

Visit to Sandaoling 4th – 14th October 2018

After flying to Xian and a day of site-seeing, I set off for Hami on train K1573 at 07.08, 3rd October. The train is 6 hours slower than the 'Z' train my travel agent couldn't get me on, but I have the compartment to myself for the first 9 hours. The 18 coach train is hauled by an SS7 electric locomotive the whole way - at Longxi, 40+ withdrawn SS3 electric locomotives await their fate.

Day 1 Thurs 4th Oct

I wake before sun rise - K1573 is somewhere east of Hami, can make out a group of camels by the line side fence. Arrive at Hami on time (08.22); police want to take a photo of my passport, visa, ticket and face but are pleasant enough.

09.30 bus to Sandaoling takes long detour off the express way : arrive 11.15.

Check-in at Hotel Sanhe opposite the bus station, Y128 p/nt.

Taxi to Nanzshan at 14.15, Y15.

Nanzshan

The yard is busy, frequent shunting movements until two of the engines leave on trains for Erjing. 4 engines in steam here, including 8080, possibly spare (didn't move / no crew).

Crisp breeze ensures it's not too hot on a cloudless sunny day. German group are at Nanzshan for an afternoon with Chinese guide, unfortunately she can't get us into the workshops— according to security guards, it's closed due to public holiday.



8077 at Nanzshan, pushing CNR wagons under the loader.

14.30 DF8B 0250 maneuvering in yard

14.35 8366 Shunting

14.37 8053 Shunting

15.00 8053 > Erjing

15.02 8077 Shunting

15.07 DF8B 0248 CNR network > yard

15.40 8080 in steam – not used while I was there.

15.50 8077 > Erjing



8080 in poor condition at Nanzshan.

Washery at Xuanmeichang

16.30 8173 Departs washery – but stops after washery points for 40 minutes, by which time 8167 has arrived.

17.05 8167 To Washery



8173 with train being tipped at the Washery.

Kengongzhan – Pipe

Three pit trains in operation plus one spare engine kept in steam at Dongbolizhan.

17.30 8195 B (Beichang / Blue Loader) > (to) W (Washery at Xuanmeichang) (Up loaded)

17.40 8173 W (Washery at Xuanmeichang) > (to) B (Beichang / Blue Loader) (Down empty)

18.14 8173 B > W

18.35 8167 W > B

19.00 8195 B > W

19.15 8173 E (Empty) W > D (**Dongbolizhan watering and crew change point**)

Dongbolizhan

19.50 8173 at platform without train

Chinese guide secures invitation for German group and I to come on up. Unfortunately visitors don't spot the floor mounted fire box door control, inadvertently opening it repeatedly!

20.10 – 20.30 8167 + 8195 arrive with empties / other unidentified JS in steam not used.



8173 at evening crew change, Dongbolizhan.

Lift back to hotel with German group then unexpected knock on my door; 3 Chinese people have heard that I'm here to photograph the railway and would like some advice. After a brief chat, I agree to lead them to the pit in their car at 07.30!

Good day.. great to be back.

Day 2 Fri 5th Oct Temp 4 – 25

Kengongzhan

Sunrises over Kengongzhan, as my new Chinese acquaintances share out moon cakes and almonds.

07.45 8197 B > W

08.00 8173 E W > D

08.14 8195 B > W

08.16 8197 E W > D

Dongbolizhan : 8167 spare

08.30 8173 Light engine used as 'Passenger' vehicle to take miners to/from Beichang for shift change D > B > D

08.30 – 09.45 : 8173 > B / 8195 > B / 8197 > B



Nanzshan

10.00 DF8B diesel > CNR

10.05 8080 Shunting

10.10 8366 Shunting

10.50 8077 Shunting

No problems visiting Nanzshan previous day, but this morning security want yard clear of people, possibly alarmed by some guy with camera and young kid nearby. Walk back to Kengongzhan, then kindly returned to town by construction workers - loaded train approaching pipe visible through van window (12.10).

