

# Desert Ra

Nearly the final leg of BNSF's Chicago-LA main line

by David Lustig

A train descends from Ash Hill heading east-bound towards Needles. The Mojave Desert comes into its own before dawn and after sunset. This is the land of the telephoto. Kit Courter

# ilroading

at its finest





**When the wind is blowing**, and more often than not it is, you'll see a train in the distance long before you hear it.

You're in the Mojave Desert, and as the song by The Who says, you can see for miles and miles and miles. Not necessarily flat like parts of Texas, but a rolling, up and down terrain punctuated by cactus, tiny hamlets both alive and abandoned, and fragments of the original Route 66 — now a disconnected relic from the past — can be seen here and there.

If there is an arid version of heaven, for train fans, this is it; an endless parade of BNSF freight trains hustling to and from the West Coast, with a smidgen of Amtrak and an interchange with short line Arizona & California thrown in for punctuation at a remote wide spot in the road called Cadiz.

This is the Needles Subdivision of the former Santa Fe's main line, which at one time was the only railroad route between Chicago and the ultimate prize: California. Once it was simply known as the main line to California. Now, it's part of BNSF's Southern Transcon, its northern counterpart traveling between Chicago and the Pacific Northwest. It's a great place to

watch, chase, and photograph trains doing what they do best — moving freight rapidly and efficiently.

### **Beginning the journey**

The chase begins at the Arizona-California border for the 170-mile dash to Barstow, significant for the site of BNSF's mainline split — southwest to the Los Angeles basin and north through the heart of the state to reach the San Francisco Bay area.

Barstow is not only home to a significant classification yard and servicing facilities, but a U.S. Marine Corp logistics base, a former Harvey House hotel, and the Western America Railroad Museum.

In between lies what looks like a deceptively easy run for train crews. Easy compared to operations over nearby Cajon Pass, perhaps, but the trip through the desert, with its up-and-down contours, keeps everyone on top of their game. This is no place to sit back and enjoy the scenery. Located on the western bank of the life-giving Colorado River, Needles — named after a group of mountains on the Arizona side of the river — is an oasis for BNSF and travelers on parallel Interstate 40. Just east of the

former Harvey House, trains make a quick crew change. Initially the town was just a series of tents for advancing railroad construction crews. Southern Pacific originally built the line from Barstow to Needles and met with the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad (an ATSF Subsidiary) at Needles. In 1884, the SP sold the Needles Sub to the ATSF.

At its peak, Needles would sport a Harvey House Hotel, car repair shops, a roundhouse, and refrigerator car icing facilities. Except for being a crew change point, today little remains except a portion of the Harvey House — now on the list of National Register of Historic Places. No longer a functioning hotel, restoration of the structure was completed in 2014, and currently the El Garces Intermodal Transportation Facility is used as a transportation hub for Needles area transit and other civic activities.

Once on board, westbound crews leave Needles and its 5,000 or so residents in their rearview mirror.

For those who have a little time to explore, this small town has more to offer visitors than just the railroad. As the entrance to California, it was once a major stop on U.S. Route 66, the Chicago to Pacific Ocean

