

## **February 2019 Update**

### **Celebrating 8 years of Linesiding with John Tours**

The beginning of a new year and after 8 years of organising overseas railway tours with 18 tours completed, I'm looking back but also considering the future.

When I offered my first tour in 2011, I'd participated in TEFS, RT&P and LCGB Tours to the Philippines, Java Indonesia, Turkey, China and Poland and worked with Dave Thornhill (World Steam Skyliner Tours) and with Rob Dickinson for his Java Tours. I'd also spent much of my working life abroad and had visited China and Java extensively chasing steam. I entered the tour market in 2011 as a tour organiser when some of the big boys had given up on China after the end of mainline steam over the Jingpeng Pass but at a time when there was still plenty of real working steam to be found. The initial tours were popular and successful, so I carried on and added Java, Bosnia and now Romania to the list of countries offered. I have good contacts in the first 3 of those countries to offer quality railway tours and my new contacts in Romania will hopefully be as competent. However, now that real, working steam is coming to an end, the future of Linesiding with John tours is uncertain. Is there a future and if so what is it? How will Linesiding with John Tours transition (or not) into a new era? Your suggestions after reading this are most welcome.

### **Linesiding with John Tour History**

I organised my first tour in 2011 to Shibanzi (Jiayang Coal Railway) at the time of my 60th birthday. Twelve people signed up for an extended visit. We stayed at Sanjing and Bagou and walked the whole line during the course of our visit. At the time, there were steam and electric coal trains, of course, as well as steam passenger and tourist trains, Bagou was quite a thriving community (if mainly retired) and the railway was only just getting into tourist trains. Now it's primarily tourist trains with just an early and late passenger train in the tourist seasons, Bagou is depopulated, the steam and electric coal trains are both finished and they have one (perhaps more) diesel steam pretenders.

You can read the report of that first trip here:

<http://rabylee.uk/bagoublog.html>

and

<http://rabylee.uk/bagousteam.html>

The photo below shows 8 of the participants on the very first Linesiding with John tour outside the Tianya Guest House in Bagou, Sichuan.



Back row, Paul M-B, John A, Bruce, Ron, Peter, Paul S, Elmar  
 locals including Tianya Guest House hosts in front of Bruce,  
 Front, Terry

I followed this the same year (2011) with a visit to see some standard gauge Chinese steam locations - **Baiyin, Sandaoling, Yamansu and Fuxin**. Of course, of these steam locations, only Sandaoling remains steamy.

Read the report of that trip here:

<http://rabylee.uk/sandaoblog.html>

In **March 2012**, I led another trip to **Shibanxi** but including **other steam and narrow gauge sites in Sichuan and Chongqing**. Tourism was really taking hold at Shibanxi and the local tourists provided some of the more interesting photos! The steam coal trains still survived but had been timed to avoid delaying the tourist trains.

<http://rabylee.uk/shibanxi2012.html>

<http://rabylee.uk/bagou2012.html>

The next photos shows a smart young Chinese couple beside a typically grubby C2 at Huangcunjin at the top end of the line at Shibanxi.



In **July-August 2012**, I assisted Bernd Seiler of Farrail Tours with a Java tour that included a pre-tour to mills with interesting diesels or diesel field work. The long field line at Kreet Baru which required diesel banking was the highlight. The main tour and saw a lot of steam action at places such as Sragi, Sumberharjo and Pangka. Although Bernd enjoyed the non-steam element himself, this didn't prove popular with his regular 'hard steam' men so the pre-tour ran with few participants and Bernd didn't repeat it.

<http://rabylee.uk/javablog12.html>

**October 2012** also saw another **Chinese standard gauge tour to Sandaoling, Baiyin, Yuanbaoshan, Pingzhuang, Fuxin and Tiefa.**

<http://rabylee.uk/china4blog.html>

The photo below shows part of the group at Sandaoling. The purpose of the wall is unclear but with some slabs remaining on the top, it may have been a passenger halt on the former line from Kengkou to the town. Such a line would probably have once been used by workers coming on and going off shift. It may also have served the power station in town.





Alan, John Athersuch, me, Gareth, Richard, Tony  
At the Pipe at Sandaoling at lunchtime looking into the pit



John A gets his priorities right?

**2013 November - Shibaxi, Baiyin, Sandaoling, Pingzhuang and Fuxin**

<http://www.users.waitrose.com/~jraby/mom2.html>

**2014 September Bosnia**

Prompted by Terry Wallace and John Athersuch with a guide suggested by Terry, I organised my first Bosnian steam tour with Majda and her boyfriend (now husband) Dario. Even by that time, active steam was limited to the Tuzla area.

