

Sandaoling and Rongshan, Dec 2018 – Ameling Algra

Sandaoling

Already in January 2018 I bought a business class ticket to fly Amsterdam-Chengdu in December, for the incredible price of € 813 return. I was hoping to take the Chengdu-Hami flight that just started. Alas, when I went in December, that flight was no more. I did not want to fly into Ürümqi because of the complex security situation, so instead I flew Chengdu-Zhengzhou-Hami.

I arrived Hami airport on Monday Dec 3, where I had a rather long discussion with the police. All very friendly, even offering tea. And though it seemed to take forever, after half an hour I was outside and in a taxi to Sandaoling.

Near Nanzhan, the police "interrogation" was repeated. We (me and my taxi driver) were escorted by a police car to the police station in Sandaoling, for registration and some more tea. And then again escorted by a police car to the San He Binguan where I held a reservation. Time for some shopping, dinner, contacting "my" taxi driver and to bed.

What followed were thirteen magnificent and undisturbed days on the line. The first day (Dec 4) the weather was overcast, all other days it was sunny. Partly the sunny-and-hazy variety, partly extremely clear with the Tianshan mountains clearly visible. It was definitely colder than on my visits in 2017 and 2016, but still agreeable temperatures of around 0 Deg Celsius in mid day.

In the open cast mine, every day two sets were used, resulting in about nine trains out of the pit during daylight. Some long breaks mid day, partly caused by the fact that frozen coal had to be removed from the trains. That was often done on the second now open line near the blue loader, once I saw a train going to the coal unloading point for that purpose.

My first week, there were one or two trains a day to the coal unloading point. The trains were filled on what is now line 1, to the blue loader, but not from the blue loader. In the second week, all trains were filled at the blue loader, none going to the coal unloading point.

Once I saw a train of CNR wagons being filled with coal near the coal unloading point. It left with a Nanzhan loco (tender first of course) around 9.30 AM.

I saw a train from Erjing on three successive afternoons in the first week, between 16.00 and 16.30. Not observed in the second week.

As noted before, the shift change at Dongbolizhan now seems to be more flexible. Once, there was a loaded train going to Dongbolizhan, which had to get back with full load to Kengkonzhan after shift change. Also seen: a loco still with the night crew going to the washery around 8AM, then returning light, shift change in Kengkonzhan, light to the washery and then back with the empties to Dongbolizhan to take water. Third observation: loaded train to the washery with shift change in Kengkonzhan.

After 13 enjoyable days, it was time to go back to Hami airport on Dec 17. I went early because I supposed there might be several police checks again, but there were none. The security at the airport was thorough but fast and friendly.

I have not booked for next winter yet, though looking at my ‘preliminary’ video I would definitely like to go there again, if the trains are still running next winter. After all, it is the last real steam show on earth – people comparing the Harz favourably with Sandaoling probably also would go to the zoo instead of going on safari – much better chances of seeing many different lions in one day. Anyway, even though it is a limited operation with only three locos, it is enough to keep you busy all day; the newbee’s on Bernd Seiler’s group seemed to enjoy themselves immensely.

About the time of year to visit: I think Dec-Jan is the only good option, with the blue hour during shift change in Dongbolizhan and cold enough to have steam all day round. Remember, there is hardly any black smoke from these engines (only when departing from the mine). It is possible to take video from around 8 AM till 7 PM – and a day of 11 hours is definitely long enough for me. Of course, if you insist on long lunch breaks it might be a different story.

One of the often mentioned nuisances are the other enthusiasts around. Well, that was not really a problem during my 13-day visit. On my video of the first days, I can sometimes see (or hear) a few black figures from Bernd Seiler’s group. The Chinese enthusiasts were very careful not to run in the picture of others (maybe I was lucky) and there were at least three days when I had the whole place for myself. The floods of Japanese gricers come between Christmas and New Year.

Can it be done on your own? It turned out to be much easier than I expected. The police know about gricers, and having my hotel prebooked helped. So, I think it won’t be impossible for a first timer to go there. On the other hand, the whole atmosphere is quite intimidating and I am not sure I would have felt confident talking to the police (through google translate, of course) if I had not met the chinese police many times before. So maybe a first timer should join a group & have nothing to worry about. That is, if there is a group tour in December or January next year – I would not spend money on a group tour in other months. Both November and February can be too warm for visible exhaust. And visible exhaust is definitely something you want there.

By the way, both the sim card in my phone and the data only card in my tablet worked fine during the trip, even in the middle of the mine. Only google and google maps were out of use.

Rongshan

I flew back to Zhengzhou and took high speed trains to Chengdu. A wonderfully efficient system, built at an impressive scale. Imagine seeing about ten high speed trains standing side by side at Xian Bei station.

I made a stopover in Guangyuan to take a brief look at the Rongshan railway.

My journey to Rongshan was in a Chinese version of the German ICE3. Good track alignment and better seats made the trip a treat, quite a difference from travelling in those trains in Germany. The train from Guangyuan to Zhengzhou was an older Chinese one, even more comfortable.

In Guangyuan, nothing seems to have changed apart from the loss of the narrow gauge. Decrepit buses of line 8 still bring you to Rongshan for a few yuan. The narrow gauge looked as if it could restart tomorrow. Around Rongshan, track and points are a bit overgrown but seem in reasonable condition as is the unloading platform in Rongshan. The shops in the railway station were still in business! Passenger coaches were found, but hardly any coal wagons. They might be at the mines, or sold and gone to other mines of course. No narrow gauge locos seen, the SY was still there.



