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A Steam Powered Time Machine: The Cumbres And Toltec Scenic Railroad

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Abstract

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A Steam Powered Time Machine

The Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad





The coal tippie at Chama is still functional.

THIS PAST SUMMER, WHILE ON A FAMILY VACATION IN Colorado, we visited the *Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad*. As a lifelong train buff, this had been on my bucket list for a long time, and it did not disappoint! The *Cumbres and Toltec* is really a museum, but it's a living museum. On the morning we were there, we felt as if we had stepped back to a time when the narrow gauge railroad was a thriving business. If you get to the rail yard early, you can watch the crews getting the locomotives ready, and hooking up the trains for the day. These are the very same preparations that would have been made almost 100 years ago.



Here the engineer is backing his locomotive to pick up his passenger car consist for the day.

I will not go into a detailed history of the *Cumbres and Toltec*, but I will give you a quick overview. During 1880, the Rio Grande built a narrow gauge extension from Alamosa to Antonito, and then on to Chama. Eventually, the rails would extend past Chama to Durango, and then Silverton. The goal of all this was primarily to access the rich minerals in the San Juan mountains, and later oil from the oil fields near Chama. The railroad also carried passengers, mail, and other commodities to these far flung mountain towns.



The old Rio Grande herald is seen here on the observation car in Antonito before the day's run.

The narrow gauge lines had originally been chosen for their cheaper building costs, and their ability to better traverse the rugged Colorado mountains.

However, even from its beginnings, narrow gauge lines faced a compatibility problem with standard gauge railroads. This led to problems, such as having to transfer cargo from narrow gauge cars to standard gauge cars, and thus delays in transit times. The Rio Grande knew this all too well, and by 1968,

only the San Juan extension from Antonito to Silverton still existed in narrow gauge. The Rio Grande wanted out, and so the states of Colorado and New Mexico stepped in to purchase the line between Antonito, Colorado and Chama, New Mexico. In 1970, it began operations as the *Cumbres and Toltec Scenic Railroad*. In addition to maintenance and funding by Colorado and New Mexico, a volunteer group known as the “**Friends of the Cumbres & Toltec**” does a lot of preservation and fundraising work.



Even at night, the depot in Chama feels like a step back in time.

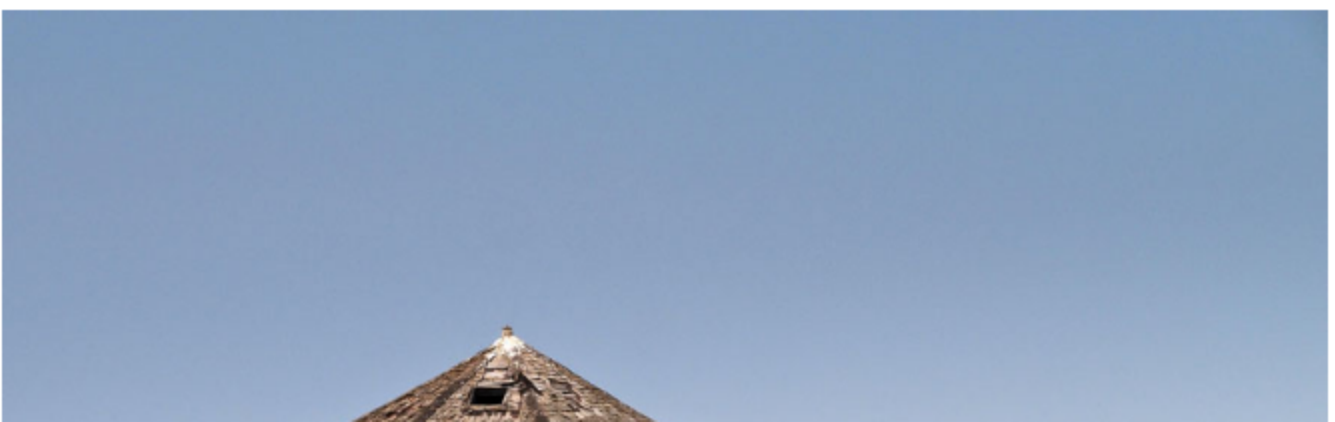
Our ride on the *Cumbres and Toltec* began with a motor coach ride from Chama, where we were staying the night, to Antonito. Then, we boarded the train in Antonito for the six and a half hour ride back to Chama. And what an amazing ride it was! The first part of the trip from Antonito is open and barren with sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and native grasses. Even at 7,888 feet in elevation, it is an arid, almost desert like landscape, with lots of mesas and dry washes. The line feels like it is just meandering through the landscape, but it

is deceptive. You are actually steadily gaining in elevation, and the “meandering” of the track is an effort to reduce the grade.



