# Rails and ski trails lure fans of trains and the slopes to Izaak Walton Inn

**by James McCommons, Special to The Oregonian**

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The inn offers guests the option of staying in four cabooses converted into housekeeping cabins.

Heavy snow weighed down the Douglas fir and lodgepole pine lining the ski trail. I'd awakened at dawn for an early ski, but the groomer had already been out with his machine, compressing a foot of new powder.

On a ridgetop, I leaned on my poles while breathing hard from the climb and the altitude. Below, a freight train grumbled as it negotiated the steep grade approaching Marias Pass.

Minutes later, the diesels gave out a throaty roar and a whistle blast echoed through the mountains, shattering the silence.

Hearing trains is just part of the ambience of cross-country skiing at the Izaak Walton Inn in Essex, Mont.

The inn, on the southern edge of Glacier National Park, sits next to the mainline tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe. More than two dozen trains pass by daily. Several idle on the tracks nearby, waiting for their turn to cross the Continental Divide.

The Great Northern Railway built the Izaak in 1939 to house track crews clearing snow on the pass. Today, it is privately owned, serving as an alpine resort for cross-country skiers. The area receives more than 400 inches of snow annually.

The inn also attracts rail fans who come to watch the trains and absorb the history of the Great Northern Railway, preserved in memorabilia displayed throughout the hotel. Guests can even sleep in cabooses renovated into housekeeping cabins.

More than half the guests arrive and depart by train, just as I did when I took Amtrak's Empire Builder from Union Station in Portland. The Builder leaves the city in late afternoon and reaches Essex about 15 hours later. I secured a sleeper for the outbound trip; three days later I returned by coach.

We pulled out on a bright, snowless afternoon, crossed the Vancouver-Hayden Island Bridge and followed the Columbia River east, passing Bonneville Dam with its high voltage lines and spillways. The train pulled only a snack/cafe car, but first-class passengers received a fully prepared meal. I had roasted chicken, a Caesar salad and glass of white wine in my room.

In Spokane, our train connected with the Empire Builder from Seattle, and a full-service dining car was added. We crossed the Idaho Panhandle and then Montana's Flathead Valley before climbing into the Rockies.

The snow deepened as we ascended. In Essex, snowbanks towered two stories high, and big flakes floated down over mountains dark with forest. It's wild, rugged country, with Glacier National Park to the north and the Big Bear Wilderness to the south, and just the narrow ribbons of U.S. 2 and the railroad tracks as a border.

**Railroad reminders**

Arriving at the Izaak, it's easy to see why rail fans love it. Bedspreads, lamps, iron railings, stained-glass windows and napkin holders all bear the image of Rocky the Mountain Goat, the symbol of the Great Northern Railway. A length of rail serves as the footrest in the bar. The hallways are lined with yellowed route maps, timetables, rusty lanterns, sepia-toned photographs and advertising posters from the 1950s. Display cases hold diner menus and china, harking back to the golden age of railroading, when some of the finest restaurants were onboard a train.

My trackside room on the second floor was comfortable but simply furnished with a bed, end table and chair. The Izaak's rooms have no phones or televisions. Cellular phones don't work, either. There is, however, a pay phone and wireless Internet in the lobby. Unless you bring a car or rent one at the inn, there's really nowhere to go. Most guests come for the skiing and the trains.

In the lobby, railroad magazines and coffee-table books recount the Great Northern's history. James Jerome Hill, a ruthless rail magnate from St. Paul, Minn., assembled the railroad from smaller roads. He extended it from Seattle to Duluth and opened the country's northern tier to settlement and development. Hill did it without public money and was nicknamed "The Empire Builder" -- hence the name of the train.

**Modeler marvels**
In the lobby, I met Bob from Illinois, a large, bearded fellow who builds model railroads from scratch, takes train pictures and gave me detailed explanations of why the milelong freight trains, stacked two high with shipping containers, stood idling in front of the Inn.

"They're waiting for a pusher engine to get into position at the rear of the train," he said. "This grade up to the divide is too steep to just pull the cars over."

I nodded, although the railroad jargon sometimes confuses me.

Bob headed out to the tracks to take pictures, and I rented a pair of skis. Just a few years ago, skiers had to carry their equipment over several sets of tracks to reach the trails, threading their way through idling locomotives. It was a dangerous situation, which the BNSF and the state rectified by building a steel pedestrian bridge.

The bridge is the catbird's seat for rail fans, and Bob was up there with his telephoto lens. I clipped on my skis and went up the trail into the forest. The Izaak grooms 33 kilometers of trails for both classic and skating styles. For backcountry skiers, Glacier National Park is close by and the inn runs day trips into the more rugged terrain.

Most guests, however, ski or snowshoe the well-marked trails, return across the bridge for hot chocolate and food, and then go out for another ski. That's what I did for two days, as well as visiting with skiers and rail fans, watching the trains and lying in bed at night hearing the whistles blow.

On my last evening, we went out to the platform to wait for the westbound train. The stars shone bright in the deep cold.

Up the valley came a single light, shimmering back and forth, growing larger and illuminating the trees. Then came the whistle's moan. It was a train -- this time, my train.

-- *James McCommons has traveled much of the country by Amtrak while researching a book on the future of the U.S. passenger rail system. "Waiting on a Train" is expected to be published this fall by Chelsea Green Publishing;* travel@news.oregonian.com