



TransWorld boards the legendary Winter Park Train—a one-of-a-kind means to the mountains.

Traffic sucks. There's no way around it—or through it, sometimes. When you live on Colorado's front range (Denver, Boulder, et cetera), a day of riding can mean sour hours of sitting still on I-70 West instead of sweet ones making turns. Forget miles per hour, we're talking inches per minute.

However, this story is all aboard the Ski Train—an epic Colorado tradition that's been carrying riders from the streets of Denver to the base of Winter Park for 68 years. This ride is all about comfort, camaraderie, and community—with a guarantee of no road rage or car exhaust.

Sprawled across the bench seats on an epic December morning are Winter Park loc Pat Milbery, J.J. Johnson, Bev Vuilleumier (that's vee-um-yay), Greg Hahn, and photographer Christy Chaloux. They're backlit by the downtown Denver skyline reflecting the rising sun as we pull out of the Mile High City's historic Union Station. The skies are blue, and there's fresh pow ahead. It's a good day to ride.

But first things first. Each of the train's seventeen cars has a host—and ours, Rob Carpender, is brewing us coffee. Carpender started riding the

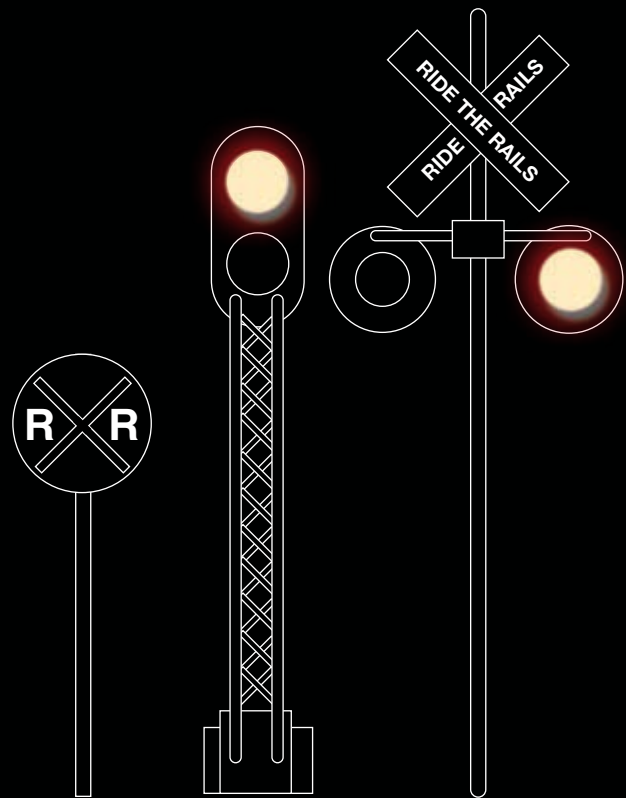
Ski Train in 1965 when he was four years old and probably has 400 rides to his credit. His mom was riding it way back in 1949, and his kids (who are with him today) are third-generation passengers. This guy has some classic stories.

Greg and Bev are scoping the trail map, while Pat tells us about Winter Park's Dark Territory—an area of the Lower Rail Yard Park that has controlled access and contains some of the mountain's largest and most technical features. "Controlled access" means you have to shell out twenty bucks and watch a safety video before entering, but Milbery nails the upside: "No gapers. You don't have to worry about getting snaked, and the jumps are so perfect."

J.J.'s snapping shots out the windows as we pass from real urban railyards through suburban sprawl on into foothill prairies and begin snaking up into the Rockies. There's Boulder down below, and then we see rock and peaks and trees and snow and tunnels—29 of them—along with an occasional one stop-sign town. I walk to the café car for an egg and cheese bagel sandwich laughing at the thought of an I-70 traffic jam. This is without a doubt a sick way to access the mountains.

Words by Jeremy V. Jones

Photos by Christy Chaloux



JJ Johnson, full cruise mode.



Greg Hahn got some extra pillows for the price of the train fare. Bonus!



Ryan Thompson, over the boulder melon holder.

