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Natural beauty by train - Trip gives look at some unique views, insight into railroad history.



The fall train ride at Doe River Gorge chugs through some scenery. (Dave Boyd / Johnson City Press)

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ELIZABETHTON — The leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn the familiar shades of golden brown, redish-orange and bright yellow.

The cool fall breeze was blowing through the train's open-air trailers where several dozen riders gazed at the dense mountain foliage hidden deep in the forest.

"That is wild, isn't it?" one onlooker exclaimed as she marveled at Doe River Gorge's majestic beauty as the small train wound around and through the mountain side, chugging through old, dark tunnels and coming surprisingly close to rocky outcroppings and the ledges of sheer cliffs, which allowed a unique view down several hundred feet into the gorge and the rushing water below.

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The Doe River Gorge Ministries Christian camp for youth held Fall Color Excursion 2005 last Sunday from 1 p.m. until 5 p.m., letting all who stopped by ride the historical East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad that sits on the property.

The small gauge railroad was built in the early 1880s to haul valuable iron ore from Cranberry, N.C., to refineries in Johnson City.

It is not used for that anymore, but occasionally the camp will open it up to the public so that everyone can enjoy the short, scenic ride through the mountains.

One couple from Erwin, Letha and Phil Wilson, rode the train and thought the experience was wonderful.

“Oh, we enjoyed it,” Letha said.

“I enjoyed it tremendously,” Phil added.

The train’s guide provided insightful quips about the railroad’s history.

“I learned a lot of information,” Phil said. “I didn’t know it went all the way to Boone (N.C.).

It does not now, but at one time, that was just about the only way to travel from Boone to this area, stopping along the way to let passengers admire the scenery or catch some fish and picnic along the Doe River.

“We love the outdoors, me and Phil, and it’s turned out to be a beautiful day,” Letha said.

Though fall was trying to present itself on the mountain side, there was still plenty of greenery to be seen.

“It would have really been enjoyable had the trees been turned,” Phil commented as his wife eyed the children riding mountain boards down a grassy hillside a short distance away from the train.

Mountain boards are like snow boards. However, they are equipped with four large wheels and a hand brake — and there is no snow on the incline, just grass or dirt or gravel — preferably grass.

“I’m going to try this here,” Letha said with a grin. She and her family then left to watch her brave the hill.

The ministry’s president, Terry Maughon, said Sunday was a chance to show everyone God’s scenery.

“Today is basically just an open house and railroad excursion, just to open it up to the community and show them God’s beauty,” he said.

Train rides, mountain boarding and God’s beauty were not the only things available for visitors. Tree climbing, mountain biking, hiking, apple butter making, rock climbing and other physical activities could

be enjoyed.

The camp is geared toward children, though not limited to them, and was the result of Maughon's search for full-time employment and a desire to teach kids the word of God by providing a beautiful setting and fun-filled environment.

"So I was looking for something full-time that everyone could be involved in," he said.

Before he found the Doe River Gorge, he had several camps around the area, mainly for younger children.

"As we were running these camps, parents started saying you need to have a camp for older kids," Maughon said.

One day he hiked the Doe River Gorge, and, according to him, through divine intervention, he had the deed to the land in his hand about two years later. A feat in itself considering neither the state nor Elizabethton could manage to wrangle the land from its owner, Maughon said.

Now the camp is capable of hosting around 2,000 kids at a time. That is a long way from their first year of only 20 about 10 years ago.

Maughon credits that success to the camp's fun learning environment.

"We're a Christian-oriented camp and our goal is to help kids discover the adventure of knowing God," he said. "When you're having fun, it's a catalyst to building relationships."

Find out more about the ministry at www.doerivergorge.com.

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