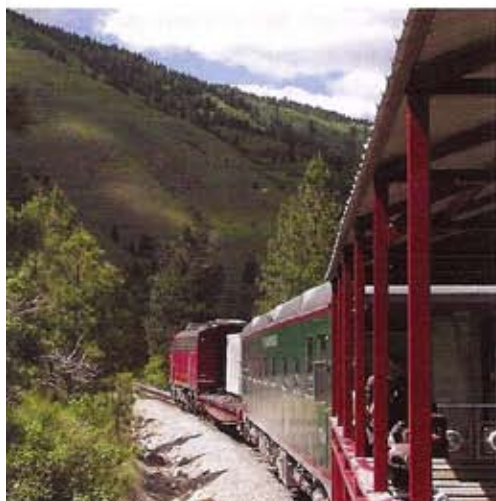


COURTESY MT. RAJNER SCENIC RAILROAD

{ RIDING THE RAILS OF THE OLD WEST }

STEP BACK IN TIME AS YOU ENJOY SPECTACULAR SCENERY ON ONE OF FOUR HISTORIC TRAIN ROUTES IN WASHINGTON, OREGON, IDAHO, OR ALASKA.

STORY BY CORINNE GARCIA



COURTESY WHITE PASS & YUKON ROUTE

IT WAS MAY 10, 1869, when the Golden Spike was pounded into the final railroad tie, representing the completion of the first Transcontinental Railroad.

The sprawling web of tracks opened up a new West, with bustling towns sprouting up along the tracks. And along with the railroad and the opportunities came excitement: train robberies, mining boomtowns, and expanded tourism to Yellowstone and the Northwest.

More than 140 years later, a handful of dedicated train enthusiasts are running tours on some of the historic routes. In most cases, locomotives have been restored and depots preserved. Stepping on board one of these antique trains is like stepping back in time.

The following tours offer history lessons, glimpses of untouched Western backcountry, and a step back to the rough-and-tumble railroad days of the past. Here are some of the best family-friendly train tours running the rails of the Northwest.

MT. RAINIER SCENIC RAILROAD WASHINGTON

Growing up in a timber family, Tom Murray Jr. was surrounded by the sound of steam locomotives hauling heavy loads through the mountains. And to him, the area just wouldn't be the same without it.

In 1980, when the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad shut down the 66-mile branch line between Tacoma and Morton, Washington, Murray worked out a deal with the new owners of the tracks to keep a portion open for tourist travel. The old steam trains were rebuilt on his property, and a year later, the Mt. Rainier Scenic Railroad (MRSR) was open for business, chugging along the base of the snow-capped Mount Rainier.

Officially the longest-running steam train railroad in the Pacific Northwest, the MRSR is almost completely run by volunteers who are eager to share the rich history of the railroad. Tours depart June–October from an historic depot in the tiny town of Elbe and run through lush, thickly timbered forests, over creeks and the Nisqually River, to the town of Mineral. Special tours are also featured throughout the year, including a summer BBQ Tour, Autumn Leaves Tour, the Pumpkin Express, and Santa Express, among others. (888-783-2611; www.mrsr.com)

THE THUNDER MOUNTAIN LINE IDAHO

As gold mining and timber operations expanded in the Thunder Mountain Mining District in the early 1900s, the roads used to haul out the loot just couldn't keep up with the volume of freight. In 1914, the Union Pacific Railroad started operating this branch line, with regular service to McCall, Idaho, as part of their Oregon Short Line Division. Small towns sprouted up in response, and the railroad was used for freight as well as tourist travel into the surrounding mountains and towns. In 1993, the Idaho Northern & Pacific Railroad purchased the railroad, with part of it in use today for tours.

The Thunder Mountain Line winds through the scenic, narrow canyon along the Payette River in Idaho. The Horseshoe Bend Route (3 to 3 ½ hours) leaves from Horseshoe Bend, March through December. An open-air train car travels along the Payette and the Old Wagon Road to the early settlement of Banks, Idaho. Special excursion trips are numerous, ranging from the Pizza Unlimited, Aloha Express, or Mystery Theatre Dinner trips to Halloween and other holiday-themed trips. These trips often feature live music.

The train is also available for charter. (877-IDA-RAIL; www.thundermountainline.com)

COURTESY MT. RAINIER SCENIC RAILROAD



COURTESY THUNDER MOUNTAIN LINE



TOP: The Mt. Rainier Scenic Railroad is the longest-running steam train railroad in the Pacific Northwest.

ABOVE: The Thunder Mountain Line winds along the Payette River in southwestern Idaho.



The scenic and exciting White Pass & Yukon Route climbs 3,000 feet in 20 minutes.

COURTESY WHITE PASS & YUKON ROUTE

connected the port in Skagway, Alaska, to Whitehorse, Yukon, and into Alaska's interior. The railroad was in service up until 1982, and in 1988, the spectacular route was reopened for tourist travel. Now, the White Pass & Yukon Route carries an astonishing 360,000 travelers each season.

The WP&YR is as scenic as it is exciting, climbing 3,000 feet in 20 miles, traveling up steep grades, winding around cliff-hanging turns, through tunnels, and over a breathtakingly high steel cantilever bridge. The route accesses the first 67.5 miles of this infamous track with excursions of various lengths and themes departing

from Skagway, Alaska, May through September.

The White Pass Summit Excursion is a narrated, 40-mile round trip (3 to 3 ½ hours) to the 2,865-foot summit of White Pass. The Yukon Adventure, from Skagway to Carcross, Yukon, is a one-way, 67.5-mile, 6-hour trip that stops on the way at the restored 1903 depot on Lake Bennett. The Fraser Meadows Steam Excursion is an historic steam locomotive trip that travels just beyond White Pass Summit to the Meadows. (800-343-7373; www.wpyr.com)

WHITE PASS & YUKON ROUTE ALASKA

This narrow gauge railroad was built—well, actually blasted through the surrounding mountains with more than 450 tons of explosives—in 1898, for the mining efforts at the booming Klondike Gold Rush. Funded by the British, this was a \$10 million project, employing tens of thousands of men and breaking ground in some of the harshest climates and landscape in only 26 months.

When it was completed in 1900, the 110-mile track con-

MOUNT HOOD RAILROAD OREGON

The Mount Hood Railroad was completed in 1906 for use as a freight line, transporting timber products and fruit from the fertile Hood River Valley. In the 1920s, as towns grew along the tracks, the railroad began servicing commuters as well.

Today, while it still runs as an essential freight line through the valley, it's also a popular and scenic way for tourists to explore the area. The Mount Hood Railroad Excursion Trains are comfortable double-deckers, with rides available in the dome top for an extra fee. Excursions travel along the river and through forests, meadows, and orchards, with up-front views of Mount Hood.

The Odell Excursion is an 11-mile, 2-hour narrated trip running Saturdays and Sundays, June through September, from Hood River to the center of the Hood River Valley, with a short layover in the small town of Odell. The Parkdale Excursion is a 22-mile, 4-hour narrated ride from Hood River to Parkdale, a small fruit farming town at the base of Mt. Hood, from May through November.

Special excursions include a Friday Night Wine Train,

COURTESY MOUNT HOOD RAILROAD



Mount Hood Railroad excursions travel through the Columbia Gorge and the Hood River Valley, with up-front views of Mt. Hood.

Western Train Robbery Rides, Autumn Fests, and a Polar Express, among others. (800-872-4661; www.mthoodrr.com) ■