



TRAINING DAY

A ride on the Cass Scenic Railroad serves up equal parts history and natural beauty.

BY RICH WARREN

There's a point about halfway through your ride on the Cass Scenic Railroad when the commentator will come on the loudspeaker to point out 4,800-foot-tall Bald Knob, the third-highest point in West Virginia.

"That's where we're headed," he'll say almost casually, causing jaws to drop. That any train could make it up a mountain so steep to a point so high is simply mind-boggling, even though the iron horses pulling you, Shay steam engines from the 1920s, have already amply demonstrated they fall into the category of "Little Engines That Could." One locomotive at the front of the train and one at the rear—sometimes pushing, sometimes pulling the cars filled with delighted passengers—traverse their way up grades that rank among the steepest encountered by any railroad in the world.

The ingenious solution to climbing such rugged terrain is a series of switchbacks, a zigzag track arrangement on which either the engine at the front or the rear takes over

for the next segment of the Journey. From start to finish, the 11-mile round trip takes four hours, but there's never time for boredom. Occasionally, the forest opens up for amazing vistas. But even when you are surrounded by trees, there are potential surprises. Just the day before my own ride last September, a mama black bear with three cubs had been spotted. The possibility of seeing them again kept all of us onboard intently gazing into the greenery.

The running commentary is also sure to engage. We were being transported on an old logging train, sitting in covered open-air cars that once carried the felled logs down the mountain.

And so we were regaled with stories about the logging days, even stopping for a break at a re-created logging camp, where the "wood hicks," the local name for lumberjacks, sacked out for the night. And for those interested in historic trains, there's ample narration about the steam locomotives. My favorite part was the whistle-blowing demonstration

COURTESY OF DURBIN & GREENBRIER VALLEY RAILROAD



PHOTO BY RICKI WARDNER

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with a series of long and short blasts that were almost musical. In the olden days, those within earshot could recognize who was driving the train just by his signature whistle blowing.

TERRAIN TO BE TRAVERSED

This beautiful ride takes place in West Virginia's Pocahontas County in the southeastern portion of the state along the Virginia border, a sparsely populated but huge county about half the size of Rhode Island. Its rugged mountains, the birthplace of eight rivers, give the county the highest average elevation east of the Mississippi. Amazingly, these lush green mountains, now covered by forests as far as the eye can see, had by the mid-20th century been cut clear, their prized red spruces used in construction all over the Eastern U.S. A local legend has it that even the Wright Brothers ordered timber from this mountain for their earliest airplanes.

We chugged slowly through those new-growth woods with one final steep grade—at 10 degrees, the steepest of the ride—taking place before the arrival at Bald Knob. With the front of the train an amazing 46 feet higher than the rear, we emerged into a mountaintop meadow where the train stopped, allowing us to get off and admire the stunning view. It appeared that the full range of the Blue Ridge Mountains unfolded in front of us, the most distant visible point a mountaintop 15 miles away in Virginia. Far below, the gigantic white structure that looks like an alien spacecraft is actually the Green Bank Observatory, the world's-largest telescope observatory, another major point of interest in

Pocahontas County. And then, it was back on the train to head back down the mountain.

THE QUINTESSENTIAL COMPANY TOWN

The starting and ending point for our ride was the tiny town of Cass, itself a fascinating story. Once a company town for those working at the West Virginia Pulp & Paper Company, Cass in its heyday was home to nearly 2,000 people working in the locomotive repair shop or in the sawmill that processed the timber. As the mountains' trees slowly disappeared, business slackened, and the lumber company finally closed its doors in 1960. The next year, the State of West Virginia purchased the railroad and later the entire town, turning it into what is now the Cass Scenic Railroad State Park. Nowadays, barely 50 people reside in Cass, mostly in service operations for the 42,000 people who come here from all over the U.S. and even from as far away as Japan and China to take the fascinating ride up and down the mountain.

Straddling the Greenbrier River, the town of Cass is like a time capsule. Though the sawmill lies in ruins after a 1982 fire and a few buildings, including the original school, are gone, much of the town remains just as it did when its residents were awoken each morning by the mill whistle at 6 a.m., signaling the start of the work day. Up on Big Bull Hill overlooking the town's center are a cluster of larger homes once occupied by the company's managers and superintendents. The bulk of the town, however, comprises rows of cookie-cutter houses once occupied by the sawmill's workers. The boardwalks lining the streets are re-creations of

the original walkways constructed to keep townspeople out of the muddy streets.

In yesteryear and even today, the heart of the town is the huge Company Store adjacent to the railroad depot, where workers once purchased groceries and other necessities. Nowadays, it's a gift shop where you can purchase novelty items such as Moonshine Pickles and Coal Candy. Before hopping aboard the train, you have the option of dining at the store's soda fountain or the neighboring Last Run Restaurant. Or you can peruse curiosities in the town's museum, including the handcar the town's doctor once used to navigate the tracks on his way to make house calls.

For a true "company town" experience, do as I did: Spend the night in one of the workers' houses, comfortably furnished with modern (but vintage-looking) furniture and also featuring a fully equipped kitchen, television and Wi-Fi access. Just short of two dozen of these refurbished homes are available, sleeping anywhere from 4 to 14 in the three upstairs bedrooms. They're quiet but not nearly as peaceful as another option for accommodation: a renovated caboose atop Bald Knob, where once the train heads back to Cass, you'll enjoy mountaintop isolation until the next train arrives the following day.

MULTI-TRACK MINDS

Lovers of vintage trains, take note: The Cass Scenic Railroad is just one of a handful of options in this region to ride the rails of yesteryear. The Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad, which is headquartered in nearby Elkins and serves as

administrator for the Cass trains, offers several package deals riding on old-time diesel trains. A variety of day trips winding through the mountains will take you to attractions such as the High Falls of the Cheat River or the ghost town of Spruce, once the highest (and coldest) incorporated town in the Eastern U.S.

There's even the opportunity to ride both the Cass Scenic Railroad and the diesel-powered Cheat Mountain Salamander, overnighing in either Cass or Elkins. High up the mountain, you simply hop off one vintage train and board the other. But no matter where your whistle stop tour of southern West Virginia takes you, you can be confident you're on the right track.

IF YOU GO

Cass Scenic Railroad operates its trips to Bald Knob daily, except Mondays, through August 26. A shorter two-hour version of the train ride to Whitaker Station, about half the distance to Bald Knob, operates twice daily until August 26 on Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. An abbreviated schedule for both these trips is in place in early September, but starting September 14, the regular schedule resumes until October 27. For full information on both these rides, plus all the various ride options offered by the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad, visit mountainrailwv.com.