

Ontario by Rail

Rail passengers get to visit isolated communities on an autumn itinerary that makes tracks for the scenic wilderness north of Superior



High Falls on the Onaping River, near Sudbury, above, is also known as A.Y. Jackson Falls because the Group of Seven artist once painted it surrounded by autumn glory. Right, Craig MacTavish and Daryl Adair hang out on the front of old Engine 6077, on exhibit at Capreol's Northern Ontario Railroad Museum and Heritage Centre.

CATHERINE GEORGE PHOTOS



Superior colours

Trip aboard Budd car the highlight of tour

Stops made at isolated northern communities

CATHERINE GEORGE
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SUDBURY—All aboard folks, we're making tracks for the autumn forests of northern Ontario. And, though it's impossible to predict the whims of Mother Nature, with the right conditions, this year's foliage might just be the prettiest we've seen in years.

A group of 38 of us made the five-day rail trip to the Near North last October. Themed "Superior Colours of Ontario" the annual tour is offered by Winnipeg-based Rail Travel Tours whose owner, Daryl T. Adair, has had a passion for trains since he was knee-high to a hopper. And, despite the hassles of operating a rail tour company for the past four years, his fascination with trains has never waned. In fact, he rates them right up there with his other big passion, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

By 1997, Daryl had saved enough to travel around the world by rail. Since then he has authored the *Guide to Canada's Railway Heritage, Museums, Excursions and Attractions*.

Once our tour group, mostly from southern Ontario, got to know each other, we found we were a mixed bag — rail buffs who knew all there is to know about engines and the mechanically-challenged tagalongs like myself, simply looking for an excuse to escape the city. But, regardless of who knew a locomotive from a caboose, we all agreed that we enjoy train travel.

Our itinerary called for us to do the Toronto-Capreol segment aboard VIA Rail's sleek silver and blue Canadian, which makes the transcontinental trip between Toronto and Vancouver three times a week. Between Sudbury and White River, we travelled on VIA's two-car train 185, known as the Lake Superior service, and better known locally as the "Budd car" after the Budd Co. that built it. Mother Nature didn't provide the leaf peepers in the group with the best of colour shows but most felt the two days aboard the Budd were the highlight.

But, first things first:

We boarded the Canadian at Toronto's Union Station on a crisp October morning. Rolling past the green farmland of southern Ontario, the Canadian quietly wound its way north, rounding the eastern edge of Lake Simcoe. The first signs of Ontario's autumn glory became evident as we passed through the forests and skirted the lakes of Muskoka where maple, birch and sumac had made the transformation from subtle summer greens to the bril-



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Above, left to right, rail passengers stretch their legs in front of the general store at Biscotasing, once home to Grey Owl; conductor Jimmy Cockburn, centre, stands on rail track in front of Budd car; and right, engineer Phillip Morin at the controls. Photo at left is of VIA's Lake Superior service, known locally as the Budd car.



liant reds, fiery oranges and golds of autumn, a Technicolor show that many passengers watched from the glass-domed viewing car against a backdrop of cobalt-blue lakes and the rugged grey of the Canadian Shield.

It was just after 4 p.m. when we dis-

embarked at the town of Capreol, a railroad hub and home to the Northern Ontario Railroad Museum and Heritage Centre. Its extensive collection is housed in Prescott Park and is dedicated to the settlement and the historical impact of the railroad on the region. On

exhibit outside the museum includes an historical wooden caboose and CN steam locomotive 6077. A visit to the museum is all part of the package on the annual "Superior Colours" tour.

After a turkey dinner with all the trimmings at Capreol's M&R Grill, we were bused the 40 km to Sudbury. A two-night stay afforded us plenty of time to explore the Big Nickel, as Sudbury is known. An attractive city, it's site of the much-touted Science North and the new Dynamic Earth exhibit, which takes visitors on an underground tour of the Inco Chasm.

An evening highlight of the Sudbury visit was an historical presentation by James Cockburn who serves as conductor on VIA's Lake Superior service (the Budd) and who has been around railroads for most of his life. Jimmy is full of stories, particularly of the days when Sudbury was a major passenger hub on the Canadian Pacific mainline.

We joined Jimmy on the Budd car next morning for the full-day excursion to White River. The Budd does the return trip three times a week, following the Spanish River, and can literally stop on a dime, picking up passengers who flag it down — fishermen with canoes, hunters with a week's worth of supplies, local residents like Sally and Joe transporting their pet turtle to town for the winter.

The 380-metre tall Inco smokestack dominates the skyline as the train passes through the Sudbury basin, 100 km wide and 15 km deep. The crater was formed about two billion years ago when a massive asteroid slammed into Earth's crust, creating one of the world's richest deposits of nickel. On the outer edge of the basin, engineer Phillip Morin slows the Budd so that we can photograph High Falls on the Onaping River.

We drop off two hunters at Windy Lake Provincial Park and, to our amazement, out of the bush comes a World War II amphibious duck vehicle to transport them across the lake. We make a stop at Biscotasing General Store that stocks everything from beer to bullets. The former fur trading point was once home to Archie Belaney, better known as Grey Owl.

We roll on past old lumbering communities like Sultan, Kormak, Cartier and Nemegos, whose claim to fame is being the site of Canada's most remote phone booth.

Jimmy has been on the Sudbury-White River run for 30 years now and knows every inch of every mile of the route (yes, it's still miles in railroad language). And, the stories he can tell.

At Mile 107, known as the Bermuda Triangle to railroaders, Jimmy tells a story that's been on the "cold case files" since 1957 when a locomotive engineer and two railroaders were dropped off at a camp never to be seen again. Another unsolved mystery of the Triangle involved an engineer whose camp was set afire in the 1940s. Investigators found him dead from a bullet to the head.

By 2:30 p.m. we're at Chapleau, exploring Centennial Park with its historic steam locomotive No. 5433. The world's largest nature reserve, the 81,000-hectare Chapleau Game Reserve, is on the outskirts of the town. Now, who knew that?

We pass through forests of tamarack, pine, poplar and birch and enjoy the passing scenery — lovely Lake Windermere, named by an Englishman homesick for his favourite English lake.

We arrive late at White River, the end of the line. At the halfway point between Toronto and Winnipeg, the town's most famous citizen is Winnie the Pooh. Mayor Angelo Bazzoni is waiting at the station to greet us and transport us to the community centre where the ladies of the local Harmony Club have kept a hot supper waiting.

Where, but in the North, could you find hospitality like that?

★ This year's Superior Colours of Northern Ontario tour departs Sept. 30. Cost from Toronto is \$695 per person, based on double occupancy.

Rail Travel Tours, Box 44, 123 Main St., Winnipeg, Man. R3C 1A3, call 204-897-9551, toll-free 1-866-704-3528, www.railtraveltours.com.



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