Kengongzhan – Pipe

Pleasant walk down to signals at the Blue Loader on another cloudless day - apart from the occasional worker on a motorbike, I have the place to myself.

15.00 JS? B > W

15.30 8173 W > B

15.45 8195 B > W

15.50 8197 W > B

Pipe – Beichang (Blue Loader)

16.25 8173 B > W

16.55 8195 W>B

16.55 8197 B > W

Beichang

17.30 8195 B > W

17.35 8173 W > B

18.20 8173 B > W

18.25 8197 W > B

Beichang - Pipe

18.45 8195 W > B

18.55 8197 B > W

19.05 8173 W > B

19.25 8195 B > W



8195 rolling down to the Blue Loader.

Light fading fast by 7.30pm so climb the pipe and head for hotel.

Day 3 Sat 6th Oct

07.00 : pitch black outside and no taxis around, walk to the approach to the washery.

Washery-Kengongzhan

07.45 8167 W > D

08.00 8173 B > W

08.10 8197 W > D

08.25 8173 W > D



8173 heading for morning crew change at Dongbolizhan.

Dongbolizhan : 8195 Spare

08.30 8167 D > B > D 'Passenger'

09.00 8197 > B

09.25 8167 > B

09.45 8173 > B



8173 and 8167 wait to be watered.

Kengongzhan - Pipe

09.50-10.35 8173 (invitation to footplate for 10 minutes)

11.15 8167 B > W and 8173 finally in to loader

11.35 8195 B > W

12.00 8173 B > W

Lunch

Kengongzhan – Pipe

15.05 8197 B > W

15.25 8173 W > B

15.35 8167 B > W

16.00 8197 W > B

16.20 8173 B > W

16.40 8167 W > B

16.50 8197 B > W

17.10 8173 W > B

17.15 8167 B > W

17.45 8173 B > W



8167 (right) pounding the gradient while 8173 waits the road for the Blue Loader.

Another excellent day, cut slightly short by suspension of operations late afternoon; 2 trains stuck at washery (8197 there 90+ minutes) and third (8173) still held at **Kengongzhan** signals at 18.15, so give up and climb the pipe. By the road I explain/gesticulate this situation to 3 teachers from Sandaoling who were hoping on some pictures. In an exchange via phone translator, I inquire about good places to eat; after establishing that I like barbequed meat in bread, they kindly offer to take me to a place they know. My excitement is short lived however as we pull up, not by some smoky little restaurant, but by a cake shop, where they help me purchase a sausage roll!

Day 4 Sun 7th Oct

Kengongzhan – Washery

07.35 8197 E W > D

07.40 8167 B > W Sparks visible as it rounds pipe bend (not arranged by me)

07.50 8195 E W > D

08.00 8167 E W>D

Brilliant low sunshine again, and no photographers to navigate at Dongbolizhan.

Donb' : 8173 spare

08.35 8197 D > B > D 'Passenger'

09.00 8195 > B

09.25 8197 > B

09.45 8167 > B



8195, 8167 and 8197

Kengongzhan – Washery

10.20 8195 B > W

10.45 8195 W > B

Washery

I walk to the washery; able to pass pack of hostile dogs but unable to avoid stepping in to soot over a foot deep on the railway embankment. At washery, train flagman offers water to clean myself with, while hotel manage to restore my trousers by the evening for Y10!

JS in steam at work shops, possibly 8197 (not seen since leaving Dongbolizhan at 09.25). At Nanzshan 8080 + other JS shunting and DFB8 moving light engine.

11.05 8167 In to unload

11.20 8167 Out empty to Beichang

11.45 8195 In

12.10 8195 Out

12.20 8167 In

13.00 8195 in to loop outside washery, waiting for 8167 to depart (second unloading siding not used).

13.05 8167 Out



8167 at the washery, tipping in progress.

Try to flag bus down for a lift back to town, driver not interested but railway man in car behind more obliging.

Lunch (the sausage roll from cake shop)

Kengongzhan - Pipe

15.50 8167 W > B

16.00 8197 B > W

16.15 8195 W > B

16.50 8167 B > W

17.15 8197 W > B

17.20 8195 B > W

17.40 8167 W > B

17.45 8195 W > D or other washery?