<http://rabylee.uk/bosnia14.html>

**2014 November Sichuan Narrow Gauge including Rongshan plus Sandaoling and Baiyin**

This was the tour where we became the last group to see working steam at Rongshan. We had to leave Shibaxi early and head up to Rongshan after a tip off that steam was ending. My March-April 2019 tour will go back to see what if anything has happened there. A recent solo visitor Ameling failed to find the narrow gauge C2s and one of the SY. We plan to ask questions at Rongshan but will also visit working coal mine railways in this area.

<http://rabylee.uk/chinareport11-14.html>





Tom, Chris, Zebedee, me, Bruce & CJ at the top end of the line - Rongshan

### **March 2015 Baiyin, Sandaoling, Fuxin and Shibaxi**

<http://rabylee.uk/chinafeb-mar2015.html>

Very much a 'best of what was left' tour.

### **August 2015 Java Sugar Mills**

This was the year when 5 out of 9 mills unexpectedly stopped using steam. As I wrote at the time:

This leaves 4 mills with limited use of steam and no steam field working at all for the first time.

Purwodadi, Kanigoro\*, Pagottan (local fireless conversions), Semboro (fireless)

<http://rabylee.uk/java2015.html>

<http://rabylee.uk/java2015conc.html>

Note: these reports have been missing for some time but I've only just found out. I've just uploaded them again.

\*This mill is now closed.





Ron and me with a trolley used to move produce from the fields - Sumberharjo

**October 2015 Bosnia**

<http://rabylee.uk/bosnia15report.html>



John P, John K and the driver of a Yugoslav USA Tank Durdevik Mine, Tuzla

### **Feb-March 2016 Fuxin, Fushun, Jiutai, Sandaoling, Shibaxi**

This tour visited two of the more minor steam operations at Jiutai (even now one loco in steam rarely doing anything) and Fushun which was still using 1 or 2 SYs but this has now finished.

<http://rabylee.uk/chinareportfeb-mar2016.html>

### **May 2016 Bosnia Industrial Heritage Tour**

<http://rabylee.uk/BosniaMay2016report.html>

This tour ran with just 3 of us! Although the three of us had fun with Dario guiding us, this was another sign that non-steam tours just don't have the pulling power of real or charter steam tours.

### **October 2016 Bosnia & Serbia**

John Parker led a tour that I had organised with charters at Mokra Gora and charters and regular steam in the Tuzla area. Mokra Gora was reported challenging with tree growth and unhelpful management obstructing things but overall the tour was a success. No online report on this tour available.

### **March 2017 Sandaoling, Shibaxi**

By now this was the best of what was left of real, working steam but people find it hard to accept Shibaxi as real steam these days despite 2-3 regular passenger trains a day. Perhaps it's now best to go out of the main tourist season when 3 passenger trains run.

<http://rabylee.uk/chinatourreportMarch2017.html>

### **August 2017 Java Mill Tour**

By now the logical Java circuit no longer included Cepu or Ambarawa nor the 3 central north coast mills at Sragi (closed for remodelling), Sumberharjo (diesel and tractor yard work only) or Pangka (diesel yard work only). Since then, Sumberharjo has closed, I have not heard that Sragi has re-opened although it may still just be possible to charter a steam loco at Pangka. Instead the tour focussed on Surabaya - Situbondo - Jember - Madiun - Surabaya - a circuit that includes all the mills with diesel field work and the 3 mills that still have real working steam (2 of these fireless operations).

<http://rabylee.uk/java2017tourblogs.html>





Elmar, Nigel, Graham, Bagus, loco crew, Ross, Chris, Peter Purwodadi Mill, Madiun

### **January 2018 A Sandaoling tour without me - Linesiding without John!**

Some like it cold! A small group of 6 wanted to be there when the temperatures produce great steam effects. They succeeded in that!

<http://rabylee.uk/sandsnow.html>

### **April 2018 Shibaxi tourist, Nanpiao coal, Jincheng reed, Fuzhowan salt, Hailar cement railway**

This was China Narrow Gauge I. Numbers were reasonable for this mainly non-steam tour and 3 of this group will be on China NG II. The focus was on railways with extensive track systems and we found trains working on all systems although on the reed railway it was just a works train and during a shutdown at Hailar we made a quick visit to Wujiu near Jiutai to see an in steam but mainly inactive SY on the coal line here.

