

# THE SKI



## NEARLY A DECADE AFTER IT LAST RAN, AMTRAK AND WINTER PARK TEAM UP TO BRING BACK A DENVER TRADITION BY JUSTIN FRANZ

### EARLY

on a Saturday morning in March, dozens of skiers and snowboarders converge on Denver Union Station. As the sun rises over the still-sleeping city, people with skis slung over their shoulders and bags of boots, goggles, and gloves trudge across

the platform, walking under the neon “Travel by Train” sign that has been an identifying feature of the station since 1958, when aviation patronage began to overtake that of the railroads.

As another group walks onto the platform, a woman looks up at a waiting passenger train and says, “It’s back.”

“It” is the *Winter Park Express*, the reincarnation of a seasonal passenger train that took skiers directly to the slopes, and was a Denver tradition for more than 60 years, but disappeared nearly a decade ago. Now,

thanks to Amtrak, the Winter Park Resort, and a dedicated group of supporters, one of Colorado’s most famous trains is back.

### THE RIDE

Shortly after 7 a.m., Amtrak’s *Winter Park Express* departs Denver Union Station, twisting and turning through a web of rail lines used by Union Pacific, BNSF Railway, and commuter operator RTD. Soon, the train turns west on its way to the mountains, passing through suburban Colorado communities like Arvada and Leyden.

# TRAINS

## GRANDE RETURN



**The skiers are just finishing up a day on the slopes as Amtrak's Winter Park Express ski train heads to Winter Park to pick them up on Jan. 7, 2017.** Mike Danneman

While most of the passengers today are skiers looking forward to a day on Winter Park Resort's 3,000 acres of terrain, some, like photographer, author, and retired railroader Steve Patterson, are just along for the ride. Patterson literally wrote the book on the subject ("The Ski Train" first published in 1984), and as it spins around the Big Ten Curve — one of two reverse curves designed by engineer H.A. Sumner to help the Denver, Northwestern & Pacific Railway gain the elevation needed to climb the Rockies — he regales a few fellow passengers with stories

of David Halliday Moffat's legendary mountain railroad and the passenger train that called it home for seven decades.

Thirty years after the first transcontinental railroad bypassed Colorado, banker and railroad financier Moffat announced that he was going to build a railroad from Denver to Salt Lake City. What resulted was one of the most stunning mountain routes ever constructed in North America. In order to reach the Continental Divide, the Denver, Northwestern & Pacific had to drill 30 tunnels, resulting in the largest or-

der of black powder in Colorado's history at that time. Initially, the railroad went over Rollins Pass, 11,660 feet above sea level. The line over the pass featured 4-percent grades, horseshoe curves, and seemingly endless snow sheds to protect the rails from unrelenting winters. A day after the first train arrived at Rollins Pass in September 1904, a blizzard nearly closed the route. Twenty-four years later, the Denver, Northwestern & Pacific's successor, the Denver & Salt Lake Railway, constructed the 6.2-mile-long Moffat Tunnel, which elimi-



**Kathryn Flanagan, a University of Denver Alpine Club member, helps unload skis at Winter Park on March 4, 2017.** Two photos, Justin Franz

nated the treacherous route over Rollins.

While the primary goal of Moffat's line was to move people and goods through the mountains, passenger agents of the era would do anything they could to sell tickets, even promoting scenic train rides to the mountains. Almost immediately after reaching Rollins Pass, the Denver, Northwestern & Pacific lured passengers with rides to "the top of the world," where they could see mountains of snow well into summer.

In 1936, the Denver & Salt Lake teamed up with one of the city's newspapers, the Rocky Mountain News, to run the first "snow train" to the annual winter carnival and ski tournament in Hot Sulphur Springs, Colo., northwest of Denver. With the help of some creative marketing by the newspaper, the train quickly sold out, and a second and third section were added. On Feb. 9, more than 2,000 people boarded the first snow train on the Moffat Line and embarked on the 172-mile round trip into the mountains. The trip was such a hit that a week later, the railroad and newspaper teamed up for another excursion, this time to Steamboat Springs, Colo., northwest of Denver. The snow trains became a popular annual tradition until World War II.

