



THE TRAIN AT THE END OF THE WORLD

By Gordon L. Wilson, TCA #76-10233

I have many reasons for traveling around the world as we do, not the least of which is a “wanderlust” instilled in me by a Junior High School Geography teacher named Violet Crusier. She opened my eyes to the wonders of the sights, sounds, and wonderful people in this wide world around us.

Like being a serious Toy Train Collector, it took “disposable income” to be able to go to the far reaches of the world where we’ve been fortunate to have gone. Also a great deal of luck, great “deals,” and being in the “right place at the right time.” We were among the first Americans to venture into Mainland China when it opened to USA citizens in 1980. I’ve walked on all Seven Continents and that was the reason for our most recent trip. Back to Argentina and its southernmost city of USHUAIA, on Cape Horn. When I was there some dozen years ago, I wanted to ride the Southern Most Train in the World, which is in Ushuaia. However, there simply wasn’t enough time to do so. I made myself a promise! If I ever returned to Argentina, I would ride that train.

Unknown to most members of the Toy Train Fan Club, of which I probably became a member at age 3, I do have several other equally ardent interests. I nearly played professional baseball at age 18, but before that, starting when I was 5 years old, the worlds of Ice Hockey and Music pretty well dominated my life. The way the National Hockey League was set up in the 1950’s, I was a farm hand of the New York Rangers until the age of 19, when they decided I wasn’t good enough. I resided near New York City and discovered the Metropolitan Opera at age 15. To this day, NOTHING will separate me from a Phillies baseball game or a TCA Train Meet faster than an Opera. AND . . . So it was for the Desert Division’s 37th Annual Turkey Meet on November 24-25, 2012.

You see, in May of 2012, it was announced that the one Major Opera House in the world in which I had NOT attended a live performance, Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, Argentina, would be presenting a World Premiere Opera by the Great Granddaughter of Richard Wagner, my most favorite Opera Composer. How could I (we) NOT go to this performance, even if 95% of the items on the Turkey Meet Auction were mine? Chet Henry had no problem with us not being in attendance and I have no reason not to trust the people who run the Turkey Meet and the Desert Division. We hated to miss our first Turkey Meet since moving to Arizona in 1988, but this was the chance of a lifetime for such an operatic performance.



Opera House - Teatro Colon

We booked the trip and with it some side trips in Argentina. First and foremost would be a trip south of Buenos Aires to fulfill that promise I’d made to myself more than a decade ago: to ride the Tren Ferrocarril Austral Fueguino, or “The Train at the End of the World.” More accurately, it is the southernmost Steam Train in the World and it is the passion and joy of one man: Enrique Diaz.



Prisoner garb – ca. 1909

The original railway was used by the Argentine government from about 1909 to 1947 to transport prisoners to and from the port in Ushuaia to an escape-proof prison and also to assist certain “trusted” prisoners in their work duties of clearing trees for the construction of buildings and for creating wood for fire, since Ushuaia is located at the very southernmost point of South America – roughly 600 miles from Antarctica. From 1947 until October 11, 1994, this piece of railroading history lay in disuse and most likely, nearly destroyed by the weather. When Mr. Diaz decided to reintroduce the railway in the early 1990’s, he had little more than an old road bed, rusty track, a few dilapidated pieces of rolling stock, and some falling-down buildings. A daunting task, to say the least. However, as he would tell me later during a chance meeting in the Buenos Aires airport, his inspiration to persevere and continue came from the building of the American Transcontinental Railroad workers of the late 1860’s. Not coincidentally, a large photo of the driving of the “Golden Spike” at Promontory, Utah hangs in the Depot at Ushuaia.



Sign designating the end of the Pan American Highway

The “Train at the End of the World” operates twice daily, at 9:30 AM and again at 2:30 PM. Each time there are three locomotives which leave the main station for the one-hour journey to the beginning of the Argentine Tierra del Fuego National Park, roughly 25 kilometers away. This National Park has many unique features, but probably its most famous two points of interest are that the Terminus for the Pan American Highway is located within its boundaries and that the Southernmost Post Office in the World is also here.



Southernmost Post Office in the World. We took the opportunity to post a card to ourselves and several close friends from this postal facility.



The No. 1 and oldest locomotive, “Rodrigo”

The locomotives, all steam, which pull the string of passenger cars on 50 cm narrow gauge track, all have names and distinct histories. They all travel at a speed which does not exceed 7 km per hour, and will occasionally need help from one another to climb some of the steeper grades. The oldest locomotive is known as “RODRIGO” and is an 0-6-0 Orenstein & Koppel engine which entered service in 1993, and was the only locomotive available for service on opening day in October of 1994. It weighs in at 8 tons.