<http://rabylee.uk/chinangtour2018.html>

### **October 2018 Bosnia**

Despite concerns that the tour would have problems because it overlapped with a Tanago/Balkan Romantik large-group charter, it all worked out fine and we were blessed with excellent sunny weather. Three of us arranged an extension to Mostar at the end. Dario was the main guide as his wife Majda was looking after their first child.

<http://rabylee.uk/bosnia2018.html>



Tadayuki, Masato, Nobuyoshi, Akira, Peter, John P, Bruce, Dan, me, Dario, Ian, Steve, Steve

**Total 18 tours (plus one assist)** - It's been a lot of fun and I thank all those who signed up for these tours.

**Are we nearing the end of Linesiding with John Tours?**

**Java August 2018** did not happen. Insufficient interest.

**Sandaoling December 2018**

No takers for the tour. John Athersuch and I went on a private visit instead.

<http://rabylee.uk/linesidingindex.html#china>

**Java August 2019** will not happen. No interest.

**Looking forward to 2019 and 2020**

Looking at the 18 previous tours, you will see that I have specialised in China, Bosnia and Java. The original focus was real, working steam in all 3 countries but now this has changed to be mainly charter or mainly non-steam industrial or narrow gauge. I'm not that keen on charters as you probably know. They require more people in the group to make them viable (often 20+) and they need complex arrangements before the tour and while they are happening. The micro-management required takes away most of the fun for me. I'm more in favour of exploring obscure industrial railways with real action including new locations but also going back to see how lines we knew in steam days have changed after several years (Rongshan, Hegang, Jixi on the China NG II Tour). I enjoy the freshness and novelty of something new or the nostalgia of returning to see how things have changed. In Bosnia, the Industrial Heritage Tour visited Tuzla Power Station (to see their shunting operation), the Kakanj diesel narrow gauge coal line, the Lukavac Soda Works where we hitched a



ride on its diesel shunter and the rail served Tuzla Salt Factory still damaged from the independence struggle. The most fun to be had in Java these days (to my mind) is to hitch a ride on a diesel out into the fields at Wringinanom or to chase trains in the fields at Jatiroto. That's what I like to do. The upcoming Romanian Narrow Gauge Tour fits in with that approach - a new country to explore, steam and diesel hauled trains with lots to look forward to without knowing necessarily what that will be.

### **How can you help?**

I'm not asking you to sign up for tours that you aren't interested in. That would be ridiculous. But I would ask you to be pro-active about any tours you are interested in. Please let me know and please discuss details and make suggestions about what would make a better tour for you.

Please consider these 2 tours:

### **China Narrow Gauge II Tour March - April 2019**

Last Call! This tour starts 17 March in Chengdu (KLM direct from Europe) and will visit around 20 narrow and standard gauge industrial line from Chengdu in the west to Jiamusi in the east. Chinese New Year is 5 February and anyone joining will want to apply for a Chinese visa shortly after that. Details are here but note that the itinerary has changed slightly. Email me for details or to sign up.

[http://rabylee.uk/China\\_ng\\_II\\_tour\\_details.pdf](http://rabylee.uk/China_ng_II_tour_details.pdf)

### **Romania Narrow Gauge Tour - August 2019**

Dates changed to a time when we can expect more trains to be running and better light for photography. This tour will visit all 7 Romanian narrow gauge lines that offer a passenger service including one which doesn't yet but where a draisine ride is possible by arrangement. Six people need to sign up by the end February to guarantee that this tour will run.

[http://rabylee.uk/romania\\_2019\\_tour\\_proposal.pdf](http://rabylee.uk/romania_2019_tour_proposal.pdf)

and to let me know if you are interested in a **Sandaoling visit winter 2019-2020** so we can choose dates and the length of the tour.

Even if I don't organise many more Linesiding with John tours, I will continue to make trips around the world to see surviving steam locos and industrial and narrow gauge lines. I'm sure most of you will do, too. There's still plenty of interesting stuff out there to see! I'm certainly not 'dun gricin' yet.

**John  
Linesiding with John  
February 2019**



Jincheng Reed Railway



Real Ale Bar in Mostar  
Dario, Dan, Hans Peter & me



Gareth and Rich Xibolizhan



Boxcar Selfie Banovici



Tuzla Bier Keller



Caiziba - Xianrenjiao, Shibaxi



Two Johns Banovici Works



Mine Monorail Bukinje