After the war, skiers quickly started to fill regularly scheduled trains on the Moffat Line, which soon was to become part of the Denver & Rio Grande Western. Many of the passengers were heading for the newly established Winter Park Ski Area, just out-

side the west portal of Moffat Tunnel. Unfortunately, there was not enough space aboard the regularly scheduled trains for all of the skiers destined for the Western Slope every weekend, so a local ski instructor wrote to the railroad. Frank Bulkley convinced the D&RGW that a weekend ski train to Winter Park could be a profitable venture. With Bulkley's help, the D&RGW remodeled some old heavyweight coaches to accommodate skis, and a week before Christmas 1947, the first Rio Grande *Ski Train* departed Denver Union Station. A round-trip ticket cost just \$2 plus tax.

The *Ski Train* was an instant hit, and by the 1950s, the D&RGW was frequently leasing cars from other railroads to meet demand. The train routinely exceeded 20 cars, but that created problems at Winter Park, so in 1966 it was limited to 19 cars so that the tail end of the train was not stuck in Moffat Tunnel. In the 1960s, the railroad picked up a set of used Northern Pacific heavyweight coaches for the *Ski Train*. When the D&RGW's *Prospector* was discontinued, the *Ski Train* scored a streamlined combine car with a baggage area, perfect for transporting injured skiers back to Denver.

Even after most freight railroads had handed over their passenger services to Amtrak in 1971, the D&RGW continued to run its flagship *Rio Grande Zephyr* to Salt Lake City and the *Ski Train* to Winter Park. In the 1980s, after industrialist Philip An-

schutz purchased the D&RGW, he upgraded the Winter Park train with coaches he bought from VIA Rail Canada.

The *Ski Train* continued to run in the 21st century, even after Union Pacific absorbed the D&RGW. But around 2009, a number of issues began to arise. Denver Union Station was being rebuilt for new regional commuter service, and track space there was getting sparse. The train was also having trouble staying on schedule due to freight congestion on the Moffat Line. Liability insurance costs for the train were increasing, too. In April 2009, the Anschutz Co. announced they would no longer operate the *Ski Train*, and the equipment was sold. The following winter, a new operator tried to restart the train but insurance



**Amy David, Danielle Papedo, and Brenton Moland put on ski gear as the train approaches the east portal of Moffat Tunnel.**

issues derailed that effort. For the first time in seven decades there was no dedicated ski train between Denver and Winter Park.

“The *Ski Train* was a Denver tradition for 73 years, and then all of a sudden it was gone,” Steve Patterson says. “But the demand for such a service never went away.”

## MAKING A COMEBACK

Today’s *Winter Park Express* departed a few minutes late due to track work just outside of Denver Union Station. But despite the delay, the train is quickly gaining time as it passes through Plainview, Crescent, and Rollinsville. The congestion that delayed the *Ski Train* a decade ago is no longer an issue, due to declining coal traffic on UP’s Moffat Tunnel Subdivision. A few daily run-through BNSF trains constitute the vast majority of freight traffic over the route.

Over the *Express*’ public-address system, train manager Brad Swartzwelter apologizes profusely for the delay but adds it could be worse: The passengers could be stuck on Interstate 70, the primary route from Denver to the slopes, where drivers are already experiencing 90-minute delays. “Say a prayer for all those poor folks stuck in traffic,” Swartzwelter says.

Highway congestion was one of the reasons why ColoRail, a nonprofit passenger-rail advocacy group, started to champion the *Ski Train*’s return almost immediately after its last run in 2009. In 2014, ColoRail Board Member Bob Brewster authored a story in the group’s newsletter that laid out the argument for why the train should return. Swartzwelter, who has a degree in hospitality services and worked on the original *Ski Train* before becoming an Amtrak conductor, saw the article and ran with the idea.

