

Riding the Rails

Story and Photos by Terrisa H. Meeks

In the small town of Boulder City, a slow-moving monument to our past chugs up and down the railroad tracks. The restored train cars and locomotives from Boulder City's Nevada State Railroad Museum give riders a glimpse into a world long ago passed up by jet planes and sport utility vehicles.

Located at 600 Yucca Street in Boulder City, the museum's main attraction is its depot, where visitors can ride the restored antique trains. Train lovers of all ages will enjoy the 3.5 mile trip along tracks originally laid in 1931 to transport supplies to Hoover Dam (then Boulder Dam). After the dam's completion in 1935, use of the tracks diminished and they were last used in the early 1960's. The tracks were donated to the State of Nevada in 1985, and construction on the museum began in 1996. Many of the cars and locomotives on stationary display, as well as several of the functioning cars, were trucked in from Heber, Utah. In 2002, the museum started offering train rides on a limited basis. This year, the trains ran every weekend from September through December, and rides will resume in February 2007.

The 45-minute ride reaches a top speed of about 25 miles per hour. As you watch the traffic whizzing by on US93, the train's slower pace gives you a new perspective on traveling. Passengers are free to walk around the cars after the train safely crosses Yucca Street – what a novelty to experience being on the train instead of

stuck in an automobile waiting for the train to pass! Children and adults alike broke out in smiles when we heard the signature train whistle.

The restored cars and authentically uniformed volunteers make you feel like you've stepped back in time. Our 1913 Pullman was beautifully restored, and a surplus of docents meant no question went unanswered. You can choose from enclosed or open air cars, and on the Saturday we visited, the cooler temperatures made the enclosed car the clear choice. We got to peek at the recently renovated kitchen car, but the pointy edges of cabinets and counters meant no visitors allowed inside. After its leisurely trip to railroad pass, the train stops and then starts back to the depot. The docent told us that the area where we stopped was once home to a tent city during the construction of the dam. It's hard to look out over the miles of unforgiving, cacti-encrusted desert and imagine people living there in tents. Boulder City itself was once a sea of tents until homes could be constructed for the dam workers and their families. While I found the history fascinating, the men in my group were more concerned with how the brakes work on a train. My husband and son spent a great deal of the ride quizzing the engineer about the train's mechanics, and the three of them happily chatted away until all passengers were sent back to their seats.

The Nevada Southern Railway is part of a larger effort throughout Nevada and the Southwest to preserve railroad history. Just outside Boulder City, heading toward Hoover Dam, another portion of the Hoover Dam track is preserved as a hiking trail. The Railroad Trail, also known as the Six Tunnels Trail, winds through the old railroad tunnels and is wide and level enough for bicycles. Turn at the Alan Bible Visitor's Center and look for the trailhead on your right. In California's Mojave National Preserve, the Kelso Depot, once a pivotal stop in the region, was recently renovated into a visitor center. Trains regularly rumble past the building and several exhibits inside explain the railroad's history.

In 1905 the railroad arrived in Las Vegas, and on May 15, 1905, over a thou-

sand downtown lots were auctioned off. This is considered the official founding of Las Vegas. The original train depot sat on the spot occupied today by the Union Plaza Hotel. The Union Pacific built 64 cottages for its workers, but few of the original cottages are still standing. When the Regional Justice Center was built, local preservationists were concerned about the fate of the remaining cottages. One was successfully moved to the Clark County Heritage Museum. The railroad's importance to Las Vegas can't be understated – without it, Las Vegas probably wouldn't have grown beyond a dusty watering hole with a few casinos.

To visit the Nevada Southern Railway, take US93 to Boulder City. Look for the signs that announce Bootleg Canyon Trails – it's the same street. In addition to the depot, the museum also has a gift shop and maintenance building, and plans to have an exhibit hall eventually. The railway will be on hiatus in January. When the trains are running, rides are available Saturday and Sunday, from 10:00 to 2:30. Call for prices. You can visit the museum on the web at <http://www.nevadasouthern.com/> or <http://dmla.clan.lib.nv.us/docs/museums/BoulderCity/rr.htm>. The museum's cars are also available for charter, and for those special train enthusiasts, they also offer an "Engineer for an Hour" program that lets you call the shots (with a little help).

While you're in Boulder City, take in some other sights. Visit its quaint downtown district to explore the antique stores and restaurants. The historic Boulder Dam Hotel offers rooms, a restaurant, shops, and a museum. Built in 1933 to house more affluent dam workers, the hotel today is listed on the National Register of Historic Place. At Hemenway Valley Park on Ville Drive (just past St. Jude), you might get

lucky and see bighorn sheep grazing on the grass. Contemplative souls can visit the labyrinth at St. Andrew's Church, 1399 San Felipe, to do a walking meditation. Lake Mead and Boulder Dam are short drives from Boulder City. Feed the carp at Lake Mead (they love popcorn) or take a tour of Boulder Dam, one of the largest dams in the world. Tighter security after 9/11 restricted access to the dam, but tours still take you deep into this amazing structure. The next engineering marvel in the area, the bypass bridge, is under construction and visible at several points along US93.

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