

Colorado Trains

CANON CITY, Colorado -- There's something about a passing train that stirs our wanderlust.

Whether we're sitting at a crossing when a train thunders by or listening to a faint whistle sounding far off in the night, the urge to climb aboard tugs at us and fires our hunger to roam.

And who among us hasn't wondered what it would be like to sit in the massive locomotive, high above the rails, and drive that train? All that power at your fingertips, revving up or idling down, speeding or slowing at your command.

Well, the Royal Gorge Route in south-central Colorado gives you that chance. OK, you can't really drive the locomotive. But by paying extra, you can ride with the engineer, watch him work and listen to his stories -- and that's almost as good as having your hand on the throttle.

Colorado, of course, is Nirvana for outdoor enthusiasts, what with skiing, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, camping and a host of other pursuits. But it's also home to several tourist railroads, most of which snake through jaw-dropping mountain scenery. Or in the case of the Pikes Peak Cog Railway, right up the side of the mountain.

A train enthusiast could easily devote a week to riding the rails. During a recent visit, I hitched a ride on five tourist trains -- and wished I would have had time to catch a couple more.

For my money, though, there's no place on a train better than the cab.

The Royal Gorge train follows the old Denver & Rio Grande tracks along the Arkansas River as it winds through a narrow, steep-walled canyon more than 1,000 feet deep. Along the way, it passes under the Royal Gorge Bridge, which at 1,053 feet above the river is the world's highest suspension bridge.

My trip began at a trackside picnic shelter at the Canon City depot, where I met engineer Bob Vicker and my fellow cab rider, Gary, a test pilot in Wichita, Kan., who seemed to enjoy talking more about trains than airplanes.

"Have you ever ridden in a cab?" Vicker asked us.

"Nope," we replied.

"Neither have I," he said with a mischievous grin.

I could just hear Vicker adding: "But I did stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night."

He just chuckled, however, and the truth is, Vicker, 68, has plenty of experience in locomotive cabs. He was an engineer for the old Chicago & North Western and frequently pulled freights across Iowa on what are now Union Pacific tracks. He also spent time in Boone training Union Pacific cab crews.

Vicker moved to this area of Colorado to retire, but when the Royal Gorge Route came calling, he couldn't resist. Once a hogger, always a hogger. That's railroad talk for an engineer, by the way.

The train -- 17 cars and a locomotive on each end -- climbs 420 feet on its 10 1/2-mile run from Canon City to Parkdale, once a small community for railroad workers. In places, the canyon is so narrow the engineer could reach his right arm out the window and almost touch the rock wall.

One of the most photogenic scenes in all of railroading is the big orange and silver locomotive pulling the train under the suspension bridge, which traces a line across the sky. It's a snapshot right out of the 1940s and '50s, when luxury passenger trains crisscrossed the country and rumbled through this very gorge on a regular basis.

On the trip out, we rode an SD9, which has a platform on the front. Gary and I could sit on the platform as we passed beneath the bridge high overhead, giving us an unimpeded view far better than any dome car, of which there are two on the train.

At the tightest point, workers built a unique hanging bridge that parallels the river and carries the railbed above the water. Rafters float past along most of the route, sometimes serenely, other times tossed about in churning whitewater.

The ride was amazingly smooth, though we had 1,500 horsepower throbbing at our backs and 3 million tons of rail cars behind us. Rail cars tend to sway, but the tracks are top-notch (136-pound welded rail) and the locomotive is solid. It would take a lot to rock that behemoth.

After stopping in Parkdale, the three of us walked through the train to the engine at the other end. This was an F7, the "bulldog-nosed" engine seen in the Royal Gorge publicity photos and a workhorse during the heyday of passenger trains.

We passed through the engine compartment, catching a strong whiff of diesel, before entering the cab, settling into our cushioned seats and taking in the views on the return trip through the wide windows that span the front of the cab.

If that doesn't bring out the railroader in you, nothing will.

PIKES PEAK COG RAILWAY

My Colorado train tour started in Manitou Springs, at the base of Pikes Peak, not the tallest mountain in the state (at 14,110 feet it ranks only 31st), but surely the most famous.

It's called a cog or "rack" railway because each car has a cog wheel that meshes into a grooved rail running through the center of the railbed. This enables the cars to conquer the 25 percent grades up the mountain. A standard train can climb grades of only 4 to 6 percent.

The Manitou Springs depot, about six miles west of downtown Colorado Springs, sits at 6,571 feet, so the cars climb about 7,500 feet over their meandering 8.9-mile course. I've driven to the top of Pikes Peak, following a winding road that's only partially paved and skirts dropoffs of hundreds of feet. Trust me, the Cog Railway is much more relaxing and enjoyable.

Clouds hung like cotton balls in the deep blue sky as we left, climbing through forests of fir, pine and small aspens, easing past granite boulders sprinkled with lichen and moss. Finally, just short of 10,000 feet, we got our first view of the peak, named for the explorer Zebulon Pike, who, incidentally, never made it to the top.

