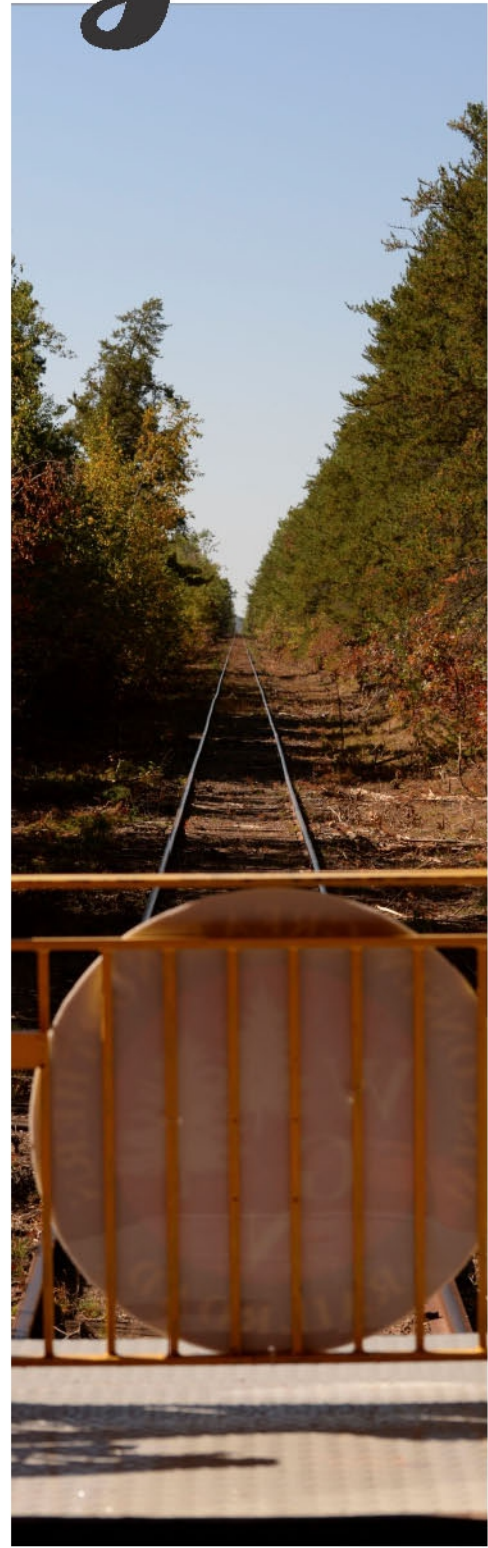


Train Magic

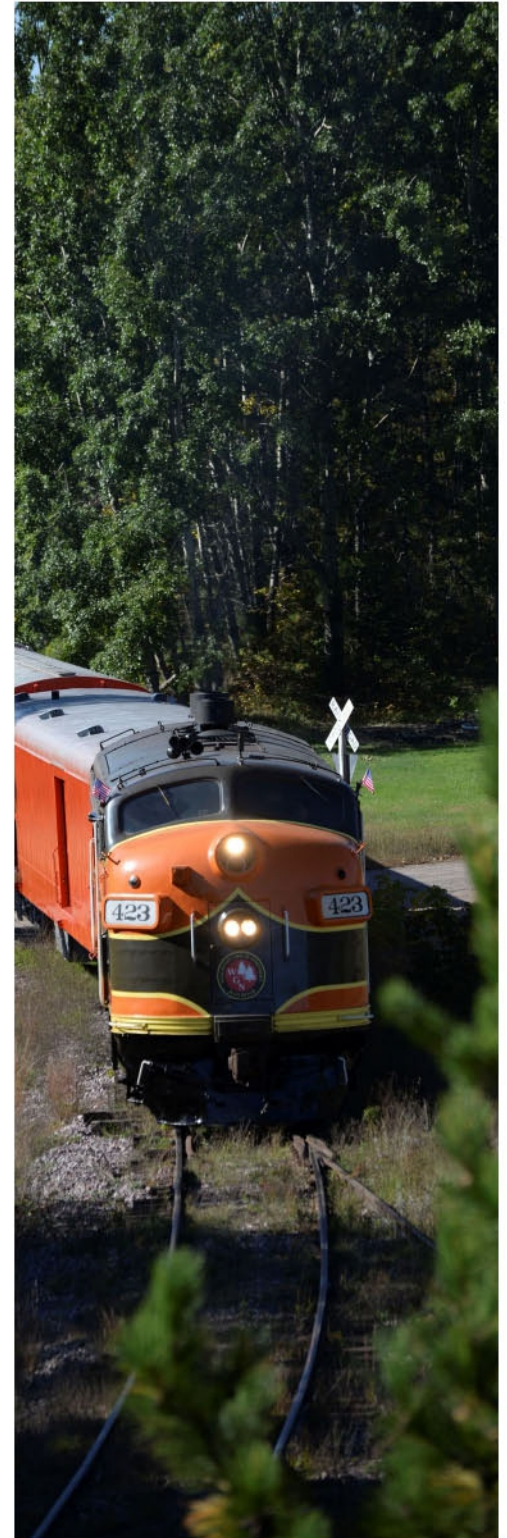


The sun is still high in the sky when the bright orange F7 locomotive honks cheerfully, and slowly begins to roll north along the scenic Wild Rivers Trail, away from the station building and the red brick platform.

There is something magical about being on a train, as if you have been transported back in time, and it shows

A Scenic Railroad Adventure

Story by Eva Apelqvist



on the expectant faces of the passengers who fill the seats in the polished wood paneled lounge of The Pine Cavern. They are farmers and nurses and investment bankers, to name a few, and they have come from near and far to ride this heritage railroad, the only moving bed & breakfast train in the country. Many are here for a full night's adventure and will sleep on the train after it returns to the station.



Dorothy and Jerry, from Bevent, Wisconsin, are taking in the landscape outside the window and getting to know their fellow passengers. They were given the full historical train experience as a Christmas present from Jerry's daughter, a dinner and an overnight stay in the luxurious first class car, The Allan L. Vreeland. Cleverly, a train brochure had been cut into a puzzle, with half the pieces given to Dorothy, the other half to Jerry, tiny clues hinting at a grand outing on the Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad.



The atmosphere in the first class car goes from quietly excited to joyful. People are laughing and pointing out the window. "Everybody is in a good mood when they're on the train," said Tim Brabec, the jovial Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad porter. "Being here makes you feel good." Throughout the ride, Brabec walks through the train cars and shares his knowledge of the area with the passengers, and people-person that he is, also tries to learn as much about them as he can. He loves the diversity among the riders, but his favorites... "I love meeting World War II war brides."

There are not that many war brides left, of course, but Brabec has met several and he loves hearing their stories and how getting on this train brings back memories from