How The West Was Fun

The Old West was won by cowboys and cattlemen, but it was trains that populated it—bringing the masses from big Eastern cities into the vast expanses of the West, including the mountains. And back in the day, skiers were the ones pushing the limits to forge a snow-centric lifestyle. As early as the 1930s, Denverites were riding trains to West Portal—the western side of the 6.2-mile Moffat Tunnel and the site of today's Winter Park Resort. Forget liftlines—everything was backcountry then.

A ski club cut the first downhill trail in Winter Park in 1933—one of Colorado's first—and named it Mary Jane after a local mining claim. It became such a popular spot that Denver's parks manager convinced the city to buy the land and build a half-mile rope tow. Shouldn't every city own a snowpark?

An institution was born a week before Christmas

1947, when the first official Rio Grande Ski Train rolled out of Denver loaded with members of the youth-oriented Eskimo Ski Club. Over the next 26 years, thousands of groms rode the rails to Winter Park and kept the Ski Train running.

A man named Jim Bain was one of those winter-loving kids, and since 1990 he's been president and general manager of the Ski Train (he's also the unofficial ride king—45 rides a year for eighteen seasons running equals more than 800 round-trips.) "You can imagine a whole train full of junior high kids," he says about the good old days. "Throwing oranges and having food fights. All the lights would go out in the car, and there was a lot of making out."

By the 60s, the scene was a teenage rager on wheels. "Rowdyism" it was called. Alcohol flowed from Thermoses, an occasional grom climbed on top of the moving train, fire extinguishers were set off, and vandalism got serious. Somebody pulled the

e-brake at 40 mph, stopping the whole train and doing major damage to that car. Cops started riding along. "It must've really calmed things down," we think to ourselves as we look around. "Years ago you'd have a conga line going," Bain says. "Now half the people are asleep."

Overall it's a pretty mellow but good-time vibe. And comfortable—it's like riding a couch to go snowboarding. That's thanks to billionaire businessman Philip Anschutz. When he bought the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad in the 80s (in order to lay fiber-optic cables along the rails for a little company he owned called Qwest Communications), he got the then-struggling Ski Train, too. Amazing what big money can do. By replacing the old, worn-out train cars with plush historic ones and adding features like the lounge and café cars, Anschutz's dollars completely revived the Ski Train.

Snowboard Train

I tried to get Jim Bain to change the name to Snowboard Train, but he wasn't buying—even though longtime volunteer and snowboarder Scott Donheo (he still has an original Burton Air in his closet) has seen more boarders coming aboard. "I've probably seen it go from 95-percent skiers to 60-percent skiers/40-percent snowboarders," he says. Good enough for us—we were calling it the Snowboard Train anyway.

Whatever you're riding on the hill, the Snowboard Train is all about the snow-loving community. Milbery's making friends left and right on the ride up—with train volunteers, with other passengers, with kids. He's maximizing the social scene. And when we all finally step off the train at Winter Park, we're about 40 yards from the lifts. No parking lots—just 3,078 acres of in-bounds with 3,060 feet of vertical waiting to be explored.

"Somebody pulled the e-brake at 40 mph, stopping the whole train and doing major damage to that car."



Rail Steez

A ride in coach costs 49 dollars round-trip, and “club” runs 74 dollars (think first class with bigger, cushier seats, a breakfast buffet, and après snacks and drinks). Our crew scored the “presentation retreat” car—complete with flat-panel TV, sound system, and lots of space.

If you and 70 friends want to do the Shred Train in full style, ride the back three luxury cars. For a mere \$10,000 you can feel like a rail baron of the Old West lounging in the fully furnished, mahogany-paneled living room on rails or taking in the 360-degree alpine views from the Vista Dome’s glassed-in upper deck. You can always get some fresh air on the rear platform, too.

Trains roll out of Denver at 7:15 a.m. and drop you at Winter Park by 9:30 a.m. Departure home is 4:15 p.m., and you’re back to Union Station by about 6:30 p.m. You can start riding these rails in December and catch a weekend ride through January. February adds Fridays to the schedule, and in March you get Thursday through Sunday options.

Get your tickets and more info at skitrain.com



Greg Hahn, conducting a frontside spin. All aboard!



