



July 2020 Update

Covid-19

Mixed messages on the corona front with parts of Beijing, Melbourne and Leicester back in lockdown. Meanwhile, the EU is accepting visitors from China, (as long as China reciprocates) as well as so-called "safe travel destinations" Algeria, Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, Montenegro, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, Serbia, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia and Uruguay. The UK is automatically included apparently along with Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. The UK will announce on Monday which countries you can visit without having to quarantine for 14 days when you return. However, nothing at the moment allows me to plan trips 6 months ahead let alone in the next few months. UK pubs and heritage railways are set to re-open for pre-booked but not for casual visits which takes most of the fun out of it. It looks like a visit to see the East German narrow gauge would be far more fun and more like normal than a visit to a British preserved line.

e-Book Linesiding Tours Part 1 2011-2015 and Part 2 2016-2020

This lockdown project is nearing the end. The project was multi-purpose - to focus attention on the plight of heritage railways and encourage donations, to provide a record of the 22 tours I have organised over 10 years with contributions from tour participants and to give me something to do! Part 1 is available but I am still receiving submissions for Part 2 and it will probably take a couple of weeks to complete the first version of this. When finished, I will offer Part 2 to those who may be interested in return for a pledge to support a heritage railway of their choice. Those who have already made a pledge for Part 1 will not be asked to pledge again for Part 2 (although they can if they wish) but will be given access to Part 2.

Opportunities to travel again?

I'm looking at this from a UK perspective but we are expecting to shortly get the green light for travel to certain countries where the covid-19 infection rate is as good as or better than our own. The first people looking to take advantage of this will be people desperate for a traditional package summer holiday at a beach destination. It looks like they may be able to do this sometime in July.

Meanwhile UK enthusiasts will find heritage lines in England re-opening but with very tight control on travel involving pre-booking on specific trains - see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-53219312>

for an idea of how far from normal this is likely to be. For those who don't know the NYMR - a long scenic section from Goathland to Levisham and the section from Grosmont to Whitby over the national network will have no NYMR service. It's not at all clear if a normal service will be resumed in 2020.

Given this very restricted re-opening in the UK, British enthusiasts may be tempted to head to Europe where heritage train travel may be a bit more normal. The Harz Schmalspurbahn is probably the first that comes to mind. Things already seem a bit more normal there with just the obligation to wear a face mask on trains. The timetable is also reasonably normal:

<https://www.hsb-wr.de/Fahrplan-Tarife/Fahrplaene/Sommerfahrplan/>

It's just a question of getting there and for that we are waiting for a new 'traffic light' system (on Monday?) to tell us which countries we can travel to without quarantine on return. Germany is expected to be green rather than amber or red.

Travel to more exotic destinations (China?) and even some European destinations such as Romania and Bosnia are not yet possible without accepting 14 days UK quarantine on return.

Romania

My contact in Romania at Carpathian Travel Center emailed last month to let me know that they were back in business and that tourist railways are running again and hotels had re-opened. While I suspect that life has not completely returned to normal in Romania, I had to tell her that UK residents were not yet able to travel abroad and I felt it was not possible to restart plans for an end of July visit in 2020. I am now considering a combined Bosnia, Serbia and Romania trip in 2021. Dates would need to be in the Romanian tourist railway operating season (May - September). We should be able to offer Bosnia (Tuzla area - Bukinje, Dubrave, Sikulje (standard gauge steam) and Banovici and Oskova (narrow and standard gauge steam). While there are still elements of 'real steam' near Tuzla, we would arrange augmented shunting and charters to make the visit worthwhile. In Serbia, Mokra Gora can offer narrow gauge steam charters from Visegrad (inside Bosnia) to Mokra Gora and Mokra Gora up the Sargan Eight. We may decide to concentrate on Visegrad - Mokra Gora as there would be no regular traffic apart from our charter. The Sargan Eight sees frequent diesel tourist trains which makes run pasts difficult but (see Elmar's photo in the upcoming Linesiding Tours Part 2) spectacular results could be achieved with careful planning. Majda and Dario our Bosnian guides would be in charge until here but from there on, our Romanian minibus could pick us up to visit all of the working Romanian tourist lines. This would likely result in a 15-day tour starting in Sarajevo and ending in Bucharest or Cluj Napoca.

China

I have had limited contact with Jun in China. He let me know in May that they were back at work and I've read that some Chinese domestic tourism has restarted. However, the new infections in south west Beijing and the chance of further local outbreaks makes it unlikely that enthusiast visits will take place in

2020. Some may be keen to get to Sandaoling before the expected end of steam there this year. I've emailed Jun to see if he has any news from the lines we are interested in. If I receive anything before posting this, I'll include it here. I'm working on the supposition that China Narrow Gauge III will happen at a similar time in 2021 to the planned 2020 tour (September). That month was chosen so that reed and cement railways would be working. As they make up only 2 lines in the planned tour, it might be possible to consider a tour earlier than September 2021 or possibly add an extra short tour in spring and keep China NG III in September 2021. It will all depend on the state of covid-19 and progress in finding a vaccine and drugs that help those who get badly ill.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is advising British nationals against all non-essential international travel at this time. ...

China has suspended entry to foreign nationals with visas issued before 27 March.

<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/china>

Java

Wilson has found a video clip of the new way of operating at Purwodadi mill, the last conventional real steam railway operation in Indonesia. The operation is now a combined tractor (push across the road) and steam (push into the mill yard) operation and in the clip just one loco No. 16 is in use with diesel No. 2 on the empties.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6nC0PDfl-8&feature=youtu.be>

Elsewhere in Java, Asembagus mill has reopened but without a railway as, I believe, did Sragi. Semboro did not use its fireless in 2019 but Pagottan did. There are now 5 mills with diesel line work - Olean, Wringinanom, Semboro, Jatiroto and Kedawung but Olean is marginal and Wringinanom track is terrible. A trip to see this would not need to go much west of Surabaya which concentrates much of the remaining railway interest in the east of Java from Madiun (conventional and fireless steam shunting) to Jember. I have discussed combining Sumatran oil palm railways with Javan sugar mill railways with Aditya as likely local organiser. Without covid-19, we would no doubt be discussing this further.

Let's see what August brings.

John Raby
1 July 2020

