

ABOARD!

My Old Kentucky Dinner Train's Nostalgia Tour

By Robert Bolson
Photos by Kirk Schlea

The sight of a train waiting at the platform has an indisputable, alluring romance that touches the soul. Passenger trains once regularly crisscrossed the country, the rails singing beneath them, transporting passengers practically anywhere their hearts desired — and their wallets permitted.

For more than 175 years, trains have inspired countless stories, songs, movies, and legends. From the very beginning, trains promised an enticing world of exploration — and along the way attracted anyone bold enough to answer the conductor's call of "All aboard ..."

A scenic slice of Bernheim Forest is part of the excursion from Bardstown to Limestone Springs and back.



ALL ABOARD!

In its heyday, train travel nurtured the pioneer spirit, helped carry troops to war, and provided savvy politicians with a highly visible, portable campaign platform. Rails spurred the industrial revolution and helped win World War II. Trains helped define the Wild West.

The romance of railroading in America can be traced back to 1830 when the steam engine *Tom Thumb* pulled the first pas-



senger car 13 miles from Baltimore to Ellicott's Mill, Md.

Here in Central Kentucky, the romance and splendor of train travel have been resurrected in nearby Bardstown. While many other rail systems have quietly and sadly faded into disuse and disrepair, the R.J. Corman Railroad Co., which owns and operates My Old Kentucky Dinner Train, has firmly established its dinner train experience as a "must" for tourists and adventurous travelers. Safety regulations prohibit the dinner train from permitting children under five.

The company purchased the 20-mile stretch from Bardstown to Limestone Springs from CSX Transportation in 1987 and developed the dinner train soon thereafter. Its inaugural run occurred in 1988. The perpetually popular train features three dining cars created in the 1940s at the height of luxury rail travel and is powered by two diesel electric FP7A locomotives constructed in the 1950s.

Meticulously refurbished, the gleaming and handsome silver "steel-wheeled yachts" of My Old Kentucky Dinner Train

Train lovers enjoy the outing through the Kentucky countryside.



Beautifully laid tables provide a perfect setting for a prime rib dinner prepared by experienced chefs.



preserve a nearly forgotten chapter from America's rail history. They exemplify the sleek style of the luxury train travel era and offer passengers the opportunity to socialize or simply take in the sights while enjoying a grand journey back into time and dining on an expertly prepared four-course gourmet meal.

The ride is a relaxing two hours for lunch and 2½ hours for dinner.

"What time is it? Are we ready to board?" the staff was overheard asking in obvious anticipation only seconds before the first passengers began to board. The electricity in the air from all of the necessary preparation is reminiscent of that for a Broadway play's opening night.

During a summer evening's trip, as many as 175 clearly eager passengers can be observed boarding quickly, taking their assigned seats, and settling in before the train leaves the hustle and bustle of today's world behind. The temperature may be warm outside, but inside the cars it is icy cold from the train's more-than-adequate air conditioning, a welcome relief on a sultry summer Kentucky evening.

Lavish attention to detail is apparent in the warm, rich tones of the dark mahogany walls and gleaming brass light fixtures that greet passengers as they step inside. Instantly the mood is set.

Attendants in semi-formal attire officially welcome passengers aboard with true Kentucky warmth and hospitality. There is an almost palpable sense of anticipation and adventure permeates the fleet of historic rail cars.

"I've wanted to do this for years," remarked a fellow passenger seated nearby.

Once the train is underway, the sound of Sinatra's "Night

and Day," playing during boarding, fades as passengers gaze outside the train at the passing fields with houses dotted in the distance and at the occasional cluster of grazing cows.

Back inside the train's cozy confines, the conversation is spirited and friendly.

During the trip, some passengers converse while sipping cocktails; others simply wait for the savory multi-course meal freshly prepared onboard by experienced chefs in a completely modern kitchen car.

The current dinner menu entrees include slow-roasted prime rib carved from certified Angus beef from Kentucky, baked Tilapia, and stuffed chicken breast. Vegetarian dishes and a children's menu also are available, plus a selection of tantalizingly tempting desserts, including Derby Pie and cheesecake drizzled in a bourbon and caramel sauce. It's a rolling feast served on linen tablecloths set with fine china and underscored with the soothing sway of the moving train cars.

In addition to the nine servers aboard, seven culinary experts including head chef and restaurant manager David Cobb work with pride and rapid precision behind the scene in the confined

THE KENTUCKY RAILWAY MUSEUM: It's all about the Trains

My Old Kentucky Dinner Train is not Kentucky's only tribute to trains and train travels. Train lovers of all ages also will delight in visiting the Kentucky Railway Museum located in New Haven, just minutes from Bardstown.

The museum offers visitors the chance to tour an exquisite collection of railroad artifacts and other fascinating memorabilia; an opportunity to explore a comprehensive model train exhibit; and the chance to take a 22-mile excursion through the Rolling Fork River Valley.

The popular non-profit museum has been in operation for more than 50 years and is open year-round. There are five paid staffers while all other employees volunteer their time.

