

NARCOA



Frequently Asked Questions About the Motorcar Hobby



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1. What is that “thing” on your trailer?

That is a Railroad Motorcar, sometimes called a “Speeder”. Smaller models, like this one, were used routinely to inspect the many miles of track for defects. Larger versions would carry half a dozen workers and pull a few trailers loaded with spikes and tools, to handle track maintenance. Use of motorcars has been phased out over the past couple decades in favor of Hy-Rail vehicles, which are standard road vehicles with retractable guide wheels that can operate on road or rail. Although these “speeders” have a top speed of only about 30 m.p.h., they were so nicknamed because compared to the manually powered pump cars they replaced, they were much faster.



2. What do you do with it?

Motorcar owners belong to several clubs which obtain permission from railroads to operate on their tracks. These clubs are under the organizational umbrella of the North American Rail Car Operators Association (NARCOA). With permission of the railroads, members operate their motorcars on excursions ranging from one day to over a week in almost all parts of the U.S. and Canada. Many of these excursions are in remote and very scenic areas that are impossible to see from the highway and thus provide an experience not available by other means of transportation.

3. How do you get permission to use your motorcar on a railroad track?

We rent the tracks for our outings from the many small railroad companies which have taken over former branch lines of the major carriers (as well as some large railroads in the U.S. and Canada). Often smaller railroads operate trains only on weekdays, so a group of motorcars on a Saturday or Sunday does not cause the coordination problems the larger lines would have. We have developed an excellent reputation within the rail industry for our attention to safety through operator training, self imposed safety rules and mechanical standards for our motorcars. We know that our operation must be viewed as a positive experience for the railroad to invite us back year after year.

4. Do you need any special training to be able to operate a motorcar?

Yes. NARCOA members who desire to operate motorcars must become “licensed”. They must first obtain and learn the NARCOA rule book which prescribes procedures for safe operation and mechanical standards to which all motorcars must be maintained. A written test must be passed on the contents of the rule book. New operators must then be “Mentored” on their first excursions by an experienced operator who has been designated to act as an instructor. Only after passing these written and practical tests is a new operator allowed to operate a motorcar in a NARCOA sanctioned event. Each motorcar is inspected by a NARCOA qualified safety inspector prior to each excursion to be sure it meets mechanical standards.

5. What happens when you meet a train?

Train meets are never accidental, but always planned events. On smaller railroads we operate on days when there are no trains. Our groups are always led by a specially qualified NARCOA "Excursion Coordinator". In addition, many railroads provide Hy-rail vehicles with railroad staff at the front and rear of our group. On busier railroads where train meets occur, our group leaders maintain radio contact with the railroad dispatcher and the crews of all trains we are scheduled to meet. We generally proceed into a siding or passing track and wait for the train. All operators and passengers are required to leave their motorcars and stand on the side away from the passing train for safety reasons. From the railroad's perspective, we are treated the same as a train.



7. How safe is the hobby?

NARCOA members pride themselves in maintaining an extremely high level of safety. Although no statistics are available, it is possible that a motorcar participating in a NARCOA sanctioned excursion is the safest form of any type of recreational vehicle travel in the world. Due to our strict attention to safety, any type of mishap is rare and usually limited to a minor incident.

9. How many horsepower is the engine?

Most of the two and four person motorcars commonly operated on our excursions have a 20 horsepower Onan 4 cycle engine. Some restored older motorcars use the original 2 cycle 5 horsepower engine. Since we travel at low speeds, more power is not required or even desirable.

6. What happens when you come to a busy highway crossing?

We always yield the right-of-way to automotive traffic. In addition to brake lights, each car carries a red flag that is lowered by the operator to warn the following motor car that he is approaching a road crossing and stopping or slowing to check for traffic. If traffic is encountered, we stop, wait for the automobile to cross and then proceed. When we cross busy multi lane highways, we stop, wait for the rest of the group to catch up, and send trained personnel in safety vests with red flags ahead to stop all highway traffic before crossing the road as a group.

8. How fast can you go?

Most cars have a top speed of about 35 m.p.h. Since we travel in a group of usually 25 to 30 cars, our speed is limited to that of the slowest car. We generally travel at speeds between 15 to 25 m.p.h. with frequent stops at scenic places and to take bathroom breaks. Our speed is always limited by a rule that requires we be able to stop in half the distance we can see ahead. This is particularly important on curves. Our hobby is unusual in that it is strictly non-competitive. We operate in a group. If one car breaks down, the ones around him can help fix the problem or easily tow the car to a more suitable area for repairs. One thing is guaranteed: the car that leaves the starting point last will arrive at the destination last no matter what the cars speed capability.

10. Is it possible for members to operate Hy-rail vehicles?

At the discretion of the excursion coordinator, privately owned hy-rail vehicles can be permitted to operate. They can be very useful for carrying spare parts, extra baggage or running into town if something is needed.



11. How far apart do the motorcars travel during an excursion?

We keep close enough to each other to maintain visual contact with the car in front, never getting closer than a safe distance that will allow for stopping should the car ahead come to a sudden halt.

12. What is the role of the NARCOA Excursion Coordinator?

The Excursion Coordinator is the excursion leader, liaison with the railroad and person in charge of the operation. He assumes responsibility for and has the authority to be certain each participant is in compliance with all NARCOA and railroad rules. He is the ultimate authority on any decisions made for situations not covered by published rules.

13. What type of people participate in the hobby?

The motorcar fraternity is a very mixed and friendly group. There are professors and programmers, farmers and physicians, teachers and truckers, as well as police officers, engineers, firemen, plumbers, and many retired

people. Almost all of them have good mechanical skills for restoring and repairing motorcars. Many of them travel, with their motorcars on towed trailers, in pickups, SUVs, and motor homes; others have family sedans or station wagons. Although certainly much less expensive than flying or boating, it is still not a hobby for the financially challenged.

14. What is traveling in a motorcar like?

Riding in a motorcar provides a perspective on rail travel that most people never experience. One is seated perhaps only two feet above the top of the rail and can see directly ahead and to both sides, similar to the view a locomotive engineer has, but even better. Travel is relatively slow, generally averaging less than 20 miles per hour. Every culvert, bridge, road crossing, tunnel, and building along the rails is seen from an uncommon vantage point. Because motorcars are so uncommon, they attract much attention from people along the track. When we pause for lunch or other extended periods of time in populated areas small crowds often gather to look and ask questions.

Most motorcars have a windshield and roof for protection from the wind and rain. Most also have sides and backs (sometimes made of canvas) with doors (or opening flaps) and windows. Many are fully enclosed with metal or fiberglass bodies. These are the most desirable for rain or cold weather.

Most excursions cover 50 to 120 miles in a day. The average hobbyist uses his motorcar 500 to 1,000 miles a year. A very few, mostly those participating in the longer trips, run as much as 2,500 to 3,000 miles a year.

15. How can I get more information on the motorcar hobby and NARCOA?

Visit the NARCOA Web Site at:

<http://www.narcoa.org>

NARCOA
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North American Railcar Operators Association