

Snow line to reopen

Trains are expected to begin running over the snow-capped Andes mountains within three years, after an historic agreement between Argentina and Chile.

The presidents of Chile and Argentina agreed the timetable for the £150million reopening after a September meeting in Mendoza, Argentina.

Chile's Michelle Bachelet and Nestor Kirchner of Argentina are inviting international companies to bid for the opportunity to rebuild 145 miles of track from Lujan de Cuyo in western Argentina and run the line.

One of the major loads for the rebuilt railway will be wine from Argentina, including Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, destined for the Californian market via the Chilean ports of San Antonio, Valparaiso and Ventana. But other goods can go to the rapidly expanding markets of China and the Far East.

The Ferrocarril Transandino Central would also reconnect a web of freight railways in Mercosur, a trade bloc comprised of Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and

Venezuela. That would clear the way for exports of beef, chemicals, shoes and rubber. Currently exports have to go in the 1,000 or so lorries a day which climb to more than 10,000ft to cross the Andes.

Some have plunged into the Mendoza River, polluting vital drinking water supplies.

When snow closes the pass, up to 3,000 drivers have to camp out for days and several freeze to death each year. Last winter the road was closed for 25 days and urgent traffic has to be re-routed via Buenos Aires which delays traffic to North America by at least a week.

The original rail line opened in 1910 but closed to passengers in 1979 and five years later for freight. The railway's major advantage is a tunnel through the border area where road vehicles are affected by snow.

Two other cross-border railway projects are being considered, one in the south at Neuquen and the other to the north at Jujuy.

FCTC would have the capacity to transport 4 million tons a year, equivalent to 780 trucks a day, at 15% cheaper rates than the road.

A view from the top

Railfuture director Trevor Jones travelled to the area in late September by plane and coach. He writes:

The best part of our journey was following by road the disused metre-gauge railway over the Andes between Los Andes near Santiago in Chile and Mendoza, Argentina.

At Cumbre there are parallel two-mile long road and rail tunnels at 10,453ft under the Paso del Bermejo.

It was a clear sunny day, with several good views of Aconcagua, at 22,800ft, the highest mountain in all America.

Even on 23 September, two days after the spring equinox, there was snow all around going down well below the tunnel, although the busy road was clear.

Tour guides on both sides of the border talked of the plans to reopen the line for passenger and freight.

The railway had several rack and pinion sections each side, according to O S Nock's *World Atlas of Railways*.

The reopened railway should be a good tourist ride if only for all the views – on a clear day.

The lower Chilean section is still in use for copper ore trains, one of which we passed in our coach.

In Chile, Santiago has a double-track electrified mainline south out of town but other directions seem largely replaced by buses. Our tour guide pointed out the former main rail terminus for the north. We

overtook a blue metro train running along the middle of a dual-carriageway.

In Argentina Buenos Aires has three central mainline termini side by side, whose collective multi-gauge approach tracks are very reminiscent of London Bridge, apart from their lower quadrant signal gantries instead of colour lights.

There is even a through freight track continuing beyond the passenger terminals across a busy wide road and then across many more unguarded level crossings presumably to docks and maybe making a cross-town connection.

According to Thomas Cook's Overseas Timetable, there is still one occasional 24-hour train journey available from Buenos Aires to the north-west, but crossing into Brazil there are no long-distance passenger services at all (not even Rio to Sao Paulo), although I did notice four well-used pairs of tracks coming out of Rio de Janeiro's central station, presumably well-used by regional services.

At the Iguacu Falls the tour guide told me it was something like 22 hours by bus from Rio unless you could afford the high air fares when purchased locally.

But at Rio we did use the Corcovado Railway, an 1884 rack line and overhead electrified in 1901 (the first in Brazil), to go up to the statue of Cristo Redentor, built during the 1920s at the 2,310ft summit.



DISUSED: Two of the abandoned rail bridges in the Andes

INTACT: A more modern bridge with track still in situ on a lower section of the line over the Andes



Pictures: Trevor Jones