This low trestle is known as “Hangman’s Trestle” because some vigilantes “borrowed” a locomotive from the Antonito yard and hung a Mr. Ferguson at this bridge for an unknown crime.

About ten miles along the route, the elevation gain is becoming apparent. This area is known as Lava, and had a siding, phone booth, and water tower. The siding is no longer here, and vandals had destroyed the original phone booth. At this point, the train has gained about 600 feet in elevation.





This water tower at Lava was originally located in Antonito, but was moved here after the original tower burned in 1971. It is not currently in service.



This is a replica of the original Lava phone booth built by the Friends of the Cumbres and Toltec.

From here, the train continues to wind its way up through the mountains, steadily gaining elevation. Along the way, the line doubles back on itself

several times in an area known as “Whiplash Curve.”



If you look closely in this image, you can see two lower switchbacks of the track. From this vantage point, we had already traversed both switchbacks.

Nine miles later, we pulled into the old siding called Sublette. Here, there are a few old frame buildings that once housed section gangs that maintained the track and equipment. The Friends of the C&T have done a nice job restoring these old buildings. Here also, our mighty K-36 locomotive stopped for a drink of water. At this point, the train had climbed to an elevation of 9,276 feet.





This is one of the section gang houses at Sublette. Note the “curtains” in the windows, they are actually just painted onto boards over the windows!

Not long after Sublette, the train came to the first of two tunnels. We were riding in the open-air gondola, with no roof, and my wife asked if we should go back to the enclosed car. The boys and I looked at her in disbelief—we were not about to miss going through a tunnel on a steam train in an open car! She just shook her head, and kindly stayed with us. This first tunnel was called “Mud Tunnel.” It was indeed a bit smoky inside, but worth the experience!





Looking back at “mud tunnel,” this end is reinforced with timbers.

As we continued along our journey, we came to a spot known as “Phantom Curve.” It seems that in the early days, the Denver & Rio Grande trainmen often made the trip at night. The headlight would create strange shadows and shapes in the rock formations, as the train wound through them. This was also the site of a wreck in 1948, caused by an avalanche.





This is one of the unique rock formations in Phantom Curve. You can see where it might make strange looking shadows in the glow of a locomotive headlight.

Also in this area, the train is high along the side of the mountains. The scenery has changed from the arid desert to a high mountain vista. There are aspens, ponderosa pine, pinon pines, and various other trees. Here it becomes a much more rugged land, with boulders along the track, and steep drop offs.



This is a panoramic view of the mountain valley far below the track.





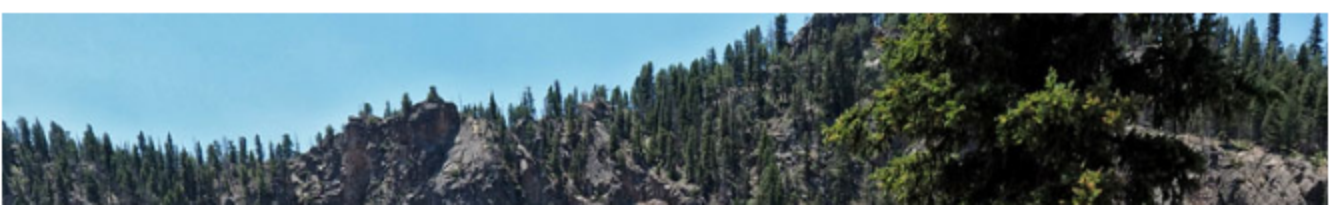
Here you can see some of the big boulders along the track, and if you look closely, a lonely ranch way down in the valley floor.

