

Supporters plan train service from Barstow to outpost



The Kelso Flyer sits at the Kelso Depot visitors center. The Kelso Flyer was a passenger excursion with six vintage cars and an Amtrak engine.

1 of 2



By DUG BEGLEY | The Press-Enterprise

Published: 25 October 2010 12:58 PM

Photo Gallery: Destination Kelso

When the Kelso Flyer left the train station in Barstow and passed wild canyons, towering sand dunes and rocky mountain ranges on its journey into the heart of the East Mojave, it carried people packed with expectations.

The train picked up speed leaving the station, and riders pressed their faces to the glass. Some were looking to see something spectacular in the undisturbed desert, while others sought affirmation that there's an untapped market for rail trips here.

RELATED

[Supporters plan train service from Barstow to outpost](#)

[Train can't be only selling point](#)

[Kelso Depot has own story, photo exhibit](#)

ON THE WEB

[Kelso Depot map](#)

[National Park Service - Kelso Depot](#)

For the one-time trip earlier this month from Los Angeles to Kelso, a historic rail stop in the Mojave National Preserve, Amtrak loaned a locomotive and two cars, and train buffs provided four vintage cars to carry people on the first passenger trip into the East Mojave since 1997. Promoters hoped the train, with its load of public officials, media and train fans, would build interest – and financial support – for their idea to offer regular, one-day tourist trips to Kelso.

"We did it; we pulled it off," said Carol Randall, one of the trip's organizers, clutching a handrail above her head as the train jostled, picking up speed across the flat land.

Randall is one of a loosely organized group that includes the Barstow Chamber of Commerce, park conservationists and desert boosters that put together the Kelso Flyer trip Oct. 17.

Their coalition has disparate goals – to bring overnight tourists to Barstow, the main departure point for the trip; to show people the wild beauty of the desert and why it needs to be protected; and to bring to life the region's railroading history.

Old men in overalls and engineer's caps pointed at markers along the route to Kelso, clocking the train's speed.

In the 1956 dining car two sections back, a youngster, 5 or 6, stood on the seat and peered out the window as the train breezed past tanks and Humvees stored on railcars at a Marine base in Barstow.

Linda Slater, a park ranger with the U.S. Forest Service, led a discussion during the two-hour journey in the second car, taking riders on a trip back to when rail cars like these transported riders throughout Southern California. Past the same dry, flat lands that border Barstow.

"This is wonderful," said Jeanette Hayhurst, a member of the committee pushing for daily train service, as the train sped through the remote desert. "You're not going to be able to see this in a car."

Gaining momentum

On a platform just behind the diesel Amtrak engine that reeked of diesel fuel, visitors crowded and tried to keep their hair from getting too mussed by the wind.

What some thought was rain was actually water spitting off the sides of the locomotive: condensation from the water-cooled engine.

Riders on the Kelso Flyer, as the train was called for the day, also soaked up the scenery on the train. Some sat in booths where diners once ate, while others rested solo in updated sleeping compartments. A barber from Barstow was along for the ride as well, charging for haircuts to those willing to get a trim on a moving train.

"You do it the same as if you'd been drinking," barber Carl Hunt joked when asked about how to cut hair on a train. "I practiced a bit by drinking."

John Caestecker, owner of one of the railcars used to ferry riders last week, spent 13 years transforming the Silver Splendor, a dining car with a glass dome atop it for 360-degree sights, from a hunk of junk to a showpiece. Caestecker did most of the work himself, with help from his twin sons, who started the project as 3-year-old gophers and ended working with power tools.

"There is enormous grassroots support for passenger rail," Caestecker said of the plan to take trains daily into the desert. "But during lean times, they aren't getting as many riders. Would I love to see something like this happen? Sure. But it's got to make sense financially."

"That said, this is a wonderful trip," he said, looking out the window as the train sped through the open land.

Frank Drake of Glendale used a stopwatch to clock the train's time, based on passing mile markers along the tracks. Other rail fans gathered to hear the results.

"We're going 75 (mph)," Drake yelled from an open platform between two passenger cars.

Wild ride

Travelers swung and swayed into the walls of the railcars, as the train bounced along the tracks, through the weathered towns of Daggett and Yermo, with the Old Dad, Granite and Providence mountains to the south.

Eventually, the straight tracks gave way to a curve to the right, and with a clang the train crossed an old steel bridge and entered Afton Canyon.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Jean LaFrambois, 64, of Los Angeles, as the train wound through the canyon, considered by some to be the Grand Canyon of the Mojave Desert. High walls of red and green rock alternate with darker, volcanic peaks to form the canyon, a popular horse riding spot for High Desert residents.

Through the canyon, riders waited with excitement for the rare chance of spotting a bighorn sheep or mountain lion wandering down to drink from the stream that carved the canyon.

Though sweeping views of nearby mountain peaks and the rugged plants and wildlife are the main attraction, understanding how people interacted with the Mojave before the automobile is important, said David Lamfrom, California desert program manager with the National Parks Conservation Association.

"It was a totally different experience," he said.

Officials hope to use diesel-powered trains to pull refurbished vintage passenger cars, like the ones that ferried riders. Exact costs and details aren't decided, they said. With the Barstow Chamber of Commerce, supporters started the Desert Heritage Rail Group, which will work with the parks conservation association to establish the train.

The project still needs the blessing of the park service and Union Pacific Railroad, which owns the tracks through Kelso, Lamfrom said. A separate, private company would be brought in to operate the train.

End of the Line

Finally, out of the canyon walls, the train eased into Kelso. The stop, mostly a blip on the desert floor where the tracks cross two rural roads, boomed during World War II, when steel production in the mountains surrounding it was crucial to the military effort. Following the war, travelers poured into the train depot on their way to and from Southern California.

But as car travel replaced train trips, and mining ore in the mountains decreased, Kelso faded. The depot was saved from destruction in the mid '90s by local preservationists and Bureau of Land Management officials, making it and the old post office in the outpost the oldest buildings in the area.

The former Union Pacific Depot was refurbished in 2005 at a cost of \$5 million, which included adding fences and other safety features along the rail tracks, the park service's Slater said.

Kelso now boasts a population of around 20 -- mostly park service and railroad workers and their families -- and a thriving park service gift shop and lunch counter. The Beanery, which reopened last year, occupies the same lunch counter that served passing soldiers and Southern California visitors more than 70 years ago.

From Oct. 1, 2009, to Sept. 30, Slater said 66,686 people visited the depot, an average of 183 per day. The depot is open every day except Christmas.

Travelers can access Kelso's depot by car on rural, two-lane highways from either Interstate 40 or Interstate 15. But proponents of the train trip say some travelers would prefer a train.

"This is an established rail line, and something we can take advantage of that is already a part of the desert, part of that culture and that story," Lamfrom said.

Members of the Morongo Basin Historical Society welcomed the riders stepping off the train by waving signs and ringing cowbells.

"You finally came; we've been waiting 13 years," one historical society member yelled as passengers strolled by.

Milling around Kelso, riders stretched their legs and took photos of the Providence Mountains, dotting the otherwise barren horizon.

Ninety minutes filled with lunch and lectures, and then it was time to climb the narrow stairs back onto the train. As young and old waved from the windows, the handful of park rangers and historical society members smiled, and told their guests to come back.

On the way back to Barstow, bouncing along the tracks, visitors smiled as the blue sky suddenly turned ashen and a light rain fell. Rather than dampen spirits, the brief storm drew gasps of appreciation.

"This is awesome," Randall, one of the organizers, said, once again taking her place on the outdoor platform. "We need to come back."

Reach Dug Begley at 951-368-9475 or dbegley@PE.com