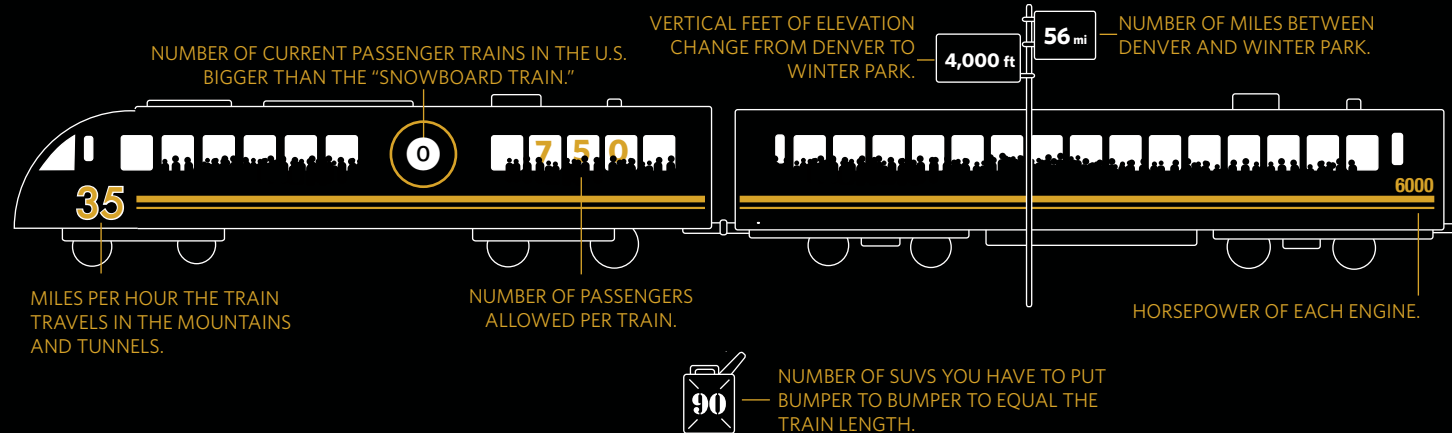
Pat Milbery said “Yes,” to this bridge to nowhere.



Meghann O’Brien pins it and spins it, she doesn’t want to be a “runner.”



Snowboard Train By The Numbers



Winter Park is Colorado’s fourth largest resort. Mary Jane has the steeps, powder stashes, and some solid hucking potential—but watch out for the “best bumps in Colorado.” For trees, head up to the Parsenn Bowl. Scout the Vasquez Cirque to drop some cliffs. And then there are the four parks. Winter Park has stepped it up in recent years by sharpening its focus on making quality jumps and jibs (the resort has scored a spot in TransWorld’s Top Ten Parks list for several years running, and has hosted the TransArms). Dark Territory is the crown jewel, but Rail Yard serves up exact replicas of four urban Denver standouts, including the State Capitol steps. Yeah, practice here and you’ll soon be ready to poach the real thing in town.

Round-Trip Ticket

Our crew makes a casual day of dodging crowds, lapping parks, and building kickers into the trees. By 3:45 we can hear the train horn echoing off the peaks. The ride home rolls at 4:15, and in the words of a train volunteer, “You don’t want to be a runner”—the occasional passenger left trackside.

If the ride up is early-morning anticipation, the ride down is satisfied gloat. “You feel like tons of people have probably had amazing days and ridden the train home with friends, just like we’re doing,” says J.J. “It’s like we went back in time a little bit.”

As we cruise toward Denver, we can’t help but wonder, why isn’t there a rail line serving Colorado’s high country (resorts like Vail or Breckenridge)? Why not a light-rail line from Denver to Summit County, or L.A. to Mammoth Mountain, or Salt Lake City to Park

City? The idea of a train into the Colorado Rockies has been debated for years, but at this point the cost would be *huge*. However, maybe it’s worth it to pay a little extra for this laid-back, slope-serving social scene that’ll reduce traffic headaches and carbon emissions. It’s like Pat says, as snowboarders, we always have to be conscious of our surroundings—whether it’s searching for possibilities in urban environments or looking for jumps and cliffs in the backcountry. So why not revive a little dose of consciousness with this form of transportation?

The train has been around a long time, and its passenger cars are kept running by a devoted crew willing to salvage parts that aren’t even made anymore. Who knows? Maybe part of its progression is to bridge a historic past with an environmentally conscious future. Either way, it’s a sweet way to ride. ☺