

TAKE A RIDE *on The* RAILROAD!

by Colleen Birch Maile

*The Durango-Silverton
Narrow Gauge Railroad
takes passengers places they
can find in no other way.*



Life is as good as it gets in Durango, Colorado. Nestled in the Animas River Valley and surrounded by the Rockies' rugged San Juan Range, this high-country paradise sprouted as a Rio Grande Railroad town in 1880. Fortunately, the 19th-century technology that spawned Durango still works. The train continues to take passengers places they can find in no other way.

Curator of the Durango-Silverton Railroad Museum Jeff Ellingson explained the benefits of the Durango-Silverton line. "Narrow gauge railroads are 36 inches wide; a standard railroad is 56-and-a-half inches. The narrow gauge lines were smaller, the trains lighter, so bridges didn't have to be as big. There was less to blast out of the mountainside, and the curves could be a lot tighter. The six locomotives that pull Durango-Silverton trains were built in 1923 and 1925. They were state-of-the-art technology for their time. They are still very complex equipment."

Ellingson understands their intricacies. As one of the railroad's 80 year-round employees, he spends winters in the museum and summers in the cab of a vintage locomotive shuttling between Durango and the old mining town of Silverton. His onboard time is split between roles as fireman and engineer. The backbreaking labor often finds him shoveling coal in temperatures that typically reach 115 degrees. "It's hard work. You go through six tons of coal a day, but we do it because it's such fun. It makes you feel young. I was never a train buff growing up," he said, "but I always loved our little train. After college, I came back here and went to work." That was 26 years ago, back when the locomotives were merely in their sixth decade of use.

Initially created to haul ore, the Durango-Silverton line soon doubled as a tourist train, according to Ellingson. "Back in the beginning everybody was so amazed at the area's beauty. The railroad company hired well-known photographer William H. Jackson to come out and take pictures. He



Jeff Ellingson

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captured it all, the canyon, the mountains, Silverton, Durango, Mesa Verde [the ancient ruins are 35 miles from Durango]. When those photographs got back east and the investors who created the railroad, many of who were British, saw how beautiful it was, they wanted to see this country for themselves. Word spread. Tourists started riding the trains," Ellingson said.

They still do. "By the late-1950s, any ore coming out of Silverton was being hauled by semi-trucks, and this became exclusively a tourist train," Ellingson said.

It's owned by Heritage Railways now and enjoys immense popularity. In 1960 about 12,000 people rode the train. Now around 150,000 make the trip each summer. Special events such as a



Thomas the Train trip on Father's Day weekend and a Polar Express train at Christmas attract an additional 25,000 to 30,000 passengers each year.

Most passengers come for the thrilling ride and top-draw scenery. Glimpses of wildlife—moose, pronghorn, bear and mountain goats—are

common. But not everyone climbs aboard to simply sightsee. Outdoor adventurers also benefit from the train's back-country access.

"There are two flag stops at two major trail-heads," Ellingson said. "We take in backpackers with all their gear; we carry kayakers and rafting companies with their boats to the Upper Animas. Rail provides the only access back into the river canyon. There are time schedules posted at the



Narrow gauge rail lines ably hug tight mountain curves.

train stops so they know when we'll be back to get them," he said. Many passengers repeat the experience. Ellingson promises that no two trips are the same.

"I've probably made the summer trip thousands of times, but every time I still see things I've never seen before," he said. "That's typical of Durango. There's so much to do here—kayaking, rock climbing, skiing, the Indian ruins. Within such a short distance the scenery changes so much from alpine to desert. I've lived here all my life, and there are still places within 20 miles of town I want to see; trails I want to hike. There are so many beautiful places that are simply timeless." Just like the Durango-Silverton train. ■

ARTWATCH

| DURANGO, CO

Sharon Abshagen Capturing a World of Inspiration



Sharon Abshagen, the artist responsible for this edition's cover, possesses an affinity for plein aire painting that occurred naturally. The lifelong Coloradoan has always enjoyed her state's outdoor opportunities *and* art. "I love being outside so plein aire really suits me well. When I go camping, rafting, fly-fishing, I also paint. I've always painted in the studio, too. Those are typically larger works from field sketches."

Spud Mountain, shown in its entirety here, was created during an outing with the Four Corners Plein Aire Society. "We were up at the Durango Mountain Resort on a gorgeous July morning," she said. "The light was just amazing. I painted it mostly in one morning. I may have worked on it a bit at home. But I work very hard to complete a painting quickly when I work plein aire. You can see that in the loose, fast, brush strokes. The spontaneity brings excitement to the piece."

Abshagen's enthusiasm for her work is rivaled only by her passion for Durango, a place she's called home since 1973. "I work in a home



Spud Mountain, an 11" x 14" plein aire oil

studio with a spectacular view overlooking Silver Mountain and a wildlife refuge. There's this great northern light coming in the window. And the nice thing about Durango is its variety. We're in the mountains but so close to the desert. So I am able to draw great inspiration from our surroundings here." To view more of her work, visit her website, www.sharonabshagen.com. ■