



FarRail Tours

Newsletter June 2012

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Welcome to the FarRail Tours Newsletter June 2012!

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China

As expected we're now close to the crossing point of effort and results. When some internet blogs consider Hongmiao to be a line worth visiting, you know how bad the forecast for steam must be.

The desert line of **Yamansu** will receive its first diesel soon. The diesel is planned to take over all line service instantly after arrival. For a certain time one of the JS will remain in service for shunting and as a back-up.

Sandaoling changed from steam trains to truck transport in the eastern section of the open cast mine. The western part is supposed to change to trucks as well. This should start anytime soon step by step.

The new deep mine some 30 km west of the pit will start production in the next few months. But they changed their mind about the transportation mode: they'll not construct a new railway, trucks will bring the coal to Sandaoling. Hence the hope of seeing a newly constructed line opened by a steam train is blowing in the wind. How long steam will linger on in Sandaoling is unclear as before. There are supporters and "preventers" of steam in the management. However, most of the people we asked think that steam will not last more than five years.



Baiyin already owns five diesel locomotives. By March 2012 they had used two at most. They told us trained diesel crews are not available. The passenger trains are still steam-heated. There are no reasons not to change to diesel anytime soon. Up to now the passenger trains are steam hauled and still spectacular to see.

The copper smelter slag is not going to a railway served dump any more. The company purchased special purpose trucks from Germany which are now handling the slag. One SY less in service ...

I tried one last attempt to gain a permit for the “prison railway” of **Rongshan**. So far all attempts to get an official permit from the government have failed. That’s why I’m now trying it on the ground and sent a guide there. It seems to be the last chance to get there before the line will be finally closed.

Meanwhile the situation in **Shibanxi** (Sichuan province as well) has changed dramatically. But this was to be expected: after they opened the road to Bagou the number of passengers dropped drastically and now the power plant company who owns the railway have told the mine in Huangcunjin that they’ll stop coal transport by rail soon. Recent reports state that the last coal train will run by the end of August. The first idea was to purchase diesel locos to bring the coal from the mine to Bagou (less than a mile) and then carry on by truck. The argument that the road is too small and not good enough to operate trucks doesn’t count because many other mines in that region have transported their coal on even worse roads for many years. Recently there was a rumour that the Huangcunjin mines might be closed.

In the northern part of the country the last steam operated trains in the **Jixi** coal mine system might run just now. Maybe they will use steam for the dump trains for a little while more but it’s doubtful that the SYs, although cheaper to operate than diesel or electric will have a long life here.

Diaobingshan (formerly Tiefa) uses only one SY in regular service. Recently they said on Saturdays the Faku line sees a steam passenger, but usually they only run steam on the flat and uninspiring line to Daqing. During the night they serve the two freight loading points in Diaobingshan and Wangqing which are still not suitable for the diesels, a few inches wider.

The steelworks at **Dong Tonghua** still sees three SYs in regular use and those at **Beitai** a dozen. In March a group of German visitors caused an incident which might be the end of all official permits to enter the steelworks for photography. Whether our tour will be affected is hard to say at this time. Because we know three channels to get a permit we’re still optimistic to make it to the old blast furnaces.

It is expected that the opening of the huge, new blast furnace will end the use of the four old blast furnaces which are still steam operated. They might reduce the use of steam or even finish it completely. The new blast furnace should be tested by 2013.

Recent reports from **Fuxin** talk about a reduction in steam activity and numbers of steam locomotives in use. Only six locomotives remain in service.

From an investigation tour to China in 2011, I reported from steam in **Fushun** because this location had not been in the reports for several years. However, there is no “steam-alert” for the locomotives of the Special Steelworks at Fushun. Often wrongly named the old steelworks, but only because the so called New Steelworks exist - it doesn’t mean the Special Steelworks were renamed. In Fushun it’s possible to make a nice (but not spectacular) shot at the stabling point, but the operation on the line and in the steelworks is, from a photographic point of view, rather boring. There is no row of huge blast furnaces, fat pipes going over the tracks or a slag tip. It’s just a small steelworks which – in my eyes – doesn’t justify the effort which



would be necessary to get official access. However, Fushun is worth a visit for the pre-revolution Japanese electrics.