Swartzwelter, who’s president of Local 166 of the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART), asked his fellow officers if they would support his effort to revive the train; they voted unanimously

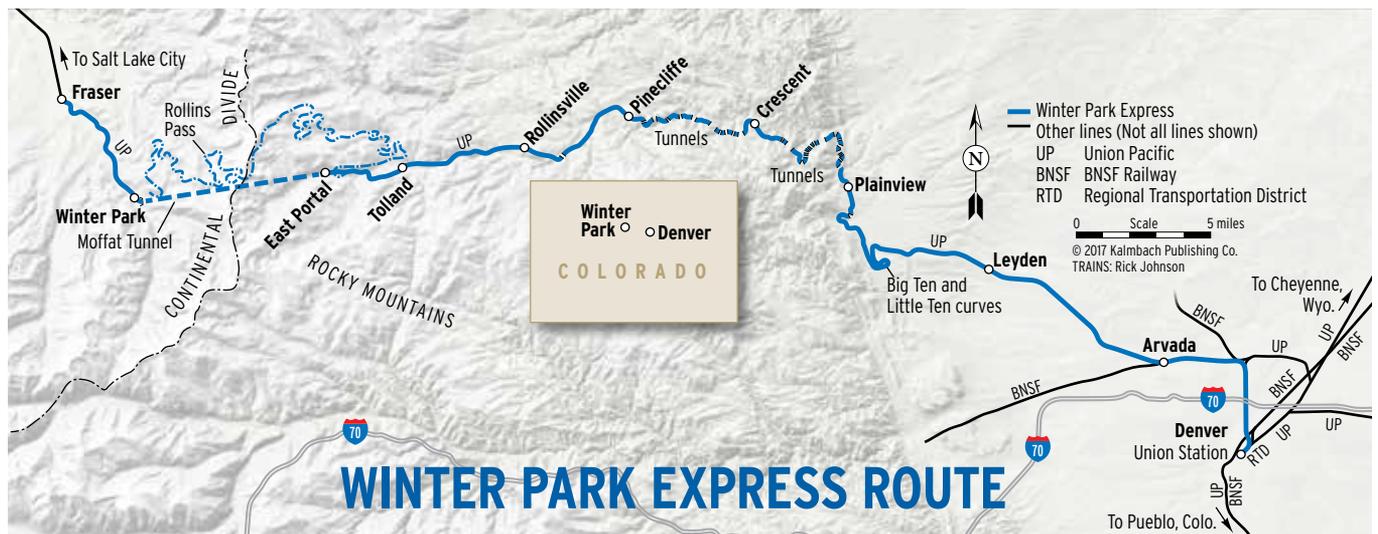


On Jan. 7, 2017, the first day of the new *Winter Park Express*, the train arrives at Winter Park outside the west portal of the Moffat Tunnel. Mike Danneman

in favor. Next, he reached out to Amtrak officials in Chicago, who said they were open to the idea and asked that he submit a formal proposal for the train, now dubbed the *Winter Park Express*. With help from ColoRail, Swartzwelter put together a business plan to show that the train could again be a money-making venture. It also described the demographics of people who live around Denver Union Station; primarily active, young professionals who like to get outdoors but in many cases do not own automobiles. Swartzwelter says it’s the perfect audience for a ski train.

Amtrak officials were impressed, and in December 2014, a group of company executives rode the *California Zephyr* from Denver to Winter Park to learn more. After meeting with Winter Park Resort President Gary DeFrango and other officials, who threw their full support behind the idea, the Amtrak officials boarded a bus back to

Denver. Jim Souby, president of ColoRail, was on board and said it was a traffic-riddled, white-knuckle drive home over the mountains. “I think having the Amtrak officials see the situation that drivers face every weekend coming home from the slopes was really important,” he says. Soon after, Amtrak and Winter Park decided to run a test train in March 2015 to see if the demand was really there. Within hours of announcing the trip, tickets sold out and officials decided to add a second run for the following day. Nearly 1,000 people rode the test trains, and they were quickly deemed a stunning success. Amtrak and Winter Park, along with Union Pacific, quickly began discussions about a full-scale return of the *Winter Park Express*. Swartzwelter credits Joy Smith, senior manager of customer service for long distance trains; Rob Eaton, senior manager of government affairs; and a host of other people at Amtrak for helping





On Feb. 15, 2008, the westbound Rio Grande Ski Train approaches Tunnel 1, just east of Plainview, Colo. Mike Danneman

make his dream a reality.

