

The Magic Behind Our Steam Trains: Walt Disney World Backstage Tour Review

by Jennifer Shorey Arnold, PassPorter Guest Contributor

If you think you may want to add a behind the scenes tour to your next Disney vacation, a good one to take is **The Magic Behind Our Steam Trains Tour**.

This tour is great whether you are a train enthusiast, a Disney enthusiast, or both. For just \$49 per person, you will get a new perspective into the man, Walt Disney, along with having a behind the scenes adventure into the **steam trains of Disney World**.

The Magic Behind Our Steam Trains Tour begins bright and early at 7:30 am at the front gates of the Magic Kingdom, and is scheduled to last for three hours. This start time may be a bit early for some folks, especially since you need to add travel time from your resort, but it is definitely worth the effort. The first thing I did to book our tour was to research the tour online and then call the Walt Disney World tour office (407-WDW-TOUR) to make a reservation. When you call, make sure you inquire about any discounts that may be available. Currently, if you are a Disney Visa Card holder you can receive 20% off the per person price of this tour. Make sure to book early since tours do sell out. At this time, this tour is held six days per week (Monday through Saturday) and the maximum number of participants is twenty per tour. Items to note are that participants must be 10 years of age or older, you must prepay for the tour, and there is a 72 hour cancellation policy. Other good things to remember is that this tour is almost completely outside, so you will want to dress appropriately for the weather, and you need to wear closed-toe shoes because you will be taken into the service area for the trains.

We arrived at Magic Kingdom on a chilly and foggy February morning to find only six other eager guests awaiting the tour guide. The front entrance of the park was quiet and nearly deserted except for a few cast members who were scurrying around prepping everything for opening. A few minutes before 7:30, we were greeted by our charismatic tour guide, Jim from New York, who handed out name badges that displayed a picture of Mickey riding a train. Soon a train arrived at the train station for a photo opportunity, and we were given a brief introduction of the hand signals used every day by the train operators. As we were ushered through the park gates (Magic Kingdom park admission is required), Jim brought us back to the turn of the

twentieth century, explaining **the history and atmosphere that Walt Disney wanted to create with Main Street USA**. He spoke of a simpler time in history and of the excitement of the new innovations in that time period. Slowly we walked through the tunnel and emerged at Main Street USA. The fog was beginning to lift and Main Street was silent and peaceful. For a few precious and fleeting moments we were able to enjoy a nearly deserted Main Street and a spectacular view of Cinderella Castle, knowing that when we returned from our tour the park would be open and the hustle and bustle of the day would be in full swing.

Next, we were escorted into Main Street Station and onto the last few rows of an **awaiting train for our own personal train ride**. We were headed to the backstage section of the park to experience an area that the average guest doesn't see. While on our way, the train stopped for a brief moment for the brakeman to move a manual switch on the tracks, to enable the train to venture into the backstage area. We were off again and within minutes we were in the staging area for the trains, just outside the roundhouse. The roundhouse is a two-story building where the trains are stored, serviced, and receive their daily detailed security checks. Ever wonder where they keep the monorails? They are actually housed in the second floor of the roundhouse.

Standing outside of the roundhouse, Jim gave us a crash course on the various mechanisms of the train along with the history of improvements to the braking system and other parts of the train. While he spoke, we were given a photo opportunity with the train and then we were invited to climb into the cab where we learned even more about the workings of the steam train. We were then treated to a **demonstration on the starting of the oil-fired engine by the engineer**, and soon we watched a pop-off valve test before jumping back onto the train to head back to the public areas of the park. As we rode around the remainder of the 1.5 mile track, we took a quick stop at the Toontown Fair station for the train to fill up at the water tank, and we peered through the fencing of the construction area of the Fantasyland expansion. Again, we were off and completed our circle of the track by pulling back into Main Street Station. Once we arrived, we were given a short rest break and treated to complimentary coffee and bottled water.

Soon the tour resumed and the group followed Jim into the now busy Main Street Station. On one far side of the station, he moved benches to create what he called a turn of the century living room. Here he brought us back in time once again to discuss Walt Disney's deep interest in trains and the history and naming of the four trains that now call the Magic Kingdom home. I don't want to give too much away, but **one fun fact you learn is that two of the trains are in fact twins**

built back-to-back by the manufacturer, Baldwin Locomotive Works. The twins are the No. 1 engine, the Walter E. Disney, and the No. 3 engine, the Roger E. Broggie. The remaining trains are the No. 2, Lilly Belle, and the No. 4, Roy O. Disney. The engines were built in the early twentieth century and used in Mexico by the United Railways of Yucatan. The trains were found and purchased by Disney scouts in 1969 and brought to Florida for restoration. Originally designed to be wood burning, part of the restoration included the engines being reconfigured to handle fuel oil. The trains also received the distinctive look you now see, which brings them in perfect harmony with the atmosphere of Main Street USA.

Although the tour is scheduled for three hours, our **tour lasted until almost noon, close to 4 1/2 hours**, because of the enjoyable conversation. The time flew by and it was so nice to know that Jim didn't have to run off as soon as the tour was scheduled to be completed. At the end of the tour, each participant is treated with a Disney Steam Train Pin. This special pin is only given to tour participants and cannot be purchased anywhere in the park. After the tour, we took a few moments to explore the memorabilia on the first floor of the station, which you can do any time you visit the park. Here you can find photos of Walt Disney with his personal trains, photos of the restoration of the Walt Disney World trains, and plaques devoted to each park train along with other historical memorabilia of trains.

About The Author: Jennifer is a Disney enthusiast and loves to visit Walt Disney World and Disneyland with her husband as often as possible. Since taking their first tour, The Magic Behind Our Steam Trains, in February 2011, the couple has been researching other Disney tours and are looking forward to planning their next Disney trip.

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