17.50 8197 B > W

18.05 8195 W > B

18.25 8167 B > W

18.30 8197 W > B

19.10 8195 B > W

Day 5 Mon 8th Oct

Cloudless morning again – no photographers.

Dongbolizhan : 8195 spare

08.25 8197 D > B > D 'Passenger'

08.50 8173 > B

09.15 8167 > B

09.40 8197 > B



8197 takes 15 minutes to pass the level crossing, constant wheel slip and numerous attempts to roll back and try again finally get it to the Kengongzhan signals.

Kengongzhan - Pipe

10.50 8173 B > W

11.20 8173 W > B

On 8173's approach to pipe bend, track worker signals the train to stop. 8173 and empties are there until 11.50 while track gang make repairs to Down track.

11.55 8197 B > W (Presumably held at Beichang until track work complete)

12.05 8167 B > W

Lunch

Kengongzhan - Pipe

Hottest afternoon so far, can't avoid getting sunburnt in the pit. Video all Up trains from 3pm to sunset and last two Down trains, at which point tripod leg jams permanently!

14.45 8167 B > W

15.00 8197 W > B

15.35 8173 B > W / VDO

15.50 8167 W > B

16.10 8197 B > W / VDO

16.25 8173 W > B

16.50 8167 B > W / VDO

17.10 8197 W > B

17.30 8173 B > W / VDO

17.45 8167 W > B

18.15 8197 B > W / VDO

18.35 8173 W > B / VDO

18.45 8167 B > W / VDO

19.05 8197 W > B / VDO

19.20 8173 B > W / VDO (No sunlight)

No taxis pass by, so march slowly back up the hill – Nanjing beer from shop goes down nicely (Y3).

Day 6 Tues 9th Oct

Kengongzhan – Washery

07.45 DF8B moving in Nanzshan yard with train of CNR open wagons.

07.50 8173 B > W

08.05 8173 W > D

Dongbolizhan : 8167 spare

A large group of photographers (mostly wearing red anoraks) gather on the platform, so spend my time by the water columns.

08.35 8195 D > B > D 'Passenger'

09.05 8197 > B (No problems getting train away today)

09.40 8173 > B

10.05 8195 > B (Departs from water columned siding nearest staff building, not used on previous days)

Kengongzhan – Pipe

Nothing. Track repairs on both lines near Pipe prevent all movement, head for hotel 11.20.

A different group of 6 Chinese near the pipe with cameras – basic communication possible; they turn out to be ‘rock’ rather than ‘steam’ enthusiasts and are geologists from Beijing interested in the rock formations between the Pipe and Beichang (just as lucky, as there are no trains to photograph..) Apparently, one of the rock faces was cut to resemble Mao Se Tung – I must have missed it!

Lunch

Work shops

14.50 Visit work shops for 2 hours : 6 locomotives on site



8089 in steam inside the shed - no work takes place on it during my visit.

8225 Cold inside shed – can be steamed if required.

8314 Just overhauled and in steam outside shed – guide unsure when it will return to service.

8190 Cold – moved inside shed by 8167 for welding.

8167 Spare engine for pit trains, at works for shunting.

8384 (no tender) dumped at east end of site with various parts missing in advanced state of corrosion.



8314 is eventually to be used to 'foster cordial international relations' (according to the guide's telephone's translation) - hence why a Communist star has been painted on the chimney cowling?

Guide confirms the whole operation will close in two years and is unsure what he will do when the time comes. Visit many buildings full of lathes and machinery – none being used. We walk to a derelict building which became redundant 30 years ago, it produced oxygen – on the top floor there's a 2 metre high painting of a cobra, the floor was previously used as some sort of fight club. He also points out the dump for contaminated coal situated on the other side of the signal box.

