

The Shrine

8 July 2008

You approach as any new pilgrim would after a long, long journey across the dry, dusty desert.

You approach with trepidation.

You approach with wonder.

You approach with reverence.



What will it bring, this shrine you have come so far, endured so much, to see, to touch, to experience?

What lies inside its perfectly preserved skin and skeleton; mummified by the searing sun and the dry desert air?

The Shrine

With caution and humility you approach, passing slowly by the sentinel, once bountiful, but now dry and brittle with age.



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Cautiously, ever so cautiously, you enter.

Each step tentative, each step a tread on holy, hallowed ground.



The Shrine

Deeper into the shadows you penetrate, until slowly, out of the darkness, they emerge.



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Frozen, eternally arrested in mid flight, they stand.



Ever ready, ever longing, ever wistful for the days gone by.



The days gone by when they ruled the rails, ruled the valley, ruled even the desert; its forbidding expanses beaten back by ribbons of steel, showers of sparks and the long, lonesome wail of a steam whistle fading into the long, dark night.

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But those days are gone now.

Never again will the turntable pick their slot and set them free, free to roam the rails - proud, strong, defiant, and triumphant.



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No, those days are gone, over, and, like these holy artifacts, forgotten.



The Shrine

Never again will the roundhouse stack vents each coddle a steam locomotive.



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Never again will the engine steps shine from engineer's boots.



Never again will the rails sing, then shiver, then shake from the pounding drivers of a 2-8-2.



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And never again will the steam whistle wail, long into the dark, lonesome night.



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They are all abandoned now, left to the vandals, the winds and the sun.

They are left to slowly, drop by drop, bleed out into the desert they once ruled.



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It is all that is left here, here in the shrine to steam.



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This shrine to steam is located at Baquedano, Chile, in the Atacama desert.

A 2-8-2 refers to the distribution of leading, drive and trailing wheels on a steam locomotive. The converted coal burning locomotive in the shots on pages 7, 10 and 12 is a 2-6-0, all others were oil burning 2-8-2s.

A roundhouse was used to store and service the steam locomotives between runs. A centrally located turntable rotated to extract or insert the engines in their slots and to position them for exit into the rail yard and mainline.

All photos by Douglas Hackney



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>

