

"The Magic Behind the Steam Train" Tour

Magic Kingdom Park at Walt Disney World, Orlando, FL

Saturday, February 20, 2010, 7:30AM - 10:30AM



We arrived at the entrance to the Magic Kingdom in front of the train station at 7:15AM and found the rest of our 13 guest group, as well as our tour guide, already there and waiting to get started. The other 11 guests included 2 families of four, one gentleman, and one other couple, in addition to us. Our tour guide was named Heather and she mentioned she was from New Jersey, but her name tag said she was Raquel from Jamaica. When someone asked her about the name tag, she said she left her real one on other overalls so she was using her back up one. She mentioned that the other engineers like to kid her that the "NJ" on her real name tag stood for "North Jamaica".

Lilly Belle is a narrow gauge 2-6-0 "Mogul" steam engine named after Walt Disney's wife, Lillian Bounds Disney.

Heather told us we were waiting on the 'Lilly Belle' train to arrive. She mentioned how that engine was more 'temperamental' than the other three and mentioned that the engineers there joke how much like a 'female' she acted. She said that they didn't use her for more than two hours a day, so she was usually only used for the opening ceremony and the welcome run of this tour.



It was mentioned that only a certain few of the railroad crew ever runs the Lily Belle. She said Lily Belle was running a few minutes late that morning, but she arrived just before we headed through the tunnels into the Town Square of Main Street, USA.

Two of the Magic Kingdom steam engines, the 4-6-0 Ten-Wheelers, Walter E. Disney and Roger E. Broggie, are 'sister' trains built side-by-side in the original factory.

From there, we were led to the lower level of the train station where we were given a tour of four photos - one of each of the working steam trains at the Magic Kingdom. We followed Heather up the stairs and over to the train cars.



Heather told us to sit in the last car, where Bob, the Conductor, was. Bob picked two volunteers - one to set switches and one to signal the engineer to get our ride underway. We rode through Frontierland station to Toontown station. We stopped there so Bob (and another volunteer) could switch the track so the train could back into the station. Heather told us we were free to take pictures of anything except the Security gate at the road intersection we were passing by.



As we backed up, Heather pointed out some things, including the proximity of the train tracks to a fireworks station. She mentioned that was the reason the trains stop running each day just before the fireworks begin. She also requested that we not photograph the dumpsters outside of the train shop. She said it wasn't against the rules, but they were ugly and not even part of the tour.

The safety rails that line the outside of the passenger cars have been removed on the Lilly Belle's cars to make it easier for the characters to do their thing.

As we got to the intersection, the Conductor manually lowered the crossing guard and Heather said she felt it was her duty to give us a general reminder that we should never try to outrun a

train with our car when we come upon a railroad track crossing. The train was backed across the street to the shop and stopped for a moment so the fireman in the engine could raise the crossing guards. As the train started up again, Heather mentioned that for safety reasons, guests are not allowed to walk into the shop building, so instead, the train will back us into the building for a few minutes and sit there while she pointed some highlights out to us.



She pointed out the workstations located under the tracks as well as the surplus supplies located in the back of the building. She said there was an underground path that allowed parts to be moved under the tracks to the machine shop on the side of building for maintenance or repair (and then back to the trains.)



The Lily Belle was pulled forward again to let us out into the yard and off she went to open the Magic Kingdom that morning! Bob gave us a hearty wave as she pulled away for her second ride that morning!

Each of the four engines on the railroad has tender capacities of 1,800 gallons of water and 600 gallons of fuel.

We walked two tracks over to the 'Walter E. Disney' engine and cars. The fireman and engineer had her on to pull her out of the shop so they shut her down to do some checks. While they were doing that, Heather told us some more about the train. She said the tender box held the water and fuel and were rebuilt completely above the 'truck' after they were purchased (only the wheels and platforms were original.) She said the electricity and brakes are run by the generator on the back of the tender box. She mentioned that the brakes are on the cars (instead of the engine) so the cars aren't thrown forward (like they would if the engine had them.)



She mentioned that the engineer can use the "throttle" in such a manner that can slow the engine down but it is not often. I asked is that is ever used, and she said that it is usually used when guests step out onto the boarding platform at the station (usually through the exit gate) before the train has come to a stop. She also mentioned that the tracks get coated in graphite twice a week. If they don't apply this coating, the wheels begin to whistle on the tracks. The tracks are really slippery immediately afterwards and sometimes a train might unintentionally slide through a station even though it is breaking to stop. Someone asked if the wheels slip, and Heather said it was rare, and they really try to avoid it because it causes flat spots on the wheels.

The trains were restored by a crew of Disney Imagineers and machinists from the Tampa Ship Repair and Dry Dock Company after being purchased in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.

She brought us up into the engine in groups of four to explain its inner workings. She explained the fireman's job and equipment on his side of the train to the first group. The second group was inside the engine when she explained the engineer's tasks and equipment on that side of the train.



The last group got a leisurely look at the cab before we walked around to the front of the train. She walked us through the brake system, the emergency braking box that is checked every morning. This box can be triggered on Magic Kingdom tracks just after the Frontierland station where the tracks for the Thunder Mountain train cross over the steam train tracks.

Unlike the rolling stock for the Disneyland trains, which was built at a scale of approximately 5/8ths actual size, the Magic Kingdom trains at Walt Disney World are full-scale.

She then walked us to the other side of the train where the fireman was getting ready to start the train. She told us that they lit an alcohol-soaked rag and threw it into the firebox to get the train started. The fireman, Robby, showed us how he lit the rag (and gave us his best 'Statue of Liberty' pose) before getting the train started. We were able to watch them do their daily 'pop-off' test.

