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Do You Love Trains? Well, You Can Buy One

Hobbyists have bought and restored old railcars, and use them to travel along thousands of miles of tracks in the U.S., Canada and Mexico

Crossing the historic Frankenstein Trestle in Crawford Notch, N.H., on what is now the Conway Scenic Railroad. ROB PILIGIAN

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A few years back, Robin Douglas was on choir practice break at his suburban Los Angeles church when a fellow parishioner came over with a startling pronouncement.

“Guess what? I bought a train!”

His friend was a working man, not a tycoon.

“You can’t buy a train,” Mr. Douglas said. “Surely not?”

His pal whipped out some photos.

Well, it wasn’t exactly a train. It was a “railcar”—a kind of boxy mini-locomotive that for decades was used to transport track-inspection crews by railroads around the U.S. and Canada. With its gas-powered engine, the railcar was reliable, but slow, which led railroad companies eventually to switch to a faster, more versatile technology that lets ordinary pickup trucks ride the rails.

Before the pokey railcar could reach the scrapyard, however, a handful of armchair railroad engineers and other rail fans pulled a switch of sorts that set off a curious rescue and started one of the most unusual hobbies ever.

What if, these hobbyists asked themselves, we were able to create our own railroad set, not limited to some park or tourist area, but on a continental scale? Operational railcars were showing up on the collector’s market for about \$2,000 to \$10,000 at the top end. With a little cooperation from the railroads, it could be possible to become your own engineer, powering your own private railcars through some of North America’s most beautiful—and least accessible—landscapes.

What once sounded crazy has turned into what Mr. Douglas and other railcar operators say is crazy fun.



Railcar operators have a chinwag as they wait to transfer their cars from the tracks back to their trailers after a 100-plus mile run in northern Vermont from Newport to White River Junction on the Washington County Railroad. PHOTO: CARL CARLSON

In 1986, the hobbyists formed the North American Railcar Operators Association. Since then, [Narcoa](#), as its members call it, has made deals with about 100 different railroad lines to gain access to thousands of miles of tracks from Mexico and the U.S. clear to Saskatchewan in Canada. The group has grown to about 1,800 members who have restored and operate about 2,000 of these cars of various makes and vintages, says Bob Knight, an affable, silver-haired Sandwich, Ill., resident who serves as Narcoa's president.

Safety, says Mr. Knight, is paramount. The amateur engineers intricately plan their runs and coordinate with railroad-traffic controllers when the desired rails still are in commercial use. Narcoa members must be mentored by experienced operators and pass the equivalent of a driver's test before they are allowed on the rails.

Liability insurance and accident waivers indemnifying Narcoa and the railroads are mandatory—a chief reason why more railroads are welcoming railcars on their tracks, says Mr. Knight.

The experience of Mr. Douglas is typical of how railcar enthusiasts get hooked. He caddged his choir-practice friend to take him for his first railcar ride. They chugged out along a historic track that runs on the eastern side of the sand dunes at Pismo State Beach on the ocean about 20 miles northwest of Santa Maria, Calif. The weather was lousy but the scenery stunning and the ride a hoot.



Just below Crawford Notch in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, a railcar excursion pauses for a lunch break on rails that were formerly part of the Maine Central Railroad, now part of the Conway Scenic Railroad. PHOTO: CARL S. CARLSON

“I said, ‘I’ve got to get one of these,’ ” Mr. Douglas recalls. He found one online a few months later, driving up to a barn on a Napa Valley farm and paying about \$3,000 for a “rattletrap” model that came with an aluminum trailer necessary to tow it around.

He estimates he has put an additional \$4,500 into restoring his railcar, changing out seats and windows, updating the engine and the like. But it has given him years of pleasure for a relatively small investment. He has logged a few thousand miles in

California, Oregon, Colorado, Idaho and Washington state, seeing sights that few others get to see.

A trip to Coos Bay, Ore., was particularly memorable. “On that one ride you probably go through a dozen tunnels and cross maybe 75 trestles as you head toward the ocean. Simply spectacular,” says Mr. Douglas, a 65-year-old semiconductor-industry retiree who resides in Kuna, Idaho.

While railcar enthusiasts sometimes go solo, the big allure is group excursions—typically involving a dozen to two dozen cars—with owners usually accompanied by spouses, relatives and/or friends. These outings can run from a long day to sojourns that cover hundreds of miles over four days or more.

Keith Mackey, an Ocala, Fla., resident and longtime railcar owner, is a big fan of such outings. Not long ago, he and his wife, Renda, took a Quebec excursion from Sept-Iles on the St. Lawrence River to Labrador City that wended through “a primitive wilderness with no roads. You see the country from a totally different perspective than is normally seen from highways and local roads,” he says.



