we now have a railway that all of a sudden is a more or less historical treasure," Posner says.

El Rancho, where our trip began, is in the scrubby lowlands of eastern Guatemala. From there, the train followed parts of three rivers—the Cañas, Los Plátanos, and Sanarate—before reaching Guatemala City, at just under five thousand feet above sea level, several hours later, a total of sixty miles. Although there are three wagons, an open car that feels a bit like a patio on wheels was the favorite spot of many passengers. The more adventurous could also take a turn on the four-person bench (called a tender) perched at

"The fact that it was not modernized means that we now have a railway that all of a sudden is more or less a historical treasure"





Opposite below: *On a trial run, Steam Engine 205 makes steady progress through the eastern lowlands near Tenedores. While a small group of experts such as this technician in the Guatemala City railyard, opposite top, keep equipment in good working order, today's tours require little rolling stock, so this vintage caboose, above, has found a home on the abandoned southern line, in Zacapa*

the back of the engine. The view was great, and it was worth having to duck small, oncoming branches!

For the moment, the outing is just a once-a-year event. Posner's company, the Railroad Development Corporation, brings out the engine and three old luxury wagons as a thank-you to patrons now shipping goods on a diesel-powered train that runs along the company's only line here: a 125-mile route between the capital and Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean coast.

Celeste Mackenzie is a freelance journalist based in Ottawa, Canada, and a previous contributor to Américas.

Among the forty or so passengers were railway-tourism promoters. The outing also ensures that staff keep up on how to maintain and run the engine.

Because of the high price of engine fuel—Posner says it costs several thousand dollars to run the train for a day—the trip is only offered to charter groups. Posner believes getting rail fans and others to travel to Guatemala and ride on his historic line is just a matter of finding the right marketing formula.

"We're sitting here in a 1920s-era office car—the Michatoya presidential car number one—and farther up in the train is a steam locomotive from 1948, a Baldwin, narrow-gauge, locomotive engine. And in between is a mixture of passenger cars that would be very typical of the glory years of the international railways of Central America. So, it's all here. It's just a question of putting the pieces together for the right market," Posner says from a car that boasts a luxurious hardwood interior and an observation platform off the back. (His company did offer some steam trips through an agency a few years

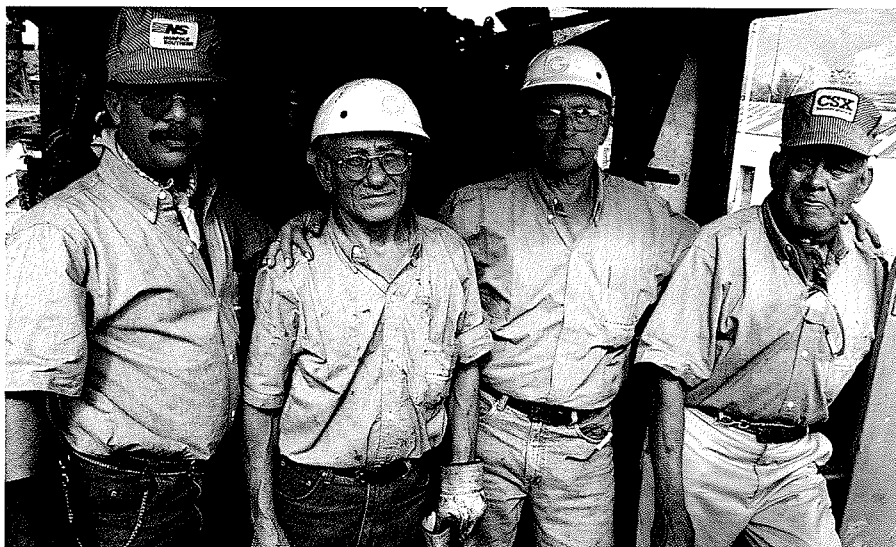
ago, but Posner says the arrangement wasn't sustainable.)

The Guatemala railroad was built in phases, beginning in the late nineteenth and continuing into the early twentieth centuries, by several U.S. companies interested in exporting bananas. Guatemalan president Manuel Estrada Cabrera's government signed contracts with U.S. railway builder Minor C. Keith, who, as well as being a banana producer with huge land concessions throughout Central America and Colombia, was a major shareholder in the United Fruit Company. Keith had overseen construction of the Costa Rican railroad, which his uncle, Henry Meiggs, had built. Meiggs had also constructed the Chilean and Peruvian railways.