The museum owns more than 100 pieces of rolling stock, including flat cars, cranes, refrigerated units, box cars, and other assorted pieces.

While visiting the museum, enthusiasts may choose to ride in vintage train cars attached to the 102-year old L&N 152, the last remaining steam locomotive still in operation in Kentucky.

The two-hour trip will average speeds of about 25 mph, with the locomotive consuming one ton of coal. Built in 1905 at a cost of \$16,000, "152" was once clocked at 90 mph at its peak, according to the museum's chairman of the board, Frank Bryan.

During the narrated train trip — complete with an actual ticket-punching conductor dressed in traditional conductor-style attire — passengers travel aboard refurbished coaches classified as "heavyweights," built between 1928 and 1932.

The steam engine's belching black smoke blankets the tree-lined Kentucky countryside as the familiar sound of the engine's whistle pierces the air along the route, which snakes across Nelson and LaRue counties near Abraham Lincoln's birthplace.

There is a 15-minute "rest stop" in Boston, Ky., which allows the train's crew to switch the engine from front to back to make the return trip.

The railroad that the train travels upon was built between 1856 and 1857, prior to the Civil War, making it one of

the oldest rails in Kentucky.

Bryan says the museum hopes to add a dining car to the fleet in late fall. There is also an annual "Christmas train" trip, which sells out early each year, in addition to a murder mystery train trip.

There is no charge to visit the museum; however, a donation is suggested. The train ride costs \$15 for adults and teens, \$10 for children 2-12.

For more information, contact:

Kentucky Railway Museum
136 South Main St.
New Haven, KY 40051
(800) 272-0152 or (502) 549-5470
www.kyrail.org
No train rides on Mondays except Memorial Day and Labor Day.
Fares and schedules subject to change without notice.



The museum houses more than 100 pieces of train equipment and other items.

ABOARD!

kitchen quarters of one standard 60-foot train car to create a distinctive and delectable dinner. They will prepare approximately 12 mouth-watering prime ribs (about 150 pounds) for the evening trip.

The speed of travel is slower than that of ordinary passenger trains. The emphasis is on the journey itself, not the destination. Passengers willingly accept the languid speed as they venture north through Bernheim Forest — a 14,000-acre private nature preserve — and the Jim Beam distillery property, located along the line.

In keeping with the tradition of railroad dining, each of the car's tables accommodates four people. Full bar service is available on the train and in the depot except on Sundays.

Ellen and Donald Oliver from Bluffton, Ind., are vacationing on a weekend getaway and only learned of the train after having arrived in the area.

"It's our first dinner train experience," noted Ellen. "We saw it and made reservations. It's very nice. We weren't sure what to expect."

The Olivers enjoy selecting a previously unvisited town or region within a short drive of their Indiana home for their weekend getaways.

More than 16,000 passengers rode My Old Kentucky Dinner Train in 2006. Many of them were first-time guests, but Brandy Farmer, the train's office manager, estimates that as many as half of the passengers on a given run have already ridden the train at least once.

"We have a lot of repeat riders each year ... including a number of people who originally got engaged on the train and then return annually for their anniversary."

Farmer notes that as many as 20 couples get engaged each year while aboard. More than a few of the soon-to-be fiancées even ask Farmer to help hide their engagement ring, sometimes in the meal presentation, with the intent of surprising their beloved at just the right moment.

The dinner train's guest book reveals the train's wide appeal. Passengers from Philpot to Florence, Ky., and from other states such as Illinois, Florida, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, Tennessee, West Virginia, North Carolina, and from as far away as Arizona recently have all taken the trip.

Currently dozens of dinner trains operate at least part of the year in more than 30 states. Most such trains operate either seasonally or a few days a week. R.J. Corman's casually elegant dinner train operates

every day of the year and includes a Polar Express trip with Santa at Christmas and a Trick-or-Treat trip at Halloween. Reservations are encouraged, especially for the Saturday evening trips. Although some male passengers choose to wear suits or sport coats, they are not required.

The depot also can be rented for banquets, rehearsal dinners, and other private functions.

America's Golden Age of travel may be far behind us, but these magnificent vintage vehicles will evoke memories of a bygone era, a time when the journey was as equally enjoyable as the final destination. 🚂

The station in Bardstown awaits returning passengers.



FOR RESERVATIONS OR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

My Old Kentucky Dinner Train

602 North Third St.

Bardstown, KY 40004

Toll free: (866) 801-DINE or

(859) 881-DINE or (502) 348-7500

or visit www.kydinnertrain.com

E-mail: info@rjcorman.com

Luncheon Price: \$54.95

Dinner Price: \$69.95

Prices are per person and include excursion, meal, and tax. Gratuity and cocktails not included. Group pricing available.

Also of interest:

The Society of International Railway Travelers

An international organization of travelers who prefer going by rail.

Located in Louisville.

(800) 478-4881; Outside the U.S.: (502) 454-0277

www.irtsociety.com