

Welcome to the FarRail Tours Newsletter Autumn 2009!

There have been several developments since the last newsletter which are either interesting, urgent or disappointing. But some of them changed completely within days, so I was rather glad not to have started a blog yet. Zhalai Nuocer was an up and down: they changed their date to close the open cast pit five times. I even revised my January trip to China twice, once to include Zhalai Nuocer, and another time to exclude it again.



We're approaching the end of regular steam. This has been well known for years already, but we're getting closer to a point where it might become difficult to justify long flights and a certain amount of effort to see the relics of regular steam. I assume the year 2010 will have an impact on the remaining steam centres, which could make it difficult to arrange interesting tours to real steam in the world.

But the world is not easy for diesel enthusiasts, either. In Myanmar they'll get more and more Chinese locomotives, they'll get a new signalling system (replacing the old gantries with lots of semaphores); the Kiwi Rail of New Zealand ordered their first batch of Chinese diesel locomotives to replace many of their American "Road Switchers". Even in China, where the once un-appreciated class DF4B is on the way to create an interest to railway enthusiasts because of their pleasant shape and sound. New ultra-ugly, boxy diesel locomotives are appearing on the rails. It might be the case that the last DF4Bs will be chased like the last QJs before long.

Contents

Urgent Last Call: China
Indonesia
USA/Canada
Romania: Malaxa Railcars
Argentina
Zimbabwe

Urgent Last Call: China

The world's last stand of real steam action is getting to a point of no return! The fires will be extinguished at places where we thought there were sure for the near future. Zhalai Nuocer will stop rail transport from the bottom of the open cast mine very soon. The rest will be done by tucks and, maybe, conveyor belts. But did you know (of course you know if you're a subscriber of the Yahoo newsgroup "Steam in China" because I posted this information from Ronald Olsen there a couple of days ago), did you know that ...

Sandaoling

... is going the same way? This open cast mine has its own workshop, which was certified for heavy overhauls not before 2006. They always told us there won't be any change for the next 20 years – and we all wanted to believe in this.

The bad news arrived a few months ago: diesels will be bought to replace the JS 2-8-2 on the line to the deep mines and the state railway. On both lines trains are hauled chimney first. On the line from the state railway to the mine they often used a banker, so you could see steam hauled and banked trains there quite often. Trains are really long, and the gradient requires crews and locomotives to work at their limits. The latest information is that they will replace steam on the line to the state railway between middle of December 2009 to middle of January 2010, while the date January 6th, 2010 was mentioned several times from involved railway engineers.

That's why we think we're just in time with our tour to Sandaoling starting on December 2nd. You can't be 100% sure, but chances are rather good that we'll be witnesses of the last JS hauled and banked standard gauge trains, and you may add the last regular steam hauled and banked standard gauge operation, in the world.

But now you need to be brave. Sandaoling is going to change the complete operation of the mine. Instead of railways going into the open cast mine they want to change to trucks! This shall happen in 2011, far sooner than anyone had thought! So all hopes for having a last stand of steam well into the next decade are gone completely! I don't want to reflect about the chances for Yamansu to operate their 36 km long desert line much longer than the JS in Sandaoling will last ...

That's why I'll carry some extra films with me when I'm going to Sandaoling in December 2009. If someone wants to jump on the rolling train: flights are still available at bargain prices. But I'll leave the internet for a while from November 17th (I'll have access in Bangkok and Yangon which I'll leave November 21st, but Namtu has no internet connection, as well as the government capped most internet connections in the Xingyang province of China).

Diaobingshan (many of us know this place under its former name Tiefu)

Another safe place for steam? Forget it! They got a new boss in October 2009 – and the new man is not a steam locomotive supporter. The planned steam festival this year was not going to happen until a call from a travel agency came in that they want to hold a steam festival in November this year. The new arrangement is that two days of the steam festival will be held in Fuxin and only one day in Diaobingshan. The good thing about is that they'll prepare the KD6 and the YJ again, so those two locos will be in use beside four SYs. In Fuxin you can expect a dozen of SYs in use (as usual).

However, the future of steam in Diaobingshan is more or less uncertain.

Just to add: The JiTong management decided to run their steam festival the last week of December 2009 and the first few days in January 2010. They have eleven plinthed QJs in Daban ...