Railcars take a break on the Wellsboro & Corning railroad in western Pennsylvania overlooking Hammond Lake. PHOTO: KEITH MACKEY

Sociability seems as important as the scenery to some. “This is an extremely sociable hobby—you won’t find a friendlier group of people,” says Richard Dunton, a retired U.S. Department of Agriculture administrator and president of Cedar Springs, Mich.-based Great Lakes Railcars. It’s one of 22 Narcoa regional affiliates.

Mr. Dunton, who like most railcar fans caught the railroad bug as a child visiting rail yards with his dad, operates a restored Fairmont MT-19 Speeder, a widely collected example of railcars now in operation. It has an 18-horsepower gasoline motor, a cab with seats for two to four people, and it clacks along comfortably at 15 to 20 mph with a top speed of about 30 mph.



Richard Dunton, left, and Bob Knight, Narcoa members and longtime railcar owners, flank Mr. Knight's Fairmont MT-19 railcar before taking a ride out of Coopersville, Mich. PHOTO: KEN WELLS

He also serves as an excursion coordinator, working with hobby-friendly railroads that usually charge a fee for access to their tracks. Many are “heritage railroads,” which are preserved for their historic significance, or those that no longer carry commercial freight but are still maintained by the railroad companies that own them.

One popular railcar run is the Skunk Train route that winds for 40 miles through towering redwood forests between Willits and the coastal town of Fort Bragg in Northern California. The line, which dates to 1885, is owned by closely held Mendocino Railway; these days its vintage steam and diesel trains carry tourists instead of cars filled with timber.

Keith Knowlton, an excursion coordinator who splits his time between Connecticut and Maine, has organized trips throughout New England. He says the prices that railroads set vary so widely from region to region that it’s impossible to calculate an

average cost. Some charge by the car, some by the mile, while others levy a flat fee. In some cases “some have us donate to a local charity in their name,” he says.

The bottom line is that the fees are generally modest enough that, along with the relatively inexpensive entry fee to buy a railcar, it keeps the hobby affordable. Last month, for example, about 20 riders took an overnight, leaf-peeping excursion on the Vermont Rail System covering a 220-mile round trip along the pastoral Connecticut River. It cost \$410 per car (or \$205 per person assuming two riders per car.) But that included railroad fees, overnight hotel accommodations, three meals plus bus transportation to and from restaurants.



Railcars ride the White Pass & Yukon Route railway north of Skagway, Alaska, which was completed in 1900 and today operates as a historical tourist attraction. PHOTO: KEITH MACKEY

The fun is sometimes marred by accidents, but these are rare and rarely serious. Derailments, usually caused by track obstructions or flaws, are the most common mishap, according to a perusal of documents on Narcoa’s website. The cars also occasionally break down, which is why Narcoa requires they be fitted with tow bars

so that incapacitated cars can be towed by a working car to the next road crossing and removed. “That way no one gets stranded and the excursion can move on,” says Mr. Knight.

To demonstrate what the fuss is about, Mr. Knight invited this reporter to join him and Mr. Dunton on a 14-mile round-trip trek starting at Coopersville, Mich., along a track now used by a seasonal tourist train that features playacting masked cowboys riding up to rob it. (Spoiler alert: They get shot dead and fall dramatically off their horses.)

No bandits appear on this implacably sunny day as we head out, sent off by Mr. Knight’s wife, Laurie, with a little railcar humor: “Don’t get lost,” she says.



A railcar waits on a siding for a train to pass. PHOTO: KEITH MACKEY

With Mr. Dunton in his car ahead of us, Mr. Knight and I rattle along the first 7-mile leg in his restored Fairmont MT-19 as he explains his railcar’s basics, which are

simple: a clutch, lever shift and throttle, and a handbrake. No need for a steering wheel. Railcars are noisy, so headsets, the kind you see long-distance motorcycle riders wearing, are a necessity to damp sound and carry on a conversation. But after a while you settle into the rattle, hum and clicketyclack of the rails. Most people find the ride soothing.

This run isn't the most beautiful; the track sometimes allows views of nearby Interstate 96. But when we amble through a glade of wildflowers poking up through the tracks and flanked by a patch of tallgrass prairie, it offers a glimpse of the scenic promise of railcar riding.

I ride back with Mr. Dunton who, arranging his blue-and-white striped engineer's cap, says getting out to some of the wildest places in America is a big part of the draw. But he offers a little perspective to make the point that not every moment is a wilderness experience.

"You see some great places," he says, "and also lots of backyards."

Mr. Wells, a former Wall Street Journal reporter, lives in Chicago and is the author of the recently published "Gumbo Life: Tales from the Roux Bayou." He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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