when they were young and went across the country to be with their husbands who were home on leave, or getting ready to take off for Europe.

Brabec is not the only dedicated train buff working for the Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad. Passengers will meet much of the staff throughout the ride. Locomotive engineer Lynton Brooks has been running the train on and off for ten years. He too, might be seen walking through the cars, chatting with passengers. Brooks lives in International Falls in northern Minnesota, and travels the close to 250 miles every week to run the Spooner train.

Outside the train window the nature scenes change. Sunrays sift through the trees and sprinkle light on the forest floor. The Namekagon River comes into view, a part of the protected St Croix Scenic Riverway. It cuts through lush wetland like a shiny blue ribbon sprinkled with silver stars. Then forest takes over, a mix of pine and deciduous trees, before the view opens up again in a field of gold so bright it seems otherworldly, wheat perhaps, guesses the farmer at a west facing window table.





This late summer view is stunning. It should be noted though, that nature is not only lovely in this northwest Wisconsin setting, during an evening such as this one. Later in the fall, a constantly moving maple mosaic of orange, red and yellow will be reflected in the river, a spectacular show. In the winter, hoar frost will decorate the trees, snow and ice deposits will edge the river and a poetic stillness will embrace the scene outside. And there is spring, of course, lovely, hopeful spring, with patches of fragile wood anemones and young forest creatures exploring nature around the train tracks, a tumble of fox pups, a shy fawn, bear cubs.



Today, two couples are celebrating their anniversary on the train, thirty and thirty-eight years respectively. After drinks in the first class lounge, they will be served their dinner in the formal mahogany, mirror-walled dining room. Tomorrow morning, after a hearty breakfast buffet served in the recently refurbished dining car, they plan to explore the small historical town of Spooner nearby.