While the original *Ski Train* unloaded passengers right onto the packed snow, officials were leery of doing that again, so Amtrak and the resort contacted the state of Colorado about getting funds to build a heated platform. In April 2016, the Colorado Department of Transportation granted the project \$1.5 million for a new ADA-compliant, accessible platform. The cities of Denver and Winter Park both contributed \$100,000, ColoRail gave \$1,000, and the Winter Park Resort picked up the rest. In total, \$3.5 million was spent on the platform and upgrades to UP's siding at Fraser, 5 miles west of Winter Park, where the train would be parked during its layover. Tickets for the first runs went on sale in late 2016 and quickly sold out, so Amtrak add-

ed additional capacity. On Jan. 7, 2017, the first regularly scheduled ski train to Winter Park in nearly a decade rolled out of Denver Union Station.

## A LINK TO THE PAST

As another sold-out *Winter Park Express* approaches the siding at East Portal, just before Moffat Tunnel, Swartzwelder gets on the PA again to announce that the train is only a few minutes away from its destination and that it's a good time for passengers to start getting on their ski gear. In the last car, a group of passengers in their late 20s and early 30s slip on their ski boots and dig out their hats and gloves. Danielle Papedo, 29, from the Denver area, says today is the first time she's taken the *Winter Park Express* but that it won't be the last. "It's a lot of fun, and it's convenient," she says. "It's a nostalgic ride."

A few cars back, John Phoenix, 48, helps his children get ready for a day on the slopes. Phoenix grew up in Denver and in the 1970s and 1980s was a member of the Eskimo Club, a youth ski club that took the train to Winter Park every weekend. Back then, Phoenix recalls, some of the young skiers would try to pair off before entering the "Makeout Tunnel." Even in later years, Phoenix was a loyal *Ski Train* rider and says he frequently took it with his wife until the train stopped running in 2009. "The *Ski Train* was the setting for some of my favorite childhood memories," Phoenix says, adding that he's excited to finally share the experience with his own children.

Less than 10 minutes after entering Moffat Tunnel, the *Winter Park Express* emerges from the west portal and slowly pulls to a stop in front of the Winter Park

Resort. An army of car hosts and resort employees starts unloading skis and snowboards from the train, standing them up against a nearby railing where passengers comb the pile looking for their gear. From there it's a quick walk to the lift line.

Among the people helping unload skis is Steve Hurlbert, director of public relations and communications for Winter Park. He says resort officials knew that there was still a demand for a weekend train from Denver to Winter Park, but that even they were surprised at how quickly the trains sold out. They are also surprised at how many people are taking the train just to spend the day at Winter Park and enjoy the mountain scenery, with no intention of skiing. Hurlbert says many passengers have also opted to take the train to Winter Park on Saturday and stay overnight before returning home the following day, something that wasn't possible on the original *Ski Train*, where you could only purchase same-day round-trip tickets. By the end of the *Winter Park Express*' inaugural season in March 2017, more than 18,000 people had taken the train. "Based on the success of this first season, we would love to see this service expanded," Hurlbert says. Winter Park's ski season traditionally starts in late November and goes through April, so there are at least two months when the train does not run. The resort is also a popular destination for mountain bikers in the summer.

But finding locomotives and cars for extended winter service or summer excursions could be tough, since most of the equipment the *Winter Park Express* uses (usually two P42DC locomotives, a non-powered control unit, and eight Superliner coaches) is needed elsewhere the rest of the year. Amtrak

## RAILS TO THE SLOPES

While Colorado's ski train to Winter Park may be the most famous passenger train to the slopes, it is certainly not the only one in North America. During the first half of the 20th century, railroads across the country tried to entice skiers to climb aboard their trains, especially during the Great Depression, when passenger departments did anything to boost ridership.

Among the most popular were the Boston & Maine's "Snow Trains" from Boston to New Hampshire's White Mountains, which started in 1931. That first year, more than 8,000 boarded the ski trains out of Boston's North Station. Other Eastern railroads followed by offering special trains or skier rates aboard regular trains, including New

York Central, Delaware & Hudson, Reading, and Pennsylvania.