An 1884 agreement for construction of the Guatemala City to Puerto Barrios rail line called for the Guatemalan government to provide three thousand to five thousand laborers, as needed, says Professor Delmer G. Ross of California's La Sierra University, author of *Development of Railroads in*



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 between the time when the steam locomotives finished and now"

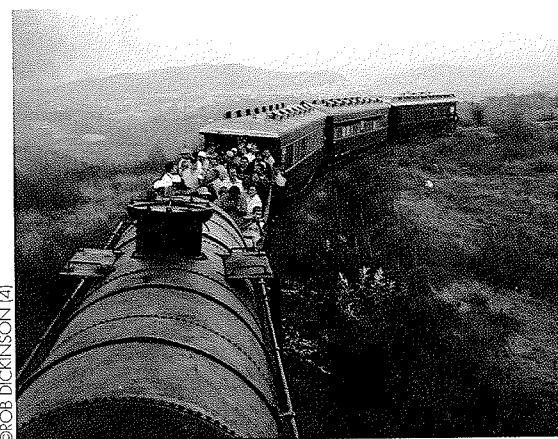
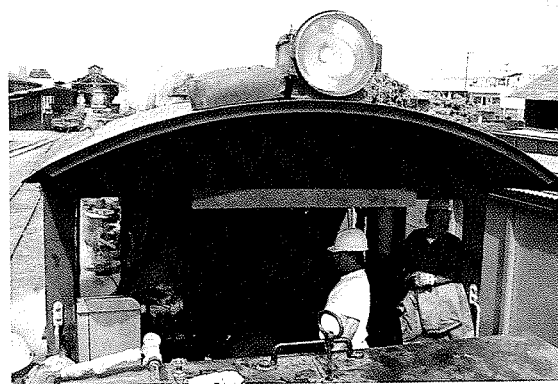


Guatemala and El Salvador, 1849–1929.
 To aid in recruitment, the government promised just under twenty-eight-and-a half acres of land to any North American who would work on the railroad for at least one year, and then stay on in Guatemala.

"Title to the land, however, would not be granted until the recipient had lived on it and cultivated it for five years," explains Ross. "Anecdotal evidence from several sources seems to indicate that aside from a handful of former slaves, few Americans took advantage of this offer. On the other hand, blacks from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands supposedly did, resulting in the large number of blacks living on the Caribbean side of Guatemala today."

Ross adds that one of the advantages of African-American laborers was that they

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seemed to be less susceptible to tropical diseases than others, including most Guatemalans.

As more lines were built, they were consolidated into the International Railways of Central America, and a link to El Salvador was later added. At one point, the Guatemalan network included nearly five hundred miles of track. Coffee shipment also became an important source of railway revenue.

Bananas and the railroad would remain intimately linked for several decades, as the United Fruit Company came to hold a virtual monopoly on transportation and was a huge landowner in the country. (It also owned the port in Puerto Barrios.) In 1954, United Fruit supported a U.S.-backed coup d'état against Jacobo Arbenz's reformist government, which had expropriated portions of large United Fruit plantations. Just prior to Arbenz's overthrow, the CIA bombed the Zacapa railway station—an important meeting point of the line running east-west and another running south to El Salvador.

But by 1958, anti-trust proceedings launched by the U.S. Department of Justice forced United Fruit to divest itself of the train line, which was nationalized ten years later. The beginning of the end

had already started, however, with the completion of a new highway to the Atlantic in 1959.

Rob Dickinson, a steam train enthusiast from England, was sitting in the old presidential car, taking a break from the sun. He says that few countries still use steam trains—China, Indonesia, Eritrea, and Cuba among them. Dickinson has ridden many of these trains, but this was his first time riding the rails in Guatemala. For him, the change in elevation between El Rancho and Guatemala City made the route stand out.

"If you go to Indonesia they have much older steam engines—some over a hundred years old—but what they are doing is nothing like as demanding as what this locomotive is doing—going up a 3 percent grade hour after hour," Dickinson says.

He adds that restoring and maintaining the old engines isn't easy, as knowledgeable mechanics are a rare breed these days. This railway brought in a specialist from Colombia, Federico Reynales, to fine-tune the train for the trip.

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KARL ZIMMERMAN (1)

At El Rancho, the trip's starting point, this young vendor and other residents gather on the rail platform before departure, above left; later, at Cucajol, opposite top, where the train is serviced, children are drawn to the engine's ages-old sight and sound. In the capital's railway yard, top, rail enthusiasts inspect 204; two of this train's great attractions are the flat car, located behind the spare water carrier, middle, and the presidential car, the Michatoya, above, with a viewing platform off the back. These four machinists, opposite bottom, attest to the many years of experience required to keep such pieces of history in good working order



locomotives finished and now. And only in a very few countries has this tradition been maintained. If you go to Eritrea, where they've just completely rebuilt the railway, it's actually being run by people who are seventy, eighty, and ninety years old because they're the only ones who have the skills," he says.

In addition to the Pittsburgh firm's efforts to bring back steam, a small group of Guatemalans has formed a foundation, *Amigos del Ferrocarril* (Friends of the Railway), to preserve and promote the old railway. For them, it is an important part of the country's history, and they want to see the stations and more lines restored, as well as the repair shop in Guatemala City preserved.

The foundation's director, Hans Gehlert Mata, believes that more Guatemalans should know about their railway's history.

"In the first half of the twentieth century, the economy of Guatemala was based on the railway. The lines linked up El Salvador with Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific. . . . It's incredible, but in Guatemala the young generation doesn't know what they represented, except of course, the communities along the line like where we are now," Gehlert says.

