A new age of steam?

The Tua Valley Line, Portugal - Experience and Examples from the Technological Heritage Operations and Preserved Railways of Britain.

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Industrial and technological heritage tourism in Britain is an important part of the nation’s tourism portfolio and includes historic factories, coal mines, motor museums, old ships, canals and railways. Most of these are owned and operated by charitable organisations, founded and staffed by volunteer enthusiasts.

Great Britain has over 150 preserved railways, which generate in excess of 15 million tourist journeys each year. The industry employs 2,000 people directly and engages a further 18,000 volunteers. They contribute £579 million to the British economy and play a very important role in the extensive cultural and heritage tourism industry of the country.

The railways of Portugal are well known to a global community of steam enthusiasts, many of whom used to visit the country specifically to experience and photograph the last days of steam traction until as late as the 1980s. The narrow gauge lines north of the Douro river, and the Tua Valley line in particular, were considered as very special railways. Their unique combination of narrow gauge steam traction, relatively long runs of track and extraordinarily beautiful landscapes made for a magical railway experience. In the 1980s and 1990s steam was replaced and although there are now a few steam hauled tourist trains on the Douro Valley line, there are currently few opportunities for people to recapture this experience.

Portugal has several railway museums under the control of the excellent National Railway Museum in Entroncamento, but these present static displays rather than “live” steam. Portugal possesses a considerable number of redundant steam locomotives dispersed in yards around its national railway network, some of which remain in usable condition. Portugal also possesses track and routes, which have been recently closed to passenger and freight traffic. These are still largely intact and could be reinstated at relatively low cost. Almost 60 years of experience of operating and developing technological heritage and preserved railways has been accrued in Britain and this may prove valuable to the recognition of the tourist potential and economic benefits that such technological heritage and preserved railways present as part of a modern tourism industry.