



A BLEAK DAY IN THE HILLS IS BRIGHTENED BY A TRIP ON A STEAM TRAIN

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You can only see it as an adventure. On a miserable, cold Adelaide morning we pack the family in the car and head for the Hills. The fog above Crafers is so thick the tail lights of the cars in front are swallowed by the mist after 50m. But that's OK. The sense of excitement from the kids in the back seat is infectious. We are heading to Mt Barker to board the Southern Encounter and will soon be rolling to Victor Harbor.

The Southern Encounter takes a meandering route through the Adelaide Hills towards the sea. Unfortunately it's almost as cold inside the carriage as it is outside. Still, the green leather seats are soft and comfortable, and for a family of four the set-up is ideal, with four seats in a booth formation facing each other. Today the train is being pulled by a 930 Class Diesel Locomotive which began its working life in 1955

The passengers are a mix of families with young kids and some older trainspotter types and it's a happy atmosphere as everyone settles into the swaying, rollicking rhythm of the train.

There's plenty to watch on the two-hour journey. Kangaroos race the train, abandoned sidings and stations from a different era materialise, there is the change in landscape from the Hills to the plain and then the run along the coast. For a break there is always the buffet car for a coffee, although on this day the cupcakes disappear too soon.

But it's at Goolwa the real highlight of the day appears. The Rx207 steam locomotive, which first ran in 1913, will take us to Victor. There is something primal about the steam engine. A steam engine is alive, it has a presence beyond a mere machine like the diesel. Today is all about the journey and not the destination. Which is just as well because Victor on a cold, wet day is even less appealing than usual, especially with three hours before the return journey.

The Anchorage by the station is a good place to hole up and some vouchers distributed on the train even means you can have a free coffee. Soon we are back in the cocoon of the carriage. It's still cold inside but that familiar cadence of the train sends us all into a state of deep relaxation and the youngest gently falls asleep.

It's after 6pm and pitch dark when we get back to Mt Barker. It's been an exhausting, fun day and already the seven-year-old wants to know when he can go again

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