A few days before the train ride, I visited the railway repair shop in the capital with Tony Sloan, a New Jersey train enthusiast. To the untrained eye, the site might seem like just a huge garage, but Sloan, a member of a railway group back home that also supports the new Guatemalan foundation, describes the shop as "the motherlode" for rail fans—a veritable "fairylane," filled with museum-quality artifacts. He pointed to an old turntable on which cars were driven and then redirected to other tracks. He was also captivated by a machine that could pick up a car from one bay in the garage, slide sideways, and then put the car in another bay.

Situated in the capital's historic downtown, the railyard and the repair shop neighbor the central bank and other civic buildings. Sloan says there are worries that the railyard could be taken over by government growth, but he hopes that the fact that earlier this year a railway museum was inaugurated just next door to the garage (and another one in Zacapa) signifies increased awareness of the railyard's importance.

Back on the train, as we continued towards Guatemala City, the mountains began to put the engine to the test. Our speed never exceeded twenty miles per

hour, and we slowed at some of the tighter curves, in advance of each bridge and town and, a couple of times, for livestock on the track. The vegetation became more tropical, and pine trees also started to crop up. The train passed through two tunnels, enveloping the passengers briefly in smoke.

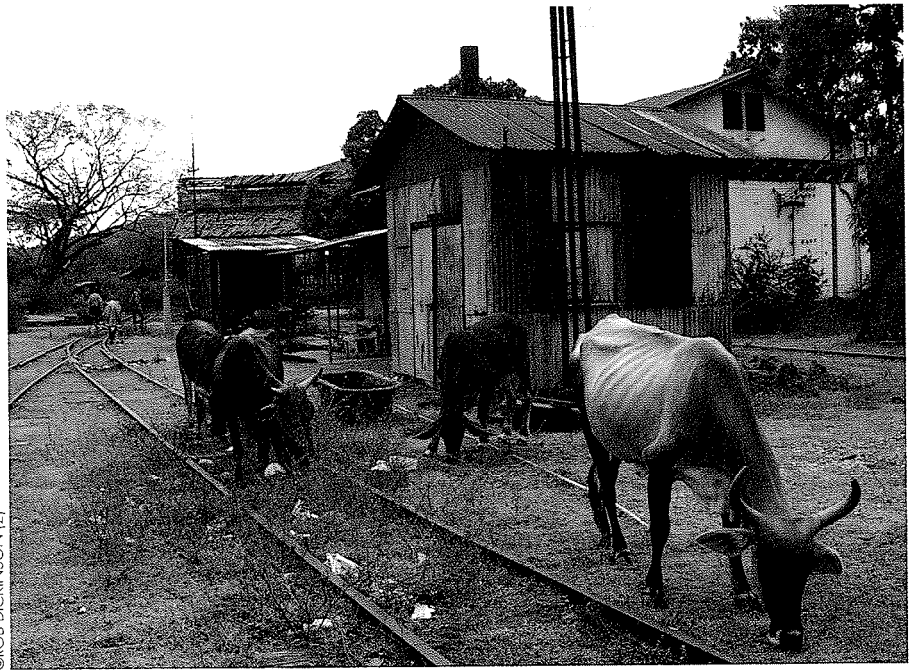
Closer to the capital, more and more townspeople stood along the tracks smiling and waving as the train chugged by. Many of them are squatters who, when the line was abandoned, put up shacks close within the railway's right-of-way. Their presence is an ongoing safety concern to the company, which hopes that the government will be able to find housing alternatives for them. Though often displeased with the diesel train that goes by their homes daily (residents have been known to throw stones at it), the steam train elicited a very positive response.

On the outskirts of Guatemala City, the pump that sends water to the engine stopped working, but luckily, maintenance personnel had been waiting at strategic points along the track so that in less than an hour, the pump was fixed and the train was off again. Soon, we crossed the *Viaducto de las Vacas* (Bridge of the Cows), the highest train bridge in Central

America. After passing through a garbage-strewn area and reputed red-light district, where for a few blocks residents waved at us from their doorways, we arrived at the old railyard just after dusk. Everyone seemed to have enjoyed the ride on the historic line, although the sun, steam, and smoke had taken their toll.

If the wishes of Posner's company and Gehlert's foundation come true, more people will be enjoying this train soon. For example, foreign visitors could expand their itinerary beyond the Maya ruins and colonial towns most of them come to visit. And while the days in El Rancho that Perfecto Santos Turco remembers may never return, Guatemalans just might be able to see their history come alive more than once a year. ■

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COURTESY RAILROAD DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION/HENRY POSNER III

As the elevation increases, Steam Engine 204 roars over the steel-trestle viaduct at Agua Caliente, opposite; closer to the capital, right, workers toil amid a cloud of steam on a malfunctioning water pump (Henry Posner, in cap, is standing on train). Later, at Guatemala City's Central Station, 204 proudly rests on the turntable, above, basking in an afternoon glow. This rail station at Zacapa, top, was once an important part of the line running east-west and south to El Salvador; today the town is home to a new railway museum

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