In the West, Southern Pacific ran "Snowball Specials" to Lake Tahoe, Milwaukee Road took skiers to Snoqualmie Ski Bowl east of Seattle, and Great Northern frequently promoted skiing at Big Mountain in Whitefish, Mont. Union Pacific took it one step further and established its own ski resort: the world-famous Sun Valley in Idaho.

Nearly a century after the first snow trains and skier specials, some railroads still try to make a few bucks off people bound for the mountains. Every March, Alaska Railroad teams up with the Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage to run a ski train from Anchorage to an old ski area near Curry. In New York,



Passengers detrain from Boston & Maine Railroad's Snow Train at North Conway, N.H., in this undated photo. TRAINS collection

Metro-North ferries skiers to the Thunder Ridge Ski Area near Patterson. Farther east, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority runs a special weekend ski train from Boston to Wachusett

Mountain. And in Montana, Amtrak is still offering special rates to skiers and riders traveling to Whitefish aboard the *Empire Builder*, just like the Great Northern Railway did decades ago. — Justin Franz



Riders board the *Winter Park Express*, with Amtrak non-powered control unit No. 406 on the rear, at Denver Union Station. Justin Franz

spokesman Marc Magliari says that, while some future schedule adjustments are possible, the train is unlikely to start running before January. The 2018 season will run weekends from Jan. 5 until March 25. In response to passenger feedback, Amtrak officials are considering including some food and beverage services aboard the train during the 2018 season. “We’ve learned a lot from this first season, and we’ll utilize that knowledge to make this service even better next year,” Magliari says.

Amtrak is also looking to expand sponsorship opportunities. Telecom firm CenturyLink was the train’s presenting sponsor during the inaugural season and had its logo wrapped on the non-powered control unit and three of the Superliners. Other sponsors included Clif Bar and Noosa Yoghurt, which offered samples of their products to passengers.

Hurlbert says the *Winter Park Express* also helps address what he believes are big threats to Colorado’s ski industry: climate change and congestion on Interstate 70. According to the Colorado transportation department, the *Winter Park Express* took at least 500 automobiles off the interstate every weekend, playing a small, but still important role, in reducing traffic and pollution.

But perhaps more significant, Hurlbert says the train helps the resort rebuild a link to its past and to the service that connected Denver and Winter Park for seven decades. “Winter Park Resort literally exists because of the railroad,” he says. “And the ski train is a huge part of our culture here.”

### FUTURE AS FRESH AS SNOW

As the sun begins to dip below the snow-covered peaks that surround Winter Park, exhausted yet happy skiers and riders start to gather near the platform. After the eastbound *California Zephyr* rolls by, the *Winter Park Express* pulls up, and skis, snowboards, and passengers are loaded for the return trip to Denver. Once everyone is aboard and the engineer sounds two sharp blasts on the horn, the *Winter Park Express* rolls into Moffat Tunnel.

The sun sets near Rollinsville, and the train grows quiet; passengers drift to sleep or softly talk about their day on the mountain. Meanwhile, volunteer car hosts from ColoRail walk through the train and hand out literature about passenger rail service and a simple message: If you like this train, let your elected representatives know that you want more of it. The group has long advocated for expanded rail ser-

vice along the Front Range to Fort Collins, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo. “This train is a great example of what passenger rail can be in the state of Colorado,” says Souby, the ColoRail president.

Swartzwelter agrees. The train manager and conductor believes that the *Winter Park Express* is a model for what Amtrak and others could replicate elsewhere across the country. But he notes that getting such efforts off the ground isn’t easy and that it takes a team of willing partners like those he found in Amtrak, the Winter Park Resort, Union Pacific, and ColoRail. The legacy of the original *Ski Train* doesn’t hurt, either. Or the stunning scenery that flashes past the big picture windows.

As the train exits one of the more than two dozen tunnels on the Moffat Line, Swartzwelter looks out the window and across the plains toward the glimmering lights of Denver, where the train will come to its final stop in 30 or so minutes.

“I’ve been on hundreds of trains, and nothing beats the scenery on the Moffat Line,” Swartzwelter says. On the *Winter Park Express*, “you don’t have to deal with Interstate traffic, and you get to take in some of the best scenery you can see from a passenger train anywhere in the world.” I