



JUSTIN FRANZ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

In the Southwest, it's still full steam ahead

‘Best train ride in North America’ traverses mountains
between New Mexico and Colorado on vintage rail cars

BY JUSTIN FRANZ

A pair of steam engines on the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad
pull a passenger train near Chama, N.M.

There are hundreds of railroad museums and scenic train rides all across the United States. Many of them offer the opportunity to “step back in time” or “relive yesteryear.”

But few can truly deliver on that promise quite like the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad — a 64-mile, narrow-gauge route across the rugged San Juan Mountains of New Mexico and Colorado that has gone nearly unchanged since the last freight train rumbled over Cumbres Pass 50 years ago this summer. Unlike other museums that are a hodgepodge of old trains from different places, nearly all of the locomotives and cars of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic are original to the railroad they run on today.

“This place is the real deal,” says Stathi Pappas, the assistant general manager of the railroad, who spends most of his days restoring locomotives and passenger cars built more than a century ago. “There really is no place like this on Earth.”

The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic was voted the “best train ride in North America” by USA Today readers in 2016 thanks to the spectacular moun-

tain scenery it traverses between Chama, N.M., and Antonito, Colo. But for history buffs and railroad enthusiasts, it's the dozens of vintage rail cars, smoke-spewing steam locomotives and original buildings that make the journey to the Southwest worthwhile.

What makes the spectacular railroad even more amazing is that it was almost lost for good a half-century ago.

The Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad first put down rails in 1870, under the command of Brig. Gen. William Palmer, a Union officer brevetted during the Civil War. Looking to save money, Palmer decided to build a narrow-gauge railroad with rails just three feet apart, as opposed to a standard-gauge railroad with rails built 4 feet, 8½ inches from each other. The railroad reached Chama in 1880. Soon after, it was busy moving people, livestock and minerals to eastern markets.

While narrow gauge railroads were cheaper to build, there was one major downside to a three-foot-gauge railroad: it was incompatible with most other railroads. Whenever a Denver & Rio

RAILROAD CONTINUED ON F4

Digging deep into the Norwegian root system

BY ROBERT STRUCKMAN

Norway has held a mythic place in my mind for most of my life. In grade school in Billings, Mont., I read everything I could find about Norse mythology and history. Once, I asked my father if our Norwegian ancestors had been Vikings. He dashed my hope for toughness by ancestral connection by explaining that our family had been bonded farmers, like serfs. One of our surnames from Norway was Bonde, after all, which means “farmer.”

Most of my Norwegian associations were through my great-aunt Corinne Bonde Ackley, a matriarch of my family, who prepared lefse, meatballs and gravy, lutefisk and other traditional Norwegian fare for every holiday. I heard her talk about her friendship with her second cousin, Kjell Nilsson, who was a hero of the Norwegian resis-

NORWAY CONTINUED ON F3



KERIN FORSTMANIS/STOCKIMO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The sun sets over Oslo. Norway has a population of about 5.3 million — and there are about 4.5 million Norwegian Americans.



NAVIGATOR

What is ‘drip pricing,’ and how does it affect consumers? **F2**

DINING

Where to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner in Wilmington, Del. **F2**

HOLLAND

A caramel-fueled stroopwafel quest in Amsterdam. **F5**

NEW YORK

Recapturing a summer in Provence without leaving home. **F6**

Railroad offers a trip back in time

RAILROAD FROM F1

Grande Western train reached the junction with another railroad, the freight had to be unloaded from the narrow gauge cars and reloaded onto standard gauge cars for the rest of its journey. By 1890, Palmer began widening parts of his railroad. However, the route through the San Juan Mountains kept its narrow track because the railroad's executives didn't see a lot of potential for the line, says John Bush, president and general manager of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic.

"It made just enough money that it was worth keeping around, but it didn't make enough money to justify upgrading it to standard gauge," he says.

By the 1950s, the old Denver & Rio Grande Western's narrow-gauge lines had become a historical oddity and the railroad started to look at abandoning it. However, the line got a brief reprieve. Thanks to a boom in natural-gas production near Farmington, N.M., the Denver & Rio Grande Western was called upon to move pipes and other materials to the region. Realizing the need for pipeline materials would only be temporary, railroad officials decided to put just enough money to keep the narrow-gauge route operating — and not a cent more. The decision to squeeze every bit of usefulness out of the old railroad helped it survive into the 1960s, when the idea of preserving old rail lines for scenic excursions was gaining traction.

The end finally came in the summer of 1968. The last freight train ran over Cumbres Pass in August and the railroad was finally able to move forward with its plan to rid itself of its unusual narrow-gauge operation. The Denver & Rio Grande Western asked the government to let it to abandon almost all of the track, except for the 45-mile stretch between Durango and Silverton, Colo., which had become a popular destination for tourists.

The tracks between Chama and Antonito were about to be ripped up when historians and railroad enthusiasts began looking at ways to save the line. Their efforts to convince the states that they were worthy of saving paid off: Officials saw the potential for turning the railroad, which traversed some of the region's most spectacular scenery, into a tourist attraction. In 1970, Colorado and New Mexico came together to purchase the 64-mile section between Chama and Antonito for \$541,120. The states formed a joint board to oversee the railroad; the following year, the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic began running passenger excursions. Nearly a half-century later, the investment has paid off for the states: A 2014 report found that the excursion trains support 147 jobs in the area and bring more than \$14.8 million annually to the remote region.