At an elevation of 9,631 feet, we came to the second tunnel known as “Rock Tunnel.” As before, we stayed in the open air gondola, and this time, I got a spooky picture from inside the tunnel.



This is actually my son's silhouette in the smoky tunnel, as the train rushed us through.

As the train cleared the tunnel, we were treated to a breathtaking view of the Toltec Gorge. About 600 feet below was the Rio de Los Pinos, and a curious monument.





This is the view as the train pops out of the tunnel. You can barely see the river far below the track.



PASSENGERS
STAY SEATED
WHILE IN TUNNELS
Please Do Not



A few days after President Garfield was shot in 1881, an excursion train held an impromptu memorial service here. Later a small monument was erected to the slain President.

A few miles later the train stopped at Osier, where there is a restored section house, water tower, and new dining hall. Here, our westbound train met the eastbound train, and we were allowed to get off to enjoy an incredible lunch and stretch our legs.





Here you can see the Osier dining hall and the eastbound train on the siding.





From our vantage point in the gondola, I noticed this old marker lantern on the back of the observation car on the eastbound train. If you look closely, you can see our train's lettering reflected in the lens.

After leaving Osier, the train continued to wind along the mountainside following the Rio de Los Pinos. We crossed the Cascade trestle and then continued along the edge of a high mountain valley.

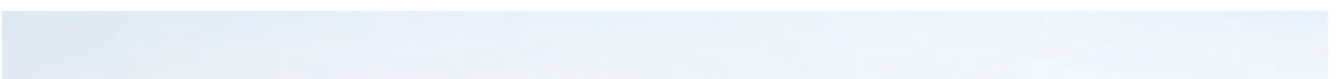




The train seems pretty small against the immense background of the mountain valley.



Many of the original telegraph poles still stand along the right of way. This one still has some wire and insulators on it.





This is the approach to the Los Pinos water tank, which is still operable.

As the train continued on its way, we came to an interesting part of the track called “Tanglefoot Curve.” This 20-degree switchback curve is interesting, because the two levels of track are about 70 feet apart horizontally and 20-25 feet apart vertically. It is a favorite spot for photographers as well.





If you look back into the curve, you can see a speeder following the train. It is looking for hot embers from the locomotive, and has water on board to protect against wildfires.

Finally, we reached the summit of Cumbres Pass at 10,015 feet in elevation. Even in early July, there was a cold wind blowing, and the train stopped again for water. Here at Cumbres Pass, there was once a small town, and they even had a post office until 1937. From the Cumbres Pass heading west, begins the steep four percent grade. Eastbound trains that are full of passengers often need a helper locomotive to make it from Chama to the crest of the Cumbres Pass.



Here is the old section foreman's house, turned depot. The Friends of the C&T added the signal after vandals stole the original.

The line continues downgrade all the way to Chama. Along the way, there are lots of beautiful sites, including a crossing of the 100 feet high Lobato trestle. The *Cumbres and Toltec* has been used in the filming of many movies over the years, and there are even some remnants from those films still around.



This water tower was built as a prop for the 1989 movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

FINALLY, LATE IN THE AFTERNOON OUR TRAIN PULLED INTO Chama. We had greatly enjoyed our trip along the entire line, and it was an unforgettable experience. Chama itself is an awesome little town, and we ended up staying two nights there at a little hotel right across from the rail yard. There is also a great little restaurant right next door where you can eat breakfast and look out at the rail yard. If you ever get a chance to ride the *Cumbres and Toltec*, you will not regret it. Truly, it is an amazing experience, and you really feel like you've stepped back into the glory days of

the narrow gauge railroad. I will leave you with a few more pictures from the rail yard in Chama, which has now become one of our favorite places to visit!



One of the Friends of the C&T volunteers paints new lettering on this boxcar, the same way they would have done 100 years ago.





Two freshly painted switch stands in the early morning light. The rotary plow in the back is still functional, and occasionally used to clear large snowdrifts.



While the C&T owns a number of operable locomotives they also have a few on the "dead line." Old #492 looks like she has been picked over for spare parts many times.

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