

Izaak Walton Inn's locomotive turned luxury lodging now boarding near Glacier

By RICHARD ECKE • Tribune Staff Writer •
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Outside the Izaak Walton Inn near Essex, near the boundary of Glacier National Park, guests can stay overnight in a locomotive converted to luxury lodging.

"It's never been done before," said Tom Lambrecht, whose day job is general director of locomotives for Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway in Fort Worth, Texas.

Lambrecht stumbled upon the locomotive more than two years ago at the Metro East Industries scrap yard in East St. Louis, Ill., as it awaited destruction. As a personal project, he rescued the locomotive and had the outside and the interior shell restored by craftsmen at RELCO Locomotives in Albia, Iowa.

Last August, BNSF hauled the locomotive from Iowa to Essex, some 1,746 miles.

Jamie Lambrecht, Tom's wife, designed the locomotive's posh interior.

The result is spectacular, said Brian Kelly, owner of the Izaak Walton Inn, near where the locomotive sits.

"It's the Taj Mahal of lodging in Glacier Park," said Kelly, who stayed in the locomotive last month. "You feel like you're going into a five-star hotel."

The locomotive has been available for booking since January.

Turning a caboose into lodging has been done before. In fact, the Izaak Walton Inn has several cabooses decked out for visitors across railroad tracks from the inn.

"It's a great option for families," said Dorothy Van Geison, general manager of the inn.

Turning a locomotive into luxury accommodations is even more difficult than sprucing up a caboose because it was never intended to serve as living space, Lambrecht said. A locomotive contains huge engines and other equipment, and ventilation systems to keep engines cool. That made it a challenge to plug all the holes to create living quarters.

But the Lambrechts succeeded.

Where large fans once evacuated diesel fumes and heat, workers installed skylights. The fan blades remain in place for ambiance.

Steel doors cover large picture windows retrofitted into the train. Flip one switch, and hulking doors open to reveal a view of the Great Bear Wilderness. Flip another switch and take a gander at the BNSF main line that runs alongside the southern border of Glacier National Park.

The locomotive is a joint project between the inn and Revelstoke Ltd., owned by the Lambrechts.

"It was a great fit," Lambrecht said.

The locomotive features an unusual "Big Sky Blue" color scheme used by the Great Northern Railway in the late 1960s.

Workers pulled out all stops in renovating the locomotive under Jamie Lambrecht's direction.

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Oak plank flooring made from trees some 400 years old was installed throughout much of the train and combines with a blue pine tongue-and-groove ceiling to offer warm colors in the dining area.

The original cab area where the engineer operated the train has been spiffed up and adorned with leather seats.

A brown leather sofa with a hidden queen bed stands out in a sitting area that includes a stone fireplace and 40-inch plasma TV screen. Other amenities include a king-size bed covered with a Hudson Bay blanket, a stone-trimmed shower with a jetted tub and heated floors, and a full kitchen with custom cabinets and granite countertops.

The locomotive's history traces back to 1969, when General Motors built it for the Santa Fe Railway. The 190-ton F45 model once led trains carrying high-priority freight from California to the Midwest. Later, it hauled coal for the Utah Railway over the Wasatch Mountains. The locomotive was retired in 2001.

Most of the interior was converted on site in Montana and now is available to entertain tourists, skiers and other visitors.

Staying overnight in the fancy accommodations is not cheap. A night's stay costs \$299, and there is a minimum stay of two nights, plus the state accommodation tax, according to the Izaak Walton Inn's Web site.

Lambrecht said the train carries an honorary label of GN441, even though it never actually was used on the Great Northern line. Several GN locomotives were identical to this one but were scrapped years ago.

The Lambrechts tried out the luxury locomotive for more than a week around the Christmas and New Year's holidays, and they can testify that it's luxurious and comfortable.

Spray-foam insulation keeps cold air out, and the interior features a large furnace plus two fireplaces.

"We're confident it'll be cozy," Tom Lambrecht said.

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