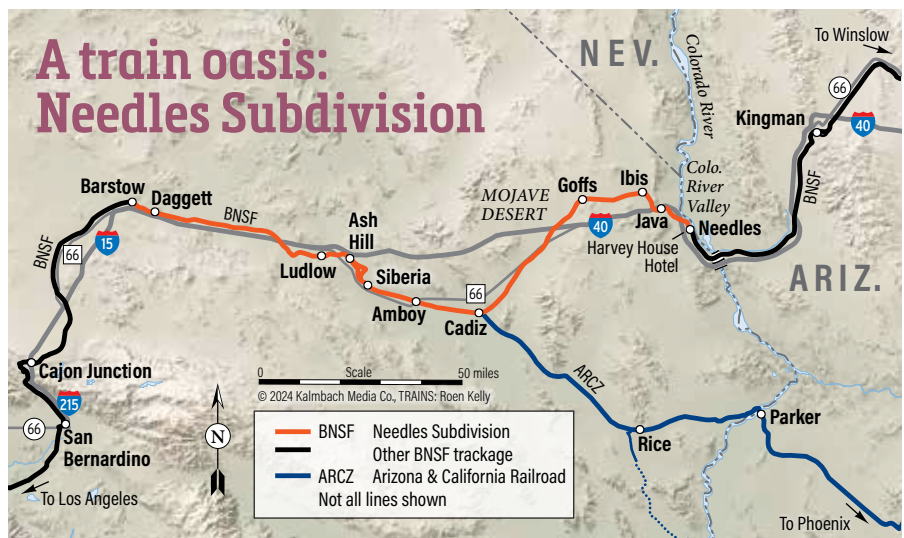


A westbound intermodal container train was holding on the siding at Goffs, Calif., to allow a higher priority train to pass. Lightning storms are common during certain parts of the year. Be on the lookout for flash flooding. Kit Courter

highway made famous in movies, television shows, and music. For movie buffs, Hollywood made it forever known as one of the shooting locations for the 1940 epic *Grapes of Wrath*, the story of a down-on-its-luck Oklahoma family escaping the Dust Bowl during The Great Depression.

For the scores of trains leaving Needles and climbing out of the Colorado River Valley, the first 30 or so miles is an uphill slog, with the toughest being a 1.4% grade stretching from the crew change point west to the crest of the hill at Goffs and the end of the newly installed third track. After topping the hill at Goffs, there begins a high speed decent (up to 70 mph for freight and 90 mph for Amtrak) toward the aforementioned Cadiz, which looms quickly on the horizon. Here, the BNSF interchanges with the Arizona & California Railroad, a Class III short line that was originally a subdivision of the Santa Fe.

Sold to ParkSierra RailGroup in the early 1990s, it was taken over by Rail-America, and eventually Genesee & Wyoming in 2012. From Cadiz, the A&C heads southeast to Rice before crossing the Colorado River at Parker, Ariz. It continues to



Matthie and then on to Phoenix via BNSF trackage rights.

Past Cadiz and over the slight “Bolo Bump,” the line traverses the longest stretch of zero grade on the Needles Subdivision, the 1-mile segment east of Amboy. Continuing west, another 1.4% grade must be overcome to reach Ash Hill. Manned help-

ers are rare to non-existent these days, replaced by a liberal use of distributed power.

Continuing west, there are other points of interest — most of them a myriad of scenes revealing what the harsh desert climate does to humans and the little towns that dot the right-of-way. A perfect example is the hamlet of Ludlow, some 50 miles



An outbound crew waits to climb aboard ES44AC No. 6350 at Needles, Calif., for the next leg of the journey to Winslow, Ariz. The employee descending the locomotive stairs on the left has just handled the train across the 170-mile Needles Subdivision. Elrond Lawrence



With the Dead Mountains as a backdrop, ES44DC No. 7825 crosses U.S. Highway 95 as it leads an intermodal train on Main Track One and rejoins Main Track Two climbing Goffs Hill. David Styffe

east of Barstow. There are a few gas stations and local businesses, but basically the unincorporated town sitting on or near Route 66 is only a shell of its former glory. Dating back to the 19th century, it was originally a water spot that turned into a mining center after ore was discovered nearby.

Adding to its fame, from 1906 to 1940, it was the southernmost destination of the Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad, as well as the northernmost point of the Ludlow & Southern Railway, a mining railroad that operated due south to a place called Rochester and the nearby Bagdad-Chase gold mine. It lasted into the 1930s, with its last stand as

a railroad being transportation for locals into Ludlow on an L&S speeder. If nothing else, it is notable for once operating a former New York Central 4-6-0 that, when the boiler was no longer usable, was rebuilt with a Holt tractor engine connected by chain drive to its original driving wheels. If one knows where to look, remnants of some old Tonopah & Tidewater structures or foundations remain visible.

By the time World War II came around, the town of Ludlow was on the skids, save for being a watering hole for rubber-tired travelers. The coming of the replacement Interstate 40, bypassing what was left of the town, sealed its fate. It's a scene that plays

out over and over again with only slight variations as the right-of-way reaches Barstow. Along the way, you may start noticing some of the peculiarities of this line. Many of the long-abandoned online stations, now just mileposts, have interesting names. Many were named for local Southern Pacific employees; others were cleverly put into a loose form of alphabetical order.