The final three miles of track take passengers above tree level, where the alpine tundra -- a mixture of mosses, grasses and wildflowers -- needs 100 years to spread 1 to 3 inches.

Sharp-eyed passengers might spot Bighorn sheep on the rocky hillsides. Much easier to photograph are the yellow-bellied marmots that often crawl close to the cars. During one pause on the way up, I thought our car would tip over from all the passengers scrambling to the left side to get a shot of a marmot nosing around the tracks. It was a cute little critter, though.

Passengers get 30 to 40 minutes at the top, where it seems all of Colorado unfolds before you. The Sangre de Cristo range rises in the south. The broad, high valley known as South Park spreads out to the west. On a clear day, you can see skyscrapers in Denver, 70 miles to the north. Each car has a narrator and ours kept talking about the view to the east and the "beautiful" plains of Kansas.

Even on the ground, you can't tell if you've crossed from Kansas to Colorado without a highway sign. From the mountain, it all looks the same, though it is quite spectacular.

An English professor named Katharine Lee Bates was so taken by the view during a visit in 1893 that she wrote a poem when she got back to Colorado Springs that evening. You might recognize the opening line: "O beautiful, for spacious skies ..."

You have to return on the train that brought you up. The driver sounds a long blast of the horn 10 minutes before departure to remind you that it's time to start wandering back to your seat. About 30 people in our car had arranged to walk back to Manitou Springs on the Barr Trail, completed as a burro route in 1917.

My friend, Caroline, did just the opposite. While I was sleeping away on a thick mattress at my hotel, Caroline was starting UP the Barr Trail at 5:30 a.m. I took the 10:40 a.m. train and when it reached the top around noon, she was there waiting, not the least bit out of breath after her 13-mile trek. Did I mention she's in good shape?

She did ride the train back down, though

Mattresses, by the way, fit right into this story. Construction of the railway was financed by a businessman named Zalmon Simmons, who -- you guessed it -- made his fortune by inventing the Beautyrest Mattress. Mr. Simmons got into railway building after spending two days riding a mule to the top of Pikes Peak and figuring there had to be a more comfortable way to do it.

I say bravo for him.

CRIPPLE CREEK AND VICTOR NARROW GAUGE RAILROAD

From Colorado Springs, I made an easy 45-minute trip down State Route 115 to Canon City to catch the Royal Gorge train. Then I headed 25 miles north to the old mining town of Cripple Creek, reachable on a paved backcountry highway or more scenic, single-lane gravel roads, including a white-knuckle route called Shelf Road that has no shoulder in places -- only sheer drops. One traveler thought it hardly deserved to be called a road, writing: "In Kansas, we would call it a cow path."

I opted for pavement, still got plenty of mountain scenery and arrived without my hands cramped from gripping the steering wheel. A drive down the town's main street is all you need to see that gambling has replaced mining as Cripple Creek's economic engine. Nineteen casinos, most maintaining the ambiance of the Old West, keep the place buzzing.

The shrill whistles from the steam locomotives of the Cripple Creek railway add to the atmosphere. This is a narrow gauge line to the extreme. Standard gauge roads, like the Royal Gorge Route, have rails 4 feet, 8 1/2 inches apart. Typical narrow gauge lines, practical in mountainous areas because they were easier to build around sharp curves, have rails 3 feet apart.

The Cripple Creek tracks are just 2 feet wide, so the size of the equipment is scaled back as well. The open-air cars are pulled by miniature coal-fired locomotives, one

more than a century old, that look like something from the kiddie train at the zoo. But they weigh 15 tons and generate plenty of steam.

It's a 45-minute, four-mile round trip that's more about the area's mining history than a train ride. The engineer narrates while driving the train -- and shoveling coal to keep the fire going.

Gold was discovered in Cripple Creek in 1890 and the 4-by-6-mile district became the fourth largest gold-producing camp in the world, yielding an estimated \$463 million worth of ore. The train rumbles past numerous abandoned mine sites and snakes around hillsides pockmarked with 5,000 ``prospector holes," dug in the hopes of striking it rich.

So you can learn something, get some fresh air, take in mountain views and listen to the sound of the whistle bounce back to you in Echo Valley -- all to the delightful, rhythmic chuff, chuff, chuff that makes a steam locomotive such a joy to the ears and eyes.

DURANGO & SILVERTON NARROW GAUGE RAILROAD

Why do you suppose people wave at trains?

At the height of the summer season, the Durango & Silverton runs four trains a day on its 45-mile route through some of the most majestic scenery in the state, so it's hardly a rare sight.

Yet as the train steams past, the engine belching smoke, its drivers pumping, everyone waves. Kayakers and rafters. Travelers in a motel parking lot. A woman standing in the doorway of a shop. A man and a woman watering plants. Some golfers took time to wave before lining up their putts. We could even see a guy waving from the cockpit of a glider.