Nanpiao

One of their SY failed in October 2009. Another one needed to be stopped due to small problems on October 30th as well. The third serviceable locomotive, SY 1299, was the last remaining loco in use on October 31st – but had leaking glands as well. Shortly after midnight, November 1st, they found leaking pipes in the boiler and needed to drop the fire in SY 1299 as well. The management of the railways held a meeting on October 31st and decided not to repair the two failures of



October (SY 0366 and 0754), instead store them as they are. They purchased two DF5s second hand and they are negotiating with the steelworks at Benxi for another three diesels of that type to be purchased as soon as possible. Due to lack of diesels they repaired SY 1299 November 1st, and November 2nd we could make some splendid pictures of this locomotive on a brilliant clear day. But it's not sure that we'll be lucky in December again. However, on the December tour it will be the last time that Nanpiao, in my opinion one of the best remaining standard gauge steam operations in the world, appears on a tour program. Another heavy loss!

More details about Nanpiao and your last chances there will be published with the trip report.

Indonesia

Olean and Asembagus are not a safe stand for steam any more! This season saw many weeks and almost months without any steam movement in these two mills. The future of Olean is in question because the government announced plans to build three super-modern, large sugar factories. Situbondo wasn't mentioned, but with it's four small and out of date sugar mills (Olean, Panji, Wringin Anom, Asembagus) it would be predestined for a new, bigger mill.

There are more details in the upcoming trip report. It will be probably end of December before I can finish it.

The new trip to Indonesia will include these mills again, but we might be disappointed. However, we're planning an extension to the rack railway of Sumatra (steam, of course), a steam freight train on the state railway and more time in Cepu on the forestry railway. In Semboro we'll run three charter trains as well. There is some good news from Java as well, but these must wait until the trip report is finished.

USA/Canada

WP&YR

In the United States and Canada you can find a good variety of preserved lines and locomotives. The more or less easy to arrange tours are on offer everywhere and it's rather unlikely that I'll run charter trains there before late 2010. But there are some challenging

railways, extraordinary ones, which didn't see many steam trains in the past and which saw few really exciting events. In co-operation with Doug Cummings who knows the place and the people quite well, we'll arrange a never before offered tour to the White Pass and Yukon Railway on the border between the U.S. and Canada. They had their steam trains, of course, but they never ran three of them within one week, and they never used both of their locomotives on consecutive days. We pushed the railway people to their limits and tried to make the most out of it. But for several reasons some arrangements are not possible. But you can be assured that this program will offer the most possibilities for the moment.

Such a tour as we planned could not have been realised without the economic crises and the decline of tourism. Yes, you're reading correctly: because of the decline in numbers of visitor going to Skagway the railway sees the chance to offer many additional trains in their running season. With the normal number of visitors and charter trains there wouldn't be a chance to add another six trains, three with steam and three with quite rare and interesting diesels.

This unique event will be held in June 2011. Yes, 2011, not 2010. The railway needs to arrange many things for these trains (because we want many things from them that no-one asked before) and they require a huge non-refundable deposit one year in advance. That's why we need to start selling 70 seats before May 31st , 2010. Very large groups are not possible on this line. One of the superb photo spots allow only 30 people to take the shot, but we'll repeat this position three or four times to give everyone the chance to get a splendid photograph.

However, you need to consider that such an event might not be possible later when the economic situations eases and tourists are flooding Skagway again. At least not in June when the days are long that far north and photo positions are possible, which are in the darkness of shadows of the mountains for almost the entire year. You could only use the days before and after season, when weather conditions in this region are rarely suitable for photographers and video film makers. You need to expect deep snow until May and rain and fog can come back in late September already – before it suddenly can turn into deep snow again.

We expect to get about 110 bookings, which would be the maximum number of participants because of limited flight connections and hotels on offer.

For the European participants who don't like to go that far for a week only I'll probably add Port Alberni (steam train to a steam driven saw mill) and Mt. Rainier. But these add-ons will be arranged later.

For the beginning please check your calendar and mark June 8th to June 13th , 2011 (add a day for the flight). Please book already now, I can't guarantee that the seats will be available for long.