There are thousands of tipper wagon parts scattered across the site, they've been trying to sell them for the last two years to no avail. Two of the 60T cranes can still be steamed, the others have been withdrawn. Also abandoned, are the ex-'passenger' vehicles for ferrying miners to the pit – bogie vans with boilers but no seats or windows! In the yard to the east of the works are numerous withdrawn JS engines and an SY. Finally I'm persuaded to take in the panoramic view from the roof of the administrative building by climbing through a window and then up some rungs attached to side of the building, when I indicate that I don't want to go any higher (it would be quite a drop) he insists, and I find myself on the roof. While I get some shots, he straightens the flags out! (Don't recommend this.)

15.30 8173 passes south of the works with loaded tippers for the washery on the south side of Nanzshan, the first time I've seen this washery used on this trip. Can hear it return towards Dongbolizhan some 30 minutes later.

Washery

17.20 8195 has unloaded but is held at the signal. The crew sit around the track chatting, looking unlike they will set off any time soon, so I head back. (17.50 : 8195 still at Washery)

Works guide with colleague pass in a car, and offer lift back to hotel.

Day 7 Weds 10th Oct

Kengongzhan

08.00 8173 W > D

Dongbolizhan : No spare engine present

08.15 8197 W > D light engine

08.35 8195 'Passenger'

09.00 8197 D > W light engine

09.20 8173 D > B



8195 departs from Dongbolizhan platform, taking miners down the pit.

09.55 8195 D > W

09.55 is fully loaded on arrival and sets back 300m or so to get up enough speed through Dongbolizhan to get up the incline where it struggled with empties the day before. The presence of the load attracts three locals who throw down prime pieces of coal off for transport away by motorbike; the crews show no interest.

10.00 8197 W > D with empties (not clear why it has returned)

10.20 8197 D > B

Kengongzhan

10.40 8173 B > W

11.00 8195 W > B

11.10 8197 B > W

11.50 8173 W > B

11.55 8195 B > W

Lunch

15.35 8197 W > B

16.40 8173 B > W

16.45 8195 D or 2nd Washery > B

17.10 8197 B > W

17.30 8173 W > B

17.35 8195 B > W

17.55 8197 W > B

18.15 8173 B > W

18.30 8195 W > B



8195, excellent light at 18.30 but no more trains before darkness.

Day 8 Thurs 11th Oct

Kengongzhan

07.50 8173 W > D

08.10 8197 W > D

Dongbolizhan : No spare engine present

Operation doesn't go to plan this morning. No spare engine available again, 8195 needs a trip to the works after its 'passenger' duty, and 8197 is unable to get away due to some problem near its cylinders requiring four staff, much discussion and various adjustments with a large spanner. Last train finally out to Beichang at 10.35.

08.30 8195 D > B > D 'Passenger'

09.00 8173 > B

09.10 8195 > Works light engine

10.00 8195 Works > D

10.20 8195 > B

10.35 8197 > B



8195 has left its train at the washery and arrives for watering light engine.

Kengongzhan – Pipe

11.10 8195 B > W

11.30 8173 W > B

11.45 8197 B > W

11.55 8195 W > B

Lunch

Washery

15.30 8197 train doesn't unload for 40 minutes – problem with washery?

15.50 8195 loaded waits in loop

16.30 8197 Out

16.35 8195 In

17.05 8195 Out

17.10 8173 In

17.55 8197 loaded waits in loop

18.05 8173 Out



8173 pushes away from the washery in the fading light.

Walk to official entrance to Nanzhan – security guards in military uniform indicate that photography isn't allowed and that and I can't come in either! DF8B and 2 x JS moving in Nanzhan yard.

Kengongzhan

18.15 8195 B > W

3rd bus I attempt to flag down gives me a lift to edge of town.

Day 9 Fri 12th Oct

Kengongzhan -Washery

08.00 8173 W > D

08.15 8197 W > D



8197 leaves the washery for Dongbolizhan.

