

RailCruising – Mike Brown

On a recent trip to New Zealand I had the luck to stumble across a unique rail experience. Driving along near Rotorua, I spotted a sign advertising what appeared to be a small car sitting on rail tracks with the title RailCruising. I did not have time to investigate that day but was intrigued. The next day we had some free time so I backtracked to the sign and followed the arrows. After about 8Km we came across a small town called Mamaku with a railway track and a station with a number of “cars” lined up. It turned out that we had stumbled across the Mamaku Express RailCruising Experience.



The Station at Mamaku



All aboard

The Rotorua railway was planned in 1877 to bring tourist to view the Pink and White Terraces by the shores of Lake Rotorua. At the time, the terraces were often referred to as the 8th wonder of the world. Construction was started in 1881 by the Thames Valley and Rotorua Railway Company. However disaster struck in 1886 when Mt. Tarawera erupted, burying the terraces forever. Unfortunately the railway was still 49km short of Rotorua when the eruption took place. Not surprisingly the Company swiftly gave up on the venture. However Rotorua still had other attractions, large geyser fields and the lake itself, so despite this disaster the line was taken over by the government and was eventually finished in 1894. A couple of branch lines were added, the section between Puaruru and Rotorua becoming the *Rotorua Branch* line. The branch line was 3ft gauge and was primarily used for forestry and livestock. Train loads were limited by the climb up the Tarukenga Bank west of Rotorua, although most of the heavy loads were being taken down the line. The climb from the lake shore to Mamaku had considerable stretches of a 1:35 gradient (even steeper than the new club track!). Over time the line fell into disuse and it was finally closed in 2001. Although sections of the main line were ripped up, the branch line was mothballed.

It stayed that way until a guy called Neill Oppatt had the inspiration to open up the line as a tourist attraction. However this was not to be a heritage railway but something new. After much development work the RailCruising operation began in November 2011. The line now takes fully automated petrol electric four seat self drive hybrid railcars. The concept is that up to a dozen cars set off from the Mamaku station to Tarukenga, a distance of about 10km. They leave one at a time, separated by about 250 metres. Each car runs automatically controlled by sensors at track level. Speeding up, slowing down and braking is all controlled by the vehicle. Generally the speed is regulated to 20km/h, but occasionally it automatically slows down to negotiate crossings. The passengers do have a sort of handbrake for emergencies, but in practice this is only used to fine tune the stopping point at the station. The trip from Mamaku is pretty much all downhill, and is powered by the batteries. On arriving at Tarukenga the vehicle is move manually onto a small turntable and is rotated through 180 deg. ready for the return journey. As the climb back is pretty steep, a small petrol engine is started and is used in conjunction with the battery for the return journey.



The plush interior (note "handbrake").



The car in front leaves the station.

Fortunately we arrived about 20min before the next trip was to depart and there was a spare car available (a good job as only 3 trips leave each day!). The railcars had certainly had a lot of thought put into their design and getting into them was easy enough. We had some simple instructions about the use of the emergency radio, while we watched the car in front trundling off into the distance. Then it was just a matter of letting the handbrake off and away we went. It was a pretty surreal experience sitting in a small rail mounted vehicle with no controls whatsoever. I felt like it should have a steering wheel or a throttle or a "proper" brake. However the vehicle accelerated smoothly up to speed and we soon felt totally relaxed as we cruised along. The line passes through the Dansey Scenic Reserve, so the views were excellent, and being electric powered it was pretty quiet as well (although the electric setup was mainly used for regenerative braking as the line is pretty steep). A commentary ran throughout the journey. Although we could have turned it off, it had a lot of information about the history of the line and the scenery. It was a weird feeling the vehicle slowing down and speeding up as we approached crossings, but it always felt totally safe. Eventually we saw the Tarukenga Station coming into view. The car slowed to a crawl and a simple pull on the handbrake stopped us directly in line with the unloading steps. Now we could have some additional entertainment watching the other cars arriving. As the passengers disembarked, the station handler pushed the cars to the small turntable, rotated them and moved them down the line to line them up for the return journey. On the return we climbed on board and the petrol engine was started by the station handler. The return journey was just as smooth, with just the hum of a well silenced petrol engine. The total time was about 1 ½ hrs and I have to say the whole trip was thoroughly enjoyable.



The view from the cab



A car being turned on the turntable.

Congratulations to Neil and his wife Jane Oppatt who have had the vision and hard work to create something really different. If you are ever lucky enough to visit Rotorua, be sure not to miss this great attraction.

P.S. Opening in 2014 is the section of line from Tarukenga to Rotorua. However this section is mainly flat so the railcars are going to be pedal powered!