

Sandaoling - Day 8 - Saturday 15 December 2018
Half day at Sandaoling + Overall Tour Comments



JS8167 had been standby loco but was in service early on during shift change.





Prior to shift change, the second of the two working coal trains returned to Dongboli.



A loco heads from Dongboli to the Workshop. It either returned after picking up supplies or it was switched for another loco. Given the fast turn around, I suspect the former.



John Athersuch, Jun (Liu Xue Jun), me and driver Mr Xie at the crossing between Dongboli and Kenkou.



Our last train leaving the pit was hauled by JS8197.

We left Sandaoling (no security check on leaving), used the expressway to Hami (driver documents check at toll gate en route) and checked in at Hami Station (security departing Hami easier than 18 months ago). So ended my first and likely only winter trip to Sandaoling. Temperatures ranged from -7 to -20 while we were there.

Overall Comments

Compared with my last visit 18 months ago, the only area which was no longer open for photography is the area including the two crossings east of Nanzhan yard. There is a security check point at the main road level crossing on the Yijing - Erjing branch which makes this area off limits.

The railway had just recently reduced coal traffic (early December) until the end of the Chinese year. This is explained as having already met their annual quota so they reduce activity to protect their 'safety bonus'. (As we all know the safest railway is one that doesn't run trains.)

I do still question going to Sandaoling in the depth of winter. It boils down to three negatives; 1. the cold can make it hard to enjoy the spectacle, 2. there may be fewer trains in December and January (as this year) because quotas have been met for the year and 3. there are few daylight hours (9 am - 6 pm) and long nights. On the other hand, if you want good steam effects, the only other reasonable time is on the margins of winter (November and February). February is normally around Chinese New Year and Lantern Festival which makes domestic travel difficult even if the railway continues almost as normal. With 21 December the shortest day, early November is 51 days before this and mid February is around 56 days after.

And then of course, is the question of whether there is sufficient of interest left to go again. Two locos at work at Dongboli with a third loco which may be rotated or do a bit of shunting (plus 3-4 more at Nanzhan that are more difficult to observe and have less interesting work) is a reduction on previous years especially if we look back to the west side spoil tipping or further back to steam hauling coal from Nanzhan to China Rail. As has been observed, you can see more steam locos in use on the Harz railway in Germany in winter and more likely to be in the snow.

The new security measures are a third factor. Getting to Sandaoling now involves a police check at your port of entry (Hami Airport or Hami Station) that will approve your continuation to Sandaoling after you have been documented and a central police office has been consulted by mobile phone. The same happens again on a local level when you enter Sandaoling. As long as you remain inside the Sandaoling Security Zone, you are fine. Leaving is also not a problem. Re-entering requires another check. I wouldn't recommend a first time visitor trying this alone without a guide. Old hands, as Ameling and Martn have recently shown, can still visit solo without problems. A prior booking at a Sandaoling hotel may be required to satisfy the security checks.

Inside 'the Zone', a ridiculous amount of work has gone into protecting buildings. It started with petrol stations but now includes almost every public building or housing estate. There are black and yellow bollards everywhere with more being added, security gates, flashing red and blue lights everywhere, new or higher railings and lots of razor-wire toppings. The streets have police vehicles patrolling and parked up at strategic locations such as the bus station. There are security arches and scanners at hotels and some

restaurants and a dedicated security person in a stab-proof vests, hard hat and wooden club in every commercial establishment. All roads now have new signs every 100 metres or so denoting the exact location and giving a police number to call if you see anything suspicious. It's unbelievably way over the top given the level of threat and the incidents that we are told about outside Xinjiang. And you are no longer allowed to film people or street scenes apart from those that may appear in photos near the railway and the steam locos. I remember someone explaining before my first visit that unlike Shibaxi, there weren't a lot of other things to photograph at Sandaoling but there were markets, street food, bread ovens, steamers and lamb barbecues on the street, ethnic restaurants, old mud-brick buildings and local non-Han people. Now, whatever there might be is off limits for photography. It may be just a personal, subjective impression but I saw far fewer Uighur people than on previous trips and I wonder why.

Would I go back? Possibly but most only likely if I was leading a group where I would be able to support them getting there and re-assure them that if hard working industrial steam locos doing a real job is what they want, it's still possible to see and enjoy that at Sandaoling (in November 2019?) I'll wait to see if there is sufficient interest in a final look before it all ends (most likely) sometime in 2020.

In addition to a possible Sandaoling tour in early November 2019, I am also running a China Narrow Gauge Tour in March - April 2019. This tour will visit ng railways in Sichuan, Chongqing, Hunan, Henan and Heilongjiang. Along the way, I expect a steam charter at Yujian (Henan) and a steam tourist train at Huanan (Heilongjiang). This is not specifically a steam tour but will have an interesting variety for anyone interested in the surviving Chinese narrow gauge lines.

John Raby