A switch on the 50 cm narrow gauge track

The No. 2 locomotive of the FCAF (Ferrocarril Austral Fueguino) Railway is “NORA,” believed to be the very first steam locomotive EVER manufactured in Argentina. Built in 1994, with a weight of 9 tons, it has an 0-4-0 + 0-4-0 wheel configuration. It came into service during 1994. In my opinion, it is the most attractive of the locomotives, both in color and in design. Its unique look seems to command immediate attention of any onlooker. The dark blue color and gold trim paint merely adds to the luster of this very eye-catching work horse of the FCAF Railway.



The No. 2 locomotive, “Nora”

Below: “Camila,” FCAF’s No. 3 locomotive and a view of the interior of her rebuilt cab



FCAF’s No. 3 locomotive is perhaps its most famous and popular. “CAMILA” is a 2-6-2 steamer built by the Winson Engineering firm of the United Kingdom in 1995. Unfortunately, within a short period of time, it became obvious that this engine was severely underpowered for the service and workload expected of it in Ushuaia. In 1999 it underwent a nearly complete overhaul of its valve and combustion systems, plus new boiler insulation, flue tubes, and sanding gears. Many other technical redesigns were incorporated and it can be said that basically the entire locomotive was essentially rebuilt, if I may use a nautical term, “from stem to stern.” Suffice it to say, this locomotive is now one of the main “Bell Weathers” of this End of the World Railroad. It is the locomotive which pulled the train upon which Christie and I rode while in Ushuaia.



“Camila,” the engine which pulled the train that Christie and I rode in Ushuaia



A fourth train, a diesel named “TIERRA DEL FUEGO,” is used for yard work. Plans are under way for another steam engine, plus a specially designed 150 horsepower machine, which will be unique to the tourist railway industry. Hopefully this engine will be ready at about the same time as FCAF’s proposed 10-kilometer extension to the city of Ushuaia.



(Right: Small Diesel, “Tierra del Fuego”)

Our guide in Ushuaia, a vivacious young woman named Victoria, picked us up on the morning of November 24 for the 16 kilometer ride from our hotel to Estacion Fin Del Mundo, or The Station at the End of the World. On the way we drove past the Southernmost Golf Course in the World, a 9 hole layout with a par of 60. Obviously very difficult! As much as I would have liked to play it, it was golf or the train. The train won! But, I did take some photos of the golf course. Maybe next time???



(Left: Our guide, Victoria, at the Post Office at the End of the World)

(Right: Ushuaia Golf Course, 9 holes, par 60)

We pulled up to the train station and while Victoria secured our pre-arranged First-Class tickets, we toured the station and by chance, made the acquaintance of the railroad’s owner, Enrique Diaz. A very wonderful, personable man, it was easy to ascertain that this railway was a labor of love for him. He couldn’t explain enough fast enough, and I was stuck on his every work, afraid I’d miss something. He explained the difference between tourist and first class tickets and told us we would be very happy with the 1st class coach. We were, as promised, very pleased with the first class coach. It differed from the tourist coaches in accommodations. The tourist coaches had bench seats and held 20-persons, while our coach was configured with 4 small tables for food service – two tables on each side of the coach with 2 chairs at each table. This meant a maximum of 8 persons only in each 6-foot wide coach. At the rear of the coach was a padded bench style seat, which we used to hold our jackets. On our trip, we shared the coach with a young Argentinean couple. We were offered a choice of beverages and were served a light meal along our way to the National Park. It truly was done in an understated, first-class manner. Nothing ostentatious, but quite “classy.”



Station - Tren Ferrocarril Austral Fueguino
“The Train at the End of the World”



Railroad owner
Enrique Diaz



Tourist Class Coach



First Class Coach



Mural on the rear wall of the
First Class Coach

The first stop was at Estacion Macarena, perhaps 15 minutes into the trip. It was here that all passengers were advised that they could exit their coaches and enjoy the magnificent scenic views which surrounded us. For me, it was an opportunity to rush to the front of the train and take photos of Camila and the crew performing various functions. I was even invited to enter the cab of the locomotive, but believe this – I declined, mainly because my back was hurting a bit too much and there was a slight problem with a small thing called my lack of language skills. All too soon, we were informed it was time to resume our journey.



Macarena Station



Wild horses along the tracks

Shortly into view came a herd of wild horses. Goodness gracious, could this really be the Virginia and Truckee Railroad near Reno, Nevada? Despite crossing rivers and rickety looking bridges on essentially 30 inch (750 mm) Narrow Gauge Track, in Railroad Cars that did not faintly resemble the modern luxurious construction of the Acela, France’s TGV, or Japan’s Bullet Train, the ride on this train was as smooth and comfortable as any I’ve ever ridden. As a matter of fact, it was every bit as good as New Jersey Transit’s “NY Direct” Commuter Train we’ve ridden into New York City and beats to pieces Amtrak’s Southern Crescent we rode from New York to Atlanta many years ago. Without a shadow of a doubt, it is fair to say that we were duly impressed by the operation of this train. It far exceeded my wildest expectation!!

