

# MEMBERSPOTLIGHT



## ALL ABOARD THE STAR TRAIN!

### MARK BASSETT

Executive Director of the Nevada Northern Railway Museum & Operator of the Nevada Star Train

#### A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

Nevada Northern Railway's Star Train offers a truly unique experience. On select summer evenings, the Star Train pulls out of Ely to take visitors on a journey to experience what our ancestors saw when they looked up into the night sky hundreds of years ago. The Train's passengers aren't there to see sunny landscapes, instead they're focused on the views after dark. Aboard the train are Dark Rangers from Great Basin National Park to operate telescopes and serve as astronomy guides. (*LA Times*, *CBS News*, and *Nevada Northern Railway*).

Mark Bassett, president of the Nevada Northern Railway Museum and operator of the Star Train, came up with the idea to create a stargazing-themed ride about five years ago after overhearing a museum customer lament the distance to Great Basin National Park. The park is 65 miles east of Ely and was certified as an *International Dark Sky Park* in 2016.

Mark contacted the park about a partnership where he would provide star-themed train rides if the park would provide rangers who could serve as astronomy guides. Great Basin National Park agreed and the "Star Train" has become one of the Nevada Northern Railway's most popular train excursions (*The Nevada Independent*).

Beside the Star Train, the Nevada Northern Railway offers a variety of train excursions including the Haunted Ghost Train, Santa's Reindeer Flyer, and a geology-themed ride. Publicity for the Nevada Northern Railway hit a crescendo after CBS News filmed their summer series "American Wonders" featuring the Star Train. The series explores places that make America wonderful, from majestic natural landscapes to spectacular creations. The segment aired on August 7th 2019 and by the end of the day all of the trains for 2020 were sold out. (*The Nevada Independent* & *CBS News*)

#### THE STAR TRAIN EXPERIENCE

The Star Train excursion begins when the train leaves Ely at 7:30pm and travels 11 miles east and climbs 800 feet along a mountain ridge just in time to catch a view of the sunset. Upon the return journey, the train stops at a place where rangers set up telescopes outside for visitors. According to Mark, folks can usually see a couple of different constellations as well as catch a glimpse of Jupiter and Saturn. Celestial visibility varies on cloud cover and atmospheric conditions but rangers know exactly where to point the telescopes for best viewing. The train returns to Ely about two and half hours later. The Star Train is a little less than a four-hour drive from Las Vegas and those who want to stay overnight can stay in the railway's bunkhouse or train caboose for just \$60 a night. (*LA Times*).

#### ECONOMIC IMPACT

The economic impact of the Star Train is not insignificant. Each ride can accommodate 100 people and with tickets priced at \$41 per adult, the excursion can bring in as much as \$4,100 a night. With 18 scheduled rides a season, revenue from ticket prices alone could top \$73,000. Local tourism officials estimate that 80 percent of the Star Train's guests stay overnight. These overnight stays combined with the economic impact of the Nevada Northern Railway's excursions likely total \$2.5 million annually (*The Nevada Independent*).

While the glittering lights of Las Vegas attract millions of tourists each year, Ely's dark skies can draw its own set of visitors. According to Mark, "especially out west, every town has mountains. Every town has a fishing lake. Every town has bike paths... but Ely is very fortunate in that we have dark skies. And this is something that is very rare and to be able to develop this is even rarer." (*The Nevada Independent*)



**MORE ABOUT THE NEVADA STAR TRAIN**

**The Nevada Independent** <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/how-a-stargazing-themed-train-ride-is-boosting-tourism-in-rural-nevada?fbclid=IwAR0O6HjSqaYuwKEVsZ2oA1dPe93HK9W8hrOvuH4mpgay5aqQb3Ltk1Z-Ck>

**The LA Times** <https://www.latimes.com/travel/lasvegas/la-travel-las-vegas-great-basin-star-train-stargazing-20190703-story.html>

**Travel + Leisure** <https://www.travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/bus-train/nevada-star-train-stargazing>

**Conde Nast Traveler in Spain** <https://www.traveler.es/experiencias/articulos/great-basin-star-train-tren-observar-estrellas-desierto-nevada/15780>

**CBS News Christmas morning 2016** <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/on-the-trail-the-brilliance-of-the-night-sky/>

**CBS News August 7, 2016** <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nevadas-great-basin-star-train-american-wonders/>

**Las Vegas Channel 3** <https://news3lv.com/news/special-reports/ride-the-star-train-to-see-brilliant-night-sky-you-cant-witness-anywhere-near-las-vegas>



National Park Service Photo



Nevada Northern Railway



Background Image: Kevin D. Grant



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