### What you might see today

BNSF wisely tries to keep certain locomotive models assigned to particular regions on the system. On the southern transcon, expect a majority of General Electric (now Wabtec) units, while in the coal and grain fields of northern and mid-America various EMD (now Progress Rail) models predominate.

That doesn't mean you will never see an EMD/Progress Rail locomotive in GE/Wabtec territory and vice versa, but be aware that it is not particularly common. If an EMD slips through to the west, consider it just a little variety.

Amtrak has the *Southwest Chief* on this line, and if it is running on time, you will never see it in daylight. It is, however, a prime candidate to hone your night photography. Eastbound Amtrak No. 4 slips out of Barstow at 9:46 p.m. and stops at Needles at 12:11 a.m., departing 5 minutes later for Chicago. Westbound No. 3 stops at Needles at 12:26 a.m. and sees the bright lights of Barstow at 3:40 a.m.

### How it came to pass

Before getting into chasing, watching, and photographing the railroad and its trains, perhaps consider some of the reasons the original Santa Fe and its Chicago-LA main line became such a buzz word. The word is publicity. At one time, every major U.S. railroad knew how to effectively get the word out, especially when it concerned its passenger trains.

Just as important as the operating department in the organizational chart of any railroad was its publicity department. And Santa Fe's was among the best. It was not a coincidence that when a movie or stage star boarded or got off a Santa Fe train that the press and its accompanying flashbulb popping photographers were on hand for the event. The city of Pasadena, a suburb of LA, for example, was a popular photo op when the railroad and the movie studios combined their efforts.

Toy makers such as Lionel and American Flyer were eager to display Santa Fe's red-and-silver livery on their model locomotives, and the railroad made liberal use of highway billboards and print media to advertise almost every passenger train that plied the system. Perhaps the biggest and most well-organized boosters of the rail-

A 25-second exposure combined with an electric flash captured BNSF No. 8205 East rolling downhill at Bagdad, Calif. The desert is a great place to explore photographic angles unavailable in more urban environments. David Styffe



road's image were the local public relations offices that dotted the system. From Chicago to Topeka, Amarillo, and LA, as well as San Francisco, Albuquerque, and Dallas — wherever the railroad had an image to project — Santa Fe men and women were pushing it, whether at a public event or working the halls of the state government.

Perhaps one of the busier offices was LA. Among the farthest from corporate headquarters in Chicago, the men and women in this field office made sure everything went well. They were there when Hollywood's special passengers were appropriately received when they took the *Super Chief* to or from LA, or when someone suggested that the railroad should again run its annual Holiday Train. Unfortunately, at times, they also were there standing trackside at a major derailment managing the information flow to a questioning press to ensure public understanding that the railroad was doing everything it could to clean up the mess safely and in a timely manner.

Accordingly, whenever the press, usually a local newspaper or regional magazine wanted to do "A day in the life of the railroad," it was the PR department that handled it. And more often than not, the story always included a locomotive cab ride.

Acquiescing when they got the green light from Chicago, before any reporter or photographer set foot on the property, the



Part of the success of continuing to keep the line in front of the press was Santa Fe's public relations department escorting journalists on tours. Based out of Los Angeles, PR representative Mike Martin takes a break to enjoy the ride from the cab. David Lustig

telephone was heating up. It would be somebody like Tom Buckley or Mike Martin from PR talking with the operating department to arrange it. Then it was a call to the shops.

"I've got a reporter and photographer planning to take a cab ride from San Bernardino to Barstow next Tuesday," Martin would say. "Please keep an eye on what

power is planned for their trip. Can we put together a quartet of F45s? Maybe wax the lead unit?"

And Martin or one of his cohorts would shepherd the visitors throughout the trip. Working for Santa Fe was more than just a job, it was a career. Which is why when train fans want to get a taste of desert railroading today, more often than not, BNSF's



Grinding upgrade, C44-9W No. 4078 is in charge of an intermodal train at Siberia, Calif., east of Ash Hill and Ludlow. Telephoto lenses are perfect for shooting in the Mojave Desert.

