

The Last Great Steam Show



One nostalgic night in the early 1990's a group of steam photographers and enthusiasts got together in an English pub and, as the beer began to flow their fantasies took flight. They dreamed of a steam paradise where there were no diesels, at least 500 miles of scenery to match that of The Shap or the Settle and Carlisle tracks. The track would have horseshoe bends, tunnels, viaducts and many loops. Ideally this paradise would be in a cold clime where the steam and smoke would rise like sculptures to hang in the crisp, cold air. There would be passengers and freights, all double headed, and the line would be signaled by semaphores. One wag suggested the biggest steam shed in the world would provide the cherry on top. The evening ended with them all trudging back to their various stations to catch their DMU's home.

Now, the universe works in mysterious ways, for at that very time, a body of serious, sober gentlemen were gathered around a table some 5,000 miles away, discussing actually building something similar.

The Mongolian Autonomous Region was keen to open the Northern Chinese border but was hampered by a mountain range and a lack of money.

They could purchase, virtually new, Chinese QJ 2-10-2 steam locomotives for thirty thousand pounds each, about one tenth of the cost of an equivalent diesel electric locomotive. They could not afford to tunnel right through the mountain but they had to provide a means of getting 2,300 tonne trains over the mountain using gradients of up to 1 in 20. By comparison, the Settle and Carlisle's maximum gradient is 1 in 80.

In May 1990 approval was granted for their ambitious plan. A plan that began to be implemented in May 1991 and culminated in the first steam train traversing the mountain in September 1995.

The 589 mile line from Jining to Tongliao (dubbed the Ji-Tong railway) traverses the spectacular, breath-taking, Jing Peng Pass. The track through the pass has five horseshoe bends, seven major viaducts and seven tunnels. There are no less than seven stations and loops in the pass, many signalled by semaphores and numerous servicing points for the big, powerful QJ's. The line has a fleet of 128 of these engines of which more than 90 are operational. They were all bought second hand from China Rail (CNR) and were built from the late 1950's to the mid 1980's.

In 1996 a French steam enthusiast named Julien Blanc was on a journey through China when he suddenly came across the Jing Peng Pass, "I thought I had died and gone to heaven," he said. He simply could not believe that in today's global village such a discovery could still be made. And so the world became aware of China's little hidden secret.

The climate around the pass ranges from plus 30 degrees in summer to minus 30 degrees in winter. The obvious time to travel there is in winter to capture those billowing castles of white smoke and steam. Getting equipped for the journey is almost more costly than the trip itself. Expect to spend a small fortune on protective clothing, thermal underwear, balaclavas, ski trousers, goggles and arctic strength gloves. At least a dozen spare batteries and a couple of spare cameras are a good investment in a climate where a photographer's exposed skin will suffer frostbite in less than a minute. A warm pouch in which to keep the batteries and cameras is also a good idea. The area is prone to biting gales, which are notorious for causing the exhaust to obscure the trains. Yet on calm days the sights and sounds raise goose bumps and send shivers down spines. There are plenty of excellent spots to photograph from, many require a stiff hike but for the less athletic, roadside vantage points also provide spectacular views.

Before setting eyes on the Jing Peng Pass I had seen all the steam videos, read all the steam books and been to most of the remaining steam tracks of the world but none of these could have prepared me for this experience. It is a spine-tingling, awe-inspiring, full frontal assault on your visual and aural senses as the QJ's emit their regular, deep-throated, thumping bark as they drag their loads upwards in scenery that virtually defies description.

The mountain pass is 28 miles long, that is, as the tracks run and not as the crow flies. You can stand on a hilltop in the pass and watch a train for up to forty minutes as it snakes back and forth. And not only one train, but up to four can be seen at once, one eastbound, one westbound and two waiting in loops for the others to cross. At times you think there are up to three separate railways as a westbound train travels east and the eastbound train travels west while the next moment both appear to be going in the same direction. Almost all the trains are pulled by double headed QJ 2-10-2's. This is truly the last great steam show on earth.

At the one end of the pass, in an isolated little town called Daban I was astonished to find no less than 35 steam locomotives in one shed, all in various stages of preparation for their next journey. There are no less than six engine sheds along the route. The mind boggling thought is that, ten years ago, there were no tracks and no trains here.

Today, no less than fifteen steam hauled freight trains traverse the pass in daylight. The freights are all approximately 50 wagons long and consist mainly of coal wagons, oil tankers and mixed goods vehicles. All trains end with a guard's van that has much in common with the old BR brakevan.

Not only freights but a daily passenger service uses the pass in both directions. As our train pulled into a loop in the pass there were two double headed, steam hauled freights waiting for us. Where else on earth could this still be possible?

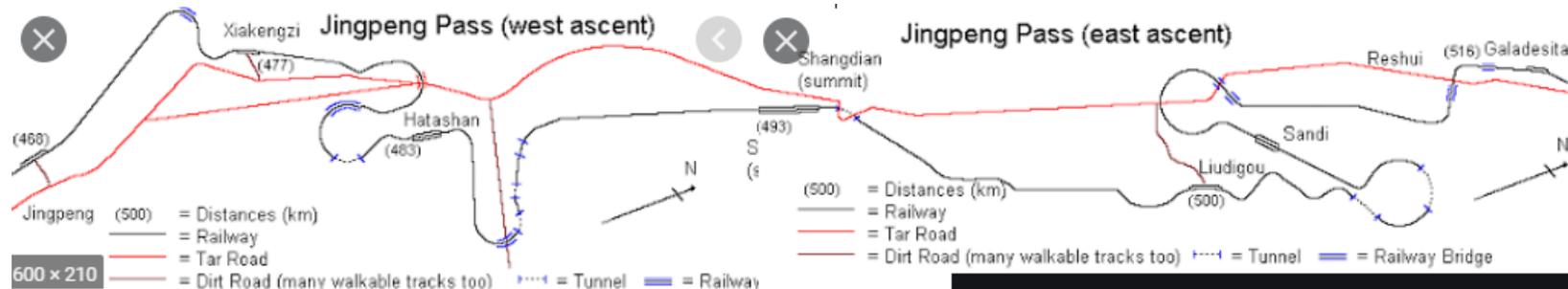
Photographers can now virtually range freely in the area and this last great steam show is bringing in much-needed foreign currency to an area which up till a few years ago boasted only "a small hot-spring" in the hills. Japanese, British, German and American tourists come in such droves that the brand new Railway Hotel at Reshui was built specifically to cope with the stream of steam tourists.

The railway has also been a commercial success. The QJ's proved to be an extremely shrewd buy for the Mongolians for they are returning availability figures of which diesel engineers would be proud. Freight traffic has doubled to ten million tonnes since 1996 and passenger figures have risen from 193,000 to 350,000. There are plans for 46 new stations along the whole Ji-Tong line, raising the total to 101.

Alas, since a short while ago the pass is no longer all steam as two high speed passenger DMU's have been introduced to the line and two DF4 diesel electric locomotives have proved that they can do what the steamies do. In fact they can haul 35 per cent more load for the same timings.

As I write this, China Rail, who services the QJ engines, have advised the railway that they will be terminating the overhauling and maintenance of the QJ's from this year. The Chinese are obviously trying to twist the Mongolian's arms by claiming that they have "run out of spare parts" even though they have only recently withdrawn half of their own remaining 1,100 steam loco's and were still building new class SY 2-8-2's until three years ago.

So steam enthusiasts, take out your credit cards, buy your arctic kit, pack your bags, and book your seats on the upcoming October tour to ensure that you experience the last of the world's great steam wonders before this too disappears into a haze of diesel-electric exhaust fumes.



Ray Hattingh