

July 1, 2010 - Hill City to Keystone by Steam Train

Those of you who may have read some of my previous blog postings have come to realize that my next choice of conveyance, after the airplane, is probably the train. Whenever I have the opportunity to take a ride on an excursion train, I never pass it by. I think that this fascination with trains, especially steam locomotives, goes back to my childhood when we used to commute, by railroad, from our small town (about 2 thousand people in northern New Jersey) to our High School, located some 3 towns and just 4 miles away. During my Freshman year that trip was usually taken on a large steam locomotive, which also took daily commuters to their jobs in nearby New York City. Later years saw us ride behind diesel tractors and it wasn't until my Senior year that we began using the more conventional school bus.

The old 1880 tin mining town of Hill City, located some 15 or so miles from downtown Custer, offers 3 round trip trains each day (in season) to nearby Keystone, a gold mining town. The 10 mile trip, each way, takes about an hour and has a 4-6% grade in both directions. While I chose the 10 AM steam train for my trip, I opted for the 2 1/2 hour layover to give me time to see the Gutzon Borglum museum which has quite a few of the art works and sculptures from the man who "carved" Mount Rushmore.

Since I had an hour or so before boarding in Hill City, I wandered around a bit to get the feel of this old, historic community of about 750 residents. While many of the buildings have the look and feel of a typical western mining town, the venue has changed to tourist type shops and boutiques featuring art galleries, boutiques and restaurants. And typical of this part of the country, it seems that during each summer motorcycles abound. Almost every "large" town has a Harley dealership, I guess as an offshoot to the big rally held each August in nearby Sturgis.

The train departed precisely at 10:00 AM and I had an enclosed car, which was pleasant since it was still a tad cool with morning temperatures hovering in the mid 50's. The scenery enroute started with dense wooded Ponderosa Pines and, with the ever increasing altitude, changed to Grey Birch and then the native Aspen which is so beautiful in the autumn. I learned that this Ponderosa Pine does not easily reflect sunlight. When viewed from a distance its needles appear to be very dark in coloring, thus the term "Black Hills", due to this phenomena.

We almost immediately began traveling uphill and soon the open valleys gave way to the rocky terrain leading into Keystone. Along the way we had several clear views of the Herney Peak, which is the highest point east of the Rockies, topping out at 7,242 feet. However, since my Custer County Airport elevation is 5,600, this means that this "mountain" is only 1,650 feet or so above the surrounding terrain. Later that day I took my plane up to retrace the track between Hill City and Keystone and had a chance to photograph the stone lookout tower atop that Herney Peak from 7,500 feet and about a mile away. I also had the good fortune to locate the 1880 train as it steamed its way back to its home depot and got a nice photo of it traversing through one of those open valley's.



Downtown Hill City - motorcycles all over



Me, in front of horse sculpture at Art Gallery



1880 Steam Train at the Hill City Depot



1880 Train rolling across "hill and dale"

Shortly after arriving at Keystone, a community of about 350 permanent residents, and walking the entire mile or so of its main street, I wandered over to the Borglum Cultural Center to take the self guided tour with the available audio headsets . This privately owned museum has quite a bit of memorabilia and even some of the original art work from this American born artist who earlier began the carving of the Stone Mountain Georgia Confederate Monument. While I will give more details about his work when I write my future Mount Rushmore article, suffice to say that this man devoted most of his life completing that world famous Presidents' sculpture. Another interesting fact that I learned was that Keystone was the adult home to Carrie Ingalls Swanzey (Little House on the Prairie fame) after she married and moved there from the Oklahoma "little prairie" childhood home. Her younger sister Mary Ingalls also lived with them for a time.

The thing that never ceases to amaze me about these small western towns is that each have their own fine dining restaurants. I guess that since these are tourist destinations, it is to be expected. But I can honestly say that I have been impressed with the quantity and quality of eating places available while I have been here in the Black Hills of southwestern South Dakota. My lunch today was at the Ruby House restaurant whose ambience includes many antiques and artifacts from the late 1800's and early 20th century. Red velvet, natural wood paneling, and historic photos, posters and memorabilia abound. The Ruby House, like most of these restaurants, feature some sort of bison on the menu. I had already tried bison steak and hamburgers, so today I thought that I would order their signature buffalo stew, served in its own edible bread bowl. It was quite tasty and reasonable as my whole meal, including a local beer was under \$15, tip and tax included. However, the barmaid from the adjacent Red Garter Saloon had to bring the beer over, since the restaurant did not have its own liquor license.

There were plenty of tourist things to do in Keystone. Since I still had 45 minutes before my train departure, I decided to stop by one of the saloons to listen to a bit of western folk music played by a really talented duo. While I greatly enjoyed their music, I opted out of purchasing any of their CD's. I have found, from previous experience, that while the impulse to bring home a souvenir of these trips are strong, once back home they are put away and rarely seen again. So I just sat back, drank a cold sarsaparilla, and enjoyed the free entertainment for only a couple of dollars tip.

Because of the steeper uphill grade on the return trip, this portion of the ride took an additional 10 minutes to complete. The only thing that I missed about this train was the bitter sweet smell of an honest to goodness coal burning engine. Out of deference to the environment, this train used fuel oil to heat the 4,000 gallons of water needed to generate the boiler steam. It burns cleaner, but does not produce that very distinctive coal dust and steam smell that I have come to enjoy.

By now the afternoon temperatures had reached the mid 60's, so I opted for one of the open sided cars with a window seat, which allowed me to take some more photographs of the natural beauty of the Black Hills.



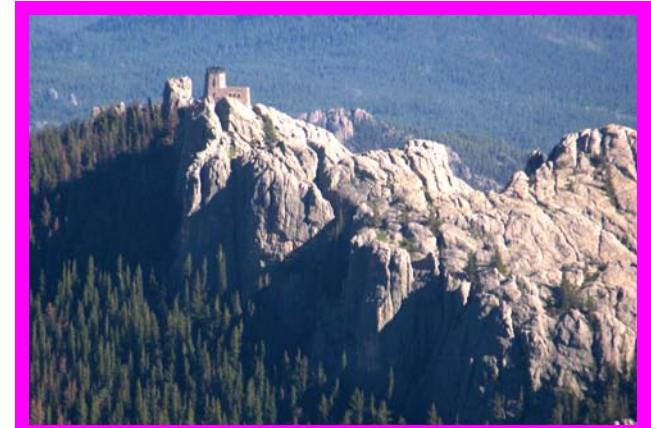
Some of the rocky scenery encountered



A Buffalo stew lunch at a Keystone eatery



The 1880 train viewed from 600 feet above



Herney Peak, the highest point (7,242 ft) East of the Rockies, until the Alps