The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic runs every day from May until October. Although passengers can start from either Chama or Antonito, the ride up the west slope of Cumbres Pass is a must for die-hard railroad enthusiasts. Trains departing Chama often require a second locomotive — what railroaders call a "helper" — to climb the four-percent grade. Over the course of the 14-mile trip to Cumbres, the locomotive will use 2 to 3 tons of coal and 3,500 gallons of water. The backbreaking work of shoveling that coal falls to people such as Evan Martinez, a 20-year-old whose job is to maintain the locomotive's fire. Martinez is a fifth generation railroader and started working at the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic in high school.

"It's a lot of cardio," Martinez says of shoveling three tons of coal in one hour. "It's probably one of the dirtiest jobs in the world but once you get over all the soot, dust and grease, it's a pretty cool job."

Cumbres Pass sits at 10,015 feet above sea level and is the highest mountain pass reached by a railroad in the United States. The location gets its name from the Spanish word for summit. Decades ago, it was not uncommon



A Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad passenger train, top, rolls down the east slope near Cumbres Pass, Colo. A pair of railroad workers, above, prepare a locomotive for the day's run in Chama, N.M. "This place is the real deal," says Stathi Pappas, the railroad's assistant general manager, who spends most of his days restoring equipment built more than a century ago. "There really is no place like this on Earth." The Cumbres & Toltec Scenic runs daily from May until October.

for trains to get stuck here in gigantic snow drifts that can survive well into spring; the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic has needed to use a vintage rotary snowplow — essentially the railroad version of a massive snowblower — to open the line for the first train of the season.

From Cumbres Pass, the train continues east downgrade through the rugged Toltec Gorge, which features rocks from the Proterozoic Era that are more than a billion years old, and crosses over tall trestles and through tunnels. Trains stop at Osier so passengers can disembark for lunch at a nearby mess hall and the locomotives can get more water. From there, trains enter the desert of southwestern Colorado for the final stretch to Antonito. During the 64-mile trip, the train crosses the Colorado-New Mexico state line nearly a dozen times. While a nearby highway follows the railroad for the



first dozen or so miles out of Chama, after that, the train is alone on the rugged southwestern landscape.

"Most of this territory doesn't have paved roads or telephone lines and so once the train pulls out of town and you're looking out the window, you're seeing the country as it was a century ago," Bush says.

Bush is the man who makes sure everything runs smoothly — no easy task for a railroad for which the newest steam locomotive was built 93 years ago, he says. Because the companies that built the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic's steam locomotives went out of business decades ago, the railroad's employees often have

to make replacement parts on their own.

Bush and his team also have the help of hundreds of volunteers who are members the Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad. The nonprofit group was established to rebuild and maintain equipment that is not critical to the railroad's day-to-day operation but is important to maintaining the historical character that got it listed as a National Historic Landmark in 2012. Tim Tennant, president of the Friends group, says volunteers dedicate thousands of hours a year rebuilding vintage freight cars and painting old buildings. During the summer, the group hosts week-long work sessions that can attract well over 100 members.

"It's a chance for people to get away from the day-to-day grind of normal life," Tennant says. "[We all share] a passion for keeping this history alive."

This year, the railroad is em-

If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Chama Station Inn
423 Terrace Ave., Chama, N.M.
888-726-8150

chamastationinn.com

A small hotel in downtown Chama, directly across the street from the train station. The inn was opened in 1926 and each room is furnished with vintage furniture and historical photos of the railroad. Rooms start at \$95 a night.

Chama River Bend Lodge

2625 Hwy. 84, Chama, N.M.
800-288-1371

chamariverbendlodge.com

Located on five acres of land right along the Chama River, the lodge offers rooms in a large lodge as well as cabins. Rooms start at \$89 and cabins start at \$119.

1911 Steam Train Hotel

402 Main St., Antonito, Colo.
719-298-8908

steamtrainhotel.com

The hotel is just a few minutes from the train station in downtown Antonito. It offers "marijuana friendly" rooms that are separated from the main hotel to not disturb "guests who are not as enthusiastic about a toke or two." Rooms start at \$119 a night.

WHERE TO EAT

Boxcar Cafe

425 Terrace Ave., Chama, N.M.
575-756-2706

facebook.com/boxcarcafechama

Across the street from the railroad, the cafe serves traditional Southwestern and American cuisine. It is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner; entrees start at \$7.

High Country Restaurant and Saloon

2289 Hwy. 17, Chama, N.M.
575-756-2384

The restaurant and bar offers casual dining with a wide variety of food options, including Southwestern and Italian. The restaurant is open for lunch and dinner; entrees start at \$9.

Dos Hermanas Steakhouse

435 Main St., Antonito, Colo.
719-376-5589

The downtown restaurant offers Southwestern cuisine, including a local favorite: green chilies. Open for lunch and dinner; entrees start at \$9.

WHAT TO DO

Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad

500 Terrace Ave., Chama, N.M.
5234 B Hwy. 285, Antonito, Colo.
888-286-2737

cumbrestoltec.com

The railroad offers day-long excursions through the mountains of New Mexico and Colorado. Trips begin in either Chama or Antonito and start at \$100 for adults and \$50 for children. Passengers can ride the train from one end to the other and take a motor coach back or ride the train partway across the route and return aboard another train.

INFORMATION

cumbrestoltec.com

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barking on one of its biggest projects ever: restoring a steam locomotive built in 1883 and was last used in the 1930s. Pappas says rebuilding a 135-year-old locomotive is a time-consuming process that requires every part to be disabled, cleaned, repaired and reassembled. If everything goes according to plan, locomotive No. 168 will be rolling down the tracks again in the next few years, just as it was when President Chester A. Arthur was in office. Pappas says projects such as the restoration of old 168 make the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic such a unique place.

"It's been generations since these artifacts were used regularly," he says, "and yet we get to turn back the clock here."

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