``I think a train somehow brings people back to childhood or their years of innocence," said Andrea Seid, the railroad's marketing manager. ``Nobody is different than anyone else, everyone is friendly. There's just something about a train that makes people smile."

The Durango & Silverton, which is celebrating its 126th anniversary this year, is Colorado's best-known tourist railroad and carried more than 170,000 riders in 2006.

It leaves from Durango in the state's southwest corner and runs -- actually it ambles more than runs -- north to Silverton, a once-roaring mining town tucked into the San Juan Mountains at 9,305 feet. Passengers ride in vintage coaches or, if you're willing to pay more, in parlor cars fitted out in Victorian decor. Those wanting a breezier ride can opt for an open-sided gondola.

The train tops out at 18 mph, so the trip is leisurely. How leisurely? Well, once a year, the train races bicyclists to Silverton. The train has never won.

My wife had joined me by this point and we found the padded seats in our 1880s-era coach were all the comfort we needed for the 3 1/2-hour trip. There's no narration, part of the effort to keep the train as historically correct as possible.

The train follows the Animas River all the way, accompanied by traffic on nearby U.S. 550 for about the first 15 miles. Then the tracks venture off into the wilderness. No roads. No vehicles. No people. Only the train, the trees, the river and, all around us, mountain peaks rising to more than 13,000 feet.

The Animas is your perfect mountain river -- blue-green water running down the valley, turning to white foam as it cascades over rocks. At times, the train chugs along

right next to the river at the bottom of the canyon. But a little more than 10 miles into the trip, we began a 6 1/2-mile climb that took us high above the river and along the edge of a cliff, giving us a view of the valley so broad that photos couldn't do it justice.

If you suffer from vertigo, this is not the time to look straight down.

“Wow,” a man behind us exclaimed. “This feels like it's going to fall over.”

The train clung resolutely to the tracks, however, and we trundled on, catching a scent of pine mixed with smoke through the open windows. Twice we stopped at trackside tanks so the crew could replenish the boiler with 3,500 gallons of water. The locomotive, built in the mid-1920s, has to work hard because it's all uphill to Silverton, which is about 3,000 feet higher than Durango. And so does the fireman, who has to shovel enough coal to keep the boiler hot -- about six tons for a round trip

Firemen also have to make sure they start out with enough coal. Brian Davis, a brakeman on our train, told us about a friend who worked as a fireman on a run.

“They used up a lot of coal getting to Silverton,” Davis said. “By the time they got back, he was down to sweeping ashes into the boiler to keep the fire going.”

The trip took us past several areas where the train or tracks were used in movies, including “Around the World in 80 Days,” “Night Passage” with Jimmy Stewart and “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.”

The cliff from which Butch and Sundance made their unforgettable jump is near Bakers Bridge, about 14 miles up the line.

In Silverton, passengers have time to eat lunch and shop before returning to Durango. If a round trip is too much train travel, you can take a bus for one leg. We stayed in Ouray, a delightful mountain town 25 miles north of Silverton, so we left our car in Silverton, took the bus to Durango and rode the train back. You can also take a bus from Durango to Silverton and go back on the train.

The bus is a lot faster and the highway incredibly scenic, but there's a big difference.

Folks don't wave when you go by in a bus.

GEORGETOWN LOOP RAILROAD

This is one of the easiest tourist railroads to reach, sitting just off Interstate 70 about 45 miles west of Denver.

It connects Georgetown and Silver Plume, both old mining towns, and is named because the track loops over itself on the 300-foot long Devil's Gate High Bridge. The stations are only two miles apart as the eagle soars but are separated by 640 feet in elevation. That would translate into a 16.5 percent grade, far too steep for a railroad.

So the builders had to get creative. Hence, the loop.

We rode the 3.1-mile route in open-air cars pulled by an oil-powered steam locomotive. You get the smoke and whistle of a steam engine, but not the cinders generated by a coal-fired boiler.

The valley is steep and narrow at this point and you can hear and see traffic from I-70. But there are nice views of the river as it tumbles toward its junction with the South Platte just north of Denver.

And you certainly appreciate the engineering that went into this line, which was rebuilt in the 1980s with the help of Navy Seabees. The High Bridge has an 18 1/2-foot curve, one end is six feet higher than the other and it rises 75 feet above the track that loops beneath it.

We passed on the mine tour that can be added on to the trip. We also had to pass on some other trains.

The Leadville, Colorado & Southern Railroad takes passengers on a 2 1/2-hour ride through the mountains near Leadville, which is 100 miles southwest of Denver and stakes its claim as the highest incorporated city in North America (10,152 feet).

Colorado's newest train, the Rio Grande Scenic Railroad in the far south, runs east from Alamosa, crosses the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and rumbles into the small town of La Veta.

There's also a trip from Alamosa south to Antonito, where you can hook up with the narrow gauge Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railway, which takes you 64 miles through forests, mountain passes and alpine meadows to Chama, N.M.

So many trains, so little time. But hey, that leaves something for our dreams when that lonely whistle calls to us again.