

## Steve's Great Rail Journeys 2013-2017 – ISLE OF MAN

Great Rail Journeys operate the Vintage Railways of the Isle of Man tour, a five-night break by ferry from Heysham, based in the four-star Claremont Hotel in the island capital, Douglas. The tour is popular and runs almost weekly throughout the summer. I have taken it several times, most recently in 2014 and 2015.



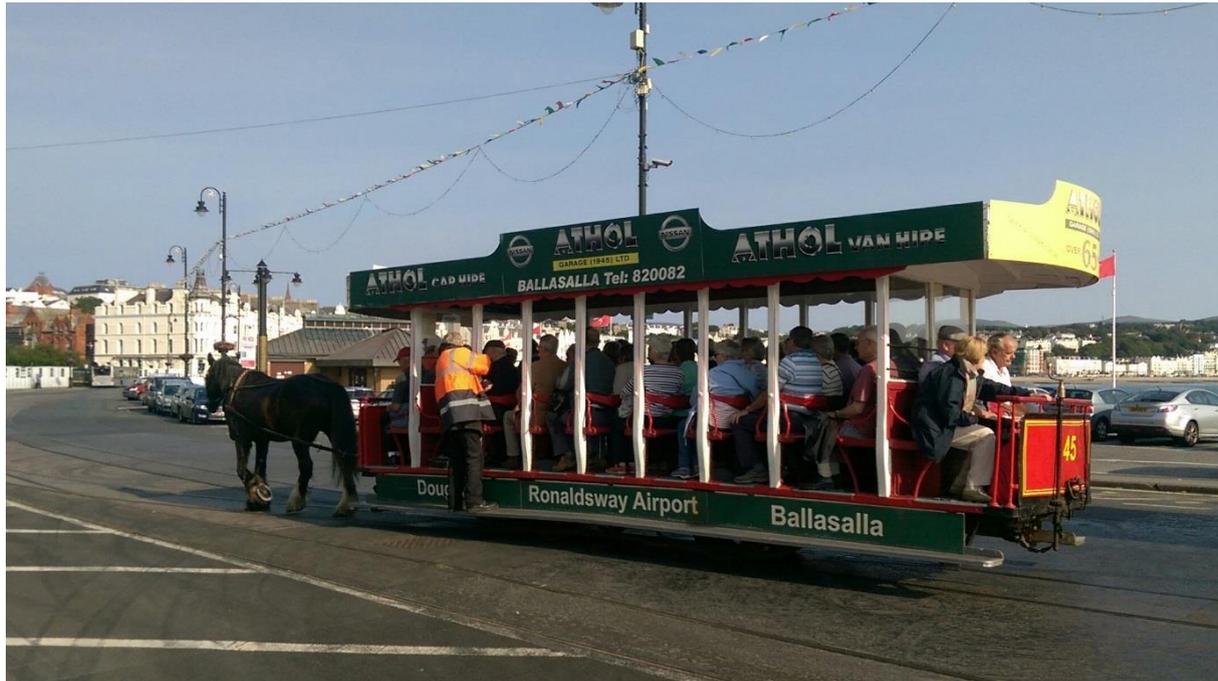
The island is a centre for vintage transport, one of the main draws for tourists, and the tour includes journeys on all of the main routes. The Douglas horse trams run along the promenade from the ferry terminal to Derby Castle where the Manx Electric Railway, a tramway with most cars over a century old, runs for 17 miles via Laxey to Ramsey. From Laxey the Snaefell Mountain Railway runs to summit of Snaefell, the highest point on the island at 2034 feet, with views (if weather permits) over to Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. The Isle of Man Steam Railway, operated by steam locomotives built between 1873 and 1926 runs from Douglas to Port Erin. The excursions also include coach travel to reach most other parts of the island, including the towns of Peel and Castletown, the Sound at the southern tip of the island looking across to the Calf of Man, much of the course of the motorbike TT races, and Tynwald hill, the ancient site of the Manx Parliament.

*The Laxey Wheel*

The tour includes a Go Explore pass, which covers all the public transport on the island (including the vintage railways) and free entry to all Manx National Heritage sites. The pass is worthwhile for anyone visiting the island. Heritage sites which can be visited during the tour are the Laxey Wheel (the largest working waterwheel in the world, built to pump water from the local mines), the Castle and the House of Mannanan Museum of Manx Celtic and Viking heritage at Peel, the Cregneash open air museum of traditional Manx farming life, and Castle Rushen and the Old House of Keys in the former capital, Castletown.

A free day allows participants to explore other parts of the island at their leisure. I've been able to take some of the group to the Steam Railway sheds and the two small, volunteer-run railways, the Groudle Glen Railway and the Laxey Mine Railway, plus a backstage tour of the magnificently restored Gaiety Theatre in Douglas. In spare time I've visited Port St Mary during the queenie (scallop) festival and explored the old part of Laxey by the harbour.

Personal highlights include being hauled along Douglas Promenade by a horse called Steve, and following the TT course with a commentary by our coach driver, who had often ridden it on his own motorbike. Clear weather at the top of Snaefell (on one occasion out of four so far) was a plus, though the railway journey to the summit is always worth it. I've managed to climb to top of the Laxey Wheel by the narrow spiral staircase, and on each visit to Peel I have made sure I have a kipper roll from the smokehouse. There has been time to visit a few of the pubs in Douglas and around the island – there is plenty of decent beer to be had, and a good selection of Good Beer Guide listed pubs.



*Steve the horse takes a full load in his stride*

The tour gives a good introduction to the island which has reinvented itself from a bucket-and-spade destination. Other attractions are the motorbike races and an island-wide network of marked walking paths. A visit to the island can seem like stepping back fifty years or more – this can have its downsides, though the last time I was there the Isle of Man seemed to be edging its way slowly into the twenty-first century. In the middle of the Irish Sea the weather is not always perfect - there has been the occasional wet day but none of my visits have been spoiled by a long spell of bad weather. There are microclimates on the island and one side can have sunshine while it is raining on the other.

Finally, The Isle of Man is a Crown Dependency and is independent from the UK except for defence and external affairs. It is not part of the European Union. Maybe England should have applied to become part of the Isle of Man, and left the rest of us to get on with life without the horrors of Brexit.



*'Oi! Who's stolen my tank engine' said Thomas to his twin brother.  
Isle of Man Steam Railway sheds.*

For more information about Vintage Railways of the Isle of Man tour visit [www.greatrail.com](http://www.greatrail.com) . The tour is running regularly from April until October 2018. Strangely, the website includes this tour under England. Some of the attractions mentioned have limited opening hours, though the published and online tourist information provided by the Isle of Man Government ([www.visitisleofman.com](http://www.visitisleofman.com)) is comprehensive.

I can provide additional information for anyone interested in this tour or in visiting the Isle of Man independently.

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