Mt. Washington

Because it used to be the last regular steam train of the U.S. I like to mention that the Mt. Washington Cog railway is replacing their steam locomotives by ugly modern diesels. They may finish this in 2010. At the end of the recent season they used only one or two steam locomotives.

Romania: Malaxa Railcars

This is for diesel enthusiasts, not the entire planned tour in May 2010, but the Malaxa Railcar extension. These railcars, built at least five decades ago, are going to disappear from Romania's rail network. The nice, speedy shaped, railcars of class 750 and 1000 as well as the two axle railcars of class 900 are pre- WW II constructions. They have a mechanical transmission and are one of the oldest rail vehicles used by a European state railway. All depots we want to visit lost several of their railcar duties because the operation on several lines was handed over to private competitors which are using modern railcars or the lines have been shut down completely. Suceava has only one remaining route for a Malaxa railcar, Timisoara has only two lines left for their railcars. Both of these lines are in danger to be closed soon.

So if you're interested in these railcars don't wait too long. Either go there on you own as soon as you can or just enjoy the convenience of a pre-arranged group tour. We'll have the permits to visit the depots of Arad and Timisoara, the last two strongholds of Malaxas. The other remaining depots have only a small fleet of these nice railcars left.

Argentina

Negotiation continue, but v---e----r----y slow. If I would have news to publish, I'd do that, but the result of dozens of phone calls and maybe hundred emails is just that I could give them the answer "Yes, we really would like to come, even if there is no Henschel locomotive in working order."

By the way, Belarus is not so much different. But there are more or less safety concerns involved in why they're so slow. We could take a picture of a birch tree, and they might think it was of military importance ... so we have to be sure all is approved in advance. However, we're also continue to work on this project. Don't expect a result anything soon for either, Argentina and Belarus.

Zimbabwe

After waiting long and not believing anything was possible, I got this letter from Zimbabwe:

"The Zim tour is very possible. I'm worried about the price they will give you. This is due to some of your request. I attended the meeting, it was great that I was part of the all stake holders meeting. I will write to you tonight on flush drive and send it to you in the morning. Lets do this in the morning. We need dates for your tour." And

"The NRZ all stake Holders meeting on November 5, 2009 was a very positive meeting with everyone voting for the tours to go ahead in 2010."

Of course the price is an issue, but I didn't ask for one of the usual Safari trips. I want to make the most out of the opportunities they have (and give them time to recover as well because we'll use two locomotives but need only one at a time). I'm not sure they learned much from the recent disasters, for example a loco under steam needs to be cared overnight – which caused two dropped led fuses in 2008, or a loco needs water and can't start out to the line with a half filled tank only. I'll arrange people who monitor the night shifts

and hold them away from drinking beer and liquor in the next bar (as they did at least once in 2008). However, looking back at the last tour which I called a disaster, and seeing the grandiose pictures we made as well as re-reading some of the rather euphoric positive comments about this tour from participants (including “the best tour of my life”) I think it is worth trying again. So if you want to see a ‘Prussian General’, at work as some of the people say who like to discredit my tours (while owing many of his former customers, his landlord and me as well money), I’d be glad if you would consider coming to this fascinating African country with the chance to see really authentic trains in an almost unchanged environment since the last steam hauled trains ran more than 15 years ago. Until the itinerary is published please have a look in the gallery and the tour report sections to see what was possible under really difficult circumstances. Imagine what will be possible under the better situation as it is now.

NRZ is always good for surprises. Have a look what they recently announced:

Sunday Mail 15th November 2009

NRZ unveils Rail Leisure for 2010

Business Editor

THE National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ), in partnership with a local hospitality concern, plans to introduce a safari train service that will ply the Harare-Johannesburg route during the month-long 2010 world soccer jamboree.

Plans are now at an advanced stage with trial runs between Harare and Johannesburg expected next month. The train service, Rail Leisure Premier Class, comes with service at par with that of a three-star hotel.

NRZ public relations manager Mr Fanuel Masikati told The Sunday Mail Business that the parastatal, together with its partner, intend to increase transport between Harare and host country South Africa. “We are introducing a train from Harare to Johannesburg in conjunction with a player in the hospitality industry. We are presently refurbishing and upgrading our coaches for this programme. We have the capacity and the expertise in this business and we will be on track to unveil Rail Leisure come the 2010 World Cup. “We are not new in this business. We presently have a safari train locally but the Harare-Johannesburg route will cater for visitors to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. The NRZ promises three-star treatment to passengers who will board the luxury trains. Added Mr Masikati: “The trains will offer services equal to those of three-star hotels but the difference is that this will be a hotel on wheels. That is real leisure. We have highly trained staff that will be manning the trains. They have been extensively trained by the Bulawayo School of Hospitality.”