The planned tour to China in November is named "40 steam locos in 16 days". At the time I planned the tour this was calculated with a convenient buffer, just in case. But according to the most recent developments it seems to be ambitious. Questions following recent tours to the last big steam reservoir can't be answered at the moment. I'm not sure whether there is sufficient action left in the near future to make another trip to China worthwhile. After our tour in November 2012, I see the usually expected superb results on such tours is in danger. After the tour I'll decide whether or not China will appear in the tour calendar in 2013.

Vietnam

In short: the steelworks at Thai Nguyen still uses one or two of their 0-6-0 tank locomotives of class GJ.

Malaysia

The Sabah State Railway in North Borneo was completely worked throughout its flat land section. Chinese rolling stock dominates the picture on the rails. The steam train is back on the track – but only on the first, boring and flat section. I tried to convince the people in charge to run a charter train into the mountains on the partly still traditional track, but didn't succeed. They only offered a train with boring coaches on the most boring part of the line at their normal high charter rates. However, they wanted to come back to me as soon as there is an improvement possible according to our wishes:

"Dear Mr FarRail,

Thank you for your email. Allow me to recheck again your request. But just take note, the train only reach till Papar town.

Will get back to you soonest once I have the confirmation pertaining your request.

Thank you, regards"

This message dates back to November 2011. Since then I didn't hear anything from them, despite asking several times. Unfortunately this is a rather common event when you're organising charter trains.

Indonesia

After the interest in tours to the last narrow gauge steam paradise almost faded out over recent years the FarRail Tours journey this summer will have no successor in 2013. I'll give the harvest season in 2013 with its ancient locomotives and stationary steam engines a miss. If you still want to jump on the tour in 2012 we'll make it possible. We're just eleven.



Eritrea

It's becoming serious! The government of Eritrea made a decision: the ore concentrates should be transported by rail. In the whole investment package they included a connection to the new cement plant near Massawa. They want to work through the complete Massawa – Asmara section with changes to tunnels and bridges to allow a higher axle load. The rails will be changed to a larger profile as well. Photographically this is not welcomed, but it will help the country to develop its industries.

As soon as funding is available they want to start with the refurbishment of the line. For the ore transport, they need about eight new diesel locos and some 80 freight wagons. When this rolling stock is acquired they will start with about 600,000 tons of freight a year between Massawa and Asmara. When this becomes reality we can forget about our extensive photo charter events in Eritrea! The steam locos with their weak boiler and their steam leaking cylinders are using by far too much time on the line, also because they need to blow up steam after a couple of miles when running uphill. Not even considering our wishes to see repeated runpasts, climbing mountains for the best photo position and waiting for the perfect situation with fog and clouds. The density of commercial train movements will most likely not allow such photo charters any more.

The section Asmara – Keren is not planned to be rebuilt. Their plans are even more exciting. The line between Bisha, close to another ore mine, and Keren via Agordat will be rebuilt. From Keren eastbound they want to avoid the steep ascent to Asmara (2,300 m above the sea). Instead they're planning a new line via Ghizghiza and then eastbound to the sea, to a new harbour. This line will only climb up to some 1,500 metres above the sea. But the investment including the new harbour would be immense and it is doubtful whether the economic situation of Eritrea will allow such massive construction plans to be executed in a foreseeable time frame.

Feasible however, is the construction of a new track to the mine near Asmara as well as to the new cement factory near Massawa. And this is why I'm thinking the time for charter trains in the well known style has an expiry date.

For the tour in December 2012 we've planned some so far unforeseen improvements, yes, you can also say investments. Some of the freight wagons I consider to be worth keeping for future generations (see my list <http://www.farrail.com/seiten/tour-report/Eritrea-wagons-for-overhaul-2011-03.html>) have already been taken away from Mai Atal and brought to the workshop in Asmara. We hope that we can see some of them on our charter trains in December.

After our December tour we'll report the newest developments. For the Eritreans we hope that their railway will become a commercial carrier very soon, although our own wishes are quite different. But progress can't be stopped, even when it comes slowly and takes some time in certain regions of the world.

Poland

The tour in April 2012 which almost needed to be skipped due to lack of interest was sold out eventually (although we faced some last minute cancellations which would have allowed two others to join the tour). The tour was very successful. A trip report will follow soon on my website. The first pictures from the tour you'll see in the blog (<http://www.farrail-blog.com/germanposts/schmalspur-dampf-in-polen/> and <http://www.farrail-blog.com/englishposts/steam-in-wolsztyn-april-2012/>).

