

Four Moons over Mount Washington

By Katie Dokken

The Mount Washington cog railway that ascends Mount Washington in New Hampshire is known locally as the Railway to the Moon. During the recent LGBMRRC convention I had the joy of riding this interesting and fun cog railway and also finding out that while it may be known as the Railway to the Moon, for those of us in our coach, we will forever refer to it as Four Moons over Mount Washington. More on that later!



This railway has its own distinctively designed engines with tilted boilers and balloon smoke stacks. This is the world's first steam powered mountain cog train (1869) which travels up the world's second steepest railway track and includes grades up to 37%. This is the only railroad in the world built entirely on trestlework.



As we ascended through a well-cut path through the thick forest, our poor little engine belched and bellowed smoke across the mountainside. We made one stop on the way up to refill with water. It takes 1000 gallons of water for the trip to the summit and one ton of coal. No coal used on the way down, since the steam cylinders are used as an air compressor.



We pulled off on a siding once on the way up and once on the way down to let other trains pass us by, going in the opposite directions. Since there is only one track, all trains share, and today 5 trains were on the mountain. Two trains can fit at a time on the siding. A total of 7 trains can use the track at once.

There is one wooden passenger coach per engine with a 70 seat capacity. Each coach has 14 rows of seats, 5 seats per row. Seats are flipped up at the top to face the other way on the way down. Which leads to some interesting soot marks on your clothes! On some of the "steeper" assents (they were ALL steep!), soot rained down on the coach giving free souvenirs to everybody!!

The gauge of the train is 4 feet 8 inches which makes it one half of an inch narrower than standard gauge. The switches which are the most complicated in the world, require 9 separate hand movements to be thrown, Bret our brakeman did it in 21.6 seconds.



Towards the summit the landscaping slowly changes, here rock cairns were scattered about on the barren rock and grass strewn landscape, and a grand panorama of the surrounding Presidential Range forms a breathtaking backdrop.

On the summit, during the few clear days of the year, you can see four states and the Atlantic ocean from the peak. For us, this was not to be. At the top, fog banks rolled through suddenly clearing and just as suddenly nothing could be seen at all. It was a spooky atmosphere, with people appearing and disappearing in front of my eyes. You could be 20 ft from the train and not see it at all. It was easily 30 degrees colder on the summit then down at the base station. The summit falls within the arctic climate where it can snow any day of the year. Mount Washington's elevation is 6288 ft. It is the highest peak in the northeast part of the United States.

After a short 20 minute stop at the summit we again boarded our little wooden coach but facing the other way. During the stop, our brakeman had flipped over the seats so that we were again facing the direction of travel.

The descent down the mountain was much faster than the ascent but hair raising in its jolting, jerking movements as the brakes struggled to hold the coach to the track. The passenger car and the locomotive are never connected during

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this time. This allows the passenger coach brakeman to independently brake the coach. The brakes have to be replaced every 4-5 weeks due to the incredible wear and stress this journey puts on them!!

Shortly after we left the summit on our way down, we were "moonied" by a group of four hikers causing our passenger coach to erupt with laughter. Now we know why this train is called the "Railway to the Moon!" Though we preferred to call it, "Four Moons over Mount Washington."