All too soon we were pulling into Estacion del Parque, the gateway to Argentina’s Tierra del Fuego National Park. While what was to come next was nice also, I truly would have liked to ride the train back to its home station and foregone the National Park, which I had been to those many years ago prior to my journey to Antarctica. However, our guide, Victoria, was so very good that she did make the National Park visit rather interesting.

Unbeknownst to us at the time, we were to experience a very wonderful “P.S.” to our Ushuaia Train trip in a most unlikely place two days later: The Airport in Buenos Aires. After our stay in Ushuaia, we flew to the Domestic airport in Buenos Aires to connect with a flight to the northernmost part of Argentina, Iguazu, specifically the World Heritage site of Iguazu Falls, reputed to be the most spectacular and largest waterfalls in the World. Having been to Niagara, Victoria, and countless “Bridal Veil” falls throughout the world, how could we pass on these? It was a three-hour layover in a totally “twiddle your thumbs” airport.



Entrance to Tierra del Fuego National Park - Note the mileage from Buenos Aires and Alaska in kilometers.

Suddenly, someone tapped me on the shoulder! My first thought was that I was in trouble with either the police or customs officials. Was I about to be kidnapped by some terrorist group? Then in broken English a smiling face and voice said to me, “What did you REALLY think about my train?” There, standing in front of me was Enrique Diaz. This time, however, he was minus his railroad gear for he too was on his way to Iguazu Falls, albeit on a different flight than Christie and me. For the next 45 minutes – his flight left well before ours – I had the privilege of a one-on-one interview with this highly successful Argentinean entrepreneur.

It seems as though he was well connected within the government and political circles of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina’s southernmost “State”/Province. I learned that it is technically an island and culturally has more in common with Chile than with Argentina. There are also a great deal of Italian, German, and British connections in this area, and Darwin had a great influence on the area prior to gaining most of his later fame in the Galapagos Islands. Mr. Diaz is a real train fancier, as he is the Vice-President of the International WATTRAIN, World Association of Tourist Trams and Trains, an organization devoted to the preservation of excursion railroads around the world, with an emphasis on preserving Steam Railroads. Thus the main “push” for preserving the Railroad at the End of the World in Ushuaia.

He told me that it was a trip to Promontory, Utah, some years ago, that provided him with the “spark” and “impetus” to pursue restoring the Prisoners’ abandoned Railroad in Ushuaia. When he discovered that the Americans, with such basic primitive railroad tools as picks, axes, and shovels, were capable of laying 100 miles of Standard Gauge (4’ 8 1/2”) Track in one day, he felt sure that in the late 1980’s, with modern equipment, men should be able to lay a fraction of that much, in narrow gauge, in a fraction of the time. Consequently, he convinced his investors that not only was such an excursion railroad possible, it was very doable and would make money! So far, 2/3’s of his enthusiasm has proved correct. The money making part has not yet materialized, BUT they are Breaking Even! From my own observations, I’d say the Ushuaia’s jumping off point as a port for Antarctica trips has helped a great deal. When I was there in 2000, Ushuaia was a town of about 6,000 inhabitants. It is now pushing 75,000, and from one steam-powered tourist train, there are now three, plus a World renowned Golf Course.

He pointed out to me that they are now manufacturing their own rolling stock and have repair facilities which rival some of the best in the United Kingdom and Canada. This obviously helps with their economy since when repairs are needed they can be done “in house” rather than shipped half a world away. We spoke about many of the trains upon which we both had ridden around the world: trains in Australia, China, Kenya, Israel, Switzerland, France, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Peru, USA, and ones like the Orient Express, Bullet Train, B.A.R.T., and even the Phoebe Snow, years ago. It was amazing how similar our railroad paths really were. I felt so fortunate to have had this opportunity to speak with a true “Giant” of Railroading in his native land. All too soon his plane was called and he was on his way to Iguazu Falls.



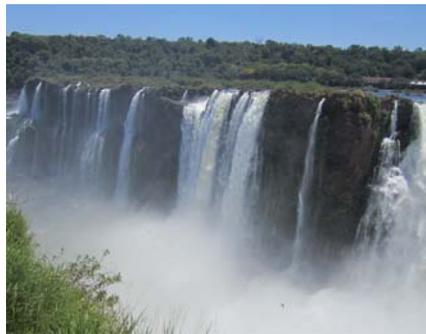
Manufacturing and repairs are done “in house”

We still had two more hours to wait for our flight to Iguazu Falls. However, once we arrived, it was all the Travel Brochures said it was, and MORE! PLUS, we had to ride two (2) trains to get to it. This trip on The Train at the End of the World necessarily came to an end. It was a dream come true and I’m glad to be able to share that dream with all who read this all-too-brief remembrance of those wonderful few days in November of 2012.

Here are a few pictures of what we consider the most overwhelmingly fantastic waterfalls we’ve ever seen, anywhere in the world!



Iguazu Falls: Park logo



Two views of the falls, taken from different vantage points



Left: Photo of us taken by a stranger who lives in Chandler, AZ
Small world, huh?



Right: And yet another train ride adventure

More Later!