

RIDE THE POLAR EXPRESS

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It's time to make a reservation (or just decide to show up) for a Santa Train ride. Those Santa rides have been a special part of Colorado railroad history for over a century. An iconic photo shows kids lining up by a caboose in the Rio Grande (D&RGW) yards in Salida to get holiday treats from a brakeman Santa about 1944.

Today at least a half dozen rides follow the basic theme of the Polar Express, though legally not all can use that moniker. The polar express idea comes from Chris Van Allsburg's 1985 book by that same title. Today a half dozen Santa Trains follow this general plot. The basic outline hasn't changed.

The kids and parents arrive in their pajamas for snacks and a visit to Santa. Each train has variations on this. Most of the longer ones still encourage the sleep wear. Various kinds of snacks happen always.

The plot is that Santa gives a silver bell to one kid (a boy in the original, sometimes a girl now.) When the bell rings there is peace and goodwill amongst all. The magic happens Christmas morning as everyone busily opens their presents. The boy doubts that there is any magic left anymore. Then what should appear in the pocket of his robe, but the silver bell! It's his secret and a favorite Christmas story.

If you are looking for a short, but still stunning ride, I suggest the Georgetown Loop. You'll be looking straight down 150 feet from the highest bridge. Santa boards each train and the club and parlor cars are nicely fitted out. There are holiday lights everywhere. An added twist is your chance to meet Ebenezer Scrooge. He boards the week after Christmas to tell his story of greed gone bad and his ultimate redemption.

The holidays are a time for festive gifts. One region of Colorado Central land seems to be having a bit of a hard economic time this year. Buying local makes sense. Donating unwrapped toys is nice too. Stop by the stations for the Cumbres and Toltec Railroad for a train ambiance hit and a light display. Local folks are making a number of holiday items, especially handmade toys, many made by kids.. Those will be on sale Dec. 11 in Chama and Dec. 18 in Antonito after two P.M. The home made light display follows. Home made goodies will likely include bichochoicos, special holiday cookies. Our Mexican neighbor make big boxes that he'd give all around.

The yards in Salida were the place the Santa train stopped. Here is a photo. Imagine how exciting it was to hear that big steam engine coming into the yards. It was still painted yellow as it had been for the railroad faire in Chicago in 1948. The logo CC&TC was made up and stood for Cripple Creek and Tin Cup. My Dad and I marveled at how good she looked: big plume of smoke, the bell ringing, the whistle blowing all added to the drama. The caboose itself was a wonder. The outline was trimmed with pine branches.

There were brakeman and car inspector's lamps at every window. The goodies given out were mostly home baked by the sororities and ran toward pinon nut cookies. At least some of that spirit has survived in Salida, though not the train. Several clubs feature a train theme for their holiday give away and toy and food collection.

Durango is always a Christmas fantasy. They've arranged to call the train "the Polar Express." The immortal story by Chris Van Allsburg is told on the way up through the snow. One version is recorded by Tom Hanks. Santa does board on the way back down. It's a total hour or so long trip. The magic happens when the kids discover a tiny silver bell in their bath robe pocket. They need only ring it to remember that love is still alive in our world.

The Santa Train at the Colorado Railroad Museum in Golden doesn't cover much trackage, but it is authentic. Their coal burning switch engine has been lovingly restored. The seats give a real feel for holiday train travel in Denver's early days. One advantage for really little kids is that it's a fairly short trip. Most kids in that age range (not all) do tire quickly. This museum group deserves our support for all they do to preserve our rail heritage.

Local Santa Trains are sometimes just the usual train dressed up a bit. The cog railway from Manitou Springs up to the top of Pikes Peak is breath taking anytime. They plan to dress up things in holiday garb this year. Mrs. Santa will ride along, and she'll be dressed the part.

We can't forget our Colorado Central region. Every time I go to Canon City to board the Royal Gorge Express I know I'm in for a treat. They have built a Santa's Village about 15 minutes out of town. Elves, gnomes and reindeer all greet the kids.

The engineer cuts loose and everyone welcomes Santa on board. That jolly old elf chats with each kid and reportedly does a good job of listening. A buddy just tried the green chili burger at the lunch counter and pronounced it good. I've always enjoyed the food on that train too.

So, get with the holiday feeling! Book a holiday train ride and you'll be happy.