Patrick and Gloria from Merrill, Wisconsin, are celebrating a belated honeymoon on the train. Gloria has long had a passion for excursion trains. Even Patrick's health issues and the fact that he is learning to walk on two prosthetic legs could not stop them from fulfilling this dream of riding the



Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad. And with a little help from the train crew, getting up and down the stairs turned out to be very manageable. Now the newlyweds are comfortably settled in, chatting easily with each other and their dining room neighbors.

By the time dinner arrives - a fresh salad, a delicious little bowl of local favorite chicken wild rice soup, and the main meal; a steak, chicken, shrimp, or a vegetarian pasta, all with a big helping of vegetables - something has shifted inside the train car, the passengers are no longer a number of individuals but a vibrant group. Everybody is talking and sharing stories across the aisle with former strangers, laughing and pointing out the window to draw attention to northern Wisconsin wild life.

"It always happens," says Greg Vreeland, owner and operator of the Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad. He has seen over and over how couples in their 70s connect with couples in their early 20s, and six hours later, have become close friends, exchanging phone numbers and emails. "Trains build connections between people," he said. He can't explain the magic, but he believes that the





train experience hits people on a deeply personal level. "Everybody has a train story," he said. "Even if it's just a brief memory of seeing a steam engine for the first time. And look at little kids. They love trains. It's natural."

Not just couples celebrating their honeymoons or anniversaries flock to the train, but also adventurers. The passengers, diverse as they are, seem to have one thing in common; a hunger for a unique experience. Two Bird Island, Minnesota, couples in their early 60s have had the Spooner train ride on their bucket list for a long time. They are excited to finally be here. For these couples, this b&b train ride follows bucket-list events like parasailing and a trip in a hot air balloon.

While it can very much be a joyful social event, the train ride also leaves plenty of room for solitude and couples time. Some couples withdraw to their individual bedrooms after supper for alone time or choose to walk around and explore the train.



By the time the now empty cheesecake plates and coffee cups have been cleared off the tables, the train pulls away from its short stop at beautiful Veazie Springs, historically, a Native American blueberry-picking spot. The sun is lower now, turning the white pines into pointy sentinels on the horizon behind us. Soon, the train stops again, this time to change directions. When it starts up, it is once again heading in the direction of Spooner.



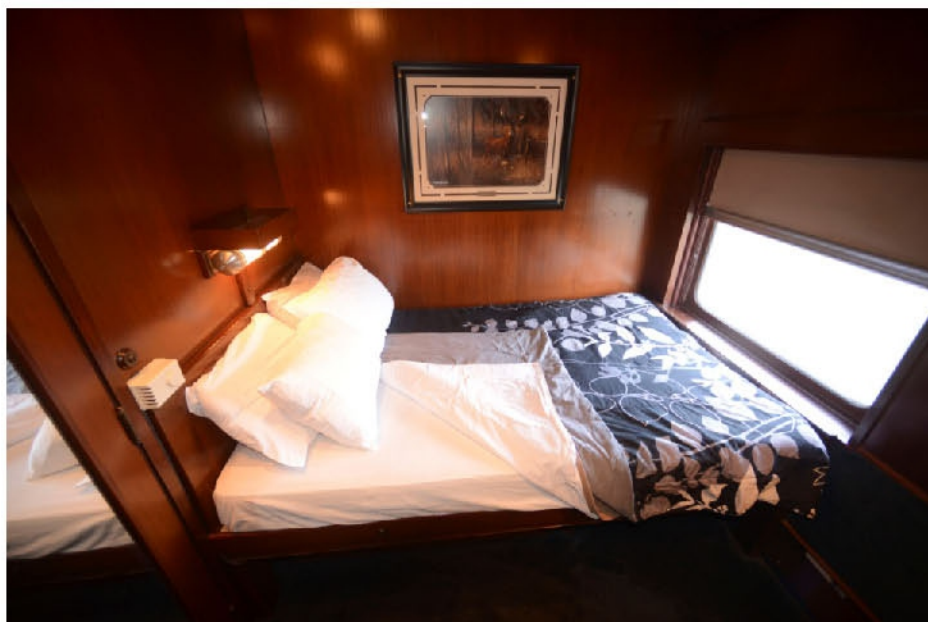
Our Family and Yours Every Child's Dream

The Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad is owned and operated by Greg and Mardell Vreeland and their five-year-old son, Alexander. Yes, Alexander is very much an important part of the operation. Alexander, who had his first train ride when he was two weeks old, and has been practically raised on a train since then, wears Dockers and a collared shirt to work. He helps set the tables and stock the pantry. He takes visitors on tours and describes the equipment to them, and he helps guests find their way to their bedrooms. He is also a perfect test market for the rich selection of toys in the gift store, toys he has to earn... by working.