He added that the steam locomotives, which had been disbanded at the height of economic challenges, are also set to be re-introduced early next year as these are an attraction with tourists. “We are re-introducing steam locomotives again on our tracks. The steam trains are an instant hit with most foreign tourists since Zimbabwe is probably the only country in the world that still has them,” added Masikati.

The Fifa World Cup comes to Africa for the first time next year and is expected to see an influx of tourists into the Southern African region where South Africa’s neighbours are battling to lure participating teams and their bands of supporters. “We are aware that some people coming for the World Cup will be coming here (Zimbabwe) from South Africa and we want these trains to complement transport demands.” NRZ is also rehabilitating rail infrastructure to ensure safe travel. Tourism and Hospitality Industry Minister Walter Mzembe has made a passionate appeal to those that can provide transport to do so as a matter of urgency. “Fifa 2010 is by the corner and Zimbabwe must reap maximum benefits from this football extravaganza,” said Minister Mzembe at the launch of Pathfinder Coaches, a bus company that has already taken the initiative to introduce five-star world-class coaches in the region. The company, which is new on the market, introduced the Irizar PB coach, which was voted Coach of the Year in Europe and is the same coach being used by Barca FC, the England national team and the Brazil national team, amongst others.

“As you are aware, most of these teams travel with their supporters and these also need quality service either in transport, accommodation, food and general hospitality,” said Minister Mzembi.

In 2007, Zimbabwe unveiled a national 2010 World Cup strategy and transport development was cited as one of the key strategic issues that the country was focusing on in terms of preparations for the 2010 games. However, a travel and tourism competitive report of 2009 compiled by the World Economic Forum (WEF) paints a grim picture of Zimbabwe’s ground transportation system that covers coaches/ buses, car hire and taxis. According to the report, Switzerland and 2006 World Cup hosts Germany are first and second respectively while Zimbabwe ranks a lowly 131 out of 133 countries, only ahead of Panama and Paraguay. In Africa, Gambia ranks number 38, Malawi 47 while South Africa is at 126, making northern neighbour Zambia the strongest competitor in terms of quality ground transportation system in the Southern African Development Community (Sadc) region. Poland has already confirmed its interest in camping in the country once it qualifies. This would open up potentially difficult to fill opportunities in the transport sector. For the 2006 World Cup in Germany, Mexico took along 35 000 supporters and has guaranteed 10 000 supporters to Zimbabwe once they qualify. Ten thousand passengers require about 200 buses, making the NRZ initiative commendable.

Here is the tour calendar for the upcoming tours.

China: North-East Real Winter Steam	Dec 11 th - Dec 20 th
China: Ice Quickie 2010 (incl. Huanan)	Jan 7 th - Jan 16 th
Eritrea: Mallets in the Mountains	Jan 29 th - Feb 06 th
Eritrea: Arbaroba Special	Feb 6 th - Feb 10 th
Bosnia: Farewell for 2-10-0 Kriegsloks	Apr 1 st - Apr 10 th
Germany: Harz Mountain Steam	Apr 18 th - Apr 23 rd
Eastern Poland: Narrow Gauge Steam	Apr 24 th - May 2 nd
Romania: Vişeu, Comandău, Moldoviţa	May 15 th - May 23 th
Romania: 50 Years old Malaxa Railcars	May 23 rd - May 27 th
Indonesia: Sweet Steam & more	Jun 6 th - Jun 27 th
Zimbabwe: Garratts to Victoria Falls	Aug 1 st - Aug 14 th
China: Sunflower Steam	Aug 21 st - Aug 31 st
China: Open Cast Mine Steam Farewell	Aug 31 st - Sep 5 th

I’ll be off-line for a while between November 21st and December 8th, so please don’t be worried if you need to wait a few days to get an answer on your emails.

Let me wish you a Merry Christmas and successful New Year already now!

All the best,
Bernd

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