



The Authentic Tourist Train from Nevada's Carson City to Virginia City, the Historic Silver Mining Capital

by Lee Foster

Put the thrill of a 21-mile ride on an authentic steam train, carrying you back to the fabulously wealthy silver mining history of Nevada, high on your must-do exploration list about the American West.



Locomotive of the V&T Railroad to Nevada's Silver City, Virginia City

This train travels from Nevada's current political capital, Carson City, to the richest silver mining area ever in the U.S., which was Virginia City, Nevada. The area in question is immediately east of California's Lake Tahoe.

The train is the Virginia & Truckee Railroad, a significant player in the "national progress" of America in the 19th century, especially in the 1870s. While the train is now for tourist enjoyment, its original purpose was to haul silver ore down from the mines and take wood beams up to stabilize the underground mine tunnels.

Our three-generation family group, ranging from a 4-year-old to a 73-year-old, found the trip engaging, for many reasons.

Costumed re-enactors and entertaining gunslingers got everyone into the mood for a fun outing on the V&T Railroad as we boarded at 10 a.m. in Carson City at 4650 Eastgate Siding Road. The train consisted of an engine and two passenger cars.

Once on the train, as we rolled along, Conductor Dave gave an engaging presentation about the historical story of the wealthy silver mines of the region. Another very patient man, Conductor Fred, walked through the train and answered questions, posing for photos. Along this arid desert route, we saw about 50 wild horses in small scattered herds, providing another romantic element to the outing.



V&T Railroad Conductor Fred celebrates
New Rail Fans

The first prospectors who came here were searching for gold. They found a little gold, but cursed the bluish mud mixed with the gold. Only later did prospectors realize that the bluish mud was a high-grade silver ore. The silver could be extracted from the mud with chemical processes. The first discovery was in 1857, but a roustabout named Henry Tompkins Paige Comstock briefly participated in the enterprise in 1859. His name stuck regarding the discovery, which went down in history as “The Comstock Lode,” though Comstock himself sold out too quickly and did not profit much from it. As is to be expected, there were a few shenanigans involved in settling who would own and control this vast wealth. Many mines opened throughout the region, as evidenced visually today by the “tailings” that dot the hillsides. A few produced astonishing wealth. Many were complete busts, bankrupting their backers when no precious metal was discovered. The major boom period was the 1870s. In 1875 there were 105 working mines in the area. Socially, you could join the select Washoe Club, which had 180 members, only if you were a millionaire (in 1870s uninflated dollars!). San Francisco’s development benefitted immensely from the wealth of the “Silver Kings” of Nevada.

By 11:30 we arrived in quaint Virginia City and were met with a shuttle that took us to the center of the small, brick town.

We were all hungry for lunch, so had burgers, steak sandwiches, and salads at the Mustang Ranch Steakhouse, on C Street, the main street.

Then we took a 30-minute, narrated trolley ride around the town, to learn more details about its fascinating history. Driver Carl knew the town's story in detail and enjoyed sharing it.

Virginia City was the biggest boom site for silver in U.S. history. The town was actually the first major industrial city in the West because silver mining was highly capitalized and required major investment, such as digging underground tunnels. The miners were well organized and received the highest industrial worker wages of their day. Three great remaining mansions of the mine owners—Savage, Castle, and Mackay—testify to the opulence of the era. A museum called Way It Was Museum shows a scale model of all the tunnels below ground, searching for veins of silver ore. There are an estimated 700 miles of mine tunnels underneath this small town.



Virginia City Nevada's brick facades from the fabulous Silver Mining Bonanza of the 1870s

The most famous miner of all was a failure. He was a young man from Missouri named Samuel Clemens, who had no luck in mining, so went to work for the regional newspaper, the Territorial Enterprise, and took the name Mark Twain. Mining's loss was literature's gain. His classic book from the era was *Roughing It*.

After walking up and down the boardwalk main street, C Street, we went into the Ponderosa Saloon and Mine for a mine tour. Incredibly, you enter the mine shaft right from the restaurant/bar. The mine is directly under the town.