Dongbolizhan : No spare engine present

08.40 8195 D > B > D 'Passenger'

09.10 8173 > B

09.30 8197 > B

09.50 8195 > B

Kengongzhan > Pipe

10.25 8173 B > W

11.10 8197 B > W

11.40 8173 W > B

11.55 8195 B > W

Waiting on main road for a taxi back to hotel when police car pulls up and driver summons me over. He wants to know how much I will pay for the tail lamp he has pictured on his phone resting in his living

room – gesture to him it would weigh too much in my luggage, so he drives off towards town without even offering me a lift!

Pipe – Blue Loader

A slow afternoon with only two trains in circulation and the dumper truck at Blue Loader taking a long time to fill the trains.

14.45 8173 B > W

15.00 8195 B > W

15.30 8173 W > B

16.40 8173 B > W

16.45 8195 W > B

18.20 8195 B > W / VDO

18.25 8173 W > B



8173 moves in to load on a slow afternoon.

Day 10 Sat 13th Oct

Kengongzhan

07.50 8167 W > D

08.05 8195 W > D

Dong : No spare engine present

08.15 8173 B > W

08.30 8173 W > D

08.35 8167 D > B > D 'Passenger'

09.15 8195 > B

09.35 8173 > B

09.55 8167 > B



8167 is last away from Dongbolizhan.

Kengongzhan – Pipe

10.20 8195 B > W

11.10 8173 B > W

11.30 8195 W > B

Lunch and bus station visit (previous 13.10 Hami bus replaced by 14.00, none for a while after that).

Finally in to Nanzshan yard via the level crossing (avoiding CCTV posts). Nothing for 20 minutes, but then numerous JS shunting movements, massive DF8B trains to/from CNR, a train from and to Erjing and the return to service of ex-works 8314 on shunting duty. Unfortunately, 8314 emits a high pitched squeal when in motion, as if a whining child is trapped in it – crew must be delighted!

Nanzshan : 8080 spare

14.20 DF8B 250 + 55 bogie open wagons from CNR

14.30 DF8B 247 Maneuvering

14.55 DF8B 247 to CNR also c55 wagons

15.05 8077 Shunting / Pushing CNR wagons through loader

15.20 8314 Shunting

16.05 8366 Erjing > Nanzshan then shunting

17.15 8366 Nanzshan > Erjing



8366 departs for Erjing, passing ex-works 8314 on shunting duty.

Kengongzhan

17.40 8173 D or 2nd Washery > B

18.05 8195 W > D

18.20 8167 B > W

18.20 8195 D > B

Day 11 Sun 14th Oct

Dong : No spare engine present

08.25 8167 D > B > D 'Passenger'

08.55 8195 > B

09.00 8173 > Works light engine

09.10 8167 > B



8167 makes an impressive departure on my last morning.

Kengongzhan - Pipe

10.25 8195 B > W

11.00 8195 W > B

11.10 8167 B > W Last Train

A quiet final morning; all trains back at Dongbolizhan before sunrise and then only two in circulation. 8167 passes the pipe at 11.10 before I climb it one last time, and begin the journey to Beijing.

Hotel agrees to 13.00 check out, still leaving time for 30 more beef dumplings! Bus departs 14.15, arrives Hami 15.45. Z70 to Beijing departs on time (18.32); share compartment with two elderly people who provide pleasant company for the 26 hours to Beijing.

I complete my tour of China on train G1 from Beijing to Shanghai; frequently touching 348 km/h, it connects the cities in 4hrs 25 – I wonder how long it would take a JS?



Train G1. But after tearing across the countryside in China's fastest train, most passengers spend quarter of an hour stuck on the platform as it is single file exit down to the underpass!

Conclusion

After contemplating a December visit to Sandaoling to capture the winter steam effects, I'm glad I went in October. The extra hours of sunlight, sun rise at Dongbolizhan, nice weather and the absence of other photographers most days more than compensated for this. Frequency of operation didn't seem significantly diminished since October 2017 (despite the reduction in pit trains) and it was good to see 8314 return to service on my last day – even if it sounded in pain!

If you're thinking of making the trip, it looks like there's still time with closure two years away – and hopefully there won't be any further reduction in the number of pit trains.

Stephane Grant