



TRAINS ARE ALIVE AND CHUGGING IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

Working on the Railroad. It was December of 1883 and Anderson Drake shivered as the makeshift flat-boat bobbed and groaned its way across the rain-swollen Tuckasegee River. Drake and his fellow convicts were on their way to another day of hard labor digging the Cowee Tunnel for the Western North Carolina Railroad. Without warning, the shaky vessel capsized, dumping the 20 prisoners and a guard into the icy waters. Nineteen shackled prisoners sank to their deaths, but Drake, who was not in irons, managed to save not only himself, but prison guard Fleet Foster as well. Visions of a pardon danced in his head as he heroically dragged the guard to the shore. Unfortunately, it was later discovered that the slippery prisoner had stolen Foster's wallet during the rescue. The next day, Drake was back working on the railroad... with an extra 30 years tacked onto his sentence.

The Train Whistles Still Echo in the Valleys. Laying tracks in the rugged terrain of the Smoky Mountains was difficult, but the benefits were immeasurable. "The railroad brought needed goods and transportation to settlers who were virtually cut off from civilization," says Roxanne Marshall, marketing manager for the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad (GSMR). "However," she adds, "with the coming of roads and automobiles, the once vibrant passenger train service ceased in the mountains... that is, until 1988." That year marked the return to the glory days of railroading in the Smokies. Today the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad regularly pulls out of the old Bryson City depot, taking visitors along the Tuckasegee River, through the Cowee Tunnel, across Fontana Lake and into the spectacular Nantahala Gorge. Railroading in Swain County, North Carolina, is back!

Dining, Mystery and the Polar Express. In addition to its regular Nantahala Gorge run, the GSMR offers seasonal excursions for young and old. "Our mission is to introduce children to trains," says Marshall. "Kids love Thomas the Tank Engine™, Peanuts™ - The Great Pumpkin Patch Express and The Polar Express™," she adds. And railroad enthusiasts of all ages will enjoy a visit to Smoky Mountain Trains in Bryson City. The model railroad museum features Lionel™ trains and would-be engineers are invited to push the buttons that operate the trains and accessories.

Taking the Green Line. Swain County is an ideal place for railroading. With 87% of the county composed of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and national forest lands, the scenery is breathtaking. (A favorite excursion drops passengers off for whitewater rafting at the Nantahala River—one of the finest paddling rivers in the Southeast.) Not surprisingly, the stunning views inspire residents and visitors alike to employ green practices, including energy conservation. "Just parking your car and riding the train is a step in the right direction," says Marshall.

To ride the rails in the Smoky Mountains is like stepping back in time. Some say you can hear a turn-of-the-century conductor cry out, "All aboard!" as you pull out of the Bryson City Depot. And some say, when you pass through the darkness of the Cowee Tunnel, you can still hear the screams and clanging shackles of 19 prisoners who never made it to work on a cold day in 1883.

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800-867-9246.