

Historic British Trains Live Again on Wildlife Express

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — For most of Disney's Animal Kingdom guests, Wildlife Express to Rafiki's Planet Watch is a novel way to travel by rail behind the scenes. It runs from the African village of Harambe past state-of-the-art animal care facilities to Rafiki's Planet Watch, an interactive, fun-filled center of activity focusing on animals worldwide.

But for railroad buffs, the puffing steam engines and their open-air carriages provide a nostalgic adventure extending the legends of British railroading in the mountains and jungles of far-off colonies.

Engines like these were first produced by British boiler works 150 years ago. For nearly 100 years they were shipped to places like South Africa, Rhodesia or India carrying European explorers and the native population to the animal lands, mines and agricultural areas of the two continents.

The model for the new Disney engines, discovered in the archives of the Indian Peninsula Railroad, features an unusual Aspinwall side-tank 2-4-2 design first built in 1898 in England's Horwich Locomotive Works. Its passenger carriages are partly enclosed by waist-high, wood-louvered shutters with carpet bags, boxes, crates and wicker luggage stacked high on its weathered rooftops — definitely an "Out of India" theme.

The Express travels a 1.2-mile circle-tour route built in narrow-gauge (3.3-foot rail width) to fit the scale of its Disney's Animal Kingdom surroundings. The smaller scale was used in many remote areas where narrow-gauge was easier to build along canyon walls and around horseshoe bends.

Three engines and two sets of cars were built in 1997 only a few miles from William Shakespeare's cottage in Stratford-on-Avon by the model-railroad firm of Severn Lamb, Ltd., at Alchester, England. The company makes trains, large and small, for parks throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, including one for Disneyland Paris. Each five-car train seats 250 passengers on contoured benches facing sideways.

The stubby-looking locomotives — engine and tender all in one — look very different from the Magic Kingdom American-style engines with their bells and low-moaning B&O whistles. Wildlife Express whistles sound like the scream of a wounded piccolo. You'll recognize them right away from a dozen British mystery movies.

The classic depot is patterned after stucco structures with archways surrounding an open-air waiting area built by the British

in East Africa during the early 1900s and complete with colorful travel posters on the walls and a corrugated-metal water tank nearby. Next to formal, wrought-iron railings is a “local addition” made of thatch-and-pole construction.

The train makes its way down a shallow valley between Africa and Asia for a behind-the-scenes look at ultra-modern animal care facilities which provide nighttime shelters for lions, elephants, warthogs and antelope herds. All of these animals and many more spend their days in the forests and grasslands of Africa along the route of Kilimanjaro Safaris.

At Rafiki’s Planet Watch, guests enjoy up-close encounters with small animals, interactive videos showing animal researchers and conservation programs around the world, and a complete veterinary hospital with medical procedures in progress. Television screens provide intimate views of animals during feeding, health care and other daily activities within backstage animal care facilities and at locations in the Africa and Asia animal lands.

Supervising design and construction of the trains for Walt Disney Imagineering were Joel Fritsche, technical director of mechanical engineering, and veteran Disney train-maker Bob Harpur, who came out of retirement to help with the project.

Harpur ran a model train factory before joining Disney in 1966 to help locate and rebuild antique trains from Mexico for Magic Kingdom and Disney’s Fort Wilderness Resort and Campground in Florida.

The Wildlife Express job involved overseeing tracklayers on site, traveling to England to check on construction of three engines and 10 carriages, and directing final theming and “weathering” by Disney experts at the Walt Disney World site.

Although some of the 19th century trains may be still operating with makeshift repairs and unreliable schedules in isolated areas of the world, the last of the vintage steam trains in England retired nearly 50 years ago, relegated to places like the National Railway Museum in Yorkshire. None will ever again carry as many passengers as the Wildlife Express will carry at Disney’s Animal Kingdom.