Greg Vreeland himself started working on an excursion train when he was very young. Little by little, he learned all there was to know about restoring and running old trains. He started buying his own train cars and restoring them, and is now one of a handful of experts in this country when it comes to historical train car restoration. His future wife, Mardell, soon learned to share Greg's train dream.

For their wedding, Greg and Mardell restored a train car modelled after one of the thirteen original chapel cars in this country and named it Chapel Car Everlasting. In the morning of June 5th, 2004, the day of the wedding, the historical wooden pews, the altar and the carpet still had to be installed in the chapel car. The work was completed at exactly 3 p.m. that afternoon. At 3:15, the wedding guests began boarding the train for the ceremony.

In addition to the Dinner Train and the Bed & Breakfast, the Vreelands offer almost daily (seasonal) 45-minute sightseeing trains on a sweet little 1913 Interurban, "The Doodlebug." They also offer family fun Pizza Trains, Mother's and Father's Day Trains, Thanksgiving Trains (for a relaxed family outing that everybody can enjoy, even the one usually stuck in the kitchen), and Santa Trains. Many of these trains have become an annual tradition for visitors.



But there is still time to explore. Even a wobbly walk through shaky train cars is an experience worth adding to the happy train memory; the thrill of opening the doors between the cars and stepping over the buffer plates, rails moving eerily beneath your feet.

A few train cars down from the dining car is a dance car with a twirling disco ball, then a quiet lounge for board games or reading or talking, and for the retro romantic, a vintage video game - Pacman.

The sun has gone down, but halogen lighting from beneath the train lights up the immediate surroundings outside. Soon, the train will be back at the station. There will be dancing, gatherings around the gas fire on the brick patio, perhaps a game of cards and socializing with new friends.

Behind the very last train car – or the first, since the train changed directions - the rails shine like a skinny upside down V, beautifully edged by dense vegetation. These tracks have been here since the 1880s, as a part of the Great Omaha X; four railroad lines: The Hudson Line, the Altoona Line, the Ashland Line and the Itasca Line, with Spooner at its very center. How lovely that the train should be heading right back to the very center of where northwest Wisconsin train traffic began more than 130 years ago and that we all get to be a part of this railroad history.





Traveling in Style The Pine Cavern, The Sleepy Hollow and The Allan L. Vreeland

The 1950 Pine Cavern was the first sleeping car acquired by the Vreelands in 2010. It is a Santa Fe car and was originally used between Los Angeles and Chicago. It was converted from a passenger car by a Catholic Monsignor train enthusiast. It now features five bedrooms, each sleeping two on bunks. A sixth bedroom was converted into a shared shower room. A number of roomettes were taken out to make room for the wonderful open floorplan it now has, with dining and lounge space.

The early 1950s Union Pacific Railroad car, The Sleepy Hollow, was added to the fleet in 2012. It was formerly used as a sleeping car on the luxury line, The American Orient Express. The Sleepy Hollow passengers eat in an ex-Amtrak auto train buffet dining car.



For a luxurious adventure, the first class Railroad Business Car, originally built by Pullman in 1914, offers a truly unique experience. The Allan L. Vreeland, named after Greg Vreeland's father, provided a way for the rich and famous to travel in comfort between Los Angeles and Chicago. Who knows what famous people have once stood on this very platform in the front of the train car, giving speeches that might have gone down to history.

A fourth sleeping car, The Royal Palm, with eleven more bedrooms, is currently under restoration and will be put into service for the 2016 season.

Earlier this summer the Wisconsin Great Northern acquired the former Columbia Star Dinner Train from Missouri and is in the process of completing a minor refurbishment of the 4 dining cars, full kitchen car and the twin streamlined locomotives. This new train adds 224 seats and will allow the railroad to feature expanded dinner train operations beginning in 2016.

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