

Essex Steam Train Offers Comedy, Drama Presentations On Dinner Rides



Jenny Hart and her date Brian Walsh, both of Wethersfield, talk before ordering dinner and watching a performance of "The Cutting Room Floor" aboard the Essex Murder Mystery Train. (MARK MIRKO/HARTFORD COURANT / July 17, 2009)

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Maybe it's the train platform that looks perfectly planted in this sleepy town or the restored 1920s Pullman cars that line the tracks, but the **Valley Railroad** Co. station in Essex looks like something out of a movie.

And at this time of year you can board the Essex Steam Train and instantly become a part of a drama or a comedy.

For the summer, this heritage railroad, which still operates between **Old Saybrook** and **Haddam**, is offering dinner train rides suited for the season and priced for the economy. The "Friday Night Lite" program includes a leisurely ride with an improv comedy, "Laugh Tracks," or a murder mystery, "The Cutting Room Floor."

The Essex Clipper Dinner Train starts boarding at 7 p.m. and leaves the station by 7:30 p.m. Passengers are assisted by a conductor in the traditional uniform, flat hat and all, while music softly plays from the station's speakers. The train holds more than 50 seats with tables — draped with white cloths and roses — available for parties of two and four.

Passengers spend the first half of the ride enjoying dinner. Each person gets a chicken or vegetable salad wrap, a fruit cup and dessert included in the \$45 ticket price, and the **car** has a full bar with drinks ranging from \$4 to \$8.

The scenery is a tranquil view of hills and trees. The train offers a perfect view of Gillette Castle in **East Haddam** and sailboats and yachts along the **Connecticut River**.

From time to time, the conductor pops into the car to give information about the sights outside the window.

The cars occasionally jostle back and forth, but never enough to make anything spill or tip.

Once the sun sets and the scenery is less visible — about halfway through the ride — the show begins. The murder-mystery show and comedy improv are presented on alternate weekends. Both rides last about two and a half hours. Tonight's production is the "Laugh Tracks" improv. Only a handful of actors can move and work along the small aisle and manage to stay steady on their feet to stage their act.

"It's a lot more intimate and that's one of the things that I like, because you can really connect with every person in the audience on the train, whether it's a full train or partially full," says Michelle O'Neill, an actor in "Laugh Tracks." "Everybody feels like they're part of the show."

The improv-comedy show, which includes three actors, changes with each ride, and is driven by audience participation.

The murder-mystery show is closer to a play, with less audience participation, and involves the cast of the first "talkie" movie on a train bound for Hollywood during the 1920s. Both shows are presented by Riverway Studio, a production company and recording studio in East Haddam.

Conductor Rob Bradway says the train has gained a good following, and many people come for repeat visits. Jackie and Tony Lozowski of Cranston, R. I., have been regulars for years. On every trip, the couple throws a penny into the Connecticut River as the train passes over, for good luck and because it's their tradition.

"We love the train," Jackie Lozowski says. "We come at least once a year and sometimes we'll take the boat ride as well as the train."

Bradway says beyond the dinner, improv comedy and murder mystery, the train offers the chance for riders to really relax, even just for a few hours.

"It seems as though life is going so fast and everyone's going at such a frantic pace that [we do anything] to just kind of guide people into that place of peacefulness ... and let us do the worrying for a couple hours."