Heather mentioned how the smoke coming out of the stack should be white, and gray smoke is bad.



Heather reminded us that we would be heading back to the Magic Kingdom as soon as the 'Roy O. Disney' train (which had pulled across the street already) completed her checks and headed off for its daily rounds.

The fourth steam train engine is a 4-4-0 "American", named the Roy O. Disney.

We all took many pictures around the train and of Robby's poses and headed to the first car on the 'Walt E. Disney' train. We sat there for a little while Heather gave us some more information about the trains. She mentioned that the shop was looking into using bio-fuel for their trains and have been testing it on and off in the trains for about a year and a half.



She mentioned that they used to buy it from a place in Florida who they sent their trash to, but that place closed down recently because it didn't meet federal standards. She said she liked the bio-fuel because it burned hotter so they didn't need as big of a flame in the firebox. Rich asked her what it smelled like and she said it was a toss up between Chinese food and French fries. She also mentioned how the steam train layout has priority over other rides. Another example of this is when the train rides through the first tunnel after the Main Street station. The tunnel is the Pirates ride. In the ride, the boats take one ride down a slope and that slope is actually over the steam train tunnel. She reminded us the train doesn't make way for the other attractions, but the other attractions make way for the steam train.

The Roy O. Disney steam engine entered service later than the other engines because a crack was discovered in the frame after it arrived in Florida.

At 8:45AM, the Roy O. Disney was still sitting across the street. Heather mentioned that if they didn't get moving soon, then we would have to wait for the Lily Belle to return to the station before we headed back to Main Street, USA. She mentioned that the crew on the 'Roy O. Disney' engine was a newer one and they probably were having a few challenges getting through the morning check outs. It was only a few more minutes and it was on it's way (and so were we.) We pulled across the street (crossing guards went up and down, of course) and our engine crew began their set of check outs. We waited about 10 minutes and then we were on our way back to Toontown station.



We stopped at Toontown station to top off our water from the water tower next to the railroad tracks. Toontown Fair itself was empty because it didn't open until 10AM. Once that was complete, we headed back to Main Street, USA.

The under-the-station entry design creates a fairly steep upward grade in the Tomorrowland area for the trains as rose from the nominal ground level up to the raised berm level around Main Street, USA.

Once we reached Main Street station, we took a 10 minute break. As we got off the train, we headed down the ramp next to the tour offices and were able to see Chip and Dale heading backstage through an almost-hidden door for a short break from their photo shoots in the Town Square.





After the break, we caught up with Heather in the Tour office and headed upstairs to the inside of the station. Heather pulled a few benches together at one end of the station to give a more thorough background of Walt's history and passion for trains. While we sat there for about 30-45 minutes, a number of people attempted to get out the doors near us that were obviously closed and locked (but that didn't stop dozens of people from trying!) No wonder they keep (our) benches in front of there normally!

Roy, Walt's brother, worked as a “news butcher” on the Santa Fe selling newspapers, beverages, and snacks. In 1917 Walt himself worked as a “news butcher” on the Missouri Pacific railroad for a brief time.

Heather gave us ALOT of information in that hour! She reviewed his childhood, where she talked about his summer working for the railroad as a news butcher, but spent all of his time trying to get into the engine and learn how to drive it. Heather also mentioned how Walt's visit to the 1948 Chicago Railroad Fair with the 'Golden Spike' re-enactments helped fuel his love of train. She talked about Walt's trip to NYC where he found that his cartoon, Oswald, and his artists had been hired by someone else.

In order to keep the peace within the family, Walt had a studio lawyer write up a legal right-of-way contract which, after being signed by Lillian and witnessed by Diane and Sharon (Walt's daughters), gave Walt the right to build a ninety foot tunnel under the flower bed.

She talked about his scaled trains in the backyard of his home at Carolwood Drive. Heather explained that he originally asked some colleagues about their model train interests and explained what he wanted in a model steam train. She talked about how they built trains at the studios and how Walt built a caboose for it from scratch. The trains were eventually moved to his home. She mentioned the visitors, such as Salvador Dolly, who brought Walt four original paintings for inviting his family over to ride the trains. She mentioned that the trains were only there for two years because of a minor derailment that cause some steam burns on one of the younger guests who was nearby the incident when it occurred. She mentioned the model trains were stored for a long time near Presidio in San Francisco for a long time before a group in Griffith Park volunteered to care and display them.

There are several wonderful photographs of the Walt Disney World Railroad steam engines as they were being moved to Florida and being refurbished that are on display in the Main Street Station.

She then showed us a poster that contained several pictures of his backyard trains. She talked about how his love for trains spilled over into the Disney parks and in closing, gave us each a pin (only available on the tour) and answered all of our questions.



In hindsight, we found this tour to be as interesting as any of the tours we received on the ABD Backstage Magic adventure. We even learned things we had not learned on any of our tours with ABD. The trains, the train shops, or the engineers that we met were extremely friendly and made the tour that much more enjoyable. Although the tour is simple overall, it offers a wealth of information and definitely worth more than the cost of it. This is definitely one of the best deals that Disney offers at their parks!

FYI, below is a list of on-line reports of this tour:

http://www.mouseplanet.com/6776/Steam_Train_Tour

http://www.mouseplanet.com/6778/Steam_Train_Tour_Part_2

http://www.mouseplanet.com/6779/Steam_Train_Tour_Part_3

http://www.mouseplanet.com/6780/Steam_Train_Tour_Part_4

http://www.kingdommagictavel.com/newsletter/articles/steamtrains_tour.htm

<http://www.westcenterstreet.com/2009/04/wdw-classics-it-started-with-steam.html>

http://www.darrinandgeoff.com/wdw_2007/trains/index.html