For a long planned event in the south-east we now have good news: the loco we need for our plans, a Kp4, is now serviceable and made its first tests in spring 2012.



USA

Organising this tour blew away the myth of the service society in the United States, at least in my mind. Nevertheless, the programme was put together and will hopefully not be touched by the ever changing people in charge on the Cumbres & Toltec which was recently taken over by the Durango & Silverton management. What we still do not have in sufficient numbers are registrations for the tour. For the five days on the Cumbres & Toltec we have currently 34 (plus another 14 who announced their interest in the tour). To hold the costs down we calculated with 45 participants. We still have some time, but by mid August we need to transfer large amounts as deposits, and by then we must make a decision about the tour. The down-payments are not refundable. This risk can only be covered by more registrations. If we can't find sufficient people the American dream will die ... The same result could be achieved by our politicians whose aimless and unfruitful fishing around in the many European crises continues to weaken their own artificial currency. But as long as the American economy is not much stronger we can hope that the exchange rate between the Euro and the US-Dollar is not questioning our tour from this end. However, everything depends on the number of participants ...

Trip ideas for 2013

A number of parallel plans for the next year are in my mind besides the currently published tours. The prices for almost all those plans are rather high and bring up the question how long and how many tours close to perfection are suitable to put into one year. Maybe the trend will be away from, as close as possible, authentic trains to avoid too expensive tours. At the multiple events to celebrate 125 years in the Harz Mountains, I guided several of their (Harz Narrow Gauge railways, HSB) tours. At groups of more than 80 participants it was surprising to see that the vast majority was very happy with the train compositions, the photo opportunities and the tour as a whole. I saw, here and there, much potential for possible improvements, things which could have been organised in a different way, train compositions which should have been adjusted to make them more authentic and other things which could have been done to get closer to a FarRail event. But obviously it worked, much easier, much more relaxed and successful. Of course we didn't even come close to a photographic overkill at a sunrise location, but everyone enjoyed the pictures he/she got even without taking the ultimate master-shot. They all had fun.

Up to now, I've followed the idea of either making things as close as possible to the historic ideal, despite enormous efforts and just at the limit of possible prices, or I've just dropped the idea. But in several countries you're facing limitations. You can't change the mentality of the locals: "we always did it like this" or "we never did it this way" are the rather harmless walls and borders. Not only in Zambia, Kenya, Malaysia, Thailand or on the Philippines have I faced such problems, also just recently in Uruguay, where I could clearly see the potential for a nice event. But they can't jump over their shadow and give me prices to repaint the locomotive and to hire freight wagons. What shall I do? Should I offer simpler charter trains which would allow the local railwaymen to stick to their way of doing things, offer tours which are not aiming for the ultimate shot but which are fun and offer nice experiences as well? Or do you think that such easy events are already sufficiently covered? For every response I'd be happy. In the next newsletter I'll, hopefully, present the results of, hopefully, many readers.

To make it easier:

I'm interested in:

- 1) Tours with highest requirement of authenticity
- 2) Tours with very high photographic/videographic aims
- 3) Tours on which the chance for a good photo will be first priority
- 4) Tours which are fun and relaxed instead of exhausting
- 5) Tours on which the photographic result is not the first priority
- 6) Tours which are just relaxed and have only a loose relation to railways
- 7) Tours to rather safe travel destinations like Austria
- 8) Tours in your own country
- 9) Tours to railways – but also to temples, glaciers, volcanoes rice mills etc.
- 10) Tours to regular railway operations
- 11) Steam
- 12) Diesel
- 13) Electric locos/railcars
- 14) Narrow gauge
- 15) I'm especially interested in _____

Of course, multiple answers are possible and desired.

For 2013 and 2014 I'm working on tours to the Ukraine (yes, steam – and also nuclear submarines etc), Bangladesh (diesel), Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina again (which I'll probably regret again, but after several requests when I'm going to repeat the unrepeatabe I may do it again), Romania, Poland, Hungary (with M62 001, the first serial loco of its class) and Burma (Myanmar). For the latter one I already have five registrations although I never mentioned anything about going again to the fascinating mine railway of Namtu. This tour is planned for December 2013.

There are more plans on the desk, but they're in an embryonic state ...

I'd be glad to see you on one of the upcoming tours.

Yours, Bernd Seiler