



The Tarahumaras of Mexico's Copper Canyon

Tarahumara weavings and dog

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Many of us travel thousands of miles to photograph people whose native dress is unique and colorful. For example, the red saris and veils adorning the women of Rajasthan, the bright motifs on the hand-woven textiles worn by Guatemalan women, and the crimson and saffron robes wrapping Buddhist novices and monks can provide that special ingredient for a truly outstanding image. Members of the Photographic Society of America (PSA) have two upcoming occasions which offer relatively easy travel to Northern Mexico, the location of the vast Copper Canyon and the indigenous, colorful Tarahumara who offer splendid photographic opportunities. The Copper Canyon is south of Tucson, Arizona, the site for the 2007 PSA Conference; and it is one of the optional shore excursions on the *2007 PSA Adventure Cruise* to Mexico.

I first visited the Tarahumaras in December 1984, flying to Los Mochis on the Sea of Cortez at the west coast of mainland Mexico, and riding the El Chihuahua Pacifico Railway train to Divisadero on the canyon rim (similar to the itinerary for the

PSA Cruise optional shore excursion). After a few day trips to Tarahumara homes built in caves and rock outcroppings along the canyon cliff sides, a local church and school, and a spectacular waterfall, I continued traveling east by train to Creel and on to Chihuahua where I flew home.

Remembering the vibrant flower-print skirts and blouses of the Tarahumara women, I decided to return to the Copper Canyon in December 2006 in order to photograph these native inhabitants of the Sierra Madre. For this trip I traveled by car to Tucson and by bus to Divisadero, stopping overnight in Casas Grandes and Chihuahua. This itinerary would be appropriate for those attending the PSA Conference in Tucson. After three days in Divisadero, I again rode the El Chihuahua Pacifico Railway, this time west to El Fuerte.

Only a few things had changed in twenty two years. The rustic hotel at Divisadero with its basic amenities has been refurbished and expanded to include three times as many rooms and a large dining area on the new second floor. Merchants have set up stalls between the train station and



Tarahumara baby

the hotel. Mexican merchandise, crafts, and food are sold from the stalls in direct competition with the Tarahumara sitting on the ground to sell their baskets, woven cloth, and dolls. However, the most fascinating change is the new colors the Tarahumara are using to make their baskets. Previously their baskets were a light and dark shade of green. Now they are dyeing the pine needles and palm stripes brick red, deep brown,



Tarahumara splitting palms



Older Tarahumara woman

and black to make baskets that are more desired by tourists.

The Copper Canyon is comprised of six canyons and its total area is four times that of the Grand Canyon. In some places the Copper Canyon is a mile deep; in others, it is a mile wide. At its deepest, it is almost 1,500 feet deeper than the Grand Canyon. This expansive canyon has provided refuge for the Tarahumara for over ten thousand years.

With a population between 50,000 and 70,000, the rugged and reclusive Tarahumara are the second largest indigenous group in North America. Before the Spaniards arrived in Mexico, Tarahumara communities ranged across the entire area of the state of Chihuahua.



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Selling beads



Colorful skirts drying

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, they rebelled against Spanish dominion and moved deeper and deeper into the most isolated canyons.

The Tarahumara culture does not condone marriage with non-Tarahumara and the ruggedness of the countryside has kept them isolated from the influences of modern society. Therefore, today's ethnic Tarahumara retain their traditional migratory lifestyle, tending apple and peach orchards on the plateaus and traveling into the depths of the canyon each fall to raise oranges and papayas. The women travel many miles on foot to sell their handiwork along the edge of the canyon during all months of the year. They arrive early in the morning (nice light) and stay until sundown (also nice light).

Tarahumara women wear full multiple or layered cotton gathered skirts that have large ruffles and bands of trim. Their blouses are worn loose at the waist and have full sleeves that are heavily pleated at the shoulders and at the wrist or just below the elbow. The women wear a cloth "kerchief" that they pull forward about two inches to shade their face. They carry a brightly-colored woven cloth that they easily employ as a baby carrier, an apron, a lap cloth, and a shawl. Sandals or huaraches are the footwear of choice.

In the winter months, western sweaters, jackets, and sneakers are worn for warmth and some of the native dress is covered. Often they select colorful western sweaters that compliment the colors in the cotton print that they are wearing. An advantage to being at the Copper Canyon during cool weather is that the babies all wear handmade, pieced like a quilt, colorful cloth hats.

Among the Tarahumara, there is a great deal of reserve between the sexes. A man calling at the home of a friend will make his presence known before approaching the door of the house, and if a woman is alone he will not enter, but will remain



Tarahumara baskets

at a distance. Unless there is a close relationship, men and women generally talk to one another only when necessary and then at a respectful distance with averted faces.

They continue this reserve when interacting with tourists and photographers. Admiring their handicrafts or their children can help to engage them and potentially provide an opportunity for a photograph. However, they usually think a tourist wants a photo of them with the tourist and their purchase. It is possible to use a long lens and take lots of time to wait for the natural pose. They are constantly weaving but eventually they will look up to see if the photographer is still there and, if prepared, a photographer may have all the necessary elements in place.

For years, photographers have struggled to capture images of the Tarahumara. Some of the difficulty stems from their dark burnt-sienna complexion and their habit of lowering their head while shading their face with a kerchief. Additionally, they sit out in bright sunlight which produces tremendous contrast. Fortunately today, Adobe Photoshop CS, CS2, and CS3 have Image > Adjustments > Shadow/Highlight that can be used to help lighten their faces while darkening the effects of the bright sun.

With today's new tools, the time is now to take advantage of at least one of the upcoming opportunities to photograph the shy and reclusive, yet very colorful Tarahumara. ☺



Tarahumara woman multi-tasking