After the tour, we walked over to the Silver Queen Saloon to see the portrait of a

lady with more than three thousand silver dollars as her dress. As serendipity would have it, some entertainers were singing at the Silver Queen while we sipped some delicious raspberry lemonade.

We were careful to allow time to catch the 2:40 shuttle back to the train, which departs promptly at 3 o'clock with whomever is aboard. By about 4:30 we were back in Carson City, after scanning the hillsides successfully during the ride back for the chance to see more of the legendary wild horses. Some wild horses were close to the train tracks.

Logistics of Your Trip

Many details of your trip should be planned carefully to insure that you have a pleasant time on this historic train adventure.

The train website is a first stop, showing the schedule during the May-October main period, plus some special excursions, such as the Polar Express around Christmas. See the website for the Virginia & Truckee Railroad at www.vtrailway.com. The two city tourism websites are www.visitcarsoncity.com and www.visitvirginiacitynv.com.

If you live outside the region, allow plenty of time to drive yourself in, or fly into Reno, which is north of Carson City. From San Francisco it is about four hours by car to Truckee on Highway 80, then another hour from Truckee to Carson City. The time required for the trip grows as traffic congestion increases.



Wild horses visible near the V&T Train

enroute between Nevada's Virginia City and Carson City

We decided to split up the drive, making it easier on our 4 and 7 year olds, by renting a house in Truckee in the Tahoe Donner complex. Airbnb offered some good choices.

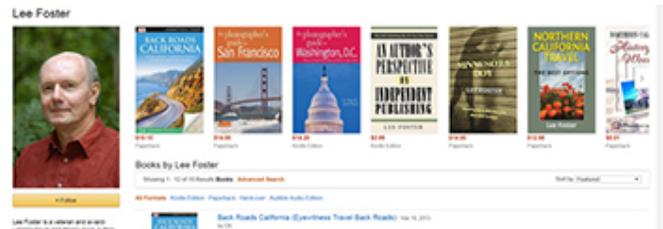
We drove up on Friday and shopped at the large Safeway in Truckee for ingredients to create a family dinner of grilled corn and pork chops on an outdoor deck at the rental house. Saturday we drove the hour to the train, enjoyed the train, then drove back to Truckee and treated ourselves to an easy pizza takeout dinner from Best Pies Pizza in Truckee.

We had to get up early Saturday morning to get to Carson City for the 10 a.m. train departure, so we drove the fast Highway 80 to Reno and then south on Highway 395. Then, after the train trip, we took the more scenic route back along the east side of Lake Tahoe, returning to Truckee, enjoying the lovely Nevada state parks that occupy much of the route.

Finally, before the Sunday afternoon drive to the Bay Area, we indulged in some morning water play for the kids and a walk at the lovely state park at Donner Lake, known as Donner Memorial State Park. An excellent interpretive center celebrates the pioneering spirit of those who crossed this terrain, especially in the 1840s. The story includes a tragic episode, known as the Donner Party, in which cannibalism was a factor enabling some of the stronger folks to survive starvation and snow entrapment in the winter of 1846. Picnic benches and a walk along the trail on the south side of the lake make this one of the more beautiful and accessible locations to enjoy in the Lake Tahoe region.

Then, to make the long drive back to the Bay Area more interesting, we drove south down the rustic west side of Lake Tahoe, along the Truckee River, stopping for a picnic lunch at Sugar Pine Point State Park. We also stopped at the commanding lookout at Emerald Bay, which many observers would nominate as the most superlative vista in the entire region. You can park along the road just north of the official Inspiration Point vista to get the best view, but be careful of traffic.

At South Lake Tahoe, we turned west on Highway 50 back to the Bay Area after stoking up with a strong coffee latte at the Alpina Coffee Shop on Emerald Bay Road, near the Highway 50 turnoff. The Highway 50 road is twisty compared to Highway 80, but we took the drive slowly, due to the expected heavy Sunday evening traffic back to the Bay Area.



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We were relaxed, knowing we had experienced a superb and authentic historic train trip, one of the best in the West, and had circled most of Lake Tahoe, immersing ourselves in its pine-filled beauty.