

Community Close-up | Austin Steam Train Association

By Jenn Rains



On July 25, 1992, a passenger train made its first run between Cedar Park and Burnet in more than 55 years. The Hill Country Flyer was a tourist train maintained by the nonprofit organization Austin Steam Train Association. Since then, more than 400,000 passengers have taken The Hill Country Flyer or one of its sister rides for a trip into the Hill Country.

A 1916-built Mikado-type steam engine that had been restored to operating condition powered the train.

In 1999, however, the steam engine was sidelined for an overhaul after traveling 60,000 miles since ASTA started the service. The train has been pulled since by a 1960 Alco-built diesel engine.

Over the years ASTA has bought, or acquired through donations, excursion, coach and First Class Pullman cars for its service into the Hill Country. Today, there are about 12 cars available for rides including a caboose that can be rented out for parties and other gatherings, said Holly Doggett, ASTA executive director.

Different riding options are available for people who wish to take a train tour through the Hill Country. The Hill Country Flyer operates every Saturday except in June, July and August. The six-hour trip offers passengers a 66-mile round trip from Cedar Park to Burnet with time to enjoy shopping and lunch in Burnet.

For passengers looking for a shorter trip, the Bertram Flyer has a scenic route from Cedar Park to Bertram and back. With only a 15-minute layover in Bertram, passengers have a chance to glimpse the 1912 train depot before reboarding. The Bertram Flyer runs every Sunday in non-summer months and Saturdays and Sundays from June to August.

Other themed rides include the Twilight Flyer one evening a month and the North Pole Flyer at Christmas.

Doggett said the regularly scheduled rides attract about 30,000 passengers a year, while the annual Day Out with Thomas event alone has about 17,000 passengers.



Mapping the Mikado's restoration

The 1916-built Mikado-type steam engine has been out of commission since 1999 when it was sent for repairs because of a crack in the cylinder saddle. As that piece was being repaired, numerous other defects from general wear and tear were found with the engine, causing an extensive repair process that is still in the works 11 years later.

Because the restoration of steam engines is specialized, Austin Steam Train Association's steam engine is in large pieces throughout different parts of the country. Eventually all of the parts will be sent back to Cedar Park—hopefully by late 2010—and will have a nine- to 11-month reassembly process.

The original cylinder saddle and much of the machinery work is being done in different cities in Alabama, including Birmingham, Springville and Muscle Shoals.

The wheels for the 786 steam engine are currently in Colorado.

At TMC-Listerhill in Alabama, which is doing work on the steam engine's frame, a webcam and photos are set up to watch the process.

Visit www.listerhilltmc.com/7-closer-look.html to see the progress being made on the engine.

Cars of Austin Steam Train Association

1 Two excursion cars, the Buckeye Lake 325 and Buckeye Trail 107 (pictured), are part of the collection. Both cars have central heating and air conditioning and offer two-passenger seating on either side of the aisle with rollover back seats to change the direction of seating for groups wishing to face one another during the ride.

2 The Santa Fe 1343 is a First Class Pullman Lounge car and was built by Pullman-Standard in November 1950. The car houses a party room for up to 10 guests, along with a kitchen and a lounge.

3 Another First Class Pullman Lounge, the City of Chicago is a former sleeper lounge. A lounge area with two- or four-person tables is available for passengers along with two-person compartment rooms (pictured). The compartments once offered passengers a sitting area with beds that were pulled out each night by the porter. Today the compartments can be joined for groups of four people.

3a Passengers of the compartments placed their shoes in this cubby each night, and the porter would check the cubby using an outside door to retrieve the shoes, polish them and return them by morning.

4 A coach class car, part of the Pennsylvania Railroad, was turned into a concession car for the tourist train. The concession car offers food and drinks for travelers along with souvenirs ranging from T-shirts, hats and prints to Thomas the Tank Engine products for kids. With windows on either side of the car, passengers can enjoy the breeze and the view while making their purchases.

5 The City of Chicago, a former sleeper lounge, still has crew bunks in place. It provides riders a chance to see what conditions were like in the past. The car was part of the New York, Chicago and St. Louis Railroad.

6 A seat for the porter was available near the five compartments in the City of Chicago car for easy access to passengers.

Summer schedule

June–August

Saturdays: Bertram Flyer 10 a.m.–1 p.m.

Sundays: Bertram Flyer 2–5 p.m.

July 17: Murder Mystery Twilight Flyer, 7–10 p.m.

Aug. 21: Murder Mystery Twilight Flyer, 7–10 p.m.

For Austin Steam Train Association travel times and prices, visit www.austinsteamtrain.org.



Photos by Jenn Rains