

WAITE'S WORLD

Just,
Narrow gauge to the clouds

James Waite ignores the cloud cover and is rewarded with glorious views in the USA
on the world's widest narrow gauge railway...





Main picture: 0-2-2-0 no 9 'Waumbek' near Mount Washington summit.

Above: 'Peppersass', the line's first loco built around 1867, on display at the base station.

Above right: The dramatic sight of a train approaching the summit through freshly-fallen snow. It is being pushed by diesel no M2 'Alonquin'. Photos by James Waite.

The weather at the Mount Washington Cog Railway's base station at Bretton Woods in the north of New Hampshire was dismal when I arrived around 7.45 on a Sunday morning after a long drive from the south. This wasn't as painful as it sounds as I had left home less than 48 hours before and was still living in UK time! Now that the line has built itself four new diesels its only timetabled steam train leaves at 8.30 each morning. Loco no 9 'Waumbek' was being coaled and watered in readiness for the trip. Built in 1908 by the Manchester Locomotive

Works in the south of the state it's one of the line's younger locos. There were perhaps a dozen of us standing around the station and I guess we were all wondering if it would be worthwhile buying tickets to ride on the train with the clouds so low.

The cheerful lady at the ticket office assured us that the sun would be shining at the summit so we paid up, piled in and were off. She was right about the sunshine! What she didn't tell us was that there had been heavy snowfall on the mountain overnight. For the last mile or so above the clouds, the sight and sound of the old loco slowly making its way through pristine snow was just brilliant!

The train stopped a little short of the summit to let everyone off as ice needed to be hacked off the last few yards of the track. There was a steep drop away from the line. I ventured gingerly down to photograph the train, keeping far enough away so that my footprints

wouldn't spoil the pictures. Apart from the gentle hiss from the loco there was utter silence. At 6,288 feet this is the highest mountain in the north east of the USA. All around the view beyond the clouds was stupendous. The glint from the rising sun off the Atlantic 60 miles or more away was clearly visible to the east as were the hills of Quebec to the north and New York State to the south west. Quite memorable!

Iced tea

It was bitterly cold and after a few minutes I climbed up to the summit station for a hot drink. Darjeeling tea was on offer – a most welcome surprise. I bet it's never as cold where it comes from! After a while the silence outside was broken by the unmistakable, and not wholly welcome, sound of a diesel train completing its climb. Soon it was time for the return journey, a trip enlivened by the sight of the conductor skilfully operating the brake wheel at the downhill end of the coach.

The depot is around half a mile further down the mountain from the base station. Here no 9 was detached from its coach and blew down most of its steam. This had been the last steam working of 2011 and the shed staff were waiting to prepare it for its winter storage. Six more steam locos stood around the shed, some in working order and others looking distinctly the worse for wear. The oldest of them, no 6 'Kancamagus', dates from 1874, only five years after the line was built when it was the world's first cog railway.

With some 4 feet 8 inches between the rails this must be the world's widest narrow gauge line! No 6 is due to be overhauled this winter. Happily there's no intention to abandon steam completely. Long may this remain the case! **NGW**

