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Golden State Model Railroad Museum: Wreck Day fun

Mary Flaherty, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, November 24, 2011



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Mary Flaherty/Special to The Chr
General manager Randy Smith (facing forward) watches children enjoy the displays at the Golden State Model Railroad Museum.

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Sunday might just be the best day of the year to visit the Golden State Model Railroad Museum in Point Richmond.

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It's Wreck Day.

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"We purposely create havoc," said Randy Smith, general manager of the museum. Not that trains don't ever derail other days, he said. But on Wreck Day, the members will purposely throw switches to send the trains off their tracks.

And then out comes the model-size maintenance equipment.

The museum has just the charming, old-time feel that you would expect from a vast model railroad collection. Displays are set in the 1950s and '60s, with cars that are now vintage and details such as a mule train and a gold mine.

There are 10,000 square feet of display space, the equivalent of nearly 70 miles of track (if it were scaled to life-size), and three sizes of train: N scale, O scale and HO scale. And there's actually a wreck to be seen every day - several smashed cars lying in a gully.

"The kids just love that," Smith said, adding that they often run straight to it when they arrive.

While the younger visitors may focus mainly on the trains, older visitors might enjoy the California scenes that have been re-created (although compressed and not true to scale), from the Tehachapi Loop near Bakersfield to Truckee. Local scenes include Niles Canyon, the Altamont Pass, Martinez and Oakland.

Spend long enough and you'll notice odd details such as the Bukowski liquor store or the bears leaning against a telephone pole.

"There's weird stuff like that all over the place," Smith said.

A scavenger hunt worksheet challenges the visitor to find items in the display such as a haunted house, a hobo camp and an occupied outhouse.

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Most of the year, the trains run only on Sunday afternoons, but the museum is also open Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays for viewing displays only. (And sometimes members can be found running trains those days.)

In December, trains will run on Saturdays and Sundays through the 24th. The museum will close Christmas Day for three months of maintenance and reopen April 1.

Theme days fall on the fourth Sunday of the month. If you can't make the third annual Wreck Day, a \$10 DVD from the museum store features some past crashes.

A \$1 discount coupon, as well as a list of other railroad museums and attractions, can be found at the museum's website. Also, discounted museum passes can be checked out from Contra Costa and Alameda county libraries.

The model railroad museum is in Miller-Knox Regional Park overlooking the bay, near the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. The park offers hiking trails, a beach and a playground.

Wreck Day: Noon-5 p.m. Sun. \$2-\$9. Golden State Model Railroad Museum, 900-A Dornan Drive, Point Richmond. (510) 234-4884.

www.gsmrm.org.

E-mail comments to 96hours@sfgchronicle.com.

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t402 12:13 PM on November 24, 2011

Everyone loves model railroads! I wish I had room in the apartment to unpack my boxes of HO locomotives and rolling stock and build the layout I've always wanted. Too bad the minimum you can really go with HO is a 4'X 8' sheet of plywood.

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