## More resources

**THERE ARE A MYRIAD OF SOURCES** that provide information on current BNSF operations, including historical societies and groups hosting detailed websites on what visitors may or may not expect on a typical trip. You cannot be too prepared for a trip into the California desert.

former Santa Fe main line in California is a natural magnet.

### Chasing the trains

If you like desert railroading, the line between Needles and Barstow is a must. You've got to look behind the obvious and realize that it isn't really desert at all, just arid, windy, and unforgiving for both man and beast if not prepared.

Hunting trains between Needles and Barstow is not only fun, but frequent. Scores of through BNSF freights punctuated by a few locals roam this line, as well as Amtrak's daily *Southwest Chief* will definitely keep your interest. But like any other



A pair of EMD SD40-2s demoted to yard service pass the Harvey House in Barstow, Calif. Today, it houses an Amtrak station, railroad museum, visitor's center, and more. Two photos, Elrond Lawrence

trip, study the maps, look and see what's available in hotels and rest stops, and take note from those who have experienced it before you.

There are remnants of civilization everywhere; once thriving towns are now shells of what they once were — some totally abandoned. There have also been line relocations and operational changes due to advances in technology.

Just as important as chasing trains, there's an incredible history out here from the country's westward push to the Pacific. You might want to consider the historical aspect. Performing internet searches and reviewing books and magazines on Santa Fe's operations might be worth your time. Researching historical societies and museums along the route will help you schedule your trip so sites are open while you're near. **I**

# Your trip

**NO. 1: BE PREPARED.** If you have never been in a desert climate before, it might be a rude awakening. The trees are few and far between, the wind incredible, the heat almost unbearable, and the cold bone-chilling.

Think you have seen it all? A couple of fans I know were tooling around in their automobile, the air conditioning taming the outside temperature hovering around 100 degrees while on Interstate 40 looking forward to finding their next train when the car's motor began acting up. Wisely getting off the freeway and coasting to a stop underneath a remote overpass for the shade, they soon found out they had no cell coverage. (Note: The Needles Sub has multiple areas where cell phone coverage may not be reliable.)

So, they sat, nursing a single bottle of water for hours until a

California Highway Patrol cruiser, on routine patrol spotted them. The officer rolled down his window, ascertained both were okay and offered to radio for a tow truck. It was the only vehicle they had seen in 4 hours.

From whichever direction you enter the Mojave Desert, the Barstow side, or the Needles side, make sure your vehicle is in good mechanical condition. Get an ice chest and fill it with ice, water, and food. If it's the summer months and your body can take it, plan to use salt. Bring a hat, maybe one with a draw string to prevent it from flying off if it's windy. Consider sunscreen lotion, and a good pair of sunglasses.

Conversely, the winter months provide their own requirements. It gets cold in the desert, especially at night. Bring a warm jacket, scarf, and gloves — basically the

typical accoutrements you might bring for a trip to the mountains.

And not to sound like "the sky is falling," but be aware of flash flooding during inclement weather. It's important to understand that flash flooding on the Needles Sub can occur from heavy rain falling on the mountain ranges many miles north of the track when it's not raining where you are. Take note of all the extensive bridges and dikes the railway has built over the years in what appear to be dry washes — they were built for a reason.

**NO. 2: DON'T FORGET THE CAR.**

Your vehicle has a trunk so use it. Bring extra water or coolant for the radiator, a sturdy shovel (foldable) — in case you get into unforeseen sandy conditions — and a decent flashlight. Planning to stake out a particular spot on the

line? Consider a beach chair and an umbrella. Laugh now, but when the unrelenting sun is beating down on everything you'll be glad you toted one along.

**NO. 3: PHOTO GEAR.** The California desert is a wonderful justification for that monster telephoto zoom you have and rarely use. Bring a tripod and be careful of heat waves. For digital photographers, bring plenty of cards and a safe place to store them. Film shooters bring ISO 100 stock. Remember it can be windy so bring adequate protection for your equipment. Optics? Wide angles to super telephotos will find use out here.

**A westbound stack train captures the last rays of daylight in the desert's wide-open spaces on a typically cloudless